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Oral history interview with Mary Shaffer, 2008 April 13-14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Shaffer on April 13-14, 2008. The interview took place in Las Colinas, New Mexico, and was conducted by Josephine Shea for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Mary Shaffer reviewed the transcript in 2018; her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSEPHINE SHEA: This is Josephine Shea interviewing Mary Shaffer at the artist's studio and home—they are adjacent to each other in Taos, New Mexico, or technically, I guess, Las Colinas—for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number one.

We begin at the beginning, with when and where were you born?

MARY SHAFFER: Let's see. Okay, I was born in Walterboro, South Carolina—can you hear me all right?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes.

MARY SHAFFER: —1943.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So in the South.

MARY SHAFFER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes, both my parents are southern. My father was from South Carolina, near Walterboro—in fact, I was born in the old family home in Walterboro—and my mother was North Carolinan. But my father's [family were carpetbaggers –MS]. He was a northerner. So when I was a girl and he was showing us swords, you know, from the Civil War, I never quite knew what side we were on—[laughs]—you know, because I've had a strange childhood. I mean, I didn't really grow up at home. I sort of always grew up away from home. So it wasn't like I could say, "Hey, Dad, which side of the war were we on?" So I always wondered about that, and I was just delighted to find out we were fighting on the North. [They laugh.]

Actually, after 9/11, I read a book that [my father and his sister –MS] put together that were letters from one of my great-great-grandfathers who had fought in the Civil War. We fought in the Revolutionary War, too. But [my great great grandfather –MS] had escaped from prison and these were letters that he wrote to his sister. And they really calmed me down because those wars back then, I mean, horrible and gruesome as they were, were not like the movies that we make of the Civil War now. In fact, I've walked out of those movies. These letters show a much different kind of time, where gentlemen were gentlemen and farmers were gentlemen. And he would pass the opposition on a path and, he writes—he says, "Well, you know, I passed a soldier, and since we didn't have our guns, we just tipped our hats and said hello." [Laughs.] And then one night he was starving so much that he actually ate with them, and he said, "Well, my uniform was sort of dusty and I sort of grunted a little bit." [Laughs.] But they shared their food. He walked home from the South. He escaped from prison, he dug a tunnel, walked all the way back from the South to the North barefoot. Can you imagine?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No.

MARY SHAFFER: To join—rejoin his regiment. Anyhow, that's what I read after 9/11. It's wonderful.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that was your father's side, and you said your mother was from—

MARY SHAFFER: My mother—it's hard to know where my mother's from, because her stories are changing daily now. But a long time ago when she really had one story, part of her family came from the Czech Republic, and I'm not sure where the other half came from. I think it was Scottish—I guess Scottish and Czech. We were Scottish via Ireland and then over to the States a long time ago.

My family founded a little town called Stillwater, New Jersey. And if you go there, it's so beautiful. It's like the old stories. The houses—it's not a grid. I mean, the houses were helter-skelter along walking-path lines along these hills. And they're all stone, and you walk in and it's like the *Little House on the Prairie*. It had a hearth with a cast-iron bar that put the pot—the cast-iron pot—in the fire to cook and then it swung out to put it on the table. It's amazing. And they—built a mill, and looking in the mill—it was locked at the time I went there—was also surprising for me because they had all these hand-forged tools, the kinds I collect.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What an amazing collection for later—connection for later on.

MARY SHAFFER: Isn't it? I was amazed, because some of the tools I find, I won't use. I just keep them because I love them so much, or I've used them but then I don't really want to sell them, because I want them. And those exact things, some of these ax heads, I found, you know, in this old mill that my forefathers had built.

And the other thing that amazed me was the houses still had the furniture my great-great-great-great-grandfather had built for his wife. They built them—you know, the closets, the standing closets and the chest of drawers. I mean, they built all the furniture. They worked hard in the daytime and built this furniture at night by candlelight. It's fun.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So how large was your family?

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, family background, let's see. I have three sisters, one that's older, three that are younger, and then I have two step-sisters. So we were a family of six girls, but actually we grew up a family of three girls, and then 6 years later my mom had another daughter. And the stepdaughters only came into the family after I was gone, really.

But I do want to describe the early childhood because it's unusual. My father was a pilot for Pan American and a race car driver. And we lived—first I was born in the States, but then we went immediately, probably when I was a couple of months old, to Central America. He worked—he flew for Avianca, and we lived in Guatemala and we lived in Colombia. And so, strangely enough, this is—took me a long time to find this out because I always thought somehow that I had been retarded, because my earliest memories of my childhood were with me not being able to speak English or not knowing the names of things.

So I met someone—when I lived in Washington, this man I was dating says, "You know, Mary, you're one of the brightest women I know." I said, "I don't think so; I think I'm retarded." [Laughs.] And he said, "No, I don't think so." And I started thinking about that. Hmm, I couldn't be retarded. I've run a department for New York University, I've got a Citation of Excellence from the U.S. Labor Department, I've written articles, and so I guess, I'm probably not retarded. [Laughs.]

And then I remembered, wait a minute, I couldn't speak English. And I remembered coming to America, coming to California when I was six years old and seeing some children on the street. And children have this sort of way of lighting up when they see each other, and I remember lighting up and them lighting up, and we noticed each other and we ran to each other, and we started talking. And they didn't understand me, and I didn't understand them, and it took us a moment, and then I think we started making mud pies or something. You know, we made some way of playing.

So I asked my dad. I said, "Did I speak English?" And he said, "No, you only spoke Spanish." So I only spoke Spanish until I was six years old. My parents did not speak Spanish. So I must have had a very strange—[laughs]—I must have had a very strange childhood.

He had an American salary, basically. Even though he worked for Avianca, I think it might have been owned by an American company. I'm not sure. But they were wealthy there, in the sense that we lived in a big house. I can remember, in Colombia, it was a big house with a courtyard, with a fountain. And there were at least two women that washed the laundry, because I remember hiding and playing in the folded laundry. And it was outdoors, and I remember there was a gardener. So I don't think we were poor there.

And my—well, my father was a philanderer, so my mom, with three children, probably spent most of her time chasing after him. And they had parties, a lot of parties, I think, at least I was told. And she had a monkey that used to follow her around and be on her shoulder all the time. We were raised—must have been raised by the servants in the house.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY SHAFFER: And I remember—I remember seeing a Bergman film where this woman dies, and she dies in the arms of a very large, buxom woman. I remember thinking to myself, Ah, that's—I would like that. [Laughs.]

Because I remembered also playing in the laundry, and I was driving them crazy because I was climbing up and down the laundry, and they said, "Stop it. Stop it." And then, of course I said whatever I said, and they said, "We're going to get the devil. The devil is going to come and get you. *El diablo!*" And they called to the devil. I said, "Oh, no, no, the devil's not coming." They called to the devil, and the gardener must have been in the garage. He must have put his head in, like, a bucket, because he called back, "It's the devil! I'm coming to get you!"

I was so afraid, I remember just flying to her chest, that was all sweaty from the laundry and stuff, and being

held by her, and just crying my eyes out because, of course, I was afraid of this devil.

But that was a strange, it must have been a strange childhood, not speaking—not being able to speak to my parents. Not having that connection. Then we lived in California maybe two years, and then we moved to Germany.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: In California, did you live in Los Angeles or—

MARY SHAFFER: No, we lived first in Walnut Creek. And I remember my mom—I remember a lot of stories. I don't know what we have time for, but I remember a little girl across the street got shot by one of her family members who picked up their father's hunting rifle and it went through a wall. She wasn't shot on purpose; it was an accident. But that freaked my mom out.

So then we moved to Palo Alto. To those old houses, the houses that [were designed by Joseph Eichler – MS].

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Does it start with an "N" or—

MARY SHAFFER: He was an architect that built sort of modular houses, and very modern in a way, and each house was different. So it was that neighborhood. And now, of course, it's a historic neighborhood and these houses are very special.

[Several years ago we went looking for our old house –MS.] First, I found my school and I knew how to walk home. And the thing that surprised me was, when I walked home, there were these dead-ends, and I thought, Well, this can't be right; I don't remember any, you know, two dead-ends on this walk home. And that was because I wasn't allowed to cross the street, so of course I'd have to walk the whole—[laughs]—the whole loop. So we lived in California for a while, in Palo Alto.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that would be probably when you were starting school, I would think.

MARY SHAFFER: I was in kindergarten then, six years old, just starting in kindergarten, and I painted. And then—well, this is also why I thought I was retarded. In the first grade, the teacher—my older sister was very smart, very verbal. She could speak Spanish and English. She was the little darling of the family, you know, and obviously had not been told that she was going to get a younger sister. So she sort of kept the screws on me. I can remember coming to the States and her doing things like burning me with a cigarette lighter, saying, "Oh, here, Mary"—you know [makes sound of cigarette lighter being flicked on]—burning my hand, and still, I think, I have the scar of that. And having me eat jalapenos. And when I was little, you know, a little guinea pig, showing me off for the cousins that she could speak English with and I couldn't.

But I remember that trip when we came to the States, when I did not speak English but I didn't know it, of looking at picture books and thinking—we had this book called *The Easter Bunny*—no, not *The Easter Bunny—The Magic Shoes* [*The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes* by Du Bose Heyward], I think. It was about a bunny that brought the Easter eggs to all the children, and the children would sleep with their hands out and get these beautiful eggs in the morning. And I would look at those pictures, and thought if I could look at them hard enough, that they would come true. So I remember developing a very strong visual kind of language for myself as a child.

But—let's see, I lost my thread. I was in that—oh, that older daughter, yes, I mean—older daughter—my older sister doing these cruel things to me, very cruel things. But—where was I?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, in kindergarten, did you—you said—

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, yes, kindergarten. Oh, retarded, yes, because she was this bright little girl, went to first grade. Well, my teacher in first grade decided I was hopeless, you know, obviously, because [I couldn't speak English –MS]. So she stuck me in the back of the room and gave me some pencils, and I drew, all the first year of school.

And then I remember, at the end of the school year she had a competition for the best drawing, that was going to go on the wall or someplace, and we got to vote on it. Well, my picture was chosen, and she really disliked—she must have really disliked me, because she didn't want it to be chosen, so she chose another one. And maybe mine was up, but it was up with some other ones; I remember that.

It wasn't until the second grade that I had a teacher that really responded to me, and it was in the second grade that I decided I wanted to be an artist. I made—remember making a horse out of papier-mâché, and she loved it. I mean, she took it to my parents and she said, "Look at this incredible horse!" You know? [Laughs.] And of course, they were not paying much attention at all.

I remember making a drawing in second grade that was of—and I ran home with it and I put it on the floor and I

stood up on the dining room table and looked at it because I didn't know to put it on the wall to look at it from a distance, but I wanted to see it from a distance. And it was a memory of flying in the mountains in South America when the valleys were in dark light and the airplane was in bright light, and looking down from the plane floating over this valley. And it was that. And I decided right then and there: man, if I can draw a picture that makes me feel like I'm flying, that's what I'm going to do with my life. So that was a decision I made at that age. But this wonderful teacher of mine did teach me how to read.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And was it one teacher the whole time, or did you, by any chance, have art classes—

MARY SHAFFER: No.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —within the—it was just the one teacher for the whole day?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Yes. That's how it was set up. Just one teacher, but we did art classes there in the class, and they were wonderful. But she taught me, you know, "Run, Spot, run," or "See Spot run," that thing, which was great. And then the third grade, the beginning of third grade, another wonderful teacher, who had us listen to music, told us about the Grand Canyon. And I remember the art, making the art, the most. Those are my earliest memories of school, other than "See Spot run," whatever, which was obviously painful—[laughs]—to try to figure out because they didn't teach us phonetically. You had to know the whole "S-E-E, see," was one word, it wasn't the sound. They were experimenting with that. So it was hard to learn to read. But I do remember that I had wonderful teachers.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did your parents or your mom take you into museums at all?

MARY SHAFFER: No, not at all. They were very self-absorbed. They were the—what is it, the '90s? Or what's the me generation? Who was the me generation? They were the me generation before anyone thought of it. They were all—my mom was wrapped up, you know, in her life in South America, and then when she came to the States, she had four kids and a new baby. So she was very busy, and no servants, you know, obviously. We were in the States. She lived on a regular—like everybody else. And so she was busy and my father was a handful. And so, really, I don't have much influence from them.

I remember the tools, you know, wanting—our father would be away for weeks and weeks at a time because he would fly to the Orient and then come back for a little while. And probably, I'm sure he was not interested in children. But I would take his tools and I remember trying to build a frame. I remember trying to connect with him as a builder working with tools. And he showed me—I tried to build a frame by hammering two pieces of wood in sideways. He actually laughed at that. He said, "No, this isn't how you do it," but then he did show me, you know, how you hit a nail straight. So that was an important thing.

When my children were young, I used to go and donate a day of my time to their schools. They were in the inner city in Providence, in the third grade, and I wanted to teach the little kids there—there were a lot of disadvantaged kids, a lot of black children. It was probably 60 percent black, maybe. And one of the projects I took in was teaching them how to hammer a nail, you know. I took tools in for the boys, and other things for the girls to do.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So that was really the beginning, when you said, okay, at—

MARY SHAFFER: —second grade.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: "I'm going to be an artist."

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Because of the way that made you feel.

MARY SHAFFER: It did, yes. And then from that time on, that's what I wanted to do.

Then we moved to Europe and came back to the States. When I was in eighth grade. Then my mother did start paying attention. I think also because teachers told her, "Hey, this girl really can draw."

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY SHAFFER: And she got me—I remember taking a summer art class in the States and drawing. It was so much fun. Or maybe the art teacher said to her, "Hey, I want her in my summer class."

And then very, very luckily, in Europe when we lived in Kitzbühel, Austria. My mother connected me with Hilde Goldschmidt who was a master pupil of Oskar Kokoschka's. And she taught me how to draw. I mean, she was an amazing teacher. She was using the Oskar Kokoschka method, which is where—and that's how I teach drawing

now. It's my favorite thing to teach. Your hand becomes your eye, and as your eye sees an object, your hand imitates it and you walk through objects. And you walk through the space, and you learn to see how your eyes actually look at an object, so when you look at a cup and what the outline is, and what the volume is, and what the surface is. So when you look at something, you're looking at everything—the space in between—and as you see, is how your hand does that. And it's a wonderful way to draw. And she really taught me that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did she teach you just as kind of a private pupil, or were you in a little, small class?

MARY SHAFFER: In that case I was her private pupil.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY SHAFFER: Actually, around the same time I started—I had my first job. I worked for seven cents an hour. [Laughs.] I was a silkscreen assistant for a woman called Babs Fisher, who had been a stewardess for Pan American. And she started a little silkscreen card company, just herself and then me as the laborer. And so I would work with her, and then also take these one-on-one classes maybe once a week with Hilde Goldschmidt.

And with her, I had—I mean, there's a lot of other things that happened to me educationally, but she was sort of my mentor. And she said, Okay, you've got to go to this school, you know, and I was going to go to school in Vienna. I mean, I had my whole plan as an artist figured out. And because my dad worked for Pan American, I could fly anywhere for seven dollars. You know, I could fly to London and see the retrospective of Paul Klee. I mean, I was going to be a painter, so I immersed myself in the European painters and would say that I would never judge an artist until I saw their retrospective. I would never judge a single painting or a single drawing. And because of that, I really got to see the artists who I admired. And in Munich, where I spent some time, I got to go to the Lenbachhaus and see the early German Expressionist paintings, the paintings from 1901, 1907, 1912, and the Kandinsky early drawings, which I totally love. They were—

The other thing, to slip back to childhood for a second, was we had some books called *My Book House,* which—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Inaudible.]

MARY SHAFFER: *My Book House.*

JOSEPHINE SHEA: *My Book House.*

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

MARY SHAFFER: —which is a collection of 12 volumes, and I might even have—I think I have it in Marfa, but they're wonderful books. And they took paintings, like from Rembrandt and stuff, and sort of recolored them —*The Night Watch* and whatnot, Frans Hals. And those were the illustrations in these books. And I would look at them for hours. These were the classics.

And so—let's see, I'm not sure how that ties in. But the education I received was very traditional, old, you know, European—the great art of Europe, which was fantastic.

Oh, so *My Book House*, that was it, the children's books, the fairy stories that I read until I was way too old to be reading fairy tales. You know, they fascinated me. And of course, science fiction, sort of the same thing. *Star Trek* fan. I love all that fantasy stuff because the universe is totally unknown to us and its magic is totally unknown.

Kandinsky had early illustrations from stories, that I knew as a child. So I responded to him on many different levels because of that and because of his painting and because of his—the lines, which were, of course, a little bit like Kokoschka in the sense that they were open and loose and fluid. But um, yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So your teacher—

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, oh—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —her advice—

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —you were going to go to a school in Vienna, but I take it that didn't happen.

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, it didn't happen. I mean, my mom was—so funny—she was totally uninvolved. We were

sent—I was sent to boarding school at nine. We went to Europe—oh, my sister and I—[laughs]—I mean, the first school I went to in Austria, they still hated the Americans. They were Nazis, some of them. And I remember I was in school, the girls around me were knitting what appeared to be large pink underwear; in fact it was, because one of them held them up—it was like this, you know. It must have been over-underwear, you know, the kind to keep you sort of warm, because it was freezing there.

The first day a teacher came in and said something to me, yelled at me in German, and I didn't understand him. So he came over and grabbed me by the hair, pulled me in front of the class and started banging my head against the blackboard. Well, you can believe that I never went back to that school. [Laughs.] So I think I just stopped and I skied that year.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: When I was nine they sent—oh, then we went back to—because we lived in—it's a very colorful childhood I've had. We moved to Germany, to Frankfurt, and my mom found out that we were living—I mean, things were still bombed out—that we were living in the Grand Hotel but it was also a whorehouse. So she had these four little girls living in a hotel that sort of seconded as a whorehouse. So she took us out in the middle of the night. I remember, the middle of the night, "Get your clothes on, get your coats on." Off she went with this little dictionary, put us all on the train, and she wanted to see Mozart's birthplace. [Laughs.] So we went to the birthplace, Salzburg. And so, there we were. Oh, it was beautiful. It was snowy.

Do you want this much background?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes. It's a beautiful—

MARY SHAFFER: Do you?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, it's a beautiful town. Yes.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes!

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, it sounds like she was kind of interested in music all—was she interested in music all along?

MARY SHAFFER: No. She had been a very bright young woman. She had got her college education. She was a chemist, she invented something, you know, or had seen something. She was considered extremely bright. My dad was sort of a rich little boy that went—whose mother had no interest in him at all, very, very spoiled, was given a car when he was 12 years old, an airplane when he was 14. So an—not an only child, but the youngest son. And then my mom was this sort of farm girl, very, very intelligent, really, and my dad just decided he wanted to marry her and followed her bus all the way back to wherever she lived, North Carolina. Every stop, he would plead with her, you know, marry me, marry me. And she finally, you know, said, I will.

So she was a little bit misfit as a mother. You know, she probably would have been a very happy scientist, I think. But she was not interested in children, really, I mean. But she wasn't that interested in music or in art. My family wasn't interested in art. But my grandmother gave us records, record of the month, classical record of the month. So we would listen to Stravinsky, the *Sleeping Beauty*, and all those great things, and dance to them. You know, the music was really strong for me from these records from my grandmother. But I don't think [my parents –MS] were interested in music. I don't remember that.

They weren't really intellectuals as such. I know they wanted to vote for Stevenson, but probably ended up voting for Ike because—you know, and I was worried about that as a kid because it didn't seem right to me. But they weren't intellectual, but we were exposed to a lot. She was more—she was just a very intelligent, intuitive woman who had a great lust for life and parties. They all drank, parties every night, it seemed, and went out and took—you know, learned to ski at age whatever it was, 35 or 40, learned to ski, took us to Salzburg.

And [in Salzburg, that first visit, –MS] we were sold this really old ski equipment by somebody; you know, wool pants and wooden skis, went out to Kitzbühel, with equipment that was, like, a hundred years old. The original ski equipment. And we were the first Americans in Kitzbühel, Austria, and then learned how to ski and that's where we spent our winters. In the summers, we'd go to Frankfurt.

When we went back to Frankfurt, after that horrible educational experience in Kitzbühel, my sister and I decided that we would just play hooky. So we were given money for lunch, I think, and for the streetcar, and would go to the train station *kino* movie, that cost 50 pfennig, and we would sit there all day watching newsreels and saying the words—you know, I think it really helped our German—[laughs]—and say the words before they came out, because they were only half-an-hour segments of film. And then we would go home.

And my mother—when we got our first report card, there was this big red circle around the days we had missed. And she said, "What is this?" And I remember saying, "Oh, that's"—or my sister did—"Oh, that's the days we've been in school. They take attendance very seriously in school." [They laugh.]

So one day we came home, happy as can be, and—I mean, all this time I was drawing, I was painting with water colors, painting scenes of houses and things like that—I remember that—from *My Book House*, you know, sort of from those illustrations of great paintings, unbeknownst to me. But anyhow, we came home and there were, like, three officials from the school and we knew the gig was up.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: So it was just I think January, and my sister was sent off to the only school that would take her, in the middle of the school year which was called the Ecole d'Humanité, School of Humanity, in the middle of Switzerland, which was a great school. They had escaped—Paulus Geheeb was my first mentor, and he had escaped with six leftover children—he had a boarding school in Germany—six leftover kids, two helpers, two teachers, and his wife, who was Jewish. He wasn't Jewish. They escaped. They walked out of Germany, walked over the Alps, and he didn't stop until he got into the middle of Switzerland, which was this little mountain village. And that's basically where I grew up. [My sister was sent first and wrote –MS], "I'm homesick, I want my little sister, I want Mary." So I took the train and went out with my mom.

She dropped me off, and I had gotten sick. Do you want this story? It's sort of a funny story. Here I am nine years old, and my mother—I mean, I come from a good alcoholic family, and my mom's cure for when you were sick was to give you a little beer. [Laughs.] You know? And so there I was, sick, and we were divided into families at the school. And my older brothers from my family, who—older than me, probably 12, you know, 13, these tough guys came in my room and they say, "Hey, we hear you need some beer." [Laughs.] And I said, "Yes, if I could just have a little beer, I know I could get well." And so they said, "Okay, we'll get it for you."

So they go off to the store. And they risked being kicked out of school. I didn't know that; I'm nine years old, you know. [Laughs.] So they come in and they give me this bottle of beer and I take a couple of sips out of it and hand it back. And they said, "Is that all you want? I said, "Yes, the rest is for you." Of course, they were very happy about that. But I just thought I needed that little bit.

That's where I grew up. I grew up in Switzerland and was very fortunate. I had great art teachers, you know, and great music teachers. And I learned English there. I learned how to organize my thoughts. I couldn't pass my English equivalency.

I got into—why did I go to America? My mom finally swooped down and said, "You have to go to America for two years. You have to go to college for two years in America. And then if you decide to live in Europe, that's up to you, but you're American." You know, I even wanted to ski on the Austrian ski team, the Olympic team, because that's who had taught me how to ski. I had no connection to America, really. And so she said, "You have to go to America."

So I looked through the books in the library of my school and kept coming across images of paintings from the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. Of course, it didn't occur to me that the books were there because one of the teachers lived in Rhode Island and would have those books instead of the University of Chicago, whatever. But the reference books I was reading had incredible paintings I wanted to see, and they were at the RISD Museum. So I applied to RISD and to Colby because I wanted to ski in America, but ended up going to RISD because that was really my first choice—and did not pass my English equivalency exam. I did not get a high school diploma. Because my English was so bad. So it was not until the end of my sophomore year that I actually managed to pass the English equivalency exam.

I took the entrance test for the Rhode Island School of Design. I took the test and then we traveled a lot. We were in the South of France for the summer and I never got the letter from RISD that told me when I was supposed to be there, so I just sort of appeared when I thought it might be time. [They laugh.] And I appeared in a little suit, you know, and high heels. I mean, I was a European young woman; you know, you dressed. And high heels and a beautiful suit, as I said, and probably gloves. Who knows.

And I talked to the dean of RISD, and he said, "Well, you're a week late. I probably shouldn't even take you." And then he looked at my work and he said, "But on the other hand, your exam was so good, we weren't sure if we should already give you a diploma." Because that was my focus, you know. It was really my focus and I learned all sorts of things: printmaking, dressmaking, making patterns, carpentry, block printing, sewing, knitting, crocheting, I mean, all those things that you learned in Europe—chopping wood, you know, things like that.

So that's how I ended up in the States.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, and it sounds like partially because a teacher from RISD happened to have the books in

the library.

MARY SHAFFER: No, she wasn't from RISD. She was a Rhode Island woman.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh. Okay.

MARY SHAFFER: She had started a bunch of international camps. Natalie Lüthi-Peterson—very romantic. She had been a young woman, went to Wellesley, and she had been a very strong-minded, beautiful woman who had two men in love with her when she was a helper at the Ecole. One was Jon Swan, the American poet, and the other was Armin Lüthi, a musician, a Swiss musician. Well, she erred on the side of stability and chose Armin Lüthi as her husband, and they ended up at the Ecole. But she had come from Rhode Island, and I think through her—you know, the reference, the books, probably from her family, because she came from an intellectual family.

But that was the exposure. I mean, I had—really, I had this glamorous, you know, smart, intuitive mom. But then at the Ecole, I had three mothers. I had Fraulein Peterson, who was the artist. And then I had Natalie Lüthi-Peterson, who taught me English and taught me how to think. She was the intellectual mother. And then Frau Stein, who had been my first—the head of my family there. She was a woman woman, you know? She would sun herself, do her nails, take vacations to Italy in the summer, probably had lovers. I mean, she was a woman woman. She did the house cleaning. She was head of house cleaning.

But she was also kind. I mean, she had a *Geschenk-Schrank*, which is a present closet, and she would carry the keys around her waist. So if a child needed something—you know, that she considered needed something—she would go and she would open up the little closet and say, "Here." You know, she would give you a little present. So it was very sweet, you know. She was that. So that was my sort of growing up there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you land in Providence, which was not—

MARY SHAFFER: I'm sorry, that's a lot of background.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, Providence, you know, at one time was a very industrial town, but then has kind of—

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What was Providence like when you arrived?

MARY SHAFFER: It was really interesting for me. I mean—on the one hand—I also worked when I was there, because my mother was abandoned, basically, or decided to leave my father about two years before—maybe when I was about 14, I guess, and she ended up with really no money. And she was a very good card player, so she would go out and she was a card shark, basically. She would go out and bring home the bacon by, you know, playing for money. And we would also take money from the school. We would pretend that—we did not tell them that our parents were divorced. We'd pretend we were these privileged American children and say, "Oh, we have to stop in Zurich and buy some clothes," and, "Oh, you know, just charge it to our grandmother"—because she was paying for our school. So we would take home $200 or something. We would have sandwiches, old bread, you know, things that we would take from school, the apples. We would not spend a dime, and we would give it all to our mother because we knew that she needed money. But that was another aside.

So, RISD. What was it like? I mean, so I had to work. I cooked for families when I was there. I babysat.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you live in a dorm?

MARY SHAFFER: I lived in a dorm and my grandmother paid for my school, which was fantastic. I mean, she paid my bills, but I needed to work for extra money. And I was a very diligent student. I mean, I would get my homework done. I worked really hard.

And I was this freshman, you know, and I asked for one thing. I mean, I grew up in boarding schools. So they say, "What kind of roommate do you want?" And I said—I mean, I knew what kind of roommates—what kind of children made what kind of roommates. I said, "One criteria: she must come from a big family." [Laughs.] Well, that's not what happened. But anyhow, I had a roommate that was a dress designer, and I'd wake up in the middle—I needed my sleep because I can not work without sleep, and she stayed up all night. She procrastinated and stayed up all night. And I would wake up in the middle of the night—we had this fight. I wanted the window open, she wanted it closed. And she would have covered me in dress patterns all over my bed! You know, there would be this paper rustling all night! [Laughs.]

But, okay, so at RISD, what was it like? My sophomore year—my sophomore year, I met my future husband at a dance. He was Estonian. He had been a war child. He was a graduate student. And then I sort of found American—I mean, through him I saw sort of more of what American culture was like at that time. And it was so nonverbal. In Europe you sit around and you talk about issues and politics or ideas, it seemed to me. And there,

you know, we would listen to music or you would watch TV or you would grunt—[laughs]—but you didn't really discuss too much, in the beginning. I mean, it changed.

But RISD. You know, it was great. I mean, I learned all about the Ashcan painters. I had never been exposed to Jackson Pollock. We went to New York all the time and looked at the galleries and talked about art, you know, a lot, and it was fantastic. I mean, I loved it. I took a double major, illustration and painting, because I wanted to support myself when I graduated.

Let's see, we've got to get focused, don't we? Family. Discuss your early education and career choices.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Any particularly memorable students—I mean, teachers at RISD?

MARY SHAFFER: Let's see.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what was—was it the kind of thing where you did general subjects and then design and then painting, or what was the kind of structure?

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, Freshman Foundation was fantastic. And Hardu [Keck], my husband—my former husband, actually ended up being the head of that. It was an incredible foundation course. And we did have an amazing teacher, Edna, who ran the nature lab. And you would go in and you would draw, you know, shells or seaweed or something. I had had that experience because one of my early teachers was Fraulein Peterson, who was a German printmaker and gardener and wonderful, wonderful woman. And the other one was a Swiss academician who would make us draw a rock for three hours and then tell us we weren't done, and we would end up drawing this rock for nine hours straight. And by the time we were done, it would look like it was sitting on top of the page. I mean, that's what he was.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: How much layers of—

MARY SHAFFER: Of pencil! I couldn't believe you could do that. But he would say, "No, it's not quite right here." Nine hours on one pencil drawing. I mean, it was exquisite. And you knew that rock better than the rock knew itself, almost, at the end of it, and it was more rock than the rock. I mean, it was beautiful. But Edna, who did the nature course at RISD, was wonderful that way. She did not impose any kinds of things on you. She would just give you the stuff and talk about the structure of shells or rocks or plants. It was a wonderful collection. She was really missed. Everybody that had her loved her.

In my sophomore year I had the president of the school. God, I've just forgotten his name. He comes from a famous—yes, in Freshman Foundation I had La Farge, John La Farge's son. He was a very good teacher. He was a 3-D teacher. And I was teased by some people for making things phallic, you know, because—I mean, Henry Moore, you know, had some sort of, you know, the mother and child figures if you abstracted those. I remembered that. And he was very supportive of my work. He was a good teacher.

And then the head of the—the president of the school was an incredible teacher. He taught a drawing class. And the first assignment was—that was freshman year too, I think, because I still had a roommate. His drawing assignment was to take two—you had a square a certain size, you had two lines, and he said there is one solution for these two lines in this square. One solution! You know, amazing! And so I worked, and worked, and worked, and worked on that, and I came up with his description of the one perfect solution, you know, for that task. And other times you would come in and he would give you an assignment and you would have to put your drawings up on the wall, and he would tear everything down, and then—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: At the critique?

MARY SHAFFER: At the critique. Everything would be torn down and then—usually he would leave mine up. You know, there would be one or two drawings up there that he would leave up.

But I learned. I mean, I learned about Jackson Pollock, as I said. I learned about the Americans. It was fantastic.

And then my sophomore year I ended up getting married. I mean, my parents had divorced, my mother married a man that lived in Palm Beach, and there was no room for us. There was actually no home to go to during vacation because she had uprooted it and we weren't welcome, really, in her house. So I got married. I married Hardu, who was one of the smartest men, most talented people that I've ever met, really. He still is—you know, still. He's dead now, but he was that, and very interesting. It was a difficult marriage but he was a great guy, very smart. Very bad husband, very bad father, but absolutely terrific.

So the career choices were always the same for me, to become a painter, and that's what I studied. And I didn't judge—you said, here in one of your questions, what are your earliest exhibitions? My earliest exhibition right out of school, or right in school, was being judged in the Rhode Island Arts Festival by Kynaston McShine, who

was [chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA –MS]. He curated both my paintings into the show. And they were big paintings and they were good, I think. You know, I was very proud of that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you got married sophomore year—

SHAEFFER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —you continued on and, I assume, graduated?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Yes, I graduated. And then, I missed Europe, so—and I knew how to cook. I knew how to cook. I became a good cook. I didn't know how to cook in the beginning. First meal I cooked for him was, like, put the steak on and a baked potato. I thought you put everything on at the same time and it came out at the same time, you know, which wasn't true. And everything I bought—because we were poor, you know, students with no money. So everything I bought had to have a recipe on the side of the package. [Laughs.] I think it's very smart that companies do that, put the recipe there. But I became a really good cook.

And so I wanted—I missed Europe, so we became friends with the couple at RISD that headed the European Honors Program, and I would invite them over for these wonderful dinners. And we would woo them, basically. We became friends. And then right after I graduated, Hardu was chosen to be head of the European Honors Program, so we got to go live in Rome for two and a half years, which was really important to me. And I continued to exhibit my paintings there at the Tyler School of Art and at the embassy; you know, different places. So I was an exhibiting artist.

And actually Dale [Chihuly] then came over because he was hired. He came over to Europe. We entertained him. He was with the only woman I ever saw him in love with, Frannie, who left him and broke his heart. But he was with her and that's when we met him. And when we came back to the States, we all stayed friends.

But before we went to Europe—you asked another question—was the artist—I can't remember the question, but it was about the art group or about—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Were you involved with—

MARY SHAFFER: —a community of artists.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right.

MARY SHAFFER: And that was a community of artists. That was a very important time because we talked about art all the time. Italo Scanga was a good friend before we went to Rome, and others, [Robert Archambeau, a Canadian ceramist –MS] who headed the ceramics department. Norm Schulman was his boss, but he wasn't a friend at that time, but Archambeau was. And he is in Canada now. He's a good ceramist and I have some of his pieces. And we just talked about art. We talked about what was going on, as I said—and [Martin] Prekop was Hardu's roommate, so we went to New York a lot, saw all the shows and discussed what we saw. So that was a very important formation.

Then we went to Europe and fell in with another group of artists from the American Academy and from the British Academy. And of course, we saw all the great art again. I had not been exposed to—I mean, I had seen the Uffizi. I went to Italy when I was 14 with a girlfriend, but alone. Can you imagine your mother sticking you on a—giving you a hundred dollars and putting you on a train; you know, go to Italy? [Laughs.] But that's what we did. And her father had been an art historian, so we spent a lot of time at the Uffizi and whatnot.

In fact, when I went to RISD I had a post card of David right next to my bed. [Laughs.] Beautiful, you know.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I was curious—when you were in Rome, you were exhibiting. Did you study at all with anyone—

MARY SHAFFER: In Rome?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —in any kind of formal or informal way?

MARY SHAFFER: No. I graduated from RISD, so I had studied, you know, at RISD, and I was judged in that show. And I decided that I was only going to judge myself my senior year; that I wasn't going to look at my paintings until then. Then I was going to judge it and see if I could be an artist or not. And if I couldn't be an artist, then I would go back to school and either—well, I would do illustration, because I was trained for it. So I judged [my paintings senior year and they were fine –MS].

So I just painted. I had a studio and I painted and I used house paints. And I helped my husband with his career. We became friends with a wonderful artist called Abe, A-B-E. He was also friends with Marcia Hafif, who is a well-

known artist now, she was the first one to do clothes. She did felt clothes.

But Abe would jury us into shows and juried my husband into shows. And I remember Hardu had an exhibition at Palazzo Cenci, which is the exhibition space for the Rhode Island School of Design. They were beautiful paintings. And Abe picked up our hands at the exhibition, and my hands—because I made all the work—I took Hardu's little drawings from his notebook and blew them up. I didn't speak good English, but Hardu and I understood each other. His mother spoke a little Russian, a bit of German, and Estonian, so he was good with nonverbal. And we communicated through our paintings. We would paint on the same paintings. We were very close. We would dream the same dreams. He would wake up and he would say, I asked [for you to be in my dream –MS]—tell me about your dream, and we would have been in the same dream. We were close.

And so Abe picked up my hands and he saw that my hands were—that I had made all the work there. And he then saw my paintings and really liked them and started putting me in shows. But he was a very—and then he had a heart attack—wonderful man, really, really good, good artist. But we started showing there, and then when we came back to the States. Hardu was teaching and we lived in a house, a nice house that we had found. And, by then I had two children.

And—let's see, do you want to ask a question now? [Laughs.] Well, do you want to talk for a while? Should we stop for a while?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, sure, we can pause.

MARY SHAFFER: Okay.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: We've gotten you as far as Providence. [They laugh.] I mean back to Providence.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Sorry. We're going to get into glass soon.

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JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay, once again, this is Josephine Shea with Mary Shaffer at the artist's home and studio in Taos, New Mexico, on April 13, 2008, for the Archives of American Art. And if this hasn't been said before, this is disc number two. [They laugh.]

So we're laughing because we just said Mary had gotten back to Providence with two children after being in Rome while her husband was teaching. And what happens next?

MARY SHAFFER: What happens next. Actually, only one child was born in Rome.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay, fine.

MARY SHAFFER: My second child, Maiya, was born in Providence. And she used to say, "Saarin was born in Rome, but I was born in the provinces." [They laugh.]

Anyhow, to get back, yes, it was a complicated time. Basically I had the two kids in diapers and it was hard to paint, you know, because you need—I had a studio, maybe not in the beginning, but it's hard to have the time to stare at your canvas because you need—when you're a painter, you really need to sit in front of your canvas and stare at it, without doing anything, for a long time. And you're imagining everything you can do to it. So I didn't have that time.

But I did have to cook every night, and we ended up—because we're social. We came back from Rome. So it seemed to me every night somebody was there for dinner. And often it was Dale [Chihuley] because—and usually, after a while, he would bring a different girl every night to my house for dinner. And Paul Inveen, who was a very good friend of Dale's, would come. He started a restaurant called the Bluepoint. And who else would be there? It would be different people, but that was sort of constant. And we would—I would cook; we would drink; we would always dance afterwards. You know, we always danced. And that was fun.

We would continue to talk about art. That was much more light-hearted. It wasn't as serious. I mean, our more interesting conversations would happen Sunday morning. We would get people like Mike Fink [a RISD teacher of film –MS] over and we would talk, serious, you know, philosophic discussions about world politics, or art, or what was going on, or the thinking—the current thinking. I loved that part. I miss that part. There are very few people my age group, really, that want to sit down and just talk about issues. But any case, okay, so that was going on and I was cooking every night.

And then Dale started—because he was just starting the glass program, so he started doing publications and invited me, as an exhibiting artist, to be part of that, and he invited people like Manzella [from RISD –MS] and other local artists, [Richard Colabro –MS], who taught at the University of Rhode Island, to be in those first

publications.

In Rome I had been fascinated by window and window light. And as a young mother, I found that you are really sort of locked in your home a lot so windows became a means of escape for me. I wanted to paint on an undulating surface that was like curtains.

Dale took a sabbatical. I don't know how he managed to do that after just starting the program, but he was on sabbatical and Fritz Dreisbach came and—we invited him to live in our house. He said, "No, no, no, no, I'll live in the driveway." So he lived in his car in the driveway until winter came, and then he moved into the basement, which was my studio. [Laughs.] He would get up early and feed the kids breakfast. He was so great. And actually had two girlfriends, I think. That's why he probably wanted to live in his car. [They laugh.] But in any case, [in the winter, when it got cold –MS] he moved in the basement.

He saw my attempts at wooden structures, undulating wooden structures, and he said, "Why don't you"—and also my attempts to paint on glass—he said, "Why don't you, you know, bend glass?" And I said, "Well, how do you do that?" He said, "I have no idea." So he says, "I think you use sand." He said, "Why don't you come over [the the hot shop and start to, you know, bend glass?" –MS] I said, "Okay, good."

So I went over and started using [the RISD kilns to try bending an undulating surface with sheet glass and then I started using metal rods and a big metal window frame that I found behind our garage. I put plate glass on top of those and let the glass sag and bend. –MS]

And pretty early on, I got a piece of glass—and my life was hard then, in the sense that my husband had been drinking a lot in Rome, he had been philandering, although I hadn't been aware of it, but he continued that tradition, which was a family tradition. My father was sort of a hero to everybody, I think, so that might have been an influence. But he continued that. We were only paid once a month, and I remember opening up the refrigerator and only seeing beer in there.

So I went and got a full-time job with the government. I started working full-time so that there would be money for food and stuff. It sounds a little more desperate than it maybe was, but that's the way I felt, you know, like there's not a dime and what do we have in the refrigerator, and have two small kids? This doesn't work for me.

But in terms of the art and the glass, I remember Dale including my early [work in the first RISD glass department publication. My work –MS] started getting published right away. I mean, there was a glass—I think *Glass Studio Magazine*. It wasn't part of *Glass Magazine*. It was earlier than that. It was a stained-glass magazine. And they published the first piece I ever made in glass.

I started using nails [to support the plate glass –MS]. And because, I think, my life was sort of hard then, I used nails, hooks, and barbed wire and would bind things and really squeeze that glass. And it wasn't until later that I realized that the glass was really a reflection of what was going on in my life.

I made a piece very early on, probably '72, that is probably the best piece I've ever made. And when I opened up the kiln and saw it, I just said, "Thank you," because I could never recreate that piece. It was so beautiful in itself. It was a piece of mirrored glass that I had put on a double hook that stood by itself, and it was magnificent. The surface of it looked like those old speckled Cadillacs, you know, that had the chips of reflective paint embedded in them in acrylic or something. And it looked like that. I mean, everything about it was magnificent. And I thought, whoa, wow, this is incredible.

Then, I remember I had my 30th birthday party. And Therman Statom [Tree –MS] was one of Dale's students, and I gave a party, and Tree brought me, as a Christmas present, a little test kiln that he had stolen from RISD. [They laugh.] So he said, "Here, Mary, here's your own little kiln." And Dale says, "Where did that come from?" And Tree said, "Well, Dale you know where this came from." He said, "Well, okay." You know? [Laughs.]

So I took that little kiln and took it into my painting studio, which I was sharing with Bunny Harvey, who became head of the painting department at Harvard [, but then she was teaching at Wellesley, she was –MS] and is a wonderful, wonderful painter, just a magnificent painter. She actually said that sharing the studio [was an inspiration for her to use reflections –MS]. Even though I was painting then, painting and making constructions, I was making real constructions of real windows, using neon, with fans and having the curtains [billow and blow within the window frame cut, into a false wall –MS]. It was beautiful.

So I would make little [two, three inch –MS] pieces that you saw in the wooden box, those little pieces. I'd make one every day that I went to the studio, and they were piling up, which was pretty interesting in itself. I would use RISD's kilns for bigger pieces.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Was it hard to sneak in to use the kilns, or was it pretty—

MARY SHAFFER: No, it was pretty—well, two things, yes and no.

Then Toots came over. I opened up the door and she was, there was this young woman there with tears running down her cheeks. And I said, "Hi. You must be a friend of Dale's," [they laugh] because I didn't have a clue who she was because he would bring, as I said, a different student every night. You know, if he brought a woman at all, it would always be a different one. And it was a really horrible time. I mean, he and my husband would look through the freshman catalogue and pick out pretty girls. That's how bad it was. It was really, really sort of bad. And so anyhow, I said, "Come on in." And she ended up babysitting for me while I was doing this full-time work for the government. And then, you can imagine, I had less time to work on my own stuff.

But conceptual art was happening then. Vito Acconci just did *Seedbed*, that everybody talked about. And art just had separated from [making things, it –MS]—became just ideas. And even though we did performances and things in Rome, this new work was a liberation for me. I had a little pet spider that was making a cobweb across my kitchen so I'd have to duck underneath her—her cobweb—to get to the stove. [Laughs.] And I had mold growing. I had all this stuff going on, all this conceptual work. And I would put it in my file drawer in the office, I would go to work and I'd just file all this stuff that I wanted to make and wanted to do.

But to backtrack a little—I can't remember the sequences of things. So we would go to Rome in the summer, and Hardu, my former husband, would run the European Honors Summer Program, and we would be there. I would have a studio in the [unused basement of the Palazzo –MS] Cenci, and I would just make things nonstop. I mean a huge amount of work. It was like sand coming out of a bag, you know, just pouring out ideas.

I would start experimenting. I made *Fire Laundry* then, which is a conceptual piece of nonflammable material being burnt up with high-voltage heat rods, but I would also put the red hot heating rods against glass because I liked how the sun shimmered heat waves on walls. So I would experiment with the heating elements that I had bought from a hardware store or something. Then I would let it break the glass and the glass would stick to it. The glass stuck to this hot element that was, what, 1,300 degrees or something. I thought, man, what a material; look how strong it is; this is impressive. I was really impressed by the strength of glass. And I think [a RISD student –MS] taught us [at dinner in my kitchen –MS] how to—cut glass under water with a pair of scissors. You know, all this stuff with glass. Like, wow, what a material!

In Rome I also made a series of pieces called *Do Not Break the Glass*, where I'd put scotch tape on the back of plate glass, take a hammer and nail and smash them to the wall, and it would say at the bottom, "Do Not Break the Glass."

So I had a lot of things like that, and I photographed them, brought them back to America and had, like, three whole slide sheets full of this work. I went to see Barbara Haskell at the Whitney—and I said, "I did these in a week in Rome." She said, "What?!" [Laughs.]

First of all, she told me never to use my married name. She said, "What's your maiden name?" "Mary Shaffer." And she says, "Use that from now on; you never know what happens." I mean, she looked at my art; she must have seen that I was being tortured. You know, at some level, this woman is being tortured. [They laugh.] I don't think she's going to stay married very long. So she told me to use Mary Shaffer.

And then I think the museum in Hawaii called me up and said, "Is Mary Shaffer there?" I said "No," you know? "Wait a minute." [Laughs.] I put the phone down and said, "Hello." [They laugh.] Oh, my God, that's me. So they curated me into a show.

I got a lot of response very early on because there weren't people making stuff that I was making. It just wasn't happening. You know, I was making these really big pieces. Everybody at RISD was blowing little vases, little bubbles. Dale was working with a student called Jamie Carpenter. And every morning I'd come in to see what was coming out of my—not every morning, but when I came in, when I'd use the kilns, I'd look up on the shelf to see what had been blown the day before. Well, the most inventive and the best glassblower at that time was Bruce Chao, who was one of Dale's students then. His [blown work was –MS] the most inventive, and Dale would sort of pick up on Bruce's ideas and try them out and stuff.

But I got a lot of response. I mean, I was invited to NCECA to talk, [the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts –MS] which probably still exists, the clay thing. They would invite me out and I would give a talk, and then I remembered after—you would still go out there, they would give you—I can't remember what they would give you, maybe a hundred dollars, they would pay for your air fare or something. And then they would illustrate—I mean they would publish some of the work, which was really great.

And I remember helping my huband, Hardu with his first show in New York. We painted it up and then the director said, "I'd like to see your work," to me, because he saw me making Hardu's work there and said, "Well, what's your work like?" [They laugh.] I said "Well that's what my work is like." And he said, "I want to put you in a show in the spring."

I had discovered in my painting studio—because at that point I wasn't painting anymore, I had no time—that you could take little tubes of glass, I had discovered in the little kiln, and if you [heat tubes fast enough for the glass to stick together but stopped it fast enough to keep the air in the tubes, the glass wouldn't collapse. There would still be air in the tubes so I wanted to do that idea large. I had a little tiny one, so I wanted to do it big. –MS]

So I bought the tubes, took them to RISD, put them in the kiln, and I had to be there overnight because it was a very delicate heating and cooling thing. So I had to sleep under a table to hide from the guard that would come and look, just so that I could regulate the kiln because nothing was really on automatic at the time. You had to regulate it all the time, and cool it down over that period of time. They didn't have a program something that would cool the glass as slowly as I needed it cooled.

Then I remember—it was sort of freaky—I put neon in it. It was the first piece of glass I showed in New York. And I said to somebody, "Yes, I like it, but I'd like it this long." And I put my hand where I wanted it. I think it would be better proportioned if it was this long. The next morning, I came in and the thing had jumped apart, because of the annealing or whatever, but it jumped apart at that particular place. It was a nice piece [about 5 feet long –MS].

Then Warren Benedek gave me my first one-person show in New York, maybe the following year or something, I had made a big kiln at that point.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Was that the name of the gallery or—

MARY SHAFFER: That was the name of the gallery, Warren Benedek Gallery.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And it was his gallery.

MARY SHAFFER: His gallery. He first was at West Broadway, right across from OK Harris, which was at 383 West Broadway, and then he moved, and that space ended up [becoming the Holly Solomon Gallery –MS] an important gallery—Warren ended up moving [to a second floor space –MS]. And I remember my first show there, Arman came and saw it and said, "Wow, I really like this work." He said, "Have you ever thought of going to Antarctica," which I had not, but he certainly got me thinking about it. I'm going to apply now and see if I can go. It's someplace I have always wanted to go, so hopefully I'll go.

Okay, so that sort of got me first involved in glass. And then one of the first shows was at the Huntington Museum they curated a show and I was in that one. They took three pieces. And I went down and I—it was the first show that I'd gone to with my work. My work had been around, but I had never gone to a show. So I went down to this museum show. I walk in the museum—I think through the back door—and I see Fritz Dreisbach. And he says, "Mary, have you had breakfast yet?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, come here." He took me to the kitchen. I said, "What are you doing here? Are you allowed to eat this food?" He said, "Every museum has a kitchen and they all have food in it." [They laugh.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That's very smart. [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: [Laughs.] And then for dinner we left—after we installed a work or whatever, we were driving along, and he said, "Have you had dinner?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, look, here's a house having a party; we'll go to this party."

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, my gosh. [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: And I said, "Well, wait a minute! Have you been invited or anything?" He said, "No, but we'll tell them that we're showing at the museum; they'll be delighted to have us." [Laughs.] So we went in and we told them we were the artists from the museum. They were delighted to have us. We got lots of food. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Food, yes. [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: But anyhow. So, yes. Why don't you ask a question now, because I've been rambling.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, I think we kind of talked about you moving into glass.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Oh, and so the first show—yes, Toots invited me to be part of her first show at the RISD gallery, and that was a long, long time ago. That was probably when I started showing again. And I had large-scaled glass pieces, and then I also had a piece that had—I had ironed cloth. It was in memory of Lynn Dushane [ph], who had been killed in a car accident, a friend of all of ours. And I had ironed pleats in the fabric and put it on the wall with light and a fan so that it blew. And it was like a spirit, a window spirit to her dead spirit.

But I remember I was ironing in the kitchen and my two kids were watching, and my mother-in-law—my Estonian mother-in-law was there. She had never seen me iron before. When she first came into our lives, she wanted me

to iron her son's underpants; I mean, everything. You know, she would be there ironing all his clothes, and she said, "You should be doing this." I said, "No, I'm not going to do it. I'm still a student, you know, I'm a student." She came and lived with us when I was a junior at RISD. That was tough. But anyhow, she—you know, the children would say, "Mommy, I want this." And she'd say, "Shh, shh, your mother's ironing." [They laugh.] You know, even though I was ironing a piece of art, she was still very impressed. [They laugh.]

So that was the first show and that was with Toots, and then I was invited, as I said, to a lot of different shows. And then—I'll tell you about another show—there's one I can't remember—was also a first glass show, and it was in Providence. And I had a lot of different kinds of pieces in it, with some beautiful things with nails and glass, where the nails had made a piece sort of—and with neon. I used a lot of neon behind the light, behind the glass to give it light.

And I worked with accident, you know, with gravity. And that was part of my philosophy, to have gravity shape—do you want me to answer questions as they come or do you want me just to wander around?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I think we can wander.

MARY SHAFFER: Okay. Well, one of the philosophies of my work that I developed in the painting studio with this little kiln was that—and probably because of where I was in my life, I felt that any moment in time was equal to every other moment—and that what I was making, this glass, that ended up being very pretty, was not what I was after. I was fascinated by the fact that you could take a piece of plate glass and put it into a kiln, let it move through time and gravity and then it would become a flat piece of plate at the end.

So that was a very important thing for me, and one of the first pieces I actually showed was this piece that showed that everything is cyclical and every moment in time was equal to every other moment in time. And so I believe that making art, that you worked with gravity, with a strong natural force, and working with chance. I believed in working with chance. John Cage, the *Silence*—I don't know if you've read that, but it's a wonderful book about John Cage and Merce Cunningham and working with chance and working with silence—well, not working—yes, he did work with silence, but working with chance.

So the first show, I remember Dale came down and saw it and he had a big discussion with me. Like, "What is this chance thing?" You know, it really bothered him because he was so busy trying to make very specific things, and we talked about it, you know. And I feel that that was a neat thing because it influenced his *Macchia*, or that series where he lets the bowl collapse on itself after he's blown it, where he started working with chance, which is neat.

That's how I tried to figure out Pollock when I first heard about him when I was a Freshman. I heard about him and thought, how can you drip, you know, how can you—coming from Europe, with a strict art education—how can you drip painting on a canvas? So I did it as a project in my freshman year. I dripped painting on this big canvas or big piece of paper and learned that, ah, you don't just drip it chance-wise, you actually start controlling that chance in some way.

But with the glass, in the studio I developed what I called mid-air slumping, which is where you take plate glass and you put it in a structural system and you allow it to bend and to form and become a form by itself. So that was a very, very important thing to me.

And the other thing I think it's really important to say in terms of my personal education was, I was educated as a painter. And glass, I was never taught anything. I was taught how to cut glass, but I was totally self-taught in terms of slumping and bending. And I used a form, like the auto industry, to begin with, and then I started midair slumping, and hadn't heard of—nobody [then in the glass studio world had heard of the –MS] Heatons. I think somebody wrote once that I was influenced by Heaton, who made little ashtrays by bending glass. I never heard of that. Nobody had heard of it at that time. Everybody was just running wild trying different things.

First the Americans were trying to recreate European vessels and forms that were already known, and then people just started playing with the material. And I certainly was using it for many different reasons, one as sort of an emotional expression of my being, where I was at that time, not understanding it but it was just manifesting. What I was just manifested itself in the work. And the other was, man, this is like a virgin slope of snow. There are no tracks here. Nobody has ever done this—to my knowledge, you know. Nobody had this little test kiln and just put nails in, and this in, and wire and then sand in, and rocks in, and what happens if, what happens if. It was just play and experimentation. So it was totally exciting.

So there was no—that little test kiln was my teacher. You know, it showed me what glass can do. My teacher has always been the material itself. Like in Rome, when that little, tiny piece of triangular glass stuck on that hot—red hot heating element, it said to me: Look how strong I am. You know, you can't burn me, you can't hammer me, you can't destroy me; I am here. And so I identified really strongly.

I mean, my life, as I said before, was hard. My husband was a womanizer and abusive. He would womanize and come home, wake me up and beat me because he felt guilty. You know? It took me a while to figure things out. But I did figure them out, and then when I did figure them out, I just left. I left and I moved into my studio. My kids came with me, and it was a five-floor walk-up without a bathroom, without anything, and we lived there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So, and you only had two children, right?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, two great kids. They both own restaurants. They both own two businesses apiece. And when they first started in the restaurant business, I said, "But you're going to work so hard! But, but, but I'm never going to see you!" And they said, "Well, Mom, who do you think our influence was?"—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What does that tell you, right?

MARY SHAFFER: —"What do you think? That's what we saw you doing."

And as a single mom, I think that—we lived in my studio, it was a walk-up, no heat, blah, blah, all that stuff. And then in the summer I figured, Oh, my God, I can't live up here in the attic of this building with my kids in the summer. What am I going to do? So I became a camp counselor and we lived in the woods in a tent with them and then moved back in the Fall.

Then Hardu went to Rome, back to Rome, invited me to come. But I knew three women he was sleeping with were going as his students, and I said, "No, thank you, I don't think I want to go." So I moved back into the house and just rented out rooms. But I had—because one of my great teachers at RISD, Sullivan, who was a writer and a poet, told me about Walt Whitman's mother. And he said women don't have much choice, you know, economically, but they can run a boarding house. And I thought, Aha, I'm going to rent out rooms, and we did. It was fun, actually.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That's interesting that you got that idea from—

MARY SHAFFER: —a teacher.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. I think—I mean, I know a lot of your questions have to do with education, and I just think being an educator is so important, because in my lifetime, the important people in my life—I mean, a child—you read that an abused child only has to be recognized once for it to matter. Someone has to see that child and say, "I see you and you're wonderful and you are talented and you can do this." You know, you just give encouragement and the child just blossoms.

And little words. You never know those off hand words that are going to make a difference, like "Walt Whitman's mother ran a boardinghouse." Aha, what am I going to do? I'm going to run a boardinghouse, or rent out rooms.

And it was fun. I decided—I thought about it. I thought, not to a couple, that would make me feel lonely, not to a single man or a single woman, so I rented out to a single man and a single woman. The woman was always sort of middle class, came with her TV and her upholstered chair and her curtains and lived in the guestroom, and the man was always the self-reliant, Jewish guy. You know, chance, believing in chance. I just took the first people that came. And he would live in the unheated attic. The first thing he would do is go get a job in the food service industry and bring food back. So it was just, like, perfect. And I figured three adults—you know. If you want to be alone, you can, the other two can talk; two women, if you want girl talk; a little bit of something going on for those other two, male-female—and that it would work. And it worked out beautifully.

And in fact, I'll just tell you about one show that came from that. I was mourning the breakup of my marriage, and I rented out to the first people that came, a young woman, and a young man, we were quiet all winter. We worked and we were quiet. And then suddenly, in the springtime, we all had gone through personal mourning. And I was doing a show then for Murray State University in Kentucky. I was invited to do a show and I was on the phone, and I said, "Well, what does the room look like?" And he said, "Oh, it's like a hundred feet by a hundred feet." And I said, "Well, where are the electrical outlets?" "They're every 10 feet apart on the floor." And I said, "On the floor?" He said yes, and then, boom, I saw my show. It was *In Memory Of*. Every 10 feet, there was going to be a little desk lamp, a student desk lamp because it was a university, and under that desk lamp would be a plastic folder with memories of a dead person, you know, of somebody that had been lost. 'In Memory Of'.

So I asked the people that were renting from me if they had somebody they wanted to put in my show, because I think I had room for 50 people in there, something like that. And they said yes, and then these stories came out.

The guy's father had invested—had a partner and had invested all the family money, and all his friends' and his

family's money, in this venture with a partner that he had. And then the partner left, and then the father killed himself, and they never knew why. Afterwards, after his father had been dead, all these letters came back from the father to his partner saying, "Where are you? Where's our money? What have you done?" You know, "This is my children's money for college." "This is my brother's money for his [retirement –MS]. Where are you?"

So he had been screwed by his business partner and killed himself. He had six children or something. It was devastating to the family. You know, they wanted their father. They didn't care if he had [lost the money –MS]. They did not want him dead. So he was mourning that story, a sad story. And she was mourning another story, equally as sad, you know, a very sad story.

And it turned out, in the spring—so I put their stories in the show, and all these different stories in the show—and it turned out in the spring that we were all gregarious, you know! [Laughs.] So we had a big party, in the spring and it turned out that we were all outgoing and social kinds of people, but that we had been very sad and quiet that winter. It was interesting.

So while I was making glass, I was doing the conceptual work. And I had this dream that I would sell my glass and that it would support my conceptual work, which was really key to me. But my glass work was so unusual. I didn't make vessels, I didn't make bowls, I didn't make anything saleable. I made these strong, strange pieces, and nobody bought them. Museums bought them, a few museums bought them, and UPS bought a few pieces. [Laughs.] But [selling to collectors –MS] didn't happen.

And then the career as a so-called glass artist, glass sculptor, really is a full-time career. You can't just sort of—you can't do two careers as an artist and be a mother, a single mom, and have a job that brings in the money. You can't do that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And run a boardinghouse. [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: And run a boardinghouse. At one time I had—I had seven people—no, 11 people living at my house, and seven dogs. But that was only one night or two nights because this University professor from Brown University wanted to rent it for the summer and they begged me to move in early because they didn't want to pay for a motel or a hotel or something, and I said it was okay. So I slept on my children's balcony and the family slept in my room. But then when I saw a little flea or a—what is it—tick climb up the wall, seven dogs in the house, a tick was climbing up the wall right beside me, and I just put my foot down.

Oh, and the second year, it was Rich—Richard Guralnik lived in the attic, and he was a clown for Ringling, Barnum & Bailey Circus. So he had a unicycle and he would go out and he would ride his bicycle around for the neighborhood kids, it was fun.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you decided to kind of—whether it decided, or you decided, or the original idea was to have the glasswork support your conceptual work—but then your focus really became the glasswork.

MARY SHAFFER: It did, I think, because I couldn't do both, as I said. I mean, I was doing both for a long time. One of my first jobs—well then, when I divorced from my husband, it was complicated. I said, what am I going to do? I had absolutely no money, no job—because he didn't want me to work, he wanted me to be a stay-at-home mom. I mean, I did have a job. I had worked for the government, but then I stopped because I think he really wanted me to stop, or some reason. And he said, "Why don't you—." He said "You can be a waitress in Pawtucket." So that became sort of—[laughs]—the thing, you know? Oh, my God, a waitress in Pawtucket. Oh, my God, you know?

And then I got a call from Richard Calabro, who was teaching sculpture at the University of Rhode Island, because he had come to see my studio, wanted to see my work. And he said, "Mary, you know, we have this program, this extension program—in Providence, and we're teaching sculpture and drawing." I didn't know what he wanted, because I didn't have my master's degree. And I said to him, I said, "Richard, do you want me to take the class or teach the class?" [Laughs.] He said, "Teach, teach!" you know. But I didn't know because I didn't have my degree.

So I started teaching. That's how I started teaching—extension school. It was wonderful. Fun. Really fun. And then they hired me to teach sculpture at the University of Rhode Island, which was great. And then Bunny Harvey asked me to teach painting at Wellesley, which I did for a year.

Oh, I'm sorry, you're sleepy. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No, no, no. It's just—I think it's the food.

MARY SHAFFER: And then—you should have another piece of chocolate.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.] Okay.

MARY SHAFFER: And while I was at Wellesley. I wanted to teach—there was an opening for the head of the craft program at New York University, and it was a three-year program instead of just a one-year substitute program. When I started teaching, all the tenured positions were taken. It was really hard to get. You couldn't be hired full-time. It was a very bad time to go into that job market. And I didn't have my master's degree. I had asked my father—he came to visit once and I asked him—oh, God, these are bad stories, family stories. But I asked him to help me pay for graduate school. I said, "Look, I can't—you know, I'm alone now. I'm going to get divorced from my husband. I'm going to leave soon. I really need my graduate"—I don't think I knew it then—I said, "I need my graduate degree because I need to be able to teach." Then he disappeared for, like, two years. I didn't even know where he went.

So I applied for that New York University job without my degree, and I used every resource I could to get that job. And the first day at the job, the dean of the school invited us all the new faculty into this little—what's it called—conference room. We were all sitting around the table and he stands up and he says, "Every one of you here used all your connections to get this job. We know you did. Otherwise, you wouldn't have this job. We wouldn't have given it to you." He said, "So we need you to keep using your friends." [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Coughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, are you okay?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes, yes. Just a little cough.

MARY SHAFFER: Do you want some water?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No, I'm good.

MARY SHAFFER: "You have to keep using your friends. And every time you get published, we don't care what you say, but you have to say New York University."

So *Life* magazine came to do a photo shoot and the guy asked me—oh, it was really frustrating. I was the only woman in the group, and the photographer came with a trunk-load of film, and I said, "I don't care what you do, but I want my eyes open." Oh, no, no, I didn't say that to him. That's what I thought, because I had looked at pictures of people in magazines, and men always had their eyes open, no smile, looking at the camera, and that's how I wanted to be.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Serious.

MARY SHAFFER: Serious. Strong, awake, alive, conscious woman, you know. So every picture in that whole damn trunk, you know, I had my eyes open, looking at him, not smiling. So you know what picture they published? Me with my eyes closed with a smile on my face. The only woman in that group and I'm the only one with my eyes shut and with a smile on my face. Really made me mad. But they said, "What do you want us to write? I said, I don't care what you write; just write down New York University." [They laugh.] So anyhow, that was that job.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Were you able to use that to go to graduate school? Sometimes you can—

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Thanks, that was the next thing. Then I became involved with a man that was the New York correspondent for the *Washington Post*, and I had been invited by one of my girlfriends, who's still a close girlfriend, for dinner to meet her musician cousin, who was attractive as all get out. You know, played in a rock band or something. Just great rhythm, great guy, very funny. But at the same dinner was this really ugly man, very fat, very ugly, very funny, very funny. And he said he wrote for the *Post*. Well, he had me in stitches the whole evening, so that was the person I ended up going out with.

And I thought he wrote for the *New York Post*, but he was the New York correspondent for the *Washington Post.* And then when he left [New York to return to DC –MS], we figured he worked, you know, what, 90, 100 hours a week, and I supposedly only worked, for the three classes, 20 or 15, supposedly; it actually ends up being 30—or 20. So I moved to Washington with him.

And when I moved down, I looked around for different jobs. And Chris Matthews, from *Hardball,* was a friend, and he said, "Mary I can help get you a job in the government, you know, something more tangible." And I looked around and I said, "No, I don't think so," because I wanted to work. I wanted to have a studio where I could work.

So I became the head of the—God, what do they call it—the Craft Center at the University of Maryland, where we had ceramics, and batik, and duck carving, and just all sorts of things. It had equipment and I could get my graduate degree for free. So I was there two years running that program. It was a fascinating program because with nine part-time students, nine part-time students, I had to generate $100,000 a year. That was my job.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: In tuition fees.

MARY SHAFFER: No, not tuition, just—it was a little craft center.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, from sales.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, from sales and from little classes; you know, come and learn how to carve a duck.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

MARY SHAFFER: It was open to the community. Or come in and learn how to—actually, the thing I did there, which I thought was interesting, because I was taking—my graduate degree in painting because—Anne Truitt was there. Do you know her paintings? She was the first minimalist artist, painter. She was on the faculty. And the men there—I had an extensive exhibition history, and they were faculty at a university, you know [most without a good exhibition record –MS]. And so there was this, like, a real tension.

So I thought, hmm, I'm not going to be a sculptor here; that would be crazy; so I'll get my graduate degree in painting. And I remember one review—we were in a little room—I mean, they hardly ever showed up for other students' reviews, but they were all there in my room, stuffed in there, and looking at my work, taking it apart, being really nasty in some ways. And Truitt, who was a small woman, came—left them, on the other side—came and stood right beside me, and they quieted down. It was amazing.

Another teacher there, who is a terrific—Leonard Koscianski, a great painter, terrific painter from Chicago—he was teaching there. And he said, "Mary, I want to talk to you."

He says, "You know, when you're in a battle, you don't face straight on." He says, "You let it go off you." He said, "You are taking every attack face on." He says, "You have to learn to let it go by. You can't take every barb. Let it go by you."

So it was an interesting experience. But that's where I got my graduate degree, my MFA. And when that was over, I made the decision that I would never teach full time again.

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So I decided to put all that energy that I had into developing my own career. I had a friend who was a businessperson, and he said, "Well, you need to borrow some money if you're going to do this," if you're going to jump off, you know, the diving board, so to speak.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right. That's a very interesting reaction because that's very atypical, because often, teaching is the means that supports—

MARY SHAFFER: —the artist, yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —artists. But, I mean, people go to different paths. So it's interesting to me, after being in this academic environment, you said, "I'm outta here."

MARY SHAFFER: "I'm outta here." It's so ugly sometimes on the inside.

At New York University, I had a three-year contract. I loved teaching there. But there were so many—I tried to get my contract renewed. I tried, and I tried, and I tried. I had gathered students from all over the world. The French government gave me a full-time apprentice, called Remi Muratori, who came. And then the South American artist had this incredible business making furniture, great furniture. He was a sculptor. And so his furniture-maker assistant became my woodworking assistant for my wood class. The French government guy, Remi, became my assistant in the glass class. So at New York University, I made $19,000 a year with two children to support by myself, and my staff came from other sources. I couldn't have done it without them. But it was interesting that way, you know.

And then after that contract was up, I said, "Hey, wait a minute, these students came from all over the world to study with me! Where are they going to go?" And they said, "Well, we've got these two faculty over there that are tenured that don't have any students." [Laughs.] Those poor guys. Anyhow, they survived.

And then about two years later, New York University called me. This great guy [Dale McConathy –MS] that had been one of my colleagues called me and said, "Mary, I want you to come up for a job interview." I thought, ah, thank God, I want this job back. And I had all these plans. I dressed up and had all these plans and I wanted my job back. And I was standing up in his office but, before I sat down, I knew I didn't want the job.

Because I had said, "Well, what's going on?" and he told me all the things that they were doing. As I was sitting

down I thought, Oh, my God, these are the same battles I spent a whole year of my life, you know, fighting. I'm not coming back to waste my energy on the same stuff. I already did that battle. I'm not going to do it again. And so I realized there's no way.

And so I borrowed money. I think it was like—oh, God, it's another story, but I don't think you wanted a story, another story.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Sure, why not.

MARY SHAFFER: I borrowed money, mortgage on my house in Providence that I had managed to buy from my husband, because I said, "Okay, I will pay for half of this house"—the divorce settlement. Somehow I managed to figure it out how I would pay him my half of the house and manage to keep the house from when I started paying the mortgage on it, which was when he left for Italy and when I started getting all of those renters in to help. So I managed somehow to get the house then.

I borrowed a second mortgage and I asked the lawyer—I said, "How does this work?" Not the lawyer; I asked the lender, "How does this work?" He said, "Oh, the day of the closing, I drive by your house to make sure it hasn't burned down, and then we sign the papers and you get your $30,000," because that's what I was borrowing.

Well, I got a call on Christmas, just right after Christmas, from a neighbor saying, "Mary, your house is burning down." And the fire chief got on the phone and he says, "Don't rush." He says, "Take your time." You know, "Call me when you get in. Do you want me to meet you?" And I said, "No, that's okay."

I tell you, oh, I walked in that house; the whole inside had been burnt out. It was horrible. It's something that you don't even wish on an enemy. That whole—it was horrible. Horrible. To make a long story short, to make a long story short. [Laughs.] So my closing was, like, in two or three days or whatever.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did it look okay from the outside?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, all the windows were smashed, you know. I mean, it looked bad. So what I did was, I went and got some plywood, stapled up curtains, pushed them—hammered them up against the window. I made the façade look like nothing had happened. [Laughs.] You know, because—what's his name, oh, that great Russian artist—oh, you know who I'm thinking of, with the orange curtains and—you know who I'm thinking of.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Just thinking of Chagall, but—

MARY SHAFFER: No, no, no. The one that did the orange walk.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh. Christo.

MARY SHAFFER: Christo. Christo came to talk at New York University when I was there, and he had said something like—he said, "Us Russian artists, we had to make the landscape look good from the train so that when foreigners were going by, they could think that everything was perfect." So they would paint the facades of buildings and they would put up, like, trees or—you know, they would make it look good from the train. And so, that was sort of my inspiration, make it look good from the front. [Laughs.]

So I called the lawyer, and the lawyer said, "Mary, I can't come to the closing because I would lie and perjure myself. You have to do it by yourself."

So I got my $30,000, quit my job, and I was down to, like, my last hundred dollars when I started making some money. It was very close. But my children were already in college then. I mean, they were already away from home—were not quite in college. One was, one wasn't quite, but they were sort of taken care of.

My younger one decided she would go and live in New York with her friend and go to New York to the—she was at the Little Red School House and then she went to Elisabeth Irwin School, and lived with Rainer Judd for a while, and lived with another friend that I really liked. So she decided to go to New York and live. I can't blame her, since the house had just burnt down that we were going to live in together, you know. And so I was able to just jump off and try it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And where was your studio at that time?

MARY SHAFFER: Ah. That's another good question. [They laugh.] So you asked about—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Inaudible]—house. [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: It was in the house, yes. So—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, was it? [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, it was in the house. Millville—in Glasstown, New Jersey—Millville, New Jersey—Millville Village gave artists stipends or grants, and they had just started something with master artists. So Jane Bruce, Lino Tagliapietra, myself, and a couple of others whose names just escape me at the moment, were visiting artists, were resident artists, so we had unlimited use of their facilities. It was during the last week. I don't know, it was summer. Because in my small work room I had this piece that was sort of a failed piece, and I looked and I thought, hmm, maybe I'll put a little box on top. Then I went to answer the phone. I had made a little cardboard box and stuck it on top of the glass.

I went to the phone. When I came back into my work room—it was the last week, and collectors and the public were invited, and this guy is standing in my studio and he says, "I'll buy it. How much is it?" I said, "Well, it's not for sale. I don't know how much it is. You know, it's just—I don't know if it's a finished piece," you know, blah, blah. And he looks at me funny and he says, "How much money do you need?" [Laughs.] I thought, Oh, shit, that's a different—that's different, how much do I need, oh. So I calculated what I needed, which, was maybe $600 or something. I said, "Six hundred dollars?" you know. And he pulled it out of his wallet. Or maybe it was $400. I have no idea. And I thought: Oh, that's how you sell art! [Laughter.]

So that was the beginning. That was the first series that sold, it's the *From Cube* series. It was the first work that I ever made in my life that was salable, and that sold, and that, you know, got me out of hock. And then I had some commissions early on, too, which allowed me—the first commission was, I think, $3,000. It allowed me to buy equipment and to buy a controlling device that would monitor—

SHAE: The automatic controller? That from afar you can—

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —you don't have to be sleeping under a table? [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. But you know, also before that, when I was at New York University, teaching there the last year, and I was living in Washington then and I was commuting, the French government had sent me Remi, who was great, who swore I could speak French. But I could understand him. And we would drive my van, my blue van that had been burglarized and it had been graffitied, and I had a big lock on the front to keep the battery—well, you know New York. [They laugh.] I mean, it was a New York van, and my children had nicknamed it Bluebells. And I had repaired it so many times. I had repaired it and repaired it.

But we would drive down from Washington in that, and I had this big commission. And I discovered this huge oven. I don't know how I discovered it, but this big—oh, I know, on the train. I looked, and I thought, huh, that looks like a kiln, you know. And it turned out to be a factory that heated, reheated metal. So it tempered metal. Big furnace. So I went and talked to the guy, and he was a wonderful man. He had no prejudice against women. He basically gave me the keys to the factory. He said, you can use it on the weekend. You can use this kiln on the weekend. And so Remi and I would go down, I'd buy a big piece of glass, [and had a metal support made, we would put everything –MS] into this oven. We had to stay up all night because it didn't have a controller either and it would click on and off. [Laughs.] I remember it clicking—we'd spell each other, because it was hard work. You had to concentrate—click, click, click, click.

And so he was off for half an hour and I was on, and a mouse ran by and I screamed bloody murder, you know, because I was terrified of it. And I grabbed this chair, put the chair down, click, click, stood up on the chair, and spent the rest of the night, you know, standing on this chair—[laughs]—clicking the oven back and forth.

But anyhow, we got it done. It was for the Huntington Museum in West Virginia. And we made it, and finally took it down there. And my partner then was Jim Rowe—you know, as a young woman, you always have a partner—and he was the New York correspondent for the *Washington Post* that I moved down to Washington with when I was—then later, you know, doing the University of Maryland thing, but then I was still at New York University. And Remi and I would come down for the weekend, you know, working in Baltimore, or I would come down, and then I'd be there for three days and I'd have to go back and teach.

And I'd say, "Oh, that was so restful," and I'd leave. And my kids told me—[laughs]—they said they'd do their homework, they'd come home, Jim would have food for them, you know, and they had such a peaceful time, and then I would come and they'd say all hell would break loose, the whole house would be up in turmoil, everything would be like this huge whirlwind or tornado, and then I'd leave and they'd all go, Ahh. [Laughs.] And—say, "That was so peaceful. [They laugh.]

But anyhow, that was—and then my kids also teased me when I lived there in Washington. They said, "Where's Shaffer Studios now, Mama?" And I said, "Well, the garage," you know, because I had stuff stored there and then I was working in the basement. And my daughter Maiya said, "Mom, can I have a piece of your art?" And I said—I

was really complimented. I thought, wow, that's really nice, you know. I said, "Sure, Maiya. I said, "What are you going to do with it?" She said, "Sell it." [They laugh.] But anyhow, okay, so there we are.

So we did the Washington and—the New York thing down to Washington, getting the MFA, quitting teaching—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And, as a [inaudible]—

MARY SHAFFER: —being full-time as an artist. Then Millville helped me, and then from then, I managed to—well, it's a much more complicated story, but I managed to get a place in Washington again, right on the Potomac. It was beautiful. Right by the river. And I got a commission for $3,000 that helped me buy equipment. And it was very lonely, because it was a difficult commission, and I got the idea for it at the subways of New York City. I thought, air, you know, fresh air. I want to make—I had a lobby, to make some glass for it—that I want to make it look like the wind has just pushed this glass out. So that's what I did. I did this sort of wind thing for them.

But because I didn't have the right equipment, I had to stay there all the time, for, like, two months. Not see anybody, not do anything. I'd be finished with work at, like, you know, 12 at night. I found this one place in Washington that was open for dinner, all-night down in Georgetown that I would sometimes eat at. But it was really lonely.

So the first thing I did with my first check that I got, I went and bought a birdbath for the birds because the birds were there and I had a chipmunk that would come and, you know, all these animals would come and be with me while I was working.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And they were your companions.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, so that's the first thing I did with my money, I went out and bought a birdbath.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, how did you get the commission? Was that direct or was that through a gallery?

MARY SHAFFER: That was direct through an art consultant, and we've never worked again together. It was Jean Efron, who was a Washington, D.C., art consultant. And it was for the Carr Company, and that was the first commission.

And then, I know that's one of the questions. Should we just go on to commissions?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right, or actually, it seems to me that if you're going to be an artist—

MARY SHAFFER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —I'm guessing you had to get involved in the whole gallery system—or not?

MARY SHAFFER: How did that work?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That was a question I was—

MARY SHAFFER: Let's see, the gallery system in the beginning. Well yes, I wanted to—when I was, you know, alone without my husband to support me and without a degree and without a teaching job, I thought, How do I get a teaching job? How can I get a teaching job without the necessary credentials? Aha! I will be famous. [They laugh.] So everybody was going to Boston to get galleries, and I thought, you know, I'm just going to go to New York. I'm going to go to the best gallery I can find and knock on that door.

So I was already showing, you know, with Warren Benedek early—[in 1974 –MS]—so I was already exhibiting in New York. So I went to OK Harris and asked Ivan Karpp—I mean, I would go down often to New York and peddle my stuff and try to get a gallery. I was a committed artist from the age of, from second grade. There was never any question in my mind that I was not going to support myself as an artist or be a working artist. So showing in galleries was always the idea. I showed when I was in college, two paintings, at the Rhode Island Arts Festival [curated by Kynaston McShine –MS]. So I always exhibited. Warren Benedek was sort of the first gallery—that was a New York gallery, then I wanted to show at OK Harris because that was a big name [and an important gallery –MS].

And I would go down, show my stuff and be treated like a piece of dirt, or worse. People would treat you horribly. And I would always make sure that I would see a friend in the evening so that I wouldn't be too devastated.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: They could build you back up again?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, see somebody that I could laugh with. And so I would take my stuff around. And I can't remember if I was—I know I wasn't—yes, I was single then. Then I took my work to Ivan Karp. I had a sense—I

mean, I had a sense about who was in charge. I walked in and there was a guy pushing a broom around, and I went up to him and said, "I'd like to show you my work," because he had the power in the room. There's a way of knowing who has the power, even if they have a broom in their hand. He looked at me and said, "Okay". And he said, "Oh, terrific stuff." So I thought, oh, he was just, you know, saying that.

And so that night I was staying with a friend of mine, [Steve Linn –MS] who I still see, who's in the glass world now, who lives in France. He was a New York artist then showing at Meisel Gallery. But I went to stay with them, and he said, "Who did you see?" I said, "Well, I saw Ivan Karp," and he said, "What did he say?" I said, "Ivan Karp said it was terrific."

He said, "What?!" And I said, "Yes, he said it was terrific." And he said, "Well, he doesn't lie! That means he likes your work." You know, get a show with him, you know, or whatever. So that was my first real gallery.

And of course, I was terrified of Ivan because he was a New Yorker, fast tongue, you know, quick repartee. Terrified. Our conversations would be, "Hi, when's the show? It's Mary." "December 2." "Okay, thanks." You know? [They laugh.] We never talked, I'm sure, a full paragraph in our entire lives together. [Laughs.]

But he was a great dealer. He was a great dealer. And he was so supportive of artists. And the first group show I was in, he said—you know, he knew I needed the money. He'd give me, like, 80 percent of whatever it was, or, you know, keep the fourth of—whatever it was sold for, who knows. I mean, it wasn't any money for him. So he was very generous, a very good guy.

I remember my first one-person show at OK Harris, my ex-husband showed up. And Ivan said, "Here's your husband, aren't you going to say hi to him? He's here for you." And I said, "No, he's here for you," and I walked away. You know, I mean—[sighs].

But also then, you see, I was teaching. One of my first shows with Ivan Karp—because that was the big gallery then—my colleagues from the University of Rhode Island came down. And they wanted to—not fire me, but they were really mad at me about something, because there was a student there that was a Sunday painter and he was in my painting class, and I passed him. I not only passed him, but I gave him a good grade because the guy could paint. And the teachers didn't like him. He had his own private plane. He would fly to London for the openings of his shows.

And this student said to me, "Mary, I know you're poor"—because he came up to see my studio once in Providence. He said, "I know you're poor." He said, "Look. Look what I do." He says, "I paint these paintings, I have my own private plane. You know, do what I do. You can paint". He says, "You have to have a handle. I do an ocean scene"—I know we're off the topic—"an ocean scene with a seagull on a stump." He says, "You could do the seagull on the, you know, the rock." [They laugh.] Anyhow, it was very funny.

So I passed him, and that allowed him to get his degree, the degree he wanted, and the other faculty were furious at me. They didn't want him to pass. So they confronted me when they saw me, and that was at my show at OK Harris. And I said, "I like his work," and they said, "Oh, okay." [Laughs.] So that was one little, you know, thing. But anyhow, so that was, okay.

At the same time I showed conceptual work with Ivan, the flammable stuff, and also uptown at the Heller Gallery, I started showing my glass work. And Heller didn't—they didn't say anything. I mean, the galleries were so different, they weren't in competition. It wasn't a problem for them. And my career has always been that way. I've always done what I wanted to do, basically. So I had a glass show at Heller. An art critic, April Kingsley, wrote an incredible review for the *Village Voice* of that show. And although we didn't really sell much, Diane Itter was showing at the same time and I loved her work.

I mean, I have always had the capacity and the interest—and I think it's from my European background—to value craft really deeply. I mean, craft is so important. It's so important in Europe, it was important in my upbringing, you know, learning stitching and all that stuff, and to value things that are lovingly made with craft and with tradition. There's absolutely nothing different—than being an apprentice to a painter in Italy and learning how to make fabric shine or how to paint satin. You learn how to make an object that has a huge, long tradition. So it's exactly the same.

So I had no problem showing in both places. Although—Chris Wilmarth came to my show with Doug Heller. Doug moved from—it was basically a store. His first gallery was a store, and then his second gallery was more like a gallery and I showed there. He had a lot of different galleries. I think I showed at three different galleries with him before he moved into his present location—four different locations.

And—I don't know, I got distracted thinking of all those locations. Yes, but so Chris Wilmarth came to one of my shows. It was a 2 person show that I had with Tom Patti, and I was teaching at New York University then. And he said, "Hey, Mary, just get away from these people. They'll drag you down. You don't belong in this world, you

know. Don't do this."

It wasn't that way for me, because I was abandoned. I lived on $4,000 in 1977 for the year. For the year. You know, I can spend that in a month now, in a day if I'm—well, less than a day if I'm paying for fabrication costs.

But the glass world—I mean, once I started getting invited, like, to NCECA, and then Joel Philip Myers invited me out to give a lecture to his students. And they were so—and Joel and I stayed up all night talking about art. You know, they were so warm and so welcoming and I saw the value in their work. And I tried to think, what am I doing—you know, as this sort of conceptual artist, former painter—what am I doing being in a group show with somebody that's making a vessel? You know, where is the connection, other than just the material? There's no ideological connection. What is the connection?

But it was a warm, loving group that just accepted me exactly as I was and what I was doing, and taught me, you know, taught me how to polish, taught me this, taught me about annealing, you know, or some—shared their information with me and Joel gave me a hundred dollars for going out there.

I think it was 1978 or 1979, the big blizzard. I saw Marvin Lipofsky at the Museum of Modern Art in New York going—I was going up the escalator, he was coming down, or vice-versa. He said, "Would you like to come to California and you could talk to my students?" And I said, "Yea!" He said, "I'll give you a hundred dollars." I said, "Absolutely."

So I called my mom and asked her to come down and watch my kids. Oh, man, so—do you want this story?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY SHAFFER: And it started—I was looking out the window and I was supposed to get the plane out, get the bus to the plane, and it started snowing. And having lived in the mountains, I knew this was serious because the flakes were this big, and they come down with an insistence. There's a rhythm to it. It's really strong, and it was sticking. And I called my mom up and I said, "Mom, it is really snowing down here. I'm scared. I have to leave in half an hour. Where are you?" or whatever. "Get down here," you know, to watch the kids or whatever. And I took off.

And I got the last bus out of Providence. And when I got to the airport, the last plane had just taken off. New York had already been closed. So I went to a friend's house and it took me hours to get to her house with the subway, and I had to trudge up the street and stuff. I mean, the snow was really coming down.

And my mom's story was just as desperate. She threw her skis into her car—[they laugh]—took off, had to actually abandon her car at the bottom of the hill and took her langlauf, her cross-country skis, went up the hill to my house, thank God. I don't remember how my children got home. Either somebody was supposed to bring them home that day or something. But they were home and so she camped out with them. I mean, everything was stopped. People died in their front yards in Providence. The cars were covered.

And so I was stuck in Boston and nothing was running. And I was talking to Marvin—"I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming." And then finally he said something like, "Mary, if you can't get here tomorrow, forget it." And that was, like, my hundred dollars that I needed so badly. And I said, "Oh, just give me one more day," or whatever. And I was so frustrated, I went out and I shoveled my friend's total walkway. It was like this deep with snow. It was, like, huge, long, and I shoveled the thing, came in, lay down on her bed, turned on the radio and it said, thank God, Amtrak is still running.

So I got up and I said, "Barbi, I need to borrow some shoes, a map, and a flashlight, and a coat"—because, you know, I was headed to California. So she gave me—it was getting dark already and I ran outside, walked down to the highway, stood in the middle of the highway and a snow plow was coming by. I stopped this snowplow and he said, "What are you doing?!" [Laughs.] I said, I'm going to California. [Laughs.] And he said, "Hop on—[they laugh]—I'll take you to the train station."

So he took me down close to the train station, I walk in the train station; six people in the train station, in Boston. We all looked at each other. Survivors, huh? Okay, we got on the train, and oh, my God. They announced, we're going to make unauthorized stops to save people. So we stopped, you know, in fields and different places to pick stranded people up. We passed Providence, and I saw—oh, God. I mean, I was headed to New York because I figured the first planes out are going to be from New York—first to close, first to open—so I was headed to New York. And I was on the first plane out of New York City. [They laugh.] I was there, you know?

Anyhow, at the end of it, I had worked for a week and made some pieces, and then Marvin said, "I'm not giving you your hundred dollars." And all the students were around and they got really quiet. I said, "Oh, yes you are. That's why I'm here." He said, "No, but you've used our gas, and you used our glass, and you used this." And I said, "There's no way." I said, "You're giving me my hundred dollars right now or else I'm not leaving from this

spot," or whatever I said. He gave me my hundred dollars. And the students later said, "You're the first artist that's ever gotten their hundred dollars." [Laughs.]

Can you imagine doing all that work, you know—I mean, that whole story—for a hundred dollars. But that's how desperate it was. My mother could have given me money, but she never did. And my dad came, when we were living in my studio—did I tell you—with my kids? I lived in a five-floor walkup without anything. He came and he said, "Oh, isn't this quaint?"

Then I found out—I was in New York at my second show at OK Harris. It was a big show with glass, actually had a 30-foot glass walkway and a nine-by-nine glass wall piece. And this kid from childhood who had become an airline pilot—was trying to get me to come out and see him in Queens! And I said, "No, you come here, I'm busy, I'm doing this show," blah, blah. And he says, "Yeah, your dad just bought Hu Song a house. Here I was living in my studio with my kids, without a kitchen, without a bathroom, and my father just bought one of his girlfriends a house. You know, that was—that just knocked my breath away. That was just horrid. But, you know, who knows what the circumstances were. Maybe he just signed a note or whatever.

But it was like—my parents were not there for me in any way. They pretend now that they were, but they weren't. I mean, my financial records are, you know, public record: $7,000, and that was it. But it was fine. I had a very—it was fine. Everything worked out. I would pick up my kids and take them to the YMCA to swim, and that's where they got their bath every day. [Laughs.] They didn't know. You know, kids don't say, "Mom, I want my bath, where's my bath tub." [They laugh.] They won't say that. They're fine.

Anyhow, where were we? I got distracted again.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, do you want to talk any more about your relationship with dealers, or—

MARY SHAFFER: Dealers, yes. Well, the glass dealers—so Heller was important, and then I started showing at Habatat. And I remember it was very interesting for me because I've always made art to make art. It's never been about selling, never about making a line that would sell. I remember the first Habatat international I went to. There were all these guys hanging out in the bar with the collectors, selling, you know. It never occurred to me because I was always interested in the artists and in the art and in talking with them. I found them real. I found artists to be real, real.

And back then, the glass world was so fantastic. I mean, it was us all learning and struggling and doing stuff and being warm and being open and sharing and being supportive. And those people, like Lipofsky and Joel Philip Myers, who had glass departments were so supportive of young artists, of artists such as myself that were making innovative things. You know, it was very good. And it still carries on. That tradition is still being carried on for young artists, and that's a really important one.

But the relationship with the dealers, I have a different one with each dealer. Ferd [Ferdinand Hampson] is an important dealer for me. He always makes me laugh. He's upbeat. He's a good salesperson. And every one is slightly different. Every gallery is slightly different and it's amazing how different they are. I've had some dealers that haven't liked to talk to the public. They hide during the opening, which is unbelievable to me. I have others that love the public. They don't know anything about art. They don't really have taste, as far as I can tell, but they like their job. They like supporting art. They like artists.

I heard once—I was very impressed with this. I heard one dealer once at a show, like a SOFA show—it wasn't SOFA, it was at Millville, NJ—and he said to his staff, "We've sold from this artist, this artist, this artist, but we haven't sold from these three. Let's concentrate on those three now." He wanted each of the artists he brought to make their little bit of money because he understood that that's what makes it go around.

And I think it's important to know—and I say this when I lecture—that you've got to support the artist no matter where they are in their career. Aaron Siskind, the photographer whose photograph I wake up to every morning, when I met him in Rome, when Hardu and I were in Rome for the RISD European Honors Program, he had three books out or two books out. And we invited him and his wife Carolyn over for dinner because he was going to head the photo department at RISD. I said to Hardu, "I think they're poor." He said, "Oh, don't be silly." I said, "I think so. Let's invite them to live in our guestroom." And we did, and they did, and they were poor. He was famous, he had books, but he had no money. He didn't get money until Eastman Kodak bought all his negatives. After he died the negatives were guaranteed to go to Eastman Kodak. So they gave him a big bunch of money, which he shared with other artists.

But I think people just don't realize. "Well, this is a successful artist; they've got their money." They don't. Artists, no matter where they are in their career, always need that support. And the gallery is such an essential part of that. I don't ever sell privately unless—after 9/11, I sat next to a woman on a plane and I said, "Where are you headed?" She said, "I'm going to Santa Fe to buy art," and I said, "Bless you." [They laugh.] "Bless you!" And she came to my studio and bought three pieces. You know, so that situation, I'll sell to somebody that has no

connection to any gallery. But otherwise, I never—.

And then I sold to a woman who took—my post box in Santa Fe. I was in my car. The postmistress came running out, knocked on my door and said, "Are you Mary Shaffer the artist?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "I love your work. Can I see your studio?" I sold her three pieces at, you know, no money, really. I said, "Well, there's a tradition of postmasters buying art. I mean, all of Rousseau's paintings were bought by the post guy." I said, "There's a good tradition. Come over." [They laugh.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was thinking about the postman Roulin, that posed for Van Gogh, not necessarily buying those pictures, but yes, the artist and the postman.

MARY SHAFFER: The galleries are really important. And that's why I sort of object a little bit to all these fundraisers that people do.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was wondering about that. It seems like there are a lot of them in Santa Fe. I don't know—

MARY SHAFFER: There are more in New York.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: More in New York?

MARY SHAFFER: There are so many in New York, and it undercuts galleries. The artists don't get any money. And now they're starting to give, like, 20 percent back to the artist or something, but it undercuts the galleries. And you can't—I don't know, the glass collectors anyway, I can't speak for other collectors, but they—and the Glass Alliance was started by a great guy, who I adore, but his name, he died a long time ago. He was a CPA. He lived in Detroit. He started the glass collectors group. Sossin. Hilbert Sossin.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes. Right, Jean and Hilbert Sosin.

MARY SHAFFER: He's a great guy and he started it. And now it's gotten—with some unnamed people—it's gotten so self-important. It's all about the collector. It's all about them having power. I mean some of them. I shouldn't talk about all of them. But some of the groups feel that—in fact, there was even going to be a lecture—you know, what tells—to younger glass artists to tell them what to make. That's not how art works. I mean, the collector can't have such an important influence. They have an important influence in that they give the artists—well, you know all this—to give artists money so they can create their work.

But in any case, I think the galleries are great and I don't think that they should be undercut or undersold by the collectors—by the artists or the collectors.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, that's kind of a nice segue to one of the next questions, which is, how has the market for, I guess we'll say in your case, glass or glass art, or art in general, changed in the time frame of your career?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, as I said, I guess it wasn't until way, way into my career that I actually started selling anything, that I made anything that was sort of salable. But it has certainly changed. I mean, when I started out, there were no so-called glass galleries and there were no group of glass collectors. That has certainly changed, and I think it's wonderful.

What the collectors have brought to this whole marketplace, really, is a commitment to their collection, a huge commitment, where they're doing museum shows, where they're donating it to museums, where they are understanding the structure of the art market enough to say, Hey, this stuff is great, let's support this. We're going to give this museum a wing so that when we die, our collection can go there. Collectors have been doing that forever and ever, but—and the French government, as you know, Jeu de Paume or whatever that museum is, I mean every work in there was donated by the poor widow, every single work. [They laugh.] You know, the government said either we're going to take everything you own, your house, your children, or you're going to give us those paintings.

But no, I think it's an incredible service. That's an incredible service that the collectors have done, and the books that have come out of different collections. There is a fine line and, yes, it gets crossed all the time, but the good has really been to make it possible. I mean, some years ago, I thought that the whole glass thing would just sort of collapse because it was getting so watered down and so bad, but I think the quality, especially of some galleries, have stayed high enough, and the work coming out of some of the schools and being supported by GAS and by other magazines and things like that is really bringing along talented kids, talented artists, not all of them but some of them.

As I said, I did—Clifford Rainey asked me to take over his program when he went on sabbatical. His students—one of his students, and I knew this—of course you know this when you're a teacher, you know which ones are going to succeed and which ones aren't. And one that everybody sort of—the other kids sort of ridiculed him, the

cool kids sort of ridiculed him, he was just committed, I mean committed to making art. I get emails from him all the time of shows he's in and of the terrific work he's doing. I'm so proud of him, he worked all the time. And this one girl was sort of looking around for a boyfriend. I said, "I'd go with that guy." [Laughs.] And she said, "No, no way." I said, "Well, you wait and see. You wait and see."

But it's fun. As an older person, you can look and can see what people are going to do. In fact, sometimes you see too much when you look.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: It might be a good moment to pause.

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, good. Let's do that.

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JOSEPHINE SHEA: Once again this is Josephine Shea interviewing Mary Shaffer at the artist's home and studio in Taos, New Mexico, on April 13, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc number three.

So I thought since we talked some about the galleries, that it might be—and how you had seen the market change in your lifetime, your experiences with commissioned works, and you mentioned the first one that enabled you to buy tools and everything—but how much would you say your work is commissions? And has it changed in the years?

MARY SHAFFER: Actually, not really commissions. And actually, when I read this I was thinking of big commissions. But it is true, I did get a commission from a couple that—lets see, I wonder if that was a commission or not from the Chazens. I can't remember if that was a commission. I can't remember. When collectors commission me, it usually takes such a long time to make, so it's crazy. So I think the first one probably was from the Chazens in New York and they wanted me to do an inversion of this wall piece that I had made. And it did take a huge amount of time because it wasn't only just the glass piece, it was getting a mold made and fabricating it in bronze, and then having two ledges fabricated that would hold up the glass and the bronze piece, and have the bronze ledge strong enough to hold 200 pounds, because that's what the bronze part weighed. So they commissioned me for my first one. They commissioned me for two pieces and I did another one for them.

But then the Mendels from—Joseph and Anna Mendel commissioned me for a piece, and they live in Canada, in Montreal. And I flew up to see them—well, I had met them at Harvey Littleton's studio, like, three or four years earlier. And Harvey said to them and to me, "Mary, show them your book"—or said even before they came over, "Mary, I have some collectors coming over. Do you have your book with you? I want you to show them your work"—which was, again, very, very kind of him, of Harvey. And so they came to the little guesthouse I was in and I showed them my work. And Anna immediately looked at them and she looked at her husband and said, "I love these pieces. I want one."

Well, it took her three years to talk her husband into it—three or more years, I think. I went up to Montreal to see their place because they wanted me to look at it. And they said, "Look, we want something that goes—" I can't remember if they said they wanted something outdoors or indoors. But in any case, I had this idea that I would make a piece for their balcony, which is, I think, where they wanted the piece initially, and then I'd make a glass piece for the inside. And the reason the bronze piece went outside—and maybe that was one of the first Inversion Series; I can't quite remember—but the bronze was going to be outside because the snow and the ice was so intense it would break a glass piece. So the glass piece, I told them, had to go inside so it wouldn't break, and then the bronze piece went outside. And that took a while.

That was a very wonderful commission for me because I had been making maquettes that were maybe, oh, say eight to 12 inches high. And dreaming, dreaming, Oh, I want to make this big, I want to make this big. Well, they gave me enough money, which wasn't a huge amount of money by today's standards—those pieces cost a lot more—but enough money for me to make the first really big piece, for me to increase the size of my kiln—which is down in Marfa; it's big; I can make a seven-foot piece in it—increase the size, to make the mold, and to make a lot of mistakes, you know, trying to make this thing that I saw that I wanted to make really badly for them.

So that was a great commission for me, a private commission that allowed me to, again, buy—you know, to ramp up my equipment and allowed me to make something on a scale which I had envisioned. So that was great. And those are really the only two private commissions.

I had another collector couple that I tried to talk into a commission. I wanted to make the piece so much. And the commission gives you the money to make the mistakes; to get your equipment to where you can make the big pieces, and give you enough money so that you can spend it on the materials that you would not be able to do, and to ramp up your work, and to make this piece you envision that you cannot afford to make for yourself.

So I couldn't talk them into it because they were the kind of couple that needed to see the work. And I never made the piece I wanted to make for them, but I would have loved to have made it.

But in any case, when I thought of your questions at first, commissioned works, I was thinking of public commissions. And the first one—I told you about it—was sort of a private commission from the Carr Company.

The second one I read about in *Sculpture* magazine, and it was for the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. And I read about it in the sculpture—*Maquette* magazine and applied for it and ended up on the short list. So I was invited to go down and interview with the committee.

And I remember, again, going to the airport and meeting—and a friend of mine helped me buy—or paid for, paid for the suit for me to go down, so I looked decent. And I met Chris Matthews again from *Hardball*. He said, "Mary, you're looking real spiffy." I said, "Well, you know, I really need to go down and get this commission."

So what I had done is—I was one woman with four guys. There were five of us. So I figured that that was going to be an advantage because they would remember me, because they had to see all of us on the same day, see all our slides and meet us all. I thought, aha, they'll remember me; advantage number one. And then I researched everybody on the committee, what their names were—I memorized them—and what they did for a job. So if I met, say, Joe Schmo, I said, "Oh, you teach at the university, don't you? You teach sculpture." And they would brighten up and say, "Yes, I do, as a matter of fact." And the other one, I said, "Oh, you have a gallery in town, don't you?" You know, so I knew something about them, which helped.

And then I presented my stuff and I had that great-looking suit, you know. [Laughs.] I think I only wore that one time. And clean shoes—shoes are always important—and ended up making the proposal, which was then put on display, public display, and my piece got the most votes from the public.

It was for a César Pelli building and I love César Pelli's architecture. So when I made the proposal—and we had to see him; I think we had to make the proposal and actually show it to him—I had a bunch of drawings and I took them to him. And the relationship—there was a relationship to the building, which was important because, first of all, I loved his architecture, and it was in the stairwell and had to have a relationship to the architecture. And I wanted the first spot as you walk in, and he wouldn't give it to me. He said, "No, the staircase to the left." But I wanted the center. I wanted the most important focal point of the building, but I didn't get that.

So I made some drawings and I designed a piece that mimicked the structure of his building, in a sense. Because he had glass—I mean, his first piece of architecture I ever saw was the Blue Whale in Los Angeles. And that was the first glass-clad building in the world, as far as I know, and it was major. I had a show in LA and I looked at it and I liked it, so to get to meet him in person and to design for his building was really fantastic. He was the chief architect on the TWA Building at Kennedy Airport, which was built by Saarinen, but he was the chief architect on that. I didn't know that. I found that out later. Then after he built that building, he had branched out and did his own design company and teaches at Yale in New Haven.

So I went up to New Haven, showed him my drawings, and he looked at one and said, "I like this." And I said, "I'm not in love with that yet," and he said, "You will be."

Well, it was a nightmare in the sense of how do you build it? I had the vision. It was this column that had smooth sides from the glass to the bronze. It was a huge pieces of glass the same size as his fenestration, and then the bronze were the depth of his floors, and then other glass going down. The spacewas 52 or 53 feet high. And the building had been built on the corner of Tryon and—I forget—Market Street, or something like that. It had been the original crossroads of the town. The town had been a trade crossroads and the town built up right there at this crossroads, and that was where this building was. So I had the structure, the basic structure of the—the footprint was basically a cross, although there wasn't a cross, it was circles. And I designed this, and the difficulty—and then I ended up getting—I did the drawing and I ended up getting the votes from the public, but the hard part was to figure out how to make this thing. I knew what it had to look like. You know, in a flash I knew what it had to be, but there was no technology for it.

So César said, "Well, here, go into that room. There are three engineers in there and my chief architect—" Mitch Hirsch was the chief architect on that project "—and you guys figure it out." And every time I sat down with those engineers they would start sweating—[laughs]—because everything I wanted to do couldn't really be done at that point. Glass couldn't hold its own weight. It would have to be suspended. There was no way—I wanted to do safety glass even though that wasn't the code, but I wanted to sleep at night so I wanted the whole thing safety glass, laminated safety glass, or then at that point just safety glass. And I wanted smooth connection from the glass, a straight line from the glass down to the bronze, and I wanted fiber optics inside. And I wanted it to be invisible, you know, how it was held up.

So I dreamt all the solutions. You know, I would ask for the—I would pose the question, and when I woke up in the morning there would be a riddle answer. So I'd have to interpret the riddle answer and then I would have the

solution on how to do it.

So that thing got built over a long period of time. I got $130,000 for it. Initially, people were flush with money and the builder said, "Hey, you can use our scaffolding. You know, you can do this. Oh, we'll help you with that," blah, blah, blah. Well, then money got tight so I had to buy the scaffolding, or rent it, and then they used my scaffolding that I was paying for. And I realized later that if the architect, or if they had tried to make this piece, it would have cost them twice that. I didn't end up with a penny.

But the magic was, I got to build it. I got to build this vision of a thing that was suspended in air. I designed it so the building could shrink and move—shrink an inch and move in any direction two inches, and so it would sway but it looked like it stood. There were fiber optics inside of it. So it looked like fireflies in the jars that the kids, you know, in South Carolina and North Carolina put in jars at night and look at. And I wanted the children to be intrigued by it, and then when they got older, I wanted them to think, Oh, my God, how does this thing stand up?

The only break I really got was from the fabricator, great fabricator in Houston, who just gave me the thin stainless steel cable that I wanted because it looked invisible, you can't really see how it's suspended, because it's stainless steel and it reflects.

It took me 20 days on a scaffolding, a 50-foot scaffolding. We started out with 24-inch-wide, two 12-foot-wide pieces of wood. And the guys—initially they said, "Hey, do you want students to help you?" I said, "Are you kidding me? I want the best glaziers that we can find—[laughs]—you know, that North Carolina can find." So I worked with this great group of guys, four guys. And I only found out at the end of the 20 days that one of them had lost his son falling off a scaffolding, the lead guy. But while we were working, he said, "Hey, we can't work with this 24 inches, we've got to take one of these boards off." So I was there on this 12-inch board way up there and my hands just memorized the feel of galvanized metal. I mean, I'll never forget what that galvanized metal feels like in my hands, because you have to be careful up there.

But anyhow, that was just an amazing opportunity to make something that you saw and that you want that you could never afford. What artist can afford to spend $130,000 on a piece? It's just impossible. I mean for me it is. And that part was really, really fun.

And then I went back there. I drove through—I can't remember how many years ago, but I drove through, and sure enough—it was in the fall, maybe October, November, every single building in town—oh, the kids nicknamed my piece Sparky because of the fiber optics going on and off. And when I first did it, the director of the center did not want to keep the lights on—because I went through once and I saw the lights weren't on—so I calculated how much it actually cost and I sent her a check every year to pay for the electricity so that they would keep the lights on nonstop. And it was minimal. Fiber optics doesn't cost anything. It's just one little—two little light things plugged into the wall. But I learned a lot doing that, and it was fun.

So I drove through a couple of years ago, 10 years ago or something, and every single building in that town had a Sparky in their hallway—in their stair shaft, a Sparky just made with lights, you know, those colored lights that are encased in plastic going down. And sure enough, they had put one in the space that I had wanted initially. So it was a compliment because it was an imitation and it was also like, ooh, why didn't they give me that space to begin with?

But because we ran out of money—it had a second component, it had a sound component in the basement. I was going to—I've done sound pieces before and I was going to have these little stories, local stories from the area, and have them at different levels so children would hear one story and adults would hear another story. They'd only hear them when they were near the wall, like sort of a secret being told. So that was a component—I forgot what I called it—that wasn't in the final piece because I just ran out of money.

And then there was another commission—you want to hear about the other commission? I was, again, breaking up from somebody—moved—and I got a call from somebody in Hawaii saying, "Well, Mary Shaffer, you know, we just haven't gotten your proposal yet." And I said, "For what?" They said, "Well, you're on the short list for this commission." And it was, like, $240,000. And I said, "Wow, when is the deadline?" It was, like, five days away. And they said, "Well, we can—" because I had moved and the mail hadn't caught up with me we figured out they could mail it to me, I would have two days. I would have to mail it back and it would get there. And then I realized that I had—are you okay there?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes, fine.

MARY SHAFFER: Then I realized I had some air miles, so I said, "Well, I'll just come out," because that would give me four days to be out there, to see the site, to do some research, and to make a proposal for that space.

Well, I flew out, I was in Chicago, and for some weird reason an agent took my ticket. So I was in Chicago and I didn't have the rest of my ticket, but somehow I managed to talk them into the fact that they had taken it and

not given it back, and I had to go to Hawaii, and they better let me on the plane or I was going to have a bloody fit.

But anyhow, so I got there and started researching. There were only four of us, I think, or three of us on the short list, and one of them was a friend of mine, Dickie Fleischner, a sculptor, a well-known sculptor. I thought, man, because he's well-known, I thought, hmm, to have him out here, this means this is an important project. So I looked at the site and I researched in the library, and I found out that there was a magic underground river in Hawaii called Pukana-wai. It would appear and disappear. So I called part of the piece Pukana-wai. So what I basically did is I worked with photographs, Polaroids, the local Kinko's, making copies, cutting, pasting, making the proposal while I was there. And so Pukana-wai was a river, a little segment of a river that was going to rush up the hill instead of downhill because it was magical.

And then the other part—I can show you a slide of it—was something that I had been working on that I wanted to build big. It was a maquette. It was a tall, tall sculpture that had pieces of glass that flowed through it, that made it look like the segments of metal were floating. So the glass would be sort of a magical part of this sculpture.

And I presented the proposal, and for some weird reason I was—I think the person I was living with at the time said to me, "You know, you're too egotistical. Don't keep talking about yourself." So I thought, hmm, okay, I'll try to be more humble. [Laughs.] So I didn't drop any names. I didn't say, this is in this museum, that museum. I didn't do that. I just presented the work very honestly, straightforwardly.

And Dicky Fleischner came with his very pretty assistant and gave one big reference right after the other, and everybody apparently, I found out, fell asleep during this presentation. But he got it anyway because—I hadn't understood the—I hadn't been able to research it, and the man with the most power—you know, there's only one person with power on that commission.

Do you need to fix something?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No. In the end, that makes the—

MARY SHAFFER: That is it. That's the thing. It doesn't matter. I mean, they all went to sleep, who cared? The one person that was important stayed awake and heard all the right words that I didn't say.

But he got it. Dicky got it and I was happy for him. I mean, that was fine. Of course, I would have loved to make that. But it ended out—I saw him a couple years later and I said, "What happened? Did that work out?" He said, "Oh, no. They ran out of money and nobody got paid." I mean, it was a disaster.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, my goodness. [They laugh.]

MARY SHAFFER: So it was a disaster for them.

And then another commission I tried for, the same sort of thing. I wanted to make a fountain. It was a beautiful idea, I think. The maquette was a fountain, was this fountain that had water flowing, and I wheeled it across the parking lot into the meeting. And everybody there was just, like, wide awake, oh, wow, what a—you know. And thank God I didn't get it, because first of all, there was not enough money to make that piece that I envisioned. That was the best thing.

But the art consultant wanted her guy to get it. He did some silly little mobile thing, you know—she chose him. I mean, commissions are hard that way because there are undercurrents. If you don't understand what the undercurrent is, you're not going to get it. And it seems to me that you design something, or you think of something that is out of your reach anyway in terms of money. You always lose money afterwards. You sort of make it just because you fall in love with the idea. But it's fun. It gives you an opportunity to make something big.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: To really stretch.

MARY SHAFFER: To stretch, yes. No, there's nothing like it. I mean, it's invaluable for artists to be able to have commissions.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I think one of the next questions here is, what are the qualities that you enjoy working in for your work environment?

MARY SHAFFER: That I have to work outside. So every place I've ever worked, I've been able to work outside. You know, I just love to breathe the fresh air and that's important for me. I thought I could work in New York, and I moved my studio from Maryland up to New York. I got a place, set it all up, got the electricity, plugged all the ovens in, spent quite a lot of money doing it, but I could never work there. I just felt so imprisoned, you know, in the space, and couldn't do it. I never made one piece there.

But to be able to be outside, like a piece I just made that I haven't paid the fabrication bill for. I was in Kitzbühel, Austria and I wanted to make another large curtain, large cast-glass curtain. So I strung up—the situation outside, it was snowing, I was in my boots, I was working with hot wax and stuff, and the wind was blowing [the piece is named "Wind Curtain" –MS]. And it's part of it, you know, being in nature. It's really important. And the afternoon sun is really important to me.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You mentioned that your typical workday might be 12 hours or a very long day.

MARY SHAFFER: It was, yes, longer. Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What would be kind of a typical kind of a rhythm? Do you plan your work ahead in advance the night before? Or tell me how—

MARY SHAFFER: Well, I plan some things. Not the night before, because if I start thinking at night, I won't sleep. But when I wake up, I know what I have to do. I'll say, ah, today, okay, and then I'll go through what I have to get done or want to get done. But there are many different ways of working. With commissions, yes, you think it out sometimes in a flash and then you have to figure out how do I make this, how do I make this possible?

Other times it's just one-on-one with materials. So you're at play in the studio. You're centered, your body—it's a combination of your body, your soul, your heart, your mind, the nonverbal, the rhythm of your body. It's all that stuff coming together, talking equally with the material. It's not just—you can't say, just your mind, I'm going to make this, because if you do, it looks contrived and it doesn't look honest. It has to come from within, you know, from the whole part of you out as a rhythm. And that's just working—for me, working directly with the material.

So I don't draw it out. I'll draw it out if it's a commission for somebody. I'll draw out my installations or, like, my Tool-Walls. I will draw it to scale with a scaled ruler. Before I do a show, I will draw everything to scale so I know exactly where things have to be in the space.

Let's see now, on the installations that I've done—say for the MAD museum in New York, which was a fiber optic installation, I got down from the scaffolding in North Carolina and went up to New York for five days and made a piece with fiber optics and glass in the center, and I think I just planned it out. Because one of the things—I think the reason I do that is because one of the reasons I stopped painting was that I could change diapers, make dinner, clean the house, and be thinking about my work. So I could plan everything out, or plan out the structure of how I was going to make something, and then go and do it. So I didn't have to sit at the drawing table. I didn't have to sit in front of the painting. I could plan it out in minute detail and then just get it done. So a lot of my work is that. It's almost daydreaming. I mean, planning is sort of like daydreaming, well, I need this and I need that.

So I knew, for instance, what *Point of View* in New York at the MAD museum was going to look like. The five people—I was the only woman with four guys, [John Perrault asked me –MS] if I wanted the biggest space because he knew I wanted it, and I got it. Everybody came in with crews and trucks and crates. I came in with just this little, like, suitcase I dragged, you know, like I was getting on an airplane, and went upstairs. [They laugh.] It took, like, 600 hours to get it done, but I knew how it had to come together.

Of course, I was just blown away by how beautiful it ended up being. I had no idea that it was going to be that complex and that beautiful. I called it walking into a living drawing. It was a bunch of fiber optics hanging from the ceiling, and in the center of the room there was an encircled space using glass that had fiber optics in it with a space so you could imagine a person standing in that space. And at the bottom of the tubes was a little puddle of glass that looked, again, sort of like water. And the ceiling of the museum was a crisscross, and they had a little groove in the middle of the crisscross of the wood. And in that groove is where I put the fiber optics. So you looked up and you saw this grid of light just pulsating. And then all throughout the room were these lights, these lines that would appear and disappear because if you scratch the edge of fiber optics, it glows.

And at the end of some of them I had little pieces of glass that I stuck on, glued on to the end of the fiber optics so it would be sort of brighter, like a big rain drop or something. And then on the walls I drew lines, living line. A living line, for me, is a line that goes from light to heavy, to thin to thick. It lives, like your hand lives. And so these living lines on the wall. So when you walked in, you felt you were walking into a living drawing. So that was the installation.

So, no, I didn't draw that. I don't usually draw my work before. I just think about it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what about materials? I know you work quite a bit with plate glass—

MARY SHAFFER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —but you work with other types of glass as well, right?

MARY SHAFFER: I do now, yes. I think all that experimentation with the different ways of working came in with the influence of Peter Keogh, who is a Canadian artist. He invited me—I met him at an opening in Santa Fe, and he said, ["are you *the* 'Mary Shaffer'" and I said yes, then –MS] He says, "I've always admired your work. Come over to my studio. I'd like to—any way I can help you, I'd like to help you." And so I had this idea of, like, picking up hot glass and doing different things with it. So when I started the Tool Series—and he helped me invent this—Peter helped me invent a tool to use for work that I call dippy-do. [Laughs.] So I would put the tool in the furnace and dippy-do around and have gotten quite good with it, actually. It's not like a blow spipe that's balanced. It's off-balance. Everything is off-balance and you have to find the balance.

And so with the Tool Series, I would do things like make something with hot glass and I would cool it, then I would slump it, or I'd fuse it, so I used all the techniques—slumping, fusing, casting—and would combine them and recombine them in different ways. So that was fun. That was fun and that was experimental.

But basically, I started my career with the mid-air slumping, the term that I coined, and with plate glass, using plate glass.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Is there a particular type of plate glass that you usually work with, or are there different types or colors, or dimensions, or depths, and you just choose depending on your project?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, I do. Mostly it's just plate glass, regular float glass. Sometimes I use water white or crystal clear, and that's a clearer glass. I did a commission for the Chazens that way, with the crystal clear. It doesn't have that green tinge. But I've gotten pretty fond of this green tinge. I like it. So that, actually, one of the cast curtains I'm going to do in the Czech Republic, I want that green. You know, people think, God, Mary, don't you want to get away from that? But I like it. And I like clear glass very much. So I use regular plate. The thickness depends.

For that first commission I did for the Carr Company, I used a glass that has been out of production, which is a ribbed glass, and then I captured air in it. And down at the Pizza Foundation, my daughter's restaurant in Marfa, everybody, like, takes photographs of her windows because I had all this old glass that I sort of put in the windows in different ways, and it looks good.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And most of your work, can you do it in the sizes of your largest kiln, or how often do you have to go to outside fabricators, or how does that kind of work?

MARY SHAFFER: How does that work? Well, the big piece I had to make in Baltimore. And I'm using the Czech Republic now for the cast stuff, although I can make small cast pieces in my kilns. I'm not really set up the way they are, and they're so set up. And the polishing is really difficult.

I had a great polisher. I hired a construction worker from Argentina, you know, a Rastafarian, when I lived behind the Jiffy Lube—when I lived in my studio behind the Jiffy Lube in Santa Fe. He also lived in one of those bins that we lived in, those metal bins. And he started working for me and I taught him to polish with that machine I showed you, that portable machine. Well, the first time—[laughs]—at one point he threw off his apron and his goggles and everything and stormed out of there just furious. He came back the next day and said, "I'm sorry about that." I said, "Don't worry about it. The first time I polished, I was in tears. The tears were streaming down my face. It's just so frustrating." But he became a really good polisher.

And even though I bought this house up here in Taos, at a certain point I didn't really want to leave because everything was set up in

Santa Fe down there. I mean, I had mice running across me at night down there and it was so horrible in many ways, and I once had to sleep in a snow suit.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: The studio in Santa Fe, right?

MARY SHAFFER: In Santa Fe, yes. And once the—the heat would go off in the winter and I thought I'd freeze in the night, you know, because I've read about people freezing to death in their sleep. So I got up and put my snow suit, and my hat, and my mittens on, and went back to bed. [Laughs.] It was great living in the studio because you'd wake up and start working right away. You know, I always say I should have married my polisher, because when I came up to Taos I didn't have a polisher. In Taos, I can't imagine anybody that wants to polish up here, really.

So the Czech Republic, they can cast it and they can polish it just perfectly. They're amazing. This one kid that polishes for Lhotsky, he is like a miracle person the way he can polish. And I'm not set up. At this point in my life, I can't ratchet up. I'm not ratcheting up my equipment, I'm ratcheting down. You know, I just don't have the energy for that, nor the funds, nor the interest in order to change my studio over for something else. So, yes, my equipment can make everything in slump glass that I want to at this point, because if I want it bigger, I make

components.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that makes kind of a transition to one of the next questions, which is, how has technology impacted your work?

MARY SHAFFER: You know, I don't know what you mean by that because the only technology that has impacted my work—I mean, when you work with crafts, you work with an old medium, and clay, dirt, the first art form. Glass, very, very early art form—make a fire on the beach and see the little glass beads start melting—the sand and playing with it on a stick. It's very ancient. So our tools are very old and a very hand-oriented craft—hand, hand-making.

So technology in the studio? Yes, we have a timer, Digitry, which was made by the brother of one of the glass artists. He made it and it works fine and everybody uses it. So that technology, yes. I don't have to stand on the chair in the middle of the night. I don't have to stay awake. You know, I can set it and leave the studio and it will do its thing and that's fantastic. So that kind of technology is great.

The thing that has impacted all of us has been the computer.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was wondering about the Internet. And how has that kind of—

MARY SHAFFER: It's been huge. When I saw the first movie on Henry Moore, I thought, ah, I want a secretary, because he had a secretary. Oh, that's what I want, is a secretary, because I can't spell my way out of a paper bag. And when I first got the first person that worked for me, Ellie Meyer, who used to work for Donald Judd, she would say, "Mary, this letter that you haven't answered is 10 years old!" [They laugh.] There were all these letters, you know, that I never answered, or tried to answer and never did. So it was fantastic [having Ellie help me –MS].

But now, I do everything [I used to farm out –MS]. I'll take the pictures digitally, put them in the computer, fix them up, send them out. So you're taking many people out of the equation: the photo shop, the photographer, the person that helped you in the studio, the person that wrote your letters. So you end up doing much more and I end up spending way too much time on the computer.

So in some ways it's a saver because you get it done now. And the other way, it's hard because—say you're getting a postcard made. Before, you got the images, you did the layout and you mailed it to California or wherever, and seven days later they would mail it back. Well, now, it's all like—[slapping her palms together]—do it right now. It's 10:00 in the morning and we want this by 1:00 this afternoon. It's much more pressure and you have to get it done, and you—you know, that.

So, yes, it's freeing and it's great sometimes. Just like emails. I mean, I love to communicate with my friends, but sometimes during the day I don't have time to talk. So to be able to write them at 2:00 in the morning if I'm awake, you know, and stay in touch without the long conversation, but just what you're talking about, that's wonderful. So it's great and it's bad.

And on the other hand, in terms of what you guys are doing, archiving, it's horrible because all the letters are lost.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right.

MARY SHAFFER: All the letters, you know, and the real quality of what the artist's life is. You know, the letters, the correspondence, the interest in other things.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: A postcard with a sketch, you know—

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —all of that is—

MARY SHAFFER: —is lost now. We don't have it. And then every three or five years, everything that's on our computer is obsolete, so it's just, like, gone forever. It's pretty interesting. And the letters—and I think people are really writing stuff in depth now on the Internet; I mean, real ideas again, and real concerns, and real life stuff is just going up. It's in Neverland. So that's how it's impacted me, as it has everybody, I think.

But then I can also do these drawings, you know, these prints that I do with Photoshop. I love working on them. I miss painting and it's a wonderful way to work.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: This is one of those general questions and I don't know if you have thoughts that you want to share on it, which is, where does American craft—or glass, if you want to look at it that way—rank on an

international scale? And do you see the field moving in any obvious direction?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, I think it's been amazing what America has done for crafts, first with Voulkos with clay. I mean, he just totally blew that open. And Rose Slivka certainly helped him with that, publicizing what he was doing in American craft magazines.

And with glass, too. I mean, initially when Erwin Eisch and Harvey Littleton started with the idea, hey, let's—you know, they were both sons of people that worked for—well, Eisch owned the company, and Littleton's father worked for Corning—had the idea to make an independent furnace that individual artists could use. At first, the Americans tried to imitate the Italians and the Czech and whatever. They tried to imitate what they saw. And then it just sort of blew open. It was let's experiment with this, let's play with this; oh, this doesn't look so bad; you know, let's play, let's try.

And then people like me would come in, that had no interest in blowing a bubble or anything like that or following a tradition. It was like, man, glass is incredible! Look at this strong material. What can I do with it? How can I express, myself as a young artist with this material?

So Americans, yes, absolutely, just blew the craft media apart with energy and innovation. And then they were the leaders in the marketplace. They had the collectors, they had the money, so they generated the interest. All the Europeans and the Czech and the South Americans and the Bolivians, they all wanted to show in America because that was where the market was. And now it's changed. It's gone back. I mean, the dollar is down; people have their own countries and their own collectors. It has just been transformed. I mean it's a worldwide—in glass, at least, which I know better—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Hm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MARY SHAFFER: —it's a worldwide movement.

And it's exciting, and it's still exciting. I mean, I thought at one point that it was—I think I started seeing this before, that it was sort of falling down, but now I see great stuff coming from young artists from all over the world. You know, they just think, hey, this is exciting. Because sometimes there is a group of initial artists and then there were sort of imitators for a long time, and now there are young people that are really innovators again, you know, finding a new way of using the same material to express other things. So it's exciting. So America definitely has been a very powerful influence.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And since you have kind of been, I guess, in and out of this world, but haven't really spent the bulk of your career, I don't think. What are your thoughts about universities and—[Note: The bulk of my career has been working with glass. –MS]

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —art education?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, I think initially it was really important, initially to have artists like Lipofsky and Myers and—[Gene Kpss at Tulane University –MS] in New Orleans? And Dale at RISD, and now Bruce Chao at RISD. Dan Dailey went up to Boston, and Kathleen Mulcahy went to Carnegie University and started a glass school. So people started glass schools and generated the next generation of glass artists or glass workers who carried on in the field. Some of them, you know, made their living doing crafts and selling in fairs and stores and things. Some went on as designers or architectural stuff, like Jamie Carpenter has become an important architectural designer using glass.

So the role [of education in the glass field –MS] has been really important and continues to be important. But what's happening—I mean, since I taught, like, two or three years ago in California, what I see and what I've always said, even from the beginning, is the glass departments will then become part of the sculpture department, will become part of the art department, glass will be another way for students to express themselves in another medium. And I think that happens—that happens a lot now that it's just part—I mean, some people love craft, the making of the glass object, and other people see it as just another form of expression. So it's crossed over.

In fact, it's interesting—because I had said before that Europe had no prejudice against craft. Well, a prejudice is developing now. Crafts are looked down on more, even in Europe, and they're changing the craft name and stuff, which is bullshit—except it shouldn't be on the tape, probably. I don't think we're allowed to swear.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: But in America, with young people, the kids in the school at CCA were really angry when the

California College of Arts and Crafts lopped off "Crafts" and became the California College of Art. The kids that I was teaching were furious about that. They said, "We came here to become craftspeople, to learn a craft." I've had students down in Marfa, Texas, say to me—you know, look at me with stars in their eyes, saying, "I want to be a glass artist." I mean, that was unheard of a long time ago. And here a sort of power structure [in the glass field, people –MS] saying, ooh, down with crafts, let's change our name, get the craft out of here, glass art is, oh bad, bad, bad. And the kids are saying, "Hey, we like that stuff. This is structure. We want structure, there's value in craft. We want this."

So it's funny. It will just swing back and forth. But Europe is no longer something to look up to in that regard, because they are changing their attitude, and looking down on crafts.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that makes kind of a good way to move to, basically, how has your work been received, which really is to go back to what you were kind of talking about, and who are some of the writers that you feel are most interesting to read?

MARY SHAFFER: About what, crafts and stuff? Let's see, how my work was received. It was received, you know, by the ceramic community, which was much stronger than the glass community. I mean, RISD's glass department was started under the ceramic department, under Norm Schulman. He's the one that hired Dale to come. So it was under the ceramics departments because they used the same equipment, so I guess it was cost saving and whatnot.

And then the writers—I think the most important writer over the time of the whole development of the glass movement was John Perreault. He was a poet, an artist himself, and a critic in New York, a very well-respected critic, wrote for the *Village Voice* and other magazines. He decided that glass was a very important movement in our time and he wanted to be part of it. He wanted to be the spokesman for it, and did that, did public talks up in Canada. I think GAS was up there one year. And he wrote good articles, critical articles about glass working and glass and art and was fantastic and was knowledgeable. So I think he was a very, very important influence.

And for me, of course, April Kingsley because she started writing about my work when she was an art critic and she saw value in the work and started writing about it in a critical way.

I don't read—I mean, I think a lot of the current craft magazines and stuff have, sort of, not critics so much, but just sort of complimentary sorts of articles in it that aren't critical thinking. You know, they are sort of compliments—this is this, this is that. And I think those two, John and April, came in with a critical eye and really tried to do something.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that was one of the other questions: Is criticism written by artists more valuable to you?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, it's sort of funny. I mean, I was trying to find the glass magazine that was the original glass magazine that showed my work, so I was looking through my files. And I pulled out an article I had written about—when I was at New York University, I guess I wrote a lot of articles because you have to, to try to keep your job. [They laugh.] But also I enjoyed it.

But in general, I have to say, I have not read much that glass artists are writing now, but in history, yes, absolutely. It's always been the case that I have read what the artist writes. So as a young woman, I read Paula Becker Modersohn, her diary. I read Käthe Kollwitz's diary. And I read what Kandinsky wrote about his work.

I always found that artists writing about their work were more truthful and more honest. They were attempting to explain what it is they were doing. It's like reading the mountain climbing books, which I love, and I read a lot of them. They're first-hand stories from the guys that are climbing and the women that are climbing the mountain. It's, I did this, this, and this, and this. The artist says, "I did this, this, and this. This is what I'm thinking, this is what I want to do, this is it." The critic comes along and uses all this fancy language that you don't quite get sometimes. So, yes, I like the artists' writing. You know, I'm a blue-collar worker, so I like things straightforward. [Laughs.]

I think Marsha Miro is a really good critic. I think James Yood is very good, very good, in fact. So those are some of the ones I know. I'm sure there are lots of others that I just don't know off the top of my head.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I'm actually looking at your checklist here. So you're still keeping up with *American Craft,* which is—

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, my checklist, yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —evolving, even as we speak.

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, yes. I think the new editor is fantastic. I met them and I like what they're doing with the

magazine, that they're searching out new, younger artists and highlighting things that I don't know about. So I like that. I mean, I think that's pretty terrific. And they seem pretty committed to crafts, which is nice.

I think *Glass* is great. I mean, this reminded me to—for a while, I had two subscriptions, and so I wrote them and said, "Stop this. I just need one." So now I haven't gotten any for a long, long time. But then there were a couple of other craft magazines in the past that I wrote for and that I liked.

I don't read that much now anymore. I mean, I like to read science magazines, and now the older I get, I'm finally getting to read novels again. Well, not really get to read very many novels, but enough; and listening to books; and then, as I say, straight-hand adventure stories, like all the mountain-climbing books and the diving books.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And often these magazines are kind of associated with organizations. You said you did do some demonstrations for NCECA?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Have you been involved with any of the other schools?

MARY SHAFFER: Well, I did in the beginning. I guess I did stuff for GAS. You know, I did demonstrations and talks with them, and schools. God, my resume has all that down.

Well, after I stopped teaching, I stopped for a while and then suddenly I thought, hey, you know, in my career the only thing that seems to be blocking me is women. Women are blocking women. This isn't right. So I decided to take every lecture, every opportunity to get out there and talk to young women and say, hey, get with the program. We are not your enemies. You are not competing with us for your men. You know, that's old-fashioned. We're out there. We're in this together. We have a common language and a common experience.

There were magazine people at these talks, and gallery people there, and I would ask them. I said, "Well, how come you show 10 men and one woman? And they said, "Well, the men are the ones that keep phoning us. They're the ones that keep pressing and being out there. You know, we'll get one call from a woman and 20 calls from a man. That's what's happening." So anyhow, I got out there in the conference circle to talk about that issue because I thought it was really important.

I think I answered your question—oh, organizations. Yes, I've done that in my past. I've been on boards of things and involved. I live so far away now. I probably would do it again, to get involved. Yes, definitely. I think they're good. It's good to have those organizations. The Stained Glass Group was very supportive of me as a younger artist, and NCECA and GAS, you know, those places. But I think I'm more geared toward helping younger artists now.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And you started talking a little bit about—would you go and teach? Would you go and do workshops?

MARY SHAFFER: I used to. I used to do a lot of those.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Any at Pilchuck—

MARY SHAFFER: I haven't for a while.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —or—

SHAFFFER: Well, Pilchuck—Hardu and I—well, Hardu and Manzella helped Dale—or wrote Dale's first proposal for Pilchuck and encouraged him, taught him how to do it, basically—you know, write the letter, then call them up and do this and do that. When Dale first started Pilchuck, the first time he decided to have artists in residence, I was invited along with—God, who was there with me? I can't remember offhand. I think it was Nicolas Africano. Nicolas Africano and myself were the first—I think that was the year—we were the first invited Visiting Artists. And we didn't teach there, we just made our own art, which was really, really great. That was in '79. And then I went back once to teach, at Pilchuck. But yes, I have done that.

Demonstrating slumping glass—I mean, when I went out there to teach Marvin Lipofsky students, and even when I was at Pilchuck teaching slumping—it is very, very frustrating to teach that, because there is no one formula. Every kiln is different because it heats up differently, except for the fusing ones that Bullseye sells now. But every kiln basically had a different temperature ramp, every piece of glass, if it's a different thickness and stuff, it was all so variable. And so it was hard to say to students, if you do this, this will happen, and because the way I learned was experimentation.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Very much trial and error.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, watch and see what happens, take notes, and do it again if you want to. So it was very hard to teach that. I found people would get really frustrated. And get mad at me if things didn't work out!

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: So I found it much easier to, you know, teach drawing, or teach concepts, or teach art, or teach painting. It was hard to teach slumping, although I did demonstrations. I did fun stuff with it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I don't know, should we maybe look at slides, and then we could talk about the similarities and differences between your early work and kind of—

MARY SHAFFER: —and the recent work?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —the big picture.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, let's turn this off just a second and see.

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JOSEPHINE SHEA: Once again we return. This is Josephine Shea with Mary Shaffer in Taos, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is, I believe, disc number four.

MARY SHAFFER: Wow.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So we just looked at kind of a whirlwind survey of your work over your career. And you mentioned that one of your earliest heroes, although you didn't necessarily know it at the time, was Frank Lloyd Wright.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. Well, he was my first heartthrob.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: I had been given—you know, my family, as I had said earlier, really wasn't too aware that they had this little artist in the family. And one of my mother's—well, her boyfriend, her only boyfriend I saw her with, who actually had the same initials as my only husband, H.K.—his name was Hal Keck—he gave me a book on Frank Lloyd Wright. I was interested in art and in architecture, and I think they decided, well, she better be an architect instead of an artist. And he gave me a book on Frank Lloyd Wright and I loved it. I just loved it. And I loved the picture of him on the back. That was my heartthrob, you know, with him with a big coat on and his hat on. And, you know, the vision he had, I just thought, oh, man. So that was my heartthrob.

And Fallingwater, of course, I adored. I was at Corning, and a Kaufmann talked, and I went running up to him. It was a huge lecture hall. I went running up, and I was the first to reach him. I said, "Are you from the Kaufmann family that lived in Fallingwater?" And he said, "Well, yes," his parents had commissioned it. I said, "What was it like? What was it like?" And he said, "Wet. We never really could live there." [They laugh.]

And then when the Renwick Museum at the Smithsonian asked me to talk when the Frank Lloyd Wright show was up, it was like, man, he was a really important influence. A lot of the work is related to geometry and fluidity, so all those pieces that have a geometric form, like the triangle or the cube or the base that I make, always has an opposition of fluidity. So I definitely think that I was influenced.

I had wanted to be a painter. I was only thinking of painting, I wasn't thinking of sculpture. So that definitely had to have been an influence. And also, you saw those pieces that I said were in cube or in a cage. As a young girl, we used to go to Zurich and look at the museums there, and the Museum of Modern Art in Zurich has perhaps one of the best collections of Giacometti sculpture. Those I loved, I just loved. And he worked with, you know, the cube, things coming in and out of a cube. I mean, he only did, I think, one piece that way, or maybe two, but I noticed it. And also, as a girl reading about Michelangelo. I mean, I—and a lot of students tell me this, that they were intrigued by the same idea, that idea of looking at a cube and seeing something, not a cube, but something inside of it. So that also influenced. All those little things influence or inform my work.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And it seems, as I looked at the slides, you've returned—do you feel that you have really—it seems to me that you continue to explore similar themes. Do you feel that way, or do you feel like you've really worked through a whole idea and it's done? But it seemed to me like you said, Oh, I started revisiting—

MARY SHAFFER: —this.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —this.

MARY SHAFFER: Well, because when I was a young artist and starting out in glass, I came from painting—you made one painting, then you moved on—so I would make one piece of glass, you know, one hook. I might make the little model, then I'd make the big one and that was it, no more. Why should I make another one? I made one already. Why would I make another one?

So I didn't come from the craft tradition, where you make a whole series of one work or you spend three days or a week, you know, churning out one kind of work, the same kind of work. It just didn't make any sense to me. So I guess I decided to revisit former ideas. I unpacked and I found all those little—that are still in storage somewhere; my God, I wonder where they are—all those little test pieces and totally forgot about them. Better find them. Anyhow, all those test pieces.

So I put them out. My son-in-law made a big shelf for me. And I decided, wow, you know, that's an interesting idea; let me go back and do that again, or let's do this one. I mean, they're unlimited in terms of ideas. The slides I didn't show you, there was one where the plate glass actually tore through the metal and then mended itself when it got to the other end, or came—married itself, came back together, to use a forging term.

And then I thought, hmm, I like these small things. And so my former son-in-law, Joey Benton, designed a special wall case for me that had nine compartments and I called the pieceToolbox, and I would make little, small pieces that went in them. So that was sort of revisiting earlier work. And then the small tools jumped out of the box onto the wall and became the Tool-Walls.

What I didn't show you is the slide of the current exhibit down at the Ellen Noel Museum, where I had planned to show something completely different, but they ran out of money and couldn't paint the walls, it was a dark green. I thought, I can't show the Light-Catchers on this wall, but the Tools look wonderful on them. So I just pulled the older tool pieces out of storage that were exhibited at the Tucson Museum, the Boston Museum, different places, the Heller Gallery—I think they were the first to show a tool-wall—and installed them again. It was really nice to see them. So in that sense, another revisit.

The picture I showed you of the acetate and the flashlight. When I was a painter, it was window light, had to do with light, and the glass work has to do with light. So that idea and interest gets recycled.

The Light-Catchers, I'll just start telling you straight about them. The Light-Catchers, which I worked on for a long time—I thought about it for a long time and then I tried to figure out how I would make them, then I started making them. And it came about in a sort of funny way, but I started making them and the internal part of them were cut out with a waterjet. There's some new technology for you. We didn't have that before. So it was a waterjet technology that allowed me to make a perfect shape inside of the glass. And then I slumped them and then showed them by having these chromed interiors that were sort of mathematical in shape. But the curvature of the glass—and I knew what they would do. I knew their name before, Light-Catcher—or Sun Catcher, but I decided to call them Light-Catcher, not Sun Catcher, because of the local [NM (New Mexico?) –MS] connotation.

And when I first held them up and saw the sunlight go through it, I just screamed. Because the reflections were so much deeper and more three-dimensional than I even imagined they would be, and so much stronger. So I decided to do a whole wall of Light-Catchers, and I spent a lot of time making them.

One of my dealers said to me finally, he said, "Look, Mary, I can't sell these. You know, I can't sell them." Another dealer just said, "I would like that one for my show." So I said, "Well, the word is that you're not going to be able to sell them." But even with the Tools, the Tool Walls, I showed them for such a long time before I could sell them. The first person that wanted a little Tool Wall was Ben Heineman—in Chicago, and he donated the small wall to the Corning Museum. The second person that wanted one was the director of the Columbus Museum, [Irv Lippman –MS]. They have an 18 piece Tool Wall. There's another museum that wants one but they don't have the money. It took years before I could sell that group of work.

And so with the Light-Catchers, maybe it's the same. I'm done making them. I have enough. I have a beautiful bunch. Someone recently wanted to buy one for a museum, but he didn't even want to pay me the cost for making them. I finally emailed him and said, "What would you offer me for this piece?" And he never emailed me back. [It would have gone to the de Young Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco –MS.]

But in any case, these are important pieces for me. I spent a lot of time working on them. And one of the reasons I love them is because—I think I told you I read science magazines and I'm intrigued by science. I'm intrigued by the universe and how little we know about it. I mean, I was reading my science magazine the other day and I said, "We don't even know what a magnet really is. We don't even know that. Let's go back to square one." So here we're talking about black holes, other universes, multiple universes, and energy that we don't understand.

These pieces are basically 24 by 24 inches. They have a geometric insert that pushes out through the middle and holds them to the wall. They're balanced to the wall, which I like. So there's no real fastener to them.

They're free. The reflections are so three-dimensional and so varied and so beautiful and unexpected and unpredictable—like nature. And the insides are these sort of simple geometrical signs—plus, equals, minus, times—that kind of thing.

And I love the arrogance of man, that we go out to the universe with mathematics and we think we're going to understand everything, and I don't think that we can. I think we're so limited in body, we can only perceive what we can imagine, and we can only imagine so much because our brains are limited, really, in my opinion. And we're limited also by the knowledge of our body. You know, we have up and down, right and left. We have two arms. I mean, some of my other installations dealt with this issue. You know, hot, cold. We see everything in duality because we are dual beings: man, woman, two eyes. That's how we're made and that's how we see the universe.

I think it's also fascinating that when you read the Kabbalah or any beginning sort of creation myth, I mean, they talk about the big bang. Religion talks about the world being made, you know, all at once; "and there would be light". You know, the whole big bang, it's part of our brain. That's what our brain can imagine and what we see, and then we say, ah, yes, this is what it is. So we go out to the universe with our mathematics thinking we're going to understand. We don't understand anything.

In the last century, I always used to say that I work with the female principle, which is working with chance, working with nature. That if we don't use the female principle in the next century, if we don't work with nature, if we do this whole thing, man over nature, we're not going to survive as a species. And of course, we're in the new century and this is part of our language, part of all of our language: work with nature; we're all one; we belong together. So that's what I think, and that's what these works are about.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You mentioned when you were showing the combination of metal—again, back to that duality, that you saw the metal as more—

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, masculine.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —masculine.

MARY SHAFFER: Well, that whole thing about man over nature. You know, it's not gender-based, it's just we came here and we cut down—what's his name, that wonderful French writer that wrote about the early Americans [Alexis de Tocqueville –MS] who came over here in 1831 and—you know, Americans are strange. "They cut down every tree. They don't even leave a shade tree by their house", you know? And that we've taken cement and just covered everything. You know, in Finland, they love trees and they know they're good for the atmosphere. They plant a tree in a cloverleaf. They plant a tree—every place that a tree can be planted, a tree is planted. And we cement everything we possibly can. I mean, my neighbor that came from Albuquerque is desperate to cement every road around here.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: Well, I love the dirt roads. I love my friends that live on the land or don't leave a footprint, and, you know, have a composting toilet out in the middle of their woods that they use all winter long, God bless 'em.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.]

MARY SHAFFER: You know, I love that. [Laughs.] That's really what we have to do and what we have to be.

And you know, I was saying with those hook things, I mean, the early work, one at a time, one idea at a time, and then move on to the next idea. The early work, some of it came out of a life, a young life, you know, that was difficult because there was lack of money, there was lack of emotional support, and I had two small children. So it was tough, and the work came from that spirit; you know, what are you, where are you?

Well, now I'm in this really peaceful place, without question—centered, balanced, happy. And so the work reflects that. So the work is more about light, more about its essence. And these curtain pieces—I love them. At the beginning I said I made an Iron curtain for Lynn Dushane [ph], the moving curtain in the windows. Well, these are sort of like that. The big standing curtains, they look as if—and Libenskýand his wife Brychtová just love them. Brychtova said, "Look at that. It holds itself up, you know, while it's falling down." It's standing and holding itself, and its fluid. It looks like water, you know, some element, just lifted itself up while it's pouring itself down. It looks like solidified ocean water or something. And this last one, the *Wind Curtain*, looks—and it did; the wind was blowing while I was making it.

It captures wind and rain and the elements, which—I think that as a people, that we have lost touch. We have lost touch with nature. We have lost touch with our roots. And we have to return to that. I think art has that message that it says, hey, look at this, this is the essence of something that belongs to all of us. This is the

essence. This is like water. This is one of the elements, something that we have to respect. And so that's where the work comes out of now.

In my actions, I'm a political activist. I believe in that. I believe you have to be. I mean, my students, oh, they are all so aware, those students I had in California at CCA. I mean, they're aware that it's their classmates, their friends that are being sent over and dying for oil. They know that, you know? They don't have any illusions. We might abhor the violence we see, but this is their life, in a way. We have created this violent society and they're aware of it, but also, you know, they're aware of other things too.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You mentioned that you felt that a little more spirituality might have come into your later work. Is that the sorts of things that you're thinking about?

MARY SHAFFER: Yes, I think so, I mean on two—there's always sort of a practical, and there's where you are, your essence. I think your essence can't help but come out in your work, because that's sort of what you do as an artist. It is where you are. It's when you're working with your unconscious, your conscious, your heart, and your body and your mind all in tandem, what you are comes out in the work. And the work isn't, oh, this is Mary Shaffer, in a way. The work is itself. The best work I've ever done is itself. You know, it has come into being. That's where I can say thank you. It's the forces of nature somehow of heat and gravity that have created an incredible thing.

So the new work comes a couple of ways. The Inversion Series, where I took a piece of glass that I had bent, and gravity had helped, and made a shape, and then I solidified them into bronze by making a mold. I had to work that bronze by hand. I had to sand it. I had to work it until it was perfect again, smooth, like the glass.

So my hands picked up a knowledge, a knowing, of fluidity, and that's what I'm putting into the standing curtains, the smaller pieces. My hands are just picking up and remembering, you know, all the work they did on the bronze surfaces. So that's the waves are coming into being. Then I transformed the clay into cast glass, which have their own vitality, you know, their own sort of life that comes from that tactile knowledge.

The curtain was such an important symbol for me as a young woman and something I love. It is like a spirit. I mean, when we lived in England, we lived on the corner of Pennypot Lane and Bagshot Road in a house that was called Donnystone. [Laughs.] It's the English. It's great. It's a huge house. It belonged to a sea captain. And I don't know how my parents found it. They were renting it. And it had a big formal garden and it was just an amazing house.

The captain had had five wives, three of which had died in the house. One was Italian, one was this, one was that. And our radio stations would change, doors would bang, curtains would blow even when there was no wind. And we knew—we felt as children—that it was the women's spirits, you know? "No, I want the Italian station on!" "No, I want the French station on! No!"—you know.

So anyhow, so for me, the windows, these blowing curtains when there was no wind, became sort of a symbol also of spirit for me. So I think it all ties together.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And you traveled, I think we could safely say, enormously or—

MARY SHAFFER: —a lot. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —a lot in your youth. Have you continued to travel? And you traveled back and forth for work, but then you kind of talked about how you might want to travel more again.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes. I thought I had settled, totally settled, here in Taos, which I love. You know, I love the mountains, I love skiing, I love looking out and just seeing the wilderness and the animals—as you saw, my bunny rabbits outside and my birds and all, snakes and everything live outside. And in Marfa, I had 12 gazelles living on my front lawn, and the javelinas came up. You know what javelinas are?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No.

MARY SHAFFER: They're big wild pigs. They're actually quite dangerous. But the reason they're there in the yard is because we are in a drought, you know, and they're desperate for water.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, so they're really looking for—

MARY SHAFFER: They're desperate for water. [Laughs.] The ranchers said, "Oh, give them water," you know. Yes, give them water. And the game warden said, "Don't give them water; you'll get more of them." [They laugh.] So anyhow, there's a lot of animals down there.

But yes, I have a restless spirit, I think. I have to admit it. I want to be everywhere at once, you know. Hopefully,

maybe that's what you get to do when you die; you get to be everywhere at once. I want to be in the museum in Vienna again. What an incredible museum. And I want to be everywhere that I've loved again. And I know I can't, that my life is too short. But I was in Kitzbühel this winter, and that's where I was as a little girl. It makes me so happy to be there. I just am so happy.

My girlfriends from when I was like, seven, and nine, and eight, and 12, they still live there. And all of my really close friends from when I was a child are either artists or political activists, or both. They're writing political books. I mean, they're all—you know, we were friends as children and we grew up apart, and here they are doing the same thing, in a way, that I am. I find that fascinating that we're still on the same—that we still have that same love and respect. I mean, we're old ladies. I see my friend and we're so silly together. She just looks like this nine-year-old girl to me; I can't help it. [Laughs.] It's great.

But yes, I do. I want to travel some more. I want to go to Central and South America. I want to go to the Antarctica. I would like to live in South America for a while. I want to be in Austria for a while. You know, there's a lot of places I haven't been and I am getting restless again. Although I would love to just stay in one place, it doesn't seem to be my way.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And before you set off on these journeys, it seems like it might be a nice way to kind of end with—I'm sure from time to time, people who are starting out in their artistic careers come to you for advice, and I'm curious as to what you say to them.

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, I say a lot of things. When I travel to shows and stuff, I'll give a talk to the local students. I'm going to do it again for this museum show to the local university, and then also to collectors in a separate group. But I always stress to the artist, to the young student, that they have to keep that connection with themselves. Their first impetus to become an artist, what was that? You know, what was that connection? To keep it and to keep it true; and not to be influenced by the marketplace; and to work not from just the brain or what they think they should be doing, but to work from the whole body.

When I was teaching formally in California, I was, like, you know, I've done my career and I've got my vision and the things I'm working on and the path I want to—the work I still want to make, but you guys are starting out, and this is a political world. If you can incorporate that into your work, then that is going to be fantastic. If the lessons that we're giving our society could be a little bit clearer, you know, that would be fantastic. And a lot of them did that. I mean, they did fantastic pieces that were everything, that were really true pieces of art that carried a message in addition to the art that was pertinent to our society today.

Those are some of the things I say, and I have a lot of advice. We could talk for another day on some of the advice I give younger artists, but I think that's important. It's important for older artists to share and, you know, to give back that way.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That's great.

Well, thank you for sharing your day.

MARY SHAFFER: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I really appreciate your telling us about your thoughts, your history, your past, and we'll be looking forward to see what's in the future.

MARY SHAFFER: Oh, wow! Me too! Thanks. [They laugh.]

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