Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with William Douglas Carlson, 2009 June 24-25

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

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Carlson on June 24-25, 2009. The interview took place in Miami, FL, 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.

William Carlson has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art with William Carlson at the artist's home in Coconut Grove, Florida, on June 24, 2009. This is disc number one.

We've had a good day so far.

WILLIAM CARLSON: Yeah, we've had a lot of fun. Thank you.

MS. RIEDEL: We have had a lot of fun, thank you. So we thought we'd just start the conversation with where things are right now and then we'll jump back to the beginning and look at that part of your life. But you've been here in Florida since 2005?

MR. CARLSON: No, 2003.

MS. RIEDEL: So 2003, okay.

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've been teaching at the University of Miami that whole time?

MR. CARLSON: That whole time, yes. So I made a transition, a big move from being at the University of Illinois for 27 years to moving to Miami. So Illinois, 1976 through 2003, and the move to Miami was really because of a need for a change. Life was good but life can also have some new surprises and new opportunities.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So Miami offered me that and a dean who brought me here, the dean of the college of arts and sciences —

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name?

MR. CARLSON: Jim Wyche.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And Donna Shalala, the president of the university, both were very convincing in the university's commitment to the arts. So in kind of an unexpected and kind of an immediate move I decided, and Annie Shatas, my wife, decided that we would try Miami and try to figure out whether we had an identity here. I got fitted for my Speedo bathing suit and so I was on the road to Miami.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about Miami was appealing? What about the program here was appealing after all those years in Illinois?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess the idea of change was the most appealing.

But the university, again, with those great cheerleaders, with Wyche and Shalala, were very convincing in that this smaller school, this school of 14,000, was ready for an art department that really was going to be focused on integration into the campus and a chance to have an art department develop — small, but an art department developed that was going to be crucial to the life of the school and that is what made things sound so good.

This would include the development of a real comprehensive glass program as well as trying to foster new hires in all the areas of the department of art and art history.

MS. RIEDEL: And you came here as the chair?

MR. CARLSON: So I came as the chair, yeah, and I don't think of myself as an administrator, although the folks at Miami had made me believe that I could do that and it worked okay for a couple of years. That was in the trying to promote the hires and create the new positions and talk about new facilities that really would be that transition from a smaller art program in a big university, or a reasonable university of 14,000 students, into a real, vibrant art program.

That wasn't to be, in some ways just because of the finances, the money and the resources that was going to make all this happen; and more than that, the dean who had brought me to the campus was forced out, forced out because he was ambitious, I think, and very enlightened but probably not as good a manager as he needed to be and the funds were not going to be forthcoming to make those transitions happen.

So much to my dismay, his departure meant an evaporation of some of the things that I thought would happen as chair of the art department.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was exciting to you to think about building this program that would allow you to really envision a new way of looking at sculpture and art that you hadn't been able to — hadn't been able to develop so much from the ground up in Illinois? Is that it?

MR. CARLSON: Yes I think so. Again, it was trying to take what I'd learned in Illinois, — not that they were all mistakes, but I'm not sure there were too many mistakes — but trying to figure out a way of making a program of a size and of a focus that would really make the three-dimensional area and the whole art department work as a coordinated unit rather than separate entities.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CARLSON: Probably easier said than done.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So I guess that's part of my education that went along with this move.

The university and some of the things that were imagined to happen on my arrival still have come to pass, so that the Lowe Art Museum on the University of Miami campus now has a wonderful addition to the facilities with a wing that was funded, sponsored by Myrna and Sheldon Palley, collectors in the arts, especially committed to glass and that opportunity to have a museum that selectively and expertly put together both the facility and the chance to see glass in a very contemporary art sense or in a focus that is about contemporary art was very important. And that has still come to pass and that's one of the really special opportunities that I've had a chance to be a part of since coming here.

MS. RIEDEL: And for that museum you designed that spectacular installation that we just saw, the three-part —

MR. CARLSON: Yes, so the museum, the Myrna and Sheldon Palley Collection — there have been other collectors who have donated, Mike and Annie Belkin, Florence and Robert Werner, and Joan Baxt, and others.

I'm sorry if I'm not going to get everybody included. But it's been a group effort kind of led by Myrna and Sheldon, and the building was designed around the collection. But there's an opportunity within that building design that allowed for an entry wall through the older facility into the new, and that's where I've had a chance to do an architectural piece *[Procellous Wall]* which talks about, I guess, many things.

It talks about my aesthetics in glass but it also gives the museum-goer, the museum audience, a chance to see how glass is being interpreted on a larger scale as well as the more object-oriented pieces that are a part of the collection.

So that piece has both historical references in the way that I use the glass and sense of sculpture and it also deals with I guess my own priorities within the aesthetics. So it's definitely a Bill Carlson piece but it kind of opens a new vocabulary of ways of working with glass that have been a very good learning experience for me.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's your first wall installation that is backlit, like it's actually a window piece, isn't it?

MR. CARLSON: Well, the one that's in Chicago is also illuminated from both sides. It's not an outside piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh that's true, the one you did way back in 1984, right [*Optional Refraction*s]?

MR. CARLSON: '84, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MR. CARLSON: Very good.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, but this piece feels very different than that one. Is it the transparency of the glass? Is it the movement of it? It feels very different than that Chicago piece.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, the Chicago piece is much more about abstraction of light and motion because it has limited amount of space. It has a lot of people moving both on the public access to the "L" in Chicago at Franklin — what did I say? — Franklin — no, LaSalle and Van Buren are the streets in Chicago, if I'm correct.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And then the opposite side of that wall is the entrance to the Chicago Board of Options Exchange.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Both areas of heavy traffic, both areas where people can't really stop and linger and look at a piece, so it was more about kind of the abstraction of light and motion.

So it was kind of pushing people to move on and not stop to linger on any one aspect of the piece. Where the piece at the Lowe Art Museum is really one that you can stop and really see the different kind of waves, the different kind of organic manifestations of line and sculpture that work within the piece, and then with these colored components, transparent glass floating within that kind of wave of fluidity.

MS. RIEDEL: It feels like an interesting synthesis of your three-dimensional sculptures from early on, very architectural in that sense and then the later wall installations, but there color seems to play a different role in that piece too.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, I guess for the most part the color in earlier pieces was determined by the kinds of glasses that I could find and laminate, determined by the kind of granites I would choose to use. But there were a lot of things that were kind of givens and those givens were what was available. I think with this, I had a much broader palette to work with. And also I had, I guess, something to respond to.

For the most part, other than the Chicago piece and a few other major public commissions, my work has been objects. They can be moved from place to place. So their context is changing; and the piece at the Lowe Art Museum has context which is going to be Florida. It's going to be green out there and that kind of interaction with nature, while still using it but not letting it just be a picture on nature; this is kind of a picture on the changing seasons — or I guess, not changing seasons in Florida.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: But at least changing growth that goes on around the building.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking earlier today about how the move to Florida from Illinois really affected your studio work, that you took on many more responsibilities as the chair of the art program or department here. How have you seen your work change since you've been here?

MR. CARLSON: Well, that's a bit of a frustration and a bit of a kind still anticipation. I see the work has changed in a way that my productivity was certainly diminished upon arriving for a couple of years. I have a great studio now that allows me to work but I'm still trying to kind of redefine what I make might be.

The piece at the Lowe Art Museum is a good-sized piece, I guess, architecturally and monumental in some respects. But it took about a year to do and that time was time well-spent. I learned a lot of things, and things that I thought I knew but maybe I wasn't so sure about. So my expertise with the material and with some of the illusions it created with the glass, I think, have been enlightened.

But the work, the other work in my studio that would go on has been ongoing, continuous, and maybe somewhat indecisive right now because I'm trying to finish up some of the things that were involved with text and language and that whole issue with technologies and how I might interpret the aesthetics of those things.

MS. RIEDEL: And those language pieces started a couple years before you came to the area.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, they would have started probably about in 2000.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, so that's more than a couple.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: But the text pieces had developed and that was quite a drastic change from some of the granite and glass and laminated pieces that preceded it.

So that was my really big break, was that transition from these well-manicured, -designed, and -executed, painfully crafted — not visually painful but physically painful — crafted pieces with the granite and glass. And I very much respect the aesthetics that I had developed, but I also knew that I had to change things because just as a daily routine of making. it was an awful lot to take on and I felt there were other things that I had neglected.

And the idea of language, the idea of Latin, the idea of shorthand, the idea of other kinds of ways of communicating that at one time or another have been part of our evolution and revisiting those issues in kind of an aesthetic retrospective has been exciting.

But again, I'm ready, probably, to take that to another level. So I'm not sure what that level is going to be, but evolution of work is important. For probably many years, too many years, in some ways, I had relied upon the skills of the lamination, and new ideas were evolving but new ideas weren't really groundbreaking, and I think that sense to shake it up a bit is something that we all need to try to do.

And certainly, as an educator, I need to kind of push myself in that way. As a teacher I need to question, I need to deal with the things I don't know the answers to. I think that that's what's so important about an artist's life being about that disruption; and that can be both anxiety-driven or it also can be kind of comforting to kind of recreate yourself in a way that has a new sense of visual expectations.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you're in an interesting crossroads, again, here now, because we've talked about you've been here for six years and you're getting ready in another few years to move now up to Massachusetts to the Berkshires, and we were talking earlier about how that's going to impact your career and your work again. Because for the first time — well, not for the first time — but you will have, really, that quiet studio on your own, as opposed to being part of a large university setting for the first time in a very long time.

MR. CARLSON: Well, for almost forever. Because if I kind of chart the course, I had undergraduate work at the Cleveland Institute of Art.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And I left there in 1973. While a student there, I had set up their glass program.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. CARLSON: And their glass program has really developed and is one of, I think, the best undergraduate programs in the country, under Brent Young, is the main professor there. I then had a studio for a little while, just for a year, in Ohio and then went to grad school.

MS. RIEDEL: In Akron, right?

MR. CARLSON: Akron, yes, then went to grad school at Alfred University. So from Alfred I came to Illinois and when I was — went there in '76. I continued in the educational life, so institutionalized I was.

MS. RIEDEL: So you started teaching at the University of Illinois in 1976?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: So the idea of being in an institution, being an educator or never getting out of college has certainly been still my modus operandi. And it's been a very good way to live. I would have to say that those who aren't teachers sometimes think that the teachers are somehow getting a free ride. Sometimes we who are teachers think the folks in their own studios are getting a free — not a free ride, but have a certain freedom that we might not necessarily have a chance to enjoy.

But it's really — it's been a good career for me because I think that what I bring to the institution, those questioning issues and the idea of exploration and invention and how I want to be shocked and bewildered by my students because of what they bring to the equation, is what has kept me stimulated as a teacher and also as an artist.

So I both benefit from and I hopefully am beneficial to the students and the institution.

MS. RIEDEL: We're starting to touch on a whole range of different things now, that I want to go into greater depth with. So maybe let's move back now.

MR. CARLSON: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And start from youth and we'll move chronologically so we can cover everything that we need to. So at the very beginning, you were born in Ohio, correct?

MR. CARLSON: Born in Ohio.

MS. RIEDEL: In Dover?

MR. CARLSON: In Dover, Ohio, small town, two hours south of Cleveland, two hours northeast of Columbus.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. 1950?

MR. CARLSON: 1950, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, what date?

MR. CARLSON: February eighteenth — Louis Comfort Tiffany's birthday.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, well that's interesting.

MR. CARLSON: Well, it is. I'm not sure how it's relevant, but it's interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: It is interesting. And you grew up in Ohio.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you an only child?

MR. CARLSON: No, no I had a big brother.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And your father, we talked about, was a lawyer and also a chemist, yes?

MR. CARLSON: My father moved from New York right before I was born and it was right after the war.

MS. RIEDEL: What was your father's name?

MR. CARLSON: Ohly, O-H-L-Y.

MS. RIEDEL: O-H-L-Y. And your mom?

MR. CARLSON: Ruth.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: They were both Brooklyn kids who escaped to Ohio and my father got into the — even though trained as a lawyer he was also trained as a chemist and he got into making adhesives and things that would stick — acoustical tile, ceiling tiles up on the ceiling, at least for 20 years until they might fall down. But he did a lot of the adhesive stuff that was based upon rubber, Akron being the rubber capital of the world.

So you take a little bit of rubber, you take a little bit of solvent, and you can make that rubber sticky and that's the formation of adhesives. And there were adhesives you could stick down your tile in your bathroom or the acoustical tiling to the ceiling and that was pretty much his career. He built the facility and then started his own business with the same focus.

So early on, when I was growing up we really were relying upon glue as lots of things we have around the house. Other kids had hammers and nails. I was dealing with glue because it would come home from the factory. So early on, in my glass life, I started using glue as a way of laminating these materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So glass is glass, but glass has to make different expansions. So to heat glass and have it fuse

together as one thing, to laminate it with epoxies and adhesives that are intended for that use was quite another. And putting the granite in the glass, again, together, is working with dissimilar expansions, not totally drastically different but drastically different enough so that a hot fusing would never work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: But the adhesive, the epoxy, the aerospace adhesives that I started to use, were really ideal for that unorthodox nontraditional application of glass fabrication.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, were you interested in art as a young — as a child?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, I was always interested in art and I used to tell my students, or I still do tell them, that my parents made me go to art school — which is not quite right, but they were always very supportive.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did that happen? How did that come about that you were forced to go to art school?

MR. CARLSON: Well, it didn't really happen that way but they were always very supportive. I was in a small town of maybe 10,000 or 8,000 at that point. There really wasn't much art per se in that location. But the idea of them being supportive of my art interests — it's something I kind of took on independently.

So I was a loner in many ways and took on these different kinds of art projects and tried to do my best, and that proceeded to be my main interest and eventually going to the Cleveland Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you interested in painting as a child or you were interested in sculpture? Were you interested in clay?

MR. CARLSON: I was interested in almost all that stuff. My focus wasn't really informed by anybody who was a mentor per se. I did some printmaking, painting, sculpture, and as a student at Cleveland I was kind of a major in every area at one point or another except graphic design. But my interest was kind of all over the place.

So two- or three-dimensional issues kind of came and went according to the different assignments that would go along with the curriculum. But eventually my interest ended up being in a three-dimensional area and glass was something that was of interest, although the institute did not have a glass program that existed at that point.

So I was lucky enough in 1981 —

MS. RIEDEL: In '71?

MR. CARLSON: In '71, thank you.

MS. RIEDEL: You're welcome.

MR. CARLSON: Okay, '71, I went to Pilchuck Glass School. Now Pilchuck wasn't anything more than a pastureland at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Now you were in the Cleveland Institute of Art.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you decide to go to Pilchuck for the summer?

MR. CARLSON: Well, the Union of Independent Colleges of Art, which I don't know that it still exists, it was CCAC, Cleveland, Kansas City, Maryland Institute of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, a few other institutions, those folks gave Dale Chihuly a small fund or a small grant.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. CARLSON: That grant was enough to start the idea of Pilchuck.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, I didn't know it was that.

MR. CARLSON: And with the Weyerhaeuser funding — Weyerhaeuser corporation.

MS. RIEDEL: Were the Haubergs involved then too?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: It was John Hauberg and Anne [Gould] Hauberg.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Right, so it was their interest, and certainly the convincing of Dale Chihuly, that made that happen. So there were, I think, 18 of us up on top of that hill with no electricity and no running water and it was pretty — it was primitive at best. And I wasn't that much of a camper prior to that, but I guess I gained a little bit of camping experience.

But we built the shop there and the first month — so it was a two-month program. The second month I began to do some things in the hot shop and although I learned a bit, it was kind of learn as you go, or learn on your own. There really wasn't actually a class per se but we would go in and see demos and things and then try to imitate later on in the day.

So that was enough to get me interested in this glass stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: And who was teaching or who was demonstrating, or was everybody?

MR. CARLSON: Well, it would be pretty much Dale Chihuly, Jamie Carpenter, I think Dick Marquist was up there that summer, other people I'm forgetting right now. But anyway, it was a group of novices and some people with expertise and we were all quite taken with the process and all of the magic and the alchemy that goes along with glassmaking.

MS. RIEDEL: So you built a shop?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, it was kind of a hole in the meadow.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So it was pretty primitive.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: But it was a very good start and I got enough of an interest and the person who — the other person from Cleveland Institute of Art who was there with me was Christine Federighi.

Christine was a ceramicist at the time and the two of us went back to Cleveland and built a small furnace, as primitive as you could make it, and had it in a kiln room in the ceramics program and we would go in there and work every morning from four in the morning until nine, because that was when we would be out of the way of the other use of the facilities.

MS. RIEDEL: And the Cleveland Institute of Art was perfectly happy to have an undergraduate come back and build this kiln space?

MR. CARLSON: I think there was some negotiating there but —

MS. RIEDEL: Pretty extraordinary.

MR. CARLSON: The faculty person who was there was Joe Zeller. Joe Zeller is a ceramicist. He taught at Cleveland, at Ohio University, and he was a dean out in Boise, Idaho. So he's been both an administrator and a faculty person for many years. But he was supportive of both of us and supportive of the idea of having this program.

The institute had wanted to have a glass program for a number of years but they had not had a faculty funding to bring somebody in strictly for that. So my willingness to kind of take on the opportunity was a great way for me to learn at their expense and they got a facility at my experience.

Chris Federighi went off to grad school in my last year at the art institute. I had a chance to both teach in the facility that I had built and do my own work. So it was a great —

MS. RIEDEL: This was while you were still an undergraduate?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You were teaching?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, so —

MS. RIEDEL: That's rather unusual.

MR. CARLSON: Well, it was just a beginning class and I knew a little more than they did but not much. It was unusual but I would have to say that it was a great way for me to learn and to certainly make priorities with the way the rest of my career would end up evolving, with that kind of responsibility toward teaching and probably, especially, with that material that can be blown or pushed or shoved or broken or whatever. I have had a lot of good experiences with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that initially what made — what drew you to glass, was its ability to be worked in so many different ways on top of its general — its qualities? What was it that —

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess it was the theater that goes along with the making of hot glass, that was interesting. And that process was seductive. The material is seductive. Now I always say that glass is a material that I love to love but I also love to hate. So glass to me is a seducer and a corrupter in some ways. We, as glass folks who are primarily involved with that kind of material, can easily be consumed by the nature of the material, its simple beauty, without us doing really very much.

It has all of the issues just to grab us and hold us. So to be an artist trying to work with glass, I think, is a pretty tough scenario.

You have to learn what the glass will do and how you can make it appropriate to your aesthetic, and that's kind of been the battle over the years; and as an educator that's the battle because we all see such beautiful things that are made in glass.

Beauty is an issue that is a concern and the craft that goes into the making of these beautiful things is always an admirable bit of expertise. But sometimes artistically, I think, that there can be a miss because glass will overshadow what ideas may be employed or the ideas may not even be employed. Maybe it's strictly an indulgence into the material.

So you see a lot of that and that's my personal agenda. Other artists will be quite happy to imagine the glass in its beauty as the real focus of their ambition and I respect that. But that's not necessarily how I portray my agenda.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that why so early on you began to mix it with other materials and give it a more common, pedestrian, or even commercial forms of glass?

MR. CARLSON: I would say so, yes, because that allowed me a different vocabulary of different materials to use to pull together, either all glass, or granite and glass, or whatever it would be. That was really important. And I think that the process of glassblowing, just how I learned from the beginning when it was just little bumpkin Billy out there trying to make something that would look like a vessel, it was exciting. And I still love the glassblowing and I teach it, I think, with some expertise.

But I could never really figure out what I wanted to make out of blown glass. The ideas that I came up with were much more sourced in contemporary sculpture of the time, much more sourced in ways of thinking about opacity, transparency, formalist issues, modernist issues, and certainly minimalist things at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Whose work were you looking at the time that spoke to you?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess that if I think of sculpture, I'm thinking of Tony Smith, other ambitious monumental minimalist sculptors who would talk about the austerity of the ambitious nature of form and the austerity of multiple forms. Does that make sense?

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

MR. CARLSON: Okay, but Smith was so good at editing things down and really focusing on a defined form and I think that definition, that sense of design and conclusion, dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's, was probably a way that I was trained, in that design sense of evolving a concept and a form.

A lot of my work also goes along with painters of the time. Frank Stella, whose repetitive linear paintings of that time were really very much a part of what I tried to do with some of the laminations, and the things that defined my triangles and rectangles rely, in a very small way but in kind of a very influential way, with what Frank Stella had done with his grand paintings.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you looking at the constructivists at this point too?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, well probably earlier than that, the constructivists, certainly Malevich and the Russian constructivists — and their sense of design and kind of conclusion that both referenced architecture and graphic

design and sculpture was always kind of a wonderful enlightenment when you kind of see things that you maybe had in art history and you see these images and they kind of make sense.

But then when traveling and seeing things in museums and seeing some of the real pieces, they speak kind of volumes to the way that they address issues that are being rediscovered in your own career, in my own career.

MS. RIEDEL: So very early on, you were really interested in glass as a medium that would allow you to work with other interests — architecture, modernism, design — and it wasn't just a pure love of glass. You really came at it as a medium that would allow you to explore ideas and other interests in a new way, that combination of glass with dissimilar materials.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, or maybe not glass at all, but glass was the opportunity. It was the entrée. It was kind of, again the use of the word "alchemy," just because glass, kind of because of its transparency, because of its optics, there is a sense of theater that is created and it makes the viewer sometimes a performer. But again, it's trying to negotiate the strength of an idea along with the simple beauty and seduction of the material.

So it's a material that I don't ever say I'm totally sold on but it's one that I'm continually still going back to.

MS. RIEDEL: And you do go back and forth from that to a variety of materials, as we know from the larger sculptures that you worked on in the past couple of decades.

MR. CARLSON: Right, yes. So there are a number of pieces that are public art that are in Chicago or Kansas City or Florida that have developed from the smaller pieces I do in my studio. So the pieces in my studio are something that I can handle. Sometimes they're backbreaking, but they're still something I handle.

So the opportunity to do things of a larger scale took place in, I guess the first one was about in, oh, '81 or so, I don't know. I'm not too sure on my dates right now, but a piece to take those ideas from in the studio, take them and make them into pieces either 14, 15, or 18 feet high.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it the *Contrapuntal* that we were talking about, the very large one?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, that was about 14 feet high.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: So I was combining glass and granite and having these things relate to architecture. And I think that translation for me worked pretty well in the formal aspects, and the idea of architecture and the idea of increased scale worked in a positive way. Sometimes bigger isn't always better but I think I was lucky that in those cases that increase in scale really worked pretty well.

MS. RIEDEL: And that one was — where is that piece located again?

MR. CARLSON: That's at Southern Illinois University med school in Springfield, Illinois.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was very specific — very site-specific?

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: You actually designed that geared specifically to that space.

MR. CARLSON: Right, well, all these public art pieces have been designed for the space, but that one in specific had about a four-ton chunk of glass, optical glass, German optical glass. It was laminated into a triangular component and that glass originally was aligned with the exit from the building through a door. So as people exited, you'd have some evidence of their movement in what would happen with the glass.

MS. RIEDEL: And I guess that's not dissimilar from what you were doing in Chicago in '84, with that idea of seeing the traders and all the people on the L moving through and seeing that movement registering through your piece.

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I want to jump back a little bit still to Dover and how you got to the Cleveland Institute. What was childhood like in Dover? Were you taking art classes in high school, in junior high? What was the introduction to art? How did that come about?

MR. CARLSON: I'm not sure there was much of a formal introduction. There were art classes in school but art classes in either elementary — or I guess junior high school or high school — would have been marginal. There

wasn’t an extended or ambitious program.

So again, I was on my own a bit. I would kind of have a good bit of support from the faculty and I would kind of take on projects. There were other students who were serious.

MS. RIEDEL: In high school?

MR. CARLSON: Yes. But I would kind of learn how to do silk screening on my own and some other ceramic stuff because I had a kiln available to me.

MS. RIEDEL: In high school?

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that’s interesting.

MR. CARLSON: And it was never really pottery stuff but it was using clay as a plastic material to kind of work with forms.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CARLSON: So it was very rudimentary, but enough experiences that I went off to the Art Students League, both in New York City and then Woodstock, New York, at the end of my high school career. So that would have been ’67 and ’68.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: And so I went off and took classes at the Art Students League and I really learned I was not much of a draftsman, or a painter, but I liked the experience and I think my eyes were opened wide enough so that I began to see some of the potential of things. And that led to, again, bad drawings and a portfolio that got me into the Art Institute in Cleveland.

MS. RIEDEL: So always thinking about line and form?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, and to really be exposed, because otherwise I was going to be a small-town boy, as it was. So to get a little eye-opening is important and it made the idea of an art school really feasible and, again, my parents were very supportive. They weren’t so sure about art school, but —

MS. RIEDEL: They were willing to let you try it.

MR. CARLSON: Oh yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And that’s interesting, because you didn’t go to a general university and take art classes. You went to an art school specifically.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, right. Well, I had been accepted at Carnegie Mellon and Alfred University, I think Ohio Wesleyan, good schools; Carnegie Mellon probably would have been the choice of my father, but the Art Institute in Cleveland really focused on this specialization of art and I seemed to be decisive enough about that. So they entertained the idea, probably shook their heads a little bit, but it all worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: And did they still have relatives back in New York? Was New York familiar to you?

MR. CARLSON: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so it wasn’t completely foreign.

How did you make the transition or how did you, once you completed the Cleveland Institute of Art in ’73, how then did you decide to go to Alfred for the MFA?

MR. CARLSON: Well, so in ’73, I had a studio for the ’73-’74 in Akron. We’ve mentioned that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Akron is not the center of the universe but Akron and the studio were — Randy Scherr was the artist who was there. His parents were both in the arts and he wasn’t using the studio so much because he had a day job and I was all eager and willing to do lots. So I improved the studio a bit and had a chance to work there for the year.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you doing at the time? What were you working on?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I was doing a lot of things that were really skill-building. They were really vessel forms. They were heavily decorated. They were dealing with things that came out of the history of glass as far as a lot of decorative things, plus trying to really create some things that would break new territory for me, and for the most part that new territory was probably skill-building.

So I was there for a year and I knew that that had been successful. I don't know how long it would have been successful but for that point the novelty for me and the novelty of handblowing glass had kind of interest in the area. So financially it worked.

But I also knew that I didn't have the stamina to continue with a glass furnace determining my existence. That war of the furnace is wonderful but it can also start to haunt you, and my thought about going to grad school was certainly enforced, reinforced. And I went off to grad school and at Alfred I really had a chance to explore in a facility that was a lot of new information, a lot of types of equipment, a lot of potential with the material, that both technically and artistically that were kind of new information, really exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Who were you studying with at the time?

MR. CARLSON: I studied at the time with both Eric Hilton, who actually was on leave for my first year. He was there for my second year.

Eric had worked for Steuben. He was a designer, maker, and sculptor, really an exquisite craftsman, and his exquisite aesthetic is based on that real seduction of glass that I talked about, that quality of reflection and multiplication of image and the beauty of the material, the kind of irresistible quality that glass has.

I also worked with Andy Belleci. He was really my main professor. Andy is a fellow who taught for a number of years. He started the Alfred program at pretty much the same time that Harvey Littleton started the program in Wisconsin. Andy didn't have high visibility.

He was working constantly, but he didn't have visibility the way some of the other glass artists did. But Andy had done very ambitious work at the Corning Museum and had a show there that I think would still hold up very well today and that show was also at a time of a flood.

So in, I think it was 1975, there was a flood along the Corning, New York, and his show is somehow in a mud flat near that — downriver from Corning, New York. But it was an ambitious work and Andy had a technical expertise with glass chemistry and just processes that were not out of a European, or not of out an Italian European tradition. They were much more out of a Scandinavian tradition of massive glass components that are really sculptural and may not always deal with a function or a vessel format.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CARLSON: But I learned a lot from Andy and then in 1976 I graduated. I had imagined staying in that area and having a studio. But again, the idea of being a full-time glass guy blowing glass just wasn't something that was totally comfortable.

So the position at the University of Illinois came about. Every year there seems like there's a position or two in glass education that comes around. I know there's always a scramble for applying for those and I was lucky enough to get the position at Illinois.

MS. RIEDEL: What was your work like at this point? I know very early on you were doing a series of set bottles. Was it the *Kinesthesis*?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, *Kinesthesis*, the series of *Kinesthesis*.

MS. RIEDEL: And they actually got a fair amount of attention.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, they did. Well, it was taking a familiar thing as far as glass, cutting, opening up these things, so it was not unlike geodes, where you have a simple form, you cut it in half, you expose an interior. So that is kind of the simplification of what's going on.

Now, meanwhile, when I would make these things I would build up layers and layers on the interior so there would be kind of a line, a linear orbit or linear rings around bubbles and folds so that there would be kind of a very miniature but a very kind of elaborate interior.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. CARLSON: Maybe imitated nature in a way and maybe it was just trying to push the level of what I was imagining would happen. But if you look at the Scandinavians, I guess . I'll go back to that. The Scandinavians were pretty good at the thick glass with the polished surface.

Even though mine were about color and line and things that were probably more unique to me, the kind of form and the function and history of these things was very much in a Scandinavian tradition.

So that was one part of it. Then I started to take some of those elements, the elements that went into the bottle, the overlays of color and salts and metallic issues, and I would take that and make cane and the cane was cast into rectangular components. And the *Kinesthesis* series was really about the laminations of optical glass to some of these cane castings, so that I would be able to, I guess, indulge in that reflection and that multiplication of images that happen because of polished glass and the reflection of one surface against another.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that what led into the *Contrapuntal* series?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: There was a series before that, wasn't there? *Compression* [series] — was there Compression?

MR. CARLSON: *Compression* was — yes, thank you, I should know these. The *Compression* series was trying to take this triangle thing, trying to take the rectangle that had been a component earlier used and then set up a situation in the furnace or the oven and have one component slump over an investment form of a triangular form and then I could reassemble these two together.

So by wanting to make the pieces larger but physically not being able to and technically not being able to do it very easily, I could make multiple components and have them stack into each other, and in that way start to grow these pieces and start to vary the forms that would be stacked or accumulated for a simple piece.

So that was one way of working larger and it was one way of inviting disaster, because when glass fits into glass, sometimes there can be real issues about the fragility of the material. So that is something that still hasn't — was never totally resolved in those pieces. If they're handled carefully they can last forever.

Sometimes, as a maker, I get tragically informed that something's been damaged and I can't undo damage. So it's rather problematic, some of those pieces, but I know if you look around we have some things here that have survived just fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But that very early on, the *Compression* series, was that also about trapezoids and triangles and —

MR. CARLSON: No, that was just about kind of rectangles that were softened, and I don't know how good the imagery is, the images that you have, are going to be in documenting that, but a triangle and a rectangle, more or less.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, but again, very formal, already architectural.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I'm a victim of a fascist education that talks about austerity and minimal forms being pushed together. I'm not sure it's fascist but sometimes it feels like it. It felt like it.

MS. RIEDEL: We've managed to do a lot with that.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, well, that's true. Well, the pieces are, in some ways if I look at them I think they're obviously — they're obvious. I'm telling you what you already know: This piece, it fits into that piece. But optically, again using what the glass is good at, and with the forms, there is a sense of gesture, a sense of posture to these things.

So I'm not just taking geometry and coldly putting it together, but there's a sense of a spine, a sense of a posture or a stance that these pieces have, that to me gives them a sense of grace and a sense of expression.

MS. RIEDEL: And a sense of space that changes drastically depending on where —

MR. CARLSON: Well, that's back to what that glass will do so well. It'll either exaggerate space or it'll kind of close it up or it'll multiply it.

MS. RIEDEL: And sometimes all very — within the same piece.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: And playing with glass at that point. And I guess this is kind of what I — I want to be in charge but it oftentimes teaches me what it can do that I didn't know about. So again, it's a play of negotiating my best efforts with its qualities.

MS. RIEDEL: And fairly early on you began laminating. Were these some of the early laminated pieces then?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, very much early on.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay and how did the Vitrolite, how and when did that come into play?

MR. CARLSON: Vitrolite used to be made in the '30s, '40s, and '50s. It was an architectural material and I would become a collector of architectural materials, to find it and to use it. So that went on as one of the activities.

MS. RIEDEL: What about it appealed to you at the start?

MR. CARLSON: Well, it had a density of color that was much better than anything I could make. At Alfred I had a fair amount of glass chemistry. That's part of the curriculum. I don't know if it still is, but it was the one institution that really focused on how to make glass that is unique to your needs.

I wasn't a particularly good glass chemist. But I tried to make some of these glasses and it would have a density of color and a real ability to give me linear integrity rather than just transparency or kind of an ephemeral color. I wanted it to be quite decisive.

So that's why the Vitrolite was so good and it was something that I couldn't reproduce and something I didn't really need to reproduce.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: I could find it and it's good to find that sometimes you can use what's available rather than having to reinvent the wheel every time. So the lamination process went on and it was both used with transparent glasses, opaque glasses, and it was using, at that point, glasses that they're epoxies that are used in the aerospace industry and the nuclear industry.

Now, the names on those products have changed and the chemistry and the sophistication of them have evolved but they were from Ciba-Geigy, which is a European company, and it was using those materials that allowed me to really explore some of the nontraditional glass fabrication processes.

So heat was not the issue but correct surface preparation and the appropriate adhesives were. And again I'm the son of a glue-ru, so it all worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right. Early on you were also working as a design consultant for a glass company while you were teaching. Is that right, the early '80s?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What were you doing?

MR. CARLSON: Well, Fenton Glass Company, I had worked with in 1984 for the Chicago Board of Options Exchange wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So a year after that I think, maybe two, both Dan Dailey and I went down and we were consulting for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Dan had quite a history as a designer from working with Dome. I didn't have much history but I had the connection with Fenton and a desire to see my ideas succeed and to see them succeed. At that point, I think that they were trying to reinvent themselves and trying to take what had been a tradition of very decorative vases and vessels and very frilly things that had an aesthetic that was no longer current.

So I went in with what I thought were good ideas, and using simple forms and trying to use some enamels — silkscreen enamel surfaces — to make very graphic marks on simply blown forms and I think that some of those ideas were good. It certainly didn't fit the Fenton aesthetic.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: So my time there was good information but not something that probably needed to be repeated.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you — you were designing for mass production?

MR. CARLSON: It would have been, yeah. It never really made it to that. They mass-produced these vessels. I would do the enameling on them and we thought about it but it really was so far from what they could say was their line that it didn't work.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anything in terms of that experience that added to your own work or anything that you learned either skill-wise or in terms of —

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess — yes, it was important because from doing the Chicago Board of Options Exchange wall I learned to work with a factory and be able to convince them that I needed their help and to direct them accordingly.

MS. RIEDEL: Which factory was that?

MR. CARLSON: Fenton Glass factory.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so Fenton did the Chicago Options?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: So with Fenton I would go down two days a week and we would cast all of the tiles for the Chicago Board of Options Exchange. This went on for about six months. I had to build the facilities that I took there to anneal these pieces. They had the glass. They had the manpower and we both kind of wanted it to work.

MS. RIEDEL: I see, and they had never done anything like this before.

MR. CARLSON: Never done anything like that, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CARLSON: So I went to design the more vessel-like forms and the things that they would put into production. I had learned enough how to work with these guys and so that was a good fit. They could do what we needed to do, and resist as they might, they still could — sometimes they don't like change. The factory workers, they're creatures of habit as far as the expertise they've developed and they have an awful lot of expertise but sometimes it's hard to get them to break with what they've been doing for the last year or six months.

So I learned about that and I also learned that probably the designing that I would do would be — wouldn't be in that format, because what I came up with, I thought was probably a contemporary design twist for Fenton. But they weren't ready for that, so my stuff would have been much more suitable for some of the European companies.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like it, yes.

MR. CARLSON: So much more decal design, contemporary design, Design Within Reach, that store that's around.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. CARLSON: It would have fit there and it still could fit there but at that point they were not — they couldn't afford, I think, to play the game with me and find another marketing direction.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. CARLSON: They still had to be where they were secure.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, so they were willing to do this because it was a commission, the initial one was a commission and they could afford to work with you.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah I was paying for the commission, yeah, but when I went in to design for them, kind of as a design consultant, that's where we probably crossed paths, or we probably departed paths.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting; because that ability of artists and designers and industry to work together or not seems to be a thread that comes up over and over again with more and less success. So it's interesting because this worked as long as it was an installation that was already commissioned. But in terms of changing their own objects they were interested, but they just couldn't afford to take that risk.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah. Dan Dailey, who had had more experience than I, I think he had some success, but still what he proposed was very labor-intensive and it probably wasn't again within their price range as far as what they thought their retail market would have been.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you had opportunities since to interface with industry in that manner or no?

MR. CARLSON: Not really, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I didn't —

MR. CARLSON: I have at times tried to think that it would be a good idea but it hasn't come to pass. So that's okay.

I've worked with industry, though, in a lot of the large-scale projects, but that's where I'm the customer and they're doing what I'm asking them to do. And I just have to have them be willing to do it and take on a sense on workmanship that will make sure it's done well. And I pretty much go to companies that I think or I know they have the expertise and the facilities to do things.

MS. RIEDEL: And have you gone back to Fenton for some of these other projects or have you really had to seek out?

MR. CARLSON: No, not for the other — other projects have been more about granite and granite laminations or limestone.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So the one project at the Lowe Art Museum, which we talked about earlier, I did that in-house here because we had the facilities and Fenton wouldn't have offered anything that would have made it any easier.

MS. RIEDEL: So you did that at your studio here?

MR. CARLSON: I did it at a studio in town here, where I could use their oven facilities. Everything else was pretty much done by me, by a couple of guys who work with me; and their expertise and my direction seemed to work out pretty well.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. How did that initial commission with the Chicago Board come about? Because you hadn't done anything like that before, had you?

MR. CARLSON: No, I had done small things that we would call sculpture, we would call traditional vessel forms. So how did I back into that one? That's a good idea. The small sculptures, I guess, had created some interest from collectors in Chicago, and there was some support through a couple of those folks for me to at least try to put together a proposal that would be considered.

So I had to do a prototype and I had to cast these tiles as if they were cast by the Fenton company, to make a proposal and to try to show them that I had an idea, I had the technology; even though not right at my disposal, I could certainly get the technology to do that. So there was an open competition, a number of very good artists, probably better — certainly better artists than me as far as their background.

But the bottom line was that the proposals were somehow very vulnerable because it was glass, and even though they may have been beautiful, the glass is going to be vulnerable and the dictates of the commission were that it had to provide security and transparency and not obstruct the flow of traffic. So my piece deals with that kind of abstraction of kinetic, or almost chaotic, movement of light and motion as people go in front of the textured wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So these tiles were made and they were four inches thick, so that each tile weighs about 55 to 60 pounds. They are eleven and a half by eleven and a half [feet]. The entire piece was engineered by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, as far as the structure so that the building and the wall can take the vibration and it also could be flexible enough so if there were to be an explosion, the metal is the structure. The glass would be a vulnerable part but with four inches thick of glass there is a lot of durability, just because of mass.

So I had to go and have an engineer test the thing and it had to be run through with a ram at X number of miles an hour. I don't even remember all the specs but it had to be checked and the piece eventually was accepted, I'd like to think, because it works very well in that building.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: But it also provided those key elements that were for the use of the building and the security of those involved. So it was kind of exciting and it was a rush to the end, a rush to the finish.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: I had to finally have the last few tiles, replacement tiles, FedEx'ed in a couple days before the building opened. So it was a crisis, not a proud moment, but a proud moment when it was finished.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. Was that your first commission?

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have done commissions ever since on a fairly regular basis.

MR. CARLSON: Well, I keep trying and there are a lot of public art commissions that are out there and I apply to them when I think that I'm the best person for the job. But there's a fair amount of rejection with those. So it's tough to know when you're applying for commissions because you're trying to deal with the user. You're trying to deal with its survival. You're trying to deal with your budget and you're trying to make some sense of this and also your aesthetics.

So it's tough to design things by committee and does that dumb it down, does that make it kind of like a predictable commodity? Well, it can. I'd like to think that the best of what gets picked is unique and makes that architecture more memorable. So I keep plugging away at it and I keep trying to imagine that they're going to pick my number next.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like over the years you've really treated commissions as opportunities to experiment, to try something new.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah. Like you've said, that is exactly what I've tried to do. So one will lead to the next one and with the Lowe Art Museum, which was just this last December it was finished, that kind of is what I'm hoping will lead to the next series of pieces; because I think there's enough new information there, enough, I think, personalized aesthetic in that, and enough appeal that there should be a future.

If they keep building buildings I'd like to think there's another place for a Carlson.

MS. RIEDEL: At the same time, you have continued to do the objects, at the same time as the commissions. They've really worked in tandem.

MR. CARLSON: Yes. And that's important, I think, to have something that is totally controlled in the studio and something that is without compromise. Because as soon as you start doing public art you have certain compromises. Sometimes they're truly devastating to the piece. I haven't had any terrible luck with that but you're still trying to please a committee of people who have different priorities than you.

So the idea of having these commissions continue, hopefully will allow me a fair amount of freedom to develop the ideas accordingly.

MS. RIEDEL: And they have allowed you to experiment with a lot of the same constraints or issues or concerns of the smaller pieces, but on a much larger scale and with different materials that I'm sure have different problems but also bring a whole different quality to the work, not just based on scale, but on material and then, of course, on location.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, that's been exciting when I've been able to go out and again solicit industry, get them to believe in the project, and this has been from the quarries — limestone quarries around Bloomington, Indiana, to going to Europe and getting some components made, going to the quarries in Vermont and having them take out unusually large pieces of granite out of the ground, that they really think is crazy.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that piece that we were just looking at? I think it was with really large pieces of granite.

MR. CARLSON: That's in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: At the University of Illinois molecular biology lab. So that's the U of I campus in Chicago and the molecular biology lab is about research in biology, and the research in biology is based upon the abnormal cell or the abnormal characteristic of a cell. The original fellow who coined the term "allele," which is the title of the piece, was William Bateson.

William Bateson was one of the early scientists who realized that you have to look for the exception in the grouping of cells to find the one that is going to tell you the new information that will make your research productive.

The piece is very much like any of my pieces, in that there are repetitive bits of geometry, dissimilar geometry. But it really suits my pieces because the allele is the exception and this piece had four components that were similar, not exactly — but similar, with a spherical component in the middle which was the allele, that exception.

So unlike any other piece, that one really kind of fit the user's philosophical and conceptual focus and the research that went on inside that space.

MS. RIEDEL: Is music significant to you in any way? I think about the *Contrapuntal* series and I think about the rhythm and the rhythms that are so important to your work.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, you know the *Contrapuntal* series, which was some of the two-part pieces — that was in, what, '83, we saw the one today — they were really trying to have something consistent between dissimilar bits of geometry, still made them belong together but still allowed each of them to have their own unique quality.

And no, music's really not a part of what I do. I mean, it's — why wouldn't I enjoy music? I enjoy music but not to a point where I feel that it has direct bearing on what I do with my art.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, it's more specifically visual.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, and I don't know why that is. I hear so many people and have friends who really feel like music is the essence that drives the visual inspiration and I don't feel that way. So I'm one of those.

MS. RIEDEL: Architecture has been far more significant for you in terms of that. You were talking earlier about Mies van der Rohe.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, right. Well the whole idea of that vocabulary of architecture is something that — well, I guess I had that architecture wanna-be type thing early on. So I still have a lot of thought about architecture and how it relates to my work. Even though small scale, I think the presence and the elements are, at least resonate with the architectural considerations.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular do you think of?

MR. CARLSON: Well, a repetition of line, a corner, the way things fit together, the negatives and positives.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: All of those, like when you walk into a room, let's say you're inside rather than outside, the way you have visual entry into one room from another, that's not unlike the way you have visual entry in these pieces from one side to another.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: With what the glass offers. It's maybe the empty space. Sometimes I like to use glass that has real visual viscosity to it, so it's glass that is somewhat obscured and textured in the different layers that are cast. And that makes the space look really solid and full. At other times I might use glass that is so optically pure that it's empty space.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So there's a whole other kind of possibility with this stuff that is transparent to have it read with one sense of mass, or maybe none. So you think of ice. Glass is like ice. But when ice melts or when it's frozen oftentimes you get lots of little things inside with different types of layers frozen at different times; and that's a quality that glass has and it's something that's so subtle but it's something that really is of interest.

I've used a lot of glasses over the years in the work as it's developed, so some of it's simply a soda lime glass that is like window glass. A lot of the other glasses are optical glasses that are either lead-based or borosilicate-type glasses.

But a whole vocabulary of glasses that, again, have come in primarily from Europe, although some from shot glass in America, and those different qualities are things that I can look at and use. And as a glass user I really relish in all the different qualities that the material has.

If I were to melt my own glasses I'm sure I could never be able to — I would never be able to really formulate and probably have success with this. But as a user of materials that are available, I can kind of figure out where they're appropriate, where they're best — their visual opportunity is best realized.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's assembling a palette or it's assembling just construction materials, really, in an architectural and sculptural sense.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, I mentioned earlier that my work has developed as I make things. I'm always bound to make things and start from raw materials. And the one thing that I've never developed and the one thing that I guess I have great appreciation for is those people who can go out and really find components and use them in a spontaneous way.

My work has been probably, again, kind of a self-commentary or an observation, is that my work has always been very deliberate. It has — it tells you everything and it somehow is defined enough so that there still is, I hope, magic in the visuals and there's kind of a real sense of theater because of the materials. But still it's a very deliberate relation of forms that have been put together.

So it doesn't have that kind of casualness that I see in other people's work and that's something that, somewhere I missed that aesthetic course or that course along the way of curriculum. The "find and use"-type thing, I've always been kind of much more the maker and make it into something type of aesthetic.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting you talk about the sense of theater, because I can see that certainly in the earlier objects and I almost think that that has become almost more of a poetic sensibility in the more language- and Rohe-related pieces somehow.

I don't know why it feels that way. It feels similar but different just in terms of materials being used but to different purpose.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, well — And different ways of working too. I mean, the work's completely different in visual sensibility.

MR. CARLSON: Well, I hope there's a bit of poetry in there, a bit of, I guess, poetry. That's a good way to put it.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, language has been really important to you all the way through. I look at the titles of all your series. They're all very evocative.

MR. CARLSON: Well, if we go into some of the more recent ones with the text, and my real departure since about 2000 is trying to take language, trying to take things that I find very captivating and very intriguing — I would have to say that I'm not a scholar, either of Latin or other things. I'm maybe kind of an accomplished glassworker and I'd like to think an insightful artist at times. But I'm taking the aesthetics of language and the potential of language and trying to make that be the new information that I'm bringing to the situation.

So with my earlier work it was very much about design elements, that language of design is maybe where I have explored.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes sense.

MR. CARLSON: Now, a language of design is about repetition and line, width and mass and all of the things that are true to a graphic designer's —

[Side conversation.] I locked the door. Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: This one's open.

[Audio Break.]

MR. CARLSON: So since I'm not a linguistic scholar, what I've done is, I've gone to different publications, and those publications have Latin quotes. Now, for some reason, these quotes have survived. Some of them are from B.C. —

MS. RIEDEL: Theater, from —

MR. CARLSON: They're from every aspect of life.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Some that are absurd, some that are profound, some that are hokey. So I try to take the ones that are from — not so profound; I don't want to preach —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — but things that have somehow been around so long and they're still considered relevant, from —

MS. RIEDEL: Can you think of any off the top of your head that come to mind?

MR. CARLSON: You know, I'd have to —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: I think there's one that says, "Even a fly is quick to anger." Now, a fly being — the translation is, I assume, the little insect thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: But it talks about insects and being angry, and that was one of them that seemed so absurd that, why would that have survived thousands of years? Well, no good reason, I guess, other than somebody decided that.

So now I'm taking — appropriating and using these quotes. I'm reading them in their English translation. I'm using them in their Latin as far as the letter formation. I'm changing the fonts and I'm also cutting these things up.

So the potential language, to be assembled in an insightful and informative way, is wonderful, the letters being put together so they make sense. But all of that is pretty arbitrary. If you think of the alphabet, there was obviously some agreement about the alphabet and how it would be put together, and then what alphabetical configurations would make words.

But all of that ends up being such a cultural kind of anthropological fantasy that I probably can't even fathom that, but I can fathom that I'm using these words and we all see the potential in letters and little snippets of groupings of letters that kind of somehow start to tell us something, or maybe not. Maybe they tell us there's information there. And just the idea of information is kind of spectacular.

You know, I used to be at the University of Illinois. They said that they had one of the greatest libraries in the world, and I don't doubt that, but, you know, the rare books and all of the books that were there, that's information that's available but not so continuously used. They felt good about the library. All the potential knowledge was there even if we didn't always partake of it.

So I tried to take this letter, or these letters, and these other kinds of ways of interpreting language, and I tried to appropriate them, use them so that they'd become both information with the potential of language, but more than that they end up being a manifestation of kind of the intrigue and the aesthetic entrée of language.

MS. RIEDEL: What spurred that big shift? Because that was one of, if not the most major, shifts that I can think of in your work, that arrival of language in about 2000. Is that right?

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What spurred that shift? You know, up to that point you were working — I think the last series was — was it Prägnanz [series]?

MR. CARLSON: No, it probably was the Vetro Murales —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, the *Constructs* to —

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And I want to go back and talk about those, too, but since we're talking about language now, what was the motivation or the catalyst that began that series?

MR. CARLSON: I think it was an exhaustion with what I had done, so I was ready for a big break. And I've always had this fascination with language. You know, and we all have done these things where we see buildings where

there was a sign; it's partially gone. Now, that's cliché; everybody kind of thinks, well, what was that sign all about in the beginning? It's not so far from what I'm trying to do with this, where I'm just taking parts of things, and the information is sketchy, so that the involvement of the viewer, or my involvement, is without a propagandist agenda, but it's more about the thing that all of the potential of language is there.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. CARLSON: And now, am I escaping? Am I being noncommittal because I'm not, you know, following through with an idea and kind of a verbal statement? Well, I don't know. There are so many artists who use text and some of them end up making the text and their piece is almost cliché, is because they're telling you the obvious.

As soon as you've read a word, you know all about it, and it's also impossible probably for you to escape that word if you're going to look at this piece in any other way. And I don't want that. I want you to be able to escape to another area of the piece and have some of the same intrigue but I don't want to give you the answer.

Maybe with these earlier pieces I was giving you the answer, when I said they were definitive. Maybe now I don't want to give you the answer, and I think that may be the case, where I still give you a well-designed multi-component piece that should be, I think — it's well done. It should be intriguing and it should be somehow visually satisfying or challenging or — not fulfilling, but I want to ask you many more questions, so I want you to be able to return to this thing and not always see it in its entirety.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, ambiguity sounds like —

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — it's much more important.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, that ambiguity is probably something that these other earlier pieces didn't allow.

So you know, I haven't really thought this out but that's probably the escape that I've been looking for, that ability to be ambiguous.

MS. RIEDEL: And the pieces have always felt very layered, to be sure, and always about the coming together of dissimilar shapes or forms or materials, but with these new language pieces, that coming-together of fragments, again, that don't necessarily fit together —

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — clearly, I think. are provocative in a similar but completely different way in terms of their trigger in terms of thinking.

MR. CARLSON: I would hope that that's the way they're evolving. And with some pieces that are yet to be made, I'm imagining even more kind of fractured comments as things are layered and put together — maybe with glass, maybe with other materials.

Let's go back to the other language thing for a minute. So the Latin has been maybe the main focus. What I do is I change the colors used, the glass enamels used. I change the fonts. So again, I'm trying to bring in things that are not necessarily of one time or place —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — but the pieces become a collection of things that have references to many times and places but they become a collection.

MS. RIEDEL: The fonts themselves —

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — will reference —

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, and the colors that are used, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, that's certainly the case.

MS. RIEDEL: So now, how do you decide a color — will you choose a color that was — how does a color reference a different time?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think there are colors that are reminiscent — if you think of — if it was gold leaf it might be more of a Catholicism —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Sure.

MR. CARLSON: If it was kind of aqua blue it might be a ’57 Chevy. If it was going to be orange it might be — I don’t know what it would be. But there are certainly things that — colors that are not necessarily universally used.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Again, this may be more of a Martha Stewart moment than I want —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Or culturally — culturally attuned.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah. So I guess that’s — that’s a pretty casual part of it, but still that’s something that I’m thinking about as we’re picking the way things go together.

And then the other linguistic things that have happened are both the knots — or they’re not — again, were not knots as far as the knots, but the lines and the interruption and collection of lines. So if you think of cursive writing —

[Cross talk.]

MR. CARLSON: Yes, but if you’ll think of cursive writing — cursive writing is really making a knot. It’s not dimensional but it is a knot. That E, the first line goes up at a diagonal and back and over, so there’s a knot there.

So with the ligatures, or what are referred to as knots, I’m trying to work with the idea of language. And again it goes back to the arbitrary nature of how all this stuff must have happened. Who decided, you know, how cursive writing would be done? There had to be, I guess, a consensus among a group of people who would decide how A’s, B’s and C’s would look like — what they would look like.

But ligature is that little element that goes from the A to the E that allows it to fit together, so it becomes part of the same word. So when I do the *Ligatures*, they are done with kind of a line of material. That line is turned over on itself and knotted possibly, or at least overlapped and somehow fit together so that there is the essence of letter formation there.

And with the pieces that are more with a rope-type of texture, those are done much the same way. They’re usually cast with glass — hot glass over the top of the fabric, and those pieces are referencing, again, the simplicity of language, and both ligatures and those knots are sourced, at least in a very vague way, into interpretation shorthand.

Shorthand was a technology that was around for a short period of time. It maximized meaning, minimized motion in art-making, and it allowed people to communicate in a way that was a new language. It was still interpreted back into English but it was not based upon our alphabet as it’s known.

Now, that technology is almost gone, although I’ve found a few people who can still do that, because I would like to do pieces — I would actually like to do some pieces that really do have some words in them, using shorthand. Right now I’ve used the Gregg shorthand book and I go there and I look at the things, I look at the things that I find most interesting and I kind of imitate those in a three-dimensional way from their two-dimensional page.

So I find it interesting that these things had such meaning, or language can have such meaning. It’s very ephemeral. Latin was crucial a short time ago. Latin is still around and maybe will have a comeback, but I doubt whether shorthand will.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it’s interesting too, though, because we’re talking about the knots in relation to shorthand, and something we were talking about earlier was also the very real meaning in knots in Peru — as an art historical reference —

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — looking at the Peruvian knotted pieces.

MR. CARLSON: Right. So art historians have found that the Incas, who didn’t have a written language, —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — had a language that was based upon knots and rope, and very few of these examples — examples of these things have survived because [Francisco] Pizarro — or maybe it was — Pizarro, yeah — had a bad attitude about conquest and he wanted to destroy the Incas' history, so these would have been burned, but there are examples of the *quipu*. *Quipu*, a kind of a thick string, is knotted at different segments, and those knots tell a history, take inventory, do things that we would have done with a written language.

And, again, it's something that is a technology of the past but there are researchers who have made quite a bit of sense of them. I'm re-reading a book now that talks about that, and it's exciting to imagine all these different languages. And, again, I'm approaching this as an artist who didn't have one of those liberal arts educations, where I probably should have taken some of those history courses, but I missed those because I was in the studio class.

So that's what I did miss by going to an art school, and what I did gain from going to an art school was a sense of the studio and how that part of my life can exist. So now I'm maybe trying to go back and catch up on some of the things that the anthropology class would have had for other students, or historical class would have had.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also another famous knot that you mentioned earlier that was —

MR. CARLSON: Oh, yeah, the Gordian knot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah — yes.

MR. CARLSON: I'm, again, not fully informed on all of the subtleties of it but King Gordius, who was in Asia, had a knot tied. The Gordian knot was tied in a way that was virtually impossible to have it untied. And the knot was supposed to challenge whoever was going to come and try and conquer his area, and the one who could conquer that area would then rule Asia.

And there were many people who tried to untie the knot, to break this riddle and to solve this problem. And as the story goes — at least from my limited experiences — that Alexander the Great came through and, being a conqueror, he just chopped the knot up, and so there were lots of little knots where there used to be a large one.

But that's kind of a — maybe a political and a kind of cultural way of conquest and I'm not a conqueror; but the idea of this knot that had such power and such importance because of its complexity, and then how the knot, like language, maybe gets destroyed in a kind of cultural reinterpretation.

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

MR. CARLSON: Back to the knots just for a minute.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: Also — and, again, I go on about this and the knots have many meanings for me, or many interpretations, but it is certainly true that as people become civilized they need to have order in their lives, in their culture in order to have government and to have things that are not about chaos, and a rope is one of the simplest and one of the most primary ways of addressing this issue, in that you can make things hold together that hadn't been together, so that would be the wrapping of ropes, so basic engineering.

And even counting and — people are going to put knots in rope. There is a way and there's documentation that that was the way they would take inventory or count or make some sense of keeping order with possessions and other things, so that rope has had a way of working its way in to the — from the person who owns the yacht and wants to tie it to the dock to the — probably the primitive character in a country who is just trying to do some basic architecture —

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. CARLSON: — to people who were counting the bags of salt they have because that's the commodity of the day.

MS. RIEDEL: And still, structurally, you think of ropes as really what, in metal form, is what holds up all those suspension bridges these days.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, right, basically — a cord of some sort.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right. It's metaphorically a loaded material in and of itself.

MR. CARLSON: Yes . But every time there's a guy who has a yacht, he's pretty sure there should be a clove hitch

in there [laughs]. So I can't escape that, the most immediate translation.

MS. RIEDEL: Moving back to the object pieces, I want to make sure that we cover some more about those. Did you say prägnanz?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, prägnanz is a Jungian word.

[Cross talk.]

MR. CARLSON: Well, this is a Jungian word and Carl Jung had assigned that — but, again, I'm not a scholar on Jung, but it is a word that deals with a sense of order, a sense of aesthetic order. Now, aesthetic order can be quite different from one person to another —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — but I would like to think my pieces have that kind of posture or that kind of spine or that kind of logical stance. So they may lean a little here but they also lean a little there. So they have the ability to stand upright and — with engineering and with balance as their focus.

And to me the prägnanz is the word that talks about that aesthetic order. Now, when you throw balls onto a floor, is that an aesthetic order? Well, there is certainly an aesthetic order there. The aesthetic order is casual yet very recognizable, what you're kind of experiencing.

So that's where that series came from, and usually those pieces had three or four components, things that would twist and turn a little bit. Some pieces really seemed to have a gesture. Some are more about a vertical, but seldom if ever were they just straight up and down. So they weren't just about stacking; they were about stacking and kind of projecting a movement one way or another.

MS. RIEDEL: Somebody described — I can't remember if it was James Yood or somebody else who has written about the work — but somebody described them beautifully, I thought, as "balanced asymmetry."

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: I think that was just very succinct and to the point. And there was a twisting and a faceting, and something about that series made me go — they often go to three components rather than two, that are so much more comfortable — the shapes themselves are made up of so many different components, both materially and visually, that they just — what am I trying to say about those? They just become much more complex but at the same time reduced to — it's reduced as much as they can possibly be in being very complex shapes.

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess it gets back to the minimalist thing where I want these — I want select shapes, so I don't — I guess that's not part of the wild card.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: I want their relationship to be part of the wild card as far as the way these things go together. And I think about them as being heavily embellished, as far as the different glasses and stones, but I still want to go back and imagine if they were entirely black, if I just use black spray paint on these pieces.

There would be a sculptural quality that would talk about that posture. Then we have the materials or removing the black, but I think all of those kind of lend themselves take that same theme and then accentuate it. And maybe that's the definition and the redefinition and the very deliberate nature of what I've done that is being probably stated and overstated — or restated, not overstated.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and those series went on for a period of time so it seems to —

MR. CARLSON: A long time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, like five years —

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, it was —

MS. RIEDEL: — three to five years?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I beat myself up on that one. I think it was more like — maybe more than five.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So clearly there was enough there that would hold your — theme and variation, which is what

we were discussing — over time is a way of exploring those formal concerns.

MR. CARLSON: Well, you know, there's something to be said — and I don't know quite how to bring this part to it, but as I make my work I have very much a — a very strong work ethic, you know. So I'm not trying to escape the inevitable; I'm trying to address this chore, in a way, and I'm trying to make it my own and I'm trying to make the chore meaningful because of the product.

MS. RIEDEL: And it should be so that — this is a good time to mention that you've said some of those pieces can be worked 40 times —

MR. CARLSON: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — before a single element is complete — 40.

MR. CARLSON: And pieces can take three or four months to do, or more. So the painstaking nature of it — so, does that mean that if it's painful, it's worth more? Does it mean that if it takes a lot more time it's worth more? And it's a personal worth, not a dollar worth.

I don't know, but there certainly was that kind of blue collar "make it perfect"-type of — what is that, Judeo-Christian-type of — American-type of thought that I can make this thing perfect. And that may be the delusionary part of that older work, that I really felt like had to be that way. And they were, but, again, that's one of those things that I've at least been able to kind of reflect on with some, I guess, artistic maturity, that there may not be real truth in some of that.

And I think as a teacher, I see my students who come up with good ideas that are nearly impossible to make, and sometimes I just have to talk them back down to a level of expectation where they're going to have a successful piece of art, but they don't have to somehow create anxiety and impossible feats for themselves. So maybe that's kind of where the teaching fits in.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about teaching briefly now, because we haven't talked about it at all yet. What were some of the primary aspects or philosophies or techniques and skills that you wanted to communicate as a teacher in Illinois?

MR. CARLSON: Well, that's the problem with glass in some ways, is that you want to introduce them to the material; you don't really want to teach them skills that are going to merely get in the way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And you don't want to necessarily defeat them, because skills are such a part of glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And you really don't want to have them merely imitate you because, you know, that's, I think, the sign of a very weak teacher. That may build good portfolios for students but it may not do much for their education.

So it's really trying to have eyes open into all the possibilities. So the first semester in glass, I get them right in there. There are some people who have much more of a disciplined approach as far as forms that should be made and all of that, but I try to get them right in there and for them to see how this can be handled and the extremes of what can be done without —

MS. RIEDEL: What do you mean by "right in there" and "what can be done" in terms of materials?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, just so that they're right in there working with the glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: So some faculty members would have you spend a determined amount of time making a shape. That shape is then — you have a second shape assigned. And that may be kind of a little more of an old-world type of way of doing it. You can't go to step B until you can do step one.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: "Teach the baby to walk"-type thing.

I try to really get them in there. Although it may be a little more chaotic, I think that they're more informed by the potential earlier so they can imagine what can happen.

You know, in teaching something like glass, you don't know what can happen until you've seen it, really — there's no other — now, with the museum, we can take people into the museum, but still, to do things is really the only way to understand that, and you can't conceptualize ideas that might be about those things until you know how to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Now, you could have the concept but unless you know how to do it, your concept, you're still limited by simply knowledge of what can be done.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. CARLSON: Well, and that's the damning part of a material like this, or really any material. I mean, my comments on the word "craft" is that, the craft is the process that goes into it. It's not necessarily the product.

And there's a tremendous amount of craft in all of these arts, whether it's painting or whether it's printmaking or, you know, even very ephemeral things. The idea of craft is a deliberate and a necessary evil, or, maybe, it's the necessary gratification. Craft can be very gratifying.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. CARLSON: And we have methods and we have a sense of accomplishment, and that may be back to that blue-collar-type of accomplishment thing that we all love. But when our accomplishments are determined by our abilities and not by our ideas, then that's where we may fall short.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So how did you have — do you have classes in which you try to teach both?

MR. CARLSON: I do, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you try to teach them jointly or separately or both?

MR. CARLSON: I try to teach them jointly. So I have lots of things that I will show them how to do but I'll go past — I'll do that and they may try to do that, but then I go past that, and two or three different results from this basic thing. So that they have to prioritize, because prioritizing is the main part of being an artist. You've got to figure out what you can do, what you want to do, and why you would want to do it.

And the students want to figure out just, what can I do or what should I do? And that's the last thing that I think an artistic experience should be. It's not what should I do? What do I want to do?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And, you know, as soon as there's enough of an experience to begin to make some of these judgments.

MS. RIEDEL: You have taught at many of — early on at many of the craft schools — at Haystack, at Penland, at Pilchuck. What is the difference — well, what is the strength of the university system versus those sorts of schools? What do you think are the strengths of each? And the weaknesses?

MR. CARLSON: Yes. They really are quite a different experience.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Now, if you go to the summer programs — and I try to get my students to get out of either Illinois or get out of Florida — the ones we can afford to support, we do — to try to get them so that they go out and have an experience in one of these programs. The intensity of a two- or three-week session, the intensity of doing something every day, all day, is really an ideal way to accomplish a lot so that you can get over the methods and materials and move on to the ideas.

And that's what is so difficult in a university setting. We have students twice a week for about three to four hours and then there's another time they come in. But the continuity is disrupted and there are obligations to other things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: It really determines their participation. And we have a lot of students who aren't art majors, or at least an awful lot who aren't glassmakers. We have only a couple of people at this point who are majors because our program is so tiny that it is —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, here in Miami.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, in Illinois we had about 15 or 20 majors. And that was great in another way because then the peer group has a chance to develop on its own.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: The strength of what one person knows is shared with somebody else, and the teaching may be a little easier with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — although with a group of people like that, demanding on a studio can be another set of circumstances, where students are rough on facilities. So I've really had the opportunity to deal with both ways of approaching it, and I don't know which one I prefer as far as the university part of it.

Now let's go back to the summer program thing. All of those programs, I think, are so important. And, again, my start was with Pilchuck and I taught there. I happen to really think that the broader vision of a place like Haystack or Penland may be better for students who really don't have a real vision of one material.

Pilchuck has that problem where there is an awful lot of posturing and expectation about that material and the names that are appropriate to that, where with Haystack and Penland, you really have a concentration of people who take different points of view, all appropriate to what you may interpret into your chosen material.

But all that stuff is beneficial, in the education with the big E that's supposed to happen. And it's about problem solving, and the material may not be the real situation, but that creative process, that sense of invention and discovery, is translated into all the things that would happen in all the different areas of those schools.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And so you have a concentrated focus at the craft schools.

MR. CARLSON: With summer, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You have the ability to work exclusively on those projects for a limited but intense period of time.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you have a diverse range of approaches and materials as well.

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you feel — and what do you feel the university brings that none of those schools can bring? Or, in your experience, what did you feel the strengths were?

MR. CARLSON: I guess the strengths are that these students are in a curriculum of other things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: And, you know, if you have art students, then usually they're there with that intensity. That's good. But I also enjoy — this is taking a really different tack with the question, but I also enjoy the idea that these students come — and they may be pre-med majors or they may be an entrepreneurial major, and they may have all of these other expectations of where they're going to be. Those other expectations will inform the way that they may bring different issues, different ideas, to the table.

MR. CARLSON: When you go to the summer programs or when you go to an art school, everybody is already drinking the Kool-Aid, so to speak — and they already are signed on to a certain thing. With our students, you know, really, some of them bump into a glass class or a 3D class and they bring information because they're all smart kids. I shouldn't say all kids are smart, but at the University of Miami and Illinois we had very intelligent students. So they're smart enough. They're not — they're not artistically informed but they are smart enough. So that's a real challenge to get these folks who haven't addressed visual issues or the kind of work that it takes to gain the skills to get them to focus.

But if you go off to a summer program and you're signing up for a glass class, you already have had some kind of indoctrination or some kind of exposure.

MS. RIEDEL: You think so?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Most of them have —

MR. CARLSON: Yes, maybe not much hands-on, but they certainly have some kind of exposure.

MS. RIEDEL: You taught in Illinois for over 20 years, been here at Miami for six, and then you also taught at the craft schools. What do you see as the difference between an artist that has learned their art in a university versus one that's learned it in some other way?

MR. CARLSON: Well, this is probably going to sound cruel but it's true, I think, that the summer schools are a great way to learn something. So it's more vocational education. You're going to learn how to do this because you're doing it every day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And there's no way to avoid that, and if my students were able to do that here and just take a class for three weeks before the semester started, then when the semester started they would be that much better-equipped to bring in those other ideas and to bring in the things that are unique to their experiences.

And the idea of international students and the idea of a range of students who have different interests — again, go back to the different majors these students have — that creates a certain amount of chaos in the classroom because we're not all on the same page.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: We're not all there caring about certain things, but we all bring something to the equation.

If you're teaching in a — probably the drawing classes where it's more of a disciplined drawing, there is a relative ease about that, because there is something that is correct to what you're seeing and what you're rendering. We're working with an amorphous material that has no identity except it's hot and sharp and it's kind of difficult to work with and you can't touch it. So there is a tremendous amount of commitment to make sense of that equation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: You know, if you want to think about it, some of the kids come in — we're asking them to come into Florida in August, stand in front of a furnace that's 2,200 degrees. So there's a certain kind of student that's going to do that, and I guess the — it's exciting to see how they take that challenge and how they either run with it or they [telephone rings] or how they might not.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: You had some wonderfully diverse teaching experiences in Illinois for years and I think university program — state university program teaching, and now at a small private university — smaller, not necessarily small university teaching, and then at the craft schools. What place do you see for universities in the future of the craft movement?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I don't know. The future of the craft movement, the future of arts education — I don't know. I think the craft movement, if it's going to succeed, needs to be fully indoctrinated into at least the history of art and have that be a real strong focus.

I don't think it's an either/or; it really is kind of a full plate because in times like we live in — and even though I'm a technology Luddite — the idea of fully informed art is to really have cultural and visual and technology abilities, is quite a full plate of expectations, and I don't think it can be done in the backwoods under kind of the privacy of a region. I think it probably is much more international than that.

And I don't know what will happen with university art programs. Increasingly, the universities are being expected to become more technology-driven, like it or not, and sometimes that is at the sacrifice of the art program, and sometimes the technology —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that's been your experience in both — in Illinois.

MR. CARLSON: That's been my experience in Illinois.

MS. RIEDEL: And Miami as well?

MR. CARLSON: Not so much Miami.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: That may happen sometime, but certainly in Illinois.

The idea of technology is wonderful, but technology is kind of one level of creativity, and as I say, to the disdain of my colleagues, it is still software-dependent. So it has a level of creativity but it's not about an open mind; it's about a programmer who wrote the program on what you can do. Now, that could be very short-sighted because of my prejudice.

But I don't know; I think, still, there is really the need to operate free of some of the things that are not technology-driven. So it has to be inclusive but not exclude the hands-on activity and the eye-hand stuff, which is still so important.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: I know that in Illinois the graphic designers who were being pushed so heavily into technology followed that expectation, but they also had a fair number of hands-on, eye-hand coordination things, which are drawing. Still, it is about an eye and the hand, and making things happen, and whether it's a keyboard or not, the old-world expectation — at least this old-world guy, interprets it as being necessary, you know, for a full thinker about all of the potential of artmaking.

So is a place like the University of Miami going to have an art program that is going to be really a model for other universities? Possibly. But it's also possible that the universities, in their competition to sell themselves and a competition to bring along the next MBA or the next masters of liberal arts — which I don't know what that is, but that's what they have — is going to squander their resources and maybe forfeit some of the art stuff, and I would think that's very unfortunate.

So I don't have an answer. I would have to say it is a problem. If you look at the art schools of the country, the ones that really focus strictly on a studio type of focus — and we look at the way they may create themselves — to focus on the studio stuff and different ways of thinking, given this different time and place, there is real excitement in what could be the potential.

There was an opportunity in Miami to meet with a number of people during some different seminars. There was a forum on thinking about that new paradigm of an art school. The Anelphia Foundation — I think I'm saying that right — is a collector — a finance foundation that supports the arts and was pursuing this discussion, and that may actually be underway in Miami.

It may be a very small type of opportunity, it may be funded, so it may be more like an internship type of thing, where accomplished artists would come in, [and students would] work with more accomplished artists, more established artists, and that might be the experience. It would not lead to a degree but would lead to a period of time to work in the situation that accelerates the energy and the potential of these younger artists.

MS. RIEDEL: How would that be different than a residency?

MR. CARLSON: It wouldn't be too much different than a residency, —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: — although maybe the grouping would be larger so maybe it would be a couple dozen people, and maybe it would be done in the idea of collaborative as well as kind of accelerated opportunities that wouldn't — under the tutelage of a main person. Usually residencies, you go there and work, waiting for lightning to strike —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: — or to get a good idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: I think the potential of this would be that there is — somehow the dynamics of a situation, they may be thematically driven and they may be driven by conceptual strength of the leader. There's a little bit of a — a little bit of —

MS. RIEDEL: It involved graduate seminars kind of thing?

MR. CARLSON: Yes. So it would be that kind of seminar, research-oriented, partially funded so that there would be really the chance to explore in a way that wasn't always driven by finances and how much studio you can

rent and that kind of stuff. So I hope a situation like that would happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Now would that be across the board in terms of media?

MR. CARLSON: I think it would probably be conceptually driven and the media would be whatever the artist would conceptually need to engage.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. CARLSON: Now, there's a lot of questions about this idea and whether it can work. Who's going to fund it, and if it's funded in one way, does it become merely a mechanism of the funding — of the funders? If they're collectors, does it become somehow a situation where they're too instrumental in what might happen or who gets in? That's possible.

So you need, somehow, kind of a benevolent funding that allows for this thing to evolve in a way that would be really beneficial — ultimately beneficial. Yes, we all have comments about our art school experience or the kinds of issues that were possible in an art-school curriculum.

Most of us came out of a Bauhausian-type of at least format, whether it was — whether I would admit it or not, that still is a bit of the curriculum that's here. So now we have to kind of rethink those things and get past that and take on a different agenda.

Some art schools at this point are having their students come in to a graduate program and the graduate program would be without studios. People will come in and they are expected to have whatever they need made or brought in, or they provide the facilities if they need it.

Now, that cuts down on the universities' liabilities, expenses of providing such facilities, but it changes the entire art-making thing to the size of your wallet and the depth of your ideas. If you can think about using things you've picked out of the dumpster, you're going to have more raw material than if you are picking things that come out of the Fermilab in Chicago, which would be strictly conceptual physics-type of things that would still relate to art-making.

MS. RIEDEL: How have you seen the student body change? Have you seen much change in that over —

MR. CARLSON: Well, a long time. So we're talking about — we're talking 33 years, something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, '76.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, it's a long time. And I guess we're seeing — I think we're seeing quite a change on — probably the first 15 years of life as a faculty member were much more familiar to me as far as the in-the-trenches kind of student being willing to do all of the nitty-gritty of being a part of the studio, and that was more the familiar end of things in the way I grew up — thinking that you went in there and you learn how to do it, and then you fixed it if it broke and you were a responsible citizen of the studio and your work was built upon — you know, your hard work.

It's a kind of a not very glamorous blue-collar way of working, but I think that it was, and is, still a part of the expectations. Over the last 10 years, let's say — we'll forget five years somewhere, but over the last 10 years, that there is really kind of an entitlement that the students expect that they should have.

The University of Illinois is a school that's pricey. With that price tag people expect to have it all there, and sometimes the "all there" means the answers and the kinds of assistance which are beyond expectations of what had happened earlier.

So there are a privileged group of students and their privilege is part of what they've had with their life, and — it's not to take anything away from them. They are smart kids, but sometimes as a faculty person, that privilege can be a tough thing to reconcile, given what we want our expectations to be for their learning.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm trying to think of who I spoke with recently who said that there's some degree of being lost folk. He felt it was really an important part of our art education that he didn't feel the students were as comfortable with or as interested in. They wanted to —

MR. CARLSON: That the students were lost in some way?

MS. RIEDEL: No, that being lost was an important part, or that confusion or that willing[ness] to struggle with something, was something that students now seemed less interested in doing. They were more focused on having a completed portfolio and being ready to go; that there was more focus on the final product and having something set and ready to go than there had been before, and there was less willingness to spend time — for

better or for worse —

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — flailing, looking.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I think that's probably the case. The students are so driven to find a profession and to find a job. Now, that may change a little bit because there aren't going to be some of those jobs, and people, whether willfully or not, will have a chance to do some exploration.

So we'll see with the grad students who come along. Certainly in times of economic downturn, grad school applications increase, usually, and the ability of the grads to understand that being in school is a good thing and getting out may not be to their immediate advantage. And it gives them a chance maybe to develop a bit more. We'll have to wait and see.

But the students certainly are pushed from, I guess, parents, the guidance counselors, to themselves. This pushing — they seem to have less willingness to say that, I'm going to find out — I'm going to find out how it works out by exploration and being a student. And many of them are already in place with the expectation of a type of career and a job and probably a number of dollars to be hired at.

MS. RIEDEL: Over the years you've had some fairly extraordinary students —

MR. CARLSON: Yes, a good number of students. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — to go through who have gone on to have successful careers on their own —

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Very valid work.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, within, hopefully the sculpture area, and glass in particular, I've had success. Some of my best students would come into Illinois — because I've had more grads through that program — and they would explore and, you know, they would explore their way out of one thing and into another.

So it wasn't always, again, a material-based thing, so it really was allowing for them to build a momentum with their ideas that was going to take them for a career. You know, the idea of the product and the portfolio and the kind of package that that offers is appealing on one level but it's not terribly realistic if you're thinking about 30 or 40 years at this endeavor. The answers that are at one age are not going to be the answers you want at age 40 or 50.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: So students kind of go in and out of success. And what is success? It's hard to tell. There have been an awful lot of people who have benefited from the experience of how to solve problems and how to be inventive and rediscover —

You know, there's also that thing where these students have come on board and they're a part of this glass thing, and the glass thing in some ways is — well, you have to reconcile the whole idea of the energies that may be used. Even though glass is not totally indulgent, there's an indulgent part of it. And even though these students have a love of what they're doing, you know, there has to be a way of creating studio opportunities. It doesn't always mean everybody needs their own.

So I think that there's fairly healthy organizations around the country who are offering group studios where people will share and be a part of the expense, and that actually makes the whole activity, maybe, stronger in that there's a group who work together and there is a shared experience but not only one person is indulging in the facilities and the materials and the expendables, but it's something that has greater impact. That's a possibility and I think maybe that could be the future of what we think of as studio glass, at least in that format a bit at a time.

MS. RIEDEL: And then more opportunity for dialogs as well —

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — among the students as they're working and continuing to develop their own work and their careers.

MR. CARLSON: Right. You know, there is that kind of either painter or artist in a garret waiting for the perfect

painting, or the hills of North Carolina where you can drink moonshine or make glass. That's facetious, but there's a lot of folks who escape to a rural location — as I hope to do — and expect things to happen, and that's a tough one.

I know that some of the students I've had who have been most successful have tried to reestablish or maybe to relocate to areas where there is a little bit more of a community because the isolation of inspiration in a remote location can kind of get lonely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: And that loneliness doesn't always build the kind of energy that you would want to be a creative person.

MS. RIEDEL: When I was in North Carolina a couple of years ago, I heard that again and again, primarily from the younger potters who were relocating — there were many who had come to go to Penland —

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and then just stayed or — but that seemed to be extremely significant to them that it was reasonable place; they could afford to live there, but there was an enormous community that understood the problems of being an artist, a working artist, and they were able to use as resources and for critiques. It seemed extremely positive and helpful to the people who were there.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, Penland, I think, is unique in that, that people have gone up into the area and it has been appealing and they've stayed. I don't know whether there are other areas that are going to be as supportive —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. CARLSON: — as that place seems to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that's the one I can think of where I've sort of heard that repeatedly from all sorts of different people.

Shall we stop for today?

MR. CARLSON: Let's stop for today.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we'll pick up tomorrow.

MR. CARLSON: We'll resume tomorrow at six a.m.?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Thank you.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art with William Carlson at the artist's home in Coconut Grove in Florida on June 25, 2009. Good morning.

MR. CARLSON: Good morning.

MS. RIEDEL: We thought we would start this morning discussing exhibitions and the exhibiting history because your work has been — it has had a very interesting trajectory from early — were the ACC craft fairs the very early ones?

MR. CARLSON: No, the earliest pieces that I made were early pieces, so they were not grand examples of glass skill.

MS. RIEDEL: Are we talking about the scent bottles at this point?

MR. CARLSON: The scent bottles — even before that, there were years of highly decorated pieces that had a real sense of line and simplicity of form.

MS. RIEDEL: Functional forms then?

MR. CARLSON: Functional, although, nothing more than a decorative bottle. It wasn't like I was doing functional cups. I probably didn't go that route.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. CARLSON: But the pieces were decorated, so they fell into that glass tradition of kind of a beautiful vessel.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: And at that point, that was probably as much as I could do. And quite honestly, the market was eager for these unique pieces of glass and the whole idea of glass becoming something that was going to be a familiar art form in either the art fair circuit or in galleries. So I really benefited from that.

And usually, the art fair scenario was that during the summer, I would take pieces and we would go either to Kansas City, but more often than that, it was a Chicago location and also Milwaukee. Those tended to be good markets. There was quite a popularity amongst those cities. That popularity brought out big crowds. And the prices were rather modest. But still it was one means to continue, I guess, my glass habit.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. CARLSON: The glass habit being a good thing, not a bad thing. And the idea that the monies that came back from those fairs were ways of either building things in the studio, paying a fuel bill, and trying just to keep the financial end of things solvent. And it worked out pretty well. So I had a —

MS. RIEDEL: So this was after Alfred, while you were teaching? Or this was before —

MR. CARLSON: This was actually before Alfred and during Alfred.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so during the ’70s.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, so when I was in grad school, I took a little bit of time, went to the Institute of Art in Cleveland where Brent Young was, at that point starting out. And I would collaborate with him and we would both use the studio, make work and both of us would go off to our respective fairs the way that we felt — the fairs that we had been accepted into.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: And it worked pretty well. So that was up until ’76. These fairs really were not very lucrative, but they were financially reasonable events to be a part of. And at that point, the fair system also was not quite as grand as it is now. These weren’t the ACC fairs with thousands of dollars in booth fees and booth construction. These were kind of little setups on the street. And, you know, a step above a farmers’ market — a few steps above a farmers’ market. But it was still a very kind of casual experience.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. CARLSON: And there were other artists, really accomplished artists who were there. So it wasn’t just the rank beginners. It was really artists who had accomplished a lot. And through that, I developed friendships with these people, everyone from Dick Huss, who was in Minnesota, to Mark Peiser, who was in North Carolina, and many other people. And it was good to see the community of people, ceramics, fibers, wood, leather, glass. These people who were working with their chosen material and therefore, an event that was their mainstay, their livelihood. So it was a reality check and an ability to kind of look at my career potential in that kind of market.

But in ’76, when I really had moved into Illinois, I had really established myself at the university, the level of ambition that I wanted in the work was changing. And that level of ambition probably made it a little less appropriate to the art-fair venue. I was going to take it from the familiar to the more sculptural. I was going to be dealing with things that probably just wouldn’t translate into what that market was going to support.

So I ended up going with different galleries. And galleries were sometimes kind of easy to work with. Other times, there was a battle between the artists and the gallery, and trying to negotiate what you get over what they think you should have, the percentage that they take and the idea that they simply have your work on consignment, where you have nothing until they sell your work. So you are, in essence, filling their galleries with pieces. And with nothing more than a kind of hope that some of the things will sell.

MS. RIEDEL: So way back when you were just starting in, say, ’76, when you first started with Heller, there was not a pre-understood standard percentage that was negotiated?

MR. CARLSON: There was. When it started out, it was one-third/two-thirds at one point.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. CARLSON: That didn’t last long. And then it went to —

MS. RIEDEL: Who got the third? The gallery got the third?

MR. CARLSON: The gallery got the third.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Yeah, and I would get two-thirds. But that didn't last very long. Then it was a 40-60 split and then quickly went to a 50-50, which is where most of the galleries are today.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. CARLSON: So as prices went up, the galleries certainly wanted the ability to deal a little more with the collectors. So that is one issue that was always up for discussion. But besides Heller Gallery, this is when they were on Madison Avenue in a small space, but a space that was right next to an antique glass gallery. And I'm trying to remember. I think it was Rosenblatt Gallery. I'm not quite sure. But they were right next to an antique glass gallery.

And Doug [Heller]'s partner at the time was the son of the woman who owned the antique gallery. So the art collectors who would come in, glass collectors who would come in there, typically would come in for the antique work because it had an established value and a real positive and strong audience. The new art glass stuff was, you know, questionable. Will this stuff maintain? Will there be a value that will increase? Will it have longevity as far as the collectors' interest? So that was the kind of uphill battle that Doug Heller was working with. And he is a very smooth guy. And I think his confidence in what he was doing and his shared confidence with the collector was at the strongest element of his years in business and still his success today.

I was also with Habatat Gallery early on. I think even before Heller.

MS. RIEDEL: Even earlier?

MR. CARLSON: And Habatat, at that point, was in the Detroit area. And they were a print gallery and multiples gallery, posters and some things. And then they started showing glass very early. And I would bring things up there and that was one of the earliest supportive locations. So that was good.

And then even before that, I think that another gallery in Detroit, whose name I've just forgotten.

MS. RIEDEL: Not Riley Hawk .

MR. CARLSON: No. I'm drawing a blank on the name of that gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll come back.

MR. CARLSON: So it started out that way. First, in the Midwest, where I was in Ohio and I could drive up to Michigan to get the work there or drive over to Illinois and have a chance to exhibit the work at the art fairs or other galleries that were developing in Chicago. Synopsis Gallery up in Winnetka. It was a very early one and very supportive.

But the galleries, some of them had been around a long time — Habatat, Heller. Others come and go. So it's a business that is very demanding and financially kind of vulnerable during good times — or vulnerable during bad times. So I've had a good chance in exhibiting internationally, but primarily nationally, primarily in the East and Midwest, a little bit in the West Coast.

MS. RIEDEL: You were with Elaine Potter.

MR. CARLSON: Elaine Potter out in San Francisco years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, because she wasn't around all that long, but she was there very early on. And how was that? How was the reception on the West Coast?

MR. CARLSON: It was okay. It never seemed like the West Coast was as supportive. I think the use of income and expendable income and maybe the people in the West might imagine it being more recreational — spent on recreational activities rather than art objects. It seemed like that was the difference between East and West, at least in my experience.

Then there was a Kurland-Summers Gallery for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. CARLSON: That was in L.A. And it was John Kurland, who is such a character and traveled around and came to people's houses and tried to recruit them for the gallery. And, you know, I was at that point eager to be recruited. And sometimes that worked and sometimes it was a situation where there was a disappointment because things were promised. It was really done on good faith. Not much in the way of contracts, so sloppy business processes.

MS. RIEDEL: So nothing written really. Okay.

MR. CARLSON: And so it's all kind of a bit of trust. And I would have to say I've had bad experiences, oh, but probably not horrible ones. My bookkeeping has never been good, so I'm part of the problem there. But I also have not been really abused by the galleries in a way that some folks have. That is pure luck rather than any wisdom on my part.

MS. RIEDEL: So really, with dealers over, we're talking now — well, certainly 25 years, 30, really, since '76. A fairly mixed experience? Or would you say it's more —

MR. CARLSON: Well, fairly positive. You know, it's the whole glass thing, the whole crafts thing and the whole kind of phenomena that we have with this industry, if you want to call it an industry or this kind of art movement, if we're going to call it that — it's a bit of both — is really predicated on the support of the populace and the interest of people to want these things that are somehow unique, somehow have art or creative inspiration as part of them or, possibly, just beauty as the focus.

But it has been an amazing career in that way and kind of watching as things develop, as the level of work becomes more and more ambitious, as the collectors become more sophisticated. So no longer is it necessarily about a tradition. It becomes more about an exploration. It becomes not only about beauty, but it becomes much more sophisticated in the way that the collectors will be attracted to and will kind of get onboard and support an artist one way or another.

Now, that doesn't always mean what collectors like — it may not be good work. So as an art teacher, I guess I have an aesthetic agenda, which is judgmental. And I've my priorities on what I think are good pieces of work. And I guess that is informed by art history.

A lot of collectors are really informed by emotion and immediacy. And that doesn't always make for confidence that I would have in the work. But it certainly has been the driver of the market over the years. But the collectors are the ones who have supported these things. So these things that have become the possessions of the collectors are hopefully shown and they are seen by other people, that is built to market. And that market has been enough to foster quite an ambitious amount of work.

You know, glass, in particular, I think has really benefited from a perceived value that is rather expensive at times — not always, but certainly, there are healthy prices. And so the return on your investment and then your funding, your means to do the next series of pieces is really what is able to be accommodated and what is able to really happen because of these situations.

There used to be a buying frenzy in the old days. And it was crazy. Heller Gallery moved up — well, still on Madison Avenue. It moved across the street into a bigger gallery. And there was a show that I had probably in maybe '82 or '83. I'm not quite sure the date of that one. But people were lined up outside, you know, to come in and get the pieces. Everything was sold quickly. And it was a real battle. And that feeding frenzy hasn't happened in a long time that I'm aware of. There still may be artists who kind of command that kind of eager audience. But it has been a while since that has happened.

And, you know, probably rightfully so. I think that the maturity of the audience — so the collectors are basically mature individuals. Some of them are elderly. But we've gone through 20 years of knowing many of the same collectors and going to many of the same events and seeing them at shows. So it becomes, really, a kind of a wonderful extended family in a way. You don't always want to see your families, so it's not always great to see them at times. And somebody — your uncles are pretty cantankerous guys. Some of the collectors are.

But it has that sense of people being on board and really knowing the artist, as well as the collectors. Certainly, the SOFA events, which have been around for a good number of years.

MS. RIEDEL: I wanted to talk about that because you were really involved with those from the very beginning when it was probably Chicago International New Art Forms, even before Mark Lyman was —

MR. CARLSON: New Art Forms. And it used to be the May Show when I was with the Betsy Rosenfeld Gallery. It was really the Chicago Art Fair, which was at the May Show. And that really wasn't one that was so much about craft objects. It was really more painting and sculpture and photography. And Betsy Rosenfeld was in that one, so I had my work in that exhibition at times.

But, you know, again, there is that hierarchy that is very apparent between the shows that are more about materials. And then, I guess I would say it that way. And then, the other art events, Art Basel, Art Miami, the Chicago Art Fair in May, those end up being much more about photo, painting, and installation. And they would like to think they're more conceptual. I'm not sure that is true. But the material prejudices are kind of well-defined.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. How has your work been received at these various fairs over time? We've talked about Heller and Habatat. There's Chicago, the May Fair versus the SOFA exhibitions. How have you noticed the collectors' and the dealers' reception to it over 30 years? And then that major change to language work — was that always — I don't imagine it was always encouraging.

MR. CARLSON: No. The recent SOFA — again, this is the most recent over the last 15 years, I would say. I've still shown with Heller. And at this point, I still show with Leo Kaplan Modern. I'm still with them at this point. So Heller and I haven't shown together for a while. I still show at Habatat during some of their events. But my main gallery has been Bonnie Marx, Marx-Saunders Gallery. And Bonnie [Marx] and Ken [Saunders] have been really — very supportive, transparent in the process, willing to put together catalogs, willing to really go the extra mile to really kind of mark the exhibition and its accomplishment in my career, so that there is a document, so there's a lot of things that really focus on that moment in the career.

MS. RIEDEL: Where are they located?

MR. CARLSON: They're right in Chicago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. CARLSON: In the River North area. And they have been really the gallery of choice. For many years, I used to want to get out of the glass galleries and move on to galleries that would have many other things. And I thought that my work, given its mixed media and given its kind of sculptural focus might be the type of pieces or might be the type of work that would do that.

But in my talk about it, I haven't probably pursued it as much as I should if I really wanted it to happen. And quite honestly, Marx-Saunders does such a good job that I understand that they have a select audience. That audience is pretty good for me. And I'm well-served by that. So maybe the anxiety about the other people in the gallery who my work is next to is just fine with this material selection of glass as the primary focus.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that the primary focus of the gallery, is glass?

MR. CARLSON: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MR. CARLSON: It has been exciting, though. And the SOFA things have been, again, that kind of party atmosphere that goes on, on the opening night.

MS. RIEDEL: And there can be that feeding frenzy in the SOFA exhibitions, too.

MR. CARLSON: And there's a feeding frenzy and there are lots of people there. And there's kind of excitement about the whole event. So unlike a show, where you might have an opening and you have people come in — they might have lots of people come in; but it's still a regional thing. The SOFA events are able to bring people from all over the country, so it becomes a chance for collectors to get together. And the idea of them getting together is probably good for the whole field.

And it also is good for artists to connect with the collectors because the collectors want to know us. They want to kind of be involved with the artists. Now, sometimes we just say they want a little chunk of flesh because, you know, they really do want to spend some time with us. It's enjoyable. Sometimes it can feel a little intrusive. And I don't know whether other artists in other fields have the same relationship with collectors. I kind of doubt whether they do.

MS. RIEDEL: The glass collectors are almost a phenomena.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, the glass collectors are kind of a phenomena because they have formed groups and they have formed kind of clubs and they travel together and they go to Europe as groups. And it's done with certainly a commercial end, by the commercial expectation by the people who do some of the organizing. But it has also been very good for the artists, who have made very good friends. And I have friends who no longer collect, but they're still very good friends. So it's not strictly based upon opportunism of the moment, but it's really based upon a lot of good friendships.

I mentioned Mike and Annie Belkin yesterday. They gave a piece to the Lowe Art Museum, a large Prägnanz series, which was wonderful because I really wanted that piece to be seen. And they had had it and they were going to try to sell it on the secondary market because they're deciding that their collection isn't the priority it used to be. They'll have some work kept, but they really are going to sell off and have sold off a good bit of it.

But still, we have such a strong friendship. It's just great to kind of have known them through different identities, when I was hitting them up as customers for my work and now we just kind of get together and talk about, you know, whatever is current — our dogs and our kids and what's going on with Mike's rock-and-roll efforts.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay. Is he a musician?

MR. CARLSON: No, he's not. He is a promoter.

MS. RIEDEL: A producer. Okay.

MR. CARLSON: So he's done that over the years. He is also the one — now, little-known fact about Mr. Bill is that Mike Belkin puts on these events in Cleveland. And there's an international rib cook-off. That rib cook-off happens Memorial Day every year. And for a number of years, probably three or four or five, I would go in and I would be a judge at the international rib cook-off. So I was sitting with some of the important barbecue boys and girls at the jurors' tent, as we would scrutinize the smoke and the tenderness of the meat, the smoking of the meat, the sauces, quite an exhausting process that I thought I was very good at because as a consumer and as a pretty good eater, the rib — that kind of competition really attracted my interest.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] How did you get started in this?

MR. CARLSON: Well, Mike Belkin was organizing it. And he said come on and you can be a rib judge. So I ended up going there.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you have experience as a big fan of ribs?

MR. CARLSON: I had experience as a consumer, so I probably wasn't the educated juror. But I was a consumer and by experience, I felt like I was pretty well-informed.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. So there you go.

MR. CARLSON: So that's probably the top line of my résumé. All this glass stuff is second to my ability to judge fine barbecued ribs.

MS. RIEDEL: Boy, the longer we talk, the more I find out.

Early on in some of those especially significant traveling shows, *Poetry of the Physical*, for example, did you find that that was especially significant or helpful to your career? Or was it just part of what was going on?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think it was very significant and for a couple of reasons. First of all, to be in that collection, like *Objects: USA*, which is the predecessor of *Poetry of the Physical*. That really set a standard and that really kind of opened up the eyes of the audience and really gave professional expectations to the artists. So it wasn't about sitting in your garage or working on your wood lathe and just kind of doing this out of idle curiosity, but maybe some kind of future. But it gave people documentation and a historical precedent that was so important for any kind of movement.

So Lee Nordness and Paul Smith really kind of set a standard there and an expectation, which our futures have been built by. *Poetry of the Physical* traveled extensively. I wouldn't say that I always got feedback from the different locations. So the pieces I would have there would be displayed. I would see the reviews. It would come back. And it was exciting in that way.

But quite honestly, if I think of résumé stuff and the ideas of what we write down as our accomplishments, those exhibitions, either the ones in Japan or the ones in *Poetry of the Physical* or other ones that were the touring shows, were great for my accomplishments as a university type. So it gave me international visibility. It really gave my work a sense of visibility — I guess I'm going back to that word again — that universities really want their faculty to have.

So if you're going to be a researcher, they want you to publish papers. They want you to do your research. In art, we do this thing, making art. And we call that research because it's actually working with ideas and they're evolving. So it is, in a way, research. But that research has to somehow be seen to bring credentials back to the university. And so the visibility of me being on the international scene, having the work seen, along with the University of Illinois as the by-liner part of my information, is a way that the institutions work. Like it or not, it's a necessary way to do it. And really, with faculty who are active, the university is really enhanced by the

reputation that the faculty have earned.

MS. RIEDEL: And very early on, you began traveling overseas and gave a number of keynote lectures in the past probably 20 years, 25 years. We were talking a little bit before we turned on the tape. How did those experiences traveling overseas and speaking about your work affect your work? Or did they?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think they did, again, because when I travel — and I don't know whether it affected and changed it. It kind of reinforced it, I guess. I think of some of the things where I'm referencing architecture in earlier pieces, the constructionist kind of focus that goes on with the laminated pieces, those are very much based upon architecture. And architecture is different in different locations. So I would say traveling gave me kind of a supportive update on how architecture is a part of my work. And architecture is different in some places.

The little nuances, the positives and negatives that go along with architecture, little nooks and crannies that kind of are the unique qualities to architecture. I mean, buildings pretty much contain space. But architecture and its different styles are really in the details and the kind of finishing of either proportions or of the little nuances that are the things that might be Asian with carvings or maybe kind of slabs of cement in more modern architecture or any of those kinds of things that are the embellishments of architecture, I guess, become of interest.

And then, certainly with the newer work since 2000 with the language, it's been great to travel. Again, I guess I say that the — when you're traveling and you are looking at different peoples, you are looking at different languages. Now, not being a linguist, I don't understand a lot of the things that I'm seeing. So I can appreciate the aesthetics of this language even though I'm not understanding the meaning. And somehow, either right or wrong, when I travel and I see a phrase or some language that I don't understand, I automatically think that it must be very profound and that this must be new, great information for me.

So I already think positive thoughts about it, where it may be just marketing garble or it might be the surgeon general's warning about smoking. But suddenly by not understanding the language, I'm much more forgiving of the trivial nature of language sometimes or the fragility of it.

So I use language and I try not to have it understandable. There's a layer of piecing together things, those little snippets, those little pieces that are there. The collages of the language stuff that I use are not supposed to present an agenda with a word that you would assign to a piece, but it's more about the potential of all these things that are mixed up in there. And that potential is not realized in a linguistic way. But it's realized, I hope, in an aesthetic way. I wasn't very good at Scrabble, but maybe I should go back to Scrabble and think about just the Scrabble pile before it's ever put into order.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you use — when you're working with language, it's primarily Latin, isn't it? Or is it exclusively?

MR. CARLSON: No, it's not expressively [sic] Latin. And I've tried to change that a little bit. But I don't want to get too clever. You know, I guess that if I were to — I looked in Sumerian mark-making, you know, clay tablets and the marks that are on those. That's probably too archeologically driven for what I want to do. Most of what I use is Latin, because Latin really is the basis for the languages we use in Western culture. And I guess that is why it's not so foreign that it's inappropriate. It's close enough that we all can relate to it. But I'm not allowing it to be necessarily linguistically successful.

But, you know, there are other things, what you mentioned yesterday, the shorthand is a language. Shorthand is maximizing. And so that — I guess it's a Western technology. It's not really — it would be based upon Latin as far as the words, although the marks that are made, I think, probably don't have any source in the Latin letter formation.

But things like sign language could be interesting. So if I start working with hands and the sign language, that's, again, one thing that I would still like to keep it abstract from specific words. But I'd like the idea of the hand as a tool to talk with. And as I talk to you, my hand is moving back and forth. And I'm always kind of throwing the hands around.

Now, it's all done — it's kind of an emotional or physical accessory to the language. But I think that the hands are very important and they could possibly be used as a sign-language user might have the ability to communicate.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. CARLSON: Or even Morse code. Morse code can just be dots and dashes, so it can start looking very designerly and that's probably where I would start with it. But the Morse code is, and was, such a breakthrough

so that people could communicate over great distances. That was really one of the biggest, I think, accomplishments after the Gutenberg-printed books. Morse code had to come in there pretty closely behind that, because it allowed communications and the entire relationship of peoples and where they were and what they could say to each other, that changed.

Maybe I should start smoke signals. I don't know about that. So I could do smoke signals in the Berkshires, right?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] There you go, there you go.

MR. CARLSON: Anyway, it's really interesting because if we think — I think of the technologies that are really kind of intimate to the way people have developed language and communication to this domain more. Nothing too profound about that. But thinking about all of the different ways that communications have been done and probably many others that I'm yet to find out about. But I'm becoming a bit more of a researcher as I try to do some of these.

Early on with my sculpture, I was, I think, a designer. I worked intuitively, in some respects, and did drawings in others. But pieces went together according to a certain kind of engineering logic that was second nature.

And now I find as I'm getting into some of these other things, I've become a bit more of a researcher in trying to uncover things that, before, hadn't really been a part of the work. So it ends up being a wealth of things that I'm considering as I still use that intuition in making pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you say a little bit more about that?

MR. CARLSON: Well, just that there's research. The idea of, really, substance behind the work. I'm less about the monumental quality of the piece and the materials giving the piece its credibility. And I'm more interested in how I can play with the viewer and have them enter on a number of different levels and think about things other than the grand exploitation of materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It seems with the new work, the language work, there's always been an emphasis on pattern, but even more so, perhaps, on texture and line, in terms of the fonts and the words themselves. But there is a certain complexity there. And they feel more poetic and more intuitive somehow, even than these, which feel very dramatic, but very straightforward, relatively speaking.

MR. CARLSON: Well, with the texts — again, I'm taking it and using the different fonts. But I also have layers and layers of it. So it's kind of like if you've written on sheets of glass and you pile them up, you know, you're looking through one to another. You lose a relationship to which page is on top because it's all transparent. So you have somehow made language impotent. But the language is still there. All of that information is there. That kind of intrigues me that we have — we can look through things, but we can't necessarily see the different levels as we would try to understand what language is there.

MS. RIEDEL: It comes back to the ambiguity we were talking about a little bit yesterday. Since we're talking about this shift in the work and the working process, let's talk a little bit about the working process. We were at your studio yesterday and saw, I don't know how many different types of machines you have there to help you — let's talk about the earlier pieces first, which were so labor-intensive — not that the other ones aren't. Can you walk us through how many different stages that involved or the process of putting that together and how many different machines were used? Because technology has played a role in your work.

MR. CARLSON: Absolutely. It's curious because I love machines. I have collected probably too many of them, given some away because it's repetitious with the number of machines that are a similar type. So I've gotten rid of some. But somehow, there was security in having all of these things. So if I can turn these saws on and turn the Rociprolaps on, then I could — I was working, even though I was just tending the machines.

You know, we used to have a little business where I would sell some of the machinery. Steve Weinberg and I had this business. And it was "set it and forget it," the kind of machinery that's semi-automatic, but allows for some grinding and polishing and cutting. Those machines were really important because if I wanted to — I couldn't make these earlier pieces if I wanted to, with traditional glass kinds of processes. I have to use large lapidary saws. Those saw are 36-inch saws, which cut slowly through the material.

And these pieces go in and out of those saws 20 or 30 times. And then each of the surfaces is going to be laminated. It has to go through the Rociprolap so that the surface is as flat as possible. It's a cosmetically flat surface, but it's still flat enough, so that when I go to do the lamination, the adhesive, the epoxy can flow out of that joint, that common joint, and the surface can be as visually tight as possible. So you're not having to view the process. So we would spend hours and hours on trying to get the thing really correct in the way the piece would go together.

So a piece like the one you're sitting next to, which is one of the *Contrapuntal* series —there must be 30 or 40 different pieces that went into the thing. So you're building up these pieces from the center out. The clear area in the middle and those stripes were the first part, then the concentric lines that go around it. And there are three of those lines. And three times four is 12. And so we're building up these matrixes of a center core that is transparent out to the exterior, which is opaque.

Now, if you want to somehow relate this to earlier work of mine, even back to the scent bottles, which were in the early '70s. With the glass, I would take a clear gather, build up some color and build up a little more color and some of the intrigue of that geode-like form and then usually cover it with a black exterior. So one layer over another, building up from the center out. That's still what I'm doing here.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And so really the processes have changed, but the concepts, the way of working and the idea of focusing on some contained space that gives us a subject matter, kind of a little portal or a little window into the composition. All of those things have been somewhat consistent. Just the materials have changed a bit — glass still being one of them, but the granite being the laminated component of it. And just trying to have some of the issues that were so interesting about these little precious bottles and the little way they could be examined in their little kind of frozen moment in glass is still kind of what I pursue with these larger pieces.

But even with the wall pieces now, they're no longer about that center core. They're no longer about accentuating a center spot and a window in there. But they are very much kind of controlling your view of the text by way of just a little faceted window, a little faceted slit in the piece that gives you access.

MS. RIEDEL: Your studio is huge. Do you know how many square feet that is?

MR. CARLSON: It's about 3,500 square feet.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a really large studio. And you've got facilities in there for casting.

MR. CARLSON: For casting, for grinding, for cutting, for sandblasting, for milling. So it's a lot of stuff in there.

MS. RIEDEL: You cast wax there and rubber, as well?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, wax and rubber. But the thing is, I've always been very committed to the complexity of the studio and all that it can do. But in some ways, what I find myself thinking about now as I — you know, I'll be here a few more years with that studio as my main source. But I'm trying also to think about ideas that needn't always use the same equipment. So maybe — you know, I've built this thing and I've purchased all of the equipment in pursuit of being able to do a thing.

Now, that "a thing" has probably changed. And that's where the idea of still working with glass — because I'm committed to that, other materials, also. But trying to think of ways where I might work with an installation of sorts, where there's a context. That context is determined by components that I may make and the way they're illuminated. So does it become an installation that deals with text as projected on a wall through a number of glass components? Possibly.

Is it a prismatic piece that because of light and because of the qualities of prism that a spectrum can be somehow controlled or moved? If I think about some of those things, it's real exciting. If I go back again to how I get to that source, there was a real strong group of students when I was leaving Illinois, who I worked with quite a bit, who were doing projected kinds of installations. Theirs were oftentimes a narrative that dealt with kind of a personal subject matter. And that wouldn't be my choice. But just the use of the camera, the projection, and the way that you can really work with a space is spectacular.

I think back to other artists and Thomas Wilfred is somebody I mentioned yesterday. And he's a fellow who was in the '20s. He created these boxes that would project. They would project onto a piece of glass and the glass would kind of hold that projection. But it was very much like a Morris Louis painting. But those paintings were animated. Because of the light and the prisms and the mirrors, it would move. And I don't want to copy any of his things. But I do think that there's some real interest in that type of work, without the object as the constant, but the ephemeral nature of light that can make things work.

Kara Walker is an artist who is very visible right now. And she doesn't necessarily use glass at all. But her work is a narrative about historical things, oftentimes slavery. And she sets up just some very simple things with projectors and cutouts in paper that just turn and will both interrupt a light beam and allow it to shine through perforations. So she sets up this thing, which is a little bit like a circus or a funhouse. But they are oftentimes really powerful narratives that are appropriate to her subject matter. But I enjoy the simplicity of that. It's not high technology. It's not software-dependent. And it's a way of working with light and transparent materials and

real powerful imagery.

There's another artist who I'm trying to think about, Christian Boltanski, who did also some almost puppetry-like things with lights and simple candles and dark spaces. I'm not going to imitate those people, but there's something really to be said for taking on a different way for the work to be seen. Take it off a wall and maybe have the wall be — a blank wall — be what is potentially the source for the stuff to exist on.

But [when] the machinery is put away or the lights are put away and the wall is back to being empty again, there isn't an object, per se, that I have to pack up and take away. It's more a situation that can be created in environments.

You know, MASS MoCA is a wonderful — this is Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. They have a museum up in Adams, Massachusetts — North Adams. And it's in an old factory. And it's near the place that I'm going to be moving to in the Berkshires eventually. But it's such an interesting experimental place where people come in and try things that seems like aren't often tried in other museums.

It's less about the stodgy nature of the museum and really about the experimental nature of things, you know, of phenomena. And that experimental nature is what I need to kind of get a grasp on again and take it into an open-ended opportunity rather than something that has, again, that kind of defined conclusion.

MS. RIEDEL: Just listening to you talk about the reflections existing on the walls as opposed to being a refraction or optics played with within the piece, it made me think of that large sculpture you did [*The Nature of Things*], I think in 2000, at the Mayo Clinic. And in that, it's primarily stone, but there's some glass in there. What was interesting to me about that is the glass in that case, the reflections are cast on the ground.

MR. CARLSON: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So it seems like an idea that you have, perhaps, visited before. And it's an interesting piece.

MR. CARLSON: I have, and other people have, too, so the prismatic thing is familiar. But it's just — you know, it's wonderful. It has the intrigue of nature controlling that component or that element of the piece. It's a little wonderful like a Science Day project because the spectrum is just such a beautiful thing and it changes so quickly with the sun. And it's really about time.

So in the Mayo piece, the Mayo Clinic piece, which was a pergola-type structure. It was about 16 by 16 by 20 [feet], something that was really a large limestone structure.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was in Florida?

MR. CARLSON: Right, in Jacksonville, Florida. And the prisms are mounted up in the top of the pergola, so they really aren't seen. You can see them if you look at them, but they are clear glass. They are a zero-expansion glass, so that even though Florida's hot, and the heat can be abusive, that's a kind of glass that will take the shock of the rain coming on something that's already heated up to a high temperature by the sun.

And those just flood an area with these small prismatic spectrums. And, again, they move according to the time of the day. It's a location where the Mayo Clinic people wanted a chance for people to get out of the lobby of the hospital, do something else. They didn't want it to be a difficult art issue. They didn't want it to be too profound. They wanted it to be kind of a location. So the structure is kind of simple in its stacking nature. It's not unlike kid's blocks being stacked up because they're not ordered in a way that a lot of my work would be.

MS. RIEDEL: That is true.

MR. CARLSON: But they still are structurally correct. And then the prisms just float through there and kind of wash the cement surface as the sun moves. So it was really an interesting piece. And I hope someday to do another one of those.

The whole public art thing has been — it's become more competitive, a little bit more. It's also there are more opportunities. So I keep trying to apply for these opportunities. And sometimes they come through. But it's kind of tough because you're given the basics of what the situation is, kind of what a budget might be. But you're really not too sure how you can convince these people that you can do the best job because they don't necessarily ask for a specific proposal. They ask for slides of past work.

So if I have a brand-new idea, the slides of past work may not show them what a smart guy I am. And that's disappointing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. That piece was done in 2000. And I want to talk about the year 2000 because it was such an interesting year of transition in so many different projects for you. But before we move on to that, I wanted to

just talk to you about that quote that I mentioned yesterday because I think it summarizes the earlier work, the more architectural work, the objects, before we move into the language and more of the public sculpture.

But I thought this was such an interesting and apt summary. This was you talking about this work in 1998. You were talking about the orchestration of visual noise. “And for me, the narrative is too self-absorbed with the human condition, while clutter of visual noise is deafening and irresistible.” I thought that was such a wonderfully accurate, poetic description of [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: It does sound good. I know I said it. But I haven’t been that profound in a while. Yes, well, visual noise, all of these pieces have, I think — they’re not shouting. But there is kind of a hum to them. There’s a resonance about them that, I think, is a visual noise. And we don’t necessarily hear it, though we hear the air conditioner. That’s visual noise — or that’s audio noise. But with these, there really is a visual noise that kind of keeps things moving. Nothing really is empty. They’re always kind of congested. And that congestion is, I guess, what I would be referring to.

The newer pieces, I guess, I also — the Texas pieces — would also have that kind of deafening roar of this language stuff because it is, again, historically charged. And I guess it has all of that that comes to play. Again, it’s maybe a historical noise — or [laughs] hysterical. But there is a visual noise. And it was something that I remember with that quote that I had really thought about that for quite a while. It’s been something that I haven’t gone back to for a while. But I’m really pleased that that quote has been brought back up.

Actually, I was looking for it earlier today. I couldn’t place it in the publications.

MS. RIEDEL: I can’t remember where I found it, but I’ll look.

MR. CARLSON: You know, and that was interesting today. I was reading through some of the articles that James Yood or Brunetti or Chloe Zerwick had written. And they sounded pretty good.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. CARLSON: I was pleased to have critics who can enter the work and can respond to it and critics who aren’t about strictly a decorative arts tradition, although that is certainly a part of where I come from. I think they do a good job. Criticism, the critical thinking that goes on is such an important thing. And I think the glass world has certainly had some good ones. But it’s not always consistent.

MS. RIEDEL: Who haves been significant, in your opinion, critical writers, any [in] particular you read?

MR. CARLSON: You mean, as far as —

MS. RIEDEL: Your work or in general.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I guess I don’t have a person. I read the things that are in our magazines, *American Craft* and —

MS. RIEDEL: *American Craft* and *Glass*.

MR. CARLSON: But I also go to *Art in America* and *Art Forum*. Those end up being, I think, for me, much better. And, you know, International Sculpture Center, *Sculpture* magazine, has done a much better job of getting critics on board. I still think that sometimes the glass magazines maybe miss the mark or haven’t stepped up to the plate. And that’s certainly something that needs to be addressed.

MS. RIEDEL: How so? Just in not being critical enough or being more descriptive?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, not being critical enough or taking an agenda point of view that isn’t about objectivity, but is already about some kind of focus and a cause, on what they feel has to be said.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you feel those specialized periodicals have been helpful to the field in any way?

MR. CARLSON: Well, yes, because I think they do things that other magazines wouldn’t. So they’re very helpful in promoting careers and giving visibility. And ideally, those magazines will evolve and improve as critics become more available.

You know, it seems like the art history end of things has often neglected the decorative arts. I think there are some institutions that maybe are trying to do a better job of addressing some of those things. But it has not necessarily been an easy situation.

Are we going to lose it? [Sound of rainstorm.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm going to pause this for just a minute.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's see. Would you say we're — [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: We're in a monsoon at this point. It is the twenty-fifth of June. The rainy season is here.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. CARLSON: About an inch has come down already in the last 15 minutes. We're going to have to vacate the house — and swim. No.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't see — [inaudible]. Okay, well, as long as we can continue to hear you. Yes.

MR. CARLSON: Okay. Can you hear me okay?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I think we're — yes, we're fine.

MR. CARLSON: All right.

MS. RIEDEL: So in 2000 — these transitional years — [inaudible] — you were still doing wonderful object pieces [inaudible] pieces and *Quadrants*?

MR. CARLSON: *Quadrant Constructs*, which were taking many of the same processes and trying to add components so that there would be four or five components that would go together into a piece. They would — it'd still be about that center crevasse or opening or brio and they were kind of the conclusion of what was happening with this whole lamination career.

Now, so why did that come to an end? Well, physically, it just seemed like I had done everything I could do and —

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, too, because they were suspended unlike so many of the other objects.

MR. CARLSON: Yes. So they were, so that that stand gave them an elevation. So it wasn't simply a flat surface in the bottom, but sitting on a pedestal that was kind of the conclusion but because they kind of hung in a frame, they had a fair amount more use of the negative space and kind of that sculptural edge that was made up of both broken stone and then polished and manicured kind of stone surfaces. So those pieces —

MS. RIEDEL: They're all pretty much about squares and spheres.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, right.

And the piece in — *Allele*, the piece that's in Chicago that is 20 feet tall, was really the first of that series. It was the large one. It was the public art piece. And then the ones that followed were the smaller versions — the studio-made. But it was trying to, again, use a lot of different types of qualities of clear glass, translucent glass, and opaque glass, and have that be the constructivist format.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That was interesting, too, because that's the first time, the only time, a larger piece — [inaudible] — first — [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: Yes, it really was, yes. And, you know, the larger pieces always are a problem because how big a component can I get of the granite, so it's how big a piece can I make in the studio and still lift it off my machines and get it into a box? And the problem for the larger pieces is how big a piece of stone or granite can they pull out of a mountain to be used for whatever I'm trying to work on.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Now, this is kind of a little out of sync, but early on, there was an artist by the name of Mel Kendrick, and he's a sculptor who does a beautiful job of putting pieces together and they are rough, oftentimes wood or bronze, they kind of slice and dice next to each other as they go into a construction, and sometimes they're doweled together; other times, they're just kind of held together by compression.

But he's been a sculptor who I've kind of looked at over the years and I don't see him for 10 years and I end up seeing the work again. And so his work has evolved quite a bit, but every time I see it, I find his work to be inspirational because he kind of does some of the same things I do. He does it in a way that is kind of a raw handling of materials. It's not about the kind of perfection that I pretend to be attracted to.

MS. RIEDEL: They're all large-format, aren't they?

MR. CARLSON: Well, there's a lot of things that are smaller too. Yes, pedestal pieces — at least stuff that I've seen. But an interesting artist to look at. And I guess what I think is so important with the students or the teaching part of things and my fellow artists is that we're really well-informed. So as we become more mature, as we develop our work, we still have a healthy grasp of where the sources are — whether they're historical, whether they're artists who work in other materials, whether they're about natural things. But we need to have a real grasp of what we've been looking at and how it's affected us. I think that's awfully important.

And, you know, it starts as a student. The students need to really to make sure they're responsible about being influenced and make sure they're responsible about knowing where those influences are coming from. So that's one of those things that has been very important both in the teaching and in my own career.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Actually, it's a perfect way to ask about your influences — [inaudible] — a little bit — [inaudible] — constructivism — [inaudible] — what else comes to mind, or who has been significant over the course of the past 30, 40 years?

MR. CARLSON: Well, as I mentioned earlier, constructivism — Russian constructivism, kind of an austerity of line and form has been most interesting. I look at other sculptors — I think of a sculptor like Fletcher Benton. Fletcher Benton uses many of the same components — [inaudible] — bronze. And he made use of — twiggle or a wiggle in lot of his things. No wiggles in mine but we have some of the same disciplines.

We also think about Frank Stella, the painter, when he was doing his lines and that kind of stuff ends up being an important component. I think I like his current work an awful lot. I think I like the old stuff for what it offered me as a student and for what I thought could work with the glass.

Lyonel Feininger is a painter. And Lyonel Feininger's paintings were about imitating what would happen with prismatic or faceted optics. The pieces weren't done in glass but they kind of imitated the break-up of forms into what was a faceted — imitation of faceted optics.

And the cubists also do that. The abstraction of cubist ends up being a similar effect — it is painted and it is more deliberate. But if you look at the glass pieces, if you look at the optics, as you look through them into your environment, a lot of the same things are happening with that kind of disjointed disappearance and reappearance of objects for an environment. So my pieces aren't broken up into little components as a cubist's would be, but because it is transparent, it allows the environment to be broken up and kind of redefined because of the glass.

And, you know, it's as simple as an optical glass and a soda lime glass. They have different optical qualities. So really, although they're both clear or transparent and they're both glasses, they end up offering such different kinds of qualities. And maybe that's the Science Day project waiting to happen as far as all of these — all the vocabulary of the different glasses and somehow realizing a piece that really offers me a chance to fully understand that. You know, because there's only — [inaudible] — it's kind of intuitive but it's a sense of discovery. And maybe I owe myself a little bit of serious research into really the qualities of these different silica-based materials.

MS. RIEDEL: You started to talk — [inaudible] — the 2000 and that year was really an interesting mix of scale for you as well as focus — [inaudible] — because you were still working on the quadrant series, you were working on three major public site specific commissions, I think, Jacksonville and a couple others. And then you started — [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So that was a hugely transitional time. What brought that about and then how did you manage?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I don't know that I managed too well — certainly, if you talked to my family, the support of family. But, you know, maybe that was a rough time. I think it probably was. But it was also a wonderful time because I realized it was the end of the constructivist stuff, the *Quadrant Constructs* and that was evident that I had complete the expectations and finish the pieces that were in the way. So I knew that was ending; and then the coincidence of having these large-scale commissions was just wonderful. I was popular at one point and that was the point when, you know, those large pieces were really happening.

MS. RIEDEL: Were the pieces in Chicago or — Tennessee — [inaudible] — Kansas City *Abest* [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: Right. Well, I was working with — in all those pieces, I was working with fabricators who were doing a fair amount of the work. So I would have to go to the quarries in Vermont, or I'd had to go to Germany and to work on the component, the spherical component in the *Allele* piece. And go down to Bloomington,

Indiana, with the drawings — engineering drawings that would be the prototypes for the patterns for the piece in Kansas City.

So it was a frantic time and it was great to be popular. Now there's been kind of a shortage of some of those big projects. So things haven't quite been the same. But it was a wonderful, exciting time and, at that point, maybe I was imagining that I would just get out of teaching and I would just say, hey, well, these big projects are going to sustain me. That was a nice thought but the teaching thing is still important. I think it's important for the stability for my family, it's important for, really, for my creative juices.

I hate to go back to [discussing] the teaching thing again, but there really is something that's offered, that's shared between faculty and students — which isn't always something I enjoy every day but in the long run and, in retrospect, there's a good reason to stick with the teaching. Because it brings new information and it brings people who can be collaborators with some of these larger components where I need help.

And that year 2000 came and went and with the new work, with the Latin work or the *Ligatures* and the language, those have been, I think, well-received and they are really a different focus. They seem like — to some people like they're coming out of left field. But I think that there's good reason to think that they made sense with all my other work.

But there hasn't been really a groundswell of support in purchasing those pieces. There certainly has been some success but, you know, it's a tougher issue. They are primarily about textures and about language and them being glass is kind of a secondary issue. And they need to be out of glass but I don't optimize the glass quality as I would have with earlier pieces. And that's, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: [inaudible] — does not anymore specifically on visual or even on beauty — [inaudible].

MR. CARLSON: Yes, right.

MR. CARLSON: So yes, beauty has certainly been denied and I feel okay about that; if I were to make comments about the laminated pieces in the way that that whole thing developed is, I got caught up in the beauty and the sense of trying to be perfect with the way that they were round and polished. And that was an accomplishment, that was a part of those works that just has, again, been fulfilled as I moved on.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did your dealers — and your collectors deal with that change?

MR. CARLSON: Yes. Well, the collectors — I have wonderful collectors who say, I really don't like that in your work but I like you. So they're not going to be the people who would buy the work, but I like them to keep looking at it and I think I offer something that's valuable in those pieces, valuable for me, and then valuable for just people in the whole glass effort to look at things in a different way.

MS. RIEDEL: Has it brought in new audience?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, maybe. I think it could be. I'm not sure quite what that audience is. I don't think it's a critical mass yet. There's people out there who certainly are interested in them and will stick by me as — you know, as these things evolve. And the galleries, you know, the people I'm dealing with now have been very supportive. Again, it hasn't always been uniquely fruitful for their part because it hasn't been a commercial success. But there's been enough interest and enough success to keep them, hopefully, by my side and me by theirs.

Really, the last — the two shows that have happened with Bonnie Marx that included these newest ones have gotten a lot of interest. And maybe the interest is a good way to kind of ease into what may become eventual success because of the — it's a harder call, it's a harder thing to see the quality in those, where the other things were so obvious and they shouted at you about the qualities of the materials. And these don't shout.

MS. RIEDEL: No, they don't. The *Ligature* pieces followed a couple years after the language pieces?

MR. CARLSON: No, they actually were pretty much simultaneous.

MS. RIEDEL: Simultaneous? Okay.

MR. CARLSON: Yes. So it was just using language differently and different processes too. As I mentioned before, I think that we're evolving out of some of this stuff into — what will happen next? And I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's interesting, when I think about the work, I think a framework that feels very architectural, but there's an emphasis and a focus on fragments and structure. And I think that in the new pieces, I feel that seeing the same fragmentation and structure but — as opposed to architecture, the structure feel more based around language.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, it is. Much more. The forms are pretty much wall-dependent. All of them are wall-dependent. So there may be a little bit of material there that may have some quality of sculpture, or three-dimensional issues going on, certainly it does. But they're modest in comparison to the earlier pieces as far as the exploitation of that geometry.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a compression of layers, too, in your pieces.

MR. CARLSON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Good. Well, I mean, I think that the multiples of the language and them overlapping is intended to give that compression. There may be better materials, I think, to use — or maybe not better materials but different glass processes, to do different layers of glass with the text on them and put them together.

A fellow who used to work for me, Jeff Sarmiento — Rudy Sarmiento — a former student who's now in London, he's doing some pieces that have that text sandwiched between layers and doing a really good job with it. His things are text-related, as well as pictures of family. So he has this narrative along with the text, so different — certainly different than mine — processes he's using are probably a good way for me to consider going as far as some of the making of these pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Pieces to me still also feel very much about theme and variation. I was thinking of the *Ligatures* and language exhibition and I think there were a number of pieces in there — I think you have Flexes and Reciprico, Equatious, Oratio and Resonance. And there was such — they all feel very much about dialogs. I mean, there were such clearly a dialogs between the pieces. It seems very much about language and communication and dialogs.

MR. CARLSON: You mean, because of the way tiles were related?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I mean, visually, somehow that was all very much suggested, not only in each individual piece but as what the pieces had to say about language and communication to each other and different ways of communication, of communicating and listening and being heard.

MR. CARLSON: I just looked at that catalog today and I would say that some of those relationships and the pieces and the configurations of them were better solutions than I've dealt with in recent times. And they weren't as big a piece — pieces but they were really — they were working more like a book —

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I think that's true —

MR. CARLSON: — and the pieces now kind of have these little openings but the idea of a book — [inaudible] — so you can kind of see the binding is what those pieces had. I think were good and I kind of lost that direction for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: There's so much about pattern as well. Those pieces were intriguing on many levels.

Which pieces do you think of as your most significant or important commissioned work, or are there one or two that stand out above the others?

MR. CARLSON: Well, yes. If I think back to the first one, the CBOE — *Optional Refractions* is kind of what we've called the working title. That was significant because there was — it has survived very well. It really solved problems — as a designer I think it worked. As kind of orchestrator of resources, it was great because I could go and have the components made. I had to make the facilities but the glass was available through that Fenton glass factory. But that's important.

But if I think about the esthetics of it, the *Allele*, the one that's in Chicago at the molecular biology lab, the University of Illinois, Chicago — that one, for me, really has a presence because of size. Size isn't everything. But that piece is large enough and the piece is entirely solid. I mean, it doesn't look like — it's not hollow, doesn't look hollow. It's what has that presence. It has a visual mass that is pretty unique. You can have big things and they can be fabricated — but all of the pieces have been solid material and that one just works the best.

The simplicity of the core drills and the breaking of the cubic material that came out of the quarry. Those cores are how they make the rock — how they break the rock, so they put a series of holes in them, somehow pry it and break it and that fracture, the natural fracture of that granite. It's just wonderful.

So maybe it's more what it does that I didn't do, other than I created the circumstances where it could happen. But it has less of a hand, really, in a lot of that. And the hand part of it, the finish, the manufacturing, the machining is on the sphere. And the sphere is kind of this perfect thing. So it's about as simple as you can get, certainly much simpler than most of my work.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that the sphere that came from Germany?

MR. CARLSON: Right, that was the one, yes. So that was — for me, is the piece that just feels like there really is an accomplishment there.

MS. RIEDEL: And why did that sphere come from Germany? Why was it essential to get it from there? Was the technology only available?

MR. CARLSON: Well, for that size, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: Now, there's people in Canada and Vermont who do some of these machined spherical components. I've had some pieces made by those folks. But they can't do anything — at that point, couldn't do anything that large.

I also was working on a piece or a proposal for a piece where it would have been an eight-foot diameter sphere, and that would have been kind of — gigantic. And if you think about human scale and you think about that and it's — eight-foot diameter is — does it really have more impact when something has that kind of proportion to our human scale? Well, I think so. As soon as you get past the human scale and you start to push it, there are interpretations that go along with it that really change the viewer's ability to relate.

Now, I think of a piece that we — I was on a committee at the University of Illinois, but it was an Alexander Liberman piece and it's just a simple, kind of a red pipe-like thing or multiple pipes, but it's big enough to hold its own with a five-storey building. And people really don't like it because of the simplicity of metal and it's just metal tubing, really. But it's, the concept about it being put together that way with such volume is really a good lesson in the way we make things.

We make things that are intimate and little is something that really is wonderfully tactile. And those were my early pieces, those little perfume bottles. And they — I didn't care so much about perfume, but I liked a little bit of geometry, I liked the conclusion of a knob or something on top and that was the stopper, and I liked to be able to kind of look into this thing which was a record of glass at its most fluid in a kind of movement that went on. And by doing that, I created an intimate thing. I guess, on the other hand, the *Allele* piece, the piece in Chicago is the one that maybe gave me my macho identity for a day.

It came in on three different semi- trucks. You know, so I guess if that's how they judge — how many semi trucks does it take to get it here.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] How have your sources of inspiration changed over time?

MR. CARLSON: You know —

MS. RIEDEL: Or have they?

MR. CARLSON: They have. I talked about inspiration before. That was more, maybe, historical. I don't know if there's one thing that would be an inspiration. But I try to see as much contemporary art or art or interesting stuff as possible.

So there is a place in Beacon, New York — Dia: Beacon, which is a wonderful location some of the most kind of powerful, both minimalist and postmodern, I guess, and modernist — some of it. But if I go there I'm just overwhelmed. Again, Mass MoCA is another location for this. But Dia: Beacon has the Richard Serra *Ellipses*, and those *Ellipses* both give you an environment and an intimate space, monumental space kind of a sense of material. You know, you look at metal, it just looks like metal. And I guess you could put a metal surface on a piece of plywood, but these things, again, like what I was saying, my other pieces deal with a perception of mass in just heroic volumes.

MS. RIEDEL: Those are interesting, too, because they're so contained, they're so tightly contained in a relatively small space, relatively snug — as snug an installation of his work [as] I've seen, which I think emphasizes the mass even more.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I'd say so, yes. But I think they need to be inside. I don't think they would work as well outside.

MS. RIEDEL: I agree.

MR. CARLSON: But a person whose work is inside in Dia and this person's work is also excellent outside is — just forgot his name — well, okay, should be quick —

MS. RIEDEL: We'll pick this up again.

MR. CARLSON: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll — we'll think of —

MR. CARLSON: Richard [sic] Heizer.

MS. RIEDEL: Richard Heizer. Okay. On that note, we'll come back again.

MR. CARLSON: Okay. Richard Heizer. Okay.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about Michael Heizer when we had to stop.

MR. CARLSON: Talked a little bit about Richard Serra and we were on to Michael Heizer.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And Dia, in general.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, and Dia and the kind of real kind of impact of sources that are outside of the glass field per se. Michael Heizer is an artist who really deals with negative space.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And his pieces are both grand in scale — so again, I'm seduced by that issue. But they are simple openings. They are openings in the earth, they're openings in buildings.

Gordon Matta-Clark was also an artist who dealt with spaces and altering structures and houses and buildings by removing — or at least by altering their secured stance. And both those artists are people who push an envelope of space and [the] precarious nature of things to an almost threatening way, but no longer is that building as stable or that hole is so deep. But it's a hole that's been orchestrated and — [inaudible].

So it's dealing with the absence of object, where Tony Smith would build a large-scale minimalist sculpture, Michael Heizer would build an even larger-scale minimalist negative space or hole. And these holes aren't just about digging a hole. It's because of the dirt and the removal process but they're about very well-defined spaces. So the discipline that he has is kind of what I imagine I'd bring to some of my small-scale pieces. And the empty spaces are not unlike what I tried to do with glass to open a piece up in a vague way, what he does as he's kind of masterfully orchestrated the natural forces.

MS. RIEDEL: He so often has negative spaces at the very center of the pieces.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, yes. So it's certainly is a long shot but his work has been very influential.

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

MR. CARLSON: So if I go back to the glass area and who's been influential, there have been a lot of people who'd developed over the years. I don't know if anyone who's been so influential but I had such a strong group of peers who have been young artists, maturing artists, artists who I both have admired and then people who evolved; and it's been quite an exciting, intense time, because of the glass community is very incestuous but in a probably positive way where we really are also somewhat self — interdependent. There's plenty of egos and plenty of jealousies but more or less we have a relatively strong relationship between the things we do and how we do them and why we do them.

We've talked about my start with glass. It was going to Pilchuck. That summer in 1971 was kind of — from zero I learned about glass. I didn't learn too much about how to make glass during that summer, but I got enough of an interest in the opportunities and that community of people that Chihuly brought together were really pretty spectacular, and the ability of creating something from nothing.

MS. RIEDEL: Do ever remember who was there that first time?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, pretty much. There was — and a lot of people who aren't in glass anymore. There were some folks from the different arts school that I had mentioned.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: And I mentioned the person who was there from Cleveland.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. CARLSON: And Toots Zynsky was there from RISD and Chihuly was there from RISD. Marshall Boris was there from California College of Arts and Design, at that point. And I don't remember the ones from San Francisco Art Institute. And there was somebody from Maryland Institute of Art — Debbie Goldenthal was there. And somebody — Arthur Ang, I think, probably the wrong name but another person from Maryland.

And there was a fellow from Kansas City — I'm forgetting his name — I shared a tent with him. I forget his name. But we lived in tents. And you know, these slugs kind of took over our lives and we have to hang the food in trees so the bears wouldn't get us. So it was primitive and wonderful and enough camping for me for a lifetime. [Laughs.]

It was — it led to so many good things. So Chihuly has to be a big influence. And although I'm not always enamored of Dale's work, his coattails are long and his ability to create interest and disciples has been very impressive. So his efforts alone have really done an awful lot for glass. People want to criticize him maybe for being a bit more commercial than some of us might like. But we all are beneficiaries of what he's offered.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. CARLSON: And because of his introduction, he ends up being the household word that is known by almost everybody with contemporary glass. And his —

MS. RIEDEL: Would you hold that thought for one second?

[End of track 2]

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry, we were talking about Dale Chihuly.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, so Chihuly just is somebody who certainly comes up and everyone has an opinion. But without his initial start at Pilchuck and without that introduction, I certainly wouldn't have had the opportunities I've had.

Now, I never really was a student of his per se in a curriculum-type program. And I kind of liked that distance, where our friendship has been based upon interactions. But I didn't need to be a student of his in a degree-granting program to have the benefits of I think what his expertise seems to be.

So that's a glass person. And there's a number of other people I could mention, but I want to just go back and mention one other person that I know that you've done a review of or an interview with — and that's Bill Daley. Bill Daley is very much out of the same discipline of constructivism or of a time and place that seems familiar to my work. And he deals with a sense of engineering in architecture. And the pots are, they are small pots by architectural standards, large by ceramics standards and really have all of the makings of architecture and buildings. And I think that he's somebody who has had a long career, an insightful career.

A couple of times I've had the chance to meet with him and have him either critique my work or we just have a chance to talk. He's really somebody who I admire and who I'd like to emulate.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. I can see that connection, to be sure.

How have you seen the craft field change over the past four decades since you started? What sort of changes have you observed?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I guess, if I think of my own efforts and opportunities, it's kind of echoed the way things have changed — from those first art fairs which were introductions to the public. I mean, I'm out there in the public eye with all of the stupid questions that go along with it as well as the insightful questions; you know, having a roll of cash in my pocket from selling pieces that people want and not having to deal with a gallery — and having that ability to turn that into the next generation of pieces. That was kind of exciting and very immediate.

But as things have developed, galleries have become more and more the issue. And galleries provide a tremendous amount of a kind of professional visibility. A street fair happens and it's over and the street is cleaned up and used for traffic again. And the galleries really have the potential to build and provide a historical perspective that is going to be about the documentation of what we do.

And that documentation is so important. I've had catalogs and things that have been written; I've had articles written. Some of my peers have had books published about them. That hasn't happened; I don't know that it will.

Maybe at this point something like that would be appropriate because I think there's enough of an evolution that a substantial documentation would be warranted. I mean, I hope that happens. But the galleries and the —

really the support of the collectors — so, again, the collectors are folks who sometimes we have good relationships with; other times not.

But the collectors have really been the ones who have facilitated the momentum of this situation. I don't like the word "movement" much, but I think this is a situation that is really unique. And the educational institutions putting together glass programs to respond to demand, the idea that glass can be something that is considered an art material, the idea of what Harvey Littleton and Dale — Andy Belleci did with early furnaces in early studios — so that those opportunities are unique to this end of the 20th century.

MS. RIEDEL: You've traveled a lot in conjunction with your work. You mentioned some of the lectures. There was one really early on in West Germany, I think; more recently in Beijing in 2006. And many of these have been keynote lectures — in Japan, in Tokyo, I think, in '92; in London in '84. Where do you see American craft or glass fitting in, in the international spectrum?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think that we are indeed somewhat different because our history of glassmaking in the U.S. is long, but it's been more about windows and functional things. Europe and Asia, I think, have a — Europe certainly and Asia partially — have such a strong tradition of glassmaking and the decorative arts as being highly respected activity and something that is considered on a par with other artmaking activities.

Now, when I go to Europe, I see that the Americans are doing one kind of thing; the Europeans still have their history to contend with. So I think that the evolution of an interest in glass is truly international and that that is happening, really, all over the world.

The Chinese are aggressively educated people — at the university that I talked at — and they are indeed graduating people and they're sending them out to the different universities expecting a number of them to start glass programs. So the government is planning that that will happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Which university was this again?

MR. CARLSON: [Tsing Hua University —WC]. And, again, my pronunciation is probably a little brutal.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. CARLSON: But that is the premier institution in Beijing. It absorbed the central academy of art. And that means that they are really the premier educational institution for the — training the educators and the people who go out and spread the kind of interest that will take the Chinese into quite a fantastic position; to have facilities, to have programs, and to have the government really be the source and the funding.

Now, that may be a downside as far as the government's involvement, but it also may be an upside as far as funding the programs in a way that the U.S. really never has. Glass programs typically start either in a sculpture area or a ceramics area. Over the years they've evolved and things start small. And as with the Cleveland Institute of Art, which just had a furnace and a kiln room . And to use that was just on the off hours when the facility was available.

But that kind of working from a very modest facility and then having it grow as your enrollment increases is the way that a lot of the U.S. programs have developed. And the Chinese seem to be jumping in with far more support and far more expectations of having things happen quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: And are they looking towards functional or sculptural work or both?

MR. CARLSON: Probably more sculpture. And they want to make sure that their students can handle glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Architectural, too?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, I'd say so, yes. I think every aspect of glass is being explored. And I don't know with what success, but there certainly is a lot of activity. And the European tradition — this may be a little different — because the hand schools or the hand-craft schools that were kind of a combination of college for the basics of design and then the vocational education with the specialization and the material.

So the Europeans, as I see it — and I think that I've been to enough institutions and know enough people who have gone through the system — is that these students are — they apply to a school, a hand school, an arts school or a craft school. And that school will train — they give them a very much voc-tech kind of education with some art and some design. And then that prepares them to work in industry.

Now, industry may not be needing all of these glass people in the future. As things are made in different locations and its designers are used or not used, I think the numbers of people who will be employed in those factories has probably decreased.

So I think that the Europeans now — and certainly in Scandinavia this is true and in Germany — those hochschule, I think, is what they're called, are the schools that are more or less teaching students how to think and how to work with a material. And the material could be clay; it could be glass; it could be wood. But there still is that specialization that goes along with the materials that have been the decorative arts.

And the way that they're evolving their education system, I think, is to become more independent, art-wise. But they still have a very strong tradition of design to some point —

MS. RIEDEL: And technical background.

MR. CARLSON: Yes. And in the U.S. our design discipline is there, but I think we — I don't think it's projected in as strong a way as what the Europeans would do. And I would say that we were also probably a little more belligerent towards some of those things that have been strictly established, the established way things have been done.

MS. RIEDEL: For example, does anything come to mind?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, just because, I think, that we don't want to necessarily learn how to — I shouldn't say we don't; I would say that there is an aspect of students who want to try to push something and do it differently, so that if it's going to be a vessel form, let's not do it by blowing, but do it by something else. Where there's also — and I should say this in retrospect that there's a tremendous amount of interest now among students to learn to imitate the Italian techniques.

I think that that is maybe, great skills to learn, but the idea of imitating another culture's aesthetics probably is a little misguided. And the idea of imitating Italians because there may be some commercial success in it may make monetary sense but it doesn't make any artistic sense.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, certainly, I think of the Italian influence as having a lot to do in the early phases of American studio glass movement with the back-and-forth between Chihuly, for example, or *Dick* Marquis and the influence of [Venini glass —WC]; I think we call it — [inaudible]. So there has certainly been some back and forth there in recent — fairly recent — glass history. But do you see that happening again more now?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think that Chihuly has kind of taken the Italian techniques and made them his own, or at least his possession, with the people he works with. Dick Marquis is wonderful; wonderful in that he really is able to take those techniques and make them uniquely his and uniquely Western or American.

But there are a lot of students out there now who want to be like Lino Tagliapietra and they want to do the same overlays and they do the same kinds of forms. And there is a reason for that as far as skills, but there also is a kind of deception about that, that I think is probably not healthy.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. Is that a fairly recent development?

MR. CARLSON: No, I think it's happened over the last 15 years or so. As young glassblowers have gotten better, and as Lino has been around more and more, and as the market is obviously very powerful where he's involved. So there's a business sense that maybe is what is driving it.

MS. RIEDEL: When you think of your work, do you think of it as particularly American or as part of an international tradition?

MR. CARLSON: Well, I think it's an international tradition in that we're trying hard to push the envelope of what happens. And I think that that's probably the case.

I'm still — if you want to categorize my work, I would still be a formalist. I'd be a modernist in many respects. I may push certain things but I would fall into an aesthetic that is familiar. And I think that in that case, probably most glass people are in the same boat. I don't think there's the unexpected happening in a grand way, although hopefully we're moving things ahead. So that, I think, is international.

And if you look at the exhibitions, of which there were — used to be more than there are now. I guess the finances of things in museums make it tougher but there used to be international exhibitions, like in Hokkaido, in Japan, there were three or four years of those. And I was a part of one of the early exhibitions.

But those were really surveys that allowed us to see the international scope of what was going on with glass. And unfortunately — and that doesn't seem to happen as much. There are some — there was a Kanazawa Japanese exhibition that happens periodically.

And there are some other events that happen. But it doesn't seem like they're happening with the same frequency. So that international connection, that kind of community of being in a show with somebody from

Japan or from Australia, Germany, just may not be as frequent an opportunity.

MS. RIEDEL: How regular is the exhibition in France that you've partaken in the past?

MR. CARLSON: That's at a gallery and that's invitational pieces. It's every year. And that's a very good chance to have things seen in France.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that looks great. What's the name of the gallery?

MR. CARLSON: Biot is the name of the town — B-I-O-T. And it's called the Verriales.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, [affirmative] that's it.

When you weren't teaching and when you weren't making your own work, you've been involved with quite a few national glass and craft organizations. I'm thinking of GAS, I think, in the early and the mid-'80s and then the Renwick and the American Craft Council. How has that — why were you drawn to each of those in particular and how effective do you think they were?

MR. CARLSON: How effective was I, maybe. They may have been effective; I wonder how effective I am in that format. I don't think of myself necessarily as working ideally in that way.

MS. RIEDEL: No, you said you don't think of yourself as an administrator.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, so I think I can be a contributor, and in that way, I've been helpful. I don't know that I've been pivotal in the changes that may have taken place, but I feel like I might have enough experience and enough of that experience is informed by both the educational and the career work. So I feel like I have something to offer.

So with GAS, it was in the '80s, it was a time when the organization was just growing. Really, it didn't have much in the way of a support staff. So the president kind of did everything.

MS. RIEDEL: That was you.

MR. CARLSON: And it was a tough time. Yes, it was a tough time to be president. And as things have changed, I think it's the maturity of the organization, the size of it, and the way things are run have really gotten much better.

But I enjoyed being a part of it because we really could chart the exposure of new people. We could set up things that were going to be unique for students. We could have keynote addresses by people who had information that wasn't always the most familiar. It wasn't always show-and-tell in what kind of glass you do. But it became a much more literary or intellectual pursuit of some of the lectures that would challenge and inform the audience. So that was great to be a part of that, and GAS has gone on to do a very good job of that.

I haven't been as involved with GAS recently as I should be. It just seems like there are too many things. But I need to get back and involved with that.

MS. RIEDEL: You've been on the board of the directors of the American Craft Council most recently, yes?

MR. CARLSON: Yes, and that was good for a few years. The Craft Council seemed to be going through changes. It was after the museum had split. The American Craft Council still was trying to pursue its educational mission and trying to put together conferences and trying to define the things that it always seems to discuss; the "how does this thing called craft" — how does it exist in the 21st century, how does it exist given all the other things that are competing and informing our members and our audience and our creators?

And the progress was slow, I'd have to say. Financially, it seemed like they were trying hard to still make the ACC fairs be probably the main source of income. And I think the ACC fairs were changing. So the wholesale market, the urgency for these objects that had been quite — that the artists were making — there was some doubt as far as how all of this was playing out.

MS. RIEDEL: So the ACC fairs must have really changed in character as galleries have developed.

MR. CARLSON: Right, yes. Galleries are developed and the idea that some of the shops and things would get the things from the ACC fairs may go to things that are done offshore.

There's an awful lot of things that are imported, from Japan, from China, from Europe, from — as far as glass, from all of the — in the Soviet bloc, former Soviet bloc; from Poland, from the Czech Republic, from Romania. An awful lot of things are made there. And some of it is just factory stuff that is tableware. But there are some

things that really push the envelope of aesthetics. So you're being inundated with things that are made in a better way and designed with a little more expertise.

So I think that the ACC fairs hopefully will still continue to be a good source for stability for that group of artists. But it is, I think, kind of evolving to a point where I don't know how will those institutions still exist in 10 years.

And then the other discussion that was ongoing is, you know, who is a craft artist? That's a tail that we keep chasing all the time. And my definition may be different from others; may be different from the board as a whole; or maybe we would agree. But there didn't seem to be agreement. It always seemed to be that we were trying very hard to recruit a consensus of people who were the members and trying to get a momentum going that — maybe it's started now because they're onto their second seminar or conference. I'm not going to go to that conference. I went to the last one. And it seemed like there's still a lot of mixed signals. And there probably will be and there probably should be.

You know, the one thought was that, years ago, the American Craft Council put on an exhibition called *Young Americans*. And if they were to do that again, that may be one way to jumpstart both involving younger people and to make sure that there is a venue and an opportunity for this thing to be seen so it has national impact.

If you go online, if you kind of do things over the Internet, that really doesn't have — doesn't build a sense of community, as I see it. And the American Craft Council, in whatever interpretation you want for that name, that title, doesn't have that kind of momentum at this point.

Although, if I think historically, when the American Craft Museum was in the old building, there was always a good bit of work to be seen. And when the American Craft Museum moved across the street from the Museum of Modern Art, initially, there were great things with the *Poetry of the Physical* exhibition. And Paul Smith was the director at that point. With the breakup of the American Craft Museum and its change to the Museum of Arts and Design, I don't think there's necessarily a bad thing there; I don't necessarily —

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think it's necessarily a good thing?

MR. CARLSON: I think it probably is eventually going to be good. But I don't know that the American Craft Council — where it will fit into it. The museum, I think, will hopefully prosper.

And the idea of the word "craft" being eliminated is something that I'm — I don't think it's necessary, but I think it's probably the right direction, given the mentality and the intellectual aspirations of what we do with materials, and what we make. It just no longer is about making the things that fulfilled the necessities of the life, to be lived. It ends up being about objects that are somehow the other expectations of life, that are beyond our essential tools.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, I think of the foreword of the *Objects: USA* exhibition — the foreword essay that talked about choosing that word "object" specifically, because that seemed the right way to approach the conversation and to approach these new objects, as what exactly were they and where did they fit? What range did they cover? Do you have a definition of a craft artist?

MR. CARLSON: You know, I use craft as the means to an end, okay? So it's the verb of "make." And some things are objects. Some things may become sculpture or art. I don't know that I — I use the word "art" kind of sparingly. People use it pretty indiscriminately, a lot of times. And I think that it's a pretty special accomplishment when something really can make that leap to be art. And a lot of my stuff wouldn't make it. But I think my things are always well-crafted, and they are certainly objects. But to call them "craft" doesn't seem a full explanation for what's there.

And I think that Lee Nordness and Paul Smith were very insightful to use the word "objects." And you know, they kind of set the expectation there that we aren't going to have a word that somehow will be categorized the wrong way, but we're going to have a word that gives some ability for the viewer to be objective in viewing the work and making their own judgment. Because "objects" is kind of a neutral word. And it gives the audience the opportunity to interpret.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

Where next for your work from here?

MR. CARLSON: Well, we talked about that before and I'm still working on some of these language pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have a new commission here in Miami — is that right — for this year, 2009 — the language wall?

MR. CARLSON: Oh, well, I'm going to do a language wall that will be — it's for an exhibition at the Lowe Art

Museum. So I'll have a gallery space and I'll bring in some of the older work and some newer work. But what I'm going to try to do is use the language, and use it in a way that will be new information for me. So I'm going to do what I was talking about before where, instead of having the object — instead of having the physical presence — I'm going to have a situation where I can use a projector with some video footage, and some of the language will be involved with that — with interruptions in that light, interruptions in that image.

So that I can build sculptural space, but not with physical weight, but with, you know, probably some bells and whistles, maybe, or some things that are reflective, some things that are going to allow me to build a construction. So before, I was talking about artists like, oh, who was I talking about? I was talking about Kara Walker's — the ephemeral nature of her work. I don't want to do work like that, but I just appreciate the stuff as happening with the orchestration of a context — that context is controlled by light and other things.

But there's no physical object to carry away. There are components to the piece. William Kentridge is a South African artist. And again, if I want to think of influences, I think I'm impressed by good art, and I don't think it always makes any sense in trying to relate why I do what I do. But William Kentridge does just some wonderful little projection pieces. And they're little because, I think, they're all drawings, you know. And the drawings will change, and he erases and he draws on them some more.

So I don't want to do that, but I do want to think about his way of projecting and his immediate way of working. So maybe I should do drawings and video. And these drawings might be about the letters that I'm going to do. And somehow — there'll be a big leap from what Kentridge does to how I'll interpret those things. But that wouldn't be a bad place for me to start out and start to think about the text and the way that I apply it to my current pieces, and how I might make it even, kind of, a little bit more of a momentary event as other things are happening.

So again, with working with students over the years — and I guess, maybe, I mentioned this before — but there's lots of things that, when I look at student work and critique it, and other artists, there's kind of an accumulation of what seem to be nifty ideas. And I'm ready for some of those things to allow me to break loose from the kind of linear way that my work has gone. So I'm ready for a little more organic kind of impulse stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Does the work often start with drawings?

MR. CARLSON: It always starts with drawings. Now, my drawings aren't very good. And they're more or less just, kind of, working drawings. But they give me a reference point. And then there's still quite a distance between what is drawn and then what ends up. But there's always drawings. Now, those drawings are really just kind of problem solving and thinking through the things that are in play. And to look at the drawings, it would not be a great explanation for what's about to happen. But they are really important.

Sometimes — and I find out I don't multitask as well as I used to — but I really need to sit down and have time just to think in a room where there's quiet. I used to be able to think on the fly or think as I was driving. And so now, I'm a better driver, probably, but — I'm trying to think about the road — but I'm also — I just need to have some focused time.

This summer, I'm going to go back up to this Berkshire place and try to work on finishing certain things. But I want to make sure I give myself time just to not be within earshot of either the equipment that I'm used to or the expectations of the studio, and think that that might be very productive time.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And it's probably been a long time since you had that kind of empty time, open time.

MR. CARLSON: It really has been, yes. But if I go up there and I'm able to do some drawings and maybe just work with some little things, it will be, I think, refreshing. So I'll look forward to coming back down to the studio and making things here, but to have a month up there — at least a couple weeks — without doing drywall, which is what I've had to do now. But once the drywall is finished, then I'll have a chance to pull these loose ends together and see if I'm blowing smoke or if there's actually something that will occur.

MS. RIEDEL: So is that a plan or a hope for the next few years as you begin this transition — part of the time here in Miami and then part of the time in the Berkshires, too?

MR. CARLSON: I think that would be healthy, yes. I've really never taken summers off. I've kind of jumped in. And as a faculty member, I look at the summer as the best time, because some students are around, yes, but a lot of them are gone. And it's a time when I can really possess the university studio that sometimes is at their disposal, and I can work without any interruption.

So that's the luxury of the university and the luxury of this kind of job — day job. When school starts again, no matter how clever I think I am in scheduling my time, there's always a mess to clean up or fire or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we're doing a pretty good job of covering the ground here that we need to cover. A final question, I think, involves community, and if you think —

MR. CARLSON: Yes, we talked a little bit about GAS.

MS. RIEDEL: Briefly, but yes. Community has been important, in particular, to your own work.

MR. CARLSON: Well, my community has been very important. In Illinois, there was a good, strong peer group of faculty members, who were competing, but, for the most part, very helpful. So the support system from the university was strong. Even though my departure was kind of because I wanted a change, there had been a lot of very good things along the way that had made that position and made the time there productive and really meaningful.

And I think it had been a good time for my family. The university is obviously the day job, but the university community has been good for my kids and my wife. And my wife taught ceramics at the university for 21 years, it turns out.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, too, that your son, Oscar, is studying architecture, given the whole conversation that we had.

MR. CARLSON: Right. We didn't force him into that. [Laughs.] There was some talk we might have. But I've had quite an important support system with my wife, who's not always eager to help with other things, but she certainly has helped and made a lot of things happen that I probably would have been neglecting. So she's been wonderful in that way, and to the point where, taking care of the family, she sacrificed some of her career interests. But that was her choice. And the whole idea of a community like that is very good, and I think very important.

Now, in Miami, I don't quite have the same community — a bigger location, a city that spreads out and faculty who live in all sorts of different places. So there's something to be said for that smaller town — that Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. The kind of collective that's there, with lots of resources and lots of really, really smart people, and the ability to draw from the resources of the university were a really important part of the community and my evolution.

And we'll see how the Berkshires work. Though again, it's going to be a while before we get there, but hopefully, by the time we move that direction, we'll make some connections. The Berkshires are full of clever people who are creative, and we'll whether I can connect with them or whether I'm going to be a little recluse on the top of the hill — it could happen.

MS. RIEDEL: But you also said it's sort of ideally positioned midway between Dia: Beacon and MASS MoCA.

MR. CARLSON: Yes, two hours from New York and two hours — a little over that — to Boston. That's pretty important. I decided, certainly after living in Miami, that I'm not in need of a city for constant, daily life, but I certainly like to be near those places. So if I can be a rural guy and kind of make my way down to the big city once in a while to see the buildings and, you know, look like the tourists, I'll be a happy puppy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Well, I think that's —

MR. CARLSON: Happy puppy is the end?

MS. RIEDEL: Happy puppy sounds like a good place to end. Thanks very much.

MR. CARLSON: All righty.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]