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Oral history interview with Jon Eric Riis, 2009 June 27 and 28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jon Eric Riis on 2009 June 27 and 28. The interview took place at Riis's home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia , 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.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, with Jon Eric Riis at the artist's home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia on June 27, 2009, disc number one. Good morning.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, good morning. Nice to see you again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Nice to see you again, too, in your fabulous home here. We'll have to talk about this, I think ,at some point, too, because what you've managed to create here is just extraordinary.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you're just back from Korea, so we thought we'd start off talking about your solo exhibition, which just opens this month.

JON ERIC RIIS: It opened this month on the fifth of June.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary. And this is your first international solo exhibition, correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: Correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did this come about?

JON ERIC RIIS: This came about because of the connection in New York City. Ms. Young-Yang founded this museum in Seoul with the women's university and wanted to introduce the Korean audience to tapestry work, which is something they don't have a history [of] in their own culture. It's primarily embroidery and appliqué work that people are familiar with. So this was a good opportunity and just the most beautiful space I have encountered for an exhibition so far.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: So very, very well done.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about it was so—?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, everything was so controlled, behind glass. And that series, when you walk upon a piece, the lighting goes into effect, and that's very important for textiles.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: And this is going to be there for a two-month period, so you don't want bright lights shining on everything for that period of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

JON ERIC RIIS: So it was very, very controlled.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting. Very high-tech, it sounds like.

JON ERIC RIIS: Very high-tech, and I was amazed at other museums that I visited were extremely high-tech as well—very, very nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting too, as you were saying, that Korea doesn't have a history of tapestry, and you would know, because you've spent so many years collecting and dealing in textiles, in particular Asian textiles, yes? And that's how you first met this director—is that correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: Being a dealer in Asian textiles, she supported me in a number of ways, purchasing work for this museum. It's been a give-and-take and it's been a good experience thus far.

MIJA RIEDEL: This wasn't so much a retrospective; it was more contemporary work.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. The gallery was quite large and I was a little concerned about acquiring work, borrowing work from different museums, which was a little bit of a hassle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: So it was best that I concentrated on work that I could get my hands on through friends and things of this nature.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's primarily the Icarus series or the work from Tibet? Is that it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I had gone to Tibet three years ago and did a body of work, and the show was primarily Tibetan-inspired, but then I had number of large tapestries that, fortunately, I had here in the studio that filled a lot of space. So that was important, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: It must have been wonderful to see them all together.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was a nice feeling when I went through and gave lectures to, I don't know, hundreds of students that were there from different women's universities.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the name of the university?

JON ERIC RIIS: Sookmyung University [Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul, South Korea], and there were other women's universities that I had the pleasure of lecturing to in their lecture halls; it was well-attended.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's the response in a culture that doesn't have a history of tapestry? How did they respond?

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know—they were very, very supportive. In that regard, I probably needed to be there a bit longer. It was only a 10-day period for me, but the exhibition will be up for two and a half months and then it's traveling to another university in the southern portion of South Korea.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: That will only be there for a week.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

JON ERIC RIIS: A very short period of time. And they're also producing a separate catalog for that venue.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Which was a surprise.

MIJA RIEDEL: And any plans to travel that nationally?

JON ERIC RIIS: When it gets back to the States there is a possibility in San Antonio, Texas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: But I'll have to wait and see what develops here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, we've oriented ourselves in the present, I think, pretty well. Well actually, what are you working on right now?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right now I'm working on a series of anatomical tapes, little tapestry tapes, one and an inch wide by very, very—meters in length, and cutting these up and creating tapestries.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's really different, all right.

JON ERIC RIIS: You haven't seen these yet but I had two in the exhibition in Seoul and I've also applied horsehair to these tapes. So they're very textural and that's my new direction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do they have a historical precedent?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it's interesting that in Korea, they do have a history of using horsehair for their men's hats in the 19th century and a few other textiles, which—felting is another area where they use horsehair, for archers' hats, again, from the 19th century. So that intrigued me. I was trying to do research on horsehair while I was in Korea and that's really kind of a dead issue now. Nobody is pursuing this and that's a shame.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I talked with Dominique DiMare and he had some interesting things to say about horsehair.

JON ERIC RIIS: Beautiful material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. That long, thin format, though, is a complete departure for you, isn't it?

JON ERIC RIIS: It is. I have a series of mannequins—125 of these that are just waiting for me to do something, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Actual mannequins?

JON ERIC RIIS: Actual mannequins—small, based on a 19th-century mannequin I purchased in Boston a number of years ago and had these reproduced, and now I'm ready to embellish these little people—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: —with something. Tapes lend themselves to this endeavor. [I] went to Egypt last year and, again, looking at mummy wrappings just to firm my thoughts on these tapes. Something is going to happen here.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be the first time I can think of that you've used such a three-dimensional figure since the *Baby Jane* piece way back.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right, and Babes in Arms, another three-dimensional piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

JON ERIC RIIS: So I'm excited about producing these tapes and going on from that point of departure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes, that sounds really interesting and definitely a point of departure—so three-dimensional. And are they fairly monochromatic? Are they very colorful?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, right now the tapes are extremely colorful but that may change. I'm not sure how I'm going to get into this, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: And are they very patterned, are they very—

JON ERIC RIIS: Extremely patterned. Extremely patterned.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't wait to see those. That sounds very interesting.

Okay, let's jump back to the beginning and then we'll catch up to ourselves.

JON ERIC RIIS: Okay. Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just get some basic biographical information covered here. You were born in Park Ridge, Illinois?

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, in 1945?

JON ERIC RIIS: So long ago, that's right. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: August fifteenth. What were your parents' names? What did they do? I want to get a little background on your childhood experiences.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think one of the most important facts is I had a grandfather who owned an art studio on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, who, unfortunately, died in 1945, when I was born, but all of his materials—papers, artwork—have certainly influenced me. My grandmother would just have reams of colored paper and pencils, and it was just a place to go and explore. You know, I would go visit her and, yes, it was nice. And I had an uncle, too, that was an artist, so that certainly helped. And my parents were supportive.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were your grandfathers' names—your grandfather and your uncle?

JON ERIC RIIS: Carl Riis came over from Oslo, Norway. And then on my mother's side of the family, her mother was a weaver.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: She grew up on a farm in northern Sweden.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. What was her name?

JON ERIC RIIS: Her name was Anna Niebloom—and which was nice, I have a lot of the old weaving equipment that she was brought up with.

MIJA RIEDEL: From your grandmother?

JON ERIC RIIS: From my grandmother, uh-huh [affirmative], shuttles and—yes, I have—

MIJA RIEDEL: You have it downstairs in you studio?

JON ERIC RIIS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], I do. Uh-huh [affirmative], hackles and things of this nature.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did you meet that grandmother ever?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure. Oh, sure, sure..

MIJA RIEDEL: And would you describe that? Did you see her weaving?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, no, I never saw her weaving but we did see materials that she had made

as a child, all the linen bedcovers and such.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, really?

JON ERIC RIIS: And I've been collecting Scandinavian textiles when I can find them in this country.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that's a bit of an influence, I'm sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely, and your grandfather, the one who had the studio on Michigan Avenue—what sort of work did he make?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I can show you later but there are a series of sketches in the bathroom here that he did around 1911, and he was also from the Art Institute in Chicago. I don't know if he took courses there or what that story is, but he did attend classes there. And my mother went to Saturday school at the Art Institute in Chicago as a youngster, so that all helped.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, absolutely. What was your mom's name?

JON ERIC RIIS: Lillian. She's living in Clearwater, Florida.

MIJA RIEDEL: And your father?

JON ERIC RIIS: My father is deceased, and he was an electrical engineer. Non-art. Non-art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, that's interesting too. What was his name?

JON ERIC RIIS: Robert.

MIJA RIEDEL: —though very precise.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, he was. That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: Robert.

JON ERIC RIIS: And supportive, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it all worked out, except my grandparents were very disillusioned that their grandson would go into the world of fibers. They couldn't understand how anyone could make a living back in the '60s.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this was—even though your—had your grandfather made a living as an artist?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, yes, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and was he primarily drawing or was he painting?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, probably you would look at it today and say an advertising agency, but it was, at that time, a lot of art was produced for the industry through his office.

MIJA RIEDEL: Graphic design sorts of things?

JON ERIC RIIS: Graphic design, yes, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And for big—Marshall Field's kind of businesses?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, again, I don't—I have to do more research here. But beautiful, very classical work, and he did oil painting as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: All representational, figurative, landscape—

JON ERIC RIIS: All representational. Yes, figurative.

MIJA RIEDEL: Landscape. That is interesting. So you never met him but you—

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I never—

MIJA RIEDEL: —had access to his studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was kept intact.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, early on, and then—oh, I must have been five or six and then that shut down, so I don't really remember that too well, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it special going there? Was there something—do you have memories of being in that space and of being—

MIJA RIEDEL: —or was it just another spot?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, when you're a small kid going to the Loop in Chicago, it was overwhelming—the amount of activity, and growing up in one of the suburban areas, which was pretty quiet, it was a nice outing. And if we went down to the studio, we'd go to the Field Museum, and I've spent many wonderful memories going through their collections, and I especially remember the Tibetan collection way back when, just being spellbound by all of these skeletons and costumes that they use in their theatrical productions. I always loved going and seeing those. And it's funny; that stays with you all your life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: So I'm still intrigued by the subject matter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you have siblings as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: I had three brothers, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Three brothers.

JON ERIC RIIS: None of them are in the arts whatsoever, and one brother, the youngest brother, passed away three years ago from lung cancer.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm sorry to hear that. None of them went into the arts, though?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, growing up, did you take classes, art classes? Were there art classes in elementary school or junior high, high school?

JON ERIC RIIS: All along I remember—I definitely remember kindergarten and being introduced to tempera painting and doing one robin and the sunburst over and over and over again.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: That has remained with me, all right. Yep, lots of robins.

MIJA RIEDEL: Robins and sunbursts. So really, from the time you were very small?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, I remember—yes, I remember that distinctly.

MIJA RIEDEL: So were you drawing yourself, painting?

JON ERIC RIIS: I was painting, and then I remember, oh, a little bit older, being intrigued with unraveling fabric, for some unknown reason, just the structure. And I don't know, that must have played a part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Yes, that is unusual. What did you unravel?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think it was a—just a little round disk that was in plain weave, and just looking at the structure and getting intrigued with this, and then—I don't know; I would have

been an anthropologist if—that would have played a part too. It all tied together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. That makes a lot of sense.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was always an interest of mine.

MIJA RIEDEL: So through junior high and high school, were you becoming increasingly—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, and the art classes—what, we had an art club and a president of that and float-building—

MIJA RIEDEL: You were the president of that?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, all of the stuff that you do in high school.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you describe it a little bit? Because everyone's different.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it was a lot of fun because you would get together and have these meetings and build these floats and spend weeks painting napkins and such—and chicken wire, and dreaming up these ideas for homecoming floats. Yes, it was a good time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And primarily sculptural?—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, sculptural.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you do banners as well too?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, no, these were three-dimensional structures that would be on a float—you know, floats, wheels underneath.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. What sort of image—or do you remember? Was it all related to baseball and football?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, all football, and I don't remember really what structures we were doing, but just trying to get everyone there to work was a big to-do; [we were] upset if they don't show up and do their task.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] How far is Park Ridge from Chicago?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it's about a 40-minute drive on the train. It's just [a] northwest suburb. Very convenient.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were you in the Art Institute or the Field Museum frequently?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, when I finally applied to the Art Institute in Chicago after high school, I was going to go into advertising. And that didn't—that just didn't happen, [I took] an introductory course for six weeks in sculpture, photography, weaving and such, and the weaving kind of grabbed me.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you choose the Art Institute?

JON ERIC RIIS: You know, wanting to go into art, that's what happened.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was clear to you from the start—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, by the time I was a senior it was clear to me, or a junior. That's really want I wanted to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why did you make the choice to go into art rather than, say, something like anthropology?

JON ERIC RIIS: You know, I don't know. Anthropology would have been all right but I didn't do that. I have done both. So that's okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there materials you remember working with as a child that you liked? Were you particularly keen on sketching or painting? Did you like to build things?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, now it is coming back to me. Yes, I had a neighbor, Bruce [ph], that—we

would go and get cardboard boxes and we would make popcorn machines, or popcorn vending machines and all kinds of contraptions, paint them in little cubicles where the popcorn would be stored. And, you know, that was fun, spraying these things with spray paint.

MIJA RIEDEL: And very three-dimensional.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, very three-dimensional.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, we had a good time doing these things.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you decided early on that you were going to go to the art—or that you wanted to go into the arts and your parents were totally supportive of that.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I think they were happy—this kid had a direction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's unusual, I think, for parents to be thrilled about [their kid] going to art school.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, at that time it was a different world, though, and I never really worried about where I was going. I mean, teaching kind of was probably in the back of my mind but [I] never really thought much about what I'm going to do when I get out of art school.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: Just kind of directed me into that course of study.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what moved you from the direction of advertising to studio art?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think the hands-on—and this orientation course where I took fibers with Else Regensteiner. She kind of left me alone and gave me a project at the Field Museum looking at Mexican sashes and Mexican textiles. And I think that's what got me excited, going back and doing work that was reminiscent of what I saw at the Field Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: So was the assignment to go look for something that would inspire a project on your own?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that's correct. And she always left me alone. As I developed in her course work, other students were getting theory and doing pattern weaving and, you know, more geared for industry perhaps, and I wasn't that type. So she kind of let me pursue my own—pre-Columbian . In one way that was good and in one way it wasn't so good because my structural background wasn't so dramatic by the time I went to Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI].

MIJA RIEDEL: And so, undergraduate, did you major in weaving?

JON ERIC RIIS: I majored in—I got a bachelor of fine arts, and also art education was another aspect which I went into. I did do practice teaching in the Park Ridge school system and enjoyed that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who else was teaching at the Art Institute then? Anybody else that you were studying with who was influential?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I remember Whitney Halstead was a very terrific art historian that I remember—very, very strong in primitive art, and that certainly related to that.

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: —and I had a very dramatic instructor in fabric design—or " flat pattern" is what they called it back then—Grace Earl, who was very—just a wonderful person. I was one of the students—kind of the student monitor in the class. She finally moved to San Francisco,

and we had kept in contact for years. She eventually passed away, but she was a very strong, dynamic instructor.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was flat pattern?

JON ERIC RIIS: Flat pattern, it was just dealing with two-dimensional work, and I remember doing this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Abstract?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it was abstract, yes, and doing these patterns, and I actually won a contest designing girdle motifs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Girdles? [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Girdles, of all things, yes. I can't imagine that today but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's funny.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yep.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you made numerous trips to the Field Museum too, as well as the Art Institute. Is that correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think I practically grew up there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And the pre-Columbian collection—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, pre-Columbian—very, very strong collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was it about that collection, or what was it about the Mexican or the pre-Columbian and Tibetan—and we've talked a little bit about the skeletons and the things that—what is it about the collections that are so—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it's just such a rich—I remember Else Regensteiner had taken a group of individuals to Peru while I was a student, and I did not go but she came back with all this fabulous hand-spun yarn, and that certainly influenced me; the strip, slick-weaving techniques and the different patterns and the structures—so complex but yet something I could understand in my way of thinking. So it was a nice combination. I'm still intrigued with Peruvian textiles.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems there's often a narrative—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, certainly, certainly. Yes, the imagery was important, and a very rich culture that is in their textiles.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, it seems that there's an interesting cultural identity often in those textiles. I mean, is that something you were thinking about early on in terms of personal identity, cultural history, mythological references?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I'm sure the mythological, yes, and kind of delving back into another culture and reliving what they were going through, as far as pulling out from that culture into my own contemporary world was important, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were you pulling out? When you said pulling out—could you elaborate?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, now it's certainly different issues—political issues that I'm interested in, but the techniques just lend themselves—turning these into such a graphic point of departure is something I like.

I know that my work could be painted or get the same things across, but somehow that tactile—putting together thread after thread after thread, this whole layered effect—is something that still intrigues me.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it sounds like the process itself—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the process—it's that whole process of repetition that I must be intrigued with. I can sit there for hours and work on something and not get bored—mind

wandering around here and there, but it's good thought-process time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And as you're working, are you making decisions as you're working?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, yes—but it's pretty much planned out in my mind. I don't much deviate once I get started on something, such as the Icarus series. You really need a cartoon if you're doing something very representational and photorealism, you really can't monkey around too much and get carried away. Otherwise you may end up with club feet or something like that. You have to pay attention.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, so there's quite extensive work that goes into it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, there is, a lot of planning and then dyeing of all the yarn, and that's something that, in the past, when I was using silk, [I] paid a lot of attention to this, getting the nuances of color, but now I'm using metallic thread, and that's a little different story. I'm able to purchase what I need with a beautiful range of color and do a lot of color blending because the threads are so fine. You can put many, many threads together and form your colors in this way, little packets of various threads.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting; I was talking to Ferne Jacobs a few years ago and she was talking about using very, very fine—I think it was four-ply flaps. And she would actually separate those four plies and then reassemble them in multiple colors in a single strand.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, well, I do the same thing—very, very similar.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you actually take apart the strands?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, because the threads are so thin, I can put many, many strands together.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you'll just layer them side by side very closely—

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. I don't have to twist them. It's like sewing thread.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. And how did you get started with the metallics?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, metallic thread, I went to a metals workshop that the Met was doing in New York—

MIJA RIEDEL: The museum.

JON ERIC RIIS: The museum, and somebody asked, where do you get metallic thread? And they mentioned Tinsel Trading Company in Manhattan, and I immediately made a beeline to that firm back in the early '70s, and—just overwhelmed with all of this antique metallic threads, primarily from France. And I started using that source, and that changed my life ever since.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. When was that workshop?

JON ERIC RIIS: That was in the—probably '72 or '3.

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was teaching that?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, this was through the Metal Goldsmith, where they have conventions every two years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths]?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, and I was fortunate enough to be there, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that was fortuitous.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's really interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I think there weren't many weavers that were taking part of this, so that was a good thing. The only ill effect is that many of these threads tarnish, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, and is there a way to preserve—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, now I'm using threads that have a poly—not a polypropylene but they're coated with material where they won't tarnish.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it hard to find them too, since they were antique? Were there many—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, you had to buy—I mean, otherwise, if you didn't buy the right amount, you were out of luck if you needed this again, so you had to kind of stick with what they had and buy up what they had.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was a good—it was a good time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, right before this—we're talking '72—you had a Fulbright [grant] after you graduated from—

JON ERIC RIIS: From the Art Institute in—I mean from Cranbrook.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, no, that was after Cranbrook.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So let's talk a little bit about Cranbrook. Did you go directly from the Art Institute to grad school?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I spent a summer at Penland School and—

MIJA RIEDEL: How did that come about and how did you decide to go?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think I applied and, believe it or not, I got the scholarship for the whole summer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic. Who was teaching?

JON ERIC RIIS: And fortunate that—Milton Sunday was not teaching but he was instrumental in my life. He was working as a curator at the Textile Museum in Washington [DC], and his knowledge, certainly in the world of pre-Columbian textiles, ikat, all of my favorite things—he had been involved with at one point or another, and he was a good friend. Ted Hallman was another individual I had studied with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was he teaching—Penland?

JON ERIC RIIS: He was teaching at Penland, yes, that summer, as well as Olga de Amaral, who was another important figure in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely—gold thread—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that's right, but at that time she wasn't using metallic threads. She was doing very small-scale work. But beautiful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Isn't that interesting, that you both have gone in that direction, that source. That's fantastic.

So would you describe that summer? Penland had been—well, it had started in the '30s so it had been going on for quite some time, but it certainly had a fabulous textiles and weaving history.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it certainly did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who were some of the other students? What sorts of things were you working on?

JON ERIC RIIS: Another student at the same time who was just getting started was Cynthia and Edwina Bringle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: The Bringle sisters. And I think we were in, that summer Edwina Bringle stayed the whole summer and wove with me, so we became good friends and have kept in contact all these years.

MIJA RIEDEL: I just saw their studio when I was in—

[Cross talk.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, you did? A nice place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, so that was very instrumental. And then years later I went on to teach a number of summers when I was teaching at Georgia State.

MIJA RIEDEL: You would teach at Penland.

JON ERIC RIIS: I would teach at Penland, and then Arrowmont as well many summers.

MIJA RIEDEL: And usually you'd teach there regularly in the summers, even after you'd stopped—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, after I stopped teaching.

MIJA RIEDEL: This seems like a good time to ask—when you think about the difference between artists that have learned their media or learned their craft in a traditional university setting, or university program, more than ones that study through an alternative source—someplace like Penland or are self-taught—do you think there's a particular difference in the kind of artist that they become, based on that sort of education? Do you see a difference between university-trained artists and—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, you mean the self-taught and getting out there?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, you get so many—that summer, so many rich experiences delving into the lives of these other fiber artists through constant contact for two or three weeks, and then slide programs and eating with these individuals and sharing all—yes, sharing all of these events—quite nice. Quite nice. I think it's an important aspect of my education. I'm glad I had that opportunity. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: What in particular do you remember as taking away with you from Penland that hadn't perhaps happened at the Art Institute?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think it opened up so many other venues, being in contact with these individuals over the years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was something very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: So connections with the other students and the teachers.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the other students and especially the teachers. I forgot to mention there was a Jon Whaling who was inspirational as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Jon Whaling?

JON ERIC RIIS: Jon Whaling from Columbus, Ohio. He also went to Cranbrook, and I met him along the way. I guess it was through Penland. And there was a woman by the name of Joyce Chow [ph] from Canada, who was also a very good teacher and a lot of fun. Mary Walker Phillips—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was Kay Sekimachi there?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, but Mary Walker introduced me to knitting and to macramé, and I knew those were two areas I was not going to pursue.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: I'm absolutely terrible at that, so I didn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not interested in the least.

JON ERIC RIIS: Not interested whatsoever. Nope.

MIJA RIEDEL: When we were speaking on the phone, you said that someone—I can't remember who—told you when you were at Penland that you didn't need to bother going to graduate school.

JON ERIC RIIS: No, and that was funny; that was Olga de Amaral, who was a graduate, I mean, she did go to Cranbrook. So she said, I don't know why you need to go there, but I'm glad I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was her thinking? Had she been to Cranbrook already?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, she had been there maybe 10 years—

MIJA RIEDEL: And so she discouraged you.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, she didn't think one needed that. Just go off and pursue what you were doing. But I'm glad I finished my course of studies there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what made you then decide to go to Cranbrook?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I had already been admitted into—

MIJA RIEDEL: Accepted.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, accepted, so that was a done deal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then, unfortunately, Glen Kaufman retired and went to the University of Georgia as I was going there because I had always admired his work. So when I got there, I had Bob Kidd as an instructor, and I wasn't familiar with his work at all, and Meda Parker Johnson, who taught surface design. So that was an interesting period of time for Cranbrook.

MIJA RIEDEL: Could you describe it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think I was pretty much on my own—

MIJA RIEDEL: Again. [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Again for those two years, and pursued my own direction here. All the other students, the same situation. None of them—not many went on to industry, and I followed a few of the folks but they all kind of petered out as far as continuing with fiber.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Gretchen Bellinger is one individual that was a year younger than I, but she certainly went on to do good things in the industry.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when you say the other students—were they also left to their own devices?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes., pretty much so.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was pretty much of a hands-off teaching style.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. There was Ken Weaver, who had worked with [Jack Lenor] Larsen prior to going to Cranbrook and he went to Atlanta and did a lot of commission work and also taught at the University of Georgia for a little while in Athens with Glen Kaufman. I kind of lost touch with him. The other folks I did meet up with are no longer in the fiber world.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was your work like at Cranbrook? What were you working on?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I was working on small-scale tapestry work, working with the idea of negative and positive relationships.

MIJA RIEDEL: Abstract? Representational?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, not representational, and not many people were doing that at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Figurative?

JON ERIC RIIS: It was figurative, being influenced by Peruvian textiles, and then getting this Fulbright to India. I had done some ikat work in the past, and that was really what I was going to India to pursue, was the interest of ikats.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, this was 1970.

JON ERIC RIIS: This was 1969, when I graduated from Cranbrook and then went on to India.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where did you go in India?

JON ERIC RIIS: I went to Viswa-Bharati University in West Bengal. This was [in] Santiniketan. And when I arrived, I remember they didn't know who I was. There was absolutely no housing, nothing. So I found my instructor—

MIJA RIEDEL: Had this supposedly been set up for you?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I mean, the Fulbright people, I don't know what they did there, but they didn't do enough work as far as my arrival situation. I got there and I went to the village and found a little house.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What was the name of the village, do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: This was Santiniketan. And about a mile-and-a-half from this rural university area there was a little butcher shop that I could rent, and [I] got light bulbs in and got the electricity turned on, and there I was, wondering what am I doing here?

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was it about this part of India or this particular area or village or university?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I had to be affiliated with a university—and Tagore [ph]. I mean, this was a terrific arts community—especially for dance and theater. The visual arts not as much, and certainly weaving was another aspect here. And when I walked into the weaving studio, somebody must have been there maybe five years back and had introduced Swedish countermarch looms. So it was just like walking into a studio at Cranbrook. And I thought, this is not what I want to do, work on the same equipment I have worked on before.

And I told the instructor about this double ikat quest of mine, so it was arranged that I was going to do a lot of traveling. And then I decided also to study indigenous tribal textiles from Nagaland and different tribal groups in Orissa. I was able to get the necessary paperwork from the government to do this because these areas were restricted to foreigners.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: So that was very intriguing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were they really considered dangerous?

JON ERIC RIIS: Dangerous and a lot of political problems. These were border areas and they had problems with China and they didn't want foreigners running around there.

But I was able to do this and it was a worthwhile endeavor on my part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they have a history of double ikat there?

JON ERIC RIIS: Not with the tribal communities in East India, but over on the Western section I studied with a Salvi family who did double ikat.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what is double ikat?

JON ERIC RIIS: Double ikat is where the warp and weft—

MIJA RIEDEL: Both.

JON ERIC RIIS: —are both tie-dyed and mesh up and form this rich design once it's rolled.—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's fairly rare?

JON ERIC RIIS: Rare, yes. There aren't many cultures—in Bali you find this in the patola weavings in Gujarat. And when I was there, it was kind of a down period for patola weaving. The fellows had practically closed the studio; they were auto mechanics for the most part, and then when they got an order, they would go into the studio and work on these double ikat saris.

But I think today it's a different story. I think it's become a prestige item and they're busy working again.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's coming back.

JON ERIC RIIS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's great.

JON ERIC RIIS: Extremely expensive but still beautifully done.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it sounds like the main strength of this double ikat was an incredible amount of control and precision in the imagery.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, very much so. I mean, you don't deviate from traditional patterns—quite exciting to see this.

MIJA RIEDEL: So they were using it, but only for traditional patterns. There wasn't a lot of innovation going on?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, no, no. No, not at that time.

The All India Handicrafts Boards were a different story. They would take artists and give them a space and they would try to update and do innovative design motifs with given techniques, so that was good source of inspiration.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how did this [Salvi] family respond to you? Were you welcomed?—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I was welcome. They were the nicest people, absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they think it was a little odd that here you were—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, probably.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they want to teach you automotive mechanics?

JON ERIC RIIS: And they were so religious. You know, it really was—it really was a good experience.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how long were you there?

JON ERIC RIIS: I was probably with them for about a month—and then traveling back and forth.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they were completely happy to show you exactly what they did and how they did it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure, sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's very generous.

JON ERIC RIIS: They were very generous. And I did do one little study example while I was in India, the double ikat, and the Art Institute in Chicago has that in their collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting. Nice full circle.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then, moving across the country to the tribal areas, what were you looking at there and what was that experience like?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, you know, it was also the intrigue going back to this anthropological background of wishing I had gone into—there I was with these folks that in many cases hadn't seen Westerners before and just delving into their traditional weaving techniques—backstrap weaving—and even in some cases much more primitive weaving that you found with the Banda people in Orissa.

They would weave these small textiles that were about 12 inches by 24 inches, and these were little napkins that the women would wear around their waists, and you could depict what village they were from by the stripe arrangement in their textile.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So from there—

JON ERIC RIIS: And they primarily tried to dissuade foreigners, certainly, from visiting this area because the women were topless and the men were—when they had too much to drink, tempers got the best of them. So it was an area you had to be a little aware of what the potential problems were.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they speak English?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, not at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you communicate?

JON ERIC RIIS: You had the Upper Banda and the Lower Banda tribal groups, and the upper Banda still had their traditional garments and the lower folks had been introduced more into Western ways, and there were teachers that I would find in the Upper Banda area and they were helpful in helping me around and knowing English and the Banda language, so it all worked out fairly well.

MIJA RIEDEL: What sort of things were they weaving?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, they were only weaving these small skirts, and I'll be happy to show you these, but the structure—they only had a small period of time during a year when they were able to weave these things, when the farming was all complete and they devoted their time to weaving these skirts.

MIJA RIEDEL: And both men and women were weavers?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, just strictly the women.

All handspun. I'm not so sure about the vegetable-dyed aspect. Some of these cotton yarns were traded in from different vendors. But striking people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they make their own yarn as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: They made their own warp.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, they did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And it was primarily cotton or wool, silk?

JON ERIC RIIS: A bass fiber.

MIJA RIEDEL: What is that?

JON ERIC RIIS: A tree material that they would shred and then spin.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fascinating.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was. And I wonder if these people are still in existence today—because a road was going through when I was there back in the, well, '70s—so I don't know. Probably a superhighway going through.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So you spent part of the time in the tribal area and part of the time with the family learning double-weave ikat.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the ikat idea was also in Orissa, the same state where the Banda folks were, and that was only warp or weft ikat, not so much double ikat. So I also tried my hand at this too.

So when I did get back from India, I gave numerous workshops around the country on ikat, different convention sites within the handicraft guilds and [at] Penland, Arrowmont, and pursued this for a little while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were you up at Haystack as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Haystack was only about three years ago; I taught there one summer, and that was small-scale tapestry—a little different approach, but metallic thread and [I] certainly enjoyed that experience.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you worked in other media besides weaving? Is there anything else that's ever held your attention?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think it's always been fiber.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sounds that way.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, also working in Central America, working for the Merchandise Mart here in Atlanta, trying to elevate gift items that were being imported into the States from Central America, and that was all, oh, ceramic, basketry, textiles, leather. So there have been some other areas I was instrumental in helping design.

MIJA RIEDEL: Projects and products.

JON ERIC RIIS: Projects, yes, and little firms that needed direction, trying to help them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what year was that?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, that was in the mid-'70s, I believe.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you'd been back; you were teaching? You'd left teaching already?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no longer teaching. And this was through the John Portman—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, we'll talk about him to be sure.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, before we jump ahead to that, let's see, [turning pages] when you came back from India in 1970, you started teaching fairly soon after that, after you returned, right?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, immediately at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you did?

JON ERIC RIIS: I did.

JON ERIC RIIS: And that was in a home economics department—lovely people, but I just knew that wasn't where I wanted to be.

MIJA RIEDEL: A home economics department?

JON ERIC RIIS: A home economics, and then also teaching occupational therapy students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: It *was* interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: So a whole other route to go with—

JON ERIC RIIS: A whole other route.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then how did you segue from Illinois to Georgia?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I met a woman that taught art history, especially African art. Glazier [ph] was her name. And I thought, gee, maybe I should go on and get a degree in primitive art. So I thought, where can I do this?

And I thought, gee—because I knew I wanted to look for another position—I wasn't happy in Champaign-Urbana—and I heard about Georgia State University looking for a fiber artist. At that time I thought, maybe being down South, maybe there is an opportunity to take courses in African art. That kind of all played a part in my thinking.

So then I got the job here at Georgia State and gave up my dream to get a degree in art history in primitive art, and then just concentrated on fiber art.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were they studio classes you were teaching exclusively?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, in Champaign-Urbana?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, actually in Georgia—both.

JON ERIC RIIS: Georgia. yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then eventually became the head of the craft program at Georgia State. And then took very early retirement after running into John Portman, who saw my work, and all of a sudden overnight I became another industry altogether, doing commissioned tapestry work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, let's talk a little bit about the teaching and then transition to that.

JON ERIC RIIS: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you taught at Georgia for five years?

JON ERIC RIIS: I taught at Champaign-Urbana one year and then Georgia State for about five years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so that was '71 to '76.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Something like that. And you were teaching exclusively studio art classes?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, studio art classes, and it was a time when our program was being enlarged and we were bringing on a fabric design department, getting that established; that was probably a bad time for me to decide to leave because I thought I would just take a leave of absence, and the university said no to this. So that's why I ended up just closing that chapter and leaving.

MIJA RIEDEL: So they wouldn't let you take a leave of absence?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I couldn't do that because we were hiring a fabric designer and it was just a bad time to be leaving.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Did you enjoy teaching?

JON ERIC RIIS: I did, but it got to be kind of a routine after a while and it was good that I left.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were you teaching?

JON ERIC RIIS: I was teaching all the way through graduate studies—textiles—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, techniques?

JON ERIC RIIS: Techniques, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any—

JON ERIC RIIS: When you say any—I know I was teaching one, two, three, four five sessions, different sessions of textile design, and then graduate students.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there was some opportunity, I would imagine, for art history and those classes, yes? Giving them a context?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, of course, of course. And I had collected textiles from various journeys I had taken and built up a big collection and wanted to start a little textile collection at the university.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

JON ERIC RIIS: But then I left and—we did get that underway. I remember [that] the first person that donated a few Peruvian textiles, [they] happened to be acrylic fabrics that she had picked up on her trip, and I thought, oh, boy, this is not the way I want to see this going.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Not what you had in mind.

JON ERIC RIIS: Not at all—not at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that too, because you have, over the years, been quite a collector and then a dealer of ancient textiles, so it sounds like that is something you started immediately.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it was fortunate in that I had been collecting textiles and especially small-scale tapestry types of things, and the Chinese fall into that realm, as do the Japanese textiles, these gift covers I have been collecting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And had you been to China and Japan at this point?

JON ERIC RIIS: I had been to Japan and I had been to China back in 1977, I believe. There was a World Crafts Council meeting in Tokyo. I went from that and went on to China, this organized tour, and met a lot of great craftspeople on this trip. That was terrific.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about the World Crafts Council trip, too, because—was that the only one you attended? Had you been to others as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I said Tokyo, but it was in Kyoto.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: And, yes, there I met Lloyd Herman, who was a participant in this trip.

MIJA RIEDEL: They were pretty unusual. They only lasted for a short time, so they were quite a phenomenon.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was unfortunate. It was a very nice experience—beautiful facility, great programs, and this idea of sharing and meeting people from all over the world was certainly awe-inspiring.

MIJA RIEDEL: Had you been to the original one, I think, in Asilomar?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I hadn't been. In fact, when I went on my Fulbright to India, I had gotten an around-the-world ticket, and I had never left the States prior, so that was really an education.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, so you didn't go just to India?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I didn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, where else did you go?

JON ERIC RIIS: I started probably three months ahead of my arrival date in India and ended up going to, like, London, Egypt—[thel Coptic Museum [Cairo, Egypt], which was terrific. And then Afghanistan, Persia, Iran—areas I wouldn't be going to today.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Did you see extraordinary things in Afghanistan? I talked to—

[Cross talk.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —and she said that the fiber there was just exquisite.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, absolutely. In Bamiyan, seeing the world's largest Buddha and spending a night laying in front of that sculpture was absolutely a wonderful experience, under the stars. Oh, the contrast was just awe-inspiring.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you really had a very on-site historical experience of fiber—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I did. I did get around.

MIJA RIEDEL: —internationally.

JON ERIC RIIS: Good thing, too. Because today it's a little bit more complicated.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, you really saw it on location.

JON ERIC RIIS: I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was really—after that year of coming back, what was your overall impression?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I know my parents had a hard time speaking with me because after being in India, my English had certainly—well, it didn't improve at all; short, choppy sentences that were about three words long to make myself clear.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: But I got over that in no time.

MIJA RIEDEL: It must have been such an expansive understanding, though, of fiber in history and culture to have that experience at that age.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that's true. Going through the Krimsentz [ph] in India, the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad—absolutely a beautiful facility, and the wealth of material and the care they took in presenting this to the public, and sharing it with individuals that had a specific interest—very, very nice at that early age when you're in your early 20s.

MIJA RIEDEL: And cultures, many of them that really have a history of textiles—a long history of textiles—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, a long history—the longest.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and a real reverence for them.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that's right. That's right—where in this country it's a different story.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is. It is, and that must have—that must have really framed your thinking.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it did. It sure did. And also being interested in Navajo—you know, Native American textiles, the whole gamut of early textiles from many, many different cultures.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, because one of the questions you may have seen on this list is, do you think of yourself as an artist in a particularly American tradition or more of an international tradition? I can't think of anybody I've spoken with that is so clearly—must see

that they're working in an international perspective. No?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, you know, when you look around the house here, you'll see a lot of inspirations for various works. I live with these things and they inspire me. I don't know another way to put it, but, for instance, feathers have played a big part in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think of that in terms of Peruvian textiles.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, Peruvian textiles and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Hawaiian, to some degree.

JON ERIC RIIS: Exactly. I went to the Bishop Museum [Honolulu, HI] and taught there for one summer. I'd forgotten about that. It was a wonderful experience teaching basketry techniques.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was just beautiful.

MIJA RIEDEL: When was that? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: That was, I think, back in 1972 I was asked to give a workshop in Alaska, so I traveled to three cities there, and then from there went on to Hawaii and gave workshops at the Bishop Museum and looked through their collection of feather work.

MIJA RIEDEL: That must have been marvelous.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was. It was.

MIJA RIEDEL: So can you point to a single experience or time that feels like the most significant educational experience for you? It seems as if your travels have been at least as informative as undergraduate and graduate [work].

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, I would concur with that idea. Certainly something that has stayed with me, this Tibetan experience, the grassland area in Tibet was life-changing.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was just a couple of years ago.

JON ERIC RIIS: Seeing it from a different perspective. Going to Machu Picchu was another—something I'll never forget.

MIJA RIEDEL: When were you there?

JON ERIC RIIS: That was in the—I think the mid-'70s. And that was, I think, my greatest experience overall.

MIJA RIEDEL: What in particular—I've been to Machu Piccu, so I have some sense of—

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know. [I'm] just trembling thinking about it, looking at that vast structure and wondering how these people did this, and their rich textile history.

MIJA RIEDEL: Incredible textile history.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it is incredible that this ever took place.

MIJA RIEDEL: And for you that must have been a pilgrimage of sorts.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, having had such a long love of those textiles.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was something I had dreamt to do for a long period of time.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then Egypt too. That's another absolutely fantastic experience for any fiber artist, or any artist, seeing these beautiful tomb figures and the frescoes, and just amazing work.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were there very early on, in that early around-the-world trip and then you were there again just recently.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the early on, spending time at the Coptic Museum, which at that time I did a lot of smaller Coptic-style works when I got back at that period of time, but the museum today has very few textiles on view, and that was a little bit disappointing. Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., has a much better collection on view.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's too bad.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was too bad, but a beautiful facility.

MIJA RIEDEL: Nice now that you can see it in Washington.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when you say the experience—and since we've touched base on this, let's talk about it now, this recent trip to Tibet to the grasslands. What in particular—I can see in your work it's had a huge influence in your work since you've come back. What was it about Tibet? Was it the work itself? Was it the imagery?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it's the imagery and the people themselves, that harsh environment, and harking back to the early days of mystery at the Field Museum in Chicago, being a youngster and seeing those exhibits.

MIJA RIEDEL: The skeletons—

JON ERIC RIIS: —the displays of the skeletons, absolutely. And they had a video set up showing an old movie from the 1920s of a dance performance and a theatrical performance, and that certainly was so intriguing. And you've seen my recent work, that idea of these dancing skeletons.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: It all played a part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you ever designed for theater or for dance performances?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, not yet. Maybe that will be an upcoming project. That would be nice. But it's also—in my work the use of embellishment is so important.

And seeing a very beautiful show here in Atlanta, dealing with ecclesiastical textiles from Russia certainly gave me a spark as far as embellishment goes—pearls and things of this nature—making a rich fabric, and the history behind—it's something I'd like to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was reading something in one of the materials—it might have been a catalog about your work, but I just thought it was such a lovely way to describe the lavishness of your work, and it was talking about the desire to decorate as a sign of care and veneration, and I thought that was an interesting way to think about just how incredibly elaborate and ornate your work is, and then also how time-consuming.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's the downside. I'm working on a project now. It just takes such a long time putting it together. But these series of queso [ph] that I had designed, these priests' robes, these Buddhist garments, I put in my mind if I were going to do something, a commission for the Dalai Lama, in the back of my mind, that it has to be done with great care and precision and just the way I want it. So that's what I spent time doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: So if I'm going to do something, I'd like to have it be as—I don't know how to say it, but as perfect as I can get it for that period of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they are technically perfect, but there's also this wonderful sense of humor that runs through some of them, and a lightness, almost sometimes a subversive sense of—you know, like the dancing skeletons. And I think about them that way, that it gives them a real sense of mystery and a spiritual quality, but—

JON ERIC RIIS: But there's a sense of joy there too, which—

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: —a lot of people miss: "Why are you doing this?" Some gallery owners said,

these are so depressing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: —in this time. And I thought, these bright colors and they're smiling. I mean, I don't see this depressing aspect about them.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't see them as depressing at all.

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't either.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not at all. They're bright gold, covered in pearls and linen [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Dancing.

JON ERIC RIIS: And you'll see a piece this afternoon that is very colorful.

MIJA RIEDEL: I had a question, but I lost my train of thought. Let me think for a minute.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have a thought?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, something I forgot to mention, when I was in India I collected a lot of beadwork, this moti work. And I have repaired a lot of this work too, for my own satisfaction, and that embellishment idea is probably rooted in that too. I forgot to mention that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that is so interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I'll show you a panel.

MIJA RIEDEL: So these are pieces that you've collected that have been damaged and then *you*'ve repaired.

MIJA RIEDEL: And have you tried to repair them so that the repair is completely invisible or have you tried to embellish that in some way?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, no. I tried to do the best job I could, and in repairing other textiles, learning—I mean, this way you learn for the future, I don't know where this will lead you but at least I know a few techniques that are quite unusual, picked up through repair work.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard Kiff Slemmons, the jeweler, speak very eloquently about repair and how that's wonderful when you're first learning to work. because you can learn by working on these pieces, but then how oftentimes over time in different cultures the repairs are done in a way that are meant to somehow—

JON ERIC RIIS: Enhance and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Enhance or stand out as separate in respect to the original but also recognizing that it can't be repaired exactly and so just somehow make it distinctive as well.

JON ERIC RIIS: True. But with this beadwork, the design aspect is already given. And to break that up I don't know how I would approach that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So even when you were looking at the weaving early on in India you were looking at the beadwork too.

JON ERIC RIIS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes a lot of sense.

JON ERIC RIIS: And there aren't many areas in India where this was practiced, and the beads had quite a history of being made in Italy at one time, traded off to Africa and via Africa made their way to the coast of Gujarat where these people utilize these. And the wealthy ladies in this region would do this beadwork. They didn't have to go out in the fields and work, and they would just embellish everything—furniture, you name it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Clothing as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, not so much clothing, but beadwork all over the place, decorative items.

MIJA RIEDEL: Jewelry?

JON ERIC RIIS: Jewelry—well, more—certainly furniture, chairs, table covers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Pillows, blankets.

JON ERIC RIIS: Lots of pillows.

JON ERIC RIIS: And it has a very cooling effect when you put your head or your derriere on these cold beads in that situation, which is so hot and dry—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, I can imagine.

JON ERIC RIIS: —except for this beadwork that they've introduced.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic. And which part of India was this?

JON ERIC RIIS: This is West India, up near the Pakistan border area.

Yes, the good old days. I just—things are changing so abruptly nowadays. When I went back to India to see what they were doing, they were using snap-it beads. I mean, the scale of bead had changed considerably and they were just doing things that would say "Welcome."

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear.

JON ERIC RIIS: So it was quite a deterioration from the craft.

MIJA RIEDEL: Quite a change. And did you see the original continuing anywhere?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, not in this technique, no, no. No, kind of a bygone thing right now.

MIJA RIEDEL: It would be interesting to see if there's someone somewhere—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, somebody that's reviving this would be nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, pulling back the threads.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. I have—when you mentioned pulling back the threads, I had done two tapestries where I did my own spinning with peacock feather filaments, and that was a technique that you could find in Chinese textiles at one time.

MIJA RIEDEL: You literally spun—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, you spun—yes, you'd take this happle [ph] part from the peacock feather and twist that around a silk thread.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that wonderful blue-green iridescent sort of—

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right, you get this little thread that looks like—oh, what is that term for this—chenille.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah. That's extraordinary.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it's a good process here, but, again, another time-consuming one.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes.

So you also, in the early and mid-'70s, in '74 and '77, received two NEA awards. How significant were they? Did they make a big difference to your work or were they just a nice acknowledgement of what you've been doing?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the NEA awards, one of them was for an apprentice of my studio. Remember, I was doing commissioned tapestries at this time.

MIJA RIEDEL: You had already started that even while you were teaching.

JON ERIC RIIS: Had already started. That's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, this really happened after I—what years were these given?

MIJA RIEDEL: Seventy-four and '77.

JON ERIC RIIS: Okay, the '77 one I had already had my workshop established and had students and [was] training other individuals to do these tapestries. So I had about five or six people working on these projects. And I had a large studio in Dunwoody, Georgia.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about the transition from teaching to launching your—

JON ERIC RIIS: —launching my new career?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was something I just rather jumped into. John Portman had been so instrumental in Olga de Amaral's work and Sheila Hicks's work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was he a gallery dealer?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, he wasn't a dealer. He was an architect and developer and had projects all over the world that they were working on. And these large concrete structures needed something to soften them, and oftentimes it would be a textile. Olga de Amaral had been commissioned to do a number of works as [had] Sheila Hicks, and somehow I got involved with doing some of these projects here in Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was he Atlanta-based?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, he was Atlanta-based, right downtown Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: He had his own firm?

JON ERIC RIIS: He still does. In fact, he hired Richard Mafong and myself to do a big project in Shanghai, China, in 1989-1990. We were the art directors.

MIJA RIEDEL: We will definitely talk about that, too.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's how that all came into play here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Want to take a little break from it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, would you like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, let's do that.

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: —relive a little bit of the past and update things. And it makes you a richer person, I think, overall.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you're working with historical textiles as a starting-off point is what you're talking about.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And we were just talking about the recent work. But we're going to go back now and start with the very early pieces, the very first—really maybe start with *Baby Jane* in '74. How did that piece come about?

JON ERIC RIIS: Again, the influence of Peruvian textiles and those little effigy figures that were found in tombs. I was drawn to the tapestry woven faces and really digested and looked at those and wanted to update that whole format. And it's interesting that my own contemporary work now was falling back on those ideas. So I'm going to go back and really

reanalyze pieces I've seen and start working.

MIJA RIEDEL: So taking the figure a little bit more three-dimensional again.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, three-dimensional, yes, and a whole army of these figures. Seeing exhibitions from Xi'an, China, seeing the army of soldiers. I mean, it makes an impact. So I've always liked the idea of at least five of something—seems to be my magic number. And I'd like to do a whole roomful of these figures.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that because you find that allows enough variation on a theme to really develop the idea?

JON ERIC RIIS: It does, because I can really involve myself with different approaches, but yet holding it all together in some format. But, yes, it still makes an impact.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. And then do you often—you'll exhibit them all together, don't you?

JON ERIC RIIS: I hope so. It may be a 10-year process for getting it finished. That was the problem with a couple of things I've done. I get parts of it done and I don't see it until a few years later.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that something like the eight Tiger Coats [2007] that you just completed? Is that what you're thinking of?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I would like to do a whole series. The Tiger Coats were not so laborious. But I needed to get a series of that out of my system—the coloration and the images. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: But have you been able to see them all together?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I've had exhibitions of Tiger Coats in the past, yes. It makes an impact when you tell the whole story rather than just part of the story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. And many of your pieces are done, it seems, in limited series.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, in the case of the tigers, I had to re-weave two coats again. Somebody came along and had to have the black-and-white tiger pieces I did. So I had to replace these for an exhibition. Otherwise, I don't like to repeat myself in that manner. But I wanted a complete collection for this show in Seoul.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And so all eight are in Seoul?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, only two: The black-and-white coat that I had to redo are there and the other pieces are here in my studio; there just wasn't room for all eight of them and the shipping was rather expensive.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. I imagine. Before you started on any of these pieces, I want to talk briefly—because you spent, well, at least—

JON ERIC RIIS: A good part of my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, close to 10 years, six to eight years working on commission works. And I think we talked about John Portman, right, before we broke for lunch.

JON ERIC RIIS: Being very instrumental.

MIJA RIEDEL: So how did that connection with him come about? And then let's talk about some of these commissions, because your work is located now all over the world through these commissions in hotel lobbies and banks, no?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, after my Fulbright to India and then working again in Atlanta at Georgia State University, I was asked—I had gone to India that summer and had come back and all of a sudden they threw upon me organizing this big craft exhibition at Rich's department store. So I had to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Who threw this upon you?

JON ERIC RIIS: This was Rich's Department Store, like our Bloomingdale's, in Atlanta. And they wanted an international craft exhibition. So I got busy and I invited many of the craftspeople I knew around the world to come and give workshops and have their work here for a show.

MIJA RIEDEL: What year was this? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: It must have been 1972, I imagine.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were still teaching.

JON ERIC RIIS: Quite early, yes, in my teaching career. And I brought my 10-foot loom over to Rich's Department Store downtown and was weaving a rug for as long as the exhibition lasted. And they were very nice. They bought all of my equipment and all of the yarn I needed and got that underway.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who did you invite to come and give workshops? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes—stop this for a second.

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: —I believe was one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Arturo [Alonzo] Sandoval? It's okay. If you remember, we can—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I know what the other—what is the weaver that Philadelphia—then Industrial School—not Borne [ph].

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll come back to it. So this exhibition went on for two months, a month?

JON ERIC RIIS: At least a month, at least a month. I remember getting back from India and then organizing this and I had lost so much weight, just keeping pants up while I was weaving on that 10-foot loom [they laugh] seemed to be my preoccupation. Yes, but that was a great opportunity, because at that point John Portman came through—the architect, instrumental in many weavers', international weavers' careers—and liked what I was doing, and that's when I decide to stop teaching and devote myself to doing full-scale commissioned work.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were you weaving at the time? What did he see?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I was weaving small little tapestries, but I did one large rug that was made out of linen that had all of these wrapped elements around the perimeter of this carpet. And it almost created a fence-like corral around the carpet. And he'd like that idea and I did many weavings that were similar to this, but very colorful and textural.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were these wall hangings?

JON ERIC RIIS: These were all wall hangings, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And representational?

JON ERIC RIIS: Absolutely non-representational.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah—abstract.

JON ERIC RIIS: Very abstract and it was color and not even geometric, primarily color and texture—big, big panels and yes, very subtle coloration too. One color bleeding into the next.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what size?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I think one of the largest was probably 60 by 40 feet. Did a number of these.

MIJA RIEDEL: This sounds very different, very minimalist. What were you looking?

JON ERIC RIIS: It's strictly—the influences [of] Sheila Hicks and Olga de Amaral and what was going on at that period of time, I fit right into this. These textured wrap pieces to soften the

architecture of these concrete and sound-absorption and things of this nature. And then I could have had a whole career going around—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, so you did.

JON ERIC RIIS: —well, but going around the country to these ballrooms and these hotels—cleaning tapestries was another problem because of all the tar and nicotine.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet. People were still smoking in hotels.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, you go there and clean these things and your arms would just be coated in black tar, rubbing up against the fabric surface.

MIJA RIEDEL: That doesn't sound like fun.

JON ERIC RIIS: No, that was not fun, but I figured—I didn't want my work to look poorly, so I would subject myself.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what do you think of as some of the more significant commissions that you did over that time?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think one of my favorite commissions was at AT&T headquarters here in Atlanta. And that piece was about 20 feet by 16 feet. It might be part of the Art Institute's collection now in Chicago because they wanted to know where they could send this piece. So I went to the Atlanta International Museum of Art and Design [now Museum of Design Atlanta] for a little while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because they closed this office?

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. They closed the headquarters here. The museum in Atlanta didn't have enough room to really display it properly. And then, another large commission I did for—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was figurative, now. You were getting figurative by the time you were doing—

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, that was not figurative. That was all—

MIJA RIEDEL: —that wasn't red and blue one with the figures?

JON ERIC RIIS: —no, this was abstract. And then I did a large abstract piece for the Georgia-Pacific building. And that had—offices had also changed and that piece was removed and put in storage for a while. And that is somewhere, another museum, but I don't know which.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's nice they're moving into museums.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it's nice that museums can take this upon themselves. These pieces are so large. I don't know when they're going to have the opportunity to showcase these, but I have a whole story of many, many of these large tapestries coming down after these different—

MIJA RIEDEL: But you also have—you have tapestries in Shanghai, in Singapore, in Saudi Arabia. How did that all come about?

JON ERIC RIIS: Again through John Portman.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did you go there and look at the space?

JON ERIC RIIS: In some cases, I did. In China, I certainly did. These were two large hangings, 10 feet by 60 feet. And these were more of a landscape feeling, so they were a little bit more—they weren't so abstract as other pieces I've done.

MIJA RIEDEL: How many pre-conditions were there doing these pieces. Were you given specific colors and dimensions and subject matter?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I'll tell you an interesting case. I went to Nashville looking for work, for commission work. And I went into this design firm and they were excited to [meet] me and

knew of my work and they said they had an upcoming project in Saudi Arabia. And I said, yes, I would be interested. And they gave the Pantone colors that I needed to utilize and I said, yes, I could do this. And then maybe three years later, I get a phone call from Seoul, [South] Korea, saying, we're the contractors on this King Faisal medical center [King Faisal Specialist Hospital & Research Centre, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia]. And we understand you're doing a tapestry for us. And that's what happened. But I could not alter the colors. That was already a given, so I was just a little machine here, cranking out panel after panel of long strips with pompoms and tassels for this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you design the composition?

JON ERIC RIIS: —I—not very. I didn't have to do much. Just long panels that were about 14 inches wide and hundreds of feet long.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. Now, this is interesting, too, because you actually had to work with different groups of people in order to actually produce these pieces, correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, not in the Saudi Arabian piece, but in many other cases, I had a little workshop in Cabbagetown right in the heart of Atlanta. This was a community of—at one time it was a cotton mill that had gone defunct. And there were all of these unemployed individuals, living in these small homes that were no longer being supported by the mill. And I felt this would be perfect for a fiber artist to come in and get these people involved and making an income. They were a little suspicious about outsiders coming in, so I finally met their demands and rented a little house and had a little workshop in the house. I would show people what I needed done and that was ongoing for a number of years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were those their demands—is that there be a place to work?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that was my idea and a place for storage of yarns and a table. And yes, I became their family member in many cases.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how does this tie in—we mentioned that one of your NEA grants—I think in '77—was to pay for an apprentice?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, that was for an apprentice in my studio when I lived in Dunwoody. I had always had a number of apprentices, but this helped in the payment terms for a number of these individuals that were helping doing commission work.

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were for the large-scale commissions?

JON ERIC RIIS: The large scale, and I would train these folks in many cases. In some cases I had leading students from Georgia State come help. Who already knew—

MIJA RIEDEL: So these were apprentices or internships—

JON ERIC RIIS: Right—yes, that's right. That's right. And then eventually, I trained a group of young Cambodian folks that needed employment. They had no background in textiles, but they were all refugees and I figured I could help these folks out. They would come to my studio and in some cases, I would have to go and drive and pick them up, take them to the studio. And they worked for me for about five years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

JON ERIC RIIS: A team of four people. Then when I eventually went to China on this large project to be an art director for a big complex that John Portman had worked on, my studio, after a two-year absence really fell apart. So when I came back to the studio and tried to resurrect my commission business, many people had thought I had passed away or where had I gone and I had no work.

So I was fortunate in that I had a large textile collection that I had always been searching for and collecting various artifacts from China, Japan, India. And I started selling off a part of this collection in order for me to begin a new cycle of producing my own work, things *I* wanted to say after doing all those commission work for years, where I was only dealing with texture and color. And that's what got me on the road where I am today.

MIJA RIEDEL: In terms of the commissions, were there any—I know they were mostly done as a way to—as a production business.

JON ERIC RIIS: A livelihood. Yes, that's true. That's true.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there any—other than the sheer managerial experience of the connections and maybe large-scale pieces, were there any opportunities that came out of all those years of doing that that were somehow helpful for you?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure, one project I enjoyed, where I received the AIA [American Institute of Architects] award—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, let's talk about that.

JON ERIC RIIS: —was through a design firm in Atlanta—Richard Stonis was a good friend of mine and he was working on a project in Nashville for the Commerce Union Bank. They had the stipulation they wanted to do six or seven floors, massive walls with this Isabel Scott fabric and wanted to know what I could come up with, utilizing this fabric.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was it—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it was—it was a handspun—handwoven fabric from India and was just plain white cotton fabric. Not much going on, a little slub here and there. So I went and found the company that could make this fabric into tape and then—long thin strips that were on a bias fabric and wouldn't unravel, and I had this fabric dyed, this cotton fabric dyed in very subtle brown colorations and tan. And we wove these tapes with little loops, panel after panel after panel, hundreds of them. And that was the real challenge. But the challenge was this Isabel Scott fabric was something like $8 a yard.

And since this was specified in the contract, I had to write the check for that amount of fabric and that was a big chunk of the commission. But then I found the same fabric [for] about a dollar a yard, that was not Isabel Scott that I could not—at that time, it was too late to incorporate this fabric into those, but it was practically identical. So that was a shame, but it turned out to be a very nice product after all. It looked very nice, handsome in the building.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where was the building?

JON ERIC RIIS: In Nashville.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was a bank?

JON ERIC RIIS: It was a large bank building, Commerce Union Bank.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, sorry, you said that. And is it still there? Do you know?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, as far as I know it is. And that was something that was so subtle. I'm sure even with time and with fading, it's still going to look all right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it must have been spectacular because it won the AIA award.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I was happy about this and it was funny that all of the designers or the owners of the ultimate tapestry, they would call it the "jockstrap tapestry" [laughs] because it was the same width of fabric and I don't know that evoked that feeling with these guys. So I felt that was funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is funny.

JON ERIC RIIS: That was funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you title the commissions at all?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I never really—*Pompom One, Pompom Two*.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know, I didn't really do that. But I did a series of these wool pompoms for a number of tapestries and I remember I could have had a full-fledged business, still, replacing pompoms because people would pull these off the tapestry and take them home as a little tourist item or a remembrance of where they had been. So I was always replacing these things.

Yes—and in some cases, when they were finally taking a tapestry down for good, they wanted to know if I wanted to buy this back. And in many cases chewing gum and so many alterations had taken place that you wouldn't—this would not be a good sales pitch to show a potential client, these tired old textiles. So I didn't do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you figured out how to restore them, so in many ways—they are incredibly resilient. Not a fun job, but—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I did, but—no, it's pretty amazing. Then the other aspect is having a fire retardancy put on many of these pieces and that would certainly alter that look.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. I imagine. And that's something you had to plan for ahead of time and the tests—

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. And do all these testings. That's right, because I used a lot of nylon fabric that was used in the lingerie industry and, again, cutting it into bias tape and re-weaving this. Yes, that was popular at that period of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were all the commissions pretty much done in a tapestry method? Were they all woven in a particular way or did it really vary with the project?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it varied with the project.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: And a lot of times you would weave a solid background and then apply different elements to this background and making it more textural. That was a good question.

And then I worked a lot—a combination of materials with Richard Mafong, who was teaching at Georgia State, head of the metals program and we did a lot of collaborative works—

MIJA RIEDEL: On these commissions?

JON ERIC RIIS: —on these commissions. Metallic thread and then all these metal elements that were inserted onto these wrapped elements.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking there was a sea-inspired one, with all kinds of shells and they were metal.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, that's correct. That was a little later on in this work, of working with another artist. But this was for the cruise ship—let me think of the name—the Royal Caribbean cruise line commissioned us to do this large-scale piece with pearls, embellishments, and metal pieces that were incorporated with the silk.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there was another piece, too, that referenced the constellations.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that's the same piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, it is?

JON ERIC RIIS: It's a three-story tapestry.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the bottom probably that is the sea [life].

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. And I had the good fortune of being invited over to the shipyard and installing a piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: On the ship?

JON ERIC RIIS: On the ship, working with all the crew and shipbuilders and just another world altogether.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

JON ERIC RIIS: Very, very interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, right around the same time, as you were working on the commissions,

before you went to China, you co-founded a museum in Atlanta. How did that come about? How did you decide to—[the] Museum of Art and Design?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, at that time in Atlanta, we had the High Museum, our established museum. And then we had the Emory museum [Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University], which was primarily classical sculpture and a few pre-Columbian textiles. And there was no other showcase for what I would say, ethnic arts or arts from a particular country, be it India, Bolivia, Guatemala, the Philippines. We really wanted to get these communities involved and showcase their collections.

So that's finally what happened ,and it was fortunate the same instant that—before I went to China with John Portman to work on this large-scale project, there was an exhibition traveling around the country called "The Jews of Kaifeng." And this was primarily a photographic collection of works and they wanted to augment this with, perhaps, textiles or something else. And since I had already been working with John Portman, the folks behind this exhibition knew of my collection and I got involved and put up this exhibition. And John Portman came through and just loved it, all this Chinese focus.

And this is where he came about and said, guys, would you be interested in going to China and being an art director of this project? Because of the "Jews of Kaifeng," but more importantly that was the first exhibition to kind of launch the Museum of Art and Design in Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the museum hadn't started yet.

JON ERIC RIIS: No, it hadn't started, but there was such good support from the museum. Throngs of people came to see the show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was it mounted?

JON ERIC RIIS: It was mounted at the Marriott Marquis hotel in Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: In their office, they had many, many spaces in their little mall. And from there we're now part of the Smithsonian and the 20-year anniversary just took place.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was the inspiration for the show to mount textiles that you'd collected?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, because the "Jews of Kaifeng" was an area dating back 17th—during the Qing dynasty. There were a group of individuals in this part of China that still carried onto this day little remnants of the Jewish culture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: It's pretty much died out by this point, but they had this collection of photographs and they really wanted a little bit more to this. So I let them borrow my Chinese collection of textiles, hats, shoes, robes—

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were evoking the country of China through this—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that whole—that's true. That's true. And everything tied together country-wise and time-wise. So it was a nice combination. And it was well-received.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting, and it clearly must have been so well-received that it became the inspiration to get you launched.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the developers were so happy with what happened. They said, would you be interested to pursue this? We'd give you the space. And that's what got us going—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were able to take over a part of the hotel to become a museum.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: That seems very unusual.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was an unusual course. It's very much like the Mingei museum's early days out in California, in San Diego, when they were starting out in—what—in a mall or kind of a strip shopping center. And that was our same story. We kind of modeled ourselves after the Mingei museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: All right. That's helpful. And did you assemble a board then?—

JON ERIC RIIS: We had a board. Yes, and I was head of exhibitions for about 10 years, which is a long—

MIJA RIEDEL: —from '89—no? Yes, because then you went to China in the middle of that, though?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, this happened—got back from China in 1990—from the '90s until about 2000 I was involved with the museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the museum—it started before you left or the whole thing happened after—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the whole thing just—right around—about the same time I was working in China, the museum had just been established. So it was an ongoing—I would come back from China every three months or so and stay here a little while and then go back and make sure the museum program was moving along, because we did around five exhibitions a year.

And fortunately the museum was close enough to the house. The drive was about 10 minutes. And go and install pieces. And it was a lot of effort on our part, but since I was doing my own work, not worrying so much about money because I was selling part of my collection of old textiles and producing my own work and not really selling it at that point. I just was getting a body of work together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of your own work.

JON ERIC RIIS: My own work. And then, there was an exhibition that was going to take place in Atlanta for the Handweavers Guild of America. One of their conferences was coming to Atlanta. About two years in advance, I knew about this and I was going to have a show, because nobody had seen what I was up to for a number of years. I had everything lined up at a gallery that was a city-run gallery. And when I finally went there, two months before the exhibition was going to take place, they told me that, oh, they had closed the gallery. And I thought, [gasp] this is impossible. What am I going to do now?

So I went to the International Museum of Art and Design and we had a policy of never showcasing one-person shows. And here I was, knocking at the door, asking what we could do during this convention. And they said, well, we have another space and if you pay this amount for publicity and all this, we'll be happy to let you have this. So I had my show.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is a museum you helped found as well.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that's correct. That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was fortunate.

JON ERIC RIIS: And they were showcasing "Small Expressions." This is an exhibition of small-scale fiber works. So everyone that was involved with the conference, that was staying at a hotel right across the street, made [their] way see these exhibitions of which I was now part of. And that's where Holly Hotchner and David [Revere] McFadden saw my work.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the conference?

JON ERIC RIIS: This was a Handweavers Guild of America, every two years, they have a big conference and thousands of weavers from all over the world descend on the city for a weekend.

MIJA RIEDEL: Always in Atlanta?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, no, no, no, it's all over—it's in, what, Denver, Colorado, and Tampa,

Florida. Every two years it's a new

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: And I think it's in Santa Fe, New Mexico, coming up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that was a very good experience on my part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. The timing was fortuitous. It would have been a disaster otherwise.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it would have been, all that work and not knowing what to do with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was the mission of the museum?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, again, it was showcasing the best artwork that we could find from a particular culture and country.

MIJA RIEDEL: So was the idea to be absolutely international craft?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, absolutely, yes, it was a craft focus. Sometimes people would present other painting or something and had a package, and we would sometimes rent an exhibition from another organization.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, like a traveling exhibition—

JON ERIC RIIS: And that would give us a little relief to kind of rejuvenate ourselves and look for other work in Atlanta area or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Who else was so supportive of the museum during those early days?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, we had the [Arthur and Holly] Magill Foundation, which helped us the first three years, really gave us seed money to get started. And that was crucial.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine.

JON ERIC RIIS: Very, very important.

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was the first director?

JON ERIC RIIS: The first director. Stop the tape.

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: —That was involved with the American Crafts Council in New York—

MIJA RIEDEL: Ray Pierotti. And he was one of the first.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, he was one of the first and he's an artist living in Atlanta now. He might be retired. He was getting up in years. But he was a friend of Paul Smith. Yes—fortunate to have had him, with his background.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

Let's talk about your transition to China. What exactly it was you were doing there because I'm still not quite clear [laughs]—what exactly it was, yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: What I was up to. Okay. There's a tape running now? Okay. Richard Mafong, the jeweler and metalsmith, and I were asked to be the directors of the art program for this large project in a hotel and a conference center. And we were asked to commission Chinese artists to do various works for the building and look for antiques—

MIJA RIEDEL: This was going to be an art center?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, not an art—this was a hotel and a conference center.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so basically setting it up aesthetically?

JON ERIC RIIS: Absolutely, doing the design work, running out and looking for different materials.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where in China?

JON ERIC RIIS: This was in Shanghai. And at that time, it was one of the few high-rise buildings going up at that period of time. And now—

MIJA RIEDEL: In 1990—

JON ERIC RIIS: In 1989, yes, it was a real landmark building at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's the name of the building or the hotel?

JON ERIC RIIS: The Portman Shanghai Hotel at that time, but it's now the Ritz-Carlton Portman, I believe. So it has changed hands a few times, but—and the interior has also been updated too, but I believe my tapestries are still in the lobby, which is nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you relocated to China.

JON ERIC RIIS: I well—relocated—well, the period of time from the one-year project is what we had allocated, but then [the uprising in] Tiananmen Square took place, so while we thought the project was either going to die or we weren't quite sure—so everyone left for Hong Kong for two weeks. And then we eventually stopped the project and I came back home. And then it was revitalized in about a four-month period of time. Everyone went back to finish the project. So it took a lot longer than we all anticipated.

MIJA RIEDEL: What exactly were you doing?

JON ERIC RIIS: I was commissioning—looking at different spaces, primarily in the hotel, in the restaurant areas, public spaces, looking for artwork that fit specific needs and commissioning artists to do these works in many cases.

MIJA RIEDEL: All different media?

JON ERIC RIIS: All different media: painting, fiber, sculpture—the whole gamut, wood carving, gilding of wood. That was very exciting. Lacquer work—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a particular style or a design—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, we wanted to showcase primarily Chinese artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: —from a particular era or more contemporary work?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, more contemporary, I would say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, but we drew upon the antique scene also, especially in furniture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: So it was a showcase for a little while. Things move so quickly now in China, but for a while that was really a landmark to go and see what contemporary art there was in China, because at that time this was early, early on now.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what were you finding that you thought was interesting?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I think I—those bamboo coats—

MIJA RIEDEL: Like we were looking at on the stairs?

JON ERIC RIIS: —that we were looking at with little segmented pieces of bamboo that are strung together, knotted together to form these garments that are insulation to wear under robes for perspiration and keeping cool, more or less.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those were actually functional?

JON ERIC RIIS: Those were functional, done in the 19th, early 20th century. And I would go to the market. Every weekend, they would have a little flea market. And I would buy up these garments that no one was really looking at and then eventually they became the vogue because we had them framed in the hotel in Plexiglas boxes and they looked looked pretty nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely; structurally they're spectacular. And they're all bamboo.

JON ERIC RIIS: They're all bamboo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: And they're not going to fade. It's a good product.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there a name for them other than "a little bamboo jacket," a liner"?—

JON ERIC RIIS: No, and they made vests also, sleeveless garments. No, there's no name that I know of.

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were worn under ceremonial robes or jackets or just worn as insulation—for anyone?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, again to keep the perspiration—the climate is so humid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that became a vogue. If you go back today, they're a couple, maybe $1,000 or more. Early on, they weren't. So things have really changed.

MIJA RIEDEL: And China has such an incredible history of costumes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it does, it just goes back thousands of years. Yes, it really is a great place to do research, very exciting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anything else that you noticed that was especially—I know those jackets certainly inspired the work you came back and—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the format, definitely, the shape. I wanted something kind of universal without embellishment, no collar, just a simple jacket format. That was an influence. And I guess, the gold leafing, getting involved with so much of that and then in my own work finding metallic thread, certainly related to that idea. I really don't—I have to reflect on this thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can revisit that tomorrow if anything else comes to mind. So you moved back to Atlanta in '91?

JON ERIC RIIS: In '90, to start my business over again and it just—I think we had a recession, which I wasn't aware of, being in China, but a lot of design firms were not doing much and that was detrimental. But on the other hand, it got me started off in a different direction, which I'm thankful for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, otherwise, I'd still be wrapping down in my studio—

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that some of the early pieces—the Man with Hair triptych certainly was seen a lot. Was that piece based on Japanese wrapping cloth?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, you've done your homework. Yes, I had a large collection of Japanese ceremonial gift covers and many of these in the technique of *tsuzure-ori*, which is fingernail weaving—

MIJA RIEDEL: What is that?

JON ERIC RIIS: —what you call that. It's where your fingernails are serrated like a comb, little grooms, and when you're weaving, you pack those threads down, line by line, with your fingernail. Yes, it's a little unusual. And that technique was done in China at one time and

then in the 15th century made its way over to Japan. And they were still doing this technique more in the Ming dynasty aspect of textiles, where the Chinese were producing fine tapestry, but their tapestries in the 17th, 18th, 19th century, they used a much finer silk. So there is a difference between the two cultures when you look at silk tapestry.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when you say—would you describe what the wrapping cloth is for those who aren't familiar?—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the wrapping cloth is approximately two feet by—maybe two and a half feet, by one and a half foot in width. And it has a Japanese crest on one side, the *mon*. On the other side, you would have a depiction for a birthday—birthday wishes, long life symbols, things of this order, boy's day, girl's day, symbolic of that particular holiday or gift-giving ceremony. And this was something put on a lacquer tray.

And then under this gift cover, you had the actual gift, whatever that might be. So it was more or less like a wrapping that you would give back to the family that presented you this gift because their *mon* was on the back side, so you knew who this was coming from. So it's a very nice, very nice gesture. Yes, nice thought—

Lovely. And reusable wrapping/

JON ERIC RIIS: —reusable? That's correct. In many cases, these were also given as wedding gifts, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay, that makes sense.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, very nice tradition. And they always had this red—at least the ones I had been collecting, had a red cracked border around them and that was used when I did my Man with Hair series. And I had done a number of exhibitions of *fukusa* in different museums and looking at these every day when I was mounting them certainly didn't get it out of my system.

MIJA RIEDEL: And *fukusa* is the Japanese term for wrapping cloth.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, for this type of gift covering. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: They were about the same scale as a gift cover, these three tapestries. I primarily did these for myself, not—certainly not commission work.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there's a sense of humor for sure that comes in to play [inaudible].

JON ERIC RIIS: And I had a very nice tenant living here from Guatemala and he was always walking up and down the steps in his wooly socks so I thought, hmm, this is a perfect combination here. So that's how that all started.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was an interesting piece, too, because that was, I believe, the first piece that was done with pearls.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. That was one of the first pieces where I embellished the background with goldstone and pearls, looking at Russian icons at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was the influence that inspired that.

JON ERIC RIIS: That was the influence. Yes. It's funny how that works.

MIJA RIEDEL: And had you been to Russia yet?

JON ERIC RIIS: I had gone to Russia to look—the city of Atlanta was interested in doing a Russian exhibition at the Museum of Art and Design. And I went with three other individuals to Russia to look at various collections, which never really panned out but it was a very good experience. And then I had joined the Friendship Force [International]. This is a group of individual through the Jimmy Carter era and we went to Soviet Georgia. And I was fortunate to stay with a well-known tapestry artist there and certainly looked at various artifacts in museums, icons, and that embellishment idea again, and that played a part.

MIJA RIEDEL: How wonderful. What year was this and who was the artist? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, that was in the mid-'80s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: The artist was Gio—

MIJA RIEDEL: We can come back to that.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Oh, that—Giobelli [ph]—it's such a long, long, long, long, name.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's okay, we can come back to that.

JON ERIC RIIS: He was very instrumental and had done a lot of tapestry work in the '60s and '70s in Russia, government-type things. And it wasn't really tapestry on a loom. It was a large frame loom, where you have a frame out of wood and nails and then this grid system with the warp threads. So it wasn't what I was used to working with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: But he was quite popular and a teacher. And his wife was half-Georgian and half-Chinese, and her family introduced tea to Georgia.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

JON ERIC RIIS: And had quite a history and looking through their old photographs you swore you were in China—the architecture, the costume, just amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Georgia.

JON ERIC RIIS: In Georgia—Soviet Georgia.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then at one point I was in Beijing, China, and, lo and behold, who's teaching there but he and his wife—were teaching tapestry techniques.

MIJA RIEDEL: Isn't that fantastic?

JON ERIC RIIS: In Beijing at the university there. So, small world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Keeping everything in context here, when did you begin actually selling Asian textiles?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, right after my experience in China trying to make a living. I had that period of "What do I do now?" and to get geared up I started selling off—and that's where I really became a dealer.

MIJA RIEDEL: And in 1990, the year you spent there, '89 or '90, or on and off for two years, is that when you really developed the collection that then you would be beginning to sell, or is that something you had been assembling over time?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no, no. That was something I had been assembling for 25 years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So when you first went to India you began collecting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I did. I did. That's the beginning.

MIJA RIEDEL: So by then you'd been collecting for 15 years.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. Right.

And I had started collecting to get my students excited. You know, I would bring things in

from various cultures and we'd talk about the structure and the design application and get them motivated. And I was teaching at Penland and Arrowmont and these were more good things to bring to the students. And doing a lot of ikat workshops.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: I had a big collection of ikat textiles.

MIJA RIEDEL: What else were you collecting? Ikat and what else?

JON ERIC RIIS: Ikat and anything else [that] was embellishment I suppose, and a lot of those things I still have. They're important to me, but to someone else they may not be.

MIJA RIEDEL: And by embellishment, what exactly do you mean?

JON ERIC RIIS: You know, sea pearls or glass beads or unusual fringes and things that relate to what I like to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: So something that was beyond your traditional tapestry.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes. That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was a criterion.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. Or little metal pieces that are somehow incorporated into a textile.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. I'm thinking about some of the work we just looked at and I certainly think, see the metal, metallic thread as a consistent through-line in all the pieces.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, and also some form of embellishment and doing a little added—

MIJA RIEDEL: Could even be a very elaborate fringe.

JON ERIC RIIS: It could be. Now, with the horsehair, coming back from Korea and trying to do research in that area and looking at textiles that had incorporated horsehair is something I'm doing now. So we'll see where that leads me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, the horsehair. And that's really a pretty brand-new addition.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: You did a very early watermelon piece. What was it in there, some sort of fibery—very textural—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that fiber—polypropylene fabric that's used as a layering on—when they lay asphalt on the road.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

JON ERIC RIIS: This is a structure that they use for that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's Called *Watermelon Testosterone*, is that it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. It's *Testosterone Melon*. But I did a number of tapestries incorporating that material, which is very unruly. It's got a mind of its own, difficult to work with. So from that I graduated to this lacquered black thread from Japan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that something you liked—that it was not so controllable? Was it something you looked for?

JON ERIC RIIS: No. I like to control. I like—the textural aspect was what I was after.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you wanted more control.

JON ERIC RIIS: I wanted—yes. This kind of controls you if you're not careful. It's like—if you—it can cut your hand. I mean, it's—you can't break it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: So it's—yes. There are other ways to do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really severe material.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it is. It is.

Oh, the cardinals are back.

MIJA RIEDEL: The cardinals come here.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes. Listen. Hmm.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a fabulous little cardinal outside the window.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, laying eggs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It's spectacular.

Then you moved into a series of hair tapestries which were interesting, strike me as very different from anything—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Why did I—why did I—okay. I did my whole cycle. I wanted to do something. Now that I was getting more involved with these international tapestry shows I thought, hmm—

MIJA RIEDEL: The exhibitions.

JON ERIC RIIS: —this whole idea of doing vegetable forms and that's where I started with the Prickly Pear series and then I went on and did a tapestry with a watermelon.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: A series of those and then I did a Pearls in a Pod, beans and peas aspect, and would still like to go back and explore more possibilities with this motif but I haven't yet. So that was a little departure here. And then I went on to doing a series of—oh, that trip to Russia, looking at Canova's work and then going to Rome.

There was an award by the Southern Arts Federation [Atlanta, GA] dealing with that workshop in Rome. I don't know what that was called. But they were looking for proposals for artists to go and study in Rome for a period of time. And I thought, gee, I could work with sculpture, Canova. I could work with Davids—you know, there was a lot there. So that's where I started my David series, Blondes, Brunettes and Redheads, and then the statue of Paris and then the *Masked Muses* [2000] and then the Icarus series. All came from that idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was based on a trip that you'd taken to Rome.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, yes, but then there was a—they were looking for artists' proposals from craftspeople to go and study and do more work. And I felt that's what I wanted to do. I didn't get this award but I went ahead and did the work. I was too excited.

MIJA RIEDEL: Good for you. Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's how that came about.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those were right around the same time that you did that whole figural group also, those four figures that were draped over towel racks, right, and you called them flayed skins?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was all about the same time these flayed skins, the icon series. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the flayed skins that were based on art—from some idea from Tibet, wasn't it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. That harks back to the Field Museum days and looking at imagery from Buddhist texts in Tibet and tantric drawings and all of that aspect.

MIJA RIEDEL: It feels in some way as a precursor then to the coats and the sort of "second skin" idea.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it is. It all ties together with the skin, this intrigue with wrapping and what's beneath this wrapping and the surprise element. That's why I like these coats so much. It's like doing books. You see the outer cover and you don't know the interior.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: It's a good combination.

MIJA RIEDEL: The metaphor is very rich. And the eyes begin to show as motifs at this point, right?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I could still go back and do—I just love that aspect.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those—do those spring from St. Lucy or did they come from another origin, the whole concept of eyes? Because there's also on your Russian icons, that was a play on words.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. Right. That was a play on words, but yes, the statue from this little santos figure from South America, from Bolivia, carrying this little tray with the two large eyeballs that looked like olives.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's very odd.

JON ERIC RIIS: I just love that piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, it is. And it looks almost—

JON ERIC RIIS: Surreal.

MIJA RIEDEL: —Greek too.

JON ERIC RIIS: It does. You know that little Greek headband in your hair.

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of that iconic Greek female figure, too, only instead of the snake she's got the eyeballs.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. Yes. I love that piece and it has influenced a lot of work.

MIJA RIEDEL: And St. Lucy, I think you said is the patron saint of sight, is that correct? Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. It's such a terrible story, having your eyes plucked out.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know the story.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oooh, you don't want to know. But when you're in Tibet, you see that image of these eyes that are dismembered from one's head and there it is again, so it's interesting these cultures, how they relate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Definitely. Universal symbol. Which just makes sense for your work on so many levels.

JON ERIC RIIS: It does. It does. I could be very happy going back to Tibet today and looking at the monasteries. I don't know why I'm fascinated with tiger skins either. Maybe it comes from Tibet or India and the plight of the Bengal tiger and all of these things.

MIJA RIEDEL: And pattern-wise, the fabrics—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, pattern-wise and the flayed carpets from Tibet utilizing the tiger—

MIJA RIEDEL: Flayed carpets? I don't know what that means.

JON ERIC RIIS: —tiger skins.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting. And it's interesting, too, because the skin of the tiger itself has a pattern. It's not just the fur.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So skin-wise.

JON ERIC RIIS: There's a lot there. I wanted to do a whole series of different animals—but that will take place; I'll just have to live another 40, 50 years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right [laughs]. The fur on the tigers—you got the rabbit going at it too.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's true. And the rabbit.

MIJA RIEDEL: The *Golden Boy* [2000] piece was really an interesting one because it strikes me as one of the pieces that has to do with the whole notion of beauty, the contemporary notion of beauty.

JON ERIC RIIS: And carrying it another step, updating it with—now tattoos are so prevalent in our society. Back when I did the piece it wasn't so but I see a whole series of my own work coming out with tattoos so I'm rather excited about this. I did one piece that's complete with the Mimbres culture in mind, culture from New Mexico, ceramic culture, that I utilized for a starting point on a coat I did. Tattooed body.

MIJA RIEDEL: And which is the piece that has the snake curling around?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, that's the David series, one of the brunette figures; it's a snake.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's such a fine line between beauty and danger there too.

JON ERIC RIIS: In the composition, I liked that whole movement idea, snakes and lizards and —

MIJA RIEDEL: Frogs.

JON ERIC RIIS: I'd done a few things—yes. I did a large tapestry with a lizard. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting, the feathers, too, that have shown up in your work early on and then various other issues.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I know where that—that came from looking at Peruvian textiles, pre-Columbian, but again, not weaving them flat but doing something where they're individual feathers and applied to a surface.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you used them in very abstract, minimal wall pieces.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. There are many different directions with these. And recently I found emu feathers that—I like their structure and the form of the feathers, quite elongated. And I purchased a pair of shoes that were made by an aboriginal shaman for ritual killings. And when one put these on and you walked in the sand, you didn't leave any footprints whatsoever.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. It's a fascinating story here.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where are they from?

JON ERIC RIIS: They're from Australia.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: In the outback country and they're made with human hair, blood and emu feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I'll show you one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I'd love to see one of those.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. So that started a whole series of work. Well, I've only done three pieces based on this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Those are very new, though.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Those are newer. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And which series has this started?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it started—I was going to do something very abstract with these but again, they ended up on coats, kind of a Southwest approach here, the Rodeo Coat series but really based on these emu feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so you're doing this concurrently with the tape pieces that we're talking about [inaudible]?

JON ERIC RIIS: A little bit earlier. A little bit earlier.

MIJA RIEDEL: A little sooner. Yes. Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I'm just waiting for the right opportunity to use all of these things.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wanted to talk briefly, too, about the Blondes, Brunettes and Redheads because that was, again, this reworking of David, the David series.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. Right. The David series.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was—that won a medal or a prize in *Łódź,* yes?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it did. Yes, it did. And from that I was—they invited me two years or three years later to be the American juror for the exhibition and that was really a thrilling experience to be part of that program.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine, to be on that side of the table.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That was very, very nice. And then that led to a jurying of an international fiber show in Lithuania and being able to organize the American presence there and inviting five artists for that. So you never know what lies ahead.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was really quick, because you started really focusing on your work just in 1990 and this is by 1999. I mean, you've been exhibiting internationally those pieces for quite, really almost from the start and you've gotten a lot of great attention.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, very fortunate in that the really first show I was involved with at the Textile Museum in Washington, Rebecca Stevens' first show that she ever organized, she was showcasing artwork or in my case, that little Peruvian takeoff with Baby Jane and then I think she might have presented a piece from their own collection, one of these Peruvian dolls. So it was showcasing how people utilize their collections and can get excited about what they're presenting in contemporary terms for artists.

And I had that opportunity again at the Minneapolis Museum of Art [Minneapolis Institute of Arts] where I was invited to do a proposal based on that something that they had in their collection and that's—I've always loved the large leaf verdure tapestries from the 15th century that kind of evoked William Morris' work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which tapestries were these?

JON ERIC RIIS: Large leaf verdure. They're large cabbage leaves that were a motif, those luscious green color, and beautiful movement. I looked at their collection and they had a beautiful example, so I reinterpreted that idea and when they had their final showing, when they were opening up the new wing of the museum, they showcased my work with the actual tapestry that was the influence behind the work. So that was really a thrilling experience.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was like the Forest Coat series?

JON ERIC RIIS: Michael Graves—yes. That was the beginning of that coat. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. So that was an interesting—and I love doing that, looking at, through collections and getting inspired by something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it makes sense, when I think about your career, everything beginning with some of the things that excited you so much at the Field Museum.

JON ERIC RIIS: It does. And it's funny that it's all textile. I don't know. Maybe—I don't know. My direction—I guess I looked at so much in the way of fiber work.

MIJA RIEDEL: There was—

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I wanted to do a takeoff on the Paracas, something where you take those forms—

MIJA RIEDEL: The Paracas from—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. The Paracas from Peru and really update that jaguar- puma motif and do something contemporary in that stylized format that they have.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that we were just saying that Rebecca Stevens had such an insightful thing to say I think about your work in relation to Peruvian textiles—and that same precision of the Peruvian textiles and the representational quality, the mythological narratives that they draw, on the anthropomorphic narratives, how that history of textiles is very much alive and well in contemporary version in your work. I think there is a full circle that makes a lot of sense in terms of historical reference but bringing it very much into the 21st century. I'm thinking right now of *Bomber Jacket [(Peace Coat)*] or *Greed* [2005], pieces that are very much commentary on the 21st century state of the world.

JON ERIC RIIS: For me that's an important direction to say something, rather than just have the decorative—which is not bad, I mean, a decorative textile, but I like to go a little bit beyond that if I can.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it seems you have gotten increasingly committed to doing that. I just think the work is getting—

JON ERIC RIIS: Except it takes so long. That's the only—you can't produce so many pieces a year. That's unlike other disciplines, like photography. I envy those folks. They can get out there and really produce a great body of work in a relatively short period of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: So I understand for immediate commentary it's hard, but unfortunately these seem to be issues, for example, war and greed, that are around for a very long time.

JON ERIC RIIS: I know. That's for sure. They're not going away.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you have plenty of opportunity to comment on them.

JON ERIC RIIS: And the Maddox story—I mean, there is a lot of tapestry material there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, in Bernie Maddox [ph]?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, boy, is there. You have pyramids—

JON ERIC RIIS: Is there ever.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and interesting—I can see you doing something on that.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, you could do so much there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That would be interesting. I could you see taking that on.

JON ERIC RIIS: Is that going to give people a good feeling? I don't know what the upswing would be here, but we'll see.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

Since we've started this topic, maybe let's just talk about that. Was it a very conscious decision to begin to bring political and social commentary into the work? You just felt compelled to bring it in?

JON ERIC RIIS: You know, what was interesting, one of the first coats I did that—not *Friendly Fire* but the other—the first coat I did with camouflage fabric idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that *Greed*?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, that wasn't *Greed*. That was *Freedom's Price* [2005].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: And that piece is touring around the country now.

MIJA RIEDEL: That has "home, sweet home" inside?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That idea of taking another textile and taking advantage of that sampler idea, a real American theme, is what got me going on that idea. And I have always—there aren't many fabrics I don't like, but camouflage fabric was something I had never related to, did not like that whole concept. And I thought I'd like to take that fabric and update it and make something elegant out of that; that's why I chose some metallic thread in that idea of camouflage fabric.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't think of two fabrics that are more diametrically opposed than a "Home, Sweet Home" sampler and camouflage.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. And that's why I just love that combination.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the interior/exterior juxtaposition really powerful.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. And that blood-red color on the interior.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it works so well with the coat form too, interior/exterior, second skin, on all those levels.

JON ERIC RIIS: There's a story here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did the political and social commentary really begin once you started the coat format?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes. I think so. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so too.

JON ERIC RIIS: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't think of any pieces that preceded that.

JON ERIC RIIS: No. And then the idea of beauty, doing Blondes, Brunettes and Redheads with the David series, that really wasn't so much in my head that I was dealing with forms of beauty and updating that idea except for the tattoo aspect. I wanted that to be more contemporary but I am not sure that was behind my head here.

MIJA RIEDEL: The beauty idea.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: But when I think about that in terms of the *Masked Muses* piece, they're done about the same time, yes?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that whole series.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was very much—

JON ERIC RIIS: I wanted a little mystery, taking those ladies out of context and also putting them in water. Why are they in water? I mean, what's going on here? And I wanted that aspect where I was trying to show—it was difficult weaving in blue tone so it looked like they were submersed in water. I wanted that challenge to see if I could do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why are they submersed in water?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that's a good question. I wanted a mystery. What are these ladies doing here? Is the island sinking or what's going on here? But it was also giving equal time to women here. I had already done the David series and it was time to move on and try something that was much more feminine in form and feeling, so I'm glad I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's hold this here and change the disc.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then the Icarus folks came along.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hold that thought. Hold that thought. Yes, we'll talk about—

[END DISC 1.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Jon Eric Riis at the artist's home in Atlanta, Georgia, on June 27, 2009, disc number two. And you were just starting to say that—something about the Icarus series.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. The Icarus series came after the *Masked Muses,* and here I was going to go ahead and do a whole series with Icarus but I didn't want to do Icarus in marble tones again and this is where I introduced color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then I was so fortunate, I had been weaving feathers for such a long period of time it was perfect that these three tapestries would be embellished with feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: It was a funny story. I finished *Icarus One* and *Three* and the complicated *Icarus Two*, when I got that off the loom and put the mirror-image tapestries together, it was the seam down the middle, the border that you see on the other tapestries, one and three, was somewhat crooked when I put these tapestries together. And I decided, Gee, I'll just reweave this, you know, pull out the gold thread and work it in so it's straight. And believe it or not, it just didn't operate that way. I could not do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: So I started weaving more feathers and covered the frame with the feathers and I think that one turned out to be the most effective of all and I had already finished the other work.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is number two we're talking about.

JON ERIC RIIS: This was number two. And in retrospect, when I look at number one and number three, in my eyes they look unfinished.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I would like to have put that feather frame on there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. The feather frame is spectacular.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, something that that was just by chance happened, so I took advantage of that misstep.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. It just made me think of that sunburst you used to draw as a child [inaudible].

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right, with my little robin and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. That's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Flight and sun.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Right. So I don't know why feathers have been such an influence in my work but they have.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you think that does relate directly back to the Peruvian textiles?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I know it does. I've looked at enough of those. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Hawaiian as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Hawaiian, yes. And never having birds really, per se, as pets, but I was kind of picking up feathers and—

MIJA RIEDEL: The Icarus pieces are interesting because some of these feathers were woven individually and then applied afterwards.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, they're all woven and applied.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: None of them were actually woven on the figure itself.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the feathers themselves are embellished. They become embellishment.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, the feathers themselves. Right. If you denude these figures you'll get to their base skin. And it all started with a series of tapestries I did with a gold background and falling feathers, these panels I did that were about three feet by seven feet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: So always been intrigued with that movement. Again, a lot of these feather motifs come from lacquer boxes from Japan, looking at the way they treat feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: They have that motif on the letter boxes?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, they have that motif on their letter boxes. Yes. *Suzuri bako* boxes. I remember when the World Crafts Council meeting in Kyoto took place, seeing a number of boxes with feathers as a motif and that kind of stayed with me all these years, the simplicity of the motif was so handsomely done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there anything else about the feathers that resonates with you? I mean, metaphorically, all sorts of things that one can speculate. Maybe that's one reason why you've chosen them.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That could be. That could be this whole idea of layering. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: In skin, interior/exterior.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. In the skin, and covering up—

MR. PETERSON: And then all those different colors.

JON ERIC RIIS: Ethereal aspect to them too, which I think is rather nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mythological quality.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. One of my dreams is to live long enough to do a centaur group.

MIJA RIEDEL: A sunflower group?

JON ERIC RIIS: No. A centaur.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I'd like to do—I'd like to tackle that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That sounds ideal,

JON ERIC RIIS: I've been working on designs but still hasn't—I just need the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. But now you're working—let's talk a little bit about these new pieces with the tape. because I don't think we've discussed these yet on disc. I think we were looking at the poncho that you just—

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. That I just finished.

MIJA RIEDEL: These are the newest pieces and they're very different for you because they're such thin strips. They're thin and long, is that correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct, because the body of the mannequins I have—

MIJA RIEDEL: What are mannequins made out of? Something.

JON ERIC RIIS: They're polypropylene. I think they're casts. I'm not quite sure what the ultimate material is.

MIJA RIEDEL: They're two feet tall, about two feet tall.

JON ERIC RIIS: About two and half feet tall.

MIJA RIEDEL: No heads, no arms.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. And that's going to be my project, weaving these arms and heads.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how many do you have of them?

JON ERIC RIIS: About 120. So I'm ready. I'm ready to complete this project.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was this initiated by the trip to Egypt recently? Or this is something that's been germinating for a long—

JON ERIC RIIS: No. No. I've had—it's been sitting in my head for a while, but after coming back from Egypt, where else could I go? They utilize tape so well in their mummy wrappings. I'm ready to move on here and do something.

MIJA RIEDEL: These are interesting because they're vibrantly colored but the imagery is more—while it is representational in some ways, it shows intestines or—I'm trying to think what else was on there.

JON ERIC RIIS: Bone structure and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Or the Tibetan medical material that we're looking at.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: They're also in appearance they're—because they're so narrow they feel very abstract and they just look like patterns.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think we're looking at such a composite of forms here I may simplify these somewhat for each figure, otherwise it will take me 100 years to complete what I'm going to try to do here if I did it this way. It's going to be somewhat simplified. But it will be taped nevertheless. And I think it's good to set these kind of guidelines and work within this perimeter, at least for me, because I haven't worked in this format before and I just like the concept.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's completely different than the coats, for example.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, completely different. And it's funny—I have this collection of Guatemalan headpieces that are all tape. So I know that this is coming from that—the culture too, and the tapes from Bolivia, belts, and—it's that whole aspect again, but updating the idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: I just completely jumped us over the way—one of the things that we need to

talk about—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: —which is the starting—the beginning of the coat series and how that came about because it's been extremely fruitful.

JON ERIC RIIS: There's no—I mean, how can you end this? That's the problem. I keep saying I'm going to get on to a new idea but it keeps drawing me back. There's so much more I'd like to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: The form itself originates from Chinese coats, right?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I wanted a coat that was a simple a form as possible and they'd look—the Chinese format is fine because there are no collar buttons. It's just a simple, straightforward form.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why a coat?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, the coat—I mean, the whole idea of, number one, enveloping one's human body. I like that idea of this covering process and also this book format. It's a cover and then the interior. You have so much to work with, this multilayered idea, where you can surprise a viewer, too, is something I like to do. Who just would never dream of opening this up and there you have it right in your face. So it's a nice format to me. Something can look very sterile on the outside but not so sterile on the inside. So—good thing.

—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: And I've done many coats that are multi, multi, multilayered—eight layers.

I had a commission. A couple in Atlanta wanted something Japanese and they wanted it very erotic because he collects erotic art. And you know, I told him I can't—I can't do this right now. He wanted very, very strong images. So I kind of toned it down. But in the future, who knows?

MIJA RIEDEL: That was just the one coat, the *Shunga* coat?

JON ERIC RIIS: The *Shunga* coat. That's correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was one of them that had eight layers.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. But I've done other coats that aren't so laborious and each layer doesn't necessarily have a tapestry motif—it's strictly the color giving one the idea of a different layer of tissue in the body, when I did my *Sacred Heart* [2005] coat. It's the whole idea of multilayers, but of tissue in different reds to build up that form and surprise element, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that *Sacred Heart* coat the first one with the multiple layers?

JON ERIC RIIS: I had done—

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a piece called *Voids*.

JON ERIC RIIS: Voids—I like that idea of creating holes in textiles. You don't expect that in a tapestry.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. You don't.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That was an idea of bringing the body, the breast idea, but inverting that idea of these negative shapes giving it a structure and a form. So that's something I'd like to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: And does the *Shunga* coat have different images on every layer?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it does.

MR. PETERSON: Oh, my goodness.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it does. It does. It does.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was a commission.

JON ERIC RIIS: Believe it or not. Yes, that was a commission.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you done many coat forms that are commissions?

JON ERIC RIIS: Maybe three of four.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I have. I have.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't know that. And how do the commissioned works compared to your own works?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it's practically the same thing here. They just say they wanted something to do with insects so they let me go at it and there I am, insects, up to me really, and they approved the idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: So general sense of content and then you go from there.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have we talked—the insects we're talking about [are] the Minneapolis pieces?

JON ERIC RIIS: No. There was another tapestry I did through the Jane Sauer Gallery [Santa Fe, NM] and the woman was a gardener out in California and wanted insects, of all things. So I loved that idea, so that's why I introduced the lizard on the interior of the coat eating these insects or pursuing insects. That was a happy accident here. But that doesn't happen all the time. That was nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: The *Flamingo* tapestry strikes me as unusual, the two side by side, because they feel different than anything else.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, they're more whimsical. There was a show that was taking place, a themed idea at the Racine Art Museum and it was dealing with *Alice in Wonderland* and I remember that fabulous croquet set with the flamingos. And I thought, wow, there's something for me to work with. At that time, Richard Mafong and myself were having a show in Atlanta at one of the galleries, and I set it upon myself the format for each tapestry I was going to do was going to be three feet by seven feet. And I wanted to work these flamingoes into that format and that's why they have such long necks that are curling around to fit that space. So that's what happened there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were they a reference as well to William Morris?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure. Well, Crane, another designer from that period of time that I had been looking at, and yes, I had seen some beautiful drawings and paintings where they were utilizing different bird forms. Probably a pelican comes to mind. And also carved chairs where a pelican was done in the back of the chair. And that kind of said, hey, something can be done here with flamingos and in such a tacky—I mean, when you think about those plastic flamingoes around, it gave me the impetus to go ahead and try this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I'd like to revisit that idea again.

[END DISC 2.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, interviewing Jon Riis at the artist's home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia on June 28, 2009, disc number three.

Good morning. Humid again as ever.

JON RIIS: Yes, good morning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sunny and nice.

JON ERIC RIIS: Good morning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's start this morning with a look at the exhibitions over the years. I'm thinking of your solo exhibitions, starting with the solo exhibition in 1998, "Showing Off Time" at the Atlanta International Museum of Art and Design.

JON ERIC RIIS: That is correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was the first really large solo exhibition of your work since you had started again in 1990 when you had come back from China. Is that correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. And I spent about six years just working in my studio on my own statements and just kept storing tapestries away and finally had a large body of work, and it was time for me to show the Atlanta community and others what I was doing. And that's why this all took place for this convention period with the Handweavers Guild of America's annual convention in Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: That we mentioned yesterday.

JON ERIC RIIS: That we mentioned yesterday, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And so this was the first exhibition—solo exhibition of your work since you had been focusing on your own themes.

JON ERIC RIIS: That is correct. And no one really was aware of what I was doing for the last six years, so I thought it was time to really get out there and do my thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: And, fortunately, individuals from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, David McFadden and Holly Hotchner, saw my work and liked this and got the ball rolling and invited me to partake in a number of exhibitions at their museum. Then they purchased a very large piece for their collection, so that certainly helped.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which one did they purchase?

JON ERIC RIIS: An (Eye)con Figural Group, these flayed pearl pieces that are skins with eyes. That got things going.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I would imagine. What was the title of that piece? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: (Eye)con Figural Group. These five large panels about 3 feet by 7 feet.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was icon, E-Y-E.

JON ERIC RIIS: That is right. E-Y-E, to play up that idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And something that I don't think we have discussed at all yet is at some point, clearly, you made a transition from working strictly in tapestry to this incredibly embellished textile technique where you're sewing pearls and tapestries onto leather.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, you needed a very strong support. If I had a tapestry background and then couching or overlaying 35, 40, pounds of pearls on a piece, I'm afraid when this is hanging up for a long period of time, it's going to start sagging and pulling the material apart. So it seemed that leather was a good foundation, pretty sturdy and will hold up with time. So that's where I made the transition.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when did that happen? And how did you make that transition? How did that—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, just thinking—the love of pearls and these precious materials, wanted to incorporate that in my work. And that seemed the way to go.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did that come about from seeing Russian icons?

JON ERIC RIIS: Somewhat, somewhat.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: And doing a lot of experimental work in seeing really what will hold together. So that is how that began.

MIJA RIEDEL: And technically, did you figure that out or learn that by looking at—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, by doing little samples.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, just by experimenting?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, by experimenting on leather. So that is how I came to that conclusion. And then I have done a number of large pieces with pearls.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: And oftentimes backed the pieces with a laminate, also, to give it more body and structure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Such as?

JON ERIC RIIS: I did another figural group, kind of the idea of reincarnation. And the figures were, again, three feet by seven feet. And I wanted them upright and rigid. I had to line the leather with this Lurex material or this very heavy plastic that was stitched on to the surface of the background.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I had no idea actually how heavy they were until yesterday.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the last one I finished was about 45 pounds. Pretty beefy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And technically, that whole—because some of your tapestries are actually attached as well and thinking that the small images, the skulls or [inaudible] that you won't be woven. Those are attached to the leather as well. So this was just really a technique that you evolved by trial and error.

JON ERIC RIIS: Correct, correct.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was six years working away in the studio.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was a good, fruitful time. And I am glad I had the opportunity to work solidly for that period of time without doing any commission work and just in the studio every day.

MIJA RIEDEL: You could really focus.

JON ERIC RIIS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And focus on producing the work.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, then, at the same time, right after the show I had in Atlanta, I didn't have any gallery representation. So a new gallery in Santa Fe was opening up, the Jane Sauer Gallery, which had a history of showcasing quilters for a long period of time. And they wanted to get more diverse. And they liked what I was doing.

Fortunately, I had a body of work to show them that could be for sale. And I was off to a good start with the gallery in Santa Fe.

MIJA RIEDEL: You have also exhibited really in the past, I think since 2001, all over the place internationally—in Budapest, in Belgium, in Ireland, in Korea, Lithuania. How did that all come about?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think, again, through the Museum of Art[s] and Design in New York. Other individuals had seen my work in New York at a Bedazzled ["Bedazzled: 5000 Years of Jewelry," Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD, 2008-09] bead exhibition that they held. And I was in an international show in Germany that the American Craft Museum [New York, NY; now the Museum of Arts and Design] had established. And that also helped. And the catalogs —

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that a museum in Germany?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that was a museum in Germany. Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember which or where?

JON ERIC RIIS: I will have to look on my list here. Maybe you can turn that off—

[Audio break.]

JON ERIC RIIS: —New York contemporary artist. That helped. And then the other show—oh, I have the catalog downstairs. Let's see. I guess it is not—Bouvet, France. Oh, here it is: 2003, "Triennial 9 Form and Contents: [Corporal Identity:] Body Language," [Museum für Angewandte Kunst] Frankfurt, Germany.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. That was 2002-2003?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. That was an important show—2003. Is this on?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, okay. So that was an important show. And it had a very nice catalog. And that introduced these coats that I was doing, the Hearts of Gold series, male and female. And through that—and then having the gallery in Santa Fe sell a number of these pieces to collectors in the New York area got the word around that I was doing something. And that certainly helped.

And then the Textile Museum in Washington had an exhibition. And again, I had a piece or two in that show. And my work was introduced to the Washington, D.C., area and a number of collectors purchased pieces from that show. So I was off to a good start in that area.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has your work been received over the past 10 or 15 years? Do you see a change in the way people respond to it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that's a difficult question because I just seem to be humming along here. Certainly with the downturn in the economy, things may change. But it seems collectors want your more important works. They're not interested so much in the smaller pieces you are doing, but more elaborate.

MIJA RIEDEL: There has been a lot of interest from museums, too.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, lately, that is true. The Cleveland museum was an interesting situation where they bought two of my gold coats, male and female Hearts of Gold from that series. And recently, the High Museum in Atlanta purchased a piece. And that is unusual because they have very few textiles in their collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: I'm happy to see one of my works going in my home territory.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. How did it come about that you were included in the "One of a Kind [: The Studio Craft Movement]" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York?

JON ERIC RIIS: I was fortunate in that the Andersons—Doug and Dale from Florida and New York [and] Palm Beach—bought *Kiss the Prince* [2005] tapestry coat I did with pearls in a frog motif. And this was a promised gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And they showcased this in their "One of a Kind" exhibition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, it was a beautiful display.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then it appeared in the *New York Times* when they were advertising the show, which was unbeknownst to me. So it was very nice to get these phone calls and e-mails congratulating me on the show. That was nice. Plus, it was supposedly up for six months. But they left the show up for almost a year and a half. So that was another good facet.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is fantastic.

JON ERIC RIIS: And that's where one of the curators from the High Museum saw my work and said, gee, we had better look into what he is doing here. So that's what happened. So commissions did come that way from that show.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is fantastic.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that was a blessing in disguise.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely. And then you were part of the "Craft in America" traveling exhibition. Were you part of the television documentary as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, not part of that, but the work was traveling throughout the country and it is still—I think it is on its last leg. And this has been about two and a half years. And originally, a piece was proposed for the show called *Greed* [2005] that the Indianapolis Museum of Art purchased. Then at the last minute, they decided it wasn't going to travel. So another piece was exchanged for that called the *Census*, a pearl coat piece that I did a number of years ago was substituted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was *Freedom's Price* still available?

JON ERIC RIIS: *Freedom's Price* was in another touring show called "[Tradition/Innovation: American] Masterpieces of Southern Craft and Traditional Art."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: And that is also traveling around the country and won't be back until early next year.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about the *Bomber Jacket* piece?

JON ERIC RIIS: The *Bomber Jacket* right now is in South Korea in my solo show there. And that was designed in response to the problems in North Korea with their bombing attempts. About three years ago, that was done and has traveled to Korea once before for an international show. I had to change the title from *Bomber Jacket* to my *Peace Coat* because they thought it was too controversial.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting. And it should be noted that you did that piece—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I did that piece—yes, with no idea of ever showing it in Korea. But I just liked the concept, the bomber jacket theme. And I thought gee, I have got to do something with this since I was already so involved with doing these coats. It seemed appropriate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that is wonderful. And the language—what is the language on?

JON ERIC RIIS: The language, it says "no" in different languages. And then when you open up the coat, it says "peace." So I need to go back and do more of these provocative pieces that have a message.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, let's talk about that, because it seems you have already—you have really focused on the human condition and issues of identity. All the way through your work, you have talked about—a little bit about gender and race and sexuality, a little religion has come up a little bit, but it seems like when you started your own work when you came back from China, especially maybe—well, I think the Babes in Arms perhaps is the first one that feels really—

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I can tell you how that one came about. There was an article on my work in a tapestry publication in Australia. And it was very favorable except for one line that said "where Riis kind of shies away is dealing with people of color." And I thought, what does this mean? So I thought, well, I'll show her I can do something. So that idea of these three young children with guns in their hands came about because in Atlanta in the early 2000 period of time, there were a number of murders where young children had guns and would shoot their playmates by accident.

And I thought boy, this is a topic. So that's how I got this idea rolling along. And I had a small collection of African sculptures with beadwork. These were called the "Beegee [ph] Figures." And I thought boy, there is something here that I can tie this whole thing together. And that's where this idea came from. But these were life-size—well, when I say life-size, five foot

six, or my height. And that was quite a project.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fully three-dimensional? Fully freestanding?

JON ERIC RIIS: Fully three-dimensional and about 100 pounds of coral beads were, again, stitched on leather and then formulated into these 3D figures. And going through eight layers of leather with your needle was not an easy procedure, but got it done.

MIJA RIEDEL: They are extraordinary. They're fully three-dimensional and beaded all the way around.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. They had tapestry-woven heads and the guns in their hands and their little feet were done in tapestry. And the rest was all coral beads corresponding to their fabric dresses.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were these the first pieces really since Baby Jane that were that fully three-dimensional?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, those are, and now finally getting back to this idea again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Revisiting that again now.

JON ERIC RIIS: Reinventing these—this idea, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: And it was nice, they ended up in a collection in Belgium.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MIJA RIEDEL: And were they all three sold as a single piece?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, they were all—yes, I didn't want to break these up. It was the Freedom Museum in Philadelphia that—or [National] Liberty Museum, I think, was their focus or their name and they wanted these, but no one could come up with the funding.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. So they're in Belgium now?

JON ERIC RIIS: They are in Belgium with a textile collector, a well-known dealer in carpets and tapestries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are they part of a private collection?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, private collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. How did the Black and White wall pieces and coats—they were an evolution from that as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Again, that problem with people of color or dealing with that subject. I did a whole series from black to white, where a Caucasian or a black is morphed into each other.

MIJA RIEDEL: There is one where it is almost half and half.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, and that one is half and half. And I wanted to do something with just black and white silk and black and white pearls, and that just seemed the perfect vehicle to get that idea across. And I had a show in Chicago in 2003 at the[James] Tigerman Gallery [Chicago, IL]. That's where I showed—or I exhibited three of these coats from black to white. And they all sold at the exhibition.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the work that takes on—for example, the *Bomber Jacket* is traveling. *Freedom's Price* is also traveling, correct, and *Greed* is [inaudible]. So it seems like the pieces that take on—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, take on the political or the stronger subject matter seems to be what people are after today, a message, rather than strictly the decorative aspect. So I'm excited about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it seems that you are continually looking for issues that you want to address, that you're not shying away from anything.

JON ERIC RIIS: No, if I have the time and the inclination—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you deliberately seek them out, do you think?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, your mind is always churning out something. I mean, and then we live in such troubled times. Certainly, there's no lack of ideas. It's just the time factor, producing one after another here. You need a little rest in between, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: But I am dreaming up a new idea here. So we'll see.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the whole concept of the coats and the second skin, the interior or the exterior as a whole concept of personal identity. That form seems so well-suited to examining.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it does, because, I mean, there's a whole book format here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: You can just get so much in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know you're really drawn to that idea of the book. Would you talk a little bit about that?

JON ERIC RIIS: I just—this whole idea of the cover and not knowing what you are going to explore or find on the interior is—I have always liked that surprise element, be it humorous or just something provocative going on in these works—mystery, ambiguality [*sic*] or ambiguous. I just like that idea where the reader or the viewer is reading something into this that may not be true at all. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and we discussed that that does happen.

JON ERIC RIIS: I do like that, oftentimes. I remember doing a piece when I was a student at Cranbook. When I got it off the loom, it was a large cross and all these figures at the very bottom. And it looked so religious. And that was not at all my intention. The person that bought it had built up this whole story surrounding the piece. And she wanted to really know my insight. And strictly, I really let her down when I told her what I was thinking of in the process. So now I just kind of keep quiet and let them read whatever they want into the piece. Don't say too much.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting. And you're completely fine with that.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I am, because as long as I am getting my message across, myself. I mean, I can see what I'm doing. And if somebody else misses it, well, that's too bad. When I had my show at The Textile Museum and had all of these gold coats on view, the museum didn't want people touching anything. So we just left the garments shut so nobody saw the interior of these coats. And if they wanted to, they could buy the catalog. So I thought that was okay. That was okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: You didn't mind the fact that nobody could see them?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's okay. I like that aspect where one is spending time doing something that *you* [the maker] understood when you did this. But that is irrelevant now that it is all finished.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Which pieces were part of this exhibition? Was it a range of work?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it was a number of the Hearts of Gold series with the interior body forms.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I can see why you might not feel so strongly about those being [inaudible].

JON ERIC RIIS: Right. But if you had on the more political pieces, you're going to miss a whole concept when you just see camouflage-woven tapestry fabric and you're wondering, gee, there has got to be more. And there is.

MIJA RIEDEL: And would you be okay with those being installed purely closed?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, I think in this case, they would need to be open.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would think so, too.

JON ERIC RIIS: But on others that are more decorative, it's okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. You did a commission fairly recently within the past five years for a local synagogue.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, and that was something I was really happy to be part of because I have done a number of synagogues in Atlanta before. But this was the premier, oldest synagogue in Atlanta on Peachtree Street, just a beautiful classical building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember the name of it? Otherwise, I'll add it later.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, the Atlanta—let me take a look here. U.C. Congregation—okay, The Temple synagogue in Atlanta. And I was fortunate when I was in Poland with one of these international triennial tapestry exhibitions to go to Auschwitz and do some research surrounding this subject for these two tapestries. And quite a moving situation.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine.

JON ERIC RIIS: I ended up doing two tapestries that were about 10 feet by six feet tall for the sanctuary. And that was a good thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did the research in Auschwitz play into the final [inaudible]?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I really wanted to understand a little bit more about the plight and got the nerve up to go. And it was such a moving experience.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine.

JON ERIC RIIS: And just driving around that area and looking at the fields of wheat. That's where I finally got some of my ideas through the landscape, and did these pieces with kind of dark tones and metallic thread and much more landscape-orientated than most of my other work, certainly, which is dealing with a figure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you mentioned something about pomegranates?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, there is—it's funny, that kind of a universal motif, certainly in Chinese art and then in the Middle East. The synagogue had this kind of ongoing theme of pomegranates that you found throughout the building in different art forms. And I thought that would be a nice connection. So I worked borders of—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there a symbolic meaning to the pomegranate?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the symbolic meaning is fertility. The Chinese certainly use that quite a bit and they've got a great population. But in the synagogue itself, it was a little form of color and to have these borders at the bottom of the tapestry, I thought was a nice departure that kind of set off the pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Recently—well, in 2006, you were in Tibet for—is that right?

JON ERIC RIIS: Two thousand five.

MIJA RIEDEL: Two thousand five?

JON ERIC RIIS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And for six weeks or how long was it?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it was for a month and a half traveling in the grassland area. There were about eight of us that were on this group. And fortunately, two fiber friends of mine went along and we shared one of the vehicles. And through this, after we got back from the trip, for the past number of years, we've all been working on ideas and fiber pieces that were based on our experiences. And we hope to have a show, perhaps, at the Mingei [International Museum] in San Diego or the Rubin Museum [of Art] in New York or another gallery in San Antonio, Texas. We'll see where this leads us here.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd like to talk about that trip and the work that came out of it a bit because that seemed like an incredibly fruitful—it germinated a lot of your work, I'm thinking of the Tiger Banners.

JON ERIC RIIS: It did, but to tell you the truth, it kind of got me in a different direction for a little while. And now I am happy to go back into my more political works. The Tibetan pieces got a little bit more ethnic than my other work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], the Tiger Banners feel different from anything else.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that is true.

MIJA RIEDEL: And also the ones based on the—it looks like they're based on medical textbooks [inaudible] textbooks.

JON ERIC RIIS: That is correct. Utilizing the vestments that the Buddhist priests wear. I took that format and changed it somewhat, with traditional motifs you find in Tibet and worked it all together into one cohesive unit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Certainly Tibet could be a political topic.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it certainly could be. And some of the pieces are political. But it's just another avenue of adventure for me. I'm happy to have had the experience. But now it's time to move on to other pressing issues here.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was compelling about all the skulls and the dancing skeletons that came out of that trip?

JON ERIC RIIS: Again, it's such a universal, you know, looking at so much Italian work and paintings and then the Day of the Dead in Mexico, kind of tying together all of my favorite motifs here. And these skulls are not depressing. They're smiling. They're bright colors. I mean, it's a different take on death. It's not the end. So I looked at it that way. Yes, they're smiling and dancing and enjoying themselves.

MIJA RIEDEL: They do feel happy. But they also—it feels that—there is a provocative quality, too.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, there's a playfulness because of the eye motif, is used again. And if you look at the different direction where the eyes are looking, I mean, it's kind of a takeoff on this idea, too, watching the movement and what these eyes are looking at. So you just have to look at this and see what you can read into the piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think about the work being deliberately provocative? Not that one in particular—

JON ERIC RIIS: Not that one so much, but a lot of the work, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And is that important?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I think so. I think so. You want to get people involved and draw them in rather than just looking at it and saying oh, pretty coloring, and off they go.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. And you've stuck with the coat form for a very long time.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. Why have I done that? I don't know. [Laughs] I keep wanting to kind of break from them and do some other forms. But there is still so much to say with that coat idea. I remember Jim Dine and his series of robes. It went on for a quite an extensive period of time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those really resonated?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, they come to mind as another artist that has utilized the clothing element here. But again, being a fiber artist and clothes, I mean, it all kind of makes sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, exploring issues of human identity—

JON ERIC RIIS: Identity, sure. And I like this idea of peeling back skin and layers. It just makes sense. I just wish that I could get them to be a little bit more transparent. But I'll work on this idea with negative and positive—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's an interesting idea.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, that coat with voids started out that way, putting holes in something and negative spaces and then layering and looking through one coat to the next, to the next, to the next. So that was one departure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes, absolutely. It makes me think of the piece you have hanging downstairs, the insulation piece we mentioned yesterday that's made of [all] bamboo sticks. It is very porous.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, that is right. Yes, I would like to incorporate that in my work.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it would be.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the piece that you have hanging now in the living room—the brand-new piece—where we were talking about the possibility of now, perhaps, thinking about a poncho form or something along those lines as opposed—well, not a [inaudible]—a very stylized poncho.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, the idea—a lot of people, you know, they think clothing and I want these to be art forms, too. I don't want them to be something that you just stick your head through and off you go. I'm thinking about this whole idea of ponchos and updating that whole concept and doing something that is provocative and thought-evoking and timely, where it looks like it was done in the 21st century, not something that was done, you know, 1600s or 1700s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: But give me a chance. I'll move along here.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] No doubt about that.

JON ERIC RIIS: The idea of tattoos is also something that I have kind of carried through in my work. And I really want to do something that is much more involved and complicated and there's a lot to say with tattoos.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. It makes me think of the very early pieces based on David and some of those tattoos.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, right. But now, the tattooed body is everywhere. I've never seen so many people in Atlanta and elsewhere that really have embellishments on their body like they do. And so many tattoo parlors have opened up in town, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's hard to make that provocative. It's now so commonplace.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. It is so commonplace. But I think the message of what these tattoos are can be something—not that old sailor idea any longer, but really do something updated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Along the lines of the snake that was—or wasn't there one of Christ done?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, yes, yes. But you can go far beyond religion now.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you haven't gone?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I had a series of publications dealing with, the subject matter [is] tattoos from prisoners in Russia. And boy, they are just so strong. It's just amazing what they are putting their bodies through. So graphic. But again, that's a little on the sexual side and I want to tone that idea down. But they're pretty powerful.

There was also a tape that was produced that was so graphic I couldn't even watch it. It was just too strong.

MIJA RIEDEL: What are some of the images that come to mind that are compelling to you from tattoos?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, I did see something that just ties in so beautifully with these coats. They were tattooed epaulettes that were on a fellow's shoulders. I thought, what a spectacular idea. So that's something I'll look into.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's interesting because it looks as if now the topics are coming full circle, which is something you discussed a little bit yesterday. But you're now combining sexuality and political message and social commentary.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, all-in-one would be terrific if I could figure out the format here. Yes. But I like the coloration, too, of taking these blue tones and indigo blues and this whole tattoo idea with metallic thread. It could be quite nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Spectacular.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it could be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I think about—we haven't talked about—the Icarus series at all, but skin is just present in your work all—whether they are actual coats and secondary skins or flayed skins. I think about the (Eye)con pieces draped over the towel racks.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then working with this horsehair even makes it more tactile.

MIJA RIEDEL: What inspired the horsehair addition?

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know. There has been, again, this idea with these tapes I was doing, these peelings. There was an outside and an inside. And on the outside, I thought, why not put hair or something that evokes that feeling—on the outside.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that is how that was introduced. It's unfortunate I don't have the pieces to show you because they are in Korea also. But that's also my newest work. But now I have a good source for horsehair from Mongolia, so I know where to find this.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it is interesting because texture has come in and out of your work for a long time.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, it has.

MIJA RIEDEL: We were talking a lot on this yesterday.

JON ERIC RIIS: And there are some very nice tapestries that were woven in Switzerland and Germany in the 14th, 15th centuries, where they show these hairy goblin figures that evoke a nice feeling. They look like they are wearing outfits of fur and something that I can look into for a source of inspiration, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: How important is narrative to you in your work?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I would say somewhat. I would say there is a narrative quality. It could be more. I don't know where that will take me. We'll see. What do you think? Do you see it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it seems that—I do see, not a direct narrative, but I see a narrative thread running through your work.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think when I get this body—these many multiple figures I'm working on, there will be a narrative there tying these all together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

JON ERIC RIIS: And that will give me that opportunity to get this idea across rather than a singular or five pieces or normally what I work on, three or five statements at one time.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting, because we haven't discussed, really, your working process at all. But you do routinely work on multiple pieces at once.

JON ERIC RIIS: I do, to at least get that idea established and out and see where that leads me. But I usually work in a small series. That's true. The coats that I was doing for a long time were quite large, maybe 60 inches in width. And the gallery in Santa Fe thought, gee, a lot of people don't have space. Why don't you kind of consider making smaller coats? And I've done that for a while also. But it seems the larger coats ultimately are the more popular.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, they are just—

JON ERIC RIIS: And I can do a little bit more with them, too, as far as my statement.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, the scale does make a difference when they are very much life-size or they feel very similar to life-size. And the subject matter that the narrative that runs through this feels so reflective on the human condition through time.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right.

MIJA RIEDEL: It just resonates when it feels as if it's literally a skin one could slip on and see how it feels.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I like that idea. I'm not doing—working with children so much, but who knows? That may be another aspect one day.

MIJA RIEDEL: A smaller scale?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, a smaller scale to go along with the smaller figures I am working on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. In terms of the mannequins now?

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, in terms of the mannequins. That's right. I wanted to do a whole series of three-dimensional heads.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would those be representational, along the lines of Babes in Arms and that sort of thing or be more abstract?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, much more abstract.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Much more abstract.

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were heads and—because we discussed arms that would go on these heads?

JON ERIC RIIS: Maybe. Maybe, or just a room full of heads. I'm not sure. I'm still working on this three-dimensional aspect here with putting these together.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes me think of the piece you did that was so different than all the others, all those fabulous hands, after you came back from Tibet. [Inaudible.]

JON ERIC RIIS: That's true. I have done a series—I did a series of hands early on, Hands of the Oracle. And then I thought—

MIJA RIEDEL: With the eye, correct?

JON ERIC RIIS: With the eye. And then I thought, why not do a whole series that kind of relate to an altarpiece that one might find in Tibet with all of these upturned hands either grasping or praying or in celebration. One can read many different things into this. But that idea came from an old glove I found in Tibet that had these red endings on the fingers where your nails are. It looked like blood, but I'm not sure what it was. But it did give me that direction on these pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: That piece felt so different than anything else. It felt—

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, in working three-dimensionally, I mean, I enjoy that the most, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: Kind of taking that fabric and really doing a little bit more with it. A richer experience for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like things are definitely moving slowly. They're more three-dimensional.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, they definitely are. And then I collect *santos*, these religious figures from Central and South America, and looking at these all the time. You know, that's the next step. Why didn't I do this much, much earlier?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you did, right? It started all there.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it started, but now I really have a direction with these.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. That sounds exciting because that would be a big shift from what you've been doing for a while.

JON ERIC RIIS: It will be. It will be. Yes, off the wall onto the floor—or somewhere—other than wall pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: And just going so three-dimensional after being relatively flat or very deliberately layered. I imagine, formally, composition like that would be really intriguing.

JON ERIC RIIS: What is interesting, too, that galleries around, at least, the States, how do you present these things is always an issue. So we'll see. With these long tapes I am doing, it's been a challenge on how do you display these things. But I think I have that worked out now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, we were looking at a piece in the living room yesterday that looks like rolled tape. Do you know the piece I'm talking about?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure, sure. That was definitely an inspiration, this feather piece—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was that from again?

JON ERIC RIIS: From the Solomon Islands. Yes, there is a lot. And that got me rolling on this idea of these tapes. And then there's a beautiful collection, a friend of mine in Minneapolis collects strips—wooden strips from many, many different cultures, these small tapes. I've looked at this collection, especially these tapes from Myanmar, and they are just so beautifully done. And the Guatemalan hair pieces and there's so much. And these were done in tapestry techniques. And it just lends itself beautifully to exploring this potential.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Is there a real back-and-forth between your work and the collection that you live with?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, absolutely. Everything I look at, definitely. I don't know what that relationship is, but it does inspire my own work, certainly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe we should talk briefly then about your collection, I think, and the interior of your house because it's hard to imagine it unless one has seen it, just how rich—visually rich and complex and layered it is—the patterns and the influences from really all over the world. Certainly, a focus on Asia and Latin America comes to mind. Is that primarily what you've collected over time?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think so. Things that speak to me textile-wise and techniques and embellishments, it's all wrapped up into one package here.

MIJA RIEDEL: And extraordinary headdresses, the furniture, very three-dimensional pieces as well.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the headdresses—again, that's the whole idea of celebration and, I don't know, just the human condition again is why I am drawn probably to these pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were these headdresses for specific rituals or for specific individuals?

JON ERIC RIIS: In many cases, sure, a hierarchy. The Chinese headdresses, definitely court material—but so beautifully fashioned. One of my favorite pieces are the Manchu headdresses that women wore at the turn of the [20th] century, with semi-precious stones, pearls, kingfisher feathers, that really make an elegant statement. A lot of attention to detail. Again, I am drawn to that, certainly.

MIJA RIEDEL: The attention to detail?

JON ERIC RIIS: The attention to detail.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you also drawn to them as signifiers?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, for instance, when I was in Poland hunting around in some of these antique stores looking at ethnic art, I found some very nice headdresses that were worn during marriage ceremonies that are all made out of pearls and added materials—so elaborate and so beautifully executed. What even makes it more powerful, they have photographs with them of the actual ceremony taking place around 1900 with these items on the bride's head and on the groom. It's just a nice little remembrance. I don't know how these things ended up in an antique store and a foreigner buys these things. It's kind of sad that they aren't still with the original family.

But anyway, they are giving me an inspiration and I can give back to someone else. I'll show you one of these.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would like to see that. It seems to me that function is very significant in your work not in terms of it actually being worn, but—

JON ERIC RIIS: But looking like it certainly could be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's true. I like that, again, that surprise element or spending all this time on something that may be through a ritual of some sort. Yes, that's important.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's really compelling when you think about these as signifiers—some sort of contemporary imagined ritual.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, whatever it could be. And that's why these priests' robes that I've been working on, the embellishments all have a history. I mean, where the Tibetans did the small beadwork that you find on these layered elements, I've kind of done the same thing, but a little differently. It is that attention to detail that makes these special, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the materials are so precious.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: That somehow reflects back on that whole concept of human identity in life as well.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, and ceremony, yes. Making them as elegant as I can. Yes, maybe the pope will see these one day.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

JON ERIC RIIS: Who knows? Who knows?

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be interesting, depending on which one you—which piece .

JON ERIC RIIS: I was in China giving a program, a lecture at a brocade institute in Nanjing, China. And I was fortunate to meet a gentleman from Italy who was in his 90s that ran a company that made all of the red silk fabric for the cardinals in Rome in the Vatican. So I thought, boy, what a nice combination. His factory was on Lake Como. So I have to get there one day and see what they're producing for these religious ceremonies.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be amazing.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that would be fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why have you stuck so much with pearls, Jon? You've done some with coral, as well, but is it the luster? Is it the preciousness?

JON ERIC RIIS: The luster, it lends itself so beautifully to what I am doing. I had mentioned this ecclesiastical show that came from Russia that came to Atlanta a number of years ago. Just breathtaking fabrics. And then going to the [Kremlin] Armoury in Moscow and seeing them in person. Just the opulence, just over the top. That certainly got me moving in that right direction, I think. Yes, that is part of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you think about transparency, would you move in the direction of crystal or glass beads as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, the glass beads, I've used a lot of Swarovski crystal in my work—not the type that you just glue on, but you actually stitch these crystal beads to the surface of the fabric to give it that iridescent quality. That's something I am continuing to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any ideas for other materials that have interested you?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I found a manufacturer that has made all of these small shell panels for me and drilled holes in these so I can put these little platelets on something. It's just that something I don't know yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And is that sort of an iridescent mother-of-pearl abalone?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, mother-of-pearl. That is correct. And these may go on those small mannequins that I am working on in some way with these tapes. I have some exploring to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about feathers?

JON ERIC RIIS: Feathers, yes, that's another possibility. Woven feathers, not the actual feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry, what kind of feathers?

JON ERIC RIIS: Woven, tapestry, woven.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, woven.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, I don't want to embellish things with actual feathers. They're too susceptible to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Too fragile?

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know. Too fragile in getting insect—yes, just too many problems with these, conservation-wise.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I don't know. Maybe the horsehair. I'm not quite sure about that either. But the long run, how this holds up. But I think better than feathers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Probably, though I think about some of those older—it would probably have to be preserved behind Plexi[glas] or something, but some of those older feather capes that—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, sure, that the Peruvian—yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the Hawaiians, too.

JON ERIC RIIS: But I don't want to run into problems with the government with endangered species and things of this order.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, so that even—

JON ERIC RIIS: Even to hand-cut fabrics or a place like this, you can't find—I mean, here in Atlanta you can't find decent fabric.

MIJA RIEDEL: You can't find fabric and you can't find materials. Well, you were saying that you had to get horsehair from Mongolia?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, fortunately, online I found a source in Mongolia—but I have that, believe it or not, raises donkeys in South Carolina. So she has gone and clipped their and also has sent me little bundles of material. So that was pretty nice on her part.

MIJA RIEDEL: So donkey hair is what you're—

JON ERIC RIIS: Donkey hair is really what I'm using, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where do the pearls come from?

JON ERIC RIIS: The pearls all are coming from Asia.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the coral?

JON ERIC RIIS: I had a source, a shop on Broadway in New York and then went to China and found another source there, more reasonably priced. I was also getting a lot from Hong Kong at one time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the coral?

JON ERIC RIIS: The coral is all coming from Taiwan and this is coral that has been dyed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: It's not naturally colored in these tones of red.

MALE: It's not real coral, is it?

JON ERIC RIIS: It is real coral. It is, but dyed, enhanced.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MALE: God, I hope that they're only getting it from those dead coral reefs.

JON ERIC RIIS: I think. I hope so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I hope so too.

JON ERIC RIIS: I hope so.

MALE: —they're wiping out.

JON ERIC RIIS: And I know the shell that I've been using, mother-of-pearl, is pretty readily available. So that's not [an] endangered item.

MIJA RIEDEL: But I want to say for the purposes of the tape, I think what brought on this whole conversation about sourcing of materials was the fact that somebody saw one of your recent pieces and took it for an antique piece. It ran in the *New York Times,* I think—

JON ERIC RIIS: It ran, yes, and they thought it was an antique piece and I had to explain, no, this is my own work and—

MIJA RIEDEL: It must be confusing because you sell those pieces too.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, but it's a very good source of getting the person involved and speaking to you and carrying on a conversation and then gradually getting to other things. But it is a source of exploration for these folks and educating them into the world of textiles and hand-woven contemporary art.

MIJA RIEDEL: To find this simply—as you say, to source the materials and then to spend the time making these kinds of labor-intensive art is extraordinary. You're saying that—

[Cross talk.]

JON ERIC RIIS: And also if you're working on a particular project that is going to be so time-consuming you want to use the best materials that you can and you don't want to use lesser material. You just want it to last.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did it take a lot of experimenting or sourcing to find things that will hold up?

JON ERIC RIIS: It did certainly with metallic thread, because you don't want to use yarns that are going to tarnish or deteriorate within time, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

JON ERIC RIIS: And you also warn people that if you do purchase a piece, you have a responsibility to take good care of and you're not putting it in a humid situation or with direct sunlight. You have to take some precautions here because I have had experiences where large tapestries in corporate collections—where daylight, sun, has been streaming on a piece and after a while it's very detrimental to the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, very sad to go back and look at some early works that were not properly cared for.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is there any way to repair that?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, there's no way to repair that. No.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I know one that the Chicago art institute got is one that I did the metalwork, it's got a lot of curves.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct. That's correct. I had a piece at the headquarters for Southern Bell here in Atlanta and we requested—the art agent and myself said the window certainly [should] be treated. Nothing ever happened and when I drive by today and look at the piece, instead of this bright red it's kind of a dull pink coloration. So it really has altered the piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: How frustrating.

JON ERIC RIIS: It is, it is. It was such a—took a year and a half to commit to this piece in getting it done, one of the lengthier commissions in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: And to spend all that time finding materials that would hold up and then have it be placed in the sun—

JON ERIC RIIS: That's right. That's right. Well, in this case the piece was all linen and metallic thread, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Over the years have you taken *American Craft* and *Fiberarts*, have those specialized periodicals been of any help to you or significant to you?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, of course, they certainly tune you in to the current trend and what's going on, and certainly fiber work around the country and also other parts of the world. Yes, that's been an important addition to my library.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there's another one, *Spindle*?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, *Shuttle Spindle & Dyepot* is a magazine that comes out quarterly from

the headquarters here in Atlanta.

MIJA RIEDEL: With the Handweavers Guild, right?

JON ERIC RIIS: The Handweavers Guild of America, yes; it also covers the trends and exhibitions where one can show. It gives you a broader range of possibilities to get your work out there and to be seen.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you been involved with that group over the years, the Handweavers Guild?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, when I was teaching, when they had their first convention I attended that and became a member of the board early on, one of the few male members that they had at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would that have been in the '70s?

JON ERIC RIIS: That would have been the '70s, and I stayed with that for my tenure of time and then got involved with other issues. But that was an important aspect in my early career with fiber.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: And then the other important group over the years has been the Friends of Fiber Art [International] organization based outside of Chicago. They're very active with giving lecture at the SOFA conferences in New York and Chicago, and now Santa Fe, every year. I've been one of the speakers over the years for that organization and they also—

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you speaking about your work, Jon?

JON ERIC RIIS: My work. They also offer tours where a special fiber event may be happening in the city. They'll organize tours to different galleries and I've been a participant in these and then they also organize trips overseas. So I have joined two of the trips to Poland for the "Triennial of Tapestry" in Łódź, Poland. That's been a very exciting feature in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you find that informative and educational?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh extremely, extremely. You meet so many other people in the same discipline that are plugging away just as you are, and it's very exciting, the interchange of ideas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that's good.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, they've all been good experiences.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's been a significant community over decades, it sounds like, then.

JON ERIC RIIS: Over decades, that's correct, and my experiences with the Budapest have been very good too, the last two large exhibitions I've been involved with, when they've had international tapestry shows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now was this as a juror or as an exhibitor?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, in Budapest, this was at first a competition, or you had to be voted in, and I did get into that first competitive situation and won an award.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was this in Budapest way back in 2001 when you had that Blondes, Brunettes and Redheads piece? Was that the one?

JON ERIC RIIS: This was *Masked Muses* and that won an award that year and then when the, three years later they had another competition. Since I was an award winner, they invited me back, not going through the jurying process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it Triennial then?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes. I'm not sure this will continue, but the last few years have been very nice. And then the museum put out a publication on influence of textiles in that country and

it was nice that they gave me a write-up. Along with all these Hungarian artists, my work was featured in this publication as an American.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was a catalog that accompanied the affair?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, this was a special publication they did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Uh-huh [affirmative], yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That actually leads nicely into a question about—you've been a juror, twice.

JON ERIC RIIS: A juror, yes, twice—once in Lithuania when they had an international fiber show. I met the organizers when I was in Łódź, Poland, and they liked my work and said, would I be interested in organizing the American component of their upcoming exhibition? I said, absolutely I would be excited to do this and went back and did the jurying process for them and also—

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you do that, Jon? Did people send in applications? Did you select and make recommendations before that? Was it invitational?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, in this case, people sent their works and they almost admitted anyone that had sent their work. So it was a vast body, and then a group of five went through the exhibition when the pieces were already up and awarded the grand prizes to these individuals.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Who received the awards that year? Do you remember?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh I think we must have doled out six awards and I think a Norwegian artist had gotten the first prize.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is a separate exhibition, then, than the one that you juried that included the five or six Americans?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, this was the same exhibition, same exhibition, but the people that were invited were not part of this competitive aspect and not open to receiving awards. They were just a component.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this is when you curated with Gyöngy Laky.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's correct, and Lia Cook, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, Lia Cook, and there were two or three others. And how did you make those selections? Did you invite these artists?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it was easy. It was artists that I admired over the years and thought that the Lithuanian population would be so intrigued with seeing the current trends in America. So that's what I tried to do; and I also invited Fran Reed, an artist who has recently passed away, who was from Alaska that did kind of her take on utilizing fish skins and guts for her composition, material-wise, of her sculptural forms and they were quite well-received there.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting, an interesting material.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, and the people were *so* enthusiastic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, they have a very rich tradition of textiles there and are forging ahead, yes, and the university does a very good job of promoting the textile arts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does that feel very different to you than the current temperature?

JON ERIC RIIS: Very different than in the States, yes. Here we're losing fiber departments right and left, at universities, and the funding. It saddens me, especially when you're out there in a situation where you have an exhibition and people have no concept how these

thing are produced. Is it woven? Are you using a computer? They just don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. You've traveled so much over the past few decades. How do you see American fiber in an international perspective? What are the strengths and what are the weaknesses?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, it's so diverse an area now. It's all been broken down. You have the flat pattern—I mean, surface design—and this whole movement with basketry is quite exciting. There is so much going on now—assemblage and the photography aspect of things and the computerized. I mean it just goes on and on. It's a vast area.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does it feel as dynamic in the States as it does in other parts of the world? Does it feel more dynamic than in other parts?

JON ERIC RIIS: I think because of the scale of the States, it's overwhelming. These smaller countries, it's easier to get around and really understand what's going on; just coming back from Korea, very dramatic things are happening too, not so much in weaving but certainly in sewing and appliqué and stitchery. Beautiful things are being produced.

So that was enlightening and the people are very eager to show you what they're doing, and it's a good mix of things there. Craftsmanship is another facet. Things are beautifully crafted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are they?

JON ERIC RIIS: That was very enlightening.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you find that there are certain techniques or certain themes, certain content that seems particularly prevalent of late? You work primarily in tapestry technique but then you've developed this embellished textile technique as well, and then we've talked about basketry really evolving. Do you see any trends going on currently over the past few years?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I see much more mixed media involved in the fiber world. I think that's the big trend right now.

MIJA RIEDEL: The big thing, interesting.

JON ERIC RIIS: Combining different aspects. For years I worked with Richard Mafong, the metalsmith, on many projects and it was exciting having two personalities involved in a particular project with this give-and-take idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the dynamic of that collaboration on materials?

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, that's exciting, and I would like to do more collaborative work with someone out there. We'll see what—time will tell.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Well, I think we're—

JON ERIC RIIS: But I think that is the direction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is the mixed media?

JON ERIC RIIS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] A lot of people, too, found objects are important in their work, a remix here.

MIJA RIEDEL: In terms of anything in particular?

JON ERIC RIIS: No, but I've seen a lot of this collage aspect where other things are brought in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you seeing a leaning towards—

JON ERIC RIIS: And also, I forgot, video is another aspect, too, that people are tying that into their work.

MIJA RIEDEL: With textiles?

JON ERIC RIIS: With textiles.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. Is it anything in particular that comes to mind?

JON ERIC RIIS: Offhand, I've seen some work in Budapest where artists were incorporating that material, video aspect. I have to think about this a little bit. I didn't see anything in Korea but I'm sure that's right around the bend.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. How have you seen fiber change in your lifetime, fiber arts? Is it pretty much going back to the mixed media and more diverse?

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I think in the '60s when things were so dramatic, I mean you had Lenore Tawney in the forefront and Sheila Hicks and Claire Zeisler making this all possible for us today to forge ahead in fibers.

Without these people in the forefront back then, I'm not quite sure what I would be doing; they opened up many, many avenues for us and then the whole commissioned world where you were exposed to tapestries and all of these public works was a very good thing.

But I think that's kind of run its course now.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you said, we were talking briefly before we started the tape back up again, saying that it is a difficult medium to pursue in the 21st century because it is so time-intensive, so labor-intensive.

JON ERIC RIIS: That's true, and my pieces aren't—many artists are doing more miniature-type works and I'm not at that point yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

JON ERIC RIIS: But I have scaled down. I no longer have my two 10-foot looms any longer. So my work is getting a little bit smaller, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: What is it that keeps you continuing on in fiber?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, it's such—well, I guess just a personal commitment. I have all these materials on hand. I better be utilizing them—just lots of unused material that I'm waiting to be discovered here in my studio again.

MIJA RIEDEL: So does the material itself—

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh, that's definitely a part of this, that tactile quality and the glimmer of the metallic thread and the glitz aspect. Yes, it all plays a part, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there's just a seduction of the materials themselves.

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh definitely, definitely, that was where it all started, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's enough to draw you back?

JON ERIC RIIS: That's enough to draw me back over and over again, sure. Yes, that's a good point. That does it—rhinestone cowboy here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well—

JON ERIC RIIS: But it's exciting, too, to see—I mean, for instance Swarovski crystal, when I started using it, I wasn't aware of anyone really—the clothing industry maybe, but now every little hobby shop are selling these little kits. And it's all over the place and there are stores, certainly in Asia, that are just Swarovski crystal shops but selling actual crystal sculptures, not so much the beads that I'm interested in and sequins.

But there's another market out there, another world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, when you think about fiber and the work that you do, what do you think there is to that kind of work, be it material-wise or technique-wise that nothing else does quite as well?

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know. It's such a basic structure what I'm involved with, just like

coiling and basketry, so direct and simplistic [*sic*], just my two harness looms and myself making all the decisions, one after another. I mean, I don't really leave anything up to chance, either. It's all more or less in my head or figured out ahead of time, what I'm going to be doing and I stick to that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you have extraordinary control.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, because I—and then a lot of my pieces are done repetitiously, where I have units of things that I put together and that gives me the freedom to organize something such as these feather pieces, like a mosaic, laying these all out and the control of putting what I want where. It's not so rigid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's an interesting point.

JON ERIC RIIS: So that gives me a little bit of flexibility here.

MIJA RIEDEL: The form can change, absolutely.

JON ERIC RIIS: The form can change. So now I have all of these component parts to put onto something. So I'm ready to apply this to some surface, not sure what yet, but I've got lots of woven feathers ready to go.

MIJA RIEDEL: When I think of your work, I think of textiles and I think how it's so inextricably entwined with the history of textiles and tapestries in particular, and how that plays into it and brings a layer of meaning to it. I also think of the inherent reference to clothing and second skin—we've talked a little bit about tattooing—but how both of those, the history and the clothing, the skin, the closeness to being almost a vessel for the human condition, tying so strongly into everything that you've done.

JON ERIC RIIS: Well, I have to mention, too, when you bring this up, there were two recent exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art dealing with Renaissance tapestries that were absolutely so awe-inspiring. Just listening to the general public's comments, they were so taken with these works that took decades to produce and in some cases [in] absolutely pristine condition and technically so beautifully done. I wish everyone I know had seen these—just beautiful.

Recently the Art Institute in Chicago had a tapestry exhibition dealing with their vast collection that has all been refurbished now, and cleaned. That was so exciting to see the tapestry collection come alive and the influence it will have on future weavers, I hope, in the Chicago area

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was from the permanent collection at the Art Institute?

JON ERIC RIIS: That was, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And which was the Met exhibition? Was that from that permanent collection?

JON ERIC RIIS: The Met, some of the pieces from their permanent collection, but many of these were European collections and [other] collections in this country.

MIJA RIEDEL: When was the show, or do you recall the title?

JON ERIC RIIS: Last year.

MIJA RIEDEL: So 2008?

JON ERIC RIIS: One was Baroque tapestries and the other was the Renaissance period. They were both awe-inspiring—and very popular, by the way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, there you go.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, blockbusters, yes, so that's encouraging.

MIJA RIEDEL: Good to hear. Because you have extraordinary examples of not only Peruvian textiles, which we mentioned earlier, but beautiful—what were the pieces you showed me

yesterday, those six figures?

JON ERIC RIIS: Oh these were produced in the 1870s outside of London, the Royal Windsor Tapestry [Windsor, England] workshop, which lasted for about 10 years and the weavers were brought over from Belgium by Prince Leopold, one of the sons of Queen Victoria. He tried to get this workshop established and they did a number of beautiful pieces.

I know when I went to Cranbrook, the Booth family had a very, very nice collection of tapestries produced by the Royal Windsor Tapestry workshop, and I just happened to come across a collection in Savannah, Georgia, and it was my benefit they didn't really know what they were.

So I purchased them and then did the research afterwards and found out what they were. So that's been an influence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and then the Russian piece that we were looking at, with all the metallic thread in it, right around the corner.

JON ERIC RIIS: Right, that was used for Easter celebration, a piece on the altar, a piece in Russia done around 1600. It's embellished with leather and leather faces that are put on these figures, such as the angels—just a beautiful composition and the condition is remarkable.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's wonderful to see the dialog back and forth between your collection and in your other work.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, and you know where the rips come from, here. What else?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I think that's—I think we've done a pretty good job.

JON ERIC RIIS: You think we can—

MIJA RIEDEL: Anything, any final thoughts?

JON ERIC RIIS: I don't know. I certainly have enjoyed sharing my experiences with you over the last tw oand a half days here.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's been wonderful, and I know you've been tired just coming back from Korea, so thank you so much.

JON ERIC RIIS: Thank you for this opportunity.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm glad we could do it.

JON ERIC RIIS: Me too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Great.

JON ERIC RIIS: Yes, we did.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]