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Oral history interview with Adela Akers, 2008 March 4-6

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Transcript

Interview

Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project For Craft and Decorative Arts in America

Interview with Adela Akers
Conducted by Mija Riedel
At the artist's studio in Graton, CA
March 4 and 6, 2008

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Adela Akers on March 4 and 6, 2008. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Graton, Caifornia, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Adela Akers and Mija Riedel 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.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Adela Akers at the artist's studio in Graton, California, on March 4, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

And we thought we'd just start with a little overview of your incredible studio here, which is in an old apple barn.

ADELA AKERS: That's right, yeah. They used to preserve or dry apples in this building. It's a small building, I mean, a small warehouse —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But that was what was supposed to be going on in here a long time ago. I'm not sure how long ago that was.

MS. RIEDEL: It's clearly an old building, old stone building.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yes, right.

MS. RIEDEL: And cool in here.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it is very nice.

MS. RIEDEL: And you moved here in '95 after you retired from Tyler School of Art [Temple University, Elkins Park, PA].

MS. AKERS: I moved to Guerneville [CA] in 1995, but I opened the studio here in 1998.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: I worked out of my house for a while until I realized I needed the bigger space. I've always had my studio at home, so this was quite a move for me to move someplace else to work.

I was invited to come and see a show in this building. There's a little gallery at the other end. I came to see the show, and I met the woman artist, Cindy Cleary, and she had a studio here. And I said, well, do they ever have studios here? And she said, oh, every once in a while; so I'll introduce you to the manager.

Well, a month later, I had my studio. Somebody was moving out. Because I thought maybe it will take a year, you know. See, this area, there is no industry, so I knew I could never find a big warehouse like you would in Berkeley [CA] or Oakland [CA] or even in Santa Rosa [CA]. I didn't want to go that far. So this was an ideal location. I only live 14 miles away, and it's all back roads through vineyards and apple orchards and just wonderful country.

MS. RIEDEL: It's beautiful this time of year.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah, it is very nice.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're about an hour and 15 minutes to San Francisco.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: Because, basically, I'm a city person. And when we moved to the country, we knew we had to be close enough to the city, even if we don't go, to know that we can go for the day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And we did. That's something — we went for the day, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And so sometimes we have a place to stay. We have a friend; we can stay; so we can stay over where it's basically an hour and a half at the most. And that is emotionally convenient, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Because even if you don't do it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: — you just know that it's possible. So that's one reason to be in Guerneville. And also it's close to the ocean. It's only 12 miles to the ocean. That's very nice.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes sense in terms of your work, too.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah, right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, this is definitely a chapter of your life here.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And we thought we'd start at the beginning chapter —

MS. AKERS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: — and go back to — you were born in Spain?

MS. AKERS: I was born in Santiago de Compostela.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, in 19 — what year?

MS. AKERS: Nineteen thirty-three.

MS. RIEDEL: What was your birth date, the day?

MS. AKERS: February 7, 1933.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: And it's a wonderful town; it's a historical town, and it's a place of pilgrimage, and it's a college town, so it's a place that we always go back and visit, you know. My parents are gone, but I have aunts and uncles and lots of cousins in the area, not necessarily in Santiago but in the area.

MS. RIEDEL: And they still live there.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your parent's names?

MS. AKERS: My parents' name — my mother was Varela — V-A-R-E-L-A — and my father's name was Lloret — L-L-O-R-E-T. He came from the eastern part of Spain, from the Mediterranean coast, from Valencia, and my mother from Galicia, which is where I was born.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And do you have siblings, Adela?

MS. AKERS: I have one brother who lives outside of Chicago [IL].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: He's a retired accountant.

MS. RIEDEL: And what's his name?

MS. AKERS: Rafael.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Do you have memories of Spain? I know you left when you were young — four?

MS. AKERS: I was too young. When I went back for the first time, after many years, after I was a woman, an adult, I thought maybe something will click, that I would remember. But no, I didn't. I just mostly remember through the memories of what I had been told, the stories from my parents. And I kept correspondence with my cousins in Spain all the time. I always felt like I wanted to go back, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: I think my brother adjusted to being in Cuba more than I did. He was five years older. For me it was more like — when we moved to Cuba in 1937 because of the civil war in Spain, the idea was we were just moving for a couple of years, until things settled in Spain, and we were going to go back. So maybe in my mind that was another thing, is that we knew we were going to go back.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: I knew I wanted to go back.

MS. RIEDEL: Even so young?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think I missed my grandparents and, you know, family kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have —

MS. AKERS: Because then when we moved to Cuba, we were very poor. We lived in one room, and I think I missed having a nicer house. I was only four, so I couldn't analyze anything political.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: At that point, it was more like, what are we doing in this one room, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: So I think it was more like a big adjustment financially. And then finally, we just stay and stay, because [Francisco] Franco stay and stay.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And so we settled in Cuba, and I went to college and all that.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you in Havana proper?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it was in Havana. We were always in Havana. For a year or so, we lived in another town, but most of the time, we lived in Havana. It was a wonderful city and lots of opportunities. My mother was able to get a job; my father got a job and then eventually had a business. So you know, it was a pretty good life.

MS. RIEDEL: What did he do? I know your mom was a seamstress, right?

MS. AKERS: My mother worked as a seamstress, but then they had a business in Cuba. It was an import business dealing with materials for bakeries and decorative material. It would be almost like a party shop today, you know. But they had all kinds of more industrial-type needs for bakeries, you know, products. So it was an interesting business.

And the reason they got into that business was because my father was working with a company that did that. So once they decided, well, we could have our own little company, it was a small business, and then they had two employees and my mother and father. My father would travel to other towns and sell some of the stuff, and my

mother ran the business. She was quite a businesswoman, so it was a very good experience for me to have.

I find that because of having that experience of living with a business in the family, I've been able to run my small art business and my work. A lot of artists have a hard time organizing and putting things together and all that. Well, I had all that training.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want something?

[END DISC 01 TR 01.]

MS. AKERS: I can't remember what I was —

MS. RIEDEL: We were — I had to just pause there for a minute.

So your father would travel, and your mother was the businesswoman. And you said that was very helpful to you in operating your own small business.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Because, you know, when you're showing your work and dealing with galleries and contracts and collectors and museums, it helps a lot if you know how to organize materials and how to put it together and how to be on time, just the discipline of having a business. I mean, I don't feel like I have a business now. I just do my work and try to show it, and hopefully, it will sell. But I realize that other artists have a very hard time doing it well. And I think it's because of my experience of working with my parents. That helped that.

MS. RIEDEL: What are some of your memories from Cuba, from growing up there?

MS. AKERS: Cubans are very happy people, you know, very wonderful people. And I loved that. I'm not in touch with a lot of my Cuban friends. I mean, most of them went away, left Cuba. I only have one friend left in Cuba, who is a playwright, and we e-mail back and forth a lot. He has a great sense of humor, a very good writer. And then other friends are in Miami [FL] or in Southern California. So they're very different from Spaniards.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Very different. They're more playful. My father used to analyze it like Cubans, their attention span is shorter. [Laughs.] They are enthusiastic about doing something, but they don't stick with it for very long. But now, it has been proven that Cubans that left Cuba have done extremely well in this country, because they are ambitious, and they are hard workers, and they can stick to things if they have to. They really want to succeed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And so it's interesting how they can lower their standards until they get the right job, but they'll get a job.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And then once they get sufficiently involved in the country and the language, then they know they can get a better job or open a factory or start a career, you know. I've seen many Cubans do extremely well in this country.

But of course, a lot of the Cubans that left, they were all professionals, so it was easier than the old immigrant idea; it was always peasants who left the country, you know. Now with the revolution, it was different.

So then my parents left. Let's see, I came in '57.

MS. RIEDEL: So you went through elementary school and high school and, actually, college.

MS. AKERS: College, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You got a degree —

MS. AKERS: Degree of pharmacy, yeah, yeah. I was very interested in biochemistry. And I was trying to be very practical, because I thought, well, my parents put me through college, I should do something I could go and get a job. And you know, then when I finished, I realized I really didn't like working in a pharmacy that much, because it wasn't that interesting. I probably would have been happier if I was working in a lab, working as a technician as a biochemistry or chemistry.

MS. RIEDEL: Some sort of research perhaps.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, research. So I started kind of figuring out what to do next. And I ran into this group of

artists that said, well, maybe you should go into art.

MS. RIEDEL: In Havana?

MS. AKERS: In Havana, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What were they doing?

MS. AKERS: They were all part of a group. They were painters and sculptors and playwrights and writers. And they just —

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember any of their names, Adela?

MS. AKERS: Yes. The group was called Los Once, meaning "The 11." It was a group of 11 artists who made this group. Most of them are gone now, are dead. You want the names?

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Raul Martinez, he stayed in Cuba. Guido Llinas, he moved to Paris, and he died a couple of years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did he do?

MS. AKERS: He was a painter.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Both of them were painters.

MS. RIEDEL: Raul as well, okay.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Let me think of someone else. Abelardo Estorino, he's a playwright.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: And he's still in Cuba. He's still very active.

MS. RIEDEL: Is he the one you're e-mailing?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: He's the one I'm in touch with. I'm trying to think of — I can't think of the rest of the names right now. It's not coming.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a good start. If they occur to you, we'll make a note of them.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so what, would they put on plays then? Or what exactly did they do?

MS. AKERS: They would try to show together, maybe do some shows together. I could have brought a brochure of their recent shows. Not recent but, you know, like 20 years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Because there has been, like, a kind of a retrospective of how that group started and how they worked together and all that.

So they kind of encouraged me to maybe look into make some art. So I started taking some classes. And I met a woman through them. I met a woman who was an architect in Chicago. And she said, well, you come to Chicago and go to the Art Institute [of Chicago]. And I thought, oh, okay, maybe I can do that.

MS. RIEDEL: And how old were you at this point?

MS. AKERS: I was 23.

MS. RIEDEL: So you had finished university.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were unhappy?

MS. AKERS: And I had been kind of wandering around trying to figure out what to do next, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Not all that happy working.

MS. AKERS: No, no. And so anyway, so I thought, well, that would be interesting. Raul had been in Chicago, had gone to school in Chicago. So he said, I think you'll like it. But basically, I thought, well, I'll give it a try. I thought, well, maybe I can do something like dress design or something. Again, I was trying to be practical, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you had any art? I want to just jump back a little bit more to elementary school and junior high and high school. Had you had any art classes?

MS. AKERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No art classes at all?

MS. AKERS: No art classes at all. I mean, I always liked to draw and stuff like that. But no.

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd draw on your own.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah, as a kid, you know, but nothing serious and never in a class.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: So it was more like my own, sort of, copying things.

MS. RIEDEL: Landscapes or abstracts.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Any thoughts about color or anything then?

MS. AKERS: No, no. I think it was more like pencil drawings of things around me.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember any in particular? Anything that was exciting?

MS. AKERS: No, no. Windows and doors and —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh!

MS. AKERS: I can't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Some sort of architectural—

MS. AKERS: It was more like houses. It was more like houses. I think I've always been interested in architecture. And that was originally my plan, was to go to college and be an architect. And then I got sidetracked and went into pharmacy instead, because my girlfriend was going into pharmacy. And I thought, well, maybe I can go into pharmacy. It's only four years. And so, you know, it worked out fine.

MS. RIEDEL: But you were interested in architecture back then.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you just decided to be practical —

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and follow the pharmacy.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And I think that architecture is always in the back of my mind, you know. I think it has kind of surfaced somehow in my weaving, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. AKERS: Because I feel some of my weaving, not only the larger scale but even in general, I feel they are very architectural.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a continual sense that you might return to Spain? Or was there concern about your relatives in Spain?

MS. AKERS: Well, I was concerned — at the time when I came in '57 was the idea I was going to go back to Cuba. Because then I thought, I can always get a job there. I have connections. My mother — they knew people. And if I have a degree in dress design or in fashion or something, maybe I can get a job doing that, you know, instead of pharmacy. Well, that never happened. Because with the revolution, then I went back a couple of times to visit, and my parents were getting disappointed with the way the country was going, and then eventually they wanted to get out. And so I helped them get out. So my parents lost everything twice.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MS. AKERS: So it makes you very resilient, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Because I know it's possible to start all over again. And I think, you know, it's not something I would recommend.

[They Laugh.]

But I think it is something that influences how you see the world and how you see yourself and how you relate to other people. I think I'm more accepting of a lot of things, especially now that I'm older. When I was younger, I was much more critical. And I'm still very critical, but I'm more willing to accept people the way they are and things the way they are. And I'm more, in a way, permissive about accepting other people's ideas and ways to behave or ways to live without trying to change them.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were growing up, did your mom work at all as a seamstress?

MS. AKERS: Not really, no, only at the very beginning in Cuba when we were so poor. She supported the family. Because my mother — actually, my mother was originally born in Cuba, but they lived in Cuba for a short time. My grandfather had a farm and four kids, and my mother was the oldest. She was 12 when her mother died, my grandmother. And so they moved. My grandfather said, okay, let's move to Spain; let's go back to Galicia. Let's go back to Santiago, and then it will be easy to raise a family there. So he sold the farm, went to Santiago, and bought a hotel. And that's where the three sisters and brother lived. And that's the house I thought I would remember. My brother did remember when he went back to Spain. But anyway, that's the whole history.

Later on, it was easier for my mother to leave Spain and get into Cuba, because she was a Cuban citizen. And also then she could get a job. My father was Spanish. And that was in the '30s. There was a depression in America, you know, so it affected Cuba. So it was hard to get jobs.

MS. RIEDEL: Did your father have a profession in Spain that he had to give up?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah, he was an accountant —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: — and then had a shop. They had a shop in Spain.

MS. RIEDEL: In Spain?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: A dressmaking shop?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. AKERS: The shop was more about passementerie [ornamental trimmings], you know, like lace and ribbons.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: That was their expertise, lace and ribbon, and they had, of course, gloves and all kinds of — I don't know what would be the title of a shop like that. But then my mother made clothes, too. But it was more about products that they would buy and resell. And it was a very well-known little shop in downtown Santiago.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you sell at all yourself, or did you work in the shop?

MS. AKERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No, you were too small.

MS. AKERS: I was still little.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. I have pictures. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And do you have any recollection of doing that as a child, the sewing?

MS. AKERS: A little bit, a little bit. You know, my mother was kind of an interesting woman. She always felt because she had to do that, I should move on and do something better. So I did learn the basics with her. But basically, I learned more when I went to the Art Institute. I went to dress-design classes. And I really learned about tailoring and making things more properly, making patterns and stuff like that.

MS. RIEDEL: How did she feel about that when you followed in that?

MS. AKERS: She thought it was great.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, she did.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. She thought it was fine, because she never felt that she really had it together to do it well, although she was a great seamstress. She was a wonderful seamstress. But it was so very, sort of off, the top of her head, you know. I mean, she'd just make things up. She never felt that she knew how to do it. She just did it.

MS. RIEDEL: She just improvised as she went.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, that's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: A very creative woman. I think my mother was very creative and very open-minded. Everybody loved her. Everybody loved my mother. She talked with everybody. She liked everybody. And everybody came to her. And my aunts, they are all like that. The three sisters were like that. My other aunt, who's now dead, Rosario, she was like that, too. She had a flower shop in Santiago. Everybody came to her when they needed something. Like if the kid didn't go through in college on the one subject, they would go to her, because she would know somebody. I don't know what she did - [they laugh] - but they came to her for advice and solutions.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. A lot more than a flower shop.

MS. AKERS: Yes, that's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So then, was it difficult for your mom to be away from her family that way?

MS. AKERS: Well, I think it was; I think it was. But you know, it never showed.

MS. RIEDEL: She's so courageous to just pick up and move that way.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, and she liked Cuba; she liked Havana. And she liked the business they had there, because they were doing well. I think she was satisfied. And of course, they helped the revolution. They helped [Fidel] Castro get in power, like a lot of the middle class did, you know, because everybody thought, it's better to get rid of this — they had a dictatorship before, [Fulgencio] Batista.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So it was a good move, they thought, to get rid of this dictator. Well, they didn't realize that the country was going to become a communist country. And so that's a reason that, after a while, they decided they didn't want to stay. And then I got my brother out and his wife. It was very hard to get people out of the country.

MS. RIEDEL: But you had left before all of that change.

MS. AKERS: I was here. And at that point, I was already married, too. By the time my mother decided that they wanted to leave, I was married. Not that that made any difference, but, I mean, I was settled, you know. I was still in school. My husband was going to school. We had met at the Art Institute of Chicago, and we were married in 1960.

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name, Adela?

MS. AKERS: Frank Akers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And were you then a citizen? Did it make it easier to bring them?

MS. AKERS: Well, let me see. Actually, when I brought them, I'm not sure I was a citizen. No, I was not a citizen. No, not yet. It took me a while to decide to be a citizen. And I don't exactly know why. It was more romantic and emotional. I felt like, I feel very safe being here. I thought I was going to stay in this country. But I feel I didn't want to make a full commitment. So I was entitled to become a citizen. I had been here long enough. I had my green card, you know. I was a resident and came with a student visa, and then I became a resident. So that's the way the pattern works.

So I was a resident, and I was happy doing that. Then when my marriage broke up, when my husband left, then I felt a little insecure. Then I became a citizen; I learned to drive; and I moved out of Chicago — [they laugh] — all within a year. I moved to North Carolina, yeah. That's when I went to Penland [School of Crafts, Penland, NC].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay. So let's talk first about Chicago.

MS. AKERS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: So you've arrived in Chicago — 1957?

MS. AKERS: That's correct.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're not enrolled at the Art Institute yet.

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, you are?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So you've applied from Cuba?

MS. AKERS: I applied in Cuba. I got here in August.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have a portfolio? Did you need one?

MS. AKERS: I had my interview. I made up a portfolio before I left.

MS. RIEDEL: What was it?

MS. AKERS: I went to a couple of drawing classes. It was mostly drawing fashion, you know, drawings and stuff like that. They weren't very good drawings at all. But I think at that point the Art Institute was not so critical. So anyway, I was accepted. I went to my interview. I spoke very little English. But I did fine, I guess. They accepted me as a freshman. And the freshmen, you take everything, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: You just learn all the basics. And I just loved the school, but it was very hard.

MS. RIEDEL: Because your English was very limited.

MS. AKERS: My English was limited, and I loved art history, but I couldn't understand half of it. So that was an interesting phase, you know. Whenever in art history they had a project that we had to do assignments, I would always pick the assignments that had to deal with drawings, like sketches of buildings, of structures and stuff

like, that or bronzes, Chinese bronzes. It was all about finding the objects and do the drawings to present.

The first one, I think, was on architecture. And I just found a building that I kind of dissected in several phases. And everybody — I remember all the other students saying, why do you take the most difficult assignments? Because I don't speak the language, I couldn't just write anything, you know. I mean, I couldn't write something that would be acceptable as an essay for the theme of the courses that we were taking. So I always did some very elaborate assignments.

I remember that one time, I turned in this assignment, and then they were returning them. They had like a stage, and they put all the assignments alphabetically. And so I went to my line; mine wasn't there. I thought, oh, my gosh, something happened. And so another friend, American, she said, I'll go with you to the office. So we went to the art history office, and mine was up on the wall. They liked it so much that I thought, I don't believe this. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And it was drawing.

MS. AKERS: It was a drawing of a building, yeah. A very architectural drawing, you know. Just very simple line drawings, which is what I still do. I've never been very good at organic kind of drawings, like figure drawings and all that. I mean, I got through, and I did well, but I never felt like I was so good at that.

MS. RIEDEL: And with your interest in architecture already, it must have been extraordinary to arrive in Chicago.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, and great architecture in Chicago. And of course, I was living with this woman who was an architect, and her partner lived next door. So it was just a wonderful experience.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you remember thinking, early on? Anything particular? Any buildings in particular or anything that struck you?

MS. AKERS: Well, Mies van der Rohe had just opened his buildings on Lake Shore Drive, so that was very beautiful. And all the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in the Chicago area.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. AKERS: But I liked more of the older buildings, the ones that were more substantial, how they used the lines and space and materials. But the Mies van der Rohe was amazing. It was all glass, and it was all black, and it was just beautiful. I mean, I had never seen anything like that. And also being by the lake, you know. Chicago's a great city. I mean, I think it's a great city. And I still feel that way. I mean, I don't want to live there, but I'm glad I did. And whenever I go back, I realize I still have this tinge of that I belong there a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Because I feel like I grew up in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: It was my first home away from home. And I came on my own. I mean, I was living with somebody who I could use for my protection if I needed her, but I was pretty much on my own. And after two years, I moved by myself in my own little apartment and kept going to art school.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was teaching at the Art Institute?

MS. AKERS: Well, textiles was Elsa Regensteiner and Lorene Stone. I became very good friends with Lorene. She was like the assistant or part-time teacher. But she was very warm and loving. And I just felt she was wonderful. She rescued me. I didn't get along with Elsa Regensteiner very well. I was not by the book, you know. A lot of the students at the time who were taking weaving were more going into art education. I felt like I wanted to be an artist, weaving. And she kept saying, you can't make a living doing that. And I said, well, let me find out. And so Lorene was just wonderful. She kept saying, well, learn this, do this. She never said yes or no. She never, you know — she just — that's why I feel she rescued me.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were the classes? What classes did you take?

MS. AKERS: Well, I took a — let's see. My first year, of course, it was drawing and design. I had a wonderful design teacher and painting teacher, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember their names?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Dan Lane was my design teacher, and David Landis was my painting teacher. They were just

very wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular resonated with you?

MS. AKERS: Well, I feel that, to me, it was such a new experience, not knowing the language very well. I mean, I spoke some English but not enough to have a full conversation. So I had to depend on how people saw me or how people could relate to me without the language, you know.

David was wonderful. He would come around when I was trying to struggle with my paint. And then he would give me hints of, what about doing this? And he knew a little Spanish, so he would throw a word in Spanish in there or something. So he was very encouraging. He knew I was struggling, but he was very encouraging.

And Dan Lane, who I saw not so long ago, he's quite elderly now, but he's a wonderful artist. He had an incredible memory. And he was a wonderful teacher. Again, the same thing, I just felt so much encouragement in my first year in another country, in another city, in another media, dealing with trying to be an artist and not knowing how to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Weren't you originally drawn to ceramics during that time?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Then, in my second year, I started taking weaving and started taking ceramics. So it was part of my dress design kind of plans, see. You had to take electives, and the electives were weaving or ceramics. I took weaving, and then I took ceramics, then I dropped dress design in my second semester. I said, no, I have to concentrate on this to make a decision. And I was having a hard time making that decision, because I loved ceramics, and I still do. I liked the idea of being three dimensional and also felt that ceramics was so immediate. You put the clay on the wheel, and you touch it, and something happens, you know. With weaving, I felt it was so much more elaborate.

But then I learned that in ceramics, if you want to make something good, it is elaborate, too. It's not so simple. I just feel like the immediacy of the material is very fascinating to me. And I do love ceramics. I still look at ceramics a lot. But I thought I was closer to doing something more personal, more original in weaving. Why? I don't know. I just felt it. And I love the threads and the materials and all that.

So I decided to concentrate on weaving and become a weaver. I don't think at the time they even had a weaving major at the Art Institute. I'm trying to remember. Because I think I had to go on my own kind of thing and say, I'm going to take half the time in ceramics, half the time in weaving. And they thought it was totally odd. Nobody was doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was teaching? Do you remember the ceramics or the weaving?

MS. AKERS: Leah Balsham was teaching ceramics. And I'm trying to remember the main professor. I can't — I worked with her mostly. And I worked with her assistant Byron Temple, who became a very good friend.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MS. AKERS: And he was, again, my savior, you know. And also he became like a role model, because he did so well making some beautiful, functional ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: We remained friends until he died. I mean, I kind of followed him, because he stayed in Chicago. Then he went to London. He worked with Bernard Leach for years, and then he came back to the States and lived in Illinois and lived in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Kentucky. We kept going back to see him wherever he was. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So you finished at the Art Institute in 1960?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was your first introduction to weaving.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: You hadn't done anything before.

MS. AKERS: No, no, that was it. That's when I decided to go to Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: And you decided immediately to go to Cranbrook.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, well, I felt that I had explored all that was available to me at the Art Institute. And I had heard about Cranbrook. I had visited the school. And it had such a prestigious name and also was more like what I really had in mind. It was more like a place for an artist, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Because now you've given up the idea of fashion design altogether.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, totally, yeah. Have you ever been to Cranbrook?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. AKERS: Oh. Well, it's a very idyllic place, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: It looks — the photos are exquisite.

MS. AKERS: It's just beautiful. And you feel like, you know, you go there to be an artist. And so I was fascinated with the idea, and I applied, and I was accepted.

MS. RIEDEL: What drew you to Cranbrook? Why that particular school? Was it the faculty or the proximity?

MS. AKERS: It was — yeah. I had visited there. My friend in Chicago, Mary, her parents lived in Detroit [MI]. So by going to Detroit for all my holidays - whenever there was a holiday, I would go to Detroit to their house - then we always went to visit Cranbrook. And I so I thought, this is a wonderful place. And then, of course, I kept seeing the work that was coming out of Cranbrook at the time. And I thought, you know, this is what I'd like to be. This is where I can really become a professional weaver, no matter which way I go with my weaving. Because Marianne Strengell was also very interested in working with architects and doing more production-type fabrics.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: So the program was done very structured under her. But she allowed me to kind of go a little on my own kind of thing, because she knew I really didn't want to get a master's degree. I just wanted to work with her and work at Cranbrook.

So the first year, I took all the requirements, you know, which was design, and I forget what other courses we had. And then I wove all the time. I learned a lot from her and from everybody there. It's a school where you learn from each other.

MS. RIEDEL: The students, as well.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. It's more like a community, even though everybody is very private. And it's the first time I lived in a dorm. That was quite interesting. [They laugh.] I had my own room and everything. But you know, it still was kind of interesting. And I was married at the time. I just married before I went to Cranbrook.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So did you and Frank live in your dorm room?

MS. AKERS: No. He stayed in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. AKERS: I went to Cranbrook. Because I had applied, and then we decided to get married before I left. I said, okay, but I'm going to Cranbrook. And then eventually he moved, we moved, to Detroit. Actually, we moved to Birmingham, which is near Cranbrook.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Birmingham, Michigan. So then he worked for General Motors [Company]. I kept going to Cranbrook.

MS. RIEDEL: All right.

MS. AKERS: I developed a way of working there that I felt was fascinating. I mean, I worked on things that I never expected. I did some production line, because Marianne wanted me to try doing a line of fabrics kind of thing. And I did that for a little while. But I just —

MS. RIEDEL: Jack Lenor Larsen had been through there.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, was that part of the connection with the fabrics, or did that happen later?

MS. AKERS: Before I was — I can't remember. He must have been there before I went. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think so. Because Ed Rossbach, too, I think, was there.

MS. AKERS: Yes, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was there when you were there? Do you remember any of the other students?

MS. AKERS: The students?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: Mary Walker Phillips, she recently died. Let's see, in weaving, who else was there that stayed in weaving? See, some people just went and didn't stick with it, you know. I'm trying to think of other weavers there at the time that are still weaving — not many. It was a small program.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: A very small program. I think we were like 10 or 12 students, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And was Marianne doing commissions for architects at the time?

MS. AKERS: Yes, she was; yeah, yeah, she was. She was a wonderful person to have around, just amazing. She had such a presence that we always said, oh, here she comes. Walk through the studio, went into her studio in the back, and, you know, so she was more like an image of someone that you respect and admire.

MS. RIEDEL: She was such an active artist in her own right.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, right, yeah. So then she left, and she retired. And then Glen Kaufman came. And that was wonderful, because Glen was more like a contemporary. He had been in Denmark and had been in Scandinavian countries for a while. I think he went on a Fulbright [Program scholarship] and stayed longer or something. But it was wonderful to work with him, very wonderful. And in 1962, that was the first time my work was accepted in a big show in New York, and Glen was there, too. So it was an interesting thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that, Adela?

MS. AKERS: It was called "Young Americans 1962" [May 25 - September 2, 1962].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: It was at the American Craft Museum, which is now Museum of Arts and Design [New York, NY]. It was my first national exhibition. I had shown here and there but, you know, nothing major like that. So that was very exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Very exciting.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You're still in graduate school.

MS. AKERS: Right, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And my teacher gets accepted at the same time I did. And I'm trying to remember, another woman, another student who was very talented. I can't think of her name. She went into working for industry as a designer. She was a wonderful designer, but I can't think of her name right now. But anyway, the three of us got accepted in the "Young Americans '62."

And it was, again, you had to be a certain age. You couldn't be over 30, I think it was, or something like that. So we just made it. Glen and I just made it. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Did you go for the show?

MS. AKERS: No, we didn't. I didn't. I couldn't afford to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did you have in the exhibition, what piece? Was it a wall hanging?

MS. AKERS: I think I had a different wall hanging, but I can't remember exactly which one. I think I had done two pieces that had been shown at the Detroit Art Institute. And I thought, I'll send the one that I thought was the best for "Young Americans," and it got in. So it was kind of abstract kind of patterning.

MS. RIEDEL: Geometric?

MS. AKERS: Geometric. It was a panel about, maybe, like 40 by 36 inches, something like that, medium size. And it had inlaid of different threads.

MS. RIEDEL: Mostly jute, was it?

MS. AKERS: No, no. It was all kinds of fibers, like rayon and linen and some wool.

MS. RIEDEL: Because Marianne was working with so many different kinds of materials.

MS. AKERS: I know. And I think it was more her influence, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And I was mixing a lot of materials. We would buy yarns from many different companies and then try to work with them together, instead of, just, like now my work is so pristine; it's only one fabric, one line. But there, I was sort of mixing a lot of things, because I was dealing more with the texture.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, though, because even the new pieces with the combination of the metal, the horsehair, the texture still feels there to me, but it just feels very, very refined.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And I know you've always been interested in just paring things down to the essence.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yes, that's right.

MS. RIEDEL: So it seems to me that maybe that is something that's happened texturally.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. At the time, my work was very elaborate, really. I mean, it was all this layering that was sort of like, almost like embroidery, you know. But again, at the time there was a lot of Scandinavian influence, because we didn't have that many books to look at, and the books we had was mostly Scandinavian weavings. They did some beautiful patterning-type things. I felt like I was kind of dissecting that from those experiences.

Also because I have always liked to work with the loom, you know, I wanted a loom to produce the work for me. I wanted to use the loom as a tool. And to me, that was important.

MS. RIEDEL: And was that something that was common at Cranbrook?

MS. AKERS: Maybe, yeah. I think we all worked very differently, actually. It was interesting. We worked; we helped each other a lot. And because we had some big looms, it was hard to put the works on. So for me, it was nice to be in that kind of small group. We worked hours and hours. I mean, we worked like around the clock sometimes. And at that time, Cranbrook was a lot more primitive than it is today. We only had a little dye room downstairs, which is like a little kitchen. And that's where we did all our dyeing and just ran upstairs and dyed the stuff, and, you know, so it was a wonderful place to be.

MS. RIEDEL: And very exciting, very experimental.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And was there a lot of back and forth between the faculty and the students and textile industry or commissions?

MS. AKERS: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. AKERS: Not for me. No, I don't think so. No. I think what happened in that area is because people admired and loved Cranbrook who lived in the neighborhood, Bloomfield Hills and Birmingham [MI] and all of that, they liked to buy student work. We had shows, and people would come and buy the work. I did several commissions through that. I didn't sell the work at a show. But then someone goes, could you do a piece for our house? So I did some wall hangings, some room dividers. I did a big rug. That's another thing. We did rugs at Cranbrook, big, thick-pile rugs and flat rugs, too, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And what sort of materials?

MS. AKERS: Wool, it was all wool.

MS. RIEDEL: And woven.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, oh, yeah, woven on the loom, because we had those looms. We had a six-foot loom, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they actually intended to be functional?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And so even as a grad student, you were working on commissions.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And it sounds like they were mostly happy experiences.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yes. I've always done well with any commissions I've done, you know. I've been very lucky, because I hear horror stories about other people doing commissions and not doing very well or having a hard time with them. I have always done very well. I've always been pleased that somebody wants me to do a piece. And then what I do, I present the ideas. I present three or four ideas, and they pick one, and that's it. So there is no, well, could you do this in pink, or could you do this in yellow? No. This is it, and this is what you get.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you do a drawing of it?

MS. AKERS: I do drawings, and I do samples. So they can see what the fabric's going to look like, what the colors are going to look like, and then they see the final drawing of the piece, what it's going to look like. And there is no other way about it. I mean, there is only one possibility. So I usually then say, well, three or four designs, and then they have the liberty to pick one.

I did a commission three years ago here in San Francisco. The family had seen my work, and they said, well, how can we go about buying one of your pieces? I said, well, I can do a commission. They said, yeah.

So I went to their house, and I did that. I did four drawings to present to them, which actually was kind of interesting, because I had never drawn these pieces. And so I had to learn all over again. How am I going to draw all that hair and the metal and all that stuff? So I went to the art supply store and bought all these papers and inks and pencils and pens. So I had to teach myself how to draw my pieces, you know. So that was kind of fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Yes. And they were really nice people to work for, wonderful, wonderful. And I loved the piece they selected, and we installed it in their house. It looks great. And they always tell me — every once in a while, they write me a note: today the sun was out, or today was foggy and, you know, the light reflecting through, you know. So it's very nice. It's very satisfying. But it's always a little scary, commission. But I've always been very lucky.

MS. RIEDEL: One of the things that you mentioned earlier, I think, is that the commissions also offered you a wonderful opportunity to do things you might not have done otherwise —

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: — in terms of the larger pieces.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, especially when it's a larger scale. Like with corporations, it used to be much

larger then, and that was kind of exciting. Because it's hard to — sometimes I do larger pieces for my own, because I have the idea, and I have to do it. But then I know that nobody is going to be able to find space for this piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: It's eight feet wide or nine feet wide or 10 feet tall, you know. So it's more like indulging myself into doing something that I never find the place to put it. But every once in a while I still do that, and then the piece sits there for a long time until a client comes around, and they say, oh, yeah, we have the room for it, and we like the colors; I say, fine.

It does give me the opportunity to explore other possibilities, working on a commission. So it's challenging, too, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And so really, right from the start, from graduate days at Cranbrook, you were able to sell your work and collaborate with architects and interior designers.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. That's right, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And you finished at Cranbrook in '63?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And then moved back to Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anything else in particular about the time with Marianne Strengell or Glen Kaufman that really resonated with you?

MS. AKERS: No, it was just, again, having the fact that they were both very professional and very involved with their work, at the same time very supportive of the students, you know. I feel Glen was more of a teacher than Marianne. Marianne, you kind of learned from her more through osmosis, by being around and seeing what she did. She shared what she did with you. And every once in a while, you will have a critic [critique] of your work with her. But I think Glen was more dedicated to teaching than she was.

MS. RIEDEL: She definitely brought an interest in architecture, though, yes?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, yeah. And again, there's the Scandinavian sensibilities that Cranbrook had altogether.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm trying to think about where your first interest in light really came, because that seems like such an important part of your work. Did working with those mixed materials in Cranbrook spark an interest in that? Or do you remember a certain experience where you began to think about light and reflection off your work?

MS. AKERS: No. I think that came later. Yeah, that came later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: I remember the first time — this is maybe almost the '80s - that I started doing more things dealing with light and shadow, when I was doing those pieces that were accordion-shaped. I had just driven across country and seen all the mesas and the cliffs and the shadows and their reflection. It was so beautiful and so exciting. And so I wanted to do something with how the light moved across the pieces. And I think that's when the idea came about.

And then I thought, well, what if they are an accordion, then the light gets broken up, or it changes from side to side. I was driving by myself, so it was a lot of hours driving, and it's very beautiful. I've done it several times. I was fascinated: a sunset, you know, how the light reflects and moves and changes and creates all these shapes. So I thought, well, maybe I'd like to do something like that. But I felt like I needed the hard edge for the light to really travel and get broken by that hard edge. And that's when I started doing the accordion-format pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Okay, we'll get there. [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I jumped ahead.

MS. RIEDEL: That's good, that's good. We'll come back around to that.

MS. AKERS: Well, you asked me about the light.

MS. RIEDEL: No, it's good. No, I mean, it's important, I think, to figure out where and how that became clear. So from Cranbrook you went back to Chicago?

MS. AKERS: Back to Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: And when to Penland?

MS. AKERS: I stayed in Chicago — let's see — '62 — yeah, I stayed there for several years doing my work. I had a couple of part-time jobs. I was working, actually, with senior citizens, and that was kind of interesting. It was a nice thing to do. And they were very nice people to work for. One was near my house; I could walk there. The other one was not very far. So I had two jobs, and I was teaching weaving.

MS. RIEDEL: Where were you teaching?

MS. AKERS: At a senior center.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. Two senior centers, one near my house. As I said, I was living there in Chicago. And the other one was on the west side.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you doing commissions at this time, as well?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I kept doing my work and trying to get commissions, trying to sell my work, trying to show my work. But I needed to support myself, too, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: You did some fabrics for Jack Lenor Larsen, is that right? Or design something?

MS. AKERS: No, no, I didn't. No I didn't. I did some fabrics for designers that needed some fabrics. So I did some yardage, which was amazing. I can't believe I did that. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: You wove them.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I wove them. Yeah, yeah, I mean to their specifications. I think it was a fabric that they had discontinued. It was a linen fabric. It was white linen, it was beautiful, and it was very elaborate. And so I can't remember. It wasn't like 50 yards. It was maybe like 10 or 12 yards. It wasn't a lot of yards, but it was quite a bit for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. AKERS: That was kind of interesting. And the other one was more like an upholstery fabric. And again, it was something that they wanted. They wanted these other colors, that color. So they had the colorways that they wanted, and I wove it. And I think they probably gave me the materials. I can't remember that part.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you finding time to do your own work, as well?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Well, yeah, it all has to come together somehow, you know. Yeah, yeah. Well, I feel like those contacts were important, so it wasn't so much how much money I could make, but maybe, like, I could get better things by working with a designer who needed something, and then someday. And then another time, I got a job like that, and I gave it to somebody else. I found somebody who could do it, so I didn't have to do it. I took the responsibility and supervised it, but somebody else wove it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. That business background.

MS. AKERS: That's right. [They laugh.] I also was learning, too. Because I thought, you know, it doesn't matter. If I make half the money, it's fine, and then I have my time to do what I want to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So it was good.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a couple, two or three years there, and then, actually, before Penland there was Peru.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, in 1965 I went to Peru.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did that come about?

MS. AKERS: Well, it came about because there was a program - that was during the [President John F.] Kennedy years - called Alliance for Progress program. And what they were trying to do is help the Peace Corps volunteers, which was also part of the program, organize and sell the work that they were trying to produce there. The Peace Corps volunteers were trying to set up cooperatives with all the potters, weavers, or metal workers, whatever they did, you know, so they could work in a cooperative manner, so they could get all the materials together and, you know, get cheaper ways of packing and shipping the stuff and all that.

So they felt the next step was to have advisors to go and visit them. And my title was a weaving advisr. So somebody called me from New York and said, we are looking for this, and are you interested in going to either Colombia, Peru, or Bolivia? And I said, oh, I'm very interested. I would love to go to Peru.

So I went to New York for my interview and had my big portfolio with all my samples and stuff, all my weavings. And they said, yes, they wanted me to do it. So they called Washington [D.C.], and the guy from Washington came. And then they flew me back for my final interview. And I went, yeah. That was wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Where in the country were you? And what were you doing?

MS. AKERS: Well, I was basically up in the mountains.

MS. RIEDEL: So in the Andes?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And around Ayacucho, or do you know?

MS. AKERS: No, I was north; not many people know of the northern part of Peru, near Chiclayo.

MS. RIEDEL: Not Trujillo, because that's more on the coast, you know.

MS. AKERS: It was inland. The little town was called Chota.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: But it was closer to — I'm trying to remember the bigger town that we flew to [Chiclayo]. I can't remember. I flew to this town, and then we took a bus that took forever to get to Chota, which is where I was to make contact with the Peace Corps volunteer there who was working with these weavers. There was one little hotel there, and I stayed there, hardly anything to eat there. I mean, it was very poor, very, very poor. The weavers were wonderful and were all women. The women were the weavers in that region. You know, there are different areas. It wasn't too far from Cajamarca.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Only in Chota, the ponchos were red. In Cajamarca, they were rust. We flew to Chiclayo. And there was a Peace Corps volunteer, like a rep, who was in that town. And so he gave me all the information and put me on the bus. I was with my husband then. He put us on the bus and drove there forever. Got there late at night and found the hotel. There was only one hotel and one room available and no windows.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they weaving on looms?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes, they weave outside. It was just beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Were these the backstrap looms?

MS. AKERS: Yes. Beautiful country, just beautiful country. I just loved it there. It was so wonderful. And the guy I was working with - Tom Brazil was his name - he was wonderful. He was a painter, but he did a wonderful job working with those weavers. So he took me to see the weavers. And so we tried to organize something. And I don't know what came out of it. We did some work.

MS. RIEDEL: So were you looking at traditional weaving techniques and helping them figure out new products they might be able to weave?

MS. AKERS: Yes. We also taught them how to make them more saleable. They did these big bedspreads. And there was also the inlay, that kind of patterning that I knew a lot about, and my work showed that work. But it's interesting the way they process the work. It was so fascinating how they worked. The women who do the weaving, they don't know how to plan the pattern. They pay somebody to plan that for them. They have a very good system, organized to hire different people to do different chores.

MS. RIEDEL: So do they, for example, have an idea of what they want it to look like, but they don't know how to make it?

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: And I think they are all very traditional patterns. Actually, it's patterns that you could even see in another country. They are very logical patterns that happen in weaving. You know, you go two, you go four, you go six, you go eight, you know, kind of stepladder-type things. And they create all these diamonds and stuff. I wish I had something to show you, but I don't.

So anyway, I was just trying to figure out, okay, how can we market these bedspreads so that they match, and the things look well all the time. So I was kind of brainstorming about how to break it up so that if the line didn't match, it was okay, because there was space in between.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, it was an interesting kind of thing to explore. And then I was trying to do place mats, smaller kind of items that would be easier to sell and to produce and all that.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they interested in this idea?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, they were interested. They needed the money. They were interested in selling. One problem working with people like that in a small town that's very remote is that they depend a lot on the middle man. I felt that we couldn't eliminate that contact, because when the Peace Corps volunteers go home, then they're back on their own.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And they are not so willing to be working in a cooperative. I think weaving is more of an isolated kind of an activity. The potters did a little better working in cooperatives. They felt each one had their own special technique. They were all identical, but they felt they were all different, you know. "Oh, no, my clay is better than his clay." So the potters did a little better, you know, organized as a cooperative so that they could work together, use the same kilns, and then produce more work, and be able to ship it all together in one big truck instead of taking a bundle to the market.

But the weavers, it was very hard. It was very hard because the competition was with Asia, where they can produce it for a third of the price, and big production. And the one time that the big shots came from New York to talk with me, we had this big meeting and a couple of other artists, too. They said, well, how much can you produce of this? I said, well, it all depends when the potatoes are planted. I mean, they're farmers. They do this on the side, so it's not a full-time job. So the woman is pregnant, or the baby is sick or something. They live in little huts, all mud floors, and if it's raining too much, they can't work, because they work outside. They work under the eaves of house so that it's shady.

But they are just wonderful people. And so beautiful. Peruvians are very beautiful people. And so I liked working with them, but it was a little frustrating. And then I went south. I went to Puno and Chicuito, and that's when I met my friends the Zagars. And they were the best Peace Corps volunteers ever.

And so with them, I was able to make a little more progress. There the men were the weavers, and the women —

MS. RIEDEL: Is this on Lake Titicaca?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: On - what's the island, Taquile? It had an island in the middle of the lake, and the men are weavers; they walk around spinning the —

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah. I'm trying to remember the name of the island. They live right by Lake Titicaca.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. AKERS: Chicuito is right by Lake Titicaca where they lived. And they had this big place. They were setting up cooperatives, and they did very well. They put it all in their hands. They even had a board. It had a president, an accountant, everything. Some of them could read and write.

MS. RIEDEL: What were they making?

MS. AKERS: They were making — that's where they do the fabric that is made out of alpaca and llama.

MS. RIEDEL: Vicuña?

MS. AKERS: No, the vicuña is kind of almost extinct.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: But there was alpaca, and there was mostly llama. Llama is very coarse.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And wool, lots of sheep. So they wove these blankets and these robes and stuff. And also, the women did a lot of knitting and crocheting, beautiful work, just beautiful work.

MS. RIEDEL: And who actually made those reed boats? Because those were —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yeah. That was another thing. I don't think we ever got into that at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, completely separate group.

MS. AKERS: Because it's not something that — nobody could figure out how to use that process -

MS. RIEDEL: Right, how to export that —

MS. AKERS: - as something that could be exported, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. AKERS: So it was mostly concentrated on the weavers. So it was wonderful there.

MS. RIEDEL: So that felt more productive?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it felt more productive. Many times, I went to Huancavelica [Peru], which is a wonderful town, too. She was working - the woman there who was a Peace Corps volunteer - she was working with these women who did knitting. They knitted these sleeves to put over their clothes to protect their clothes. They wear rags, but they have to be protected. And so they weave these very wonderful sleeves to go over their clothes when they are working so that they protect their clothes. And they were beautiful. So we tried to produce them to bring them as socks without feet.

MS. RIEDEL: Leggings?

MS. AKERS: Like leggings, but they were short, you know. And so, I don't know if anything ever happened, but it was just a great town.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this when you became familiar with some of the wonderful pre-Colombian weaving techniques?

MS. AKERS: No, no. I had studied that on my own when I was in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MS. AKERS: There was a wonderful book by Raoul d'Harcourt on pre-Columbian techniques [*Textiles of Ancient Peru and Their Techniques*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962]. That's when I started exploring all the possibilities, all the techniques. But my interest was there, you know. And that's the reason I think I wanted to go to Peru, but nobody was doing those techniques there, and they hadn't been for many years.

MS. RIEDEL: And completely lost, you know. Yeah.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. But it still was a — I just felt like I didn't want to work for the State Department any longer. My contract was for three months, and I stayed an extra month just to finish up my projects that I had been working on. They wanted me to come back for a year, and I said no. No, I really don't want to do that. I just felt some of their approach was not right.

And also, I had a lot of questions and misgivings about the whole idea. I liked the idea of setting up cooperatives and helping them work together, but if there is nobody there to supervise that activity, it's very hard to keep it going, you know. And they are very independent, which I respect, and I liked. So I felt like, I cannot change their

lifestyle, and I cannot be there all the time. But I learned a lot. It was a wonderful experience. I met some wonderful people. It was great, but not the thing I wanted to continue for any longer than that. I was ready to leave.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was all very much functional work?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, yeah. Also, you know, we worked, too. I worked with a group in Lima [Peru] out in the barrios. They were doing embroidery on these pieces of cloth that came from Puno [Peru], from the south where they produce this cloth. They call it *balleta*. It's just a very simple, natural-color wool. And they use it for everything — scrubbing floors or wrapping the baby [laughs] or whatever needs to be done. That's the thing that's kind of amazing when you're in a country like that. This, again, was in '65. I think things have changed by now.

But in '65, it was cheaper to produce a bag, hand-woven bag, than to go and buy a piece of cloth in the market. They had the wool, they had the knowledge, and they had all these sacks made out of hand-woven material. They just wove them to put the corn in there or their belongings or whatever. I would come back to Lima with these bags, and the guys at the hotel didn't even want to carry them, because it was Indian stuff, you know. And I said, well, you have to carry them to my room. So they did.

They were beautiful. I lost them because of the moths. They were wonderful. Sometimes they had a stripe in the middle, or sometimes they were the brown alpaca. They were just amazing. It was mostly llama and alpaca, because they were such strong fibers. Alpaca is a very strong fiber. It has very long hairs. But you imagine them spinning and weaving these things to use them like shopping bags, you know, to go in the market. And I don't know if that's still there or not. I don't know if that has disappeared. Now they have plastic bags for everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I don't imagine that's still going on.

MS. AKERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: When you left there, was there anything you took away with you that began to immediately affect your own weaving, or it was really pretty separate? Were there any designs or any textures, anything that —

MS. AKERS: No, no, not necessarily designs. No. I think I wanted to get back to my weaving. But I don't think it was influenced by what I saw there or what I did there. I think I continued on my own trend. At this point, my work was beginning to influence my own work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So it was sort of like my work was informing my work. I remember doing a piece right after I came back, very bright colors, wool, all wrapping threads and stuff. It was very elaborate. I don't know where that went.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they working with bright colors down there, or was it pretty much monotone, very subdued?

MS. AKERS: No, very bright, very bright. They like bright colors.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And the commercial dyes were there.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: So that was beginning to get into the commercial dyes, which they loved. And one thing that was happening, too, because if they had any little money, then they would like to buy this cheap, sort of nylon-rayon fabrics for their skirts instead of their wool skirts. That was a sign of wealth, you know, to be able to buy fabric and not have to weave it.

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

[END DISC 01 TR 02.]

So after four months in Peru, you headed back to Chicago.

MS. AKERS: Back to Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: It was '65.

MS. AKERS: That's right, '65.

MS. RIEDEL: And you went back to doing your own work, commissions?

MS. AKERS: Just doing my own work and getting commissions, I mean, trying to get back, you know, it takes awhile. But at least I felt like I had finished that phase of the experience of going to Peru and all that. And I could give lectures on it and stuff like that. So it was good. It was a good thing to have.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you teaching at all?

MS. AKERS: No, I wasn't teaching. No, I wasn't teaching at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you interested in teaching?

MS. AKERS: I was, but it wasn't something that I was planning to do. It was something that I thought, well, I can always give a workshop or a lecture. I actually liked to lecture more than teaching. Then I did get into teaching later on.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: But at that time, I just felt like, I don't need to teach. I was doing just my work and trying to support myself with that. And so after coming back from Peru, they had paid me pretty well, so I knew I had a little money saved. And my husband was doing okay. He had a job. So I just continued doing my work.

Then this opportunity came to go to Mexico. This company, they are photographers in Chicago; Hedrich Blessing [Photographers] is a company in Chicago. I don't know if they're still in business or not. But they were commercial photographers, architectural photographers. And what they did every year for their clients, they used to find a craftsman in the Chicago area and ask them to produce something for their clients as a Christmas present. So I couldn't do that, because I didn't do production.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But they said, well, how would you like to go to Merida [Yucatan] and do something there? And I said, oh, that sounds interesting. So I went to Merida with one of the owners' wives; I can't remember her name. We went there, and they had a contact there with people who owned this hotel where we stayed. And the son said, well, I can take you to see some weavers if you want.

MS. RIEDEL: So you just went there not even knowing if you —

MS. AKERS: Not even knowing what I was going to find. And I said, well, I learned in Peru that when you want to find where the weavers or potters are or whatever, you go to the market. You go to the market, and you see the products that they are selling, and you see who are the best ones, what talent is, or where this is from. This is from here; this is from there, you know. And so we found this group of people who were selling their stuff in the market. It was all made out of sisal. And so the guy who was with me, I said, do you know where it is? And he said, oh, yeah. It's a little village. It's about an hour away. And we can go there. And I said, okay.

So the next day, we went in the car and went over to this village. We asked who was the best weaver. And so we went to the best weaver, and she showed me what she did. I said well, you know, I'd like to work with you and the other weavers. And everyone said, oh, yeah. Well, the weavers started coming out of the woodwork, you know. They all weave on the backstrap looms. And I said, okay, I have to plan this whole thing. I have to buy the sisal, dye it in the colors I want, and then show them how to make them all the same size.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this something that you had designed and proposed to Hedrich Blessing, and then he said —

MS. AKERS: They said, well, whatever you want to do, we'll go for it. And I said, well, this is what I propose to do.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was it?

MS. AKERS: It was to make these place mats that were actually very Scandinavian. It was a very plain weave, but it was all sisal, all hand-spun sisal in dark blue and olive green and in gold and in red. There were four different colors. And they were all the same, each set of four with the same color, and supposedly were the same size. [They laugh.] And that was a trick.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, I went home and started planning the whole thing in Chicago. I told them how I was

going to do it. And they sent me back by myself to this hotel. I said, well, I need to buy lots of sisal, and I need to find a place to dye it. Well, thank God, there was a chemical engineer staying at the same hotel, from Mexico City. And he said, you know, I'm waiting for all this equipment to come, so I can help you with the dyeing. I know these dyers who have a plant. And so I said, well, that sounds wonderful.

So we went and met with this family. There were two brothers who owned this dye plant. They were Lebanese.

MS. RIEDEL: Lebanese?

MS. AKERS: Yes, Lebanese. And they had this incredible operation for dyeing sisal.

MS. RIEDEL: This is right in Merida?

MS. AKERS: Right in Merida, right in the town. I mean, it was amazing. You know, I always feel like I have a good star watching out for me, because good things happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, this guy and I, we sat down, and he had a little lab. We set up the colors. We designed the colors, and we took little notes. And we came with the gold and with the green and with the blue and with the brown. So we had four colors. And so now we had to take it to the dyers, and how many pounds of each we want on each color. That kind of stuff. So we did it.

MS. RIEDEL: How many were you making?

MS. AKERS: I can't remember — hundreds. [Laughs.] Because I think each client was supposed to get four or six, and I can't remember how many clients. There were at least 50 or 80 clients. Lots of them.

The one nice thing that happened with this project, more than anything else, is that the second time I went back to visit with the weavers and see how they were doing, I had to design little sticks for them to measure the size. I took little twigs and cut them, marked them, this is the size for each placemat, and this is the width, you know. And the width was set up by the loom.

I came to this one weaver's house, and the whole family was involved. The husband who had been away forever — you know, husbands leave. In Latin America, the husbands disappear. Either they go to the bar, or they go someplace else. The husband was involved; the brother was involved, the sister, and the little kids. Everybody was doing something. It was either twisting the fibers or cutting the fibers or getting the other loom ready. Looms started to appear. They were only sticks, but still they had to be made strong enough to hold the yarn. That's the part that I never anticipated.

MS. RIEDEL: So they were actually making looms on which to make the place mats?

MS. AKERS: That's right. Some of them did, because they realized that they had to produce more. And in order to produce more so they can make more money — see, we paid them by piece, I think. I can't remember. We must have paid them by the piece.

MS. RIEDEL: So these weren't something that — these couldn't be woven as a long piece and then cut into pieces?

MS. AKERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: They all had to be done on smaller looms.

MS. AKERS: That's right. It was a backstrap loom, and they had to set up the warp. I don't know if they made two in the same warp, maybe. Because the fibers of sisal are very long. They're like three feet long, you know. But I think they wove one at a time. It was an amazing job.

MS. RIEDEL: So this whole village — well, it was the town of Merida.

MS. AKERS: No, no, no. It was a little village outside Merida, called Huhi.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. The whole village basically turned into a placemat production company for a short period of time.

MS. AKERS: I know, I know. And somebody told me, years later they went to the market, and they found some of those colors. Because it wasn't their colors. And in retrospect, I should have used their colors instead of trying to make it more sophisticated. I mean, I just came from a different place in my life. I thought it was fine to have

these weavers weave something that looked like it came from Denmark or Germany. [Laughs.] But anyway, it worked out fine, you know. And they made some good money. And then we had them shipped. And then they designed boxes in Chicago. They had a photograph of me with the weaver, of course. It was pretty interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: That is pretty interesting. That's actually pretty wonderful for a big company to want to do something like that as a holiday gift.

MS. AKERS: I'll show you a box. Yeah, yeah, I thought it was a nice idea. I mean, they spent tons of money. They flew me there three times, I think. Three or four times, I forget.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you know if that had any lasting impact on that community? Or was that one of the things that you were concerned about in Peru - it arrives; it happens; it departs?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. Maybe because they are not — they weren't weaving that much anymore. I would go around the village. Because I'm fluent in Spanish, I could talk with everybody. I said, where's the weaver here? Oh, there's one around the corner. I mean, it's a village, and there are no streets. It's all dirt. Oh, so and so, Marianna, she weaves, you know. And so we would find Marianna. No, I haven't woven in a long time, but I have my loom, and she would drag her sticks from under the bed. And so she could weave. So they were all weaving again. But I don't think they continued. It would be a nice thing to think about, but I doubt it.

MS. RIEDEL: So that — how long did that project take, Adela?

MS. AKERS: Oh, it was several months. I'm trying to remember. It was hot. I went when it was hot, but it's always hot in Merida. So it was summer; it was summer. And the thing was for Christmas; it was for December. So I think it took probably three or four months to get the whole thing done. And then they boxed them and gave them away and stuff. But it was kind of interesting, you know. It was one of those things.

And also, I realized how much I had learned in Peru by doing this. Because I knew how to do it. I knew how to go find a market and go to the market and find the weavers, find what town they came from and go to that town and then finding there were more weavers, and who was the best. And everybody knew who was the best. I thought that was interesting, who was the best weaver.

MS. RIEDEL: And they'd all agree on a single person or a single family?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. AKERS: But then I had several weavers. I don't know how many weavers there were anymore, you know. Because after a while, when we went to pick up the place mats, they would always be in the same place, but they were not all woven there. There were different people weaving them. And we had to have our quality control. Sometimes when they were no good, we had to reject them. So that was kind of hard. But they knew. They knew they had to be all the same. I think it made sense to them. They didn't like it, but it made sense to them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. AKERS: And I taught them how to finish the edges and, you know, stuff like that. So it was pretty neat. But what I liked the best is that the whole family became involved.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did you get then — returning to Chicago — how did you get to Penland?

MS. AKERS: Okay. So I come back to Chicago after Mexico, doing that whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: This is '66, '67?

MS. AKERS: Sixty-six, yeah, '66. Sixty-seven, I wove my first big black-and-white shield — I call it *Shield* — and that was the beginning of that series of working in double weave and also making the pieces concave and all that.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you been introduced to Lenore Tawney's work already?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I had been introduced to her work when I first came to Chicago. She wasn't there anymore, but her spirit was still there and also all her influence, because she was the only person, the only artist, weaving and making art. So yeah, it was a big inspiration to know that she's somewhere. She was in New York by then, but when I got to Chicago in '57, she had just left. Everyone said, have you ever met Lenore? So I did get to meet her later but not at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. AKERS: No, I was just doing my work. Then my marriage broke up in '67. So I stayed until '68 in Chicago, continued doing my work, but not sure where to go next. And then Penland came up.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that come about?

MS. AKERS: I think somebody must have recommended me or something. They called me to see if I wanted to teach a two-week session. A friend of mine, actually a woman I knew from Cranbrook, Joyce Chown, a Canadian weaver, she was visiting. And she said, oh, Penland is a great place. You should go. So I said, okay, two weeks. You know, even if I don't like it, I can handle two weeks anywhere.

So I went there, and I just loved it. It was the best thing that's ever happened to me. So I went there and taught my two weeks. And then I heard that they had a resident program, artist-in-residence program. So somebody said, you know, maybe you could do that if you want to. Because I didn't know what I was going to do at the time. I talked with the director, Bill Brown.

MS. RIEDEL: Bill Brown?

MS. AKERS: Bill Brown was there. And I said, I hear you have an artist-in-residence program. How do I apply? He said, just come. I said, when? He said, anytime, whenever you want. I said, okay. So I said, I have to go home and get rid of my house — I had an apartment; I didn't have a big house, you know — and pack up my stuff and come back. He said, okay, let me know when you're ready. We're ready for you whenever you want.

So that was wonderful, because it's what I needed, too. I had no idea when a marriage breaks up, and you're in limbo, you know. I had no idea what was going to happen. I thought we were going to be together for the rest of my life, and it didn't last but seven years. So I thought, okay, well, I just have to figure out what to do next. So I got rid of all my stuff and put some things in storage, my looms in storage, and some of my belongings; the rest I sold or gave away. And I learned to drive and bought a car.

So I called Bill Brown. I said, okay, I got my car; I got all my things. What else? He said, just fill it up and come.

MS. RIEDEL: How long did it take from the time you had left to get back?

MS. AKERS: From the time I left where?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, from Penland, you went, and you said —

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah. I spent that whole summer. What did I do? I left Penland. And actually, I went to California with a friend. And then I got back to Chicago, and I packed everything. So I think I moved to Penland maybe in September.

MS. RIEDEL: So it took about three months.

MS. AKERS: About three months, two or three months, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Bill just said, come and stay for a year.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I said, I got my car. He said, just fill it up and come. [Laughs.] I took my little sewing machine, because they have plenty of looms there. So it was a great move. It's such a great place.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Because also they gave me a home, you know. I felt like I had a home. I was not a country girl, so I had a little bit of hesitation about that. And some of my friends said, not a good idea, not a good idea; you're going to be so isolated; you'll fall apart, and you'll have a nervous breakdown. I said, no, no, no, I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there a lot of artists surrounding —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, there were about 10 of us. But we had different houses, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And not all weavers. You had clay artists.

MS. AKERS: Oh, no, no. There were two weavers. Let's see, was Edwina there? I can't remember if Edwina was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Bringle — Edwina Bringle?

MS. AKERS: Yes. I can't remember if she was there as a resident at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: No, I think she was still in Tennessee. But she came, you know; she came and visited and stuff. We were — Katie and Billy Bernstein and Tom Suomalainen. The Bernsteins were glass; Suomalainen was ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry?

MS. AKERS: Ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Ron Probst, he was ceramics. Jane and Mark Peiser, whom I had known from Chicago, and we ended up being residents at the same time. I lived downstairs from them. I had a nice farmhouse to live in. And then other people came later, but that first year, I think that was it. Was Ron there — Ron Garfinkel and his wife? So it became like my family, you know. We did things together and not together sometimes. And also Betty Oliver was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Did they have any equipment for you at all?

MS. AKERS: They had looms. They had all the stuff I needed. They had a whole loom room, because they didn't have classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so there are no students, right.

MS. AKERS: That's right. In the summer then I had to move out into my house, and then I usually travel and did other things, you know. And sometimes I taught a class. So it was just great. I mean, it was also what I needed. And through Penland I met lots of people.

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd just work all day. Could you describe what it was like back then?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I've always been sort of a night person, until I started teaching. When I started teaching, I became a morning person because I had to be awake in the morning. So there I was. My time was mine, you know. There was no structure. It was my own structure, so that was kind of interesting trying to figure out, when do I want to get up, when do I want to face the world? I would go to the loom room, and I would have like four looms going. Each loom had a different thing, because it was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: What a luxury that must have been.

MS. AKERS: And I was trying to do some production, so I could sell some scarves and little bags and things like that and pillows. So I thought there was a gallery in Asheville [NC] where I could send stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Penland didn't have a gallery.

MS. AKERS: No, they didn't have a gallery there. They had just like a little space downstairs. They didn't have a gallery. So anyway, it was just great; I'd just weave. But you know, the days would become longer and longer, because then I started reading and would be reading until three in the morning. And I thought, oh, my God, you know, three or four in the morning. So I'd get up at 10. And so I said, no, no, I have to schedule myself a little differently. [Laughs.] So I started just getting up more at the normal time, seven or eight in the morning, because I like the mornings. And it's so beautiful there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: But it was interesting for a while, just, I could do anything I wanted, anytime I wanted. And so it was good. Then I traveled some. Like whenever I could get a workshop near Chicago or someplace else, I would go, just to get out of there and also to keep in touch with other people. And so I would be invited to go and do a lecture or a workshop, and I would do that and come back, you know. And so I did a little bit of that, or go away to New York. I went to New York one time. Saw friends in Philadelphia [PA], the Zagars in Philadelphia, and then went on to New York. So I stayed a few days. I can't remember if I went maybe at Christmas or in the summer. I think we were there at Penland in the winter at Christmastime.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you have the loom room to yourself?

MS. AKERS: Yes. The whole room was mine. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And how long did that go on for?

MS. AKERS: Two years. The first year I had the whole loom room. Then the second year, they opened the barns, which was designed for studios, for residents. So then I had my own separate studio upstairs. That was wonderful, because it was beautiful down there, very quiet. And it was just across from my house. So it was just a little walk to the barn. The only bad thing is, like, I was above the potters, and there was all that dust coming through the wood. But it was nice to have all that space and the light and just having my own two looms. I had two looms there. And so that's what I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And the dye shed was there. So would you actually use that, too?

MS. AKERS: I didn't use it much, no, no. I was more depending on the color of the yarn that came in. I wasn't doing a lot of dyeing then.

MS. RIEDEL: And is it the same artist-resident space that they have now, that two-story sort of barn?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It was the same space.

MS. AKERS: It was the same space.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Inside, they've changed the arrangement of walls and stuff. It used to be very barren, you know. It was, downstairs were the potters; upstairs it was just me and a little gallery in the back.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But that was a long time ago — '68.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a nice, bright space.

MS. AKERS: Oh, it was beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And also they had a series of little apartments across the way for some residents.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes.

MS. AKERS: Like Geraldine Scalone, she came in the second year. Bill applied for an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant. So he got a few other artists, visiting artists, to come and stay, and she was one of the ones who came. And I forget who the others were. There were a few. Oh, Cynthia Fick. She goes by her maiden name now, Cynthia Homire. But I think at the time she was Cynthia Fick.

MS. RIEDEL: And was it very communal? Would you all get together for meals? Was there a lot of exchange of ideas?

MS. AKERS: Every once in a while; it wasn't structured at all. Some of us would get together and watch TV, something that was going on. You know, one person had a TV with antenna that we could watch. [Laughs.] We couldn't even get radio there very well.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It is really out there.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it is out there. But it was wonderful. For me, it was quite a learning experience to know that I could do it. Because I thought, I'm not sure about this, you know. And it was very hard. It was very hard at times, and it was very lonely at times. Because also everybody else was a lot younger and hadn't experienced what I had experienced. And so it was sort of like making new friends, which was good. And we did some fun things together, went to concerts sometimes. It was great.

MS. RIEDEL: It is very isolated, though. I mean, you just spent a lot of time working.

MS. AKERS: That's right. It was a place to work. And it was an idyllic situation. Also because I didn't have to worry about finances. They didn't give me money, but I could charge anything I wanted to the school. I tried not to. I tried to pay as I went along. But at the end, then I paid whatever I owed. But it was nice that they gave you that freedom.

MS. RIEDEL: So you could charge materials to the Penland account and have them and then pay them when you could.

MS. AKERS: Yes, that's right.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, that was wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: That went on for a couple of years.

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was no stipend, but all your materials could be covered.

MS. AKERS: That's right. That's the way it used to be. I don't know how it is now. Yeah, it was great. And also then — I forget. I could even charge food if I wanted to. I tried not to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: So they really took a lot of the anxiety out of day-to-day life so you could focus on work.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I always felt, well, I still have to pay, you know. At the same time, I didn't have to deal with it right then on a day-to-day basis. And it gave you the freedom, but it also gives you the responsibility. Where I come from, you don't acquire debt unless you can pay it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And so I felt responsible; I have to come through, that I'd have to do well with my work. So I tried to do things to produce work. And I did do some work for the school whenever they needed me. I taught a couple of classes; in that way they didn't have to pay me, you know. I was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And so did you experiment much with your work during this period of time? Or were you really working on making things that you thought you could sell in order to generate some income?

MS. AKERS: No, no, no. I was doing some very, very large pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: I did this giant white piece — black and white. I was going through my black-and-white and gray phase. That's the reason I wasn't doing that much dyeing. After I moved from Chicago, I had just finished two pieces. They were both black and white. And then I got there, and I started doing other pieces and introducing maybe a little bit of gray, a little bit of black, you know. But basically, it was all working with a linear kind of patterning and double weave, a lot of double weave, and using the loom a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were going to be hanging freely in a room?

MS. AKERS: One of them was hanging freely. It was a black-and-white piece. It really was like a big panel. And what I did, I wove, like, long legs that would stick out, long strips that stick out. So when it hung, they draped down onto the floor. It was like eight feet tall, you know. I think a friend of mine has that piece in Pennsylvania somewhere, unless he had a flood and it went away. [Laughs.] So yeah, it was a wonderful, big piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what it was called? Were you titling the pieces back then?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And it's funny, because I was looking for that, and I couldn't find it.

MS. RIEDEL: And the material —

MS. AKERS: The one I did before, which is the first piece I did in '67 that became part of the American Crafts Museum collection, is called *Shield of the New Standard*. Because it was this shield in black and white, it's a concave piece. Now, this other one, I wish I could remember, but I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: It may occur to you.

MS. AKERS: Maybe, yeah. It was a wonderful piece. I don't even know if I have a photograph. I must have. Yeah, I think I have a photograph. I'll look for it to see if maybe then the title will be there. I may have a slide of it somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the first time when you really — I know you've gone back and forth in scale in extreme ways. Was this the first time that you really were able to do that?

MS. AKERS: To work that large?

MS. RIEDEL: At Penland, to go from smaller pieces to larger pieces, all through a pretty short period of time.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, well, I was working somewhat large, but it was like six by six feet, you know, or five by six. And then there, I had the high ceilings in that barn.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And I thought, oh, this is great. I can hang something from way up there. I never had such high ceilings. So, yeah, it must have influenced the idea that I could do something that tall.

MS. RIEDEL: And more three-dimensional than flat?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. But then I continued on that theme a little later, when I went into the sisal and jute pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And what material were these pieces?

MS. AKERS: These were wool.

MS. RIEDEL: All wool.

MS. AKERS: Wool, yeah. It was a very rough, stiff wool I used to get from Sweden that had cow hair in it, so it made it a little stiffer, you know, rougher. And it came in black or in white. I got it from a company in Chicago, actually. A woman from Sweden used to import it.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you having any exhibitions at this point in time?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, a few here and there, not major. Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. If I go back on my resume, I [can] see where was I showing in 1967, '68, '69. Sometimes my resume doesn't go that far back.

MS. RIEDEL: This is pretty early.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So that went on through '70.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And I did show some in North Carolina, you know. There was "Appalachian Corridors," I forget [what] it was called ["Appalachian Corridors: Exhibition 1." Charleston Art Gallery, Charleston, WVA, March 29 - April 28, 1968], and in Winston-Salem there was a show. Actually, that's how that piece, that shield, was purchased. It was a show called "Objects USA" [Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, October - November 16, 1969, and travelled, ending at Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY, June 9 - September 3, 1972].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MS. AKERS: It was — what was his name? Norton?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. It will come to me.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, anyway —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: He came —

MS. RIEDEL: Lee Nordness [curator of "Objects: USA"].

MS. AKERS: Nordness. I knew that it started with an N — Nordness.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: He came to the show, which I think it was in Winston-Salem, and saw my piece and then acquired several, not only my piece, acquired several pieces in that show and became part of an exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so that toured with that exhibition.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And so then it was acquired by the museum. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did you make that? That was when you were in Penland?

MS. AKERS: I wove that in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: In Chicago.

MS. AKERS: Just before I left Chicago, I wove that and another piece, another piece that had black squares. It was all white. It was a white shield with all these black squares. Somewhere I have those pictures.

MS. RIEDEL: Did that show bring a lot of attention to your work, "Objects USA"?

MS. AKERS: I don't know. I don't know. It was a good thing to tell people about it and to have it on the resume, but I don't know if the show itself did that much. You know, it's always hard to tell where the implications of a show or a program, or how many people see it, or what did it make them do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So I don't know for sure. I was very excited, because they bought the piece outright, and, you know, it's a piece I really liked a lot. And I thought, you know, this should be in a good collection.

MS. RIEDEL: If you think back on Penland and Cranbrook and the Art Institute, and your time in Latin America as well, is there anything that stands out as really an especially profound educational experience for you? Or is it really a culmination of all those different things coming together?

MS. AKERS: I think all those things together. Each one has their own element to bring me to where I am today, and they all had their own very important educational aspects. I mean, to me, the outstanding one, of course, would be Penland, because of the time in my life when it came and also the fact that it was home, a place to work and a home and having all the support, great support. It was fascinating, you know, to have that much support.

Because when you're in school, like at Cranbrook, you had support, but everybody is kind of competing with themselves, within themselves, trying to get there, trying to finish, trying to get a job. I wasn't looking for a job, but a lot of the students I remember at Cranbrook, they were all trying to get a teaching job. So that was the emphasis. So they were very much concentrating on their own work. And there was a nice sense of community in each studio, but it was a little different.

At Penland, it was more like a place where everybody was a little in limbo. We didn't know where we were going next, but it's wonderful to be here. It's a beautiful place to be and having the support of each other and saying, hey, that's a great piece. Or you know, what are you doing next? But it was very good. It was excellent.

But they were all important. It's hard to extract how much did I get from each situation. All in all, they all gave me a lot, gave me something, anyway. Because the going to Mexico, even though that was an interesting experience, it was a job. So it's a little different.

I forget about the job when I get with the weavers, and I'm working with them and talking with them, but at the end of the night when I went to my room, and I tried to figure out, what did we do today, what are we going to do tomorrow, how many days we have to stay here, then you realize you're in a job, so it's different.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's three months. It was a very limited period of time, where this was two years that were really just open-ended with nothing to do, for the most part, but work.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And then the summers would come, or holidays come, and everyone would come to visit, and we had all of these wonderful people coming to visit. So it was great to be at Penland. It was just amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the summers compare with the rest of the year?

MS. AKERS: Well, the summers, it was fun, because everybody invaded our space, you know. [They laugh.] So we resented it a little bit, but also it was exciting, because all these famous people came to teach our classes. We would kind of go and hang out with them sometimes or not. So we were the residents. We were in our houses. We weren't part of the community at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Anybody in particular who came who made an impression, or you were excited about?

MS. AKERS: Well one of my favorite people who came to Penland was Toshiko Takaezu. I always admired her, and it was wonderful that she came and spent quite a bit of time. And sometimes she came for holidays, too,

you know. And she's the one who took me to my next move.

MS. RIEDEL: She did?

MS. AKERS: When I went to New Jersey.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right. How did that come about?

MS. AKERS: Well, she was in New Jersey, and I was talking with her at Penland. And I said, well, I don't know what I'm going to do next. I'm, you know, ready to move on. And she said, why don't you come to New Jersey? And I said, New Jersey? [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That might not have occurred to you?

MS. AKERS: That bad, huh? [Laughs.] So anyway, she said, why don't you come and visit? She lived in this wonderful little town, Clinton, New Jersey. And so she introduced me to this friend who had just bought a house, and he was going to rent the second floor. And I said, well —

MS. RIEDEL: You do have a lucky star. [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And I said, okay. So I rented it. I can't remember. It was like $150 a month, something ridiculous, you know. And he has become one of my closest friends. But the idea of going there with Toshiko is because I just so admired her work and her being a single woman who was so successful, who was so independent, who was such a good artist, and she is amazing. And I thought, I have a lot to learn here. So I just moved to Clinton. And so I really got to know her a little bit more.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you working there in your apartment?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. And then I met Lenore through her. They are very good friends. Toshiko and Lenore are very, very good friends and very close friends. But Toshiko was like another role model for me. Just someone who's made it and made it very successfully, and the work is beautiful, and she's beautiful. So it was good for me to see someone like that and be near someone like that. We didn't become any closer friends. She's very independent. I did go and spend some time with her now and then, help her unload a kiln or something. But it didn't develop, but it was fine. We remained friends.

She had a lot of friends there, you know. And she moved — after I moved to Philadelphia, then she moved to Quaker Town, New Jersey. She has a big house and studio and all that. I visited her several times.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this, then, the first time that you actually met Lenore Tawney?

MS. AKERS: No. I think I met Lenora in New York City.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I forget when exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you go to her studio?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I went to her studio, one of her studios. It was a beautiful place in SoHo. And, yeah, I took a group of students there. It was all white floors and all her stuff. Oh, it was just amazing. She was very gracious. Because she's a very private and very quiet person, but she always liked me, liked my work. And so I did ask her, can I bring some students? She said, well, if they behave, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: They will behave. Yeah. And of course, they loved it, I mean, just fascinating. It was like being in somebody's castle.

MS. RIEDEL: What was she working on at the time? Do you remember?

MS. AKERS: I can't remember. She had a couple of her big pieces hanging. It was a beautiful space. I don't think she was working on anything in particular that we could see.

MS. RIEDEL: So from Penland come these experiences with these two extraordinary, independent female artists. That must have been perfect.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it was fascinating. Yeah. And again, it's part of your growing up, your growing experiences, and you say, oh, this is how you do it; this is how they did it. So it's wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you get to Tyler?

MS. AKERS: Okay. So I moved to New Jersey from there for a while, two years, actually.

MS. RIEDEL: Weaving, working —

MS. AKERS: Weaving, working. When I moved to Clinton, then there was a little art center there, so I was able to teach there for the summer. I think it was the summer. I can't remember. Then I got a part-time teaching job in New York. So I could go to New York, take the bus to New York and go to New York. I stayed with my friend Betty Oliver and come back.

MS. RIEDEL: Where were you teaching?

MS. AKERS: I was teaching at a place called Cooper Square Art Center, which is no longer in existence. And also at the New School for Social Research. So I stayed there. And I went back to Penland. I was invited to come back. Bill Brown had gotten a grant to invite 50 artists to come to Penland — an NEA. That's when NEA had money to give away to things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So he invited me to come, plus another 49 artists. [Laughs.] So I went, and it was great. I think it was two weeks. I forget how long it was.

MS. RIEDEL: This was right after the school closes in the summer —

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah, yeah. It was like in between sessions or something, because we had the whole school to ourselves. And it was fun. It was just great fun and to see old friends, you know, that I hadn't seen in a long time. We all had projects that we wanted to do and stuff like that. So we were all working.

MS. RIEDEL: So everybody was working for two weeks.

MS. AKERS: Everyone was working for two weeks, you know, more or less, and playing and having a good time. And so I forget who was there. Bud Stalknaker from Indiana was there. And I think Janet Taylor from Kent [Kent State University, Kent, OH]. Boy, I forget. Out of 50 people, I would think I could come up with more people than that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Louise Tod was there, I think. Now, who were the potters? Maybe Toshiko was there. I don't remember her being there.

MS. RIEDEL: Weavers and potters, glassblowers.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, everything, everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Metalsmiths.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, and some woodworkers, too. Ted Hallman — Ted Hallman was there, a weaver.

MS. RIEDEL: And in the evening, were there big communal meals?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah. We were all fed and, you know, well taken care of, yeah, yeah. And the dining room was open for us, and then we had all kinds of food, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and parties and all kinds of stuff. It was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: It must have been fun.

MS. AKERS: Actually, one thing that we did — I remember that now. Mel Someroski who also came from Kent, he decided maybe each night somebody should make a meal. So he did an Indonesian meal or whatever; he had lived someplace like that. And he made a meal. And maybe Geraldine was there.

MS. RIEDEL: For 50 people?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh. [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: But he had the whole kitchen and the kitchen help, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: So that's what we did. We did fun things like that - which would take three days to create this meal for 50 people. So it was exciting, and it was fun. And who else was there? Oh, John Wahling, my friend John Wahling from Ohio was there.

MS. RIEDEL: So everyone would work during the day and get together for dinner.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, that's right.

MS. RIEDEL: And then work in the evening or play.

MS. AKERS: Work or play or, you know, have a glass of wine or a bottle of wine or a bottle of gin, whatever was around. [They laugh.] So it was great. It was a great experience. And we had little lectures and stuff, you know, to make it more educational. Sort of like to show each other what we had been doing and stuff like that. So we all brought slides.

What I did, actually, I remember. I had a project that I had the book, a Peter Collingwood book. And I decided I'm going to bring that book and put a warp on and test those ideas of his. So it was good to have a project in mind that I wouldn't get distracted with all the activities, and knowing what I was going to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So I had the book, and I had the yarns, and it was great. Because I did all these samples from this book. So it was fun to have a project that didn't require a lot of thinking either. You know, it was more mechanical kind of thing, but it was something I wanted to learn to do. And I thought, okay, now just do it. Yeah, so it was great.

But then after that, shortly after that, I got back to New Jersey, and I got a call from — I think John Wahling called me. He said, you know, there is this job opening at Tyler School of Art. And I said, where is that? And he said, in Philadelphia. And I said, oh. Well, he said, maybe you should look into it. They're really looking. I said, okay, I'll think about it. He told me who the person was who was teaching there, but I couldn't get ahold of her.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was that?

MS. AKERS: Leora Stewart. And she was quitting. She was leaving. I can't remember why, but she was leaving. She had been there for at least a couple of years. So I decided okay, maybe I better call and see what happens, you know. So I call them. And they say, yeah, we'd like you to come for an interview. I didn't have a car. [Laughs.] Someone had to drive me there, drive around the block and come and pick me up.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: I was very poor, very, very poor. So anyway, I went for my interview, and I was ill prepared, you know. I had a set of slides. No, I think I had sent my slides. So when I went for my interview, I didn't bring my slides. They said, you didn't bring the slides. I said, I already sent them to you. And they said, well, we sent them back. I said, well, that's your problem. [They laugh.] I didn't say that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: I just said, I'm very sorry. I didn't realize that you wanted me to give a lecture to the rest of the faculty. And so I met with the faculty and, of course, didn't know what to ask. I think that's what happened. I can't remember exactly. But I think that was the problem. I didn't bring my slides with me, because I had already sent them the slides. So at any rate, I went through the interview and met the dean; I met the assistant dean, and I met the chairman of the department, Stanley Lechtzin, the metalsmith, and he gave me a hard time, which he tends to do. But anyway, he said he wished I was younger. And I said, so do I.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] He said that — I wish you were younger?

MS. AKERS: I mean, today, I could sue him, you know. [Laughs.] No, I thought, he has a lot of nerve. Anyway, they were having a lot of problems with keeping somebody on the faculty. So he was kind of desperate, even though I had this reaction. So he's walking me to the parking lot where my friend was going to pick me up. And he said, well, what do you think? And I said, well, I don't know what to think. You've been giving me a hard time all day, so I'm going to have to think about this. I wasn't being facetious. You know, I just really had to think about it.

I loved my life in New Jersey. I was poor, but I really had a good life. I loved the person I was renting from, who was like a brother to me. And so I thought, you know, why do I need to complicate my life like this? Getting into

a big school, lots of responsibilities and a lot of academic stuff. So I said, you know, I really have to think about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you weren't at all committed to teaching.

MS. AKERS: No, no. I never thought I wanted to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, so I went back to New Jersey and talked with my friend Dominic. I said, I don't know what I'm going to do. He said, well, just wait. So they called me and offered me the job. And I thought, uh-oh, now I have to decide. And so then I was to come back for another interview to meet somebody else and all the financial stuff, how much money I wanted. And so we squared that one away. And I thought, okay, now I have to go home and learn how to teach. [Laughs.]

Because I had never taught in that kind of structured situation, you know. Cranbrook was so loose, and the Art Institute was totally different. It was not geared to M.F.A. [Master of Fine Arts] programs at all. So I called my friend Janet Taylor, who was then at Kent, and I said, I need to come and meet with you so you can teach me how to teach. [Laughs.]

So I went there. I flew to Columbus [OH] to my friend John Wahling's house, and we drove to Kent. I spent hours with both of them. Well, you know, this is how I do it, and this is how I structure it — just giving me the basics, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: How to set up a curriculum.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, classes.

MS. AKERS: Because they say, you know, you know enough. I mean, it's not like you need to know anything else. You just need to think about how to write a curriculum, how to present the ideas, how to organize it. So anyway, that was kind of interesting that I felt like I had to learn to do it. I probably didn't have to, but I just felt a little more secure talking to two people who had been teaching for years.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure, right.

MS. AKERS: Janet is a wonderful teacher. She's a wonderful teacher, and she knows a lot. So I thought she would be a good one. And she's very sweet and wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: And what swayed you to take the position do you think, Adela?

MS. AKERS: Well, some of it was like, okay, I could just run loose for the rest of my life. Also, you know what? I thought, I don't have to stay. And they asked me that. They said, will you stay? And I said, I'll stay for the year. You're giving me a one-year contract. Then we'll see. Because I wasn't sure that I wanted to be in that world, you know. Once I got into it, I loved it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. Not the paperwork or all the meetings. Not all that stuff. But the teaching part, teaching in a serious, wonderful school. Tyler is a wonderful school, high-quality faculty and high-quality students. So I couldn't ask for anything better. It was like being in heaven, you know. So I thought, if I have to teach, this is the place. And I loved it. It was great. I loved the teaching. I just didn't like all the other stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Who else was teaching there at the time when you joined, besides Stanley Lechtzin? Anyone else?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Well, I mean, I was there for 23 years, so there were lots of faces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Yes. Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: But when you first arrived.

MS. AKERS: When I first arrived, that year they had hired 12 new faculty members. They were low on women faculty. Six of them women.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, in one year. Margo Margolis, who is a painter. I don't know if Terry Dolan was hired at that time or not. Terry Dolan, she's an art historian. Rockie Toner, who then became the dean years later. Who else? There were two other women. Oh, yeah. Photographer — Bea Nettles.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the spirit like there then?

MS. AKERS: It was great. I mean, none of us knew that we were part of this group of women at the time. We were told later on. But it was wonderful that they decided that they were under pressure to have more women in the faculty. And I think — I may be wrong - but maybe it was 12 total, and six of them were women. But anyway, a lot of new faculty and women faculty.

MS. RIEDEL: So they were really expanding.

MS. AKERS: Yes, yeah. They had two new buildings built, so they were expanding the facilities. And so, yeah, there was somebody in design. I'm sure there was — I can't remember all the names. So I really changed. It could be a good place, you know. And it's a good activity. And I learned a lot. When you teach, you learn a lot, and I like learning. I like the idea of learning. I had to teach myself a lot of new techniques and new processes that I didn't know well enough. I could do it, but I felt like I had to do it better in order to teach it.

So it's very challenging. Teaching is very challenging, especially when you have good students. I had great students. I mean, some of my graduate students have surpassed me, they are so good. John McQueen was my student.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. AKERS: Lewis Knauss was my student. Deborah Warner was my student. But they were doing it on their own. I mean, basically, I just had to say, go, you know.

[END DISC 02 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Adela Akers at the artist's studio in Graton, California, on March 4, 2008, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art. This is disc number two [three].

And when we paused at the end of disk number one [two], you had just begun talking about Tyler and teaching there and structure for classes. Let's talk a little bit about teaching philosophy.

MS. AKERS: Okay. You know, when the teaching position opened in Philadelphia in 1972 at Tyler School of Art, I was very interested and excited about the idea, because I had never taught in that formal kind of situation. I always taught in workshops and smaller schools and more, looser kinds of programs. So I was going to be heading the textile department and working a curriculum for a B.F.A. and M.F.A. programs. So it was quite a commitment. And I liked commitments, and I liked the idea that it was so demanding, you know, in itself.

But also it gave me the opportunity to work in a very prestigious and good school with a lot of good faculty. I just felt like I had to prepare myself to how I was going to conduct this project. It was a big project ahead of me. But I felt like if I used the same principles I used in doing my work, that would be the best thing to use, you know, as a tool.

It's like the integrity of my work, the integrity of how I feel about producing and marketing my work, is what I had to offer. Because when I thought about, why would they hire me and not somebody else who has other credentials, I figured what I had to offer was the years of experience of doing my work and showing my work as a professional artist. And this is a professional art school. So I thought, this is what I had to teach my students, is how to be professional about what they do, and how to be objective but also sincere about what they are doing and how they are pursuing it and stick with the idea, you know, from beginning to end to see where it takes you.

So in a way, it was sort of like a discipline that I used with my own work, I used in my teaching, too. And I think it worked, most of the time. I feel like it was something that I had to offer, something I knew. And I feel it's important that you teach from where you are, from what you know. Not because it's better, but it's what you know best. So I always feel like whatever experiences you have are the ones that you can give. I felt like I had done a lot of work in many different areas, different cities, different countries, and that's what I had to offer.

And I had a lot of technical information. But more important than that, it was more the way of thinking about producing artwork that I felt was important. And that, I felt, is what I had to offer.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you structure that when you tried to teach it?

MS. AKERS: Well, that's — again, if I give a project to a student, I expect certain consistency in how they approach the project from beginning to end. I advise them in how to proceed, whether it's technical or aesthetic

advice. And I try to be as open and flexible as I can. Because I have my opinions, but they also have their opinions.

And so in an art school, you end up having students who are not going to agree with what you're saying, which is fine. You know, they don't have to, as long as they keep some kind of principles about why they are making the choices that they make. And so I feel that that's what I did when I was teaching full-time. And I think, in most cases, it worked very well, you know, that I gave them freedom to express themselves but also gave them some limitations so that they could have some confined rules on how to establish their own rules.

Because I feel like my rules are not the only rules there are, but I feel the more you work, the more you learn. And I always encouraged them to work as much as they could, because I think that's the way the work develops.

MS. RIEDEL: What are your rules?

MS. AKERS: My rules is to work.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: All of them boil down to work.

MS. AKERS: They all boil down to work, yeah. Because I learned from my work. I mean, I can spend hours thinking about the work. But not until I really work - things don't begin to happen until I start seeing how my ideas project. Sometimes you have a wonderful idea, and then when you start putting it into weaving or into paper, it doesn't seem to respond to the way you had visualized it.

So I find that when something reflects what I'm thinking, I feel like I arrived somewhere. I feel like something, oh, I guess I was on the right track. Or I can just change then, you know, if it's not the right track. So basically I feel it is the work itself that is going to inform me of what I am doing right.

MS. RIEDEL: You've always loved mathematics, too.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a real, logical, problem-solving approach in the way you work, too. So if it doesn't work one way, you'll back up and try it some other way.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah. In a way, my way of working is kind of linear that way. That I go from step to step to step, and I tend to stick with that until I see if it works, or it doesn't work, and then backup if it doesn't work, you know.

That's the reason I've been doing more small sketches. I never used to do drawings for my work, but now I'm beginning to do a few more, just nice, loose sketches, so that I can make decisions on a scale that, you know, is a sketch that is about, oh, four by six inches. And then I can do six of those and then make a selection on which one I think is going to work best. And then put my warp on and start maybe doing a couple of little samples to see how the colors interact and how the materials interact. And then I can still change that.

So basically, I'm just kind of changing my process a little bit. I didn't used to do drawings at all, and now I'm doing a few more drawings just so that I'm more informed when I commit myself to weaving a piece. Weaving a piece is going to take me two or three months, or two months at least, and so I want to be a little more sure than if I don't do the drawings.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you've often worked in a series.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And one piece often informs the next.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah. It doesn't — the idea doesn't come isolated, you know. It just comes with several possibilities. So that's the reason I work in series.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were in Penland, did you find those mountains impacted your work at all, either their presence or their shapes or as forms, color, anything?

MS. AKERS: No. I've never been into that. I photographed it a lot. But I'm not into landscape. It does influence how I think, because those mountains are so beautiful, and it was just so reassuring to wake up in the morning and look out. When I had doubts - what am I going to do with my life - there were those mountains there. The ocean does that to me, too. Whenever I'm uncertain about my life or my future or what the hell am I doing, I just

say, well, the ocean's always there; the mountains are always there. So I feel kind of reassured that I will be here, but while I'm here, I'm doing the best I can.

And you keep going and learning as you go along. That's another thing about teaching, is that you have to be open to learn from your students. Because sometimes they have ideas that you may not agree, but you learn from their ideas and accept their ideas and see, how can I help them make it better or make it work? Sometimes they are too set in their ways because they don't know what else to do. And so you have to be flexible to guide them in the right direction. Not say, no, that's wrong, but saying, well, let's see how this could work, you know. So it's a lot of learning when teaching. And I feel like I did a lot of learning.

MS. RIEDEL: You took a sabbatical to come out to Berkeley [CA] and —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I took a year's sabbatical in 1979.

MS. RIEDEL: So after about seven years.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah. I was tenured and then, you know, I could take a year off. So I took a year off, and I decided to come to Berkeley. I always loved Northern California, and I especially liked Berkeley. There was quite a community of textile artists in the area.

MS. RIEDEL: Around Fiberworks [Center for the Textile Arts, Berkeley, CA]?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Yeah, even though I wasn't part of that community, it was there, you know. I just felt it was something in the air.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever come out for any of those conferences?

MS. AKERS: Yes, I did.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that like?

MS. AKERS: Oh, it was wonderful. I came in '75 and then in '78. There were two conferences.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that with Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. That was wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: I can imagine.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. It was great. Yeah, I came out twice.

MS. RIEDEL: I think 500 people, from all over the world.

MS. AKERS: All over the world, I know, yeah. It was wonderful. Fiberworks was a great place. So, yeah, I came to those two. But I always felt like I wanted to be back in the [San Francisco] Bay area. So I started searching for a place. I talked to several people. They said, oh, it's impossible to find a studio in Berkeley. Forget it. You'll never find anything. And I said, well, you never know.

So my friend in Maine, Ron Garfinkel, who is a potter, he said, oh, you know, Anne Wilson is going to go to Chicago. Maybe she'll rent you her studio. And I said, oh, okay. I didn't know Anne Wilson at all. So I called her up, and I said, this is so and so, I'm looking. She said, oh, I'd love for you to have my studio. When can you come?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: So I moved to Berkeley. And I loved it so much, I stayed one more year. I took a year leave of absence without pay, which was a tough move to make. Everybody thought maybe I had run into a millionaire here in California. No such luck.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: I met a very nice man but not a millionaire. Cary Krueler, who was to become my husband years later. So anyway, I just decided I needed to stay one more year, and they gave me the year. Because I felt that they could say no, and I'd have to go back. But the dean was very supportive and said, well, you know, it's fine with me as long as the chairman approves and everybody approves. And I had somebody lined up to take my classes. The person who had been teaching there while I was on sabbatical said, yes, I'll take one more year. And so, you know, it worked out. I stayed for two years in Berkeley, and I loved it.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that at all like the Penland experience, with just being able to focus on your work?

MS. AKERS: That's right. Just working all the time. I would get up early in the morning and just work. I was within walking distance to a lot of nice things. I could go shopping across the street for groceries, you know, which is great. It was just wonderful, and I just loved it. And I knew that eventually I would be back in Northern California. I met some very good people. Dominic Di Mare became a good friend.

MS. RIEDEL: And what happened to your work during that year?

MS. AKERS: Well, that's when I started doing the technique that's called "pulled warp" that's shaped pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, right.

MS. AKERS: I had done one or two before I came to California. They were very ruffled-like, you know, and they were very active. And I wanted to be able to concentrate, to be able to control it better. And so I did that. I did one big piece; it was about five by eight feet. That was then in the collection in New York in the [AXA] Equitable Insurance Company. But at first I had it in Berkeley, and I took it to a show in L.A. The gallery is no longer in existence. I forget the name of the gallery right now. But I showed it there. And I showed it at Fiberworks, I think. Yeah.

And so it went back to Philadelphia, and then eventually it was sold to this company in New York. It was a wonderful piece. Also it allowed me to get a very nice grant from NEA.

MS. RIEDEL: So while you were here, did the pieces get larger? Did it allow you to expand?

MS. AKERS: Actually, both ways. I had a gigantic — I had the most beautiful studio I've ever had, 1,200 square feet, 12-foot ceilings. No heat; it was very cold.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: But it was great. I loved it. And I lived there, so I had, like, a little bedroom, and the rest was all studio and a fireplace.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. So we had storage. It was a big warehouse, so there were several people living in there. It was a communal kind of place. I didn't have my own kitchen. I had to share a kitchen with everybody else.

MS. RIEDEL: But you had a separate studio with a door.

MS. AKERS: I had a separate studio with doors and everything, yeah. And it's a wonderful space, so I loved it. Anne also had kind of remodeled it, so it was in great shape. She had two looms there. And of course, I had brought my loom which I had just bought in San Francisco. So I didn't bring it with me, but somebody told me there was this loom for sale. I said, well, I'll buy it. Because I wasn't sure what kind of looms Anne had. And so it turned out I had three looms in Anne Wilson's studio. It was just a great studio, so I really loved it there.

And the interesting thing, yes, I worked large. I made that big piece, five by eight. Then I did this series of miniatures. Everybody would say, you moved into this large space, you start working in 10 by 10 inches. It was just like something that I wanted to go into, working into very small formats.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: They were called Small Fences, and they were just wonderful. Yeah, Hanging Fences, I called it.

MS. RIEDEL: And there is that wonderful rippling effect in the Hanging Fences that it reminds me of the pulled-warp piece.

MS. AKERS: That's right; even though they are just loops, they are loops, you know. I had seen this photograph in a book from Ireland. It was this collapsing fence. And it gave me the idea of, oh, it would be nice to do a piece that has those collapsing lines. Then I had to figure out how to hang them and, you know, all that stuff. But it

was a series that I did that I showed at Fiberworks, which is kind of interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: You said that photography has been an inspiration over time, and this is, I guess, one of those times.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. I tend to look at photographs a lot. There were a couple of other pieces I did I know came out of a photograph.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what?

MS. AKERS: You know, there was a series of postage stamps. Did you see that series of black-and-white photographs?

MS. RIEDEL: Of postage stamps?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. AKERS: It was a few years ago. And I did two pieces after two of those photographs. I think one was [Harry] Callahan. And I forget who the other photographer was. But you know, in Chicago, there was a very strong influence of photography. I knew Aaron Siskin very well. The Art Institute had a wonderful photography department, and the museum had a wonderful photography department, too. So it was — I don't know if it all comes from that or not, but I've always looked at black-and-white photographs a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: And a lot to do with the shadows.

MS. AKERS: A lot to do with light and shadows, light and dark, and that kind of contrast or subtleties sometimes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you're in Berkeley for two years. And you're not teaching at all; you're just working full-time.

MS. AKERS: Just working. Actually, I did teach one class at San Francisco State University one day a week, one semester, and that was kind of interesting. I was asked to — I don't know if they asked me, or if I asked them. I can't remember how it came about. But they had one class that was on Fridays. It was Friday, all day, and they were all in the textile department. So what I decided to do is devote Friday to show them slides in the morning and talk about their projects in the afternoon. So something like that. It was very interesting.

Some of the students were very advanced, so it was different levels. And they did some wonderful work. It was only one day a week, which is kind of interesting. How much can you produce in one day a week, and you are not going to see them until the next week, until Friday? I was used to seeing students every day, you know, at least see what they were doing all the time. But I wasn't there. So I would come back next Friday, and they would come up with a project. So I had projects for them to do.

But I showed them slides every Friday. So it would be different things. It would be different ideas, not necessarily weaving ideas but, you know, structural ideas, architecture, all kinds of things that I felt were important, patterning, ceramics, forms. So each one had a theme, each slide lecture. But that's the only teaching I did. So it was kind of a little break; it was different than just teaching a full-time class.

MS. RIEDEL: How successful, or what did you think the strengths of that situation were, one day a week on a Friday, as opposed to more regular teaching on a regular schedule at Tyler or even Penland, where there's that very condensed two weeks? I mean, you've taught in very different formats. Do you feel one or another is better?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, you know, that's a good question. Because when I first went to Tyler, and I questioned myself, why do I want to do this, and I realized that I wanted to work with students that I could see for a length of time. I was done with going to a workshop, and I give all this stuff out for a week or two weeks, and then I don't see those people; I don't know what happened; I don't know where it went. And so in a way, it was a selfish kind of thing to want to see how the idea would progress.

I realized that that's the one reason why I liked teaching in a formal art school situation, where I can see the progress or not the progress. I can see what's happening, you know, whether they decided to go in another direction, or they flunk out, or they decided not to do it anymore, or they stick with it and continue until it goes to someplace. So at Penland it was a totally different thing. Penland is so intense for that one week or two weeks that you are working, like, around the clock. So it's just what you put in is what you get out.

In a regular school like Tyler, it's continuous; you see continual continuity, see where is it going, where is it

taking them or me. You know, where can I come in?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. You said you learned a lot from your students over time. So in many ways, this would be watching all these different projects unfold; all of that would then give you feedback as well.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, because sometimes it's a surprise. Sometimes a student may take something someplace that I had never thought about, you know, or I never anticipated. Because they have their own thoughts. They have their own ideas. They have their own influences. Their lives are very full. There's so much out there. And also, being a good school, they're exposed to a lot of other different artists. We had a wonderful visiting artist program at Tyler. So sometimes they had people coming in for a month or two weeks or a week or a lecture. There was so much going on that there was a lot of learning for them, not just from me. Mine was just one opinion, and they could get all these other things. And they'd take other classes.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you think that meeting multiple times a week was any more successful than meeting once a week, for example, at San Francisco State?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I think so. Because I usually met with the advanced students twice a week or the beginner students. The master's students, the graduate students, I only met with them once a week. But then they're working on their own projects, and I would stop by and see what they were doing. So it's different. The graduate program is a little different than the undergraduate.

MS. RIEDEL: And you taught both.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you see as the place of universities for American craft? Do you think that the craft programs have really worked well? It sounds like you think they worked really well in a more formal setting like an art school. How does a formal university compare with an intensive program like Penland or somebody who's just self-taught?

MS. AKERS: Well, I think they're both good ways of learning. I find that in a more formal situation, like Tyler or a good art school, you know, Philadelphia College of Art [University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA], I mean, all these other schools, that you have a more complete environment. So you're not only depending on that one class and that one teacher, that one faculty member. So I feel it's a wider, deeper exposure. You're able to gain more from your surroundings. It's not just one-to-one, but, you know, it's all these other things going on. So I think it's a more complete, a deeper kind of learning.

I mean, I've seen students doing very well just taking workshops and going to schools like Penland or Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. It's very personal. So many students are very ready to do that. I would have grad students that I didn't feel needed to be in the program to get their M.F.A. But they didn't suffer from it. I could see that they could do it on their own, you know, because they were already so dedicated and so mature in what they were doing that it wasn't necessary. But obviously, they felt that structure was good. And also, they could get all these other opinions.

MS. RIEDEL: A way to challenge themselves —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah. So there's room for both. I just feel that a more serious approach, more intense, organized approach — I guess that's what it is; it's a more organized, intense approach — I find is better.

[END DISC 03 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: You were just saying how beneficial it was when you —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, like sometimes, you know, being in a more formal structure, like a university or a college that puts all these demands on both the faculty and the students, makes the students really have to concentrate and know their media and know their ideas. You have to then take things that you don't think you want to take or that you don't think you want to learn. So that, to me, is part of being in school. Why should I do this, you know? Why should I learn this? Well, you never know what's going to come handy for you. You never know what you're going to be using in the future to enlarge your vocabulary, to enlarge your work, and to make your work better. So to me, sort of like learning all these things that you never thought you wanted to learn, that's a big part of being in school.

MS. RIEDEL: Did that happen for you in any specific way that you can remember?

MS. AKERS: No, because I went through school in such a free manner. I was never working towards a degree, so in a way, I was not forced to do that. But I was a little more mature when I started art school, so I feel like I had

more of an idea of where I wanted to go. Then I stopped when I felt like I had enough of that school and moved to another school, like Cranbrook. Then I did that for two years. So I was not confined to a program, but I stuck to my program and their program, too. I mean, I stayed in the school, and they were pleased with my work.

So that's the reason I say that it's very personal. It all depends where you are, you know. But I think it's best, in most cases, to be in a program that has some structure.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were starting out, where did you get the ideas for your work?

MS. AKERS: Well, I looked at a lot of historical textiles.

MS. RIEDEL: The pre-Columbian —

MS. AKERS: Pre-Columbian, Indian, Chinese, all kinds of — Indonesian. So I looked at a lot of — because I started being very interested in art history. And from there I went into history of textiles. That gave me a whole other way of looking at art. So, yeah, I think that was my main source at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: And what in particular? Pre-Columbian, Indian, anything else in particular? And what about them spoke to you? I mean, there's a real geometry, certainly, to pre-Colombian.

MS. AKERS: I think it's mostly pre-Columbian that had the strong influence or that inspired me a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a fusion of math and geometry —

MS. AKERS: Right, right, yeah, which is what happens in pre-Columbian art, both ceramics and weaving, because I've always looked at both. Ceramics, because sometimes there are so many patterning ideas in ceramics that I also like to explore. So, yeah, I think maybe pre-Columbian was the strongest influence at the time when I first started weaving. Later on, then I started looking at painters and sculptors and architects and photography, all kinds of things.

But at the very beginning, I think the strongest influence was pre-Columbian and also the fact that I used the loom as a tool, and a lot of the things that I wanted to do had to be produced by the loom. I didn't want to do a drawing and then weave it. I wanted the loom to kind of help me produce that work.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were always committed to the loom.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, and still am. Yeah. People say, are you still weaving? I say, yeah, haven't found anything better. I just like the idea that it connects me with what I'm doing very well. And I don't know how to explain that. It just happens, you know, again, because it's very logical, it is very mathematical. It is a very linear kind of thing. You put the warp on, and then you weave on it. So it's very simple. And my weavings are really very simple. My weavings are not intricate. It's not the technique that I use that is intricate. It's more what I do with it that is more intricate, like the layering of all the materials, discovering the metal, discovering the horsehair, now the painting on the warp and, you know, things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: You said that you were always interested in taking the simplest idea and just exploring that to the fullest. It wasn't that it had to something so complex.

MS. AKERS: That's right, that's right, yeah. And I thought it could be a very simple idea. Simplifying things seems to me to be more important than complicating things, you know. I had a student who is a good friend, Lewis Knauss, who lives in Philadelphia. He teaches at Moore College of Art [and Design, Philadelphia, PA]. I learned a lot from him, too. Some of the techniques he used, I used. We sort of exchanged ideas a lot.

He used to say, well, I always tried to find the shortcut. I always tried to find the easiest way to do this instead of going the hardest way. And I thought, that's a good principle; that's a good way to work. Now, of course, now he paints and does all kinds of very elaborate things, but his principle was that. If you can do it in a short amount of time, why just suffer and do it in twice the amount of time? I learned that from him.

MS. RIEDEL: When did your interest in illusion first surface? There's a real interest in bold colors and geometry and intersection. But then there was an interest in illusion.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I think that came when I started doing those accordion pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And those were in the late '70s, early '80s?

MS. AKERS: Eighties, '80s, yeah. That was after I came back from Berkeley to Philadelphia, and driving across country, I saw all these shadows and light and shadows. And I thought, that would be an interesting thing to work with and, you know, just having one color one way, one color the other way, and see how they interact and,

again, create an illusion. You don't know. Is it, am I seeing red, or am I seeing green, you know? And then they both converge and kind of overlap visually. They never really overlap; it's only visually. So those pieces were very hard to photograph because of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Because it was different.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You took it from one side, where it looked like one piece.

MS. AKERS: No, yeah — that's the reason I had, like, a front view and a left view and a right view.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Because that was the only way to read them. But then your eye would see them differently, too, because you are moving, you know.

So anyway, that was an interesting phase for me to go through and do. And I feel like now, some of the things that I'm doing — I mean, I'm still dealing a little bit with the illusion - is it there, or isn't it there - because of the hair and the metal and the way they are kind of overlapping and shadowing each other, like a veil over the whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: So things are slightly obscure.

MS. AKERS: That's right, a little mysterious.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, changes in the light.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

[END DISC 03 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: I know you've mentioned that the Romanesque churches in Spain were really an influence.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think about that when I think of these massive, geometric, bold shapes, but there is also a sense of illusion and mystery contained there. Had you seen these already before the accordion pieces, or did they come after the churches?

MS. AKERS: I think they came after, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So no correlation there.

MS. AKERS: No, I don't think so; I don't think so. I think, you know, I see the churches because of that heavy stone and the carving of the stone. And sometimes I feel some of my work, actually more of my recent work, to me, shows some of that kind of possibility of, like, carving, or like, is there a depth there or not; is there a hole there or not? I don't think the accordion pieces were related to that. No, I think that came after that.

MS. RIEDEL: The horsehair is a fairly recent addition; is that true?

MS. AKERS: Since 1995.

MS. RIEDEL: Since you were out here.

MS. AKERS: Since I moved here, since I retired and started my work here in California.

MS. RIEDEL: And you said that that really gave you the freedom to experiment more, that when you were teaching, you just didn't feel you could —

MS. AKERS: Well, I was working all the time, because I was very active producing and exhibiting my work while I was teaching. But it was a little more confined with time. I worked almost every day after I got home from school, or at least at night. And also, having a full-time job meant three days a week, but still I had a lot of other responsibilities, you know, meetings, meeting with students, going to this, going to that. There were other requirements.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But my teaching load was very good. It was only three full days. That gave me four days which supposedly was to do my work, which I did. So you know, one day for shopping and three days to do all of my weaving. So I produced work all the time, because that's when I did all those big commissions. I was teaching full-time. So I was able to organize my time very well.

The one thing I found, and this was true when summer came or when I had a vacation, it was that I could work very well every night after school for the whole week if I was working on a project. Now, if I had to start a project, then I needed more time. I needed four days; I needed a week; I needed to prepare my mind and my ideas and do samples, do sketches, do all that. So if I was in the middle of a big project, it was easy to get home every night and weave every night, or get up very early in the morning and weave for one hour before I went to school.

So I had to organize my time very well in order to be able to produce the work the way I wanted to produce it. But I felt if I was in the middle of something, if I was working on a project — and you know, my pieces take so long — that then it was no problem. But if starting a new piece, then I needed more time and even more free time. And so that was when it became harder to do it, you know, if I had to start something new that I wasn't sure about. Or am I going to do this in this dimension; I'm going to do it in these colors; I'm going to do it in this format. And so there were too many open questions; then I couldn't do it as well. But I managed, which is that I had to have more time ahead of me, like a week, you know, instead of just every night working on it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you said that your pieces were very process-oriented, that you work at lot out actually while you're working at the loom.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: With these pieces, it seems — the newer pieces since you retired — you've talked about adding paint now and ink as you're weaving. So it seems there's a lot of experimenting that's going on, actually in the moment, since you've retired.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, yeah, a lot more, yeah. And actually, adding paint was a very liberating move for me. Because I've always liked to use a little bit of paint, but I never really jumped into it as much as I am now. I was painting on it, but I was painting more conventional, woven patterns. Now I'm painting with ideas that come from pots or from bark painting or from other paintings that I feel like I'm losing the whole tightness of the use in paint. Now I can really use it very freely, and it's a wonderful step to be going through.

MS. RIEDEL: Metal, too, is adding a dimension.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, the metal was more because of the dimension.

MS. RIEDEL: Reflections —

MS. AKERS: And the reflection is pretty wonderful. I never knew how much it was going to affect the viewer or me, you know, looking at them. But it is a wonderful thing to have a reflecting movement.

MS. RIEDEL: Did it change as you see the sun move through the studio?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes. And you know, one time I had something in front of that — well, a similar piece to that — that was red. And all of a sudden I said, oh, what happened? The metal became all red. It's like a mirror sometimes, you know, just like a mirror, sometimes.

MS. RIEDEL: The horsehair strikes me as especially interesting, because it brings in a linear element that's sort of unpredictable.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: And it goes every which way, and you don't have a whole lot of control over it.

MS. AKERS: Right. It is like drawing lines, crazy lines, over the whole thing, yeah. I like that. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It brings in a little bit of chaos. [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: That's right, where everything is so organized.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. But it's very organized chaos.

MS. AKERS: Yes, that's right. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: When you first started out, you mentioned influences of Lenore Tawney and pre-Colombian.

Anybody else come to mind early on? I know you mentioned early Sol Lewitt, but was that later?

MS. AKERS: Later on. And also Agnes Martin. I did a whole series of work inspired by her paintings and drawings. I just loved her work. I saw many of her shows in New York. And I did like her ideas, because she worked so much with a grid, you know. I just related to it very clearly.

Then when I was using a lot of color in those accordion pieces, I saw a show of Milton Avery. That was a wonderful show to see to see, how soft his colors blended and mixed and overlapped and all that. I mean, my work is totally different, but it's just, I don't know, it's just reading into the possibilities, really, more than anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: In his work, the colors are so —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it was just wonderful, some of those watercolors, and just wonderful work.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, were you looking at both Agnes Martin and Milton Avery around the same period of time, or were they really different?

MS. AKERS: No, I think they were at different times. I think I looked at Milton Avery first, because I was interested in how to introduce color in those accordion pieces, like the color was moving into two directions.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And by looking at his work, I got a lot of information that I felt was important for me to learn how to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mostly his seascapes?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: His seascapes.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. When we were talking about Agnes Martin — is there, do you think specifically, a sense of spirituality in the pieces?

MS. AKERS: I don't know. I don't think so. I think they are very introspective, you know. I mean, I feel that when you say, where do they come from, they come from my head. There's a lot going on in my head. [They laugh.] So I don't know. I wouldn't call it spiritual, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: What would you call it, besides your head? [They laugh.]

MS. AKERS: I think I'm trying to make what's personal more universal by just exploring not only my personal but what is very obvious to me out there. And when I work, when I put an idea down into the little piece of weaving, whether it's a little one or a big one, it's me out there. And that's the reason sometimes it's a little frightening to show your work. It's like really exposing yourself. I very seldom have this much work hanging around me, my own personal work. At home, I only have one piece that's at the request of my husband. I don't really like to have my work around me.

Once I'm done with a piece, I'm done. So I want to move on. And in order to move on, I have to remove everything, because otherwise, I'm held back by what's there, you know. My most recent piece, is that piece and then this series, these little pieces. And because I have someone who wants to come look at them, they're still hanging there. Pretty soon they'll start bugging me, because I see them too much, you know, and I see what's wrong with them and what's right with them. But mostly, it's because I'm done with them.

When I finish a piece, I'm done with it. It's not like I don't like it. It's not like I'm not attached to them. But I don't need them in my life; it's part of my past already. I spent two months doing a piece, so when I'm done I want to move on. I prefer to roll them, pack them away. Everybody says, you don't have anything hanging. I want to come and look at your work. I say, okay. And you were coming, so I had to hang some pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Thank you.

MS. AKERS: I know you didn't need to see the work, because this is all oral. You're not taking any pictures.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

If it's not spiritual, do you think about it more in terms of archetypal or psychological?

MS. AKERS: I don't know. I really don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you ever think about a sort of sacred geometry quality to it?

MS. AKERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: In terms of the churches and that?

MS. AKERS: No. I think the mystery to me is more what is inside those pieces. That is the mystery, especially the windows. When I do little windows or little doors, I always feel it's not like I like the window. I like to see that opening and wonder what's inside, you know. So that is, to me, the sense of mystery. What else can I see beyond that window? That's the reason I like that piece a lot behind you. It's just that there is something intriguing to me and mysterious about an opening, not because of what's around it but what's inside that I don't see, that I don't know; it's the unknown. But I don't know if it's spiritual.

MS. RIEDEL: Has that mystery become more important over time?

MS. AKERS: Yes. It has.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like it's been there in different forms, beginning with the illusion and —

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and what's real and what's not and slices of things.

MS. AKERS: I think that piece is called *House of Memories* [2005]. That's it. And it has a very tiny entrance. A very tiny, little entrance, to me, implies the opening to the place of memories, you know, dreams or memories, of mystery. There's a mysteriousness about that opening that I find exciting and intriguing, because I have no idea, but I put it there.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know how you did it? Did you do it consciously, or were you surprised to find it when you were done?

MS. AKERS: No, I wanted to have this little tiny opening. Yeah — no, I didn't have the whole idea. I didn't know exactly what it was going to look like until it was all finished, but the notion of having this small entrance was very important to me, because, again, it was dealing with what's beyond that entrance. And it came right after that window, you know. So the windows and the entrance, which is a house with a little entrance, it's not the house that's important, but it's that mystery or the memories of whatever is inside that house.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because you've talked about architecture as an influence from the very beginning. And you consistently come back to metaphors —

MS. AKERS: To doors and windows, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And walls.

MS. AKERS: And walls.

MS. RIEDEL: The texture of — yeah.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I really like the ideas of windows. And I've always worked with windows and doors and doorways.

MS. RIEDEL: Threshold.

MS. AKERS: Threshold.

MS. RIEDEL: Interior, exterior.

MS. AKERS: Yes, that's right, yeah. See, I feel like the work looks different, but I'm still doing the same thing. Basically the work is about the same; it's just that it has evolved because of changing of materials, changing of scale. It looks different, but I feel like I'm still dealing with the same issues. A lot of them are still unfinished or not resolved, which is what makes me keep going. I would be afraid to arrive and have all the answers. But there is no fear. I will never have all the answers. [They laugh.]

I think I wrote somewhere — let me see if I can find it. "The problems in the studio remain a constant. In the

search for answers or solutions, the questions get better, and the possibility of a miracle is ever present." So that's one of my philosophies.

MS. RIEDEL: What are some of the current questions?

MS. AKERS: Current questions?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: It's like, why should I do this? [Laughs.] Why should I do that? What else can I do? So the questions get like, could I do it in a bigger scale, smaller scale, brighter colors, all black, all white? So there's always like, you know, what am I trying to say, questions. So there's always a philosophical question, and physical questions are involved. But as the questions get better, then you don't have to worry about the answers. It's just part of the whole cycle, you know, which is the cycle of life.

Some of that I learned from a poet and ceramic artist, M. C. Richards. Have you —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, *Centering* [*in Pottery, Poetry, and Person*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989].

MS. AKERS: She did say that, you know, "It's not arriving at the answer, it's getting" — as you search for the answer, the questions get better and better.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, did she say that?

MS. AKERS: Yes, I think she said that.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll have to go back and look at that.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I think she said that or something similar. At least that's the way it got into my head, you know. That's the way it registered.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever overlap with her in your journeys?

MS. AKERS: Yes, I did meet her. She was a wonderful woman.

MS. RIEDEL: At Penland?

MS. AKERS: She was an amazing woman. Actually, I met her when she lived in Pennsylvania at a farm.

MS. RIEDEL: And she was still working?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes. She was the most amazing person in the world. I wish I had gotten to know her a little better.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you remember from those —

MS. AKERS: I remember making a beet salad with her.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: It was being on her farm. And when you're on a farm, you're a farmer, and you make things, and you make a meal. And it was just probably the most wonderful meal that I remember. But I remember all those beets. My hands and her hands were red.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: And we were both laughing. [Laughs.] So I can't remember specifics. I was in such admiration for her that all I could do is look at her and listen to her. It didn't matter what she said — let's make a beet salad. We went in the garden, pulled the beets and made a beet salad.

MS. RIEDEL: How old was she then?

MS. AKERS: I don't know. I don't know how old she was when she died. She wasn't that much older than me, I don't think. But I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't remember when she was born. You mentioned Paulus Berensohn, too.

MS. AKERS: Right, yeah. That's how I met her, through Paulus.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And you met Paulus through Penland?

MS. AKERS: At Penland, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's actually interesting because that goes back to your interest in clay originally.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes. He was, to me, just talk about clay, you know, and he spoke about what clay is all about in a very sort of emotional and spiritual way. I think he shared that with M. C. Richards a lot. Because she wasn't into making pretty pots. She was into making that clay become a form, whatever that form was. She was such a free being, human being, you know, that it's amazing what you can learn from that. That book *Centering* is just a wonderful book.

MS. RIEDEL: That is an extraordinary book.

MS. AKERS: I think it's out of print though, probably. I'm not sure.

MS. RIEDEL: It may be, I don't know if they reissued it or not. And then Paulus Berensohn wrote that wonderful book.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: *Centering* was —

MS. AKERS: *Finding One*'s *Way With Clay* [New York: Simon & Shuster, 1972].

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. AKERS: I have it there somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And he was a dancer, too, I think, originally.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yeah. He started as a dancer, until he said dancing was doing damage to his body, so he stopped doing dancing. He still moves like a dancer, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: The cover of the book is very much like that.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yeah. Have you met him?

MS. RIEDEL: No, I've never met him.

MS. AKERS: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: But I remember the cover of the book is his hands moving with these pots.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I saw him a couple of years ago when I was at Penland. He came by to see me. And he came to my lecture.

MS. RIEDEL: It strikes me that there's a similar cord in your work and the way he talks about clay.

MS. AKERS: And you know, he also does a lot of work with paper and with fabric. He's an amazing person, just amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: And always a paring down to the simplest possible form, but it is so charged with an inner energy. That strikes me as a parallel with what I see in your work, too. Does that resonate with you?

MS. AKERS: Thank you, yes, yeah. I think it all goes back to what you do the work for? You do it for yourself; you don't do it for anybody else. You hope somebody is going to like it, but that's also not so important. That's kind of irrelevant in a way. I'm always amazed and very satisfied and very grateful when somebody likes my work enough to buy it. And I always think, well, that's amazing. It is amazing. Because when I made it, I didn't have anybody in mind but me or the idea that I wanted to put through. And so I'm always very honored when somebody says, that's a beautiful piece; I want it. It's interesting when that process takes place like that, you know. But I think that makes the work stronger, too. If you're producing for a market or a taste out there, it's never going to be successful.

And I think that's another thing I remember, when I was teaching, to say to students, you can't please everybody out there. You shouldn't even try. The work should be as strong as you can make it. Sometimes students are concerned that the work is derivative; it looks like somebody else's work. I always say, no, just keep doing it. You cannot be doing somebody else's work for very long. Eventually, it will change. It will take your place. It will be your work, so don't stop. Yeah, it does look like Lenore Tawney right now, but it won't for very long.

So I think sometimes we get trapped into, oh, I have to do something very different. It doesn't have to be different. You have to be honest to yourself. And if you feel at this point it looks like somebody else's work, just keep working. It will change. Because you can only copy somebody for so long, I think. I don't know. I imagine that. And I believe in that.

MS. RIEDEL: Thinking about how your work has changed over time, in terms of color, from being very monochromatic or very black and white to very saturated. It's never been really more than four or five tones at once. It's always been very simple that way.

MS. AKERS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But what has driven those changes? Have they been specifically color related? Or does that normally come in relation to the overall form?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, sometimes. Like I did a piece that I changed my palette totally. I had been working with the rust and the natural and the black and the gray. And I got this horsehair that's called cinnamon. So it's like a blond horse, you know. It's just beautiful. And I thought I'd really like to work with that, but it doesn't go with anything I had. So I called my source in Texas for the linen that I use. It comes from Sweden. And I said, I need some browns. So I had the sample, and I ordered like about six of them, just one spool of each just to check. And so I changed my whole palette to this brown piece.

And I had a painter come by one day. And I said, I want you to see this, see what you think. He said, you're changing your palette. I said, that's what it is! I'm changing my palette, I don't know for how long.

But then those two small pieces I have there came out of that same series, you know. And it was kind of interesting and fun. So sometimes it's because of that and material. I get a sample in the mail, you know. I just got this red, and I thought, I have to do a piece with this red. So I started thinking about, what can I do, what can I do? And I just came up with an idea, and I wove it. And I call it *Red*. It's in that catalogue, the Brown Grotta [browngrotta arts] catalogue.

Because it was such a simple thing. There was no real meaning to it in my head. It was more like I wanted to use that red; how can I use that red? And I came up with this idea. I probably saw something in a magazine or something that I thought, oh, yeah, those lines.

A lot of the ideas that I use when I use the paint, you know — that was paint, too — is because of things that are very logical in weaving — some of it, the herringbone and the diagonals and all that. That's the reason I feel this new series with the painted patterns are more liberating, because I'm not trying to do the woven lines. I'm just doing other lines, other patterns that come from other things. I find that kind of exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And are you figuring that out in the moment at the loom? Or do you have some —

MS. AKERS: No, no. I do a specific drawing to scale. And I cut it in strips, and then I weave the strips to follow those drawings. It appears very sort of, what do you say, accidental.

MS. RIEDEL: Spontaneous.

MS. AKERS: Spontaneous, and I like that. I like that they look spontaneous, but they are not.

MS. RIEDEL: And what inspired that idea?

MS. AKERS: That idea came from the pot, the Shipibo pot.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay, that we were just looking at from Peru.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And you know, actually, the first idea, the first one I did in that series of painting, that kind of loose patterning, came out from seeing my friend Isiah Zagar doing this big mural - it was like 20 feet high and 50 feet wide - in Oakland. He lives in Philadelphia, but he was invited to come here. He does mosaic work. And I

saw him up in this scaffolding drawing this big line and then an arrow and all this. And I thought, well, maybe I can do that. You know, if he can do that, I can do that, too. I don't have to stick to the weaving lines the way they should be. I could do a loose line that could change patterns and all that.

So that was the first one I did, was after seeing him up in the scaffolding painting this wild line across, which, then, of course, it almost disappeared, because it was covered over [by] the mosaic. But it didn't disappear. It was still there with an arrow at the end. I didn't have the arrow. But I did a piece that was called *Portal of Dissent*, and that was the first piece I did using that kind of idea. And I thought, oh, I can do more and more of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that related also to Sol Lewitt at all?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yes. I loved those pieces that he did, especially the drawings when he used just the pencil. Those were wonderful.

[END DISC 03 TR 03.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Adela Akers at the artist's studio in Graton, California, on March 6, 2008, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art. This is disc number three [four].

So, good morning. Let's start out today with a discussion of fiber, and why fiber over everything else. What it is that speaks to you that paint or nothing else does?

MS. AKERS: Well, I think because, going through art school, I did experience many different materials and different techniques and different approaches to making art. And once I decided — I became interested in art history, then history of textiles and ceramics. And I was more inclined to go into the ceramics or fibers. But I felt that fibers was something that spoke to me stronger than anything else. Also, it's just a very tactile quality of fiber, and it's something I've known. My mother used to make all my clothes, so I knew something about making clothes and working with fabric.

So I decided that maybe I should explore that possibility in a more formal way, like making something that would be an art form. I'm talking about late '50s, early '60s, and I was at the Art Institute until 1960; then I went to Cranbrook. So at the Art Institute, I started doing some weavings that were very much inclined to have more color and use techniques that were derived from the pre-Colombian techniques that I had been studying and researching. But I wanted to make them more contemporary by using brighter colors, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And which techniques, in particular, were you taking?

MS. AKERS: The wrapping warps with extra threads to, again, gain that dimension, and adding color that was not in the warp itself. So I could create some very intricate patterns by doing that. They're all very abstract, and they were all very suggestive, the fact that the color was added by wrapping the threads.

One thing that I was very interested in using was double weave. Double weave was a technique that I've used for a long time, because, again, it gave me the possibility of having layers, having more than one color, having more than one plane. And so I started exploring what else could I do with double weave and still using color. So I think I went through with that for at least, oh, until 1967, when I wanted to enlarge my scale.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like from the very beginning, though, there's been an interest in dimensionality and layering, veiling.

MS. AKERS: I did learn to make fabric, and I learned all kinds of different types of weaves, but my interest was more in creating something that would hang on the wall but project beyond the wall, involve my viewer somewhat, like a sculpture or a painting would. But I didn't want to paint and translate that to weaving. I really wanted the loom to help me produce that. So I started exploring double weave as one of the possibilities. And it stayed with me for a long time as one way of creating this added dimension, by not having just one layer of fabric, but more than one or two or three sometimes. Or shaping the fabric - that was another thing, shaping the cloth to create a more dimensional form.

MS. RIEDEL: So were these early pieces primarily flat with some degree of dimension?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You hadn't started the accordion at all. Those pieces came much later. So what were the other pieces like?

MS. AKERS: No, no, no. That came much later. No, no. And from the Art Institute and then into Cranbrook. So from this, 1960 to 1964, I was really using the double weave quite a bit. But they were not controlled to be

three-dimensional. It was three-dimensional because of the techniques. And they were mostly wools. I was using all wools and color and less color. I started eliminating color as a way to then emphasize the structure. And I think that's when I got interested in doing double weave with just using black and grays and browns, that the work itself revealed the layering by the different layers, not by adding, wrapping, or adding any other techniques to it.

So they were very simple. They were very plain woven, and they were all tapestry weave, basically. They were all weft-faced weaves. But the dimension was added by having several layers.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they all large from the beginning, Adela?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. They were pretty large. They were like, you know, four by five feet. Yeah, three by four, four by four, four by five. And because they were linen warp and wool weft, they were very thick, hand-spun wools. Again, I moved from the fine wools to the thicker wools. And so that was another way to explore more a visual effect with the weaving itself. It revealed the weaving more by having a larger scale of thread, being the thick hand-spun wools I used to get from Mexico and different places, Greece. I started finding other materials, but I still stayed pretty much with animal fibers.

And so I explored that for a while. And then I decided I really wanted to enlarge my scale even more, because I have always been very interested in architecture. By emphasizing the enlarged scale, I felt I was getting closer to architecture than just weaving. I didn't want to just have a piece that hung on the wall. I wanted a piece that created some kind of movement in the space.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. This was still before your trip to Europe.

MS. AKERS: Yes. Yes. I would say this is about 1967. I was still in Chicago. And so I started doing pieces. Of course, it was a lot of black-and-white paintings then, you know. The optical movement was on. So I started using black and white. Because before that, I was doing more like grays, and this is all more contrast but still being a way to show the weaving more than anything else by using black and white stripes, black-and-white layering. And so this is all '67, '69. And I stayed with that idea for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a quality of illusion to those early pieces, too, or not so much?

MS. AKERS: I don't think so. I think they were more like shields and banners. I think there was strong influence of African art at the time for me. I was looking at bark cloth and things that had that quality that were still very textile-like, but it had more of a presence that they were stiffer, and they were more pliable and sort of like Oceanic art shields and things like that. I was looking at a lot of that kind of stuff to inspire my work.

I kept always searching for other cultures that use those ideas, whether they were woven or not. I've always looked at paper and fiber and baskets, of course, and ceramics, because sometimes the forms gave me ideas. And even though I wasn't going to weave it three-dimensionally, it gave me an idea of how a movement of a pattern moves across.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. This was also the period when you actually had more patterning in the pieces than you've had later on. There were bold patterns, and they were geometric, but they weren't quite as linear. And there was a little bit more experimentation early on with two-tone pattern in the pieces. Is this right?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, but I wouldn't call it pattern, because it was more like separate panels that were woven together because of the technique that is double weave. They were woven at the same time, so they floated on top of each other.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MS. AKERS: So I didn't feel that — at that time, I felt I was getting away from patterning by using a very simple kind of process and a very simple kind of technique but doing it in a more inventive way, I thought.

MS. RIEDEL: So the — [inaudible] — was related to layering.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it was related to layering more than patterning. And I felt like, again, the influence of Scandinavian weaving, where they use a lot of double weave, but it's very elaborate. Mine were so simple. It was only dividing the space by how the panels will overlap over each other. They were like ribbons moving in and out of the background or, again, creating that space by how they overlapped together, how they were on top of each other, really.

MS. RIEDEL: But this is still before the very large white piece, the freestanding white piece that was the predecessor to —

MS. AKERS: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: This was still before that.

MS. AKERS: That was still before that.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did those —

MS. AKERS: That started in '71, '72, just before I went to Tyler School of Art. Again, I was at that point, and I wanted to have just one color. Instead of having the brown and the black or the gray and the black and, you know, all the nuances of those subtle kind of color combinations, to go just one color and have a white piece and have a black piece. And just before I did that, I did a very large piece, which is in a collection here in California, that I think I called *Ceremonial Wall* [1972]. And that was, again, a double piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: And that hung in Lenore Tawney's house for a while. I went down there. And it was wonderful to have her space. And so it was a piece that combined both the idea of — in this case, it was not a double weave. I just wove it so long that I could fold it. And then I had sumac, I had all kinds of other techniques in it. And it was all goat hair and cow hair and wools, of course, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So I still felt like I was trying to get into even a larger scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, I just thought, well, I have to keep looking. In the meantime, I'm working, you know. In the meantime, I'm working, because I feel like I'm trying to create this dimension, and my materials are too small. So I felt — it was 1969; I went to Europe. And I started looking at more architecture, Romanesque architecture that I always loved, and also meeting with Jagoda Buic in Zagreb in what was then Yugoslavia. Because I had seen her work in New York and met her. And I thought, you know, I would like to see what makes her do what she does.

So we had a wonderful visit. And you know, I just came with the idea I do have to enlarge my materials. So the walls cannot become larger unless the materials themselves, the units, are larger. So I came back, and I started trying to figure out how to do that. And it took me awhile. In the meantime, I keep working with my materials and keep creating pieces that have somewhat a larger scale without getting into larger materials, until I found this jute that was like a half an inch diameter, and it was really thick.

And so that came like a totally new phase in my life as far as, you know, enlarging to a really large scale. Because then the pieces were very massive. The weaving itself, very heavy and very massive. One problem with the jute, jute disintegrates. It doesn't hold on. So I did several, quite a few pieces, big commissions, you know. I had a show in New York at the Hadler Gallery - it's no longer in existence - in 1977.

In 1975, I took a trip to California. I was then teaching at Tyler. I had a grant to research basketry. And I decided that I wanted to look at the walls of baskets. I wanted to enlarge the scale of the weave by looking at how to enlarge the scale of the basket. So I wasn't really interested in weaving baskets, but I wanted to focus on that kind of idea that [with] the basket is so clear, because it reveals itself so much more than in a woven cloth, you know. I feel like this is more architectural in many ways.

And so I thought, well, if I look at that — and I did lots of photographs of the collection at the Santa Barbara Museum [of Art, CA] and in Pasadena at the museum [Pasadena Museum of California Art]. And then, of course, I was researching artists who were working on a larger scale. But I found this jute through some friends.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is the trip when you drove cross-country.

MS. AKERS: I was driving cross-country, and I made several stops to jury a show or do a lecture or meet friends or to get from Philadelphia to Berkeley to San Francisco.

MS. RIEDEL: And you met all sorts of artists along the way.

MS. AKERS: That's right, all along the way I was meeting people that I already knew or new people in my life. And so I found these artists who were using this jute. And I asked, you know, how can I get this? So I started inquiring how to order it or where to get it from and then find a way to have it dyed. Because it was very hard to dye it yourself. I did do it for a while, you know, for my own first experiments. But then when they get to be so big — I mean, I had one piece; it was like, I can't remember, eight by 12 feet, you know. And they were very

heavy. And also, you can't control the color as well. So I had professional dyers do the dyeing. I did the samples, and I would take them to them and skein it. And they would dye it for me.

So that continued for a while, because I loved the idea of just working in such an immediate way. Also it went a lot faster because instead of spending one hour to weave two inches, it would be the opposite.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: [Laughs.] It was two inches in 20 minutes, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was an era when Lenore Tawney was looking at working large and —

MS. AKERS: Everybody was working large. Yeah, Magdalena Abakanowicz and all the European textile artists were working very large. And there was sort of a demand, too, you know. But mostly it was just the excitement about working in a large scale.

MS. RIEDEL: The potential. I know your material has always been really important.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's really dictated when you've used that as a jumping-off point and experimented with it widely.

MS. AKERS: So I did several pieces, as I said, for that show. I came back in '75. I was only away for the summer. It wasn't like a whole year. And I came back, and I contacted my gallery, the Hadler Gallery. And I said, I have this new idea, and maybe we should do a show. They said, great. And they had a big space. That was 1977. And so I did a whole series of pieces for that show. I already had a couple, and then I did some more. And I actually did some kind of medium-sized pieces. I called them "twill drawings." I've always been very interested in twills and herringbones, because it's something that, again, pulls me back into the weaving, you know, the weaving technique and the weaving patterning.

And so I used this jute. Also then I started using sisal. I found that sisal - it was not as thick, but it was a very individual type of fiber, because it's very stiff. And it's very pliable — if you weave it flat real well, it's like a cardboard, like a thick cardboard. And I kind of liked that, you know, the fact that I could really control it that well.

So I did one piece, the first piece, 1977, for that show. It was the first time I used sisal and linen. And that's when I started doing that technique that's called "pulled warp."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And that technique is actually — it comes back from the pre-Colombian techniques, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you discover that? Is that still in practice somewhere?

MS. AKERS: No, no. Just by looking at it and seeing it, by teaching. I had a couple of students using the technique, very different from the way I decided to use it. Because what I did, I wanted to make this ruffled-type forms.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And so that was the first piece I did. I did a little sketch out of muslin, a piece of cloth. And again, my background in dress design came very handy. Because I knew how to — you cut a circle, and you stretch it out, and you create this ruffle. But to weave it is a little different.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Because you have to pull all those warps to make it happen. And so I had this little sketch on my wall. I remember John McQueen came to my studio in Philadelphia. And I said, well, this is the piece that I wish I had the time to do for the show in New York, but I don't have the time. It's just not enough time. And he said, yes, you have the time. And I said, how? He said, I'll come and work with you.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, how great!

MS. AKERS: So in one week, I started. And in one week, we just worked day and night, and we did it; we finished it.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this after he had been a student?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah. He was in Alfred in New York [Alfred University, Alfred, NY]. And he and his wife used to come and visit. And so anyway, he came and lived with me in Philadelphia for a week, and we worked like mad. It was very exciting. Because basically, I was doing the weaving; he was doing the pulled warps.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: I had planned how to do it, how to make it happen. He's just a wonderful worker. So we had a great time. And then we drove to the show in New York. And it was just — it was just amazing. It was just one of those great experiences that you never forget.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the response like to the exhibition?

MS. AKERS: Oh, it was wonderful. I mean, as far as financial success, it was none, I don't think. I can't remember if they sold anything or not. But it was a very exciting show, and it was well received. There was an article written about it in *Craft Horizons,American Crafts*, "The Loomed Plane," by Pamela Scheinman, at the time when I did that show. It was very exciting, very, very exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: And was it mostly pulled-warp pieces, or that was the only one?

MS. AKERS: No, no, no. But the others were just panels that were overlapping each other and creating this massive wall, or three strips with the sumac line. The lines were overlapping, you know, creating the pattern. And again, that was done all on the loom.

MS. RIEDEL: They look like waves, almost, on a beach.

MS. AKERS: That's right, all waves. But they were not the waves I ended up doing later, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So once I started doing this pulled warp, I kind of dropped the jute. Because also there were so many problems with the jute not having a life. It wouldn't last.

MS. RIEDEL: And there's no way to preserve that. When it's gone, it's gone.

MS. AKERS: That's right. And so curators in museums start complaining about that. And I don't blame them, you know. There is no way to preserve that. They acquire a piece, and the piece begins to disintegrate. And there is not much you can do, you know. It's just the nature of the fiber.

Also it was very softly spun, which is what made it very nice. It made it very silky-looking and very shiny. I mean, it just had wonderful qualities. So for me, whenever somebody questions, I mean, a curator would question, how do you dare to do this? And I say, well, basically, in a way, maybe I'm glad that they won't last. Because this is my work for now. It's going to change. So I don't expect a museum to acquire them or anybody to acquire them. I'm going to be honest. They are not going to hold up. But I can't stop myself from doing something that I feel I'm so creative with. So I felt like I had a good reason to do it for my own, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: I think Neda al-Hilali was doing a lot with the jute and dyed jute. She did that wonderful installation on the beach —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, with paper and, you know — yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think it was jute, a lot of jute. And it was just, again, meant to be completely temporary. She said it's probably disintegrated at this point. But they were just far more temporary pieces.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah. I feel that sometimes as long as you're honest and sincere about it to, let's say, a buyer or a collector, it's fine. Because it was getting me to the next step in my life, my life as an artist. So I felt that was a very important step. And I learned a lot by just working so fast and being able to produce so much work in a short amount of time. They were gigantic pieces — eight feet tall, six feet wide. It was very exciting times.

MS. RIEDEL: Did that spark any conversations about the process versus the final product and the importance of that?

MS. AKERS: For myself, yeah, because I felt like I didn't want the work to be all about technique. I felt like I was getting away from being about technique by using the technique but not really revealing it that much. It wasn't

so important. One piece I did - I remember that I've always liked the back of rugs, you know, where you see the pile on the front, or on the right side, and on the wrong side you see all the rows of knots. So I did a piece about that. I did a piece that I did a pile with sisal, but the pile was inside the piece.

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

MS. AKERS: It was called *Moonshine*.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes. I think I saw that one.

MS. AKERS: Yes. It's a very tall piece, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's mostly monochromatic.

MS. AKERS: Yes. It's all gray. It's all gray. That was my gray phase. I love gray as a color because it's all colors and also because there are so many grays, you know. And I like the idea that it's a color that can be anything. It can relate to metal; it can relate to fiber; it can relate to glass or to walls or anything or nature. But gray is just a wonderful color for me. I've always liked using gray. So that was what I was doing at that time and finding many shades of gray, like a gray that was a little warmer or one that was a little cooler and combining the two or overlapping the two to create some more depth. But I stayed pretty much with that. I did this one big piece that was brown, you know, kind of brown and burgundy. That's another color scheme that I like.

MS. RIEDEL: Jumping back just briefly to Berkeley when you were first there in '75, were you doing any work at Fiberworks?

MS. AKERS: No, no. In '75, I just came for the summer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And did you meet with any artists here at the time?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Lillian Elliott.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Lillian Elliott, I always liked her work, and I admired the way she was so creative with her materials. And Kay Sekimachi, who has remained a good friend and good art contact when I have questions about what I am doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you all get together and talk —

MS. AKERS: No, not really. You know, I was very busy, because I was traveling to Santa Barbara and back and then going to L.A. and trying to find all these collections of baskets.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was really a research trip.

MS. AKERS: It was a research trip, yeah. But I spent the summer in San Francisco with some friends. I had a place to stay, so I could stay there.

MS. RIEDEL: So in the early '70s, there was an emphasis on the very massive, free-hanging pieces, very minimal. There was a lot of dangling loops happening, too, or layering pieces.

MS. AKERS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that went on for a while.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I started what you call the "layering loops," which is a good way to describe them, in '71. And I continued that, except it kept changing, you know, until '77. So at that point — '77, '78 — I was just trying to figure out what I did between '77 and 1980.

MS. RIEDEL: There was that beautiful piece in the early '70s, that beautiful, white, massive piece that we were talking about that was a predecessor to the smaller —

MS. AKERS: That's right, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that piece called? Do you remember?

MS. AKERS: *Full of Light,* I think it was called.

MS. RIEDEL: *Full of Light,* I think, is right.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, I did that when I was at Tyler. That was the beginning of my school teaching — '74 probably, 1974.

MS. RIEDEL: There was another piece, too, that was just two massive panels side by side, one a more solid color and the other more mottled color. And it struck me as a very interesting predecessor to all the stripes that have come since, where you've had that combination but on a much more diminutive and nuanced scale. Do you know the piece I'm referring to?

MS. AKERS: No, I can't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't remember what it's called right now. But I think that was in the early '70s, too. When did the reds start? Well, that was an interesting piece, too. That's not the one I'm thinking about.

MS. AKERS: Okay, yeah. This is '71, I think. It's before I went to Tyler. So anyway, I got a sabbatical from Tyler, and I moved to Berkeley in '79.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: And I drove cross-country again. I've done it several times. I do it a little different every time. And I was by myself, so it was quite an experience, and I liked it. I like being by myself in the car. It just gives you a lot of time to think and to plan things. I did stop and see friends here and there. I have a very good friend in Columbus, Ohio, so I always stop to see him.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this when you began to see the landscapes in the Southwest, the light?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. That came after that. But in '79, that's when I did the red piece. You were asking me about the red.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. AKERS: So that was the first time I used that deep red.

MS. RIEDEL: Deep, saturated red.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, very saturated red. And it was a big piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that the quadrants piece, where they all came together?

MS. AKERS: No, that's *Odd/Even* [1979]. The quadrants was before that, yeah. The quadrants were more like an evolution from the thick wool pieces, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: There were two pieces in the reds. I've always liked the burgundies.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: I always go back to that red, you know, whenever I have an idea, and I'm not sure is it going to be this color or that color. Red is one of the possibilities. So I had done those quadrant pieces. They were six by six feet. And that's when I was still dealing with Hadler Gallery at the time. They had them in a show. And they had a gallery then in Texas, not only in New York, but they had a gallery in Houston. So they took my work there. And they were kind of exciting, because it was sort of like having two panels that converge, but they were double panels. So it was like weaving two sections that were each one six by six feet with a hole in the middle so that they could overlap, you know. So it was like double the work, but it created quite a dimensional feeling about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And it was combining this burgundy with the dark brown. And then the other one was more reds, and that's the one that was four panels —

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds like such different color sets for you.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right. Those two were very exciting pieces. And again, those, I think, came out of more of my research in basketry. That's how I see it influencing that part, simply finding the techniques and the planes. You know, just having the two planes converge and showing. In weaving, many things get lost. It gets hidden, not lost but hidden. In a basket, everything shows.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true. That's true. And when I think about that, especially the red quadrant piece, everything is on view.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah. And so, you know, so I worked on those. And then when I moved to Berkeley, then I knew I just wanted to start working with sisal then and with the pulled-warp idea. I had done the ruffle piece. I had done several pieces. I was still in Philadelphia. And so I thought, you know, okay, now I know how to do this ruffle. So how can I isolate the section in which the weaving becomes a curve?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And so I started exploring how to do it. First I did a couple of small pieces that were just like half a circle. And they were just assembled together like pages, a piece I call *14 Pages* because they were all these half-circles overlaid and lined up on a background.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was red, too, yes?

MS. AKERS: No, this is still gray, still gray.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: So anyway, I'm doing all this sort of testing and experiments and several pieces in both red or grays. But I'm not controlling just where to keep the curve, you know. So then I decided, well, I have to find a way of doing that instead of just always having the whole thing being ruffled or being curved, to control the curve where I want it and make that curve become like a more dynamic line. And that's when I did that piece called *Odd/Even,* you know, in '79.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is so different from anything that you had done before.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. And what I did, I just divided the strip. You know, the top was woven flat; the bottom was woven flat. And then in the middle was the curved section. And then I attached them together. So in that way, that curve could move from left to right, creating this kind of diagonal line of curves that overlapped with each other. So I did. Then I did another one in gray and another one in, you know, other colors. But I stayed pretty much with the red and the grays, because I basically wanted to just emphasize the form more than the colors. So the color was not as relevant except for what inspired me the most, you know. And so I was able to stick with that for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were done during your sabbatical in Berkeley in the late '70s.

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes, '79.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was really a time of experimenting.

MS. AKERS: That's right. I had all the time to myself. And I had a show in L.A. at the time, Mandell Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Mandell Gallery.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And how was that?

MS. AKERS: Oh, it was wonderful. It was wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that like?

MS. AKERS: And she bought a piece of mine, one of my full-warp pieces, for her house. Actually, she had bought it in New York from the Hadler Gallery. And that's how I met her. So then she had a gallery in L.A. and invited me to have a show there. It was wonderful, yeah. She was a wonderful woman.

MS. RIEDEL: What was happening in L.A. at the time? Did you meet many of the artists working?

MS. AKERS: No, I didn't meet many people. I was in Berkeley, so I didn't know L.A. I had some friends but I didn't know much about the gallery scene or the museum scene. I mean, I saw a few things while I was there. But, yeah, I used to go to L.A. quite often, because the art life there was so strong. I think stronger than San Francisco. There was a lot of creative activity everywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: By then, things were probably slowing down at Fiberworks; is that true?

MS. AKERS: Yes, that's right, that's right. So anyway, I just kept working and figuring out, one piece led to the

other, you know. After you work for a while with one theme or with one idea, then the things begin to evolve more and more. Then I did those miniature pieces, those Hanging Fences that I call them. And that was all linen, linen warp and linen weft. And I just thought that, you know, it was ideal, after working so large, to try to do something smaller. I tend to do that every once in a while, sort of challenge myself. Because I really prefer to work in a large scale. I feel more comfortable; I get more out of it. When I finish a big piece, I feel like I've done something.

And with the smaller pieces, somehow — I still like doing them, and I'm getting more interested in doing that. Because what I've been doing recently — I don't want to jump ahead.

MS. RIEDEL: No, please.

MS. AKERS: I've been doing more like studies for my larger pieces. And these studies, I realize that they are finished pieces. So I might as well call them a piece, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And some of those smaller pieces, like the fences piece, while they were small, they had such extraordinary dimensionality. They were such condensed dimensionality that being that small allowed you to really —

MS. AKERS: That's right. And it was so exciting to be able to weave a piece in a week instead of a month. I loved that. So I could do six or eight or 10. And then the ones that didn't work well, I didn't have to use them. I didn't have to finish them. So I think I had a series of six, and then I did four more. And I had to figure out how to suspend them, how to hang them. A friend of mine helped me with that. I had somebody make the plexiglas box. Somebody made this frame, helped me with the idea, because I wanted them to be suspended inside a frame.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay. And so that's how they were displayed.

MS. AKERS: That's how they were displayed, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting. I didn't know that.

MS. AKERS: One of them is at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts [TX] in their collection now. Because I worked with Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. AKERS: And she gave them that piece, donated to their collection. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And were the small fences, were they primarily — well, I know they were monochromatic. But were they primarily grays or whites?

MS. AKERS: Mostly grays, mostly grays. There was some black and some burgundy. And I did different kinds of patternings in the strips that, again, the pattern would move across, you know. Because by having all these strips, you were seeing the edge of the strip. Then I wanted to have changes in the weaving so you could see a color change or a pattern change or, you know, a material change. I used some metallic threads and mostly linen. It was all linen. It was kind of fun to do, exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd left the jute, pretty much completely, at this point?

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, yeah. I thought, okay, I've learned what I had to learn with it. And so I can move on to something else and maybe it's a little more permanent; maybe it's — also my ideas had changed. I didn't feel like I needed to make more of those massive pieces. In my studio in Philadelphia, I had a pulley system to be able to lift them by myself. It was just incredible. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I can imagine.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, they were very heavy. Sometimes it would be, like, one in the morning, all by myself pulling this piece. And what if it falls? What am I going to do, you know? Will they find me three days later? [Laughs.] So it was exciting. It was good. It was fun, you know. What is it called? It's called a tackle box [block-and-tackle pulley], something like that. Because it's like a double pulley, so they are very easy to pull.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But then once you get there, you still have to hook them up. So that's the part I didn't realize. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: So the L.A. show, did you have pretty much most of the work you had made in Berkeley over the past two years?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did it feel? Beside the new pieces, did it feel surprisingly different to you than anything you had done before in Philadelphia?

MS. AKERS: No, because it was a sequence. It was like it started in Philadelphia, and I moved on. So it's not like it was so isolated change. It was more like it was something I already had not totally planned, but I had in mind that I was going to continue doing these pulled warp pieces.

And so I continued with that idea, because, again, I always work with an idea until I'm done with it. And I never know when that's going to be, you know. I just sort of feel like, okay, I'll do this, and then when I'm done, I'll move on to whatever is next. I'm trying to figure this out.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was still before the accordion pieces, because that happened on the drive back.

MS. AKERS: Right, yeah, yeah. This is until like '77, '78, '79. Yeah, '79 and '80 - '78, '79, and '80.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting, because one or two of the earlier pieces also made me think of where you've come full circle. I see that again and again as things that have happened very early on, the very narrow black and white stripes that make up the *2500 Memorial* [1997] that's so new. And this is probably —

MS. AKERS: Well, that's the reason sometimes I say, you know, I'm still doing the same thing, only it looks different.

MS. RIEDEL: Or you've changed the materials —

MS. AKERS: Changed materials, changed the emphasis, changed the scale. But like with the *Odd/Even* piece, before that, I had done a red piece in Philadelphia. It was called *High Tide*. And so that came before, you know. And so the red was already in my mind, but I wanted to isolate the curve. Okay, now I know how to make curves. Can I isolate them and reveal them only when I want to? And so, for me, it's always learning — I have to figure out —

MS. RIEDEL: There's also a real mathematical base for your work that I think —

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: And you will actually calculate out mathematically how this needs to happen.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah. I have to measure everything. People come to my studio and see my notebooks saying, okay, 57 1/2 and 14 1/2, you know. I mean, everything had to be kind of mathematically figured out. And it never comes out perfect, because it's all handwoven. So you have to be — you become flexible about what is not going to be exactly the way you visualized it. But it's close enough. And that's what makes it a little more alive, too, the fact that it's not all so precise. But it's as precise as I can make it.

MS. RIEDEL: And that makes me think of something you had said about the work you were doing in Peru and the fact that things didn't line up and how to work with the people there —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: — sort of to make that so it was less significant or less that it didn't matter and that there could be something that was beneficial about that or would make it even more interesting.

MS. AKERS: Right. And see, I'm always using that idea. In several pieces, I've done that.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. AKERS: That piece you were talking about, *Veil* [2005], it has those black strips, because then in that way, things don't have to line up, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And it's a principle that you see in some ethnic textiles, that there's a stripe that disappears and then reappears. Well, then when it reappears, it may not be exactly in the same line. And I like that idea, that it's just something goes in and out, and something appears and disappears. There is a mystery about that that I

like. So anyway, I stayed with those pulled warps for quite a while. It became difficult for packing and shipping and hanging and all that, but I continued doing it. It's just one of those things that you deal with the problems as long as you are not done with the idea. Then once you are done with the idea, then you move on, and you realize, oh, this is so much easier to handle.

So then I'm done with my two years in Berkeley. Basically, I had a year sabbatical, then I took a leave of absence. So I stayed for two years. And then in 1981, I drove back to Philadelphia, back to my job. That's when I got interested in seeing the light and shadow and those cliffs and those hills. I was, again, driving by myself. But it just gives you a lot of time to look, you know, and to think. And so I just found it fascinating. I thought, maybe I can do something with that. And that's when I started working on those accordion pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And we're thinking specifically about the Southwest and the incredible dimensionality of those buttes and mesas and then the light and the shadow and the illusion, having it move in one way in one direction.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, that's right. As the sun goes down, the shadows are so, so dramatic, you know, and so beautiful. I mean, I knew they were there. I had seen them before. But this time, it just clicked that maybe that's an idea I could use.

MS. RIEDEL: And the change is so dramatic.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It really looks completely different.

MS. AKERS: Right. It's like black and white.

MS. RIEDEL: It just changes completely, depending on where you're standing.

MS. AKERS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did you come to that idea structurally?

MS. AKERS: Okay, so I thought, okay, how can I do this? I wanted them to be stiff, and I wanted them to have kind of an angular look to them. And so I started doing some experiments. The first one was gray sisal with white wool, *Reflections I*. It was as simple as it could be. And then I did a larger one that I called *Reflections II*. That one was burgundy on one side and blue on the other side, for the wool that I used to design the pattern. The sisal remained gray.

And it was kind of exciting to see it, what happened. To me that's what I had in mind. The second one, I thought it was closer to what I wanted to say by having just the two-color wool and then just the line that moves across.

And again, it's just an illusion, you know. The line is in both places, but you only see it when they converge together. From one side, you see one image; from the other side, you see another image. So they are like two separate things. And it just, to me, was about that. And then I got more interested in using more color again.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. You got much more colorful, very graphic, very bold.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right. The background, the sisal, remained kind of a silver-gray most of the time, but then the wool was bright colors. And I was doing all my dyeing for the wools. It's more like mohair, like a mohair wool that I got from England. It was just wonderful, and it dyed beautifully. So I started experimenting with all kinds of colors. And I had never worked with color that way, you know, that they would be so close to each other. It was like looking at a painting. The colors are close to each other, so they affect each other; they reflect on each other.

So I had to start learning a little bit about color. And so, oh, that's right. When you put a blue next to the orange, then it does something to the orange, you know, how it changes the color. Or if you have a magenta, if you put it next to the blue, then the magenta becomes redder, because the blue kind of takes the blue away from the magenta. You know, that kind of thing. But without being too scientific about it, I just realized that I had to learn a little more about how colors affect each other.

So I did several commissions and did quite a bit of work. They were very exciting to work with, very, very exciting. They fold like an accordion. They fold; they're easy to pack. I mean, I still have some in my studio here packed away. [Laughs.] So you know, they are still following me somehow.

MS. RIEDEL: And you did some of these as very large installations for huge spaces?

MS. AKERS: Corporations — yeah, for corporations. That was the '80s, and there was a lot of that work going on,

for not just only me but a lot of the fiber artists. They were doing large commissions for corporations. Corporations were really investing money. I did several pieces for DuPont on the East Coast. And then I'm trying to think of other —

MS. RIEDEL: Are they still installed now, do you think?

MS. AKERS: I would think so. They were near the entrance to their library.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that called, the piece? It had gold and turquoise.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I'm trying to remember the name.

MS. RIEDEL: It will come to us.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Anyway, it was large piece. And that was a commission. It was eight by 15 feet, something like that. It was a new building, so I was able to meet with them. It's called *Luz y Sombra*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right — *Light and Shade*.

MS. AKERS: In Spanish.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: And those pieces were just fascinating to work with, because there were so many possibilities. And whenever you do one, then you have three more ideas that you have to explore. And sometimes I would photograph them before they were put together, because I thought maybe they'll look better if I don't put them together.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking of *Night Waves*, too.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that San Diego?

MS. AKERS: That was San Diego.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, that was *Night Waves*. The commission was *Night Waves*. *Luz y Sombra* was another one, yeah, yeah. I had the two mixed up, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But *Night Waves* was interesting, too, because it was not only the accordion columns now, but it was also the sense of that form moving so specifically through that I think you worked it out in odd and even.

MS. AKERS: Right. Well, I just thought — you know, in San Diego, there's the Coronado Bridge. That bridge, I thought, was so beautiful. And I thought maybe I should do something with that curve. So that's where the idea came from basically. I mean, I always liked the idea of doing a curve or to break that edge of the pieces, because they are very angular because of that sisal. It's an amazing fiber to work with. And the way I wove them, I wove them so tightly that they would become very rigid, and so that that edge is very rigid. So it was nice to then have something soft, a soft image going through that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: So, yeah, that was *Night Waves*.

MS. RIEDEL: And those really —

MS. AKERS: That was an interesting project because the building was still not finished. They invited three artists to come, through an art consultant in L.A. And so we all went there and met with her and met with the architects and looked at the space. And then we just decided — I just went home, and I designed the piece. And I went back. I had three proposals, you know, three different variations, and they picked the one that I think was the best. So then I had a pretty tight deadline. And so I went back to Philadelphia. At that time - that was 1984 - I had taken the summer. We had come to California for the summer. We were actually in Oakland renting a place. And I was just getting ready for a show in New York at Modern Masters.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AKERS: Remember Modern Masters Gallery in New York City? And so I thought, okay, well, I can do my work

there. I brought my loom, and I worked on that show. And then I got a call from this designer in L.A. She said, well, I have this project. I'd like you to come and look at it. She had been working on it for two years. I mean, sometimes it takes a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: So I met with her and with the owner of the building and all that. And so I went home, and I made the design and sent the proposal. I flew in for doing the presentation. Usually what I do, I make them a kit, and then I also weave a sample, so that it is very clear what it's going to look like, you know. And so I did that. And then I went back and wove like a mad woman.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds like it. [They laugh.] You've worked in so many different spaces and studios, can you completely adapt your working process to wherever you are?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I think I'm pretty flexible that way. But you know, I always settle in a place. I couldn't go — I'm not one of those people who can take work with them, work on a plane or in somebody's library. I need to settle. I need to find a home, even if it's only for a month. So when I went to Oakland, we were there for three months. And I had my loom, and I had the plan.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you bring your loom? Do you drive?

MS. AKERS: Well, my husband, he has a truck. So we put the loom in the truck. It was a smaller loom. It was a 36-inch loom. It's actually the loom I have now.

MS. RIEDEL: This one right here?

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So you just put that in the back of the truck and drive across the country?

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And does your studio space affect the way you work? I remember, early on you had a studio with no windows, and you thought —

MS. AKERS: No, I need windows. I need the light. Some people prefer not to have windows, but I wish I had more windows here. But if I had more windows, I'd have less walls. So there is a give and take there. You know, it would be nice to have like all bank of windows at this end instead of just one window. But I have the skylights, so the light is very nice. And I have then more wall space for hanging my work and for all my other junk, you know, my fibers and my materials, my books. So, yeah, I guess I'm pretty adaptable, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Just take your loom and set it up —

MS. AKERS: That's right, and go. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Have you ever worked with assistants, with the exception of that —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, a little bit. Actually, I had somebody helping me a couple of times. They had their loom at home, and they would do the weaving at home, not in my studio. Then I also had an assistant that used to — when I did those accordion pieces, there's a lot of stitching, putting the strips together. She did that for me, and she was very good. I actually learned from her how to do it better. Because sometimes, someone that doesn't know, they figure out methods and ways of putting it together that is something I hadn't thought about. So, yeah, I had, but not that much. I like working alone.

Now, if I was to get into some very large project, I would probably need to have help, and I would have to then organize my time differently. Because I'm so used to working by myself, take breaks when I want to, and stuff like that. But you know —

MS. RIEDEL: So for even very large pieces, like the accordion one where you had to weave like a mad woman, you just still worked by yourself using very little help.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then that must work for you. You just —

MS. AKERS: Obviously, it works for me. It's not like I have any secrets, or I don't want anybody to know. It's more that I know my pace, so I can pace myself, and I can work many hours. I can work very hard. And then if I have

somebody else, I feel like maybe they need to take a break. Maybe we have to have lunch. If I'm by myself, I forget about eating sometimes. And so that's the way it goes. But if you have somebody, then you feel a little more responsible. I taught for so many years, too, that it's nice to just not have that pressure around you. But I wouldn't mind having somebody help.

I had somebody help not so long ago. I was working on this piece, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to finish it. So I had her cut all my little metal strips for me, and that was wonderful. And it's not like it saved me that much time, but it saved me the agony of saying, am I going to make it or not? I always have tight deadlines and so, you know, some of it is my own fault, because I don't have to say yes to everything. I could say no, but I have a hard time doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, especially if they are really wonderful opportunities for large spaces to do — yeah.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

[END DISC 04 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: So *Luz y Sombra* was, in many way, one of the major accordion pieces that brought together your interest in illusion and form and then this whole new exploration of color.

MS. AKERS: Right. It was a pretty bold move for me, because I had never worked with colors like that. And I thought, since I have this new body of work that I feel is coming, in my head, I want to explore as much as possible that light and shadow without being so concerned about what the colors are like. More like playing with them a little more and investigate the possibilities of that sense of illusion and translucency.

It was interesting to work with translucency in something that was so thick. Because there is nothing translucent about them. But I had been inspired at the time by Milton Avery's paintings, which was watercolors and colors flowing over each other. And I thought, you know, maybe that would be something I can explore in these pieces. Because the weaving is dense, and the colors applied structurally, but the colors kind of float over.

And that's the reason I think they're more translucent. They're not transparent, but there is a translucency about how the color comes through. The technique I used, which is called an inlay technique, the wool is put in structurally as I weave the strips, and it allows for a color modulation. The background, the sisal, is always there, and then the little floats of the wool are interacting with that. But it creates that sense of what's on the top or what's on the bottom.

And it calls attention to the fact that it is two dimensional, you know. Each one of those bands is very two dimensional, but when they are assembled together in an accordion format, you see that the color travels across. And it has a feeling of being more luminous because it reflects the sisal color coming through the wool. So it's not like a flat color. And I did a lot of maquettes using paint and paper, you know, in order to present an idea to a client or to a gallery. And I like to convey that.

But I think that's the reason, when I do something like that that I have to present to somebody, I do them a maquette, but then I do a woven sample, a woven section. I take a 12-by-12-inch [section] of the piece and weave that. So then they can see exactly what the colors are going to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Because there is so much more dimension in the weaving, you know, because of the scale of the weaving and because of the materials. And no matter how good I am at drawing it, it's very hard to reflect that as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is one of the things, I'm sure, that draws you to the fiber again and again in the first place.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah, yeah. And also because I want them to be woven, you know. If I wanted to just do a drawing on paper, then I could develop that to do something better. But to me, it's more like explaining what I'm doing in the weaving, but I want the weaving to take charge.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you first start painting? Sorry, were you painting at all on the textiles at this point?

MS. AKERS: No, not at all. That came much later. That came — not at that point. If I was painting or drawing, it was more to do it on paper to present an idea to somebody, even to myself. I'm trying to think how much of that I do. Yeah, I guess I did do some drawings for myself. Not as finished, but I would do them on brown paper.

MS. RIEDEL: Usually the brown paper.

MS. AKERS: Brown paper, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And the maquettes.

MS. AKERS: And maquettes, yes. Just make decisions on the shapes, and then each strip will be woven separately. So you know, I have to keep track of things. And that was kind of interesting.

And also, I learned — I remember I did one piece that I wanted to use yellow. And I had a hard time, because I don't know why, but I just felt like I kept testing this yellow. And I wove a little bit on my warp with the sisal. It just didn't look right, you know. And I kept trying something else and trying something else. So I called a friend, I said, what do you think is wrong? He said, well, you're thinking of the good yellow. You have to think of a yellow that goes with that gray. The yellow by itself may not be a yellow that you would select or that you would want. But how is that affected by the gray and also by the other color, sort of like a blue? It's a piece I call *Summer*. I had a very hard time with that piece for some reason. But it finally came through, and it was okay. It was just one of those things.

And that's what makes it exciting, too. Why did I have to do a yellow piece? It was just one of those things. It was like a mosaic, you know. It reminded me of sort of like an Arabic mosaic. And for some reason, I wanted yellow, and it was kind of like a purplish blue on the other side. Anyway, it was interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that an accordion piece, too?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it was an accordion. So I did the accordions until, I don't know how late, '85, something like that. Yeah, I had a show in New York. Helen Drutt had a gallery in New York for a while, and so I had a show with her. And it was just wonderful. It was a beautiful gallery on Fifth Avenue near 57th Street. It was just amazing. And I did do some work for that show specifically.

MS. RIEDEL: That might have been a little later maybe.

MS. AKERS: I think 1990.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, because that's when I started doing the flat pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: And I thought, okay, if I can create an illusion with an accordion, now I know how to do that, now, how can I do that without an accordion, being flat? How can I overlap the colors and the pattern? And so I worked on it. And I really liked them, you know. One is a pyramid piece, and another one is one of my favorites, called *Angle Blue*.

And it's just, again, the strips are very simple, but the band of the color travels across them in a diagonal. And of course, as the color - which is a very soft blue, purplish blue - as the color blue travels across the gray and the black strips, it looks different. And I thought, okay, there is the illusion. I don't have to keep doing accordions anymore. So I went flat. So I did about, I don't know, four or five pieces, six pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And then in between you got very quiet, too. There were a couple of pieces, I think in the mid-'80s, the *Compostela* and — [inaudible].

MS. AKERS: Yes. Oh, *Compostela*, that was because the new Museum of American Crafts was going to open in New York. And Paul Smith — director of the museum — came to my studio. He wanted me to do a big piece for that show. And so we talked, and I said, well, you know, I can do this. He wanted a large piece. And I thought, okay, I'm going to do a piece that is going to be very quiet. It's going to be about where I come from, Santiago de Compostela. It rains a lot there, and it's a beautiful town. And so I used little metallic threads, to me, to weave as rain. Nobody gets that, you know. But it doesn't matter.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Sometimes you get an idea, and it doesn't matter who gets it or not.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: It makes no difference. But I think it's a very beautiful piece. It's about five feet by 180 inches. It was a big piece. And it's called *Compostela*.

MS. RIEDEL: Another wall piece? They're all wall pieces.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, oh, yeah. It's a big accordion, you know. I still have it.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's a beautiful piece.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, it is. Well, what happens when it's so large, and in a way, it's not very dynamic, sometimes it's harder to find a client for it. That must have been '88. I think that's when the museum opened. No, '85. Maybe just the opening was '88, but then I started putting it together in '85.

MS. RIEDEL: And then the pieces got flat. It seemed they were all about columns with stripes and these sort of waves of chevrons and intersecting triangles. They seemed to be very geometric in terms of flat panels.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. The pyramid became kind of an image I liked working with in those pieces. But it was still sisal with the wool or mohair, whatever, either one, depending on what I got.

MS. RIEDEL: And then it was the '90s when you began working on — no, '95 —

MS. AKERS: Ninety-five.

MS. RIEDEL: Later is the [Agnes] Martin pieces.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So these flat pieces went on —

MS. AKERS: - for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Nine or 10 years.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. Let's see, I started doing them in '85. I must have done something between '85 and '95.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the Modern Masters show was '84.

MS. AKERS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And Helen Drutt was in '90.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, '90, that was the last show I did, I think, in the East Coast.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, it seems like there was a period of time where you didn't do a lot of shows. Was that intentional?

MS. AKERS: No, I think I had several commissions.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. AKERS: Because I know I remember just before we moved, I did two commissions, one in Cleveland. I think it was for a hospital, through an art consultant. And the other one, in Delaware or Maryland, somewhere around there, you know. And sometimes a commission, I don't photograph them. I feel like sometimes I run out of time. But most of the time I feel it's not work that I'm going to show anywhere, because it's not available. It belongs to somebody already. So I think I did at least those two commissions. And I had done, of course, all the work for the Helen Drutt show. So I can't think of anything else besides those two commissions that I did.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems then, after that, you got very quiet, sort of returned to the black and white and duo-tone. I'm thinking, well, this is quite a ways later — shadows and the black and white and the more complex patterns.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, but those are all the linen pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. AKERS: That's all after I moved here, after I moved to California in 1995.

MS. RIEDEL: So the work really changed dramatically.

MS. AKERS: It changed; it changed a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It got much finer.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It was that you went to a much smaller scale.

MS. AKERS: That's right. Because the materials themselves were smaller. I had never worked with those fine, fine linens like that. And also the horsehair, you know, that was the introduction of both the linen and the horsehair and then, later on, the metal.

MS. RIEDEL: You hadn't done anything with linen at all before?

MS. AKERS: I have always worked with linen, but not as a major — linen was always like the core, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: My warps were always linen. I love linen, because it's very strong and also it has a lot of character. It doesn't waver. It's almost like metal. It's almost like a wire that is very, very stiff and very strong. It has a lot of personality. And so I love linen, and I've always used it for my warps. But I would cover it with something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Now it's more like what they call a "balance weave," both warp and weft are showing, and they are both linen. And then I'm using the inlay to do the horsehair. The horsehair goes in as I weave, you know. It's structurally in the piece in the weaving. So yeah, but that's 1995. That's when I started doing that, and I'm still doing it.

MS. RIEDEL: And those pieces that have more of those very specific grids that recall Agnes Martin, did those start here in California?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, oh, yeah. Yes. All about the same time. They went on for — well, I've been doing this now for 12 years, right, since 1995. So, well, it's 13 years almost. So there have been different ways of dealing with that. First I had my warp on, and I started doing all these tests and those experiments, you know, both the painting, the metal, the stitching, and the hair. And that, to me, was quite a change.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the metal come about?

MS. AKERS: The metal came about because I knew I was going to start using the metal before I left Philadelphia. My husband is quite a recycler, so he had been collecting all the tops from the wine bottles. He had a big bag and took it to many places to be recycled. He didn't want to put them in the trash, because at that time they were lead. So he couldn't find anybody to take them. So I started looking at them and said, oh, maybe I can do something with this. So I started pounding them and cutting them. And I thought, oh, this could be an interesting material to use. But we were getting ready to move here, so I really didn't have the time to start exploring what I wanted to do with it. But I saved them.

MS. RIEDEL: You saved them?

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I saved them. We moved them cross-country, plus my warp, you know. My warp was already wound. But I ran out of time. I was busy with those two commissions and finishing school and, you know, all this stuff. So we got here in August; in September I started weaving. And basically what I did the first few months, it was more like weaving little tests. Like, what if I do this; what if I do that? And you know, I had just all the ideas. Just small tests. I've never done that before, but this was a new direction, so it was a total change of materials and scale and all that. And so the horsehair, the metal, and the linen. So it was all — the work became much more elaborate, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Does this all intersect, the material change and Agnes Martin ideas, and then the whole idea of record keeping?

MS. AKERS: Yes, yes. That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: These all fused —

MS. AKERS: Because I started looking. I said, what do I want to do with that metal? I thought it was going to be about names or people or something, you know. Something to keep track of. I think it changed between being more personal and formal at the same time. Sort of like something that other people could relate to maybe.

So I did some pieces, adding all those new materials, the metal, the paper, the stitching which enriched the surface of the pieces, but also it just gave me so many things to think about. What am I going to do with this? And how am I going to use it? But it really added new dimension to my vocabulary. So it was a very exciting

time, and it still is. I mean, I'm still making changes, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Then you started painting on --

MS. AKERS: Yes, and also discovering the reflective quality of the metal, you know. Because I thought, first, the lead wasn't so reflective. Now there's not lead anymore; it's an alloy, so it has a little more of shiny surface. The first piece I did was actually a memorial for a friend who had died of AIDS. And so I just thought, well, okay, I'm just going to do it all natural, and it will be all the names of all the people.

I had listened to this one man on KQED. It was the day of December first, AIDS Day. And this man was talking about coming back to San Francisco and wanted to invite some friends over. And he went through his address book, and they were all gone. And so he was, I think, a priest or some kind of religious person. And so he said, too many names, too many names had disappeared. So that piece I called *Too Many Names Memorial*. And I left it sort of unfinished. You know, there are only so many bands of metal, then it discontinues and stops. Because I wanted it to be uneven. Because like saying, this is going to go on for a while, you know; it's not over yet.

So anyway, I did that piece. That was the first one I thought was a memorial. And then that gave me the idea for other memorials, because I realized the potential of those strips of metal being a name or a person or an event or something. And then on top of that, I'm looking at the grid more and more, because now it's really a lot stronger. And so I started painting on the warp, painting after it comes off of the loom, and doing what I call the pleated pieces. I weave the strips, and I pleat them, and then I dip the edges in India ink so that it becomes this kind of hazy kind of line. Which again, it looks more like writing; it looks more like a record keeping from somebody else, from something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: Sort of some kind of language, you know, so I like that idea of having that. But then when I'm painting on the warp, it's a little more controlled; it's a little more clear.

MS. RIEDEL: And these pieces - I'm thinking of *Shadows* and a couple of the other ones we were looking at earlier, where just the patterns were so much more dense than anything you've ever done before and much more complex.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, right, yeah, very complex. But the weaving themselves are very simple. They are very plain weaving. Because then that's what happens when the cloth itself is so simple, allows you to do more with it, you know. And so to me, the addition of all those materials was incredible. It was quite a discovery. And then when I started using paint, that was quite a step, too.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that come about?

MS. AKERS: Well, first I just thought — I had seen a couple of pieces that the de Young Museum [M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, CA] had in their collection. They were painted bark cloth from the Mbuti tribe in Africa. And I thought, those are wonderful. And of course, they had a pattern, because it has a meaning. It's like a language and all that. But it gave me the idea that maybe I could work with something like that. So my patterns became more like woven, coming from my weaving background. It was like a zigzag of very loose lines.

So that's how, that first piece I did, it came. That was the first piece I did, which was called *Imaginary Message*. Because I felt it was about a message, you know. And I'm still fascinated with what that does to the look of the piece, to the look of the cloth.

MS. RIEDEL: And these pieces do feel far more personal and narrative.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yeah, definitely. They are very, very, much more personal.

MS. RIEDEL: Really different than anything else.

MS. AKERS: Right. And so that was the first piece. And I knew that I wanted to continue working with that idea. I didn't know exactly how many more I was going to do, but I didn't want to repeat myself too much. But it's something that I'm still working with, like that other piece I did that is called *Exceptional Prospect*. That's still working with the idea, only it has become larger in scale and larger in the patterning. It's more like a checkerboard. I wanted that to be about a game, like a checkerboard at the top.

I was listening to people going to gamble. I'm not a gambler, so I thought, well, this should be about gambling. Because the top part is very clear; it's very predictable. And it's like what you think. You know, it's a checkerboard. You go from here to here to here to here, then your game is over. Then the bottom part, which is like two thirds of the piece, is all this hazy kind of lines that don't match, don't meet, you know, and that's what gambling, to me, reads like in my head. It's like you think it's very clear, and then everything goes to pieces.

[They laugh.]

So anyway, I get ideas from all kinds of places, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: But the other pieces, of course, I worked on several in a series. It was the Agnes Martin, what I call my Agnes Martin pieces, you know. Because it's so logical. I always looked at her work. I always went to see all her shows in New York. And I always admired her work tremendously. So she worked with the grids; she works with the lines with that kind of discipline that I feel it really matches what I wanted to do. And so I did three or four pieces inspired — three or four or five. I can't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: And they all have the horsehair?

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Which adds a whole —

MS. AKERS: Yeah, they all have the horsehair, and they all have the metal. I did one without metal, and then I decided it really needed the metal. So I did one in white and one in natural; the others were natural, and two different scales. One I decided to scale it down, and then I realized, no, it has to be larger. Because some of the drawings were not very large. Her paintings were large, but her drawings weren't. And they were just so beautiful. I mean, I could never match what she did. But it was a great inspiration, because it really fit the way I think and the way I work and the way I see lines, you know, and grids and all that.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting, because you added a layer of dimensionality —

MS. AKERS: Right, yeah. Because I'm not a painter. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And the concept of light, too, and reflection off of both the metal and the tips of the horsehair.

MS. AKERS: Yes. That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then windows really resurfaced in the work.

MS. AKERS: That's right. In the last two years, my focus has been in windows. And I think because I like the idea - and doorways and stuff like that. But it's always been there, you know. I've always worked with the idea of doors and windows and openings. The mystery is what attracts me to it. It's not the window itself but what's inside the opening.

I remember, when I first came to this country, and I lived in Chicago, I was sharing an apartment with a friend. We would go for walks at night, and then we would see all these windows. And you always imagine, you know, or always make stories. I think they just got home. I think they are making dinner. I think they are taking care of the kids now. You know, it's not I'm peeking in the window. It's trying to imagine what their lives are like. There is something fascinating about windows.

And also I have memories of very tiny windows in Cuba and in Spain, these really tiny windows. And a window within a window, or a window within a door, you know - like the big churches have the big doors that never open, then inside that door is a little door. That's the one you use. Only for special occasions, like a big festival, they open the big doors. And I always found that fascinating, the double-image-type thing, you know.

So I think it's in my mind now a lot, the windows. Because there are so many possibilities. So I do tend to work in series. And they're not so specific, but sometimes I see a continuity, because they're not identical, but there is a way that they relate to each other.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. You said that you really feel in many ways, that Spain is home.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Could you say a bit more about that?

MS. AKERS: Well, I guess because, you know, I grew up in Cuba, right. My parents moved there when I was four.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But I lived in a very Spanish home. The whole tendency, the food, the way we lived, everything was Spain. And so I always felt — because the idea was we were going to go back in a couple of years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Well, we didn't. But I just never made the conversion into being a Cuban. I love Cuba, and I love Cubans. I had a good life there, and I have good friends. They're not in Cuba anymore, but Cuban friends. But I never became so attached to the country, which is kind of interesting. And I don't even know why.

MS. RIEDEL: I remember you saying that you still thought that your color sense was Spanish.

MS. AKERS: I think my roots are still in Spain. Whenever I go to Spain, I just feel like I am home, especially when I go to Santiago. It's just a wonderful town. And of course, my relatives are there. But it's just I feel like it all makes sense. And I always like to hear people talk and what they have to tell and their sense of humor. I just can relate to their lifestyle. They have a good life in Spain. People live well, even when they're not wealthy. People live well, because they know how to enjoy life. And I always admired that. Sometimes I ask my uncles or my cousins, I say, well, how come people have all that money to go and have tapas and all that? They said, if you watch them, they're not eating that much. They'll nurse a glass of wine for a long time. They go there to meet people. They go there to hang out.

And we found out — last time we went to Spain, we went to Pamplona. We spent three or four days there. It was just a wonderful town. It was raining. It was winter. And all the families come out to the bars to meet their friends. It was fascinating. Middle-aged people, older people, three generations, kids, all ages, and it's like in November, you know. It wasn't like it was summer. In summer, of course, everything happens. But I thought, you know — so they say, if you watch, they're not eating the fancy stuff. They may have some cheese or a bit of that or a bit of tortilla but not spending tons of money, no.

But it is a good life, I think. I mean, I don't think I could make the transition to be there full-time, but I would love to be able to be there half of the year and then here half of the year. My work belongs here, you know. And my work is what keeps me alive; I feel emotionally connected here.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you ever shown over in —

MS. AKERS: No. Actually, yes. I was in a show there that traveled — opened in Barcelona and traveled to Madrid. And I am trying to remember how that show came about.

There was a woman in fibers in Barcelona. I can't remember her name. And she worked in knotted pieces. She - I think she was the one who organized that show. And so I was invited to send work. I sent two pieces. And my parents were then in Madrid. So they were watching the news on TV, and here they show this show with textiles, and they show my work. They say, not only is she from Spain, she's from Santiago de Compostela. [Laughs.] My parents went, what? So they went to see the show, of course.

But you know, I had never told them, because I wasn't even sure how good the show was going to be or where it was going to show. But Santiago de Compostela has quite a name. They felt it was very funny. And they went to see the show. My mother tried to arrange the piece so it would look better.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: I know you've really admired the work of Antonio Tapies.

MS. AKERS: Oh, yes, yes. I like the way he's somewhere between a painter and sculptor and a writer, you know. He is very literal.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds a little like your work. [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: Yeah. His work is fascinating, and it keeps changing. And the way he assembles things — it's one of those things that I know I couldn't do, because I could never be that, what do you call it, sort of intuitive, you know. I feel like my work has become a little more intuitive. But my drawings now are more intuitive, my drawings on the warp and on the loom, the weavings. But the way he just throws things together, it's just fascinating to me. It's just wonderful. I do admire him tremendously. And I did go and see his foundation in Barcelona. It is beautiful. It's beautiful.

And he's quite a writer, too. He's a philosopher, so I like his writing. I read it in English, though. It's easier for me because — I don't know, it's harder. It was so hard to learn English. And then now I find that I read faster in English than in Spanish.

MS. RIEDEL: But you learned English in your mid-20s?

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's unusual to have a language that you've learned in your 20s that is still — that's true.

MS. AKERS: Well, you know, I think it comes from teaching for so many years. I had to really concentrate on focusing on my language more. I still feel it's my second language; English is my second language. But in reading, sometimes — like a friend gave me one of Isabel Allende's books in Spanish, because she thought I should read it in Spanish. And I had a hard time. [They laugh.] You know what it was? I kept getting fascinated with the words.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. AKERS: But I do that in English, too. Sometimes I read a paragraph, and I go back and read it again, because I'm fascinated with how words go together. So I love writing. Probably if I hadn't changed languages, I would have done more with writing. But I'm somewhere in between.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: But I think when you're teaching at college for 23 years, you're exposed to a lot of good writing through other people. And also you have to tune into it to help your students. I always would say, you know, you better check with so and so, because I'm not sure about this. Because I feel like I'm a good critic and definitely a very good speller but not something that I could improve. I could read something you wrote and maybe make corrections. But I'm not sure it would make it better. And sometimes I see students writing a paper or applying for a grant or something. I would send them to somebody else that I knew would be better than I could be. I could read it to proofread it to make some corrections but not to make it a better piece of writing.

MS. RIEDEL: How and when did you start painting on the pieces?

MS. AKERS: Well, that came about — let's see. Well, the first piece, that was this piece that we talked about before. It was 1996. But as I said, at that time I think my painting on the warp, on the pieces, was a little more tentative. It was a little more inspired by weaving or by textiles. I feel like, now, the way I'm using paint has been more liberating because I'm using patterning that doesn't relate to weaving that much.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: It's breaking away, and it's sort of more intuitive. And I just love the idea that it can go anywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: And you'll paint on the loom? You'll paint once the piece is off the loom?

MS. AKERS: That's right, both.

MS. RIEDEL: And instead of the paint really going hand in hand with specific textile, technique, or design, it's sort of like the horsehair, in the sense that it can go anywhere.

MS. AKERS: That's right. And it comes more like from - like the one piece that we were looking at earlier, it comes from a pot, you know, from the Shipibo pot.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. But you know, if you see it, you wouldn't recognize it. It's just like that's where I got the idea of how those lines move. And this small series, they're all kind of painted inside the window, you know.

A friend of mine said, when she looked at them — because I did two opposite; I did one that the pattern is on the outside and one that the pattern is all on the inside of the window - and she said, the title should be *It's a Jungle Out There*.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AKERS: So I didn't title them that, but, you know, I can see that there is that kind of feeling that it's very chaotic. You know, the drawings are kind of loose. And I find that exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: So the smaller pieces, in some cases, the lines can be totally painted.

MS. AKERS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Jumping back to the reading and writing, are there any particular publications that have been really important to you over time, craft publications in particular, *Fiberarts* or *American Craft* or anything? Or particular writers that you feel have really added something to the field or that helps people understand your work better, written really good reviews?

MS. AKERS: I guess *American Craft* magazine is still one of the best sources for getting information and also hearing about what other people are doing in other places, in other areas, in other countries. There is a British publication, a crafts magazine, that is very good, too. Also *Art in America*.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any writers in particular that have been important to you over time? You mentioned Antoni Tapies, but is there anyone important about art or other?

MS. AKERS: Antoni Tapies, Janet Koplos, Margo Mensing.

MS. RIEDEL: Architecture?

MS. AKERS: I can't think of anyone right now. I remember reading some lectures of Agnes Martin that were very wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: There were some writings of hers that I thought they were very, very important to read.

MS. RIEDEL: Lenore Tawney too, wrote well, I thought.

MS. AKERS: Yeah, yeah. Kind of short form, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. AKERS: Yeah. Because she was so quiet and so reserved to express herself out there.

[END DISC 05 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: Is there a community that's been particularly important to your work over time?

MS. AKERS: Well, I think we already talked about Penland, right, yeah. So that was a very important one. But also Tyler for me became like a community. It wasn't just a job, but it was a group of very good artists teaching there, and very good students, too. It's a great community. At the time when I questioned it, you know, and when I first went to teach there, I didn't realize that. I didn't realize that it becomes like not just a place to go and teach but a place where you interact with other people that are artists. And also we had a very good program of visiting artists, so you'd get to meet other people.

And then we had a very selective group of students. The school was very selective in who could get into the school. To accept students there is not so simple. So I think that became my community in Philadelphia. And I was there for 23 years. That's a long time. I mean, I had other friends that were outside the school. But most of my friends were related to Tyler because, you know, you spend a lot of energy in a place like that. I went away for the summer sometimes or the winter for a while, but basically I just stayed there a lot.

And then you make connections with other artists having shows and making sure that they are there for you, too, if you need any advice or any ideas. I don't think we exchanged ideas about our work that much. I was expecting more of that. But I think because in school situations you are so busy doing the job and teaching the students, and so if somebody had a show, you went to see the show, and you talked about it with them maybe. But other than that, we just didn't have a chance to just interact any more than that.

Penland was more of that, because it was a little more isolated, you know. And also I was in residence there. So it was a place to live and work, where Tyler was a place to work. I would go home after I finished. And everybody did that. I mean, everybody was very busy doing their own work. But I think it was, in a way, it was a good feeling of community there. I made some good friends.

MS. RIEDEL: But leaving that didn't seem to have adversely affected your work at all.

MS. AKERS: No, no. Because I had moved around so much, I always feel that I miss my friends. I do miss them. But I feel like they're always with me. I'm never going to lose them, you know. Because I travel so much. I think I've lived in five or six different states in this country. You see people who have lived and were born and lived there all their lives, you know. I started in Chicago in Illinois, then went to Michigan, then went to Penland, then went to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, California.

MS. RIEDEL: Have your travels affected your work?

MS. AKERS: You know, I was thinking about that, because I feel like journeying from one point to another has been a physical transformation for me; going from one place to the other place, I think, has increased my sense of self and self-confidence. And it has expanded my vision of the world, of course. I'm very happy that I made all

those geographical changes. I've experienced both life in the country and in the cities. And it's all been very important to me. I don't think my life or my work is about the travels, but I think the journey is what my work is about. It's the going, not the going places but the going through my work, how my work moves from one image to the next. That is the journey that I'm more concerned about than the physical journey of going from North Carolina to New Jersey. And so it's that kind of thing.

And I'm sure, all in all, it has affected it. I think what has affected me the most is retiring from teaching and moving to California. Because I realized that I have all the freedom, you know. I can move; it's my time; it's all my time. And sometimes I feel like I'm running out of time, but sometimes I feel like I have all the time ahead of me, even though I'm not that young anymore, you know. So it's kind of interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you always thought about that journey aspect to your work? Or is it something that's come later?

MS. AKERS: I think it's come later, more analyzing where I've been. One time when I applied for a grant, they wanted 40 years of my life, 40 years of experience, you know. I realized, after I finished doing the application, and I got the grant and all that, that that was the most fascinating part, is to have to go back 40 years and look at what I've been doing for 40 years. Because you only look at what you've been doing for the last couple of years, you know. You move on to the next one. And I found that kind of interesting to have to go back and look at what I've done.

And also it gives me the ideas. I say, my God, I've been doing this for a long time. That was a grant that was for mature artists, so it had to be someone who had to be doing work for a long time. That was a wonderful grant to get. But I still want to externalize my process and my materials. But I don't want it to be about process and materials, you know. I want it to go beyond that and be more about specific image or mystery or memories or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: It's seems it's almost a journey of form and color over time, how that's changed, how you've manipulated it, and how it's changed in your own mind, your own perspective, how they intersected, separated, come back again in a different perspective.

MS. AKERS: Right. And every time I finish a piece, it opens up all these questions about the next piece. It's not like it's all conclusive, right there; oh, okay, this is it. There's always something that's not quite there, which is what makes it kind of exciting, too. It's an endless sort of situation that raises questions that are going to maybe be answered by the next piece or by the next piece or by the next piece, you know. That's the reason I always feel like it's important to just keep working, even at times that you feel like maybe it's not there yet. But if you keep working, you'll get there, whatever "there" is. And "there" is different for each one of us.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of a piece you did called *Crossroads*.

MS. AKERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you did a series of pieces about that intersection of roads.

MS. AKERS: That's right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like that's a theme that has surfaced again and again in different guises.

MS. AKERS: Well, in a way it makes sense with the weaving, because I'm dealing with the vertical and horizontal all the time and so a crossroad. I like to travel, and whenever I see something interesting — I did some pieces that were inspired by a book that's called *The World From Above* [Hanns Reich. New York: Hill and Wang, 1966]. They were photographs taken from planes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah. Was this by the Italian photographer?

MS. AKERS: I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AKERS: I have the book somewhere. It was a wonderful little book, and it was just wonderful photographs. They were very abstract. Because I feel my work is very abstract, you know, and so it was nice to isolate one idea and then say, oh, that looks like a herringbone, that looks like a ship that just went by, or that looks like the wind created that. So things like that sometimes inspire me, too.

[END DISC 05 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: So what are you working on now?

MS. AKERS: Well, I'm still continuing to work for the last year in this series of windows. I tend to work in series. So this series of windows have become like the focus. The one I'm working on now is one more window. There were two sketches I made that I want it to be like two pieces. They're not identical, but the same scale, different color. And in one of them, the frame of the window is dark, and the inside of the window is light. The one I'm working on now is the opposite.

So what I'm thinking about doing when it comes off the loom, maybe since the inside of the window is light, I may put more and more lines in it, painted lines. So even though they're all windows, they're changing as they develop. And this one is sort of like a pair, part of a pair, but they don't have to be identical. They don't have to be the same. It's only the same dimensions, the same idea, and the same principle of the mystery of the window. That, to me, is still very much there, you know.

And what I did, I changed the fact that one has the dark frame; the other one has a light frame. So what happened inside is the opposite then. And so that inside has become a little more crucial. Maybe they'll either become smaller or disappear, or become larger and take over the frame. I have no idea.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's interesting, because it's different than the way you used to work earlier when that would be very specific to the design.

MS. AKERS: That's right.

MS. RIEDEL: The piece is now actually evolving as you're working on it .

MS. AKERS: Yeah. I think because of the painting being so intuitive and looser and not being related to the weaving itself, then it gives me the freedom to move things around a little more than when I was weaving before that. Everything had to kind of line up better. So there is some kind of something going on right now that I'm excited about.

I did a whole series of smaller pieces which were like studies for bigger pieces. And that was kind of interesting, too. No metal in them. Just the horsehair and the linen and the paint, because I then could do four or five or six different variations. It gives me the idea I can do those with the large ones, too. I can do, you know, more changes within the frame of the window as I go along. So anyway, we'll see where they go. But I think there will be many windows for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds good. I think that's it.

MS. AKERS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

MS. AKERS: Thank you.

MS. RIEDEL: It's been a real pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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