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Oral history interview with Helen Z. Shirk, 2012 July 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Helen Shirk on July 29, 2012. The interview took place in the artist's home studio La Mesa, California, and was conducted by Jo Lauria for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Helen Shirk has reviewed the transcript. Her heavy 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

JO LAURIA: This is the Archives of American Art, interviewing Helen Shirk. And it's Jo Lauria, interviewer. The day is Sunday, July 29. We are at Helen's home studio in La Mesa, California. And this is tape number 1, session 1.

So, Helen, we will begin with the beginning of your career and life with the, you know, beginning questions. When and where were you born?

HELEN SHIRK: I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1942. And I'm part of a twin set. I have a fraternal twin sister, Judy, who lives in Austin, Texas.

MS. LAURIA: And can you describe your background and what your childhood was like?

MS. SHIRK: My father was a general practitioner, doctor. My mother was a housewife. This was in the '40s and '50s. And she had gone to the University of Buffalo for one year, and she quit after — a woman friend of hers told me that — because I thought she had quit to go to work but she said, no, she quit because it got in the way of her social life. [They laugh.] She was voted the most beautiful woman on the University of Buffalo campus when she was a freshman.

I thought she quit to work, because the pictures that I knew of her were taken at the New York World's Fair, and she worked for General Electric. And she's in — she had a number of photos. She worked in that house they had there, the electrified house. I have some pictures upstairs that I can show you of that.

So I knew that she had lived in New York for a period of time before she met my father. There was 12 years difference between them, and he had — she got married when she was 29 and he was 40.

MS. LAURIA: And then when you came along —

MS. SHIRK: Yes — we were born in '42. He was overseas. He saw us one time when he was on leave for a brief time, but we didn't really see him as a father until we were 4.

My mother and my sister and I lived with my grandmother, who was principal of a school, which at the time I didn't think anything of, but then later I thought, that was interesting that she was principal of a school.

MS. LAURIA: And so your father was in the military.

MS. SHIRK: He was in the military.

MS. LAURIA: This was World War II.

MS. SHIRK: He was a doctor, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And so you would say that you had a fairly supportive childhood.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And do you think that your mother and your grandmother influenced you in the way that you might have become an artist?

MS. SHIRK: No.

MS. LAURIA: No.

MS. SHIRK: [Laughs.] No. That's the interesting thing, because I just always drew. I have a fraternal twin sister

and we were just very different from each other. The twin part almost is not relevant. We were sisters. We didn't look alike. We didn't like the same things. Our personalities weren't the same. Our voices and our hand gestures were the same, so if somebody was listening to us on the phone, sometimes they couldn't tell who they were talking to. But otherwise, we were just like sisters.

And I just always made things. Or I'd go to summer camp down at my elementary school in the summer, and they had this guy that would come and make all these plaster casts of different things, and I'd paint them. And she did those things too but not — and drew horses, which is the typical girl thing to do.

And then when I got to high school, the high school I went to had a number of art courses and I took all those. And it was clear that that's what I was going to go into, whereas my sister, she kind of didn't know so much. They tested her and she had science/biology leanings. So we went to Skidmore. I went to Skidmore in art. She went to Skidmore in nursing.

MS. LAURIA: And what is your sister's name?

MS. SHIRK: Judy.

MS. LAURIA: Judy, okay.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: So in case you refer to her again we'll know that it's Judy.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: So you both then went on to Skidmore, and you knew from the onset of entering college that you were going to major in the arts.

MS. SHIRK: Right, because I had gotten a New York Regents scholarship — that meant I had to use it in New York State, and my father said, "I'm not driving to two schools." So we both hunted for a school that was going to have a baccalaureate program in nursing for her and a good art program for me.

And I had never heard of Skidmore, you're just pulling catalogues out of the library and that was one of them. And they had this great art department, which seemingly had more courses than most schools, and so — and they had a baccalaureate program in nursing.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that was fortunate.

MS. SHIRK: So that's how we wound up there. And of course at that time it was all women.

MS. LAURIA: Right, it was one of the sister schools, wasn't it?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: And how was that experience?

MS. SHIRK: Well, I think it was really good. I think the biggest part of it was I met some [interesting women –HS] — Alice Mosher was head of the art department there, so she was a real strong female model. And you got to see a lot of strong female models, and I think that was the biggest influence because the student body was all women. There were student body presidents, and there wasn't any kind of hierarchy, male-female kind of thing that sometimes happens.

MS. LAURIA: And did they have — what was their concentration in the art department at that time? Was it geared towards sculpture or painting, or was it covering all of the disciplines? Do you remember?

MS. SHIRK: I'd say it covered all the disciplines. I mean — I felt like it was this great pool that I could just dip into and — I took the foundation things. And I forget what I was going to register for. That's when you stood in these long lines and waited. And by the time I got to the table, the class I wanted wasn't available anymore. And so I had to find something that fit in this timeslot, and there was a jewelry course, which I hadn't thought about. I don't know why, but I just hadn't thought about it.

MS. LAURIA: They actually had a class in jewelry?

MS. SHIRK: Yes, Earl Pardon.

MS. LAURIA: Wow, that was really fortuitous.

MS. SHIRK: Yes, I didn't know how much at the time. But anyway, so I just thought, well, it fits, and I'll take that. And so that was the beginning of the interest.

[Earl –HS] worked in the studio, it was a small studio. When I got to see some other studios I realized that it was small. They had mallets and they had planishing hammers, but that was it. But he worked there. He had a little office within the main room and he worked on his work there. He had another studio too, but he would work when he was at school. So you got to actually see him making his work.

MS. LAURIA: Did you know who Earl Pardon was when you entered the class at that time?

MS. SHIRK: No, I didn't [say –HS], "Oh my gosh!" No, I just took it, and then I found out he was a jeweler, an enamellist, a sculptor and [painter –HS] —

MS. LAURIA: That he was a renowned —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — artist of his time.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah, but it didn't come right away. It was more this realization from being around him and from seeing how many different facets he had been in. And of course Eunice, his wife, she was teaching the weaving class.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, so did you take her class as well?

MS. SHIRK: I did, yes. I don't think I took ceramics. I took screen printing with Alice Mosher, and I don't think I took sculpture.

MS. LAURIA: We are sitting outside and we're waiting for the helicopter to go by. Could you repeat that? You did not take sculpture you don't think.

MS. SHIRK: I feel like I must have but I don't remember anything. I remember taking 3-D. I took as much jewelry as I could. I think I took two semesters of weaving. I took a couple of semesters of screen printing, life drawing. At that time you couldn't have the teacher in the room with a nude female model. I don't think we actually had male models.

MS. LAURIA: And what years are we speaking about?

MS. SHIRK: We're talking about '63 to '67.

MS. LAURIA: Well, what kind of jewelry projects did Earl Pardon give the students? Were they basic —

MS. SHIRK: They were pretty basic. I mean, soldering, soldering layers of metal together, piercing one layer and then soldering on a solid. We didn't talk too much about design. There was one day he talked about design a little bit with this drawing on the board, but after that I don't remember. It was pretty much you can do what you want.

And if you said now you can do what you want, it seemed so huge, the choice. But then, it was pretty much metal. The work was pretty much frontal, layers. You looked at it from one view, not from the side. That was in the beginning class.

And I was also in the choir, in the chorus at Skidmore, but I quit that after one year because it conflicted with my jewelry time. It wasn't actually with the class but, I had an afternoon class and then I could just stay in the studio if I hadn't had this choral practice.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: So I quit chorus. And they had enameling as a separate class so I took a number of semesters of that.

MS. LAURIA: And do you think that class then set you on the path to be a metalsmith?

MS. SHIRK: It set me on the path to work with that material. I didn't know what the word "metalsmith" actually meant. I don't know how used it was then. Because he was a jeweler, and even though he did sculptural things,

as I said, there wasn't any forming equipment in the studio. So I didn't really get to understand what a metalsmith was until I went to IU, to Indiana University, because that's the [focus –HS] — the Skidmore [focus – HS] was primarily jewelry, small-scale work. But, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: But you developed an interest in working with this material called metal —

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — on a small scale.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And you sort of felt, now I found something that intrigues me —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — I want to learn more about ways to work with it.

MS. SHIRK: Right. I remember — as I said, I took his wife's — Eunice Pardon's — weaving class. Those were the years of Lenore Tawney, and I remember we went to New York, because we were close to New York, and saw that work. And so I spent a bunch of time up in the weaving studio, and one day Earl called me into his office and he said, "You know, you're going to have to choose." [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Really? You can't have two — you can't work with two different materials is what he was saying?

MS. SHIRK: No. No, he wasn't saying — I felt like — because textiles has a different history than metals does. And so it's more than just the material. And people were not mixing up materials like they are now. So he just said, "You know, you can't be two things. It's hard to be good at two things. And also, people want to classify you and they won't know what to do with you."

And that was funny because I was enjoying working in textiles, and I would stay there late, but in my own mind it was a side thing. My own vision of me was a metals person. But if course he didn't know that. All he knew was that his wife was probably saying, "She spends a lot of time in the fiber studio." [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: So he felt for your career goals —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Right.

MS. LAURIA: — you needed to make that choice.

MS. SHIRK: Right, I needed — and said, "Oh, I'm a metals person."

And then when I was — I think it was the beginning of my senior year, he encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright.

MS. LAURIA: And a Fulbright is to go study in a foreign country?

MS. SHIRK: Right. Right. And Glenda Arentzen, who was a year ahead of me — I think she was just a year. No, maybe she was two. But anyway, when I first came to Skidmore as a freshman, she was my "big sister." They assigned big sisters. And, you know, they're just to kind of help you. I don't remember ever seeing her in the metals studio, or the art building for that matter, even though she's a well-known jeweler now. But our biggest connection is we both dated guys at West Point. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: And this is Glenda?

MS. SHIRK: Glenda Arentzen.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, Glenda. Okay, G-L-E-N-D-A.

MS. SHIRK: Yes, Glenda Arentzen.

[… –HS]

MS. SHIRK: Glenda had gotten — I don't know if she got a Fulbright, but Arline and Glenda had both worked at the same place in Copenhagen. It was called Otto Hertz, and they were manufacturing jewelry.

[The owner –HS] wanted to help other people and share, so he had given them seats in his shop.

MS. LAURIA: Workbench.

MS. SHIRK: Workbench space, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Okay. And who was Arline?

MS. SHIRK: Arline Fisch.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, Arline.

MS. SHIRK: Arline Fisch.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, so this man who owned —

MS. SHIRK: Otto Hertz. H-E-R-T-Z.

MS. LAURIA: H-E-R-T-Z. He owned a shop —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — in Copenhagen.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And he had given them each a position at —

MS. SHIRK: A seat.

MS. LAURIA: A seat.

MS. SHIRK: A place at a desk.

MS. LAURIA: A place for them to work.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And that was great because then they could come over —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — and it was an invitation.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Well, and you went through the Fulbright Agency, but you have to have a place —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: — that says, yes, we'll do this. And I don't know what he did for them, but there was no requirement [for –HS] you — you could just use that space to work on your own work.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, so you didn't have to actually work for him.

MS. SHIRK: No, no, no. No.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, great. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: He was just being [generous –HS]. He was just being generous — he had a space —

MS. LAURIA: And it was an opportunity for the graduating seniors —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — to get a Fulbright invitation.

MS. SHIRK: Well, and [the grant –HS] wasn't specific to Skidmore or anything like that, and it wasn't anything to do with being a graduating senior —

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay.

MS. SHIRK: You can apply for a Fulbright. And there had been a precedent of people from Skidmore going to this

— at least two people going to Otto Hertz.

And so the Fulbright Agency [tries –HS] to hook you up with something, and so that was in his group. So that's where I went. And that was unusual to go fresh [out of undergrad –HS]. I graduated from Skidmore in '63 in May, and by June I was on a ship to Copenhagen.

And, you know, Earl was the one who [encouraged me –HS] — I hadn't thought of doing that. He just said, you know, I think that you should apply. I think you can get one. And at that time you didn't — I don't know if they do now but there was no language requirement to go to Denmark. You didn't have to know Danish, because it's obscure and they didn't really expect anybody to know Danish.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: And a lot of Danes know English anyway. It was a big jump [for me –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Wonderful. So it wasn't — was it an incredible experience for you then?

MS. SHIRK: In a lot of ways.

MS. LAURIA: And did you go to museums and study Danish jewelry and design while you were there?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah, but it was — I worked at — I went to the [Kunsthandvaerker Skolen –HS], which had a program of activity, and then I also worked at Otto Hertz, which was where I could just do my own work. And then I lived in a foreign country for a year, which was — you know, I'm from New York State. I hadn't even gone out of state to go to school. And my sister was also at the same school. So it was a big [change –HS] — I didn't know it, but it turned out it was a big jump in that way.

MS. LAURIA: Independence.

MS. SHIRK: Independence, yes. I remember the first [task –HS] — the first thing you had to do was get a room, get a place to stay. All the Fulbrights stayed at this one collegium — it was a small one; that's a student residence — for a period of time together to kind of bond. We all went over on the ship together and then kind of bonded. And they're from all over, you know.

But that was only through I think the end of the summer. And we all took language classes together, Danish. But then at the end of the summer you had to find your own place. So there were other student collegiums, big ones — you could live not in a collegium. You could live in a room in a — but I was more attracted to a place where there would be other people around.

So eventually I got a room at this collegium called [Otto Mønsteds Kollegiet –HS]. This is right across from Carlsberg Brewery. I never visited. But anyway — and you have to go interview with the head guy, and I told him why I was there, and whatever, whatever. And he said, "Well, you know, we have a space on the first floor," which was the first floor of all the housing. It was a big building. And he said there was a Japanese girl in there before. "She was very unhappy. Do you think you're going to be able to be happy there?" And I said, "Yes." [They laugh.] I mean, I wanted the room. I didn't know if I was going to be happy or not.

So he let me have that room. And that floor — or that end of the floor was different because they had formed a cooking club. And not all the floors had them. It just depended on the people. They had formed this cooking club because there was a kitchen for a certain amount of rooms. And one person would do all the shopping and all the cooking for one night.

MS. LAURIA: Oh.

MS. SHIRK: And I can't remember if they did the clean-up or not. Maybe they didn't, but they did all the shopping and the cooking. And so that meant — I don't know how many there were; maybe there was 10 people on the floor — you could just come home to a meal.

So it was nice, and it was a way to kind of be more together, because somebody would make it and then everybody would sit down. And I felt fortunate that way. But the first day that I actually came with my suitcase and my trunks and all this stuff, I get in my room — it was really tiny — and it's raining. And I'm thinking, what am I doing, you know? [They laugh.] It was like a new [chapter –HS].

And so I'm looking out — the building was kind of vaguely horseshoe-shaped, and my window is over here so it's curving around. And I'm just looking out my window, which was kind of a long — it's a window door. And I saw this guy at the other end. And I'm looking and — he's really far away. And then I looked and he waved at me. And I thought, oh, my god; that was so nice. He was on the same floor that I was.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: You know, it was just around. And so then I saw him that night in the kitchen and I said — he introduced himself. He had been in Virginia. He had lived in Virginia. His family was involved with tobacco or something, or his uncle. I said, "You know, I was feeling really kind of desolate and it was so nice of you to wave at me. That was really, really nice. It really changed how I felt." And I kind of went on, you know. And he speaks English really well, so whatever. And he just goes, "Oh, you know."

And he tried to — and he took me places to eat, and we went to the movies one time. It was just, you know, friends. And then later — [laughs] — he tells me, he said, "You know, I didn't wave at you." [They laugh.] He said, "I just put my hand up on the top of the curtain rod. And then you" —

MS. LAURIA: You waved at him.

MS. SHIRK: — "and you waved at me." And he said, "I could tell that you thought I waved at you." And he said, "I didn't have the guts to say" — [they laugh]. I said, "Well, it doesn't really matter. It worked."

MS. LAURIA: It worked. [They laugh.]

MS. SHIRK: It worked at the time.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that was a good initiation into your year-long in Denmark. So when you had that experience in Copenhagen, it really was — for you it was not only the Fulbright. Getting the Fulbright —

MS. SHIRK: Sure.

MS. LAURIA: — was a sense of satisfaction.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: It was an award. It was also the feeling of living in a foreign country —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — and learning — you must have learned from looking at the other people working at this place, the jewelry place, right? I mean, were you able to observe the other workers there?

MS. SHIRK: But you weren't supposed to get in their way. And the other thing is, is that the way a shop like that is set up, people have specific jobs.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: You know, it's —

MS. LAURIA: Like one person does one thing?

MS. SHIRK: And the guy that sat next to me, I think he was 33. He had been working there since he was 15. He started there as an apprentice. And he made chains. That's what his job was.

MS. LAURIA: I see.

MS. SHIRK: And then other people did — you know, it was a manufacturing jewelry company. And then the polishers — it was interesting to just see the hierarchy. And there's this great book called *Silver in America* by Venable.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, Charles Venable.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It's just a great book. I love that book because it describes those shops. And there's a hierarchy in the workers and the people that did the polishing, even though polishing is like — you can really totally mess up a piece of work if you don't polish it correctly, because it's dirty. And they would wear big things around their heads and coats and their faces. It's not considered as high a —

MS. LAURIA: A skill.

MS. SHIRK: — a skill.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Even though — so you can wreck something. But those people were in one room, you know. They were kind of [isolated –HS] — there was a hierarchy in the —

MS. SHIRK: Well, you learned that.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: That was a valuable thing to learn.

And then I had it reaffirmed when I read that *Silver in America.* I didn't really learn so much from them. It was the space — more of what did I want to make? And it's interesting because I would talk — the guy next to me, who had also sat next to Glenda, I think — because he liked that. He liked doing that. And because I was a student of Earl's, I knew how to enamel and [solder –HS].

I was going to make this brooch, and I told him when I was — just conversationally. I didn't have to tell him what I was going to do. And he said, "Oh, that will never work. That will never work. No." And I did it anyway and it worked totally fine. [They laugh.] But, you know, his —

MS. LAURIA: The way he was thinking —

MS. SHIRK: His experience was narrow. You know, if he had been saying that about a chain or something, I might have paid more attention. But so, I don't know, it's time to learn about me and what my design interests were going to be. I was in the middle of the city that was kind of the design capital at this time.

MS. LAURIA: Sure.

MS. SHIRK: And, you know, so I'd go through all those places. And I eventually focused on this little shop that actually was near the center. And I used to be able to remember the name of it. But you went down into it. The windows were on the sidewalk level and you go down. And his work was so different from all the [work –HS] that you would see, which was all smooth and sensuous and —

MS. LAURIA: What we think of as Scandinavian modern.

MS. SHIRK: His was all textural. And that's the work that I was most interested in. Initially [I felt Danish –HS] design was incredible. But eventually I ceased to be surprised because that's what mostly everybody was doing. So it was the oddball person that I got interested in, that kind of work.

MS. LAURIA: So you really think you sought out and learned a design — a European design education is what you got while you were in Denmark.

MS. SHIRK: Yes, especially — at that time Denmark was where you were — the place to be if you were in metals or if you were in metalworking. And of course I would go into the Hans Hansen shop. And when I went to IU, the son, Hans, he was my teacher [at Indiana University one year –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Really?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: So when did you leave Denmark?

MS. SHIRK: I was just there for a year. And then I came back in —

MS. LAURIA: 1967?

MS. SHIRK: No, I went there in [July '63, came back in June '64 –HS], and then I had some other time in Europe, mostly in Germany. That's kind of a dropout time.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, just to travel around.

And then tell me a little bit about your heritage. You were mentioning that you middle initial is Helen Z. — Zittel?

MS. SHIRK: Zittel.

MS. LAURIA: Zittel. Okay. So part of your ethnic background is German, correct?

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

MS. LAURIA: And what else?

MS. SHIRK: My mother is English-Irish.

So anyway, I came back to the States in — I guess that must have been ['66 –HS] — spring of ['66 –HS] or something. And then I knew I wanted to go to grad school.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, so in spring [1966 –HS] you returned from Europe and you wanted to go to grad school.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: So did you have an idea then or did you start to think, oh, I better research where I wanted to go to grad school?

MS. SHIRK: Actually, I had known that when I was there — when I was there. When I was still in Europe I thought, I want to go to grad school. And then I didn't know where to go.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And it wasn't so easy. [At that time you couldn't just look on the web. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Right. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIRK: So I was at a party and I ran into this guy who had gone to Indiana University. I knew about RIT because I was from New York State. I knew about Rochester, but I didn't know any other schools. And he said he went to IU. I can't remember in what. But he said, "They just built a huge new museum there, so there must be something in art." [They laugh.] And I said, "Okay."

So I did research that and I found out that they had this [three-year MFA –HS] program. And so I applied and I got in. And so then I went there — but one of the problems was I wanted to start in January [1967 –HS].

MS. LAURIA: — which is mid-[year –HS].

MS. SHIRK: Which is mid-[year –HS]. And I thought about RIT because I knew about that, but they didn't accept students in January and IU did accept them. So that was a big part of the reason why I ended up at IU.

When I went there, I remember going into the building — and metals was on the second floor — taking the elevator up. You get off the elevator and there are these cases, display cases right there outside the metals studio. Margie Schick had just graduated the June before, and so they had some of Margie's work in the case. And I thought — I mean, I didn't know who Margie Schick was. I thought, oh, my god, I'm never going to be able to do this. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Was it her typical over-scaled work?

MS. SHIRK: Well, yeah, but it was metal.

MS. LAURIA: And colorful?

MS. SHIRK: No, no, it wasn't — there was no color.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: She wasn't doing that yet. It was bunches of [brass –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: I remember there was this armlet thing. I mean, they were just very, very —

MS. LAURIA: Cutting edge.

MS. SHIRK: Well, I didn't even know what cutting edge was.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay, but they were —

MS. SHIRK: They were very aggressive and not like any jewelry I had ever seen. And there was some other work in the case too, but these pieces of Margie's were — if I was going to relate it to anything, like, big African — you know, the scale of African bracelets. So I thought, oh, my god.

So I went in and I [asked –HS], "Where is Professor Eikerman?" And they said, "It's that blond-haired woman over there in the high heels." [They laugh.] And that was my introduction. And of course Alma had studied in

Europe too, in Scandinavia, so she was very interested in what my experience had been. And of course she was a metalsmith and a jeweler, and I felt really lucky that through this very kind of weird path I ended up being in her program.

MS. LAURIA: Alma?

MS. SHIRK: Alma Eikerman. And she had a point of view. And as I said, when I was with Earl, my work was pretty much 2-D. I mean, it was very frontal.

MS. LAURIA: And flat.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. I did other things, like, a ring is not — I guess it's 3-D object. But [Alma is –HS] the one that developed my three-dimensional sense, because she made sure you had that when you walked out of that studio at the end of your time.

MS. LAURIA: And their graduate program was two years or three years?

MS. SHIRK: Three years. Three years. And one of the things that she would start with to develop your 3-D sense was — one of her favorite people was Julio González, who worked at the same time as Picasso, and they did collaborative things together.

We had to find some of his work, photographs of his work, and we had to duplicate it on a small scale. And of course what you would have in a book is you would have a photograph from one point of view and you had to imagine what the other views looked like. You had to project it. And there's some options, so the things that you might — the piece that you might — might not have been an accurate rendition of the complete object. But she's just trying to make you aware of, you know —

MS. LAURIA: The size of things, the volume.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah, like this looks like this from here. It could be just — it could be a square. It could be a plane. This could be hollowed out. It's like you don't — you don't know so you choose. You can choose. So whenever you're building something yourself, it's not just one choice. If you want to do a plane like this, a plane could be made out of lines.

If you want to see this from the side, it could be a piece of square wire. It could be a piece of sheet. It could be a piece — a plane that was made out of — there's all these options. Those are all variables that you have to sift through, and it just makes the work so much richer. That's what I remember.

MS. LAURIA: And what kinds of things did you make in her class? What kinds of assignments — were they vessels? Did you make hollowware?

MS. SHIRK: Well, the first assignment for everybody that came in, beginner or grad, was to make a 5-inch stretched bowl, silver — 5 inch disc of 14-gauge silver, really thick, and stretch it and then put a foot on it. That was how everybody started. And I'm not sure I got a demonstration.

But I remember there was another guy in the hammering room when I was — and I just said — she said, "This is the hammer you need to use." It was a big ball-peen hammer — heavy, heavy. "And use the round end. And, you know, hammer from the outside [edge –HS] going" — yeah, "the outside [edge –HS] going in," [… –HS]. When I made the first blow I just didn't know what was going to happen. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Because you had never done this before.

MS. SHIRK: I'd never done it. And so I talked to this guy and he said, "No, this is what's going to happen. It's going to kind of curve towards you. If you keep it at a certain angle it's going to [curve –HS] it." I said, "Oh, okay." I just didn't know.

So everybody went through the same doorway and then you could spread out. But looking at things in three dimensions, that was kind of the core of it. And she was very much about space, whether she was doing — in her own work, whether she was doing jewelry or not, she worked a lot with line, and line can enclose space or define space or create an edge or — so it doesn't have to be solid. You know, a lot of her work, it's quite large but it's not solid. It uses line and —

MS. LAURIA: I'll have to look it up. I'm not familiar with her work.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Did you learn about other design issues from Alma, you know, basic things about what kinds of

materials work better for different scales, taking of different colors, patinas, things like that in graduate school, or did you have to learn all of that on your own when you got out of school?

MS. SHIRK: Well, the metal of choice then, back in the '60s, was silver.

MS. LAURIA: Because it was less expensive then too than gold, as it still is?

MS. SHIRK: And because it was precious, and nobody made jewelry out of copper.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: You might make a model out of copper but you didn't make the final thing out of copper. That was the precedent.

MS. LAURIA: And nobody was using "alternative" — in quotes — materials then.

[Cross talk.]

MS. LAURIA: No plastics, no resins.

MS. SHIRK: No, no, no.

MS. LAURIA: No concretes.

MS. SHIRK: That's later. No.

MS. LAURIA: So the '60s was —

MS. SHIRK: It was pretty much all metal. On the bigger objects like hollowware — not the silver bowls but, you know, bigger things than that, were maybe copper and brass. Then you could work in some scale. But primarily the jewelry was pretty much silver. It was just cheaper [than gold –HS].

And of course it has different working properties than copper. I mean, copper forms really well but copper is really soft. Silver forms not quite as easily but pretty easily, and it's much — and it's stiffer. It's got more strength. So, you know, we kind of learned about that.

But there was no color involvement. We oxidized — that was all there was. That was all there was, certainly historically patinas existed but nobody was doing that. But we were oxidizing.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, what about forming methods? It was raising.

MS. SHIRK: Raising.

MS. LAURIA: Chasing?

MS. SHIRK: Chasing.

MS. LAURIA: Repoussé.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Engraving.

MS. SHIRK: Seaming. Engraving, yeah, that's a more precise thing. It takes a lot of practice. So we didn't do any engraving.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Stamping?

MS. SHIRK: Yes, texturing things with tools and — but we weren't changing the [color –HS] — we could use tones of gray because —

MS. LAURIA: It could oxidize.

MS. SHIRK: But we weren't doing any patina work or anything like that.

MS. LAURIA: Was there any photo etching?

MS. SHIRK: That was just about the time that Eleanor Moty was doing her photo etching, when I was in grad school. The surfaces were — see, I was trained in Denmark, and the surfaces were pretty smooth.

You know, the surface might be planished. It might be planished and then filed and all the marks taken out of it. Or you might choose to use a different hammer. But to put an image on the metal, that was something else. And also, when you put the image on, things tend to stay flat because it's hard to put an image on something that's —

MS. LAURIA: Curved.

MS. SHIRK: — curved.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, what about casting? Was casting something that you would learn in graduate school?

MS. SHIRK: I learned casting from Earl —

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: — because he ordered a casting machine. And there was somebody else in the studio at the time and he said, "Here, figure this out." [They laugh.] So I knew how to do that. Alma was a metal person. She was not a wax person.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: She was not interested in [casting –HS] —

MS. LAURIA: Casting for multiples.

MS. SHIRK: Casting is about learning to work with wax.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Here we're learning to work with metal. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: So I didn't know much casting. I'm kind of a direct person. I don't like casting so much but sometimes it's useful.

MS. LAURIA: All right, so by the time you are getting into your MFA show, what kind of things would you have for your odd display and your MFA show?

MS. SHIRK: Well, I had both objects and jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: Did you? Do you have any photo documentation that you can give to the Archives of your MFA show?

MS. SHIRK: [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, it's very helpful because — who was it that showed me their MFA slides that I did an interview of? And it was great to see what they had on display. Well, I can't recall at the moment but maybe it was someone who went to Cranbrook and then they showed me what they had, you know, like — oh, I don't know, the woman who ran — who was the ceramist, Maija Grotell.

Anyway, she was teaching at Cranbrook and then she showed me one of the MFA students had their show there. And I thought, wow, this is terrific because you get to see what was at their show and what their level of competency was, you know, at their MFA level. So it would be great to see what you have.

MS. SHIRK: I do have my portfolio from then. It's black and white, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Yes, that's great.

MS. SHIRK: But I don't — it's funny, when I think about it. I don't think I have any slides.

MS. SHIRK: Well, whatever you have.

MS. LAURIA: I have the — you know, the black-and-white photos.

MS. LAURIA: Yes. It would be wonderful to see what you had during your MFA show —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — because it shows what you had learned for those three years —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — in what was considered to be —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — your graduate show —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — what you had to submit, because that's how you got your degree.

So what was it that Alma thought was — what she was teaching, what you had to do to graduate? What are the things that you had to do? They were also then raised forms and jewelry forms.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So do you own any of those still? Do you own any of those still? Do you wear some of them?

MS. SHIRK: No, not wear, but I have some. I have some.

MS. LAURIA: That's cool. [They laugh.] Well, I mean, those are important parts — the things that you — you know, it's part of your learning — your evolution —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — of your career.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So when you finished that, did you know when you graduated that you wanted to go on and be an educator with your MFA?

MS. SHIRK: I feel bad you're sitting in the sun. I'm going to switch and I can sit in this chair.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Well, we're —

MS. SHIRK: [Off mic.]

MS. LAURIA: No, we're not. Let's pause for a minute.

MS. SHIRK: Okay.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: That is a big issue, because it's so much easier for the jewelers to display the work and ship the work so you do get many more entrants in those categories.

MS. SHIRK: Right, and yet it's easier at both ends, for the gallery or —

MS. LAURIA: And it's easier for people to buy.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah, and they —

MS. LAURIA: So it's not a fair — it's probably not a fair estimation, but I bet you, in terms of people applying for the programs, there are probably less people that apply to the furniture programs too.

MS. SHIRK: Oh, there are fewer furniture programs —

MS. LAURIA: Right, in general.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: So I do think that there is a huge interest, though, in people wanting to be — to express sculptural — you know, make sculpture for the body, because I think people are really into the body. I mean, I look at the websites of Etsy and other craft-related — and everybody seems to want to deal with things that relate to the body lately. So I'm surprised when you say that there's pressure in schools for the students to not want —

MS. SHIRK: I didn't say it was generated by the school.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay.

MS. SHIRK: I said it's generated by — I feel like it's generated by —

MS. LAURIA: The other students?

MS. SHIRK: The other grads.

MS. LAURIA: The other grads.

MS. SHIRK: You know, that —

MS. LAURIA: That they feel it's not serious?

MS. SHIRK: Well, it's just —

MS. LAURIA: Well, we don't have to discuss this here. I mean, it's a problem.

MS. SHIRK: Well, it's this idea that, you know: Oh, that's really terrific. It would be fantastic on a really large scale.

MS. LAURIA: Oh. Oh, a scale issue.

MS. SHIRK: It's that kind of approach. Yes, it's about scale.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MS. SHIRK: It's about the power of scale.

MS. LAURIA: It's always been about scale.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: It's always been about scale.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And of course inside I'm [thinking –HS], there's power to small.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: There's power to small.

MS. LAURIA: That's something that Ken Price and Ron Nagle have always dealt with in ceramics, and very, very successfully.

So we can go on.

MS. SHIRK: Yes, right.

MS. LAURIA: One of the questions about career development is, have you found that there has been a community in your field? You mentioned about the Allied Craftsmen. Have there been other organizations that you've belonged to that have supported you as an artist, a metalsmith? And could you mention some of those? Has SNAG been a support in your field —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: — and how?

MS. SHIRK: It's been terrific. I remember — because I was in Texas. That was in 1970. That was the first year of SNAG. That was the beginning. It was in Minneapolis. And I had a studio in Texas for that year — and so I entered that [first –HS] show with a piece that I'd made in grad school, with a piece that was brand-new. And there was a third piece, I think, but I don't know what it was.

Anyway, I got in. I got in. I was so jazzed, especially because — in grad school you've got somebody hanging over your shoulder all the time. It could be a teacher. It could be another student, whatever. You know, you've always got somebody.

And then when you're out, that [encouraging –HS] support system is gone and all of a sudden you have [just

yourself –HS]. Now with the web it's not gone, but it used to be gone. You move away and all of a sudden there's nobody that has a clue what you're doing. The whole support thing falls away.

And so I had just made this bracelet. That was the first major [silver –HS] piece I made after I got out of grad school.

MS. LAURIA: So being able to join SNAG and being able to enter a piece and it being accepted into an exhibition that they —

MS. SHIRK: Well, I mean, I just — I made it in a vacuum. You know, and you think it's good but — and of course just the fact that it was in that first [SNAG show –HS]. Helen Drutt wrote an article about it, that was one of the images she used. And so that fueled me for a long time, thinking about, hey, you know, you can compete. And then of course —

MS. LAURIA: So it was validation.

MS. SHIRK: I didn't actually go to SNAG. I don't know if I saw that show or not. I don't think I actually saw that show. But then when I came to the west coast, the first SNAG conference I ever went to was in Seattle. I think it was in '75 or '76. And I'd just been in the Midwest and — I had the [position at SDSU –HS] and so I just thought, I'm going to go to this. It's on the west coast.

And I remember — I had been showing all the time. I came to SNAG and I didn't know very many people. You know their names but you don't know what they look like. And somebody came up to me and [said –HS], "Oh, my god, you're Helen Shirk. Oh, my god! I love your art." And you just [think –HS], "Wow, this is cool."

You know, it was a place of recognition. I had been in Texas and Indiana. So then it became important to go. I haven't been to all of them but I go to most all of them.

MS. LAURIA: And do you think it's an important professional organization for your field?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah, I do. I do.

MS. LAURIA: And are there other organizations to which you belong that you think are important?

MS. SHIRK: Well, I belong to the American Craft Council.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. And that's also important. It's not as personally felt as the SNAG thing. And SNAG is — it's changing and morphing, and that's interesting to see.

MS. LAURIA: And it also produces the *Metalsmith* magazine. And likewise, have you had sort of a longtime and long-term relationship with any dealers that you have found beneficial in your career?

MS. SHIRK: Well, without question Helen Drutt has been really influential. She's never handled any of my hollowware, only the jewelry. And she's placed a lot of it in different public collections. So she's —

MS. LAURIA: And are you in her publications, like the contemporary jewelry book and the —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: I think it's *Ornament as* [*Art* –HS], the big book that —

MS. SHIRK: The orange one.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MS. SHIRK: I can't remember. I could go look. It's right in there. [The book title is *Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection*. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. She's been an amazing support system for me [since 1982 –HS]. Really. She's made a lot of things possible. [I'm very grateful. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Do you want to repeat that? Maybe it might have been just because of the airplane.

MS. SHIRK: I just said she's been an amazing support to me.

MS. LAURIA: Helen Drutt has been.

MS. SHIRK: Helen Drutt.

MS. LAURIA: And probably to many metalsmiths because of her long — her standing gallery that was in Philadelphia.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And she still is dealing privately, isn't she? Yes.

MS. SHIRK: Well, and the other thing is she did shows, and they [always had –HS] a catalogue. And they traveled. The Madeleine Albright show that —

MS. LAURIA: *Speaking Diplomatically*.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And the *Chatelaine* show.

MS. LAURIA: *Chatelaine*, yes. And I saw that show in Philadelphia at the Art Alliance.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And these things — and was there another one?

MS. LAURIA: Well, that is one of the questions.

MS. SHIRK: They traveled all over.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: So you make such connections that way. Of course they're not all American jewelers in those shows. But it presents it in such an authentic way, and the venues are always highly regarded venues when the show comes. I mean, she's got such clout that way.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And one of the questions is, can you discuss chronologically what you think were your most successful shows? You know, which ones were the most high-profile for you, you know, for your career? Is there one show that really sticks out in your mind that you think about: Wasn't it great that my work was in that show? Do you think it was the two you just mentioned, *Speaking Diplomatically* and the *Chatelaine* show?

MS. SHIRK: Those were great because they traveled. And actually now Madeleine Albright owns my piece.

MS. LAURIA: That's wonderful.

MS. SHIRK: Somebody bought it and gave it to her. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Great.

MS. SHIRK: [I always will remember *Young Americans '62*, at the Museum of Contemporary Craft, New York City. I entered it as a senior at Skidmore, my first juried exhibition, and I got in. The piece was an enameled box. I was thrilled it was accepted for this important New York City exhibition. Later on, important shows for me were in Norway, Germany, London, and two in Australia (*Design Visions 1991*, *Transformations* in 2005). –HS] But the one that I was most proud to be in was the orange book one, the one that was in Houston, [Helen Drutt's collection –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Right. That's Helen Drutt's own collection —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — that she gave to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And I'm pretty sure it's ornament — well, ornament as — well, you'll look it up and we'll say it in just a second. I'm going to pause.

[Pause.]

MS. LAURIA:. The title of Helen Drutt's book is *Ornament as Art: Avant-Garde Jewelry from the Helen Williams Drutt Collection, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*. And Helen Shirk has [two pieces –HS] in the book, an exhibition.

[… –HS]

MS. SHIRK: There's two brooches, one from 1978, which is called *Brooch*. It's 7 inches long. And one from 1982, *Brooch TB11TR*, silver and titanium. Also, it's 4 inches long.

MS. LAURIA: And these were both on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and they're both in the large catalogue that was published at the time of the exhibition. Well, that's wonderful.

And just recently, this year, in 2012, your work was displayed at the Mingei Museum in the exhibition titled *Craft Revolution*. Is that correct? What did you have in that show?

MS. SHIRK: Well, that was work from [the '70s –HS] — it had to be work from a certain time period.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: So those pieces were from 1975 to 1978.

MS. LAURIA: Right, it was a review of work that was in connection with the Pacific Standard Time initiative that the Getty Foundation sponsored. The Mingei did the show. But it was great to see that early work in conjunction with other craft disciplines.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: This is the end of tape No. 2 with Helen Shirk.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Jo Lauria recording for the Archives of American Art. This is tape two, interviewing Helen Shirk on Sunday, July 29, at her home studio. And we will continue working through some of the questions.

We probably should talk a little bit about what have been some of your most rewarding educational experiences, because we did get through graduate school, and we talked about — did you know that you wanted to become a teacher yourself after you graduated from Indiana University?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. I did teach when I was at IU, as a graduate associate.

MS. LAURIA: And you found that rewarding.

MS. SHIRK: I did. I did. I actually — I found it interesting from one particular viewpoint at that time, which was that it helped me understand my own work or my own view if you have to explain something to someone. I found myself saying things or building explanations that I hadn't actually thought before and it was just the act of speaking the words out. I would make connections in doing that that I wouldn't get to if I was just thinking it. It might have happened if I had written it, but I wasn't doing that at the time.

So I felt — even though you were talking about their work, you were not talking about your own work, and I liked using my brain in that kind of elastic way that you're working with individual people that have individual visions and you're trying to help them bring that to fruition. So you have to be over there in that corner. You may not particularly like it just from an aesthetic standpoint — maybe what they're going to do or whatever.

But you have to be there. You have to in a way see through — see their point of view, try as much as you can, because in that way then, you can — you can help them. You might — you can add to it or — so I found that the relationship between doing my own work and teaching was really beneficial. And a lot of people maybe would think, "Oh, well, didn't teaching take up so much time," and yeah. It does take a lot of time, but I felt like I was getting rewards which were more than just I was facilitating somebody else. I was actually facilitating my own thoughts. Because sometimes you don't have many people to talk to about what you do —

MS. LAURIA: They often say there's a synergy or a give and take that goes on between the teacher and the student.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: It's a growth process from both ends.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Right. And even from a beginning student, of course, what I was teaching at IU was beginning students.

MS. LAURIA: And was that part of the certificate program for you to be — no?

MS. SHIRK: No.

MS. LAURIA: It was just something that you did as —

MS. SHIRK: Well, it was something that you could do if you wanted to — Alma wanted me to teach the beginning class and I taught a summer class too. So —

MS. LAURIA: So you found it enriching personally.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And you also learned how to critique.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. And I found it — I found it stimulating. And over the years it's become more and more and more stimulating because the field has gotten much more diverse. As I said, we were just working primarily in silver for jewelry — but now there's so much more breadth to it, material-wise, process-wise, you can't — you can't know it all. And so it's beneficial to be attached to this group of people who are researching the same arena, which has now gotten so big. And everybody's got little bits of information that is useful — maybe useful, or informative, or whatever.

MS. LAURIA: And did you have any relationships with fellow students that you would describe as influential, as well as the influential teachers you've already talked about or any colleagues that you want to tell us about, relationships that you found were helpful to your career?

MS. SHIRK: God, that's a big question.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: But you said obviously Tod Pardon was a big influence on you as a —

MS. SHIRK: Earl [Pardon].

MS. LAURIA: Oh, I'm sorry. Tod is the son. Earl was a big influence on you.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And so was Alma, as teachers.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Were there any fellow students in either of those programs that you have become friends with since?

MS. SHIRK: Actually — not from undergrad. From grad — there are people — some people from the IU program that I've kept in touch with [… –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: It's really —

MS. LAURIA: More socially.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. More just socially.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And what about professionally? Are there colleagues that you've connected with that you feel are on the same sort of career path or track that you've just kept in contact with professionally because you've had an exchange of information with?

MS. SHIRK: Right. And I think one kind of way that people get to know each other, we have visiting artist programs where you invite somebody to come and do a lecture or you invite somebody to come and do a workshop. And maybe you've seen that person lecture before, maybe you've seen their work but you've never heard them talk about it, and so that kind of situation — and I taught for 35 years at State. I was able to have that kind of experience.

And that's very informative. And those things can be influential over a long term, even though you might not have seen the person after they came and did the lecture and did the workshop. But you — they just illuminated something in talking about their own work or their own process that you've found — that you remember.

MS. LAURIA: Well, let's talk about State. When you say State, you're talking about San Diego State University. How did you get to State to teach for those 35 years? Why don't you take us to that career path?

MS. SHIRK: Okay. So after I got out of graduate school, I taught — I taught at IU for two years — it was a visiting lecturer position. And then I went to Iowa for a couple of years and I taught at the Des Moines Art Center. And then, while I was there, that position came out both at San Jose and San Diego State. The San Jose position was a metals position. It was for one year. The San Diego State one was for one year with the possibility of a second year. And so I applied for both. And I actually got [both –HS], but I chose San Diego State because of the options of having a second year.

MS. LAURIA: In what year was this?

MS. SHIRK: That was 1975.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Great. And a good time for metals.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It was.

MS. LAURIA: And which program, if you don't mind me asking, do you think was the better program at the university? Were they both equal? Were they — was one larger?

MS. SHIRK: No, no. They were [not –HS] equal. And the one at the San Jose State, I think is not there anymore.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: But —

MS. LAURIA: Did you say they were not equal or they were equal? I didn't hear you.

MS. SHIRK: I didn't feel they were equal, but the biggest thing for me was the time thing. I didn't want to move just for one year. Not that I had something great going in Iowa, but, you know, you try to maximize the moves you make.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: And so this one had the possibility of two years. And I'd never been to San Diego. When I would tell people, "Oh, I got a job in San Diego," they go, "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. It's so great." I felt somewhat guilty having it because other people seemed to be so excited about living in San Diego, whereas I took it because it was a job. And you know, it happened to be in San Diego, which was nice, but I'd never been out there. I didn't know how nice it was going to be. And I knew Arline because she had been my teacher at Skidmore in 2D design.

MS. LAURIA: Arline Fisch.

MS. SHIRK: I had her for one class.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And that was in 2D design.

MS. LAURIA: And she was head of the metals program at San Diego State University, where you had applied.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Right. Right.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And this position that I got was one year with the possibility of two. And after that, you know, you could just be gone.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: But what happened was is that that year, '75, after I said yes to the position so they knew they had somebody, then she decided to go to Boston because they were opening that school of artisanry at Boston University [… –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Well, we can find out later.

MS. SHIRK: I'd have to look that up. Anyway, they were opening that. It was a big deal, the school for artisanry. And they wanted a big name to come and be the first — so [Arline –HS] went there for a year. And so I —

MS. LAURIA: So you were the replacement.

MS. SHIRK: Well — I moved up into her position for that year and then they hired Harlan Butt to take the position that I was initially hired to take.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: So that's how I met Harlan. And he's — talk about influences — he's been a big influence, just in his work — his work, his work ethic — the kind of unrelenting excellence of his work. And we just really got along well. It was his first year out of Carbondale. He had just graduated.

MS. LAURIA: The University of Illinois.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And he's primarily known today as an enamellist?

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: But, of course, he — he was just out. So he was teaching beginning classes. I was teaching the grads. And I was teaching advanced and one beginning class. So that was a great first year for me. We were both new. And we just worked really well together. He's a big outdoor person. And I found out I was too.

MS. LAURIA: Did you adjust really well to the San Diego lifestyle coming from the Midwest and the East Coast? Because, right — you did. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Especially coming from Iowa. I had to plug my car in in Iowa in the wintertime to keep the engine from freezing up. And also, what I fundamentally appreciate it about is that, basically, you can pretty much be outside all year long. You're not going to the beach — but you can be outside.

And I like being outside. I don't — in the Midwest, it was the thing where everybody went inside in the winter and you didn't see them until about maybe April 1st. And then they came out. I am used to winter. I'm used to it because I grew up in Buffalo, so, you know, that was hard-core — and I liked the cold.

But it was just great to constantly have access to the outdoors and — and the things that you can do out there, not the beach particularly. And I'd never seen plants like this. We don't have these in Iowa. And so that was a revelation, just the forms and the — looking at this kind of weird cactus there that — you know, we just didn't have that.

MS. LAURIA: Which these types of forms actually end up in your work later.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Right.

MS. LAURIA: And so do the colorations.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Become part of your palette.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So 1975 then is the catalyst for a new beginning for you.

MS. SHIRK: It was — it wasn't immediate in my work, because I then started to go out with Ed DeLarge, who came and did a lecture. He was traveling on a fellowship. And I had seen his work in *British Crafts* in titanium. That was right when titanium was coming out and there was a big article about his work. Then a letter came around from the agency that was sponsoring him saying this person is traveling and whatever. And I said, "Sure. I'd like to have him come and do a lecture," because we were just starting to get interested [in titanium –HS]. So that's how I met him.

And he made this comment, that, "God, you live in this place, you have color 12 months of the year. It's not

always the same thing, but, you know, it's so rich that way. And your work doesn't use color at all." That was true. I said, "Well, I don't want people to say, I want the pink one. I want them to look at the design of it," — I felt that color was going to end up being the star or something. It's like, "I want that one with the diamond" or something. But I started to loosen up.

And then, I suppose the big change into dealing with color was I belong to this — I belong to Allied Craftsmen, and they were having —

MS. LAURIA: Do you mean the —

MS. SHIRK: San Diego Allied Craftsmen.

[…–HS]

MS. SHIRK: I belong to that group. We, as a craft group, were supposed to make — we were going to be making ornaments for five Christmas tree in Bullock's [department store –HS] which has now gone, but —

MS. LAURIA: Yes. Bullock's […–HS]?

MS. SHIRK: Bullock's [San Diego –HS] —

MS. LAURIA: Department stores all over?

MS. SHIRK: Department store. Yes, [only San Diego –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: No, no. Just the one at Mission Valley, just that one.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: It was a promotional for the local [craftsmen –HS]. […–HS] So I thought, "I want to do that," but I'm not going to do what I do normally, because I wanted to make more than one. And my work was pretty labor intensive. And I'm not good at simplifying it in — I can't do it like at half speed. So I thought, "I have to do something totally different." I had all this ribbed titanium, because Rohr Industries in San Diego. That's a big scrap yard.

MS. LAURIA: Rohr?

MS. SHIRK: Rohr, R-O-H-R.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Rohr. And their [scrap –HS] yard is open, was opened on Saturday. And because I was living with Ed by then, we would go down to Rohr on Saturdays and go through the scrap bins. He was looking for titanium, which they had because they're involved with aerospace. And we found all this ribbed thin titanium. And I think we had gotten some of it — we thought, this looks good, but we didn't know what for.

And then — this thing came along. And I thought, "I'm going to use that stuff," because we had a lot of it. It's flexible. Because of the ribs, it's pretty strong. You could cut it with the scissors. You could punch it with a paper punch. And I thought, "I'm going to make one from that material and then anodize them."

And so I made 65, which is inconceivable to me. And it just liberated me. I was actually working with metal, but I wasn't using any metal tools. I was using scissors and paper punches. So that was strange and — so I made these, and they were ornaments. And, of course, the color — you know, you have a range from bronze, purple, magenta, ice blue. There's this whole beautiful range of colors. And so I made them so that you could put them on a tree and you could [also –HS] wear them.

MS. LAURIA: And did you have the anodizing at your school?

MS. SHIRK: No. [But it's simple to do it at home –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: With titanium, not aluminum, but titanium, it's just a one-step deal. So we had [the equipment –HS] at home.

MS. LAURIA: All right.

MS. SHIRK: We'd just buy a little [variable voltage transformer. I was doing 60 pieces –HS], that was the first coloring I'd started to do and I got really good at it.

MS. LAURIA: And did you get good feedback?

MS. SHIRK: I don't [remember –HS]. I really didn't take them seriously. I was happy that I was able to do a quantity of something and that it was a new thing. And I took them and — they did the trees and — I don't remember the outcome of that. [1981 –HS] was the time of *Good as Gold*. [It was a traveling exhibition organized by the Smithsonian, 1981 –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Oh, the show, the — okay.

MS. SHIRK: The show, *Good as Gold* [*: Alternative Materials in American Jewelry* –HS]. That came out.

MS. LAURIA: Was that Michael Monroe? Was he the curator of that show?

MS. SHIRK: [No. Lloyd Herman was guest curator –HS].

MS. LAURIA: That was the traveling show of — yes.

MS. SHIRK: It traveled all over. Yes. […–HS]. So it was alternative materials. And those were the only alternative material things I'd ever done. So I thought, "I'll send those." And they got in, which kind of stunned me. And then, of course, it traveled all over.

And then — people saw the show. Galleries or small museum shops really were — they saw those and they saw the catalog. And they wanted these pieces. They wanted to sell them in their shops or the museum shops. And they were really cheap. I think the cheapest one was $15 — I made necklaces and brooches and — I think I just made those two things and — oh, no. I made two kinds of brooches. Anyway, they were easy to make. And so I made a bunch and sent them off.

But I'm also thinking at the time, "No wonder I'm having a hard time breaking into the gallery scene. I haven't been making $15 work!" It was interesting in the beginning, but it was kind of in a way slightly depressing looking at that kind of overall thing. But — and eventually, I just got bored doing it. I cut it with a scissors […–HS]. And I would round the point off, because it's titanium, and the point was really sharp […–HS].

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: And we ended up with those triangular points in pockets, in our shoes, in our — they were in the soap in shower. They were just — all over. So I thought, "I'm going to go back to my work — what I do — did — do, but I'm going to try — I'm going to incorporate titanium into it, not the ribbed stuff," but I started working with titanium more and anodizing it in stripes.

I made this series of brooches, which were silver. There were two groups. One — I thought of [them –HS] as collages, […–HS] layers. And the other [group –HS] — I started calling the knitting needle series because they were linear. I'll tell you about why I started calling them that, but — anyway. They were lines in space. And the silver parts were very highly polished. They were tumbled actually so they were [very –HS] bright. And then the titanium line was [an etched surface –HS].

Especially the linear ones, I spent a long time trying to figure out the connections between these lines which would merge and separate how — how are you going to connect that? I wanted to keep it as fluid looking as possible.

MS. LAURIA: What was the scale?

MS. SHIRK: About six to seven inches — for the linear ones.

MS. LAURIA: And those are brooches.

MS. SHIRK: They were all brooches.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And wasn't that a little larger than you'd ever worked?

MS. SHIRK: No.

MS. LAURIA: No. Okay. So the only difference was that you were — I mean, there was a difference because you were incorporating a different material with the silver.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And this — and it was colored too.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And it was more —

MS. LAURIA: Freeform.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

[…–HS]

MS. LAURIA: So you'd already made a different transition.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And that work was a body of work. Ed also made a body of work that we showed at Helen Drutt. That was the first showing [1982, fall –HS] of that work. We were on our way to London because I had a [year –HS] sabbatical in London.

MS. LAURIA: And what year was this? Usually —

MS. SHIRK: 1982.

MS. LAURIA: All right, usually, because sabbaticals are within seven years so that was seven years.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It's 1982.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And you were still with Ed.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So you met him right after '75 or something?

MS. SHIRK: I met him in '79.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So you started teaching in '75. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: So between 1975 and you were still working in the traditional way that you had learned with Alma and then you met Ed and he was the one who said, why aren't you working with color —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — about four years after that.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

[…–HS]

MS. LAURIA: Was there a title to the show that you had with Helen in —

MS. SHIRK: I'm trying to remember. [Just our names. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: '82.

[…–HS]

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And this was on your way to your sabbatical.

MS. SHIRK: Right. We flew to [Buffalo, then Philadelphia –HS].

MS. LAURIA: It was a shared show. You —

MS. SHIRK: It was a shared show.

MS. LAURIA: You and Ed DeLarge —

[…–HS]

MS. LAURIA: One word or two?

MS. SHIRK: It's one word.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. DeLarge. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It was funny because we had both taught at Summer Vail. I think I taught there a couple of times. And then I got together with Ed and then we taught another time at Summer Vail. Summer Vail was a thing that was going on in the '70s. It no longer exists. But —

MS. LAURIA: Is it an English summer place?

MS. SHIRK: No. No. It was held in Minturn, which is right outside of Vail, Colorado.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: It was held at an old high school, or a high school which wasn't used in the summer. It was the brainchild of Jim Cotter and Randy Milhoan.

And so what happened was that [they –HS] brought these artists in [to do a metal symposium –HS]. So for a week, you had all these metal artists. They were doing overlapping presentations and workshop kind of things. And people stayed in Minturn. The faculty stayed in a vacant lot where there were Army tents out by a pond.

It was the site that was a big part of it. You were going to be in Vail, in the mountains, and the energy of the people. Summer Vail was the precursor to Yuma, the Yuma Symposium, which goes on now.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Summer Vail ended after 10 years. People [said –HS], "We don't have anything on the West Coast anymore." And so Pete Jagoda started Yuma.

[Back to 1982. So we were in Minturn for a month –HS]. Jim Cotter knew Ed. We knew we were going on sabbatical and had to finish our work for this show. But we had to rent our house. We needed to get out of it, but we weren't finished [with the work –HS]. So Jim said, come up here. It wasn't during the [month –HS] of Summer Vail. It wasn't the time of the symposium. So he said, "You can work here. You can work in the school and there's nobody bothering you." And so we borrowed a friend's Vanagon, with the pop top.

MS. LAURIA: It's a Volkswagen?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

[… –HS]

MS. SHIRK: Then we parked it right next to the high school. We slept in that, and then we took showers and worked in the high school, in the studio there. And on the way — the last day, when we were kind of getting ready to leave and — I didn't feel so good. I just — I thought I had the flu or something. I guess it was a couple of days. […–HS] I forget who — Ed said, "Maybe you're pregnant." And I just thought, "No. No."

But, anyway, we went and got a test at the local drugstore. And it said yes, I was pregnant. And then we went and got another test. I said, "I'm sorry. I do not believe that." But then I thought, "Oh, my God. We're going to England. What am I going to do?" And I thought, "I can't go. I can't go on the sabbatical." And I guess I went and talked to my doctor, and he said, "What are you doing? They have doctors here. We watch them," you know. Of course, Ed was English. So I would be on the National Health. So he said, "There's no problem. You're the problem." And we went off [to London –HS].

MS. LAURIA: So were you married to Ed? You forgot to say.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. I was married to Ed by then.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So you would be able to have your child in England then. There wasn't any problem.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. [No problem. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes. [First, –HS] we stopped in Buffalo to see my mother. We told her. She didn't know what to think! And then [we flew to Philadelphia for the show at Helen's, –HS] for the opening and we told her. She was the first non-relative person that we told. And she [said –HS], "Oh, God." [… In London, –HS]. I had a space at Sir John Cass to work. And Margie Schick also had one. I don't think I knew that at the time I went that she was going to be there, but she was there too. We had spaces right next to each other. It was just a place for us to work. And we had to contribute a little something like talk to the students every once in a while and —

MS. LAURIA: Sir John Cass is a school?

MS. SHIRK: [Yes –HS]. [Affirmative.] I want to say central London but I'm not convinced that's right. But it's a school. And Tony Laws was [the head administrator –HS] of it. And [fortunately –HS] I'd just been able to get that space to work.

MS. LAURIA: And was Ed working somewhere?

MS. SHIRK: He was. We were both actually part-time teaching at Camberwell [College of Art].

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: He was doing one [day –HS] and then I was doing another day. [… –HS] So that was good. That was the introduction to the British system, where they have all these part-time people who are well known. They come in, they work with the students. Then so at the end of the week, the student might have talked to five different people. Then they have to sift through what these five different people have said, because they each have their individual [approaches –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And sift through that and figure out — what do I think now, too? It was interesting. And Michael Rowe was there. He was at the RCA so I met him. That was the year his book came out, the patination book.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Rowe, R-O-W-E?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It's actually — the book is by Richard Hughes and Michael Rowe. Two authors. And I was interested in the book because after we'd done all that jewelry work for Helen — I have to move around. I need — I'm not comfortable working just in one scale so that's why I end up doing hollowware sometimes and sometimes jewelry. Sometimes I like the intricacy and — other times I just [think –HS], "Just give me a piece of metal, I want to work in that way, bigger, you know, a bigger vision."

So what I was working on at the Cass was some objects, not jewelry. I wanted to work bigger. I wasn't doing that in London. They were about this size, about six inches. But I that was just a preliminary to work out some ideas. And I knew when I got home I was going to work much bigger. […–HS]

MS. LAURIA: And were you — were you feeling all right with your pregnancy then?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. I was totally fine.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: I knew, since I wanted to work bigger, that I was going to work in copper and brass and Nugold. And so the fact that Michael's book about patination came out that year was perfect timing.

MS. LAURIA: What is new gold?

MS. SHIRK: Nugold is a high-copper-content alloy. […–HS] Sometimes it's called red brass, sometimes it's called Nugold. […–HS] And, in Britain, it's called gilding metal. And it's anywhere from 85 percent to 90 percent copper. Yellow brass has only 70 percent copper so yellow brass is much stiffer [than gilding metal –HS].

Gilding metal is actually [similar to –HS] the color of 14-karat gold. It's [very –HS] nice to work. It's just a little bit stiffer than copper, which is actually a good thing because copper can be kind of mushy. So it all just worked out really well.

So I would wear big T-shirts at the Cass. And I was talking to this guy, […–HS] we were looking at some work in the case. He was teaching there too. I think it was in April and I was going to have the baby in May. And he was talking about his girlfriend. She was going to have a baby. He was just talking about that. I said, "I'm having one too, you know." And he goes, "You are?" [They laugh.] I just thought — he doesn't know me, but I thought,

"What? You think I look like this all the time?"

But — I had [my son –HS] at Middlesex. I felt really lucky, actually, because they keep you. At that time, the normal stay was 10 days in the hospital. And you had to tell them before the birth if you wanted to stay the whole time, because if you didn't want to stay the whole time, then they would schedule a home help person to come to you every day. So I decided to stay because we lived in a tall row house [on the second floor –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Walk-up?

MS. SHIRK: [Yes. –HS] With this potter friend of Ed's from a long time ago, Caroline Whyman. And I just thought, I want to be near somebody that knows something. So I thought, well, it's not like I had lots of friends that were going to come and visit. So I just decided to stay in the hospital. And that was actually good. They were great. And they also had a nanny teaching section. And so you had advantage of a lot of people who knew [about babies. I knew nothing! –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: And when I compare it to some of my [U.S. –HS] friends' experiences, where they dump you out of the hospital after —

MS. LAURIA: Twenty-four hours.

MS. SHIRK: Twelve hours or whatever, you know, these experiences people have had, I was lucky.

MS. LAURIA: Absolutely. Wonderful. So what was your son's name?

MS. SHIRK: Nathaniel.

MS. LAURIA: And then does he have a British and an American passport?

MS. SHIRK: He has dual citizenship.

MS. LAURIA: Dual citizenship. Right.

MS. SHIRK: U.S. doesn't allow that, but Britain allows it.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: [… –HS] He has an American passport because we decided — and this was Ed saying this. "I think he should be American. We're going to live in America." And he said, "It's just going to be easier if he's an American, just — it is."

And the funny thing is — we were back in England when Nathaniel was two or three or something; we were at a conference in Birmingham and Nathaniel was with grandma in the country. And we put our bags in our car before the last day of the conference in this parking [ramp –HS] and somebody broke into the car and stole clothes and the passports. And that included Nathaniel's and mine and Ed's. And [Nathaniel and I –HS] got ours instantly. And Ed had to go through all this stuff. He had to drive here and there. It took him much longer as a British citizen to get his than it took us as American citizens to get ours.

MS. LAURIA: So you stayed for a year —

MS. SHIRK: Right. [Nine months, actually — until June. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: — in England and then you came back, and did you and Ed teach again?

MS. SHIRK: He didn't teach.

MS. LAURIA: He did not teach.

MS. SHIRK: He did not — he never taught.

MS. LAURIA: In San Diego?

MS. SHIRK: [Yes, that's correct. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So he was a working artist and you were an artist and a teacher.

MS. SHIRK: He had a studio at home and I was —

MS. LAURIA: Teaching.

MS. SHIRK: Teaching. [I had the summer off –HS], and then I went back to teaching full time, same schedule in September [1983 –HS].

MS. LAURIA: So he was home with Nathaniel.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. And my teaching schedule isn't five days a week and never has been. It's either Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or it's Tuesday, Thursday, really long days. Initially, it had been that, Tuesday, Thursday, really long days. And I thought, "I'm going to change it to Monday, Wednesday, Friday, shorter, ending at 4:00." But we did that for one semester and we just said, "No. We're going to go back," because it seemed easier to just have the baby all day long than just part. It's like — that day, that's what you were going to do. You weren't going to do both things in one day. I don't know. It's hard to explain, but I went back to my two-day schedule.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So were you teaching graduates only or both undergraduates and graduates?

MS. SHIRK: Arline and I would alternate semesters with the grads. She would teach in the fall semester and I would teach in the spring semester, the grads. And then we each taught undergrad courses.

MS. LAURIA: So in that time that you've been teaching, how have you seen the field change? I know you've talked about a little bit how it's grown and it's diversified, but can you be more specific, like what technological advancements have happened, you know, how has — there's been a burgeoning of materials. How have the students changed? Can you expound upon that a little bit or a lot?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Since you've been in the field for so many years?

MS. SHIRK: I think it's really changed a lot. And initially, in the '80s, there were these new materials coming onboard like titanium and niobium and the use of plastics, so that was a big thing.

I don't think the format of work changed that much. People were just employing these different materials to make the work. [… –HS]

The thing I see most recently is that — it's the format that's changed now. For many years, it was you made jewelry, or you made hollowware, or you made objects, let's say. And, usually, in the grad program — it was split half and half.

And gradually, it became more than half and half towards the object category, not the wearable thing. That's the way it was — people seemed to not be coming in wanting to do work in that format, the jewelry format.

So then it changed again, where people were not working in either formats. I don't — most recently, you know, people are working on the wall. They're working in things that are totally assembled. You know — they're making parts. They never actually see it together until — sometimes it's the day they put up their show. But that's changed.

You know, it used to be — it used to be when I first started, when they were first doing shows — because I was in the Midwest then and you had the Beaux Arts, which was I think in Louisville, and you would send your piece to the show. They would then look at it, decide if it was accepted or rejected. And if it was rejected, they would send it back to you — if it was accepted, then you got in. And, of course, now, you can't conceive of it, because, of course, at every opening of the box and repacking the box, there's always a chance that something can happen to it.

So then it became slides. Then, instead of the piece, you sent slides. And I remember when I came to IU, there were no slides. There were no images of student work so I started taking images of the work that my students made and for which I'm glad, because it was a big resource. So that's the way you did it.

But — and now, of course — you can enter online. You send a digital photograph. But then, you know, as I said, people were sending the work. So, you know, you might send them a box like this or something. And then materials — new materials were added in, then, new formats, new scale. You know, this is a wall piece. That's got a sink in it. I think the challenge today of the metals program is to stay relevant.

MS. LAURIA: But do you think these categories need to be expanded? I mean, when I see somebody who says that they are a jeweler, I have to question, is your jewelry wearable?

MS. SHIRK: Always. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Because I've seen some jewelry that is great for — if you want to expand the definition of is it wearable. I mean, I would put it on the wall as a jewelry-like piece but you would never be able to wear it.

So, I mean, do you feel like — do you question your students when — do you make it an assignment where it actually has to function as a jewelry piece? Do you ever ask them to, you know, to make it functional or do you say that it can be, you know, jewelry in the most liberal sense? Or if it's a vessel, does it have to have a bottom? Does it have to contain something? I mean, what are your parameters when it comes to, you know, those boundaries, or for yourself, even?

If someone commissions you to do a necklace and you know they're paying you for a necklace, you know that it's going to have to actually fit around the neck. It's got to be the proper weight. The catch has to work. You know, it has to relate to the body. But, as a teacher, if you give an assignment to the student for a necklace, I mean, are you going to be much more liberal about that?

MS. SHIRK: Well, the first part, if somebody wants me to do a commission, they're coming to me because they know what I do. And I wouldn't do something radically different, so they know. They've accepted whatever it is that I do, whether — and you think back about Albert Paley and his jewelry and that was in the — that was in the '70s. I mean, it was huge. It was huge.

MS. LAURIA: And it was heavy.

MS. SHIRK: And it was heavy. And it was worn, though.

MS. LAURIA: And it was exquisite, though, and articulated.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Yeah. And it was worn. It was worn.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And, yes, and articulated. It — and then, you just look at African jewelry and — it's really hard to say what's wearable because you can find in other cultures things that are worn every day that people here wouldn't consider. You know, it's all what you're used to or — what meaning it has in your culture.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's a good point. I mean — but I did see Marjorie Schick's show. And one of her necklaces was a chair that you put over your neck and it goes down to the floor. And I would say that that has a very limited use as a necklace. I mean, that's — it's referential as a necklace.

MS. SHIRK: And also — yes. And I think that's the thing is that, where's the line? You have jewelry and then you have pieces that reference the body, that reference an aspect of that. It's worn on the body, but it's not on the body to be worn, you know, for 17 hours. I look at *Vogue* magazine, you know, you see these shoes which are — how is that different in terms of wearability?

MS. LAURIA: You mean the platforms are like six inches high? Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. And the heels are — they're practically vertical, and it's a shoe. So it's the range of tolerance — it just depends on why you're wearing it, what you're wearing it for. I always said to the students, you're sitting there in your platform shoes. This is the early platforms.

And yet, when I say to you, we're going to do a ring — we're going to do a hand ornament. I call it hand ornament because it's got [broader boundaries –HS] — and you go real timid. What about these things on your feet? Where's the courage that I see there when you're doing this? They're both worn on the body. And, actually, in terms of use, your feet are going to get a harder time with it than your finger.

Many students have so many preconceptions about what jewelry is. And I think it's gotten way better now, way more exciting because some of those barriers are being really broken down, and you have people who are just assembling things that they wear, and it's less about the preciousness of the material and more about the impact or relevance of the idea that you see. And I think that's really exciting.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: I think it's an exciting time. And I think people's idea about scale is changing. You know, they're accepting bigger things. Because of all these different materials and because of the scale, I think — one thing I think about scale is that you do have to start thinking about [… –HS] weight.

And I also like to include balance in there somewhere, because I might want to wear something big, really big, but I don't want with every step I take for this thing to shift all over my — if it's supposed to be here, I'd like it to be made so that it sits wherever it's supposed to sit, and that — it's not a two-ton thing, unless that's part of the

deal with the piece, that you're wearing this piece that weighs a lot, and that you're very conscious of it, and that's part of what the artist was trying to say.

MS. LAURIA: Like a harness to make you feel the weight of the world or something.

MS. SHIRK: A harness. Right. Exactly. And I think with all these materials now, you have the ability to make things that are big but not heavy.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Use paper or other light-weight materials.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Paper or fabrics with — you know, with a lot of material in them [… –HS]. So I think the weight problem is not so big now at all because people are moving out of metal. I mean, metal is metal and — you know, it has a certain weight.

MS. LAURIA: Now, what if you have student who do want to learn different materials that are not metals? Are you able to teach them those other materials or do you refer them to other teachers on campus or other classes where they can learn like origami or weaving or things like that?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Well, especially on the grad level, they move according to their interest. You know — it's tough. Undergrad is so easy because it's a fairly structured presentation of the information in the field, the basic information about how you work with metal. Then they can move on from that, but we want them to come out of the undergrad program knowing how to solder. We want that. We want that for the field. It's not enough that they know how to glue.

We want them to have really interesting ideas about format and scale and use, what is this — what am I trying to do here, how do I want it to function in the outside world, but we also want those fundamental traditions associated — those fundamental skills associated with working with metal to continue as much as possible. I don't want them to disappear, because metal is an important material. Why would you want the way in which it worked to disappear? You're not going to learn it in ceramics. Where are they going to learn it? They're going to learn it there. But it doesn't have to be the only thing.

And the other thing is I think that it's such a discipline. I remember — I used to teach this class called design and crafts. It was supposed to be a preliminary to taking a whole semester of ceramics, or textiles, or metals, or whatever. And so you'd have four different materials in one semester.

I always started with metal first, always — so it's metals, wood, clay, and fiber, sometimes enameling. But I always started with metal first because I thought it was the most demanding. It's also the one that I knew the most about. But it was the most demanding and the least forgiving. And so I thought, if I can start them at this level, then — they will carry that sense of workmanship to the other media. If you start at the easy — I don't know what would be considered easy. I certainly don't think ceramics is easy but it's easy to pinch something out. It might crack in two days, but whatever. If you start there, it's going to be hard to jack it up. So I always started with [metal –HS] first.

But now, it's really interesting to see people come into the program. You look at the portfolios and you see — they reflect the — the good programs that they've gone to, a really good undergrad program that [taught –HS] them to brainstorm, and to work material well, and still people doing things like marriage of metal — which is hard.

And then, in six months, after being six months in grad school with other grads —because they all meet — they meet, take a bunch of classes together, so grads from furniture, grads from whatever. It's all changed. It's all changed.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: They've upped their scale like —

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. Because they evolve. It's cross disciplinary.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. And — [inaudible] — we agree on this idea that jewelry — and I'm using it in the broadest sense — it's a unique object. It's portable. It's worn on the body. And it has multiple historical connotations. I mean, it's a fundamental thing. People wore these things to protect themselves or they wore them to reflect their status or — there's so many — it's so big.

And we want those ideas to continue and the format of wearing something on the body that reflects your beliefs, or your vision, or your position, or your sentimentality, or your fears, or whatever. What's wrong with it? We don't want that to disappear and just end up on the wall.

Because the biggest — not that there's anything wrong with the wall, but one thing is it's not portable. You can't take it around. So it's a different thing, but there's a lot of pressure, I feel, on incoming grads, metals grads from the other areas to go up to ceramics, I don't know, to get off the body.

MS. LAURIA: Really? I see it — I see a swing in the other way. From my position —

MS. SHIRK: Really?

MS. LAURIA: When I jury shows, I see a huge amount of jewelry and —

MS. SHIRK: And the show is —

MS. LAURIA: Just shows in general.

MS. SHIRK: In general.

MS. LAURIA: In craft shows, when I jury them, I'd say — I'd say a third from all the disciplines are jewelry.

MS. SHIRK: Interesting. That's very interesting.

MS. LAURIA: That, of all the entries, a third of them are jewelry.

MS. SHIRK: That's really interesting.

MS. LAURIA: That's there's more jewelry submitted in — you know, well, let me just clarify that. If we have categories of glass, ceramics, furniture, wood, metals, jewelry, that taking all of that, that's six. You know, then you would say that everyone would have one sixth, but in reality, 33 percent of the entries are jewelry.

MS. SHIRK: And where does ceramics — how is —

MS. LAURIA: Ceramics is the second largest category.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. I was going to say.

MS. LAURIA: And then everything else — so, you know, 33 percent is jewelry, and then, ceramics is maybe 25 percent, and then everything else is — just shares the rest. So —

MS. SHIRK: I can see how that would be, because I often look at the people — you know, we've got a really brilliant furniture program here with Wendy [Maruyama] and Matt [Hebert], they make these huge things and it costs a fortune to ship.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Well, that is part of it too is that when you have — when you have shows where, you know, you're jurying, it's —

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Recording for the Archives of American Art, interviewer Jo Lauria interviewing Helen Shirk. This is tape number three, Sunday, July 29th, at the home of Helen Shirk on — sorry — tape number three. Okay.

We're going to continue and talk about career development. So, Helen, what are the most powerful influences in your career, do you think? Do you associate yourself with a particular movement or style? And if so, what would be your definition of this style?

MS. SHIRK: I always feel that's easier for somebody from the outside to see than it is for me to see. I sure I am to some degree — I've noticed this kind of cycle in my work as in the way I like to work, and — I call it fiddling, but I like to work small and intricate for — close, you know, kind of close. And I'll do that for a while. I'm doing that right now.

But I can feel — I know when it happens and — I just want to work more expansively. And expansively for me is not actually very big, but somewhere between, say, 12 and 30 inches is my larger scale.

And it's very different in the studio. I move around in the studio. I'm making a lot of noise, and it's very, much more physical, whereas the jewelry work is much more — I'm just sitting and I'm not hopping up and down all the time. And —

MS. LAURIA: But do you think — would you say in your larger work, which tends to be inflected, I would say, with botanical influences —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — and colorful, has a little bit of Arts and Crafts characteristics to it. And your — and your jewelry seems to be much more tradition bound, but more about designed elements, linear, about line, about movement.

MS. SHIRK: I'm not sure you've seen the recent stuff.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Well, then, describe what you feel your sort of major influences stylistically are.

MS. SHIRK: Well, I think it's really hard for me to talk about stylistic — obviously, it's really clear, in the '70s and the early '80s, the influence of Scandinavian work. The surfaces were very sleek; there's no texture. It's very cleanly constructed. There's a contrast of hard and soft. It's tight though. People have often called it cool and not in the humorous way either.

And that continued into that jewelry work that I did in the early '80s that I first showed at Helen Drutt, the linear pieces which had titanium in them. I remember a person — I had a piece in a box, and they said, "Can I look at this"? And I said, "Sure." And they kind of went to reach for it, and said, "Can I pick it up?" And I said, "Sure. Why do you ask?" She said, "I thought it might not all be together."

And that was such a great comment because I had really worked hard to make it look like that — make it look like it was a frozen moment, with lines passing over each other in space. So her saying that it didn't look like it was all together meant that I'd managed to manipulate those connections in a way that they weren't visible. But — and so I'm trying to think.

MS. LAURIA: So in the '90s?

MS. SHIRK: After I — after I had Nathaniel, which was in 1983, you know, I'd done that body of work for Helen [Drutt] — that was in the early '80s — until he was born. When I came back, I knew I wanted to work bigger, but of course I had a child and I couldn't go into school. Not that I worked at school a lot, but I knew I wanted to work big. And so I made some rules for myself about process. And one of them was, because I wanted to work big — and I was going to work in copper, which is a relatively soft metal — when it's annealed. I wasn't going to do any annealing because I didn't have enough firepower in my home studio to do that on a large scale. And I [decided –HS] — it was all going to be cold connected because I didn't have enough [heat –HS] to do soldered connections.

I made those decisions because of necessity, because of having to be home, having to be in the house when Nathaniel — because of Nathaniel. And it was amazing how it meshed. I made this set of decisions for these reasons, and then I looked at the resource material that had — I'd been collecting that was going to be the foundation of this work. And it was all photographs that I'd taken in the desert of different kinds of plant life there, and how they grew. They grow in layers. They don't grow at right angles. When you do a cold-connected joint, a rivet is the most common thing, but you have these pieces coming together at [one –HS] point, then riveting through there.

So these rules that I'd made myself about what I was going to do and not do, they fit perfectly with what my resource material was. It was an interesting happenstance. You know, you make some decisions out of necessity and they're not always bad. It's not always going to cramp you. It can liberate you in a way. I felt like I was liberated.

All the forming I was going to do was going to be with my hands. I allowed myself to use a mallet, a leather mallet sometimes, but I didn't really want to because I didn't want to interrupt the tension in the surface. And, of course, if you do a lot of forming with [metal hammers, it's noisy and it disrupts the surface –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: And so everything fit together so well. And, then, of course, Michael Rowe's book had come out about patination. That's when I did that — that body of work was the first work that really started dealing with color and with a certain kind of scale. That continued for a while.

And then, I'd been doing some experimentation with patina work based on Michael's book. You can get amazing patterns. I decided I wanted to simplify my format. These pieces had been quite aggressive looking. Actually, a gallery had said they loved the pieces, but the clients thought they were too aggressive. And I thought, "They don't have to wear them, it's just sitting somewhere. What's the deal with that?"

And because I wanted to deal more with the pattern and more with the intricacies of the patterning, the coloration than with the shape, I decided to work with a circle. It's a neutral. It's expansive. So I did a series of

bowls that were probably about 20 inches or 22 inches across.

But I get bored. I just started — you know, they were relatively flat. They were 3D but, you know, they were flat. And I wanted to move up, move up in the air. So I started doing these conical forms that were quite large and colored, with chemicals. And I was just getting my footing there. And then I went to Australia. I did an exchange for six months with — at Curtin University, [I exchanged positions with David Walker, who taught jewelry/metals –HS].

[… –HS]

MS. SHIRK: Okay. I chose to go to [Perth, in –HS] western Australia. Other people go to Melbourne or Sydney because western Australia [is relatively unpopulated and across the continent –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Is it — is it deserty?

MS. SHIRK: Well, it's the home of the most variation in wildflowers in the world. I knew that about it. And I had gone to — actually, in between there, I had gone to Australia for a conference. I was invited to lecture [in three states of Australia and to be part of the jewelers' conference in Perth –HS].

I remember I was sitting on this very deck — I was 51. And I had just gotten divorced. I was in the middle of it. And I was thinking I never expected to be here at this time. And I was just feeling really morose — and the next day comes this letter inviting me to tour in Australia, give lectures in [three –HS] states and then be part of the jewelers' conference that was going to happen in Perth. It was such a moment. It's like you never know what's going to happen tomorrow. Don't be morose today because tomorrow you may be over the top. It was so great!

So I went for that. The conference was in Perth and I met the man, [David Walker –HS], who taught metals at Curtin University. He wanted to come to the States. I wanted to go there. He proposed we do a faculty exchange, which is really easy to arrange if you can find the match, because you keep your own salary. That's the nice part. You just keep your own salary. And we exchanged houses, cars, jobs, and pets, and watering, watering the land.

MS. LAURIA: Did you take Nathaniel with you?

MS. SHIRK: I did. Yes. I said, I'm only going to go if he can come. He was 10. And it was so brilliant. I look back and I think — I had to take his stuff, our living stuff, all our stuff, [my tools, etc. –HS].

But we went and a former student of mine, Jeannie Keefer, whose name is now Eugenie Keefer Bell, lived in Perth. And she was excited that we were coming, and helped facilitate David and me meeting when I was at the conference. And she was a great support. She taught me how to drive on the wrong side of the road. She picked up my son from school — David's house was not far from the Indian Ocean, close — it was a small town. It was a very different life than here, and really wonderful, really wonderful and safe. So he would [go to school –HS] — I think it was one or two days. I couldn't pick him up at the right time, so [Eugenie –HS] would pick him up, they had a big dog and they would play with the dog and walk him. [Nathaniel –HS] didn't really want to be talked to too much. So Eugenie kind of felt her way. But we had the most incredible experience.

My teaching partner was Bronwyn Goss — she's an Australian jeweler. And she made work about the land and about herself, and I felt a real connection with her right away. She was a big bushwalker. So many of the trips we took were with her and her husband, who was a really wonderful man. We traveled too; Nathaniel and I traveled.

I took tons of photographs and was very liberating — it was very powerful that — I met a lot of women. When I got home, they said, "You took your kid and you went there all alone?" And I said, "Yes." And they thought that was remarkable. They said, "I would be scared to do that." [I said –HS], "I was scared of being here, sitting on my deck."

MS. LAURIA: And this was for one semester?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. It was only for one semester. You know, when I talk about it, people think I must have lived there five, 10 years or something. But it changed my life.

I made a plan that I was not going to work. I mean, I had a teaching schedule, but I was not going to make work while I was there. I was only going to photograph and draw, that's all, and I was not going to — upfront schedule a show for right after I got back to the States because I just thought, that's a sure way to have me clench up and not get the most out of this experience because I know I've got this thing [with a deadline –HS].

So after about three months, I just was so filled up — so anxious [to work –HS]. David had a little studio with a micro-torch in it. And so I started to make jewelry. It was silver, and they were brooches. But they were just at

the opposite end of the pole from the work that I'd made back in the early '80s because [now –HS] the silver was all worked with altered hammers, which I incised the face. Silver is a very reflective of light material and so the textures enlivened it. You know, it took that coolness away that people say when they look at polished silver.

We had a long counter in the house, David's house, that we had these things that we'd collected, you know, pods and bits of shells and all this kind of stuff. And so I just started from that, that connection to the land that is very vivid and important part of a lot of artists' life in Australia, the land. So I did this body of work and then I continued it when I got home. And then Helen [Drutt] showed that body of work [when it was done –HS]. [… –HS]

When I got home then, [after –HS] I finished that body of work, I knew I was going to work bigger. So I went back to the bowl form. But I had them spun, because Robin Quigley was out here with her husband, and they were looking at the first ones that I'd done before I went to Australia. And I said, "It's just such a pain. You know, I would cut out a big cone pattern, and then I'd have to solder it together and then I had to planish that." Before I could even start anything creative, I had to go through this.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So, you mean, you would have them spun just like they would spin aluminum?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And the way that I guess Allan Adler also spun silver around a chuck.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MS. SHIRK: It was a [form –HS]. And Robin's husband said, "You should have them spun." Of course, they lived in Providence. I said, "Well, gosh, how much do you think it would cost?" And he said, "Oh, it might cost $50 to have one spun." And I thought it was okay. So I remembered that.

It turned out it was one spinner in San Diego, not too far from here. They spun precision racing rims out of aluminum. So I went over there and I talked to the head guy, who was very nice. Sometimes people are interested in artists. They want to know what you're doing and so I said, "Well, I really want to get these big forms spun. This is the size I want. And I just want them simple." Because I'm going to go into that form and then rearrange it all. I just want to get it off the ground. I think it's a waste of my time to just repetitively raise these — I mean, there's nothing artistic about that.

So he said, "Well, I'll ask on the floor if anybody's interested in doing this." And this one guy said, "Yeah. Yeah." Because he was just doing precision work all day long. And he said, "Well, we can't — I can't tell you what time. Bring the metal over and then just whenever we can fit you in between the jobs." So I brought the metal over. It was copper and brass.

[Days later –HS] I got a phone call, "You're up." And I go over and he's sitting there kind of with his head in his hands. And there's some forms on the floor that he'd obviously — he'd started to spin, because he had the chuck that I had had made. And they were kind of ruffly at the top. And, of course, for a guy whose job is to spin precision racing rims, that would be a giant faux pas. And I had just told him I wanted a clean form. And — but it was copper and brass and he was used to aluminum.

So he had to get the speed of the lathe with the movement of the tool right. And he had [not –HS] been able to get it right. So he was depressed. I said, "Don't worry. That's great. That's totally great." I said, "I'm going to rework this all. That's great." [… –HS] I said, "Like this one. That's one's — that's great. Just do that." Then he couldn't remember how he did it wrong because he'd figured out how to do it right.

But I worked with him. And I had never had anybody make anything for me before, any kind of part, anything. And, you know, I'd always viewed it as [… –HS] you're giving up your piece or something. [But –HS] he would just stand there and hold up the disk and [say –HS], "What do you want?" And so until I said something, nothing happened. So I just realized I was using his hands and his skill. [… –HS]

That really liberated me because I didn't have to spend all these days just being like a hammering demon doing that. So I bring them back to the studio and then rework them. It developed into these bowls that had this kind of floating rim and these forms which were botanical forms that were — worked from the opposite side. I'd take a piece of leather and throw it over my blowhorn stake — it's a big stake, kind of vaguely wedge shaped but curved.

And then I put the piece [of leather –HS] over that, [… –HS] and I'd hammer from the outside so that the forms would push to the inside, because the leather made this little space. If I'd had it directly on the stake, then, of course, the metal would have just gone out sideways rather than forwards. So that's how I worked it.

And I did a number of those. They were between 22 and 24 inches [diameter –HS]. Twenty-four inches I think was the biggest disk he could do — that was big enough. But eventually, these forms, even though they pushed forward — you could tell it was a single surface. It's like looking at a piece of chasing. You see the forms, but it's still a single surface.

And I thought, I want these forms in 3D. I suppose it was Alma whispering in my ear. You know, if you've made those three-dimensional — so I started making patterns and then forming — then cutting out the metal, it might be in this kind of shape or whatever, and then forming those individual pieces, and then putting them together.

MS. LAURIA: So they —

MS. SHIRK: So losing the background [… –HS]. And there's a lot of construction on those. And that's something I like to do. I then — I would have a general idea of what I wanted to do, but not specific. I don't like to work with a really specific idea because I like to, in a way, set things up and see what emerges.

MS. LAURIA: But this was a whole series that you did of these vessels.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So did you have in mind where you were going to show them?

MS. SHIRK: No.

MS. LAURIA: No. Where — where —

MS. SHIRK: Not initially.

MS. LAURIA: Well, where did you show them?

MS. SHIRK: Gosh, a lot of different places. I just said, Helen [Drutt] — you know, she doesn't handle that.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: It was never with her but it was with — a lot of it was in individual exhibitions, you know. I always had something out, something somewhere.

MS. LAURIA: But, I mean, these were fairly unique at the time. I remember seeing them. And I don't recall that I'd ever seen anybody else doing these large-scale copper vessels with color.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: So could you tell us if you had gotten any write-ups in the publications? Did you get any recognition for being sort of ahead of the curve for this kind of work?

MS. SHIRK: I got recognition for the color [and form/dimension –HS].

MS. LAURIA: The scale too, I think.

MS. SHIRK: And the scale and just really the way they were constructed. Some of them were quite complex. I'm trying to get more complex as I go along, which is something I don't — it's unconscious, but I don't necessarily think it's productive. I have to kind of put reins on it.

But they were — you know, they were in different focused exhibitions. There was one — I think it was the 20th century American metalsmiths and it was on the cover of that catalog. And, you know, they were just out there. There were images taken and they just circulated. And then I got known for that kind of work. And then Tim McCreight did that book, *Color on Metal*. And there was a section about how I did it [and my piece was on the cover. They were discussed in articles in *Metalsmith* (2011, volume 31, number 1); *Ornament* (2010, volume 33, number 4); and *Metalsmith* (1990, fall). They were shown in *Transformations: The Language of Craft* at the National Gallery, Canberra, Australia, 2005; in *New West Coast Design* at Velvet DaVinci, 2008; in *Twenty Objects from the Late 20th Century*, Jerald Malberg Gallery, Charlotte, NC, 2000; plus exhibitions in Korea and Japan. –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Is Tim McCreight the one who also wrote the book on precious metal clay?

MS. SHIRK: Probably. It's through Brynmorgen Press.

MS. LAURIA: And he's — he — I think he's known for talking about processes, right?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: And so you then became — he was talking about how you were doing the process.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes. The title was *Color on Metal* so you have people that are doing enameling and people that are doing anodized work and people that are — I was one that was doing pencil.

MS. LAURIA: You were using pencil on those —

MS. SHIRK: Colored pencil, but when I first started using something on metal, first, it was the patination. It has a color range, the patination, which is — there's a lot of greens, blues, olives, you know, and there's some gold, but there's no — there's no real bright red or — there's not clarity. It's a different kind of color.

And so I started to want to — get rid of that. And I did for a couple of pieces use oil pastel on the surface. But I didn't like that. And so I thought, well, what can I use that's going to have a huge range of color. That would be ideal. So when you think of range of color, you think of pencils. And also, you can sharpen them really sharp if you need to. And they're easily available. They're not liquid.

So then you just have to figure out how you can get it on the metal, because, you know, I can't use colored pencils on this shiny surface. It won't stick. So you just have to sandblast it. And we had [a big sandblaster at school, luckily –HS].

And it's interesting because the color part is always the most anxiety-ridden part of the whole process of making this piece, for me, because it's like sitting there with a blank sheet of white paper and you have to make the first mark. And it is a 3D piece of paper. And the piece of paper happens to be pink at this stage because it's sandblasted copper. But you know, I'm always kind of terrorized. And I have certain colors that I like to use, but I keep trying to, you know, do something different like — I don't know.

MS. LAURIA: But can you put — can you apply various layers of the pencil, one on top of the other until you get the depth and the sort of texture that you want?

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes. Marilyn da Silva, she also is known for colored pencils on metal. She does it differently than I do. She paints the metal with gesso first. That supplies her ground. So she doesn't have to sandblast it because she just puts the gesso on. But I did that a couple of times. I didn't like the way that worked.

MS. LAURIA: And it didn't have the warmth of the pink behind it.

MS. SHIRK: I didn't think it worked [well –HS] in places that were humid or something. I did it on two pieces. One piece I did it because the piece was incredibly complex.

The way I do my color is I put the first layer of color on the piece. Then I take the whole piece and put it in really strong liver of sulfur which turns everything that I haven't colored black. So I have to make sure that I color everything that I want. But it also changes the color a little bit. And then I let that dry. And then I start working it — on it, on the ground. And so I might do five layers of color or something to get the nuances that I want. And then I'll seal it with acrylic spray, like sealing a drawing. At this point, it's just like doing a 3D drawing.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: You know, it's not about — and I do workshops and I say to students, "This is not about technique, really. The technique is a no brainer. If you're a good colorist, you will be good at this. If you're not a good colorist — [laughs] — you won't be."

MS. LAURIA: It's going to look crappy.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. It can look really crappy.

MS. LAURIA: So — but you were really probably given by Tim McCreight the credit for pioneering this technique, even if it's a fairly straightforward one. Nobody had done it before.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. I think that was the thing.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Because people [would say –HS], "It's pencil?" You know, people would make up [something –HS], "No, no. It's just pencil," [I say. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Now, did you also take this technique and apply it to your — to any part of your jewelry?

MS. SHIRK: No.

MS. LAURIA: No. Okay. So they're two separate things.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So let's talk about exhibitions. So, obviously, when you first came here to California, you got involved in the Allied Craftsmen Association. And that was important for a period of time because they offered exhibition opportunities. You want to talk about that for a little bit?

MS. SHIRK: They — when I joined, they were having shows at the San Diego Museum of Art which was a great venue. And I remember — and I've got the poster on my wall in my studio, I got on the poster. That was my image of one of these first bowls, which actually, was kind of dull.

But then the museum stopped doing [the shows –HS]. They just — I don't know what the reason was, but they stopped. [But I didn't lack for places to exhibit by then –HS].

MS. LAURIA: But did you also exhibit in California Design?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. That was right about '76.

MS. LAURIA: Right. That was —

MS. SHIRK: '75. [It was 1976. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: It stopped in 1976.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Because of that —

MS. LAURIA: Capacity in the art museum.

MS. SHIRK: The theft.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Right.

MS. SHIRK: You know, I had pieces that were stolen.

MS. LAURIA: Did you — you had pieces stolen. Okay. That was the last show they did that was at the Pacific Design Center.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And they did have that unfortunate occurrence where somebody came in and stole the work.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Unscrewed the cases.

MS. LAURIA: Unscrewed the vitrines, right, and took the jewelry out.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: But then — so after the Allied Craftsmen, that was more of a regional opportunity. And then you found that through Helen Drutt and other more national and international opportunities you were exhibiting. So —

MS. SHIRK: There was just more [available nationally –HS] — you know, San Diego is kind of an interesting place. I had plenty of venues that were out of state, which I could use. And I felt like — this wasn't a conscious thing but, you know, I wanted to be national, not just be local.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Sure. Exactly. That's what an artist has to do. First, you start regionally, then you go nationally, and then you go internationally.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: That's the — sort of hierarchy. Now, let's talk a little bit about your artistic process. What are the qualities of your working environment? For example, describe your studio or day-to-day activities, especially now, since you are, as you said, formally retired from teaching and you have been for two years. So what's your day-to-day working activity, on a general basis?

MS. SHIRK: Well, it hasn't been so long since I retired. And it's been a bit of a struggle.

MS. LAURIA: But your studio is here.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: In your house.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: You have a separate studio.

MS. SHIRK: Well, the difference is that I'm home. And, you know, before I was gone — you know, usually three days a week teaching at school, and then you'd bring home the stuff that you have to do in your head and whatever, and so the kind of stuff that niggles at you about your house and whatever, I didn't really have time to play. You know, between making my work and that, and teaching, it's like there was no space left for much of anything else.

But — and there — I don't know. So now, it's like I live here all the time. [They laugh.] You know, and I see a lot more stuff that needs working on, on this nine-tenths of an acre. And it can be very —

MS. LAURIA: So there are other priorities now that —

MS. SHIRK: Well, there are other things that are competitive. And one of the things — at least one thing about the garden is you can't work at night. And I've always been a person that worked at night anyway. So I can be happy, you know, doing this and then I'll go in the studio and work.

But the thing is, is that doing this is also creative so they're drawing on the same source in some ways. And so I've had to kind of deal with that. I have to put my blinders up sometimes and just go, okay. This day is just a studio day and —

MS. LAURIA: Well, it's a balance.

MS. SHIRK: Especially when I'm moving from one thing to another, one body of work to another body of work, once I'm organized in that body of work that I'm going to do, then it's easy for me to go in there. I know where I'm going. But when — but I also think when I'm not doing it, you know, so that helps.

Before, when I was at school, I didn't have so much time to think, to really think about what I wanted to do. And, you know, I was just thinking this morning that I want to — I want to break some of my own rules in making work. I just want to — I think because I have more time, I feel like I can take more risks, whereas before, when you're really tightly scheduled, it's hard to take a risk because it's time.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: If it doesn't work out, then you've lost that time. I mean, not really, but, you know. But now I have more time so I want to take more risks. And I've — I've also found a balance between teaching workshops, which I started to do when I retired. I used to do them a long time ago, and then I just — maybe it was after Nathaniel came and I just didn't have time to do that, and teach, and make work, and be a mom. It just was too much. So I gave that up because it's very — it can be disruptive.

But now, I just do about — I do maybe four workshops a year. And I like doing it. And the — and, in some ways, I like it better than teaching because — academic teaching because, you know, I've got — depending on where I'm doing it, like whether it's at a university or whether it's at Haystack or, you know. You have a new group of people. You are with them for two days or two weeks or something and you just kind of work with each person at their own level, and, you know, try and find out what they're interested in and how they can get closer to that thing.

And there's no grading. There's no deadlines. And that's really nice because I — I don't think any teacher enjoys the grading and I don't think any teacher enjoys the deadlines, enforcing the deadlines. Nobody likes deadlines. So I'm able to do the things about teaching that I liked. And I don't have to do the things that kind of really drag — you know, people say, "Oh, God, I've got to grade tonight. Oh, God, I've got to grade." And, you know —

MS. LAURIA: And there's also a community there.

MS. SHIRK: Absolutely. And the thing about workshops is these people have paid to be with you. And they want to suck your brains out, which is really nice. You know, it's different than sitting in a class, where some of the people, you know, they want to suck your brains out but other people want to just get the hell out. And you know, there's — you know, they're in programs — the applied design program here requires you to take a studio in each of the disciplines. And maybe they are interested in — they're a major in ceramics, but they have to take this metal class. So, you know —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Everybody that's there wants to be there. And that's pretty nice.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. And they're wonderful environments.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Because everybody is there to learn intensively and you're there to teach intensively.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And you're usually in great locations.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So —

MS. SHIRK: And the people come — it's usually a range. Even in — even if I do workshops at universities, you know, the people may be — you know, 18, 19 or they might be 35. I found that that's a good balance for me. I like to do it. I get the people contact. I get to travel interesting places. I get to renew some contacts like a lot of the places I go are where former students of mine are teaching. And they know what I do. And so I go there so I get to catch up with them. It's shaping up, what it's going to be like. I'm going to go to — I've been teaching in Seattle once a year at Danica Designs, and that's a really nice venue. I love Seattle and — it's just shaping up.

MS. LAURIA: That's great. Can you sort of describe how your work has changed over time and consider the motivating factors for these major shifts in forms, techniques and/or materials? I mean, I know you've talked about — you know, the '80s —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: — the '70s, '80s and '90s, but do you know — have there been any real motivating factors that have made your work change? I mean, you said that I haven't seen your most recent work in jewelry so can you describe what has made this new change in the most recent work?

MS. SHIRK: Well, I just got filled up with doing the work — doing on the larger scale work. You know, the vessels. I haven't discarded them, but — I just for some reason wanted to work smaller. Lake Murray is over here, which is a six mile around the lake kind of thing. And —

MS. LAURIA: Murray's?

MS. SHIRK: Lake Murray.

MS. LAURIA: Lake Murray. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: It's an urban lake.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: It's wild, and there's all these birds and whatever. You can fish there. Anyway, that's where I run or ride my bike. And I just started taking photographs. And, you know, you make choices about what you photograph, and that's informational. And all the photographs were black and white. And I printed a lot of them and I drew some of these forms from those photographs.

And like this is something I watch the light change on that vine that goes up there and how the position changes the circles to ellipses and so I might photograph that.

MS. LAURIA: And Helen is pointing at a plant that she in a pot that is round — it's a succulent that's a round disk on a vine that's trailing up her stucco white wall towards a window.

MS. SHIRK: A lot of the things I photograph are — some of them are like that, where they're very concrete shapes. But other times, it's more —

MS. LAURIA: Abstract?

MS. SHIRK: Well, they are real things. You know, they're like weeds or grasses or something, but there's a kind of mood that they make. I can't extract patterns from that. But it's just a kind of a mood, a kind of a feel.

MS. LAURIA: Like atmospheric, you mean? Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. And so this body of work that I'm involved with now is — was — I think it was last summer or two summers ago, I was in the studio all the time working and — they kept talking about global warming. That was after Al Gore, you know, did his thing about global warming. And there was other stuff going on. And you sit and listen to NPR all day and you can get really depressed. You know, everybody is talking — and I just started to feel —

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's interesting —

MS. SHIRK: Slightly depressed.

MS. LAURIA: Because one of the questions is, in what ways did political and social commentary figure into your work?

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So I guess you're going to tell me.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. You know, whether it's the economic situation or global warming — and I have one child, and he's an artist. I felt like I grew up in a time when — I got a job. I had a choice of two. And, you know, I had a fairly straight path. I had a job, I had a studio.

And now, it's just so different with kids. It seems like you don't know 50 years from now what is the world going to be like? And, especially now, with this political thing, this was going on then, but now, I just think, oh, my God. The kind of thought behind the body of work was — I actually have a lot of books of botanical drawings. And the piece that I made for Helen Drutt for that Chatelaine show was a tribute to Margaret Mee, M-E-E, not Mead, but Margaret Mee. She was an Englishwoman who, in her 40s, she had done some drawing but she went to the Amazon —

MS. LAURIA: With her daughters. Is she the one who went — no. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: No. No. But anyway, she's known as the foremost drawer of orchids of the Amazon.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Anyway, I read about her. And she was different than a lot of the people who do botanical drawings or — in a certain time period, because there were some that went to Australia. She kept voluminous diaries of her experience, some — and a lot of the other ones, there's no diary. There's no — there's just the work. But she kept diaries.

And she was an amazing person. And suffered all these terrible living conditions and — but, strangely enough, she went back to London for a show of her work and she was killed in a car crash when she'd been through all this. But she was an amazing woman. So I chose her as the person that I wanted to do the tribute to.

And I don't know where — anyway. It just — it was about — are we going to get to a place where the only record we have is drawings of these plants, or these land forms, or whatever? You know, if you get involved in all the writing, it's going to change radically. Things are just going to disappear and submerge and — you know, I do believe it. I don't believe it's — [inaudible].

MS. LAURIA: So for —

MS. SHIRK: So it's about — the pieces are — they're very intricate. And when I present them, they're presented on the wall and on stands. And the lighting comes down through the piece and casts a shadow on the ground about — you know, this is — in a way, this is a specimen. They're colored with china paint. And —

MS. LAURIA: They are metal?

MS. SHIRK: They're silver.

MS. LAURIA: They're silver. So then they're enameled with china paint?

MS. SHIRK: No. No. They're painted with china paint, which is something that you do have to cook, but only to 300 degrees for 30 minutes. [It's not glass like vitreous enamel. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: And I had initially planned to [enamel –HS] — because I love enameling. I mean, I love the work and I love the effects you can get from burning out. I don't think about the precision stuff. I loved Harlan's work but I could never do it. But I'm interested in the burnout.

And I used to teach enameling when I was at State as part of the metalsmithing class because they made a raised object. And it was seamless so it was a great candidate for enameling. No solders in these. So I got involved there.

But so I thought, "I'm going to enamel these." I kind of did them in groups of five and when I got to push comes to shove, I couldn't bring myself to put them in the kiln. I just couldn't do it. You know, it had taken a long time. So I thought, how else could I color these? And Julie Blyfield was in town. We were both in a show at IU. And then I got her to come out here and do a workshop. So we were just talking and — she uses color in her work. And I said, "What is this that you're using?" It's these paints called Porcelaine, and they're French, and you can get them at Dick Blick. And they have quite a few colors, and you can mix them. They come in transparent, semi — semi-transparent and opaque. And so I thought, "That's it."

MS. LAURIA: So you put them in the oven?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Well, you paint it, you have to let it dry for 24 hours. And then you put it in the oven, a cold oven, and I set my timer for like about 37 minutes. That gives it time — you want it to heat up gradually and then they have 30 minutes at 300 degrees. And then you take them out. And it's tough. It's really tough. It's even really tough before you bake it, because a lot of times, I'd forgotten to clean my mixing tray. You know, I'll finish it, and I won't be back in the studio maybe until the afternoon the next day. And I have to blast the stuff up. It's not even cooked.

MS. LAURIA: That's great.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: So it's almost like Fimo, the way Fimo used to be when you would put it in the oven.

MS. SHIRK: I guess. Yeah. [I looked at it and said –HS], "I'm not doing this, putting it in this 1,500 degree kiln anymore." [Laughter.] Why am I breaking my back?

MS. LAURIA: So this is how you're imparting color onto these new forms.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And these are more dimensional forms. And the shadow cast is — is the memory of the specimen.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Because this is going to be the only memory that we have if global warming comes past and everything disappears.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. That's one aspect that I connect with. There will be a lot of other things that change. I mean —

MS. LAURIA: Right. But, I mean, are they wearable?

MS. SHIRK: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: I mean, you take them off the wall —

MS. SHIRK: Totally.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So that's just the display.

MS. SHIRK: That's just the mount.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: But it's another aspect. It's another platform for it.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: I mean, because jewelers —

MS. SHIRK: Right. It's the way I want people to think about them, but they're all 100 percent wearable.

MS. LAURIA: That's interesting because I remember when brooches started to become display objects on little stands, like I think —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — Tod Pardon started to do.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And Bruce Metcalf, you know. And then they became little sculptures.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And then you'd take them off the stand and you'd wear them and then you'd redisplay them.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So that is an interesting shift.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Had your work been infused with commentary, political or personal, before this time?

MS. SHIRK: No. No. Really. The vessel objects, they're more optimistic. And these are —

MS. LAURIA: Well, they're fecund. I mean, they're about growth and —

MS. SHIRK: Yes. They're about this, you know, undeniable energy or whatever. And these are — I'm just going to start somewhere now, but they're not going to be the same. These are — these are layered so you look down between two layers. They're very frontal. You know, they're flat.

MS. LAURIA: Will you give the archives, like, some digital images —

MS. SHIRK: Oh, sure.

MS. LAURIA: — so that they can — when people read the interview, they can sort of click on, see some —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: It's always helpful, I've found. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIRK: I bet.

MS. LAURIA: To see it in each —

MS. SHIRK: You can't have them just relying on my words to know what this thing is.

MS. LAURIA: But I mean, it's interesting descriptive too, but, I mean, it's always nice. And then, what would you say the impact of technology has had on your work? I mean, you did mention about the spinning. You knew obviously about spinning, that you could use a chuck and —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Of course, that's really old.

MS. LAURIA: That is old but it's something you had never used.

MS. SHIRK: No, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: So did someone suggest it to — you said someone suggested it.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. Robin Quigley's husband.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So you — that —

MS. SHIRK: I think his name is Richard.

MS. LAURIA: So that was a good idea to sort of automate some of the — you know, the things which were really drudgery.

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Right. So that you could do more of them.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: I mean, it was like a production method,

MS. SHIRK: Right. [It was a way of working faster, getting to the interesting part faster. –HS]

MS. LAURIA: Have there been other things that you discovered? Porcelaine, that was a new thing for you too —

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Right.

MS. LAURIA: — that is working. Were there other kinds of —

MS. SHIRK: Well, when you look at these pieces, it's all about piercing. It's all pierced work. And it's interesting. It's all hand pierced. I like sawing. I like sawing intricate things. It's time to think while I'm sawing. And I always have the option of making something a little — I might have the pattern good on the metal, but I have the option to make this point a little bit longer as I'm going along, you know? [… –HS] I couldn't give it to somebody else to saw and get the same thing because they would just saw the pattern. But, you know, as I'm going along, I sometimes change it.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: But, of course, the thing that comes up now with all this laser cutting and whatever —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: — is — it's interesting. I took one to Helen at a — [inaudible] — conference. I showed it to her. And she said, "Did you pierce this?" That was the first thing she said to me. And I said, "Yes." And she didn't make any comments afterwards. So I didn't actually know if she thought that was — she was glad that I did or whether she thought that was dumb that I did.

I know that I had a show down at Taboo with Jane Groover and — of this work. And Jane said — she got in a big fight with a client about whether these were laser cut. You can't laser cut silver. […. –HS] It doesn't work.

But anyway, the woman wouldn't believe that they were hand pierced. And Jane said, "Well, I know her really well and I know that they are hand pierced." And she just wouldn't believe it. And it kind of made both of us sad, because, in a way, it's — this person, even with her saying, "I know her and I know that they're hand pierced," this person couldn't accept that somebody knew how to do that — would spend the time doing that — and it made us sad because there are things that you can do with piercing — you know — these are not duplicates. You know, everything is one of a kind. And even within the piece, you know, it changes. It made me sad she didn't believe in hand labor.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Well, I was going to say that you obviously know about these new technologies, water jet and laser cutting —

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Or computer Z —

MS. SHIRK: Form Z?

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. Form Z, but you choose not to use them.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So you — you would use —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. I would use it.

MS. LAURIA: You would use laser cutting if it was appropriate.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: You don't have anything against it.

MS. SHIRK: No. No. No.

MS. LAURIA: It's just that, in this particular instance, it was you hand pierced this piece.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. And I also — you know, right now, these things develop. And I — and because it's silver, it's influenced by the fact that it's silver. And I spend a lot of time trying to fit these as closely as I can on the piece of silver. There's a lot of waste, obviously.

And I think if I was making them out of steel, which I have thought about, that I would — it would be different and I might consider using it because this steel's — it doesn't matter if I waste it, so to speak. You know, if I don't get them as close as — or if I have pieces — you know, what do they call it? Digitally cut or whatever?

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: That I don't use because the material is not expensive.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MS. SHIRK: But, you know, a slab of silver is a chunk. And I do them out of 18-gauge silver because I do have these thin bonelike areas and I want those to be strong. I can't make them out of 20. I don't want to make them out of 20. It's kind of a thing about the expense of the material I'm using.

MS. LAURIA: And you did mention Taboo. And Taboo is a very important gallery here in San Diego. Do you want to talk a little bit about your relationship with Jane? Is it —

MS. SHIRK: Jane Groover.

MS. LAURIA: Groover. Yes.

[… –HS]

MS. LAURIA: And isn't Jane also a trained metalsmith?

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. She was — she was starting the graduate program when I first came to State. In '75.

MS. LAURIA: She was starting at Grossmont College?

MS. SHIRK: No. She was starting her graduate program [at SDSU –HS].

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay.

MS. SHIRK: At San Diego State. She was just beginning it. She — and Joanna Rhoades is her partner in the gallery.

MS. LAURIA: What is Joanna's last name?

MS. SHIRK: Rhoades.

MS. LAURIA: Rhoades. Okay.

MS. SHIRK: Rhoades. And they were both in the program when I first came. So it's been interesting to see — you know — I forget when Jane started Taboo, but — and it's had several locations, but this [current one –HS] is a great location for them, I think, in the middle of Mission Hills.

MS. LAURIA: And she — I think the last time I talked to her, she was teaching at Grossmont Community College. I don't know if she still does, but —

MS. SHIRK: No. She stopped that.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MS. SHIRK: [… –HS] She was teaching there and then she stopped, ["retired" –HS].

MS. LAURIA: So it's a great resource for collectors and people interested in —

MS. SHIRK: Oh, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: — in buying studio jewelry, but it's also a great place for jewelers to sell their work.

MS. SHIRK: Right. And she has work from all over, some European work, mostly national. And, you know, she has a particular taste and they do really great display.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So it's a great place to educate the public about the importance of the studio craft and jewelry movement.

MS. SHIRK: And also, as a teacher, I would always send my beginning students down there, because they're learning fundamental techniques, but they don't really understand how those will function for them in work.

But I send them down. And they have to write, pick out — or they had to pick out three pieces that they really liked and analyze why. You know, it's like — it's important to know why you're drawn to something. And three pieces they didn't like. And that's also important to know why you don't like it. And they also encountered then their own kind of ideas about what's wearable, what's not wearable. You know, and so, in writing this essay about this work, they have to confront that because we have conversations about it.

And so it was a great resource that way to — also to let them know — because some of the work down there is very complex. It's all really well designed. And some of it — when they look at it, then they would realize, hey, I just learned to do that. I could do that. I mean — it's not — it's not out of reach. It may be out of reach design wise, but technically, if you work on your skills, it's not going to be out of reach. It's a way to get — for them to get a vision of what it might be, what —

MS. LAURIA: That's great because I guess it's those kind of jewelry resource, studio gallery stores are very far in between. We have one here in San Diego. We have one in LA, Freehand Gallery, and we have one in San Francisco with Velvet da Vinci, and that's about it on the West Coast.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Right.

MS. LAURIA: So let's go to the last page of questions, where it's under the heading of the art world. What drives you to continue your work?

MS. SHIRK: That's an interesting question because I think, you know, when I retired — people say, "So you're retired now." [… –HS] And they [say –HS], "So what are you doing? Just sitting on your deck or whatever?" And I always said, "I just retired from teaching." I didn't retired from life or my studio practice or — I feel really fortunate, actually, that I have always had the studio practice because I just stopped teaching. And I didn't even totally stop teaching because I do the workshops. So it's — I don't have the same kind of pressure. I don't have to deal with budgets, you know, now, which is nice. But —

MS. LAURIA: And all the administrative —

MS. SHIRK: And all the administrative things. But — what was the question originally?

MS. LAURIA: What drives you to continue your work?

MS. SHIRK: Oh, that. What drives me? You know, I've had to examine that too because some people might say, well, what do you have to prove or — you know, you — I'm a fellow of the Crafts Council, and I've been in books, and — so what are you — but, you know — I'm an aesthetic person and I — I'm drawn to this.

MS. LAURIA: Pointing, again, at the beautiful scenery out there with the succulent —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. The thing on the wall.

MS. LAURIA: You know, trailing up the wall. But isn't it true that you can't just stop being an artist?

MS. SHIRK: No. I mean, it's a kind of a way of thinking, and making, and I like to put my ideas out there in the world, not just have them in my head. It's just a way of being. I've been doing it for so long. There's some parts

of it, you know, that I don't have to do, but there are other parts of it that give me great pleasure and that's the studio work. And so —

MS. LAURIA: Don't you get up every morning and say isn't this a great day? I'm going to go work in my studio? [They laugh.]

MS. SHIRK: I usually [say –HS] this is such a great day. Oh, but I've got to work in my studio. Because it — you know, Nathaniel calls it my cave. It has got big windows, but I turn the blinds down because the sun shines in and I can't see so well. And he said, Mom, I can't believe you work in this cave.

But it — it's always in between bodies of work that — I love it when — I always try to leave my work at a place where I will want to walk into the studio the next morning. Like I try to solve — even if it means staying up all night, I try to solve the problem, if there is a problem, so that the next day I can walk in kind of with a happy heart. [… –HS] Sometimes it's hard to walk in when you have this big problem. And then I have a lot of things that can distract me.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it is a beautiful deck and a beautiful home.

How has the art world changed in your lifetime, would you say? Do you think it's gotten more insular? Has it gotten —

MS. SHIRK: You mean the art — are you talking about the art world?

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. The art world. I mean, the — let's just say the Internet has really changed the art world. Don't you think it's become much more global, much more accessible?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. Totally. It's just a whole different thing. And it's interesting because I have this son who's 29 and he's in New York because of the art world. But the ways of doing things are so different. People are doing all these pop-up things now and they can communicate about them through the web. And they can find things. [… –HS] You know, everything is [available –HS] — you can find things so easily. And you can explore something easily.

MS. LAURIA: Instantaneous.

MS. SHIRK: Which I think is an asset. And you can connect people easily. And there's these online shows. And not all of it is wonderful, but it's activity. And —

MS. LAURIA: But what about originality? Does that — do you question the fact that because there is this — you know, everybody has access to everybody else's images, do you feel that that's somehow detrimental to original thought?

MS. SHIRK: I think it makes it a lot more challenging to have an original thought. Before, we never knew what was going on out there until — you could be doing something that was the same as — or similar to something on the East Coast but you never knew it while you were doing it because — but I think what bothers me the most — I don't know — it's — I don't know if bother's the word, but I see — I don't know what to think about it. You know, especially because I was teaching.

I see people who are — who haven't got their body of work yet and yet they're on the web with whatever. And it doesn't seem like — it seems like the incubation period for work is visible now. Before, it was not. You know, you have this time when you kind of hunker down and you sort out your things. And, you know, and then finally, when you think you're ready, you — but now, it's like — it seems like it's not run through the filter of time. Now, it can be just instant. And maybe it's interesting. Maybe it's not. People are putting up websites and publicizing stuff that's —

MS. LAURIA: Maybe premature?

MS. SHIRK: Yes. I think that's a good word. But, you know, I don't know. It's — maybe people think faster now. I don't think so, but — that kind of bothers me. And I know, especially if I was teaching, that might bother me. I might be saying, look, you want to get this work out there when it's resolved. That's what you want to be connected to, not unresolved work or not work that's — you're doing one thing — this one thing this month, and then, the next thing you got out, nobody would recognize that as you.

But, you know, then — whenever I say that, I think — it seems like people do jump around a lot, especially because, as I said, a lot of people — a lot of students in the program, grad students, you know, their work is changing from month to month, which is what's supposed to happen, I think in grad school. You kind of explore these kind of different poles and gradually — you know, it's like this, and it gradually — it gets more in so that it's a focus. And these things are getting published.

MS. LAURIA: The things that are vacillating.

MS. SHIRK: Right. You know, the indecisiveness is getting published it seems like.

MS. LAURIA: And you would advise against that.

MS. SHIRK: Well, I just think —

MS. LAURIA: It's unresolved.

MS. SHIRK: It's unresolved. And you — and what's the purpose of that? Just to show people that you're — you know, in your studio? I mean, what's the purpose of showing unresolved work? I don't know. Cart before the horse a little bit.

MS. LAURIA: Well, how would you like you and your art to be viewed in the future? And what do you think your contributions have been to American art? This is kind of a legacy question. And it's always hard for —

MS. SHIRK: Right. And it's hard about when you use the art thing, because to me, it's — that's — I don't know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, legacies are usually done by other people. You know, they're the ones who write your catalogs or museums who do your shows, but —

MS. SHIRK: Okay.

MS. LAURIA: But, in any case, you know, we all have a sense of how we want to be placed in history. So how do you want to be seen in history?

MS. SHIRK: Well, I'm happy [to see –HS] my legacy resting in the world of makers, metal makers. I'm happy with that. I can't define the art world [… –HS]. Because Nathaniel lives there now, I'm really aware of how totally different it is and the way it operates and the kind of ways that you make connections, because you make connections with people, it seems like, not with work.

MS. LAURIA: And you think that in the craft and design world, you make connections with your work?

MS. SHIRK: It's just different.

MS. LAURIA: Your work connects.

MS. SHIRK: It seems like that.

MS. LAURIA: And what do you — what do you want your work to say then? You want your work to talk about color? You want your work to talk about excellence? You want your work to talk about scale, about wearability? What is it that you want your work to say?

MS. SHIRK: I guess because it — because the base of it is metal, I want it to speak about the divergent ways that you can approach that material. One time, when I was at Penland and I did a lecture, I was coming out of the room. And this girl stopped me, who was with ceramics. And she said, "I loved your lecture. I just thought your work was so seductive." And she said, "You know, I always thought of metal as being cold and hard and just rigid." And she said, "You showed me that it can be really sensual."

And I thought that was great. And I suppose that's what I exploit in it, its ability to create these forms which are at the same sensual as they are tough — I'm sure that part of it will be the color. I don't know. I don't think about it so much. It's going to be — it is what it is and — it's just going to be it is what it is.

MS. LAURIA: Well, certainly, it will be placed within the context of metalsmithing, and hollowware, and jewelry.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And also you'll be thought of as an educator who, you know, had a legacy of students.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Because you taught for 35 years and —

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And I'm sure those students have now gone on to teach other students.

MS. SHIRK: And gone on to make — yes.

MS. LAURIA: And gone on to be makers themselves.

MS. SHIRK: I enjoy that part of it. A former student of mine, Jeff Clancy, who lives in Maine, he's in the *40 under 40* show at the Smithsonian. And they bought all his work [in that show –HS].

MS. LAURIA: That's wonderful.

MS. SHIRK: That's just really gratifying. I've been a big cheerleader for him. And he made this incredible piece — actually, there's a photo of it in *Smithsonian* magazine, which I picked up in my doctor's office, and I'm flipping through — because he told me that it was in the show. Anyway, it's a teapot that's got a gun in it. All silver. It's a great piece. And I said, this piece belongs in a museum where people can see it.

And, you know, there were a couple of bites, but they didn't materialize. And he finally, what he said, "It's out — it's out of the box now. It's in its place." And I'm so glad. You know, that it's in Washington. It's going to be seen, because I think it's a really important piece, as is the rest of his work. His work is really developed in a wonderful way, very different from the way the teapot is. But the rendition is different. The subject matter is similar, it's really gratifying to see that.

MS. LAURIA: That's wonderful. Those are the sort of moments that, you know, teachers have, you know, that is a part of you know, the gratification of teaching, knowing that you have given part of your education to someone else.

MS. SHIRK: Right.

MS. LAURIA: And that will continue on in a long line that will evolve.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: You know, in perpetuity.

MS. SHIRK: I know. When I was at Haystack, I — you can take your own assistant or you can ask them to — I took mine. I knew who I wanted to take, Anne Wolf, who's a — who lives in San Diego and has a studio where she teaches classes and she also exhibits. And we just worked so well together. It's — I've never sat in on a class of hers — I don't know how she teaches. But all I know is that when I was there, she could read my mind. And it was just really nice to feel that and to see that she's successful in what she's doing, you know, that she's good. And the same with David Clemons and —

MS. LAURIA: Right. Because he was a student of yours, a graduate student that I saw his graduate show when I was at San Diego State University, and I saw his work, which was called *Chitlins*, and immediately responded to it, and put it in the Craft in America Touring Show at — that was his first work that I think he had as a graduate student go into a national touring show.

And it was wonderful to see someone like the caliber of David Clemons come out of a graduate program. It's something you don't often see, you know, a serious graduate student who had all of the right elements, you know, that you sometimes don't even see of someone who's been in an established career for over five or, you know, more years, as an working artist. So you must be doing something right, Helen.

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. But I don't claim David. You know, I don't — David — the biggest part of David is David.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, I know, but a certain artist, that's the way they are, but they still need guidance and they still need tutelage and teachers. They may not claim it but they are there to shepherd the students through the system.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And even though they may be brilliant students, they still have to get through.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So, you know, teachers are important for that reason too. So —

MS. SHIRK: Yeah. There's — there's a lot of them are teaching in different universities. And it's really just great to see them build their careers and kind of grapple with the whole world.

MS. LAURIA: And you said that it all comes back now full circles because some of them now invite you come

teach workshops. So they're the teachers and you're the other visiting teacher.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So that's another part of the system the builds this community of connections. And it's a really dynamic kind of — you know, environment that — you know, feeds the craft community.

MS. SHIRK: Right. Right. Yeah. Because you know what they're carrying on. You know what they're doing as teachers. And it makes you glad, you know — things aren't getting lost — the younger generation [is taking –HS] the things that they learned, the traditional things and they're mixing it with these new things that are coming up. But they still have the traditional things.

MS. LAURIA: Right. It's —

MS. SHIRK: And that's the best mix I think.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, these mash-ups that, you know, will continue on. And — but, you know, the old — the old guard still learned the new things too, you know, the new technologies.

MS. SHIRK: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Well, is there anything else you want to add?

MS. SHIRK: I can't think of anything.

MS. LAURIA: All right. Then I think we will end the session, end of interview with Helen Shirk for the Archives of American Art, interview by Jo Lauria.

[End of disc.]