Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Clifton Monteith, 2012 July 9-10

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Transcription of this oral history interview was made possible by a grant from the Smithsonian Women's Committee.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Clifton Monteith on 2012 July 9-12. The interview took place at Monteith's studio in Lake Anna, Michigan, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Clifton Monteith has reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Clifton Monteith at the artist's studio in Lake Ann, Michigan on July 9th, 2012 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is disc number one.

So unlike many interviews, I would like to start this interview with a description of where we are.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Where we are, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Because when I arrived, that story was so compelling and I think actually really insightful into your work and your career. So if you don't mind, would you describe where we are and the story of how you came to be here?

MR. MONTEITH: Sure, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: This area in Lake Ann, my family and my relatives had summer homes here. And I was familiar with it from early on, and especially northwestern lower Michigan—or upper Michigan was where they all vacationed, eventually owned homes here. And my parents and my grandparents and my aunts and uncles all had places here.

So when I was in undergraduate school, I was—well, talk about a big spiral. I could go into that.

But it was during the Vietnam War. And I had gone to my draft board and said that I wanted to go to graduate school. At that time, I thought Josef Albers was still teaching at Yale. He was just over the edge at that time, but I didn't know that at the time. And my draft board said, "No, no, no, you've had your student deferment, now you—you're going to be drafted." And I said, "Well, you know, I'm not particularly fond of this situation here with the war." And they said, "Well, you will go now, that's not an option." And they said, "Unless you're a conscientious objector, can you qualify?" And I said, "Well, I'm not a conscientious objector, I'm just a personal objector to this situation." [Laughs.]

And the guy who was interviewing me at the draft board said, "Oh, there is one thing." The year before had been the riots in the inner city in Detroit, and the city had burned. And the teachers in the schools were not going back to teach because it was so frightening, the situation there.

And my draft board was out in the suburbs, and he very poignantly said, "Well, you can either go kill gooks in Nam or take your chances with the niggers in the city." And I said, "Well, I guess there are those people that are my people and those people that aren't. I'll take this up." And he said, "Well, you'll have to qualify to be a teacher." So I went and did student teaching and I came here to Traverse City to do my student teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MONTEITH: I had only ever been here in the summer. And it was so beautiful here in the fall and so kind of isolated because all the summer people were gone, everyone I knew was gone. And I would go hiking around in the woods around here. And this place, I would always come by. And I would carry a sketch book or watercolors in my backpack and I did many paintings of this place and even went back and did paintings in my studio from studies that I had done of this location.

And there was something about—I have never been able to exactly put my finger on it— but that felt kind of encouraging about the location. And so when I finally did graduate—

MS. RIEDEL: This would have been about '64?

MR. MONTEITH: '68; this was '68.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I had gotten to know the people who owned the land because they owned the general store which had the post office in it. So you would go to the general store to pick up your mail, and so I talked to the owner and said, "You know, I heard that you own that place over on Fowler Road. Would you consider"—and obviously, no one had lived here in years—and I said, "Would you consider selling it to me?" And he said, "Oh, Clifton," he said, "you can't have that piece." He said, "That house is a wreck, it's going to fall down, and you're too young and stupid, you wouldn't have a clue, you know, about what to do with it." And he was right about that.

But anyway, that was sort of, you know, the end of it. And—but I still continued to come by here, and I did paintings of it even into graduate school.

And—

MS. RIEDEL: Of all the places—

MR. MONTEITH: Of all the—

MS. RIEDEL: —here in this area, this was the place where—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, this was—and it's not on the water, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It's—it was, in those days, my two neighbors in the half-mile, they weren't here. There was no one. The nearest person was a mile away in any direction.

And so I don't know, there was just something about it that felt good.

And then I kind of let it go, you know, just the idea that it wasn't possible. And then years later, Max, who owned the property—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember his last name?

MR. MONTEITH: Goin, Max Goin, G-o-i-n—and Beatrice, his wife—Max had died, and my first wife had divorced me, and I had decided that it was time for at least a little vacation. [Laughs.] And I came out to visit my parents who had lost their property on Lake Michigan to the national lake shore. And when they did, they bought a piece over amongst our relatives around Lake Ann.

And so I was staying with them for a couple of weeks. And I never went back to the city.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you were in New York at the time.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I was in New York at the time. And it would have meant, you know, finding a new place to live, all of that. And so I was still able to do some freelance work via FedEx, you know, here.

In fact, the week that I came here after the divorce was the first time FedEx starting serving Lake Ann. [Laughs.] It was like really, really weird, you know. And so not that that was so important really, it was convenient, you know, not so important. But it was almost like it was a sign, you know, that it was a possibility of hanging out. So I stayed on with my parents a little bit longer.

And then I—it got to be Easter. And—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this, roughly?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, dear, we're going to have to look that up.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Eighty—

MS. RIEDEL: Early '80s?

MR. MONTEITH: Mid-'80s.

MS. RIEDEL: Mid-'80s. Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Mid-'80s.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, maybe '84 or '85, something like that. That sounds right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, right. Yes, something along in there. I can get that nailed down if you want. [Laughs.] [Confirmed: 1985.]

Anyway, I had been up to the Tamarack Gallery, which is in Omena on Grand Traverse Bay. And went in there, and David and Sally Viskochil owned the gallery. And David was very, very gregarious, outgoing guy, perfect gallery person. And he chatted me up, and who was I and what was I doing here, and stuff. And so I told him that I was from New York. And he said, "Well, where are you living?" And I said, "Well, I'm at my parents right now." And so he said, "Oh, I occasionally get over that way." And so he said, "I know where that is." And then that was it.

So then I— this was maybe a month later—I—it was March which is still skiing weather here. I had been cross-country skiing out in the woods. And I had my clippers and my pack saw with me. And I was going along and I found these wonderful little twigs growing at the base of an oak tree, like suckers. And my son often got a carving from me for Christmas or something, you know, for a holiday gift. So I cut these little sticks and I made a little three-legged kind of—it's only about 6 inches tall. I have a photograph of it, almost like a Puritan period chair with little carved knobs on it. And I carved a little wooden rabbit and put in the chair, and I sent that to him. He was about 10 at the time.

And well, you know, that would make it '84.

And I sent it off to him as an Easter present. And then I realized that cutting these sticks, I had some other sticks, but the oak didn't really—it wasn't lending itself to bending real well. So I went out again and I collected some willow sticks and I brought them home.

And I had had a collection of willow furniture that was gone in the divorce. I had never made any, but I looked at an awful lot of it. Every time I was in an antique store, a gallery or anything, I always looked at everything because they were like drawings in space, all those little lines, all the willow things, and they always captured my interest.

And I always—I'm not a covetous person. I would not be a collector ever. But I always wanted every one I saw because they seemed so personal, you know, and so individual.

So—

MS. RIEDEL: And your background when you were in school, we were going to—[inaudible]—

MR. MONTEITH: Is painting.

MS. RIEDEL: —but that's okay. Was painting. Did you draw quite a lot, always?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes. I always drew.

MS. RIEDEL: So you always had a love of the line and—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, always.

MR. MONTEITH: —anytime you were a child you drew.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, early on.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And that'll be another story.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But anyway, I collected a batch of willow twigs, and I brought them back to my dad's shop. He had a shop at his house. And I—

MS. RIEDEL: Had he been a woodworker?

MR. MONTEITH: He was an engineer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And my grandfather as well, and they always had wood shops, and they always could do—they always had tools to do everything—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —metal, wood, whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting! Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, so that was always a part.

MS. RIEDEL: So you grew up with that.

MR. MONTEITH: I grew up with that, and I started out in engineering school, too, because my father said, "You will go to engineering school."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Which that's another story.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But anyway, I, just from recalling what I had seen in the chairs, I had built this chair, a very kind of crude chair, and I thought, "Well, it's going to dry too fast."

MS. RIEDEL: This was a full-sized chair.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, full-sized chair. "I'll—Dad's got an air compressor here, I'll spray some varnish on it." So sprayed the varnish on it and I had it sitting out there in the sun. And in my father's drive comes this car, and it's David Viskochil. He had seen my father's sign at the end of the driveway that said "Monteith."

And he got out of the car and he said, "Hey, this is you." He said, "I saw the sign and I thought it's kind of an unusual name, but probably it was at least a relative, you know." And so David said, "I really like this chair." And he said, "That varnish is dry, let's put it in the car." And he said, "You've got enough sticks here you can make yourself another one."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: So he put it in the car, took it up to the gallery, and I started working on another chair. And that like a Thursday or Friday. And then the following Monday he called and he said, "You know the chair you're working on now?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "When you finish that, bring it up to the gallery, I've already sold the first one."

And we didn't even talk about what he was going to sell it for or anything, and I had no idea. And it sort of didn't make any difference, it was almost like a joke.

So I took the second chair up and—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have a photo of that first chair?

MR. MONTEITH: I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: It may only be a print, but I do—I do have one.

MS. RIEDEL: Would be nice to see that.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's pretty crude—[they laugh]—especially compared to the one you just sat in.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But anyway, one thing led to another and he said, "Well, just—if you feel like making some more of these things with this willow stuff, go for it." So I started making more chairs and doing less illustration work. And probably, I—it was probably less than six weeks before I knew I didn't want to go back to New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And so then I thought, "Well, how am I going to stay here?" As much as my parents may have loved me and, you know, like Robert Frost says, "Home is where when you have to go there they have to take you in." [They laugh.] I was definitely in that situation at the time, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: And so I started looking around, not too far—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —and I thought of this place. And so I didn't have any money. And Max was dead, but his wife, Bea, was still alive. And I liked her and knew her. But the additional part of the chemistry to my being here was that after I had left and after Max had died, my grandmother was living in Lake Ann and she and Bea Goin had become friends. And then my grandmother was dead for some time. But Bea liked her and remembered her.

So I went to see Bea and I said, "Would you consider selling me the farm?" And I was thinking maybe the house and a couple of acres. And she said, "Oh, no." She said, "There's 80 acres there." And I said, "Well, there's no way I could ever afford the 80 acres." And she said, "Well, I'd divide it in half, and I think you've come just at the right time. Somebody's broken into the house, and I'm worried about kids getting in there starting a fire, setting the field and the forest on fire and it would be my fault." She said, "I'll sell it to you on land contract."

And she said—

MS. RIEDEL: What is that, land contract?

MR. MONTEITH: land contract is a contract that you make with the seller—

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MONTEITH: —and they, with an agreed interest and a principal payment—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —and for usually a certain period of years, like 10 years or five years of whatever. And at the end of that time, you either go and get a mortgage or you renegotiate with the person.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Quite often it's done on vacant land where, at least in Michigan in the old days, banks didn't always loan private individuals money on vacant land.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And so it's an old, traditional way of selling property, around here anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And she was old and traditional. [Laughs.] So I said, "Well, that might work." And my dad was not somebody who would have loaned you the money. [Laughs.] He was very sort of Scottish and you made this bed, now lie in it kind of thing.

And so she said—she said, "And I know, Cliff, that you haven't got a pot to cook in." And I was glad she said "cook in." But she said, "I'll tell you what," she said, "if you pay me the interest every month, at the end of a year, whatever you've saved up that you can afford to put on the principal, we'll do that, and then we'll talk about next year."

And we did that. And I think it was the second year I was able to pay on the principal and more. And then eventually got my own mortgage, and all from selling the twig chairs that I had made while living here, which is so, so unlikely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it is.

MR. MONTEITH: And I mean, going out into the woods with your clippers and cutting a bunch of sticks and bringing them home, making something, hauling them up to this obscure gallery up on the shore of the lake, and him selling them. And I saved all the little pieces that I cut off when I trimmed it, trimmed off the parts on my chair, and then I would make little shelves and baskets and things with these small things, and they just kept running down the road. Every month he sent me a check, and every month I was able to pay on my land contract.

And it's worked out pretty well.

MS. RIEDEL: And at the same time that you were working on the chairs, you were slowly rebuilding this place.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, because the house had no plumbing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It had one electrical line that was hazardous.

MS. RIEDEL: And it dates from what did you say, 18—

MR. MONTEITH: 1900.

MS. RIEDEL: 1900.

MR. MONTEITH: Right—it was built in 1900.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And the plumbing was the outhouse, which is still here. You can't have one now, but if you've always had one, they can't deny it to you. So it's grandfathered in since 1900. [They laugh.] It's a little worse for wear.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: I think it's been moved many times, too. But yes.

So then I started working here, and that's when I got to hear the stories about this piece of property. All I knew was that I had this good feeling about it. And it's sort of like you know when you go into a place that has—you feel like it's kind of spooky and has ghosts and you kind of like don't want to be there?

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

MR. MONTEITH: Well, it was sort of like the reverse of that. It was like whatever was here had had fun, that there had been, you know, something good had happened here, you know?

And so the last of the living children lived a couple of miles away, and he knew I had bought the property. And he would come every day in his big old Buick and his folding chair, and I would quite often set my bench up outside and work outside, and he would just bring his chair, sit down and say, "Now, I'm going to tell you these stories whether you want to hear them or not because everybody else has heard them and I want to tell them again."

MS. RIEDEL: And this was Eber?

MR. MONTEITH: This was Eber Goin, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Eber Goin, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Eber and Louise.

MS. RIEDEL: How old was he at the time?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, gosh, Eber must have been close to 90. And Eber died first. And I was actually away when Eber died. And when Louise died, they had this huge, huge funeral. And they never had any children. And I never thought of them as being terribly social people. They were old and they had their own farmhouse and they always had a nice little garden. And all I knew was Eber came and told me all these wonderful stories.

And when Louise died, they had—I found out that they had had, I think, 64 foster children, 62 of whom came to her funeral from all over. One person was sick from California and couldn't come, and another person might have been like in Africa or something like that and maybe didn't even know, you know, that she had died. All of

the other children came. And they had, you know, been so generous. Just amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: This sounds like an Isabel Allende novel set in—

[Cross talk.]

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I know. [They laugh.] Sort of, yeah. And of course, and the funny thing is Eber was focused on telling me stories about this place—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —and I had never heard those, you know, those stories about how generous they had been with their lives for such a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: I think, given your work and the materials you work with, the tree story—you were telling me about the sugar maple—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —when you arrived. And also the lavender—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, right, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Both those are interesting to know.

MR. MONTEITH: Eber—I think the tree story was the first thing that Eber told me. Because I was out working under the shade of the tree—

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

MR. MONTEITH: —when he came. And he said, "You know," he said, "this tree is 100 years older than the others at least." And then he told me that he was born here in 1900, the year the house was built. And they tore down the old log cabin that was in the front yard. And the big maple tree was right opposite the door to the cabin.

And the Goin family inherited the land from the Tuckers, the man and woman who actually homesteaded the land. They cleared it and they fenced it and they built a barn and a granary and since they had torn the cabin down. They were living in the granary when Eber was born in 1900.

And that year there was a tornado that came through and blew the tree over. And the one thing that the owner of the land asked when he gave the Goin grandfather the land for his family was to please try and save this tree, that had been his favorite tree.

So they went around Lake Ann and they collected everybody's ox and horse and donkey and everything, and their hay ropes and stuff tied under the tree and pulled the thing back up and then went down I think to where the Gray family's gravel pit is now to get the nearest [ph] stones that they could because it's all just a sand hill here, and put stones on the root ball of the tree and kept it tied up until it took hold, and it did. It came back, it didn't die.

And then Eber remembers in 1909 when he was 9-years old that the tree was struck by lightning and split in half. And his father said, "Well, now the tree is going to die," people told him. He said, "No, we promised we would try and take care of it."

So they went into town with their last cash that they had in the spring before they had any new crop money and got the blacksmith to make an iron rod, threaded it, put big bolts and plates on either end, and then they made turnbuckles out of hay ropes and tied the two parts of the tree back, way at the top, and then drilled a hole through the trunk and put these plates on either end of the rod and drew the thing back up together again.

And you can see the dimples in the sides of the tree where the plates are and it grew back together. And they sort of kept their word.

And you kind of always wonder, you know, keeping their word had had something to do with their prosperity, too.

MS. RIEDEL: And it is a magnificent, just magnificent tree in the full spring/summer bloom now.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It really is a huge tree. And then last year, we had a sort of little tornado come through here, and Nancy and I were standing in the kitchen and we saw it coming across the field. And it really just was like a single bang, it hit just like a sledgehammer, and it broke two huge limbs off the tree. And we felt very badly about that, cut them up and everything and cleared them away.

The tree knew that it had been threatened. And last year, it put out more seeds than it had leaves on it. And there are trees all over—little trees growing all over the field from that tree, from its threat, you know.

Unlike people, plants get sexier as they get older. [They laugh.] They try and make more babies, and it really did an amazing thing. In fact, I was concerned that this year, you know, it might be stressed from putting out. But its leaves are fine, but no seeds this year.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: It did its job last year. And it survived, so maybe it feels okay.

MS. RIEDEL: It looks incredibly healthy. It looks as if it's in magnificent shape.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. You know, so it's a wonderful example of sort of that Phoenix concept.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And also just your whole emphasis on organic forms, organic materials, to have this tree and that story be a way of entering into your work.

MR. MONTEITH: Because their life was so organically connected to their promise, you know, to take care.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I also find it amazing that the lavender that lines the gardens as we walk in around here—great grandmother or something like that?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. My grandmother's mother lived in Kalamazoo. And when my grandparents were married, they got some of her, Grandma Hicks's lavender that she had in her garden in Detroit. And when my grandmother moved, she moved her garden, too. She took at least a piece of this and that and the other thing and moved it along with her.

And the plants went to each of their houses and then to each of their children's houses, too. And my aunt, who moved a million times in her life—she and her husband were both school teachers, and every couple of years they built another house as part of their investment nest egg.

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

MR. MONTEITH: You know, they had the summers off—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —and they would build a house. And each one of those houses probably has a little of that lavender growing in it. So when I came here, of course, I had to have a garden. I've always been interested in gardening, probably also from my grandmother.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I spent a lot of time with my grandmother when I was young. And she lived in Lake Ann, but was gone by the time I lived here. But both my aunt and my mother had some of that same lavender. So I brought it here and have cloned it so that we now have enough for the two rows of lavender that lead up to the kitchen door. And every time I see it, I think of grandma.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: There are many plants here in the garden that came from her, too.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And so there's this, you know, it's sort of like the—it's grandmother's lavender, even though it's not grandmother's lavender.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So the identity is really a spiritual connection that is passed, you know, from the DNA organization of one identity to the next, to the next, to the next. It's a different plant, but it's the same spirit, it's the same identity.

And it reminds you that you can derive the—all that memory of all the places that plant has been, and to me it's meant a lot, you know.

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

MR. MONTEITH: So anyway, Eber told me all these stories about the family, one of which was that they had a—there were 12 children. They had a family band, and they were like the music in Lake Ann. And you know, they didn't have recorded music really. And that's probably the great spirit that is with this place, is all the music that people came around, everybody that played music, they said, came here.

And they would dance and have music and, of course, it wasn't until later, probably '30s, when they had a barn big enough to dance in, you know. But they would dance and play music in the house, which is not, you know, that big, you know. It must have been a pretty crowded party.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But yeah, they would do that and then travel around. And that was their entertainment in that sort of—and Max, I didn't know that he played the violin, but he did. He'd never mentioned it.

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

MR. MONTEITH: But Eber told me that. But it's really kind of amazing. I had this sense about this place being a good location, a good feeling to it, even before I knew any of the stories. And the stories have kind of, you know, proved my feeling right, you know, that it has a really good sort of organic sense of good place.

And of course, in the old days, this road was the main road between Traverse City and Empire.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. The state road up there that's the big road now wasn't there then.

MS. RIEDEL: '72, is that it?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, that wasn't there then. And this was the road.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And the river flowed across the road down there and you would stop and soak up your wagon wheels in the river. Eber said that you'd work your way around so that you got the whole wheel soaked up so that the rims wouldn't come off in the summertime when it got dry. [Laughs.]

And yeah, it was—and that's why the house was built here next to the road—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —so you could see who was going by.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Know what was happening.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think that's a fantastic, extended introduction to where we are.

MR. MONTEITH: That's where we are.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: And where we are certainly has a lot to do with what I ended up doing—

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

MR. MONTEITH: —you know, because I had no training in other than what I learned through family, you know, and certainly not making stick furniture.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, let's take care of some of that early biographical information now.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's a perfect time to segue into that.

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And then we can move through things a little bit chronologically. You were born in 1944?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. I was born in Detroit—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —exactly 68 years ago yesterday.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? So July 6—

MR. MONTEITH: July 8th.

MS. RIEDEL: —8th, July 8th.

MR. MONTEITH: July 8th, yeah. And I had a very nice birthday present. Some friends came earlier in the week, who we met in Japan, Bruce and Cecille Wiegand.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MONTEITH: He worked for Caterpillar. And they're retired and they've redone a beautiful house over on the bay in Traverse City. And when they shipped their stuff back from Japan, they had this piece that they had bought at a temple sale, you know, like a temple flea market. And they said that there was just no place for it in their house, and here.

And they thought I was the only person who would put up with it because it needed repair and stuff like that. So there it is. It's the model of the temple gate, up on the wall. I just—

MS. RIEDEL: This—the gold-leafed piece on the top?

MR. MONTEITH: Yeah, yeah. That just came, what, Tuesday, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought that seemed very different from everything else in here.

MR. MONTEITH: Yeah. Yeah. It's—

MS. RIEDEL: How extraordinary.

MR. MONTEITH: They had it in Kobe, I believe.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And of course, it's lacquered, which I can work with—vrushi lacquer now. And it's gilt. And it needs a lot more repair. But I got it together enough so that I could hang it up on the wall. I had to get it out of my space. I need my space for sorting. And so there it is. You're the first person that's seen it up there. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic. We'll have to see if we can take some photos and send them along with the oral history.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I have that—[inaudible]—too, and sent to Bruce because Bruce and Cecile would like to see that.

But yeah, that was my surprise birthday present.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, happy birthday. That's quite a gift.

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But the best gift was last night after the rain shower went through and the sunset came out,

and had a rainbow come down right—I have a picture that I really should show you—the end of the rainbow, ending right at the top of my twig shed.

MS. RIEDEL: You have extraordinary tales and synchronicities.

MR. MONTEITH: That's pretty good.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll get to the significance of rainbows a little later.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, right.

MS. RIEDEL: But yeah, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: But you know, so—

MS. RIEDEL: So in Detroit, your father was an engineer, you mentioned.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was his name?

MR. MONTEITH: James.

MS. RIEDEL: James. James Monteith?

MR. MONTEITH: Monteith, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And your mom?

MR. MONTEITH: Shirley.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And her maiden name was Bossardet—B-O-S-S-A-R-D-E-T. And her father was French, obviously.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And he was in real estate in Detroit.

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

MR. MONTEITH: Because he had been kind of an end son in a line of French people that went back before this was even the United States.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And it was a nice way to start into the real estate business.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And he did very well in that until the Depression, when he had traded all of his property holdings for stock holdings. And in '29, pretty much lost almost everything that he had, and he died shortly after that. So I never knew him, but I was named after him.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, after your mother's father.

MR. MONTEITH: After my mother's father, yes. And his name was Clifton Frederick Bossardet. And my son's middle name is Frederick.

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

MR. MONTEITH: So we're passing on that little Frenchness there. The French is what dilutes the Scots dourness—[they laugh]—which gives us our license to be a little loosey-goosey and risky, you know, and risky.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like—[inaudible].

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes. Yes, if not a totally conflicted personality. [They laugh.]

But when I was born, my father was still in Europe in the war. And he didn't get home until I was almost a year old. And we lived in my grandmother's house. And my grandmother had this—this is my mother's mother—had this fabulous arts and crafts house that my grandfather had built when he had money. It was a three-story house that was—had cobblestone foundations and first floor and the sweeping second-floor overhang over the stone with the shingles, you know, in the shingle style second and third story, and a beautiful sun room with leaded glass, beveled glass windows.

And I can remember as a kid laying on the floor in the sunroom with the rainbows going all over the room from the sun coming in the morning.

MS. RIEDEL: How lovely.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it was a pretty nice place.

MS. RIEDEL: As a kid that must have been pure magic.

MR. MONTEITH: It was. It was really great. And I lived there until I was 5.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so you lived there as a child? Oh, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, I lived there when I was 5. And I started school there actually. Went to Kindergarten there in Detroit. And the house now is no longer there. They built the I-96 right through it into the center of the city and took out a lot of nice places at that time. [Laughs.]

But when I lived there in my grandmother's house, she had my grandfather's art collection. And he was a collector of mostly objects. And he really liked Asian art pieces that were very popular in the early '20s.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And he would go to Paris and buy things there. And of course, I didn't—I just knew I liked them, you know, I didn't really understand what they were. And my grandmother kind of— we had two Ming vases that they used as umbrella stands.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: They put their umbrellas in next to the front door. [Laughs.] And they were big enough, you know, to put an umbrella in.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I didn't even know until art history class in college what those things had been. And when my grandmother sold the house and she came to live with us when my father built a house, she sold, you know, at auction a lot of those things. And a few things my parents had kept. And then when they got to be elderly, they sold off almost all the rest of it. And I was living out East at the time, and when they made their last move, I really didn't even know they were doing it. I would have put a pitch in for some.

But we do have one Chinese cloisonné lamp that somehow—a little rosewood base—that somehow managed to escape the auction, I think because my mother had it in her bedroom or something, you know. So it was worth keeping.

But this is one of the things that I find very interesting. When I—my first—probably my first visual memory as a child was laying in my crib with the high sides and looking up and on the wall above my crib was—I thought it was a print of a woman, a Japanese woman in kimono and a big vase with a flower in it. And it wasn't until Nancy and I were in Kyoto that I realized it was a silk finger-weaving. And that was gone, see, when I was probably 6.

But it was a gorgeous thing. [Laughs.] And I have had this thing for, you know, Japanese aesthetic, you know, and the Japanese sense of the importance of nature and relating to it. Whether you're a city person or a farmer, you've got to be related to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And I really, really identified with that. And my father's mother was a great gardener, and she had that sense, too. And I think that was one of the reasons we really hit it off. She was also a wonderful artist, although she had no training in artwork at all. Her mother, however, had—her mother painted dresses for the stage to look like embroidery.

MS. RIEDEL: Your great grandmother.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, right. And unfortunately, none of that exists. Boy, I would love to even have a picture of it. We've uncovered a lot of ancient family photos in the last year, but still haven't come across one of any of her work, although it's referenced in, you know, newspaper articles and stuff.

But my grandmother had a design sense and a color sense that was just so strong that when she would organize her garden it was like a Monet garden. And it was—she had a sense of remembering what the color of that plant was so that when she went out in the spring, she was making a painting in her garden while she was moving around the perennials that were not showing any color.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: It was all in her head. So it was sort of like perfect pitch for color.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And when I met Nancy after I was living here and we got married—Nancy had been divorced before—and Nancy had run a big textile—a retail—a textile business in Traverse City. And so she knew a lot about fabric and all of that. She has the same color sense that my grandmother had. She can look at a button in her studio or some thread and she can go into the store and pick out a color to match.

And you know, it's like a singer who can hit the note. That's a very unusual skill.

MS. RIEDEL: It is. What was your grandmother's name?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, the—I always called her Bess.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was Monteith?

MR. MONTEITH: Monteith, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was this garden? Was this in Detroit?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, they—I think they were the ones who taught my aunt to build a house and move.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: My grandfather was a very good builder, and he was a schoolteacher. And he taught math and mechanical drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And he—

MS. RIEDEL: Was it high school level or college level?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And they had—they bought their first house—

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

MR. MONTEITH: And then after that they built a house. Even during the Depression they built houses and they would live in them for a while and build a garden—

MS. RIEDEL: She, Bess?

MR. MONTEITH: —yeah—and make them wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: And then, you know, move on, and with the profits of that build another one. And because he was a schoolteacher, he had that, you know, summer.

And my grandmother designed them.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And she would—grandpa would draw up the plans, and she would look at them. She always called him Monty, you know, called him Monty. And she'd say, "Well, Monty, that wall just doesn't want to be there."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: "It just really wants to be about a foot-and-a-half over here." And that way she didn't say, "I don't like the where it is"—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —"that all doesn't want to be." And when I was painting, she would come in and she would look at what I was doing, and she'd say, "That purple is just really upset where it is." [Laughs.] And she was always right. It was just amazing.

And you know, and she really had no formal education, it was just she had a real intuitive sense of, not just color, but design and composition, you know. She was really good with it. And her homes were all beautiful because, you know, she had a way of just knowing what wanted to be where.

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds as if your entire childhood, from your very beginning—

MR. MONTEITH: Very early.

MS. RIEDEL: —was just informed by incredibly gifted people, artists, with senses of color and design sense.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. In my—

MS. RIEDEL: And objects.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. My father's younger sister, who is same grandmother's daughter, she became an artist. She went to Cranbrook.

MS. RIEDEL: What's her name?

MR. MONTEITH: She's Marie Sturmer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: S-T-U-R-M-E-R. And she lives in Lake Ann now. And she'll be 92 this fall. And she's in the middle of doing another book. She's become a quilter. And since she retired from school teaching, she's written I think three or four books that she's had published. And last year she started a new one.

And it's sort of amazing. When I was probably like 10 or 12 and would go and stay with my grandmother, they lived not too far away at that time. And I would go over to my aunt's house, and in the summertime she taught painting classes to her lady friends.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And I got to sit in on them. And there was a lot of watercolor technique and things that I learned from her, you know, just shut up and listened and watched.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And then she would let me paint with the real stuff, too, you know, the expensive watercolors and the nice brushes and stuff like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. When you were 10?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But that whole painting thing actually started much earlier, because when my father built his house, my grandmother came to live with us, we lived out in the west side of Detroit. And the Detroit Art Institute had a Saturday art class for children. And the first—my mom asked me if I would like to go, and I said, "Oh, yes" because I had always been drawing and stuff.

So she took me down to the art institute for the registration and the first class and everything. And we only had one car. Saturdays were kind of taken up with doing things with the car when my dad was home, you know, and stuff like that. So I was 7 or 8 at the time. And you just got your bus fare, you went down, walked to the end of the block, got on the city bus, and the bus driver would say, "Well, sonny, where are you going?" And I said, "The Detroit Art Institute." And he said, "Well, that's a long way. You know, you've got to make a transfer." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Here's your transfer, and when you get to the boulevard," he said, "I'll holler. What's your name? Clif? Okay, Clif, get off here."

And so I went every Saturday down to the art institute, which was—it was like 45-minute bus ride.

MS. RIEDEL: By the time you were 7?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, by myself. And in those days, nobody thought it was weird. Nowadays you would get assaulted for child abuse—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —for especially Detroit to put your kid on.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Of course, Detroit was a much different place then. And the class was fabulous. We would—all the kids would get together and they would show slides in the dark in a room. And the teacher would talk about, you know, what was in the picture. And they were those huge, big 4x5 glass slides and the gigantic projectors, you know? And the projectors would get so hot and they'd cook the room, you know? It was great.

And then we'd get up and they'd take us to the museum and we'd go see the real thing. And it was really impressive.

Then we'd come back and we would do a painting or drawing or something inspired by what we had seen. And to do that every Saturday was a pretty big deal.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, from the time you were 7 until?

MR. MONTEITH: Until, well, until we moved out of the city, which was when I was 12.

MS. RIEDEL: So for five years.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Every Saturday.

MR. MONTEITH: Every Saturday. Well, during—it wasn't in the summer.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But during the school year.

MS. RIEDEL: What an extraordinary program. Do you remember—

MR. MONTEITH: Think of what it cost. Think of what it cost. And I think it was like—it was like five bucks for each semester, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: It was something really, really—but it was under—by the museum, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And of course, the museum had money. The public library had money. The school district had money.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: When I went to Kindergarten and lived in my grandmother's house, we had 35, I think, kids in my Kindergarten class, two teachers, two assistant teachers, and they took the 35 and divided them in half.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And we had this huge space. We had Lincoln Logs that were life-size that we built cabins out of.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, they were made out of balsa wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my—

MR. MONTEITH: It was just stuff like that. I mean, but this is when General Motors used to pay taxes to the state and city of Michigan—or city of Detroit, state of Michigan. But no more. That's evil to pay taxes like that. But we had a wonderful education.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Music, you know, I played in the band and the city orchestra.

MS. RIEDEL: What did you play?

MR. MONTEITH: I played cornet.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And we had—our local school had its own orchestra. Every elementary school had its own instrumental teacher, its own vocal music teacher and a theater teacher with a full theater with a proscenium and lights and everything in every elementary school in the city of Detroit.

MS. RIEDEL: That's—I imagine that in junior high or high school, but elementary school, that's extraordinary.

MR. MONTEITH: No, no, this is elementary school, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And also—so I would go Saturday art classes on Saturday. And once during the week, there would be a district orchestra. And you would get the instructions on where to go if you were good enough. And you'd take your instrument and leave school early, and you'd take the bus over to whatever school. And they were—the district, mine was the West Side, and you'd go and you'd meet with this huge orchestra that was like, you know, like 10 times the size of your elementary school. And they all played better, too, because they were the best. [They laugh.]

And that was wonderful. That was really fun.

MS. RIEDEL: And so all the kids in elementary school, you'd each just head out on your own on the bus—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —over to the—

MR. MONTEITH: Well, there were only a few people from each school that went. You had to be good enough. You had to compete and be good enough to qualify.

MS. RIEDEL: So you obviously played the instrument quite well, too.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, well, enough to go. Yeah. Yeah. And I enjoyed it, enjoyed it a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So it sounds as if your mother was extremely supportive of the arts, your grandmother. Your father—

MR. MONTEITH: Well, my mother was a musician. My mother played the piano, and she loved music.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And my grandmother would take me to the symphony and to the opera and things, not because it was her favorite thing, but my grandfather went.

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

MR. MONTEITH: He always went, and she had to go.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And it was, you know, we didn't have his money to go as often as he went.

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

MR. MONTEITH: But when we could, she liked to go because it was sort of like, you know, taking me was kind of a remembrance, too.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like an extremely cultural and rich childhood.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, in half.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And then you had the Scottish engineers on the other half, right? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And when my father's mother, who was this great natural artist—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —but her husband was definitely an engineer and a builder and woodworker and built all the houses and everything. And when the family would get together, the women would play music and sing around. My grandmother had a grand piano; both my grandmothers had Steinway grand pianos in their house. And you'd stand around and sing. And the men would all argue about engineering problems.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And there was something about their arguments that I really liked because I always liked the arguing. [They laugh.] But I kind of had to know something about the engineering to follow along. But I really wanted to be singing, you know, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I had one uncle—my Aunt Marie who lives here in Lake Ann, who's writing the new book—her husband was both an engineer, a good singer and he had left engineering to become a schoolteacher and a principal. And he was principal of a school. He always worked with severely bad-behaved children. And in Detroit at one time they actually had whole, separate schools that would have been reform schools in other situations, but they kept them— these kids in public school. And he was great with them.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So he was sort of the bridge between the engineers and the musicians.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Did you have siblings?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. I have one brother—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Older, younger?

MR. MONTEITH: Younger, he's five years younger.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And he became the engineer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And that's what kind of got me off the hook so that I was allowed to be that crazy artist.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So from the very beginning, you both drew and painted.

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it always two dimensional, early two-dimensional work? Were you—

MR. MONTEITH: Pretty much—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —except for things that are made of wood, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: As a child.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, because when I would go and stay with my grandparents, my grandfather was always working with wood, making or repairing or building something.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And the great thing about that, just like my aunt would let me play with the adult paint and the adult brushes, right, grandpa would let me use tools that my father would have never let me use because they were too dangerous. He'd give me huge chisels and hammers and, you know, "Go for it. This is the way you do it. Don't put your hand in front of it, it's sharp, you know." And it was sort of like he had ultimate faith that, you know, you stab yourself once and you're smarter after that, you know?

And I don't ever remember having an accident with him. But I remember that he was awfully, awfully trusting.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: He just expected you to be smart enough to do it right.

MS. RIEDEL: And what would you—were you carving? Were you assembling?

MR. MONTEITH: Carving. I could remember carving—I wish I had some of those carvings now—bowls and carved a lot of bowls and made some trays and things that he had actually done with kids, I think, in school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: But it was much more free form.

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

MR. MONTEITH: It wasn't a project—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —when he did it with you, because he would be working on something and he'd say, "Well, you know, how deep a thing do you think you could get out of that piece of walnut?" And he'd give you a gouge. And he had this wonderful collection of walnut that came from, I don't know, three or four trees that were in his father's farmyard.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And—

[End of disc.]

CLIFTON MONTEITH: [In progress]—he had a—the trees, I don't know whether they were damaged or what, but they were cut down and milled up into large, dimensional lumber. And it got passed around in the family, and my family was always rebuilding a house or building a new house or something. Every house had a little piece of walnut in it somewhere that came from Grandpa Monteith's farm.

And I have the last piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there is this profound working with and reverence for wood that goes back generations in your family.

MR. MONTEITH: I think so, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Nature in general, and it seems like wood in specific.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. It's sort of like my—sort of the men in my family really kind of communicated with one

another by doing something.

They didn't just talk to one another about people things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: It was the argument about the engineering or what was the proper way of going about doing something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so that seemed just like this is what we boys do, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Build stuff and argue about it.

MR. MONTEITH: Absolutely. Absolutely. And grandma would always ask you, "Well, why did you think it had to be that shape?"

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And then you had to defend your case.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You had to defend your case. And then she may or may not agree with you, which very few parents did.

MS. RIEDEL: Critiqued from the beginning.

MR. MONTEITH: It was a critique—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —and it wasn't always positive. And you had to learn from an early age to take it and to pay attention to it. If she's saying this negative thing, it must be serious. You know, and she wanted you to learn from this.

MS. RIEDEL: And so there's a real sense that it was an informed critique and she wasn't being—

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, no, no, she wasn't being mean at all because you knew how much she loved you.

MS. RIEDEL: She was—she was teaching you.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yeah, yeah, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So that's really good to have, close to your life. And the—you know, you were saying like five years there in Detroit, and then when we moved out to Livonia.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were 12?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. My father built a new house out in Livonia with a couple of acres, and a much bigger house, and he had more money then. But my grandmother moved with us. And she—this is my mother's mother—and she lived with us until very shortly before she died.

And that was kind of an interesting thing because I was just heartbroken to leave the city.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONTEITH: Because I liked being able to get on the bus and go to the district orchestra and to go down to the museum, and now we were beyond any buses. We were out in la-la land, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: I loved the country, I liked being there, but I felt so isolated. And it was really kind of a hard thing.

Well, then—

MS. RIEDEL: But it was too far for anyone to drive you.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it—

MS. RIEDEL: It's just that was a—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, that was just—it's just—it was a long ways to drive to the end of the bus line, you know? And it would have taken all morning to get down to the art institute. So about a year after I was living in the country, my mom read in the newspaper that the Detroit Art Institute was starting satellite art classes in the suburbs. And would I like to go?

So she had to drive me, but by this time they had two cars, so she could take me to—over to the Whitman Junior High which is where the class was. It was the first school that [Minoru] Yamasaki ever designed. It was Japanese-style.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: It was beautiful. The classrooms were like pods with gardens between them, connected by hallways. And—[laughs]—there was a sense of—it's hard to even say it—of being where you've already been.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MONTEITH: So this going to—

MS. RIEDEL: Take your time.

MR. MONTEITH: This is going to sound almost like a lie. But when I got there, of course, there's no museum—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —so all they have was the slide projector, but still has the big, boxy glass slides, you know, and everything. This guy comes in and I didn't even see him, he walks into the room speaking, and I smelled the cigarettes on his breath, I knew who it was: the same teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, gosh.

MR. MONTEITH: I still write to him once a week.

MS. RIEDEL: What's his name?

MR. MONTEITH: Kenneth Rose.

MS. RIEDEL: Kenneth Rose.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. His wife is dead now, she died a couple of years ago. And he's—he just turned 84. And so —

MS. RIEDEL: The continuity in your life is really extraordinary.

MR. MONTEITH: Isn't that amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So then, of course, this was not my junior high school that I even went to.

MS. RIEDEL: And why had he decided to move and start teaching—

MR. MONTEITH: He had—he had done better, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And he had been a teacher at Detroit, but he was a jeweler.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Wonderful craftsman.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And he had always had a sort of part-time business on the side of making jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And he had done well. And so he was able to move out to the suburbs, too. So he was there.

So then when I go to high school, he has moved up from the junior high where he was teaching, and he was my high school art teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And then when I gave my first lecture at the University of Michigan, they had a design history program, and a fellow that I knew from—I knew his wife when they were in graduate school at Michigan State. And he said—he was interested in my work. And he taught design history at the U of M. And he said, "Clifton, would you come and do a lecture about the history of rustic work in architecture and furniture in the U.S.?" And I said, "Oh, I'd love to do that." It was an excuse, you know, to put together some images and stuff and get to go and talk about it.

So I went to this class. It was one of those huge survey classes. There must have been 600 kids in the lecture room.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And—her name is slipping me now—Nancy will remember—it will come to me in a minute—who was dean of the school of art and architecture at the U of M at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll have it, no problem.

MR. MONTEITH: She was head of Pilchuck for a while, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MONTEITH: Marjorie Levy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Sorry. Maybe I need more coffee.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. We can pause if you'd like to.

MR. MONTEITH: Anyway, I didn't realize—well, first of all, I didn't know who Marge was.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And Marge was new to the head of the school there and I think maybe had a little bit of a rough time because she was really great, she was a real go-getter and powerful woman, which they had not had before, you know?

And she was in the lecture that I gave. And of course, I showed all the historical stuff, talked about where it came from and everything. And then I showed my work, too, and how it had come from rather meager beginnings to where it was at that time.

And the kids just loved it, you know? And there were lots and lots of questions. And afterwards, Marge told me they had never had that many questions from the audience of a lecture that they had had for the design program. So she got up in the middle there or sort of toward the end of the questions and she said, "I, for those of you who don't know, I'm Marge Levy and I'm dean of the School of Art and Architecture now." And she said, "If we were to ask Clifton to come and do a workshop, would anybody like to take it?" And lots of people [said yes].

So that's how I did my first workshop was at the U of M after that lecture. After the lecture, sitting at the back—[laughs]—was Ken Rose—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: —and his daughter. We were just that—sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: Take your time. We've got all day.

MR. MONTEITH: She had just graduated from the school of architecture at the U of M. I had only ever seen her inside her mother when her mom was pregnant. I never met her.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And she practices architecture in Ann Arbor now. And talk about a big loop.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I had written to Ken about there was a museum exhibit here in Traverse City from their permanent collection, and they asked people in the area to pick something from their collection and write something about it. And so I wrote about one of the Josef Albers paintings that they have. And I told about him showing that work so long ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's a powerful sense of community throughout your entire life.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: They clearly have—

MR. MONTEITH: Especially for somebody like me who has lived so much of my life almost like a hermit, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: To have that connection is really, really kind of important. So anyway, he said— he even became a gem dealer later on in life. But he's given that up now.

MS. RIEDEL: So you must have known him for 40 years now or longer.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I was trying to think. He's 84. We figured out he was 24—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: —he was 24 when I had the first class at the art institute. I think he was maybe still in graduate school at Wayne University at the time. And that's a lot of continuity that, you know, a lot of people don't have that.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I've never met anybody with that—this many levels of continuity, this many circles of coming full circle, starting with your family.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, I know. It—it—

MS. RIEDEL: It's very organic in shape, isn't it?

MR. MONTEITH: And I think that's one of the things that I have, for a long time, seen, you know, what is—there's an ancient Native American prayer that is just all my relations, that's the whole prayer. That everything is related. And you know, some people would say it was my Jewish geography, but—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: —but it came as Jewish, too, so, you know, it's pretty interesting how all those things have evolved. And if it wasn't for the divorce, I would have—which seemed like such a disaster at the time, I would have never come here.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: I would have stayed in New York forever. I would have never had the opportunity to do any of this work and maybe make an organic connection to other artists, other craftsmen, other people in different parts of the world, I would have never traveled as I have. When you realize my work has taken me to all of these places that I've been and brought those people here to the U.S. as well. And you know, maybe that's a lesson I learned from relatives early.

MS. RIEDEL: Which lesson?

MR. MONTEITH: The lesson about the connectedness of things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, I think that my Grandpa and Grandma Monteith were both, you know, very well tuned into that, you know. They were always interested in things organic, even though they were very industriously building things for economic gain, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: They were always—you know, you didn't just build the building and run away. There was the garden that was part of it. And the site was always developed to accommodate the garden.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: That was grandma's doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MONTEITH: The house wants to be facing this way. [Laughs.] It was the house's desire, not hers. She was just reading the house's desire.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: I mean, grandpa had no choice but to go along with it, of course, because she was right.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were houses that they've built around the greater Detroit area?

MR. MONTEITH: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, in fact the—when they were very old and they moved here to Lake Ann to be near my aunt, my aunt and uncle were living full time here then. They were the only ones that weren't just, you know, summer homes. That house they purchased because they really were too old then to—

MS. RIEDEL: But until that time, they lived in homes that they had built.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yeah, they always—yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: How many homes did they build? Do you have any idea?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, gosh, there was one, two, three, four, five, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: So all these homes with gardens.

MR. MONTEITH: But my—yeah. But my aunt and uncle, I think they built 15 maybe. And my uncle just died a year ago, a year-and-a-half ago, I guess, now. No, maybe it's two years maybe this month. June, yeah—or June it was two years. And they really—they were much more propelled by the, you know, the productivity line. Grandpa and Grandma would build a house and live in it. And then it was kind of like I think grandma would get it all done and was itching for a new project.

MS. RIEDEL: Isn't that interesting?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And what—were the houses all of a similar vein? Were they all—

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —a particular style?

MR. MONTEITH: No. No, they fit into where they were. The last one that they built was in Birmingham—actually, Franklin, which is just outside of Birmingham and where Farmington Hills and Franklin kind of come together there. And it was in a subdivision, but there were only a few houses at the time. And grandma picked this place because of the site. And it had a hillside that went down into a low, almost peat bog.

And oh, they had a fabulous garden there. And they had their vegetable garden down in this boggy land. And they even grew beautiful celery and stuff. It was amazing.

And so the road made a turn, and grandma said, "Well, the driveway wants to go like this, and the house will sit this way because that would be the best way for the sun." And grandpa said, "Well, that's not parallel to the road." And she said, "It's parallel to the world, it has nothing to do with the road." And do you know what, it was done as a sort of long, low house, and it was almost perpendicular to the road, not quite, but it was perfect. It was just perfect. It was like right in the bend of the road. And to line it up facing the road would have been just not right at all.

MS. RIEDEL: It's so interesting, because if one looks at your work from outside, it would be easy to think about the relationship with Japanese aesthetics and how that might influence the work. But hearing these stories from you, it's so clear that you had that sensibility long before any—

MR. MONTEITH: Well, and I think that's what drew me to the things that were Japanese.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And there was a book. I don't know what happened to it. Probably when Gran B sold her house, there was just—I mean, the library was filled with books that who knows where they went. But there was a big format book of Japanese—black-and-white pictures of Japanese architecture.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And that sunroom, I used to take that book in there—it was so big, I could hardly carry it when I was a little kid—laid down on the floor and it would open out flat. And the front pages were shavings of wood. They were a whole sheet of wood. And it was, I now know, it was sugi. Of course, I had no idea what sugi was, you know, to Japan.

But there were these beautiful pictures, you know, black-and-white pictures of sort of probably '20s, a lot of rural sort of thatched roof, you know, the high farmhouse roof things. And then there were temples and shrines and things, too, in there. And it was all in Japanese. It was probably something that Grandpa Bossardet had purchased in Paris, you know, maybe at one of those book stalls, who knows, and brought it home—just it was a picture book to them. They couldn't read Japanese.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's so interesting that as a child as young as 5 you were interested in looking at those pictures.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, I was like 3 because I could hardly haul this book. I'd drag it into the sunroom.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was black-and-white photos of architecture—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and you found that interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: Yeah, yeah. Well, of course, there were some people in the pictures, too, and they had clothes on like that woman had over my bed. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So, no, this was an interesting place.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it's all connected.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's move into high school perhaps and think about—were you taking art classes in high school? Did the high school offer a lot of art classes?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, they had a big, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Were you still taking Saturday classes as well?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: The Saturday classes wound down. I think funding was maybe cut for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: They still did them, I think, down at the art institute. But I think they kind of went away at the satellite.

But I had Kenneth Rose for painting.

MS. RIEDEL: In high school, right?

MR. MONTEITH: In high school. And jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: You had jewelry in high school, jewelry making?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yeah. We had jewelry in junior high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: We had ceramics and jewelry in junior high school, yeah. And actually, he—Kenneth Rose and Ron Ballan—who actually ended up moving to California, I don't know what happened to him—but they were friends. And they ended up moving—I don't know where Ron Ballam [ph] had been before—but both of them came to my junior high school when I was in ninth grade, because it was seventh through ninth grade.

And I had classes with both of them. And then Kenneth Rose went on to the high school. And I was always interested in music, and I loved to sing, and there was a time when I thought I would like to be a singer, an opera singer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And when I was a junior in high school, I won a scholarship to Interlochen Arts Academy here that at that time was run by the University of Michigan, because Dr. Maddy founded that. And this is their 50th anniversary this—50th? No. It started in '28, so 28 from—what is—how many years is it?

MS. RIEDEL: 2012, a long time ago.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Almost 90?

MR. MONTEITH: Sixty?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, 1928?

MR. MONTEITH: 1928.

MS. RIEDEL: That's 70, 84 years now. It's 2012.

MR. MONTEITH: That can't—hasn't been going that long. I just heard a program about it and they were saying something about Dr. Maddy. Maybe that's when he graduated from school was in '28. But maybe that was when he was born was in '28. But I think it's 50 years now. And the year after I was here in the summer, they started the Interlochen Arts Academy, which is the year-round program that is so famous for people from all over the world come to that. Yo-Yo Ma is a graduate of the school. And you know, people like that.

MS. RIEDEL: And you had a scholarship or you attended there?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. I had a scholarship from my local high school.

MS. RIEDEL: And you attended high school there for your last two years of high school?

MR. MONTEITH: No, no, no, no. No, this was just the summer program.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, summer program.

MR. MONTEITH: They didn't start the academy until—it may—I don't know whether it was the year I was a senior or the year after that. I can't quite remember now.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you—what classes were you taking there in the summer?

MR. MONTEITH: Choir. It was for singing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And so it was all singing.

MR. MONTEITH: All singing, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And Dr. Maddy was still alive then. And I had a class in solfeggio and conducting with him. And it was great. Margaret Hillis, who was—Margaret Hillis was the director of the chorus at the Metropolitan Opera

at the time. She was our teacher. She was unbelievable. She was such an amazing musician, and she had a bass voice. And we had—I think there were almost 200 in the choir. And she would scream your parts over the whole choir in her bass voice. If somebody was singing it off, she— [laughs]—you know, they say there are two kinds of conductors: those with their head in the score and those with the score in their head. It was all in her head. She was great.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was your junior or senior year?

MR. MONTEITH: That was the summer between my junior and senior year.

MS. RIEDEL: So high school, it sounds like it was a balance of visual arts and performing arts. Singing—were you still playing cornet?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah. No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: No, I wasn't because I was doing—the choir was all I could do really at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Because I was taking calculus and I was, you know, all those things, too, because I knew I was doomed to go to engineering school.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so even with all this, you knew you were doomed for engineering. Okay. [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: Because when your father tells you you're going—I'm old enough that when your father tells you you'll go to engineering school, you don't tell him to go to hell, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. So did you sign up for the or apply to the University of Michigan with that in mind right after high school or—

MR. MONTEITH: Sure would have loved to.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I would have gotten in for sure. I had to go to Michigan State because that was where my father went to school. His father went to the University of Michigan. And actually, the University of Michigan's first president was Reverend John Monteith.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MONTEITH: And we are a relative, no doubt, but the connection is way back in Scotland. And we're going to actually have to go there to make the connection.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: I'm doing a lecture there this next January. And I would love to have the connection made, because I just restored a piece that's in their museum, a Burmese mountain harp that's all lacquered. And I'm going to go down to do a presentation about the restoration of this piece, that was a nightmare. More than six years I spent doing it.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: Because it's from Burma, the weather is different, the lacquer is different.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: It won't hold up in this environment. And it had been to Indonesia, lived there for a while, and then came here through a musicologist that inherited it, and she got it here to Traverse City and it started falling apart.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So anyway, it's done, it's in their collection now. So I'll be doing a lecture on that. The lecture is sponsored by both the musical instrument museum that they have at the U of M, but the piece is in the art museum. And the Japanese society at the University of Michigan, too, because, of course, I translated everything to all-Japanese lacquer. I put it all back so that it will be sturdy in this climate, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Because the Japanese lacquer is much stronger—it's a wooden piece. All of the lacquer fell off and I had to piece it back together like a puzzle and glue it back on with Japanese lacquer bonded to the other.

MS. RIEDEL: It almost sounds impossible.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, it should have been impossible. I mean, the piece—if you'd been out and bought one, there aren't many. But you know, if you did, you certainly could never pay what it cost me to do it. [Laughs.]

So I met Pat Yamaguchi, she's married to a Japanese man, lives here in Traverse City. I had given a lecture when they had an exhibition about Japanese lacquer work—or Japanese artwork at the museum here in Traverse City. I brought some of my lacquer pieces and did a lecture about how it was done and everything.

She came to the lecture, because it was written up in the paper, and afterwards she said, "Would you come? I have something that may need a little repair. Would you come and take a look at it?"

And my friend [Kazunari] Oya was here at the time and we went over to her house. And she said, "There's these little pieces, they're starting to come off. Do you think you could glue them back on with that lacquer you said works like glue?" And I said, "Yes, probably I could do something with it."

So we wrapped it up in a blanket and took it out and put it in the car. And Oya said afterwards, "Why did you say yes?" [Laughs.] And for five years, Nancy kept saying, "Why did you say yes?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: But I've got some good photographs of the whole process.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'd love to see that. So it's a Burmese mountain harp. And which collection is it in now?

MR. MONTEITH: It's in the University of Michigan's art museum.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: And it went into their collection last September. And they wanted Pat and I to come and do a lecture together. But Pat has taken—she used to teach in Indonesia. And I think there's somebody away on sabbatical or maybe not well or something, and she's taking over the teaching of the musicology program there. And so she's not going to be available. And they—it's been over a year, they want to get done, so Pat's going to write something, I think, about the history of the instrument, I'll do the what I did and have some recordings, too.

Did you ever see the movie, the Japanese movie called *The Burmese Mountain Harp* [*The Burmese Harp*, 1956] by Kon Ichikawa?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, you should get that from the library.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: It's probably only available on videotape, but I have a copy that I bought actually. It is an amazing, almost Curacao kind of movie. It's black and white and it's about a Japanese group of soldiers that's stuck in Burma. And they finally get evacuated. But so many of them had been killed. And this one fella, this one Japanese soldier has been taught to play the Burmese mountain harp by these monks, and he doesn't go, he stays behind to bury all the bodies that the people were—you know, his fellow soldiers.

And he shaves his head and he puts on the robes and he passes the soldiers as they go. And they know what he's done, he's been a traitor, but they all believe in what he's done. It's really good.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll have to look for that.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, it's really good.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did the—how did you move from Michigan State to—you graduated from there in '74.

MR. MONTEITH: Graduated there in '68.

MS. RIEDEL: Michigan State '68?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, Michigan State '68.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay. How—did you go directly from high school to college?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And you—yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: But I went one year—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And then I left engineering school, not because I didn't like the engineering work, I just couldn't see living with those people that were going to be engineers, for the rest of my life. They were not the people that I wanted to be my friends. And I had been in school for a year. I had found out that there were other people doing interesting things. And I don't think I even—there wasn't even an art student in the group of people I was living with really, but I used to go over there all the time. I would go around, walk around it, smell the oil paint and go to the printmaking studio.

And Charles Pollock was teaching printmaking there, you know, Jackson Pollock's brother. And he was a great guy. He was this real, kind of quiet, laid back and very reserved and just the reverse of his brother, but fabulous craftsman and wonderful artist. And I'd just walk around and look at stuff. And he would say things like, "Hi, there. Can I answer any questions?" And of course, do that to me and you're in trouble.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And so I got to study etching with him. And John de Martelly was there teaching lithography, too, and he was a WPA artist, you know, and that was great.

And so I kind of got wistful about being able to do some painting, but I couldn't say, "Oh, I'm going to quit engineering school." So what I did was I just left school and I went to Boston and I got a job working as a copy boy for the *Christian Science Monitor*. My parents were Christian Scientists.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So this made it okay to run away. [Laughs.] And it was a wonderful experience. It was just wonderful. And there I met a fellow whose name is Russ Lenz—L-e-n-z—and he was the chief cartographer for the *Monitor*. And there was Gene Langley and Guernsey Le Pelley were there, were all great draftsmen, you know.

But it was really Russ that kind of was my connection. Russ was just such a nice man. And his wife was, too. I just really liked them a lot, you know? And I had the technical drawing skills to be able to do maps. All I had to do—now, this is so long ago that maps every day were drawn by hand and updated. And you would take—they would make a stat of yesterday's map, and you'd cut it off with scissors and draw on where the troops moved the next day and stuff like that.

And I had to learn to do calligraphy that looked like Russ's handwriting because they were handwritten.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: So he taught me how to do his calligraphy. And of course, I could do the projection, the map projections I learned from mechanical drawing and calculus and stuff. And none of the other art-related people had that technical background.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So you know, it was sort of like—and my dad, I think, maybe thought it was not so bad because you were drawing, but it was technical, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Can we stop for a minute?

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: I'm going to have to go and—

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so we're back on.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And before we broke for lunch, you were in Boston drawing maps.

MR. MONTEITH: In Boston drawing maps. And kind of an interesting coincidence with that. Russ Lenz, the fellow who was the chief cartographer at the *Monitor*, that I worked with and liked so well, he was a graduate of the Massachusetts College of Art.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: My son just got a full-tenured-track position teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art. And he graduated from Yale, he got his graduate degree at Yale.

MS. RIEDEL: He's a photographer, right?

MR. MONTEITH: He's a photographer, and had a Fulbright to the Czech Republic which he started visiting when he was 15, on his own, and taking pictures because his high school janitor was Czech, saw an exhibition of Matthew's photographs when he was like 14 or 15, and said, "You like to take pictures of old things that are changing." He said, "You should go to the Czech Republic." So he said, "Okay, I will."

And they had to do a senior project for his arts program. And so his adviser said, "Well, Matthew, you can't do that." And he said, "Yeah, yeah, I can." And he was living in Boulder at the time. And he had taken a silkscreen printing class at the university. They had an art festival and he sold his silkscreen prints for enough money to pay for his trip to the Czech Republic when he was 15. And he started taking those pictures there, and he's been back many, many, many times ever since.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And now he's almost 40.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: So he's documented these all the way through. And the—I should give you a copy of his book before you go—

MS. RIEDEL: I'd love to see it.

MR. MONTEITH: —about the—that whole project that I was going to say right off who the publisher is now, but they're the ones that do all the great photography books.

MS. RIEDEL: Rizzoli?

MR. MONTEITH: No. Aperture. I'll—I've got it in there. I'll give you a copy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay, I'd love to see it. Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: You can have one as a present.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you.

MR. MONTEITH: So then he did that on his Fulbright. And then he headed to [the] American Academy to Rome after he was married. And he and his wife spent a year in Rome. And we got to go and visit them there.

MS. RIEDEL: How lovely.

MR. MONTEITH: So some of these travels you get to do because, you know, your kids take you there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay, and we were in Boston. And I was going to say Russ was from Massachusetts College of Art. And then I decided that I really had to go back to school, but I felt secure enough that I could go back as an art student, which I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And your father had made peace with that or—

MR. MONTEITH: No, I wouldn't say he made peace with it, but he wasn't going to tell me no because he was just glad I was going back to school, I think. And so I did, and I had a wonderful experience with John D. Martelli and with Charles Pollock and, you know, some of those guys from—that were a generation older. And then there were some that were sort of like the next generation, younger, that I ended up finishing up with. And I actually went to graduate school at Michigan State, too—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —although I never quite completed my graduate program because I moved out to New York—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —after I was married and Matthew was born.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I needed to make some more money. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And what was your focus in undergraduate and graduate work?

MR. MONTEITH: Painting.

MS. RIEDEL: It was painting.

MR. MONTEITH: It was all painting.

MS. RIEDEL: All painting.

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I always had a definite side interest in printmaking, too. I really liked the process of printmaking. Maybe that's the engineering in me coming out, you know, but the funny thing was there was always something I could even talk to my dad about, about some techie, weird thing that I had discovered.

And that's one of the things I think I kind of like about the lacquer, too, because they say it takes 200 years to learn to be a lacquer artist—[laughs]—and I think that's probably true because there's so much stuff. And because it's organic, a lot of it is not real logical, you almost have to experience it. And there wasn't really anything written in English.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. MONTEITH: So you—I had to go, and the fact that I didn't speak Japanese didn't matter, you know. So I came back to Michigan State and I graduated from there.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anybody in particular who was an influence at that point in time? Was your work moving in any particular direction at that time?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I studied painting with Allen Leepa who was an abstract expressionist—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —who was—Abraham Rattner was his stepfather. And I believe his mother owned Abrams Press. And he was kind of an amazing guy. He had been married five times and I think three of them to the same woman.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That is kind of amazing.

MR. MONTEITH: And each time he would like take up or leave off smoking and go to Paris for a year. [They laugh.] And it was like something out of an art historical fantasy that he was sort of living out. And he, I didn't think, was that good a painter, but he was such a character that he was kind of interesting.

And then there was another fellow, Ralf Henricksen [also a WPA painter], that I really, really liked a lot. And his painting could have been Diebenkorn's painting if he had been a younger man, you know. But he spent all of his life as a teacher. And he really was a teacher, and he was a very sort of sincere and caring person to all of his students. And he was always going to do more of his own painting when he retired.

And he built a house up on Lake Michigan just north of here, and he retired and his studio was all done and everything, and he moved up here. And I don't think he lived six months and he had a heart attack, I guess, and died. And it was such a sad thing.

And my first wife and I agreed about very little when it came to people who—other people who were painters, because she was a painter, too. But we both agreed that Ralf was, you know, he was really a special character. And his paintings were beautiful. They were really, really—and they were individual, too. You know, they were his own work.

And so I kind of took from knowing him that there was a value to being a good teacher, that was maybe just as good as being a good painter, and that you didn't have to be famous, but that if you, you know, maybe said the right thing or did the right thing with somebody who just happened to be in your space, for whatever reason, that this might be more important even than having a famous painting, you know, hanging someplace and being a celebrity and being a star. Because Ralf had no interest in being a celebrity at all.

And in between my undergraduate and graduate degree, there was—I think I may have gone back to Boston for something. I had a girlfriend in Boston at the time, and I went back and forth a lot. And I would hitchhike to Boston on a weekend, a three-day weekend, there and back.

MS. RIEDEL: From Michigan?

MR. MONTEITH: From Michigan—from Michigan State, from Lansing, the middle of the state, all the way to Boston and all the way back on a weekend.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this '60s, '70s?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it's the '60s, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But anyway, at that time, I think I was probably in Boston when it was time to select your adviser, and I got back too late. And the adviser, Clifton McChesney, that I wanted as my adviser was already booked. Clifton McChesney is the name.

And not at that time, but later on, he ended up going to Japan. And he got a Japan Foundation fellowship, or maybe it may have been a National Endowment fellowship. And he went to Japan and he's still living. And in fact, I saw him just a year ago. And he did, what I think, some of the best paintings that he ever did he did in Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And so we were kind of a funny connection in that way. But when I didn't get him as my adviser, I got assigned someone, and the guy I got assigned was Irwin Whitaker. Irwin Whitaker died in 2009. And I could not stand this man. When I was in my first year of art school, I had had him. They had sort of like maybe it was a design rotation where you did some of this and some of that and some of this, and he was doing the ceramics. He was a potter.

I just couldn't stand him. And he had this— you know, he was really into repetition, you know, and that. And I—there was something about him that he was a little bit slow and I was a little bit impatient, you know?

And then what he would do, unlike any of the other people, the advisers of any of the other students, he would come around and he would visit your studio and he would pin notes to your paintings, like, "This thing sucks. You obviously did no preparation for this, did you?" And then he would come into the studio, and if you were there he'd say, "Where are your drawings for this painting?" And I'd say, "Right there." And I'd have three or four drawings. And he'd say, "Three or four drawings, that's nothing. If you don't have 25 or 30 drawings of this thing," he said, "you have no business putting paint on that canvas. And oh, it used to drive me nuts, just nuts, you know.

And so—

MS. RIEDEL: He was saying this at that time?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes, this was in the '60s. And of course, everybody else, you know, it was a loosey-goosey city, you know, and I got saddled with this guy, you know? And it was just—I would just practically break out in hives every time I saw him coming.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And you know, I was trying not to be too—he was my father's age, you know, I was trying not to be, you know, too mean about it. But anyway, finally, some day, I kind of let off and said—I said, "This is just because you're a potter." I said, "You sit at that damn wheel, you pull up the same cylinder every day, and you

expect that everybody else is supposed to do the same thing over and over again the way you do. Well, painters are different!" [They laugh.]

And he said something like, "Well, you're right about that." And he just walked out of the studio. And we never had a conflict really after that. But I never got much out of my relationship. And then the next year I was able to get Clifton McChesney for my adviser.

And so it was year and years later, I was here, the studio was already built, and one day I was standing there with a twig in my hand and my knife and I'm picking buds off this thing—[laughs]—and I realize there are probably 850 sticks I'm preparing for this one chair. And all of a sudden I realized I've gone for several years now and I haven't cut myself. And I used to cut my—for the first two, three years I cut myself all the time.

You finally figured out where your hands are and how they work. Holy cow, that's what Whitaker was talking about.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting that he'd say the same thing like that.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: And what it was is I hadn't ever done anything as many times as I had picked little buds off willow sticks to learn where my body was. I had more sense of where my hands were and what they were doing and how I felt the plant in my hand. And it was almost like a blind person, you know, develops a familiarity with something.

I was developing a familiarity with this stick. And I was learning stuff about it in all kinds of non-intellectual ways —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —which is what he was talking about with why he wanted you to do more, because he wanted you to be more familiar with it. And he didn't express it really well, but it was like he was familiar with the clay, you should be familiar with the process of thinking about your painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so I thought, oh, jeez—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: —I've got to see if he's still alive. Everybody hated him, they all hated him in the department, I think, too. So I called up the secretary, who happened to still be there from when I was there at school—I think it was her last year—and I said, "Do you have an address for Irwin Whitaker?" And she said, "What the hell for?" [They laugh.] And I said, "Well, I need to write to him." And she said, "Are you feeling all right?" [Laughs.] And people said stuff like that, you know, and that he really rubbed people the wrong way, I think.

So anyway, she said, "No." She said, "We don't even send him the alumni news." And she said, "But I think the last I heard he lived out in Arizona or New Mexico." So I called Arizona, got the information operator, and I said, "I'm looking for someone by the name of Irwin Whitaker." "Well, where does he live?" I said, "I haven't a clue." I said, "Can you look?" And she said, "No, I can't." So I had to tell her the whole story about why I had to write to him. [Laughs.] And she said, "Well, his phone number won't give you his address." And I said, "But you have it there." [...]

And there's this big, long silence. She said, "There's an Irwin Whitaker—

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mija Riedel, with Clifton Monteith, disc number two for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, July 9th, 2012.

And you had just—

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Yes. So I finally talked the phone operator into not only giving me his phone number—because I didn't want to talk to him. I wanted his address and she gave me his address, because I told her the story about how—what I wanted to do was write him all these many years later and apologize for not understanding and that it had taken me this long to figure it out.

So evidentially, I appealed to her sense of it was being worth it and she went against their policy and she gave me his address.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: So I wrote to him. And it happened to be the year that the Chicago Art Institute had just purchased one of my chairs for their permanent collection. So I had a nice photograph of the chair, made a print of it and put it in with the letter, and explained what had happened to me. That I'd studied painting and everything, and I'd gone to New York, and I'd taught school and I had done freelance work on the side and everything. And then because of the divorce, I'd ended up back in Michigan. And strangely, I had gotten involved in doing craftwork and I was building this furniture out of willow sticks and that the Chicago Art Institute had just purchased this chair and I was including a photograph. And but what I—the reason I was writing was because, I said, "It's taken me all this time to figure out what you were talking about in knowing where you were relative to what you were doing." And I said, "I realize it's taken me this long to figure out where my hands were and how they're related to my thought and how they're related to my non-thought as well. And so you were right and I apologize for being so, you know, crude or whatever."

And in about two or three weeks, I got a letter back. And he said, "Well," he said, "I'm almost blind." But he said, "I have a machine that I can look through and see things." And he said, "It's sort of like a microscope." And he said, "I could see your photograph." He said, "I'm glad it was the size it was. If it had been any bigger, it wouldn't have fit into the machine." But he said, "I could see it." And he said, "It's very well done."

And I'd told him the situation about ending up without anything and finding myself here and that this had become a new path. And he said, "I think this kind of shows that you really are an artist." He said, "Because I've always thought, if you really were an artist"—and I'd explained I'd collected the stuff from the wild from the ditches next to the road and stuff like that. He said, "If you really are an artist, that you'll make art out of shit if you have to and you've come closer than anyone I know." [They laugh]—which was the ultimate Whitaker left-handed compliment. [They laugh.] Isn't that wonderful?

MS. RIEDEL: That is just extraordinary. [They laugh.]

MR. MONTEITH: It really is. And he—his wife died and his next-door neighbor's husband died. And his next-door neighbor—he married the husband's widow. And evidentially, they had a life happily ever after out in Arizona. And the amazing thing was her name was—her married name was Wilson, I think. And she and her husband were American historians. And when I was in undergraduate school, I had a part-time job raking leaves for them. And I didn't even know that Whitaker lived next door. Isn't that hysterical? You know, I mean, it's just so bizarre.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. We have such a small, small world.

MR. MONTEITH: Small world—as Nancy was saying. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. [They laugh.]

MR. MONTEITH: So yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a little bit about your work in New York and what your—

MR. MONTEITH: Oh.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes— were you intending? What were you intending to do in New York?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I went out there to teach high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I taught in Mamaroneck and Larchmont, New York. And at the time—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. At the public high schools there?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's a very, very wealthy community.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it is.

MR. MONTEITH: And they had huge tax base and well-funded arts program—both art, music, theater, dance, everything—in the school.

MS. RIEDEL: What years were you teaching there?

MR. MONTEITH: This was—let's see, Matthew was three, so it would have been '77, you know. For quite a few years then.

MS. RIEDEL: Meaning five years, 10 years?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, let's see. Until the divorce, which was—

MS. RIEDEL: 1984?

MR. MONTEITH: — '84.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So it '83, actually, I stopped there, probably.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And I always did some freelance work on the side too. And when I was in graduate school in Michigan, there was—that's another story, but I had bought an old farm out in the country for less money than I could rent an apartment in town.

MS. RIEDEL: Gosh.

MR. MONTEITH: And I could afford the mortgage, but I couldn't afford the taxes. And one of my neighbors, Carrol Glyn, when I was complaining about the taxes, he said, "Oh, I never pay my taxes." And they were all farmers. And I said, "What do you mean you never pay your taxes?" He said, my pigs pay my taxes. He said, "You've got that gigantic barn there right next to your house." He said, "Fill it up with hogs and you'll—you'll be rich." I'm a city kid; I never saw pork that wasn't wrapped in a piece of shrink wrap, you know? And he was just retiring and he had this last litter of pigs that was unmatched. So he took the ones that were ready to go to market and he gave me the last four, I guess.

So we put the four pigs in the barn. And one of the other neighbors brought down his boar and they were all girls and they all got pregnant and they all had babies. And my neighbors all rallied around this funny city kid who is a hippy with the long hair and going to art school. They just thought it was all too—I was such a novelty, because they were all old people, you know. And it was fun to watch the city kids screw up, you know? And they taught me how to castrate pigs and everything. And I learned how to do this and everything and it worked out really well. It paid my taxes, bought a new car, paid for my son's birth—because we didn't have any insurance.

And at that time, I got a part-time teaching job in the Lansing Public Schools. Because I had worked at the *Monitor* and done illustration and design work and stuff like that, they were looking for something that could be federally certified to teach commercial art in their commercial art program and I knew about printing too—like real printing, you know? And they had printing press there and stuff. So I got the job and it was just half a day at the time. It worked out perfectly.

And one of my students—Scott Reynolds, who lives in Manhattan now—wanted to be an illustrator. And so Scott just seemed like the most unlikely person to be an illustrator. He was from kind of a factory-worker family in Lansing and he wanted to be an illustrator and live in New York City. And I thought—I said, "You know, if you want to do this, this is going to be hard work. It's going to be really, really hard work. And you have a lot of competition. And you have a lot of competition from people who grew up in the city." And he really wanted to do it.

So he went to Kendall [School of Art and Design] in Grand Rapids first. And we got him a co-op job working for an ad agency in Lansing. And he did really well. And when he graduated from Kendall, he went to the Illustrator's Workshop in New York, which all the big illustrators were teaching—this doesn't exist anymore, but it was a wonderful institution where professional guys like took their vacation, you know, and went out and taught—it was a competitive thing; just a small group of budding illustrators. And Scott went and did well. He ended up being on the board of directors of the Illustrator's Society of New York.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

MR. MONTEITH: And then some years ago, he decided he wanted to give up illustration and start doing sculpture

and he has—just as crazy a way as I did the furniture. And he married a wonderful woman who also was from Lansing, but they never knew each other until New York. And they have a place in Manhattan and I always stay with them when I go. And they now have a house up in the country in Columbia County. And with my old house experience, I've been able to help them.

And when I had the old house at the farm, Scott used to come out and help me with house rebuild projects, just because I needed the help, you know? And now it's kind of funny that many, many years—30 years later—I'm helping him with his old house. He has a beautiful old house. And we've stayed in touch this whole time. It's really, really quite amazing.

And that's that thing about, you know, what is the value of teaching? I think many artists, see the time that we spend teaching as almost a dilutor of our labor. I don't think so. I think it's sort of like the maple tree. It's not efficient, but it's effective in ways that we don't—we don't understand; we can't understand. In fact, it may become effective sometime long after we're here, you know? You don't know what—but you sort of need to go in the way you're led, you know? And so Scott has been a wonderful friend. And he helped my son when my son first went to New York. And he went to the International Center for Photography and studied there.

So that has been an interesting relationship there. And that was while I was in graduate school at Michigan State with all the pigs.

MS. RIEDEL: It was the—

MR. MONTEITH: It was a time when I was a lot younger. In fact, Nancy and I were doing something out in the garden one day. And it was extremely hot and took a long time and I thought, how did I do that? Oh, yes. I'm not 24 anymore. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I've had those thoughts before.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes. Just from time to time, because your head still thinks you are.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.] I was looking at the images that you'd sent again this morning before I headed over. And I was looking at the chair you sent from 1985. And I think—I mentioned this before, but I'd like to say it on disc—is that from very early on, from 1985, which was early on in your furniture-making career, there were the—there were the seeds or the roots of your work. The sweeping curves, the daintiness, the—I feel like the outlines and the bones and the foundations were there and then it's just flowered out from there. Does it feel that way to you as well?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And one of the things that kind of surprised me was that I started out using bigger pieces of material, because I guess I thought it was safer or stronger or something. But the more I got thinking about it—like, I often think of them being like a bridge structure.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That occurred to me too. Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And the whole is more than the sum of its parts, because of the relationship between the parts. And this has occurred to me, you know, in every facet of living, the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts or stronger than the sum of its parts. And that includes, you know, organic things. Look at our very environment and the way that it's changing is because we've done things to its parts that are affecting its whole. And that holds for political things; it holds for family relationships—all kinds of human and animal relationships too.

And the interrelationship of the identities of the parts can either make an integrity that is beautiful and functional, even though it may not be very efficient. Making one of my chairs is certainly not the fastest way to get your butt up off the ground, but it's something more than holding, you know, your body in the right position. Although that's an important part of it too, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and it's just interesting, just thinking about your chairs—having heard the stories of your family—they feel like such a—your childhood experience— they feel like a perfect fusion of a feat of engineering, meeting artistry, because they really are incredible engineering works.

MR. MONTEITH: I think—I think so in a way that probably, if you told me that that was what I was going to be interested in early on, I would have said, well, you know, that's—you're talking about my father, not me. But you know, we do find the older we get we often catch ourselves with our father falling out of our mouth—as much as we hate to, you know, admit it.

But all that time that he forced me to hand him tools while he worked on the car or hold the other end of this while we were building something, I was accumulating information—and going to engineering school too, you

know—all of that information is part of the whole and gives you either a sensitivity to noticing it so that it can be incorporated. This is one of the things that I'm a little bit concerned about the way that technology is going that the sense of noticing our place in our space and environment is being threatened, I think. And maybe that's just an old geezer's view, you know, of looking at it, but I do think there's something being compromised. It may be expanded in focus of different direction, but cell phone driving—talking on your cell phone while driving is diluting both experiences—both the conversation and the text while driving—that writing gets pretty simplified and pretty lowest-common denominator. And you know, lowest-common denominator is not necessarily the best way to go about a life. Nature doesn't do that.

Nature's complex—much more complex maybe than we realize. And that's one of the reasons I like working with natural materials too, is because it's complexity—it's stimulating, you know? And that's what I love about the lacquer too. It's so difficult. There's no reason for doing that. We've got plastic. Why do you need to do this? In fact, my dad used to say, "You know, once you put all that work into one of these chairs, you could have those inject molded and you could probably sell them in K-Mart by huge quantities and make a lot more money than you're doing." And I said, "So what? I could have time off?" [Laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: To make chairs. [They laugh.]

MR. MONTEITH: To make chairs. I'm already there; I have arrived, you know? I don't need a vacation.

Like, you know what my vacation's going to be this year? I'm going to Anderson Ranch and I'm doing—I'm going to share. And I think teaching is important and this is—this is my vacation. It's the way that—you know, there are certain—it costs me to go.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONTEITH: I can make a lot more money working in my studio than I can going there, but it's a gift, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe this is a good time to talk about your teaching experience—touch on that briefly. Has it been primarily through workshops?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. I think I mentioned that that first—

MS. RIEDEL: Other than in Mamaroneck and Larchmont?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. The first one at the University of Michigan, when I'd just given that lecture and they asked, would you like to do a workshop? Or would you students like to do a workshop? If you would, we'll twist his arm and make him come and do it, which is basically what it was.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've taught since then at Penland, at Haystack, at Anderson Ranch?

MR. MONTEITH: And at Parnham College in England.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And at Gaidai at Kyoto in Japan. In Taipei in Taiwan.

MS. RIEDEL: And are those at, quote-unquote, "craft schools" as well?

MR. MONTEITH: Some universities, you know. Parnham was a college.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Very famous furniture school. Of course, you know. And I've been there.

MS. RIEDEL: And when was that? Do you remember the year roughly?

MR. MONTEITH: '93, I think—or '92, maybe. It was just before I went to Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: And were any of these residencies or where they short-term workshops?

MR. MONTEITH: They were pretty short-term workshops. Just like a Penland class. You know, short-term workshops. Because I make my living from my studio, I can't go away from it very much, you know? There are —

MS. RIEDEL: And that's saying quite a lot. I mean, you really make your living from what you make.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Oh, yeah. Nothing else—nothing else. And we have had to face some challenges. Nancy's had some very serious health problems that have been handled before we had any insurance at all. [Laughs.] Try having cancer with no insurance, you know? And it's been paid for out of little sticks collected beside the road—[laughs]—which is, you know, a real artist can make art out of shit if he has to. [They laugh.] Irwin Whitaker comes to mind so many times.

He, you know, probably there's—there probably aren't many people on the face of the earth that have his name come up as much to their thought as his does to mine. And you know, maybe that was his whole point, you know, was to be able to pass that along to one person. And you know, you think maybe something someday I'm going to say to somebody will make—or show to somebody or even just, you know, if you can share the way you feel about what you're doing and that—you know, it's not about having a lifestyle. It's about having a life.

There's an awful lot of lifestyle chasing that goes on. And I think when you've found a life, you notice the difference. And I—before I started doing this particular kind of work, part of it was destitution— lowered my expectations for financial gain. But from that vantage point, things looked a lot different and the things I appreciated looked a lot different. I used to go to the art supply store and buy 30 tubes of gouache and think nothing of it. Get whatever I wanted just because I wanted it. Now, if I wanted a chair and I had this idea and I had to go driving around the countryside to find the perfect plant that grew my chair, just by looking at the plant and being able to imagine what it can become, when you find it, it is so much more exciting than being able to put the gouache on your credit card. You know, it's a whole different thing. I mean, there's just no comparison.

MS. RIEDEL: Has your working process stayed fairly constant from the mid-'80s through now? Do you go out and look for the same sorts of things? Do you harvest the same ways? How does that change, because—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. There's some of it that really stays the same. One of the things, as I'm collecting other kinds of fibers, obviously, because of the lacquer work, my view isn't just to the willow sticks for the furniture, you know, that's constructed that way. And I've had some wonderful, amazing encounters that might seem serendipitous, but you would swear that it was a path paved to my door about—like that matched set of sticks there leaning by the wall—by the door there that I showed you.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Those are from the willow research station at Syracuse. Know how I came upon that? I was a—joined the furniture society. We had a conference. And I don't know where Nancy and I were. We'd been off looking at something and we were late for the final banquet and we couldn't get two seats together. So she sat over there and I sat over there.

The person she sat next to was a furniture maker. His best friend, Tim Volk, happened to be the number one willow research person in the United States who runs the program in Syracuse. And he said, do you want me to mention Cliff to him, because who else would be more interested in willow sticks than him? They're interested in raising willows for power plant—for biomass burning.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And they're getting farmers to raise willows for chipping for running power plants on marginal land that a lot of that area over around Syracuse and over toward the lake is vineyard country and fruit-growing country. But those are on the hillsides; there's a swale at the bottom and they can plant the willows there. And then the State of New York now has a law that if you can harvest those, as chips, and deliver wood chips to a coal-fired power plant, they have to give you the value in Btus of what you bring them, and you can write it off your taxes. And I think there's kind of an incremental benefit like it's—it actually pays for doing it, which is a wonderful thing. So they're doing all this research on willow.

And they have literally hundreds of acres. And so they go down and they plant out all these different varieties. And then they have to cut them down every year, because they want to grow them back and measure how much they grow. So if secretly I can show up at the right time when they're cutting down and are going to burn them, you know, so that insects don't grow, I can avail myself of some. And that's how I get a bundle like that of all matched pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's extraordinary. I mean, what you guess—there are probably 50 or 60 pieces there?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, no. There's a couple hundred.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And they look pretty much identical.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. They're very close.

MS. RIEDEL: Have these all been cleaned as well? You've take off the buds?

MR. MONTEITH: No, the buds are still on those. That's salix purpurea, the variety that the soil conservation people used to sell for planting in irrigation and drainage ditches so they—not irrigation ditches, but drainage ditches—so they wouldn't erode from, you know, high-speed water runoff.

But they have many, many different varieties. They have some that they've hybridized that will actually grow 18 feet in one year. But I can't have any of those; they're patented.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. They're patented?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, the clones are all patented.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: But the ones that are the wild stock from which they breed, they cut those down every year and they burn them. And I've been able to avail myself kind of under the table. I can't pay for them and they can't sell them to me, because it's a, you know, university thing. But I think part of it is they kind of like to have people thinking about willow and it's uses and it's sustainable.

Of course, that's what they're trying to do with the power plants is make things more sustainable, because the power plant, when it's burning that wood, it is just returning the carbon to the air that the plant took out that year. So just like when I cut the tree down to make a chair, next year it's going to take all the carbon back that I borrowed to make the chair. Totally sustainable. If we could lead more of our lives in that sustainable way, we wouldn't dent our carbon karma nearly as much as we are by flying to Japan once a year. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Now, you—we were looking at your storage shed, before you started talking.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I was under the impression that a lot of the willow that you used for the furniture— and we'll get to the lacquer work; I mean, we'll deal with and talk about the furniture first—that a lot of it was green. But all of this looks like it's cured some way or another and there must be thousands of pieces of willow in there.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And those are pieces that I have saved for mosaic work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And for things like straight work, like in the structures of the table bottoms and in these series of altar tables that I'll be doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Those will all have underpinning pieces and some of those are going to be very fine. That's why I've saved all those really thin ones is I may end up sewing them together—not even wooden pegs—like I did on the one of the *Penland Table*.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the work a little bit in terms of the different stages that it's developed in. I think of the first pieces, the first chairs—that first chair of having sort of the seeds of—what to come. And how did it develop? I think of that as being sort of the early stages and I think of that 1990 piece that was sort of the long couch.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, the big round bench?

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of a couch.

MR. MONTEITH: That was one of the last pieces I did before the studio was built. And that was built when my workshop was the living room in the house.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that a commission?

MR. MONTEITH: It was a commission. Trudy Temple. It was for Trudy Temple. She's a wonderful woman who lives in Hinsdale outside Chicago. And she has—well, we hit it off, because she's a fabulous gardener. She's one of the best gardeners, probably, in all of Illinois. And she has a fabulous house. And her—oh, her garden is just

so beautiful. And I'm trying to think—oh, I know. The woman who introduced me to my gallery in Chicago—

MS. RIEDEL: Which gallery? The Carl Hammer Gallery?

MS. RIEDEL: Carl Hammer.

MR. MONTEITH: And her name is Barbara Siepker and she's from Hinsdale, too; that's how she knew Trudi. And she has a place up here on Glen Lake. And her husband was a lawyer in Chicago and she saw my work at the Tamarack Gallery. And she said, "Clifton, this is too good to just stay here. Why don't you put together a portfolio and take down to Chicago and go around the galleries?" And I said, "You know, Barbara, I've got what I'm doing here. I'm kind of doing it and David's selling it. And I had a life that was really complicated and I'm kind of enjoying this more simplified thing and everything." And she said, "If— could I take some of your pictures and take it around for you and see if anybody was interested?" And I said, "Well, sure. Here." So I gave her five or six pictures. And they were only up here like on the weekend. And she went back down to the Chicago. And one of her neighbors, who was an art consultant, said, "Oh, Carl Hammer should see this." And so she said, "Okay." And Barbara's just—Barbara's a very "let's do it" kind of person. And so she just took the pictures over and showed them to Carl. And he drove all the way up from Chicago the next day. And he bought the table that went with the chairs you ate lunch on. He had some antique chairs that he wanted to go with the table that I had made. So I ended up with the chairs and I didn't have any chairs to sit on. So perfect. He bought the table and then he said, "Within a year I want to have a one-man show for you in Chicago."

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this that he drove up?

MR. MONTEITH: Well —

MS. RIEDEL: This was the early ‘90s?

MR. MONTEITH: I can find that out. Yes. Maybe '89-'90.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, so it was after the multiple-person piece was made for Trudy? That was—it was before that?

MR. MONTEITH: This is before that. And then Trudy went to my shop.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And she knew Barbara. And she said, "I really like Clifton's work, but I've made this new dance floor in my garden." She's Austrian. And it isn't a patio; patios are for sitting. This was a dance floor and it was circular—beautiful, out in her garden.

MS. RIEDEL: An outdoor dance floor?

MR. MONTEITH: Dance floor—she loves to dance.

MS. RIEDEL: Outdoors?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Her husband was a pilot for United Airlines. And he was out driving around in the countryside, I think, in Austria and she picked him up on her farm tractor—on her father's farm tractor. And they got married and she came to Chicago and they had this wonderful life together. And she developed a business of—just an amazingly energetic person—where it was—it's called— I think the business still exists; she doesn't own it anymore—but it's called Farm Day or something like that. And it's a marketing business that she sold to schools to raise money by like having farmer's markets at the school. Sort of like, instead of a bake sale, let's do something that's good. And she did this years ago and she made a fortune off it. She's just an amazing—she's very entrepreneurial and you know, just a very strong woman.

So she said, "I need a bench for my dance floor, but it's got to fit this curve and this is the diameter." Well, I am —it wasn't even a circle. It was sort of round on one side and then had a different shape over here. So anyway, I had this form and it was a real challenge. This was before I had any cultivated willows at all. I found all of those willows from the wild. And it was an amazing chore to find them all.

But I built the thing in the living room, never realizing that it was like building the boat in the basement and not being able to get it out. And but we—we had to take the door and the hinges and all the hardware off the door and we got it out by about a sixteenth of an inch by turning it through—and it just fit. And that was—that was pretty amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that the most substantial piece to date?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. At that time, it was. That—the bridge work underneath the seats of that were really pretty

amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were the actual dimensions of that roughly, do you remember?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, gosh. I think it was—it was like 14.5 feet or something—or maybe 15 feet. It was less than 16, because I had a pickup truck by that time. And by folding the tailgate down and extending two-by-fours off the back—and I'm sure it was as illegal as heck to get it to Chicago—but we went down in the night and it looked great there and she was really happy.

And she has become such a good friend. Usually I hear from her once a year anyway. And her husband died very, very sadly. The year he retired he died—he was so healthy. You know, he was a pilot and everything—he was so healthy; and a dancer, for goodness sakes. And he just had a heart attack and died after—you know, just months after he retired.

And anyway, she and one of her friends from Hinsdale came out and took one of my workshops at Anderson Ranch. And that was good; that was great fun. So there's that—that was many—Anderson Ranch was many years after that bench, so a big loop again.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that—was that one of the first commissions as well? Have commissions been part of your work from the beginning?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, I'm trying to think about that. It was. It was kind of an early commission. Barbara Siepker had commissioned a piece that was in the Midland show. And I showed the first lanterns. When I finished—after I got back from Japan—the Midland had an exhibition on my work and they wanted to show the lanterns. But they said, can you borrow back some of the furniture? So some was from pieces that had been purchased through the Tamarack Gallery. Then I realized that Barbara's was a commission—there were a couple of others in that show. But that all came right about that time— whenever Trudy's bench was.

MS. RIEDEL: 1990 is what I have here.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Probably that was about right—'89 maybe.

Then—

MS. RIEDEL: How do most of those commissions come about?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, you know, it's like Hershey's candy bars. Mr. Hershey didn't believe in advertising. He said, you make a really good candy bar. You put it out there were people can see it and it'll sell itself.

Well, stuff was at Tamarack Gallery. Barbara saw—I even almost objected to her showing it to somebody else and I had a one-man show in Chicago in a year. And that really changed everything, because when I took work down to Carl Hammer, I would just take it into his gallery and drop it off and we would talk about stuff and everything and I would leave and drive away. I had no idea what he was going to sell it for.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't set prices?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: There was no discussion about that?

MR. MONTEITH: No discussion. And in about a week or so, I would get an inventory sheet with a number on it and what he was going to sell it for and it was like twice what I thought it was going to be. And then every time I took it down, it was twice that again. And he never got to the point where people wouldn't pay for it. So I had a couple of one-man shows there and those sold out and then I would just do a piece or two and take them down to him.

So anyway, then—

MS. RIEDEL: How long did you show with Carl or are you still—

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I had—the first one-man show, which the card is on the wall in the dining room, then I think it was two or three years and I had another one.

MS. RIEDEL: And this would have been 1990—late ‘80s, 1990?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. '89, '90, '91, '92.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a show every year or other year?

MR. MONTEITH: No. Two—I only had two shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Every two years? Only two shows?

MR. MONTEITH: Only two shows, but about two years apart.

Then, when I was in New York, my friend Scott Reynolds, who was my former student, I had a portfolio with me. And I said, you know, maybe I should show this around New York; maybe Barbara was right. Maybe it could even go—you know, I should be showing something beyond Chicago.

So I took them. Scott said, "Well, you should probably go here." And Scott knows the city, I mean, really, really—he knows the city so much better than I—than when I lived there. He knows where all the toilets are in the city. [They laugh.] And where the cheap Vietnamese sandwich is and where the soup is the best, you know, he knows all of those things.

So he said, "Well, we should go here and there and we should go—we should got to Aarne Anton's gallery and American Primitive Gallery." Well, I would have never found this place. It's like on the third floor on Broadway in SoHo. And I don't know how—well, Scott like the work that Aarne carried. He carried a lot of outsiders' work—as does Carl Hammer in Chicago, who's almost exclusively outside work now—and a lot of folk art, you know, and things like that.

So we went—and there's Aarne and Scott said, "This is Aarne Anton." And I said, "So do you want to see some great art?" And opened my portfolio on the table and he looked at the pictures and he said, "Yes." He said, "Could you bring something? I'm having a show"—in the spring, I think it was, or something like that. And I said, "Okay. I'll do something for your show." And so I did a piece for that show at Aarne's and I did some tables and stuff for him too, but it was the chair and there was a face in the back of the chair looking through the weave in the back of the chair. This person came into the gallery and saw it. This was over 20 years ago. That's piece that's in the other side of the studio for the same client. I've done a commission for them—at least one—every year for 20 years. Now, what are the chances of that?

MS. RIEDEL: That's an expensive patron.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, yeah. In fact—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to mention the name or not?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. It's Robert and Gayle Greenhill. And they purchased a chair— well, what it was is the Museum of Art and Design asked me for a chair for their collection. They said, "Do you know somebody who will buy a chair from you for us?" And I said, "Well, only one name comes to mind"—you know. And so Bob and Gayle did that.

And they are also house builders, very much like my aunt, only they're all for them. They never get rid of them. They just add another one. But Gayle has an amazing architectural sense—very much like my grandmother. She knows this wants to be here. That's not the right color; it should be this. You know, just brilliant natural sense of everything. And she had the money to go with that and she had some very good friends who—dealers that she had collected over the years, and architects, too. And when she saw my chair, she went and got her architect and brought him down to look at it. And I was going to be in New York. And she said—she asked Aarne if he would ask me if I would meet them there. So I met she and her architect there. And he said, "Well, they've just bought this little place in Maine; it's just a tiny little cabin and we're going to redo it. Would you make a bed for it?" And I said, "Sure. I'd be happy to." And then they got talking and they were saying, there's this group—the anachronism is LURC.

MS. RIEDEL: L-U-R-K?

MR. MONTEITH: L-U-R-C.

MS. RIEDEL: L-U-R-C.

MR. MONTEITH: The land—I have it written down recently, because I had to write it down for something. I can get that for you.

Anyway, LURC was giving them a hard time, because it was an old cabin. They had to—because it's in a conservancy area, they couldn't change the footprint.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So they didn't; so they had some constraints that were pretty tight. When they got the thing all done, LURC decided that they had overstepped their permit—not physically, but basically, they took this wall down and they rebuilt it; and then they took this wall down and they rebuilt it and they ended up with a whole new building on the same piece, and they hadn't been authorized to do that. So they said, you've got to tear it down. It's gone; out of here. And they didn't really realize who they were dealing with, I think, at the time.

So the joke was that LURC was always lurking around. And Gayle said this chair would be—[laughs]—he's looking through—she said, "It's a LURC chair. I've got to have it!" And so Ed, who has a wonderful sense of humor—Ed Knowles is the architect. Ed Knowles is still alive. In fact, I talked to him on the phone when I was in New York this last time. We tried to make a meeting, but didn't get to it. Ed said, "Oh. Then let's have the bed be in the same lurking thing." So I did a bed and chair.

So LURC thought that they had gotten rid of the cabin by this. Well, they did. What they did—Bob just said, well, we'll move it. And by moving it far enough, we can change the footprint and do whatever we want. So they moved it 45-feet up in the air and 250-feet back through the woods underneath this beautiful ledge rock place. Gorgeous, just gorgeous. And this allowed them to have a larger footprint. So Gayle said, "Oh, great! More furniture." So then I did a dresser and a couple of nightstands that went on either side of the bed. And so in each year there would be a little— a little something more.

So about the time—oh, and then Ed—when we actually got the house moved. Oh, this has a cobblestone chimney and everything. Moved the whole thing; didn't even crack the chimney. These guys were great.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was this in?

MR. MONTEITH: This is on Moosehead Lake up in Maine.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So when they were moving the house, Ed said, "There's room under the cliff there off to the north that would be a great place to put a porch." He said, "How about a twig porch?" He said, "Do you think you could do some really big twigs?" And I said, "Well, like white cedar?" "Yes," he said. "Some real organic stuff." Okay. So we got his drawing and we built it here in Michigan. Took apart all the hundreds and hundreds of pieces, all numbered and labeled. Put them in a truck, took them out there and put the whole porch up. I have pictures of it.

MS. RIEDEL: That I'd like to see.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. It's all white cedar.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we can get copies of that too for the archives. That would be important.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And then that—the photography of that that ended up in some books ended up—see, and then this is the Hersey candy bar thing. Somebody else saw that. I want one too. And I ended up—I had a crew of five guys that we did five porches on a house down in Three Rivers, just north of South Bend. And one of them, the ridge beam is 45-feet long. And the—it's a load-bearing, hip roof, the corner. So great that, of course, the cedar wouldn't pass code. So I'd already been Japan and back and brought that saw from Japan—the Japan woodworker's saw. Sawed through the entire beam by hand, hollowed it out and put a steel column in this post. And the—it's a whole tree with the roots and everything. And then the masons came in and built stones up in amongst the roots on the porch.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh!

MR. MONTEITH: And of course, it took cranes and everything. And then I met two of my helpers that were timber framers. And they'd done timber framing, but you know, it's pretty geometric stuff. And we just took my organic way of doing things, so we scribed and fitted everything so it was like it grew together.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, this was the place in Maine or this was—

MR. MONTEITH: This was the second one in Three Rivers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. In Three Rivers. Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Just north of the Indiana border there.

MS. RIEDEL: I think I've seen photos of the Maine one, but I don't think I've seen the Three Rivers.

MR. MONTEITH: I have a great photograph of two cranes working putting the one in—you know, those big sky

track things with the hydraulic things.

One of the great things—we could have never done without Clark Southwell, the timber framer. He had worked with another—a timber framer who's an architect from Chicago. And he'd learned how to run this articulated hydraulic crane, because you'd have to go up and put the log in place, trace all the joints, take it down, carve them all and then do it again. And it'd be 30 times you'd have to do that before it fit.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow! Talk about engineering.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, yeah. And plus it's organic engineering, because mother's nature—nothing's quite straight. And I had seen in Japan that this was possible.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Let's talk about that.

MR. MONTEITH: Well —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that on the first trip to Japan?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. That was on the first trip to Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that trip come about in '95—is that right?

MR. MONTEITH: That was '94.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Actually, I was working. I'd just finished up a piece in Maine. Oh, let's see. That's a longer story than that. I had the National Endowment Individual Artist Grant that I build the studio with—took the six months to build the studio. And—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that grant?

MR. MONTEITH: That would have been in—I received it—it was issued, I think, in '92. The studio was built in '93, okay? So Nancy was reading in *Art in America*—you know, the little blurb in the back that says, "Accepting entries for National Endowment." I said, "Nancy, I'm busy. I can't put together a portfolio of stuff." She said—I said, "It'll be some long-winded thing they want me to do and I just don't want to sit down and do that right now. I've got this work I've got to do." And she said, "Well, I'm going to write and find out what you have to do." So she wrote and it wasn't that complicated a thing. And they sent the forms back, because she wrote in this business—you know, and tiger lady. And so I did it. And I got the grant, which was tremendous. Finally, got the sawdust out of the bed; that was great, you know? [They laugh.]

So when the committee sat and did the evaluation, Hiroko Pijanowski was on the committee. And she said she sort of had to recuse herself, because she already knew me, you know. And she said, "But it was no problem, because everybody wanted me to get it anyway." So I got it.

Well, the guy who was secretary to the committee—you know, they tell you they're going to tell you the 15th of April or whatever it is, you know. And of course, as soon as they announce who it really—or as soon as they know who it really is going to be, they call you much earlier, you know? So they called and left a message on the answering machine. And I was picking up messages for family and stuff from Maine while we were working out in Maine. And we had to drive into town— there were no phones out there or anything—and call on the pay phone. And so we called and he said, "You got the grant." "Oh, that's terrific." He said, "I don't sit on the committee," he said, "I'm just observed." But he said, "I get to see all the slides and I get to hear all the discussions, because I take notes." And he said, "When I saw your work, I wondered, do you by any chance have any interest in going to Japan?" And I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to go to Japan, but it's just way too expensive. I could never afford the time away from home to stop working and everything." And he said, "You know, there is this program: The U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission Fellowship." And he said, "I have no influence with that at all, except," he said, "The National Endowment is sort of running the committee right now." And he said, "It's as similar application to the one you just did that you got." And he said, "I think the people on that committee would really respond to your work." "Well," he said, "This is a totally unprofessional evaluation," he said. "But would you be interested?" And I said, "Oh, sure. Why not?"

So people apply for that thing for 15, 20 years in a row before they get it. I applied and got it the first time and we went in '94. So I got the studio built in '93. One of my former students from the University of Michigan came and stayed in our house and he had the studio to work in. And we got the house taken care of and Nancy and I went to Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it six months or a year?

MR. MONTEITH: Six months. See, it used to be a year and then it went to nine months. And then, you know, the economy has dwindled. So anyway, but we were both able to go and there's no strings attached to that grant at all. So you get your credit card to go to the cash machine, take your money out. And you can do with your time whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: And do they—is it a set place in Japan or you're given a studio? How's it work?

MR. MONTEITH: You can do it anyway—you can do anything—well, it used to be you got more help when you were there longer and there was more money. Do you know John McQueen—the basket maker, sculptor?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, John's a good friend. And I met John when we were both teaching at the U of M. And of course, we're both working with willow and bark and we have a lot in common and we just really hit it off.

So John had the same grant. And so I called him up right away as soon as I found out. And I said, "How do you do this?" And he said, "It's really difficult! You can't understand anything!" [They laugh.] And he—Hisako Sekijima—you know her work, probably, the basket maker; she's wonderful. And she had come to the United States—or she was in the United States, because her husband was stationed here and she did a workshop with John. And she was a basket maker and she's become a very famous basket maker in Japan and internationally too. And when we went to Japan that first time, we met Hisako and she took us to this show called *The Domain of the Medium* Beautiful show at the National Gallery of Craft in Tokyo. And guess who was there? Kofushiwaki! And there was all this beautiful basket work. And Kazue Honma—her work was there too and we got to meet her and she's become a wonderful friend and I see her every time I get to Tokyo. Some years—like last year, I get to Tokyo, but usually I go to Tokyo, even if it's just for a few days. If Steven, Yumi and the kids are there, so it's hard not to go.

But so Hisako, you know, here is John and Hisako and Kazue. And this whole thing—Kazue was really interested in—she edits a magazine called *Basketry News* in Japan. And a lot of it is really heavily influenced by ecological awareness, which is in some ways it's very, very old in Japan; and in some ways, it's very, very new among young people. And it's—I don't know exactly how to stop the story. But we see each other often. She's been here to the United States. And we took her down to Chicago where she had her first pieces ever shown in the United States at SOFA. And opening night of the show, she'd sold two or three of them and she was so excited, because she was totally unfamiliar with the United States. But her work was good. So that was great.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. So this first trip to Japan just really, again, changed the world.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. Changed the world.

MS. RIEDEL: '93, '94 were big, pivotal years.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. So for—in '94, we knew— I knew I wanted to go to Kyoto, because remember the first book that I told you about?

MS. RIEDEL: When you were three?

MR. MONTEITH: [Laughs.] Yes. It was Kyoto.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Mostly, because that was where, even at that time, that was where the most precious, old architecture was. So I sort of had this idea.

Then when I worked at the *Monitor*—

CLIFTON MONTEITH: A friend of mind was secretary to the book page and they would get all these fabulous books, you know, that were approval copies. And they were just, you know, one-way direction to you. And she gave me this great book about Ise—the Temple at Ise—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —and the construction and deconstruction of that temple. And it was in English, so I could read it, you know? And I thought, oh, that's very cool. But there was a whole lot of reference in it and photographs of things other than Ise and they all related to Kyoto, so I thought, Kyoto's where I want to be.

MS. RIEDEL: So just so I'm clear: This is a six-month— this is the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowship? And 1994—is this going to a specific place? Do you get to choose where you're going?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. You could do anything.

MS. RIEDEL: What are the conditions of the grant?

MR. MONTEITH: You're just given the money.

MS. RIEDEL: Money—and you have to go to Japan?

MR. MONTEITH: Right. In Japan, right. And you can't leave; you have to stay there for six months.

MS. RIEDEL: Stay there for six months.

MR. MONTEITH: Unless somebody dies, you know. So it's contiguous time; you can't divide it up.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's really just funding to spend time in Japan any way you choose. You could go to a school, you could travel— whatever you like?

MR. MONTEITH: And it's —unlike a Fulbright, it's not based on what you propose to do, because they very brilliantly realized you haven't a clue before you're here! And whatever you propose to do is going to turn out to be a lie; you're going to do something different because when you get here, you're going to see something that's going to change everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you need to work while you're there? Do you need to produce a body of work?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No stipulation whatsoever?

MR. MONTEITH: No. All—and you've got money for travel, expenses, housing and what was called professional expenses.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Materials?

MR. MONTEITH: That could include materials, if you were going to work. You could just maybe buy materials to collect them, because you couldn't pass them up without buying them. There's a lot of that there. Books, performances came under that too, so all kinds of, you know, performances.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. MONTEITH: You could buy your tickets out of that—you know, and stuff like that. And you could pay for your transportation to those events, you know, and stuff. So that was cool. And it was enough money for two of us. I mean, we used it all up, but what we did was because of Kyoto, we got up every single day and we went to a different temple or garden every single day. And we figure we've seen about a third of what we want to see.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was every single day for six months?

MR. MONTEITH: For six months, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You went to a different temple or a garden throughout Japan?

MR. MONTEITH: Garden—no, just in th Kansai Valley. We went a few places further. We went to Takayama, which is up in the mountain—how did I get to Takayama? There's a connection I can't even put my finger on right now. What a wonderful thing that was too. Oh! Yeah. There's a fellow who's an architect. When I was there—how did I get the—I got invited to give a lecture about my work to the society of architects and engineers in Osaka. And it was the most money I had ever been paid to ever speak anywhere. And they paid for our transportation and everything and we had this wonderful time. And at the end of the evening, they just hand you an envelope with it all in cash. And I don't know, I think it was something like $1,500. And I'd never been paid $1,500 to speak anywhere, you know? And it was gone out of my coat before we got to the dinner afterwards and we never had any idea what happened to it. But it turned out that the connections that I made at that meeting were worth so much more than $1,500 it was—it was just amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. MONTEITH: Well —

MS. RIEDEL: Collectors, gallerists?

MR. MONTEITH: Other architects. And they introduced me—you've got to go here and see this. You would—

after I saw your work, you'd really like these—there's these fences that you would like. They're made out of bush clover and there's fences made out of—there's this plant. It's like—we have goldenrod; it's kind of like goldenrod. And oh, there's a sudari maker in Kyoto; you must go see him. And it was like—it was all these tour guides packed into one, right? And this one guy came up to me and gave me his card and he said—and we exchanged cards, of course—and he said, "I'm going to call you"—his English was good too; he's an architect in Osaka—he does some of the really big, new contemporary buildings—but very low key, you know, he's not a big deal. You know, a lot of architects have kind of big egos; not like that at all, very kind of matter-of-fact guy. And he was teaching at Kyoto Gaidai. And so he said, you should get over to Kyoto Gaidai and I want to introduce you to some interesting people there.

And this was in '94, right? We'd spent our six months; we were down to the last two weeks. We had to really kind of scramble to get this day in with him. And he took us around and he introduced us to Natsuki Kurimoto. And Natsuki Kurimoto was in undergraduate school with Kofushiwaki Tsukasa. So "Oh, you know Kofushiwaki Tsukasa?" "Yes, yes, yes." And I said, "I saw his work, but I really—I really don't"—I asked, "Do you know this person," because his work is so different than the lacquer stuff, you know. And this really hit me, you know?

And he said, "Oh, yeah." He said, "I know him." And he said, "But, you know, his work is different." I said, "Oh, yes. It's definitely different." And he said, "What you really need to do is get some lacquer and try it." And I had like three, four more days. I said, I'm leaving the country and I have a plane ticket; I've got to go. And I said, "How can I do this in two or three days?" He said, "Difficult." But he said, "Here." He got out a pencil and a paper and he wrote out—oh, his wife is an English professor, so his English is pretty good too. And he wrote out this note and drew me a map of how to get to his lacquer dealer. And said, "Give them this and buy what they tell you is on here." And I was a little shocked at how expensive it was, but I did have enough and so I brought it. And I brought it home and I tried it. It didn't make any sense. Nothing worked; it was just a total disaster.

Then he wrote to me and—well, then there was the big Kobe earthquake. And I called him on the phone, "Are you all right?" Because I wasn't really sure, you know, they showed the traffic going on at Kobe, you know, through Kyoto. And the road—the road was closed for two days. They couldn't get into Kyoto; they couldn't cross the road. The traffic was so—you know, people running away from the city.

And he was so impressed that I had called him that I think we kind of had a closeness. I was worried, you know, that something had happened. And his first son was just born. So then we started corresponding. And he said, "Oh, and by the way, my friend, Kofi Shuwaki [ph] just won a big Gato [ph] Foundation fellowship and is going to be coming to New York. And so he said, "Do you know anybody in New York that could sort of like help him out?" And I said, "Oh, my friend, Scott, would like him a lot, because he's a sculptor too, you know?" So we connected them up and he got an apartment. He got connected to the Japanese, you know, other culture that lives in New York and had a wonderful time. And he came here.

MS. RIEDEL: This was '95?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, we went back in '99, so it must have been '96.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: He maybe got the grant in '95, but he couldn't come until '96. He wasn't married at the time. And he—it was—the fellowship was for two years. It's the most unbelievable fellowship. You get to go for a year anywhere in the world you want. They pay for everything. Then you get to come home with what you have seen and been inspired by wherever you went or learned or whatever, spend a year working back in your studio, paid for by them. They mount a museum exhibition for you and a commercial gallery exhibition for you too. Talk about a boost to your career. Victoria and Albert bought one of his pieces as a result of the exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Which actually makes me think that I'd like to ask a couple more questions about your time in Japan.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you looking at any furniture?

MR. MONTEITH: Right. Back up and—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And what was the impact of that on your work?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, the gardens were really what sucked it in, because I knew that I could get Nancy to the gardens—[they laugh]—more—almost more than the architecture. But I'm sorry, I can't think of his name right now. The architect—he's an American. Azby Brown. I got his name through the U.S.-Japan fellowship program.

Maybe he had actually—that's how he got to Japan the first time. He ended up marrying a Japanese woman and just stayed and teaches architecture now in Japan. And he teaches like traditional technique and stuff. Amazing guy; he's written some wonderful books too. And he's the one who connected me to Takayama.

So when we went in '94, it was the hottest summer on record in Japan. Here we are, northern Michigan people, cooking our brains out and everyday just marching through the city, because we've got things to check off, you know? And so Azby suggested we go to Takayama.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And he knew this guy who runs a woodworking school in Takayama. Well, it turns out Takayama is a traditional lumber, timber place that they used to cut the trees up there, saw them up into boards, carrying them on their backs down the mountain until they got to a river or a train or something big enough to carry them. And now, of course it goes the other way. The logs come from Seattle over on a ship. Haul them up to the mountain, cut them up and—it's crazy.

But anyway, there's a village there of these same houses as in that book from when I was 3—huge thatch roofs with silk worms in the attic and the smoke going up to preserve the roof. I mean, it was—it was amazing. And then another guy from the Osaka Society of Architects and Engineers, he took us to another similar place down in Osaka.

But when we went to Takayama, there's a furniture-making school there that [Osamu] Shoji [aka Shoji San] and his friend, Tsukuda-San started with an architect I have never met—there's an architecture school there—and Asby Brown worked with the architect there. And that's where we actually met.

MS. RIEDEL: Does the school have a name? We can add it later—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Yes, it does. [Takumi Juku, a furnitur making school.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's an architecture school in Takayama. Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Anyway, the school is an amazing place. And Shoji-San is this really, really great guy. He's really wonderful. And they—it was just like going to Never-Never Land to go there. First of all, it was way up high in the mountains and it was cool. And this traditional Japanese house we got to stay in with a contemporary wing with a real kitchen, you know, and stuff like that. And there were no insects. And we woke up in the morning underneath a futon, chilly, with the shoji screens open out to the mountain. [Laughs.] It was pretty amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you there for a while? For a couple of days?

MR. MONTEITH: We were there for maybe a week. And we went—we went and saw the school; I gave a lecture at the school. The school is this amazing place. You apply to the school. The tuition is zero for everyone. You raise all your own food. The whole school cooks for each other. They raise their own rice. All of the woodwork that they do, for every tree that they use in their work, they plant four times more out. And that's part of the yearly tree planting they do every year. So for every oak tree they cut, they plant four per person, you know, out. And they use a lot of wood.

And they run a manufacturing operation as part of the school. So you work all day doing high-tech—most high-tech contemporary machinery and you learn that. Then you cook and fix dinner. And after dinner, you learn traditional Japanese tools and methods and everything at night.

MS. REIDEL: Fascinating.

MR. MONTEITH: And then somewhere in there, you work out in the gardening too. But it's real, you know, cooperative and really, really tight.

MS. RIEDEL: How many students—small, large?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I'm trying to think. When we went in '94, maybe 60. And they had a dormitory and a kitchen—you know, that kind of building. Then they had the work building and then they had a big common room area where they did the lecture for traditional stuff. And that's where I gave my lecture.

And then they had—some years after that they had a terrible fire. It burnt everything— their library, all their machines, all their materials, everybody's tools.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh—

MR. MONTEITH: Everything was lost in this fire.

And the town was so—well, and Oak Village is there, which is the business that sells the stuff that they make. And the architectural design and construction, that's also part of that. It's sort of a three-pronged operation. There's the school, the manufacturing of objects and the student learning thing.

And the thing I liked about it is, talk about organic integration of your education: You're making your own food; you're taking care of each other; you're working two jobs in a day. Talk about intense, you know, it was really, really intense. And you paid—

MS. RIEDEL: Was it sort of an art school? Was it a two-year school? Was it a—

MR. MONTEITH: It was sort of two years, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And it was for—

MR. MONTEITH: But some people stayed on, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: It was sort of an undergraduate school?

MR. MONTEITH: No. Most of the people had already graduated from—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Like graduate, then?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. They might have gone to architectural school; they might have gone to art school. They might have gone wherever. And they had to submit their portfolios or designs or their crafts work. You know, some people may not have been designers, but were, you know, incredible technicians.

MS. RIEDEL: And was it primarily object making or was it also architecture?

MR. MONTEITH: No. Well, the architects—that was a whole different thing and think they came from architectural backgrounds, really.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And that was more design, you know, theoretical stuff. Although they did build or had built, you know, things that—architecture and carpentry in Japan is much closer than it is here. You know, like Kiichi [Katsumizu], my friend who is a furniture maker. He went to architecture school in Nagoya. And then after he was through with that, he went to traditional Japanese carpentry school, also in Takayama, because that's where the woodworking was, but a different school than Shoji-San's school, Takumi Juku.

MS. RIEDEL: Takumi Juku?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Anyway, when the school burned, the local townspeople in the county and whatever the prefecture there, they saw it as a tremendous loss, because these people attracted a tremendous amount of interest in their work and that it was so amazing. The richest kid in the country and the poorest kid in the country, if they were both the best that applied, they both got in, because it didn't cost anything and they both had to work their way through, you know? And I—that just really—it was attractive to me. And of course, the school itself was set in all these rice patties. It was just out in the middle—it was just so cool. And then the forest right out behind you.

So anyway, we went there. And what I almost couldn't get through or I was going to lose it, when I woke up that morning—[laughs]—there was butterfly sitting on my nose!

MS. RIEDEL: A butterfly sitting on your nose? [They laugh.]

You woke up and there was a butterfly on your nose.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You're right; you have had some extraordinary adventures.

MR. MONTEITH: So and then Shoji-San, who ran the school—could we stop for a second?

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: I want to tell you a story—

[End of track.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: He—he was very good, reminded me kind of Ralf Henricksen. I mention my painting teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And he is the head of the school— [inaudible]—school?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, and his partner, Tsukuda-san, too. And we actually had a wonderful experience with his partner's wife, Mayumi, who had us to tea at their house on—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: —a most beautiful cool, breezy day after we were, you know, in that horrible heat in Kyoto for so long. And she—her daughter actually, or their daughter, actually came to the University of New Mexico, I think, to school. And she came several times. But anyway, we got to go and visit him and see the school. And then I've been a couple of times since—since Nancy hasn't been traveling.

MS. RIEDEL: And just to sum up first that '94 trip—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —when you came back from those six months, were there particular ideas you had? Were there any techniques you'd learned? Had you been exposed yet to different ways of building or, you know, how else were you influenced?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I don't think that really the architectural stuff would have happened if I hadn't been to Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Because it gave me the confidence—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —to say that, "Yes, it's going to be a lot of work." This stuff is a lot of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: You can do it if you're willing to do the work that it's going to take. And if there's somebody willing to pay for it, it could be fun. Let's try it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And it was, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: So that's when these different projects—in Maine —

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, as a result, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —and Three Rivers came out of—

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's helpful.

MR. MONTEITH: And I did a big porch for—out in Southampton for Ron Delsener, the—he was a, I don't know, Ron must be pretty old now. He's still alive, though. I still get a Christmas card —I don't know where he got a wife that still looks like she's 24 but she does. [They laugh.] And anyway, do you know who Christie Brinkley is? The actress—

MS. RIEDEL: The actress and model, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. She was married to Ron Delsener's architect.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And he was working on this fabulous house that Delsener has with a wonderful tree—arboretum collection out on the island. It was one of the very earliest Dutch windmill and they sold water to Southampton. That's how everybody got their water from these people and the house is still there. And it's been added onto many, many times and stuff. So they had this porch. And Ron had seen the porches, I guess, published and so I worked with his architect. And we built the thing here and took it all apart and took it out there and put it back together.

MS. RIEDEL: That must be hundreds of pieces.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, it's—yeah, it's kind of nuts.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And one of the things I've kind of decided is that—

as Davira Taragin was curator of decorative arts at DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts]. And when I had the show in Midland, she called me down to the museum. It was just before she went to be curator at the Toledo Museum—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Decorative arts there—and it'll come to me.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And she said, "Clifton, you know, you're not going to live forever." And she said, "You've got to decide what you should be doing and do that." And I was maybe 50 at the time. And I thought, "What a rude thing to say. I am too."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay, of course.

MR. MONTEITH: Do you know Davira?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay. And she said, "I just love your furniture." She said, "And you've got to get on it and don't get diluted by doing things that other people are just going to pay you to do." She said, "You've got to do your work that they've never seen before, that you've never seen before." It was really, really good advice. And she called me to her office in Detroit. I drove all the way down there just for the interview to be told that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And she was—she was so right, and in way kind of like Whitaker was right, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But it's taken me a long time to sort of figure this out. If I hadn't gone to Japan, I'm not sure I would have figured it out. One of the things I discovered in Japan was craftsmen there tended to be more limited in their—the breadth of their work. They don't do some of everything like I do.

As a printmaker, one guy does the design. One guy does the cutting of the block. One guy paints—one guy inks the blue. His family—his relatives ink the red. Somebody else down the road does the white. It's division of labor and everybody does their job really, really well. So you sort of have to ask, "What's your job?"

Well, I'm not very good at that. I can quickly see my job anywhere. And as soon as I see a new plant or a new idea, you know, I'm on it. You know, I want to go there too. And I really want to do more work with the lacquer and—because of its sort of magical, organic quality. And I will.

MS. RIEDEL: Before we get to the lacquer, a couple of more questions about in particular the architectural work and especially as it seems to relate to commissions. Are there both advantages and disadvantages that commissions have offered to you over time? Do they offer you opportunities to do something you wouldn't have done or to learn something you wouldn't have done?

MR. MONTEITH: It depends on the client.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Totally depends on the client. The people that bought that first chair from American Primitive Gallery—

MS. RIEDEL: The Greenhills?

MR. MONTEITH: The Greenhills, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: They are probably every artist's dream. They say, "You know, there's this building that we're building. And it's going to have a porch. And the porch has a—should have a bench. And it's going to face north. And it's going to accommodate drinks before dinner. Oh, there ought to be a table that kind of goes along with it. Go ahead, do something."

And they'll show me pictures or fly me out to look at the site or whatever. And we'll sit around in the space with nothing there and imagine what it would be and then come home and do it. And that's—that's pretty fun because then you can stretch yourself—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTIETH: —in a new direction, like that big bath bench.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTIETH: They're the only people that I know of—that I know personally—that would have paid for the time to took to do all of that without glue in a shrink method and—but because I got to do it, I now know it's possible.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTIETH: Possible not just theoretically. I mean, I knew it was possible theoretically. Windsor chairs have always been made that way, you know, but none of my stuff had ever been made that way. And so those are the ideal commissions. And they pay me time and materials.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the less ideal commissions?

MR. MONTEITH: The less ideal commission is for the client who will remain nameless that we went down and had —they'd seen the show, I think, in Midland. And they wanted to commission two rocking chairs, his and hers rocking chairs, okay. We went down and had this discussion and definitely no wings; you know, I've done a lot of chairs with wings. No wings.

And so I made the two chairs and took them down and delivered them. "Where are the wings? We don't want these. We wanted wing chairs." And Nancy and I were both there. I mean, we both knew what the discussion was. And Nancy was so mad she didn't want me to even make them for them.

But I did and it worked out all right. And actually, I ended up making several other pieces for them too. But they were always difficult. And it wasn't ever—they never said, "That wasn't what we wanted," ever again. But I'd say, "Well, I could have it done in October" and they would call in August and say, "Where is it," you know. Stuff like that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And would things be written down and it just wouldn't—

MR. MONTEITH: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so nothing was —

MR. MONTEITH: I never have written anything down.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And—well, that's not exactly true. The things where you're working with an architect, you have to have the dimensions and the—you know, stuff like that written down. But I've never done a contract for anything like that. And so it worked out all right. And the chairs, I just took them down to Carl's in Chicago and sold them right away anyway, so—

MS. RIEDEL: So nothing was lost.

MR. MONTEITH: —you know, it didn't—nothing was lost.

MS. RIEDEL: Just unpleasant.

MR. MONTEITH: But if I had sold those two chairs to them, I might have come home and done something that was speculative whereas I had done two things that I thought I was doing to what they wanted, you know. So there's that. And so the problem is, though, when you're making an income—when you're making your living from your work, people want what they've seen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly, which was why—one reason those—that commission sounded odd.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. And they want what they've seen. So what I have decided kind of is that I'm going to be more shopping for my clients. The clients can shop for their craftsman, why can't the craftsman shop for his client? And I have said no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: It's hard. But I have. And because I've got to have some time to do this other work.

MS. RIEDEL: Two questions about the work that followed the Japan trip. It seems like once you were back in '95 the chairs got increasingly elaborate. Is that true?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. I think so. And I think what it was was I was really kind of—I was kind of trying—it became more of a compulsion to focus on the quality of the craftsmanship after having been in Japan. I mean, you can't help but have that rub off on you, you know. And things like the spacing between things—I never measure. You know, it's all visual. But I looked a lot more closely.

When I saw the craftsman adjust his plane by looking at the space between the blade and the wood and not by touching and then it would work, by looking at it. His visual memory of what the space between the metal and the wood would be, he could tell that. I couldn't even see the difference between one and another, you know. And I thought, "I've got to bring that to my work." And so I did and I started doing those wave tables that the spaces between the waves get progressively expanding and contracting.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: In a more not measured but valued way maybe. And like the chair up there that you sat in today.

MS. RIEDEL: And what's that one called again, *Waiting for Sunrise*?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, *Waiting for Sunrise*, yeah. And—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that chair?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, that was—

MS. RIEDEL: 2000?

MR. MONTEITH: —it was 2001.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: That was the year

MS. RIEDEL: And before we get to that story, I have a question about a piece from 1997, the *Adam and Eve* piece.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, *Adam and Eve* and—

MS. RIEDEL: Sharing hors d'oeuvres preceding their new career in agribusiness.

MR. MONTEITH: In business, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Quite different from anything else.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. That piece I did for a Furniture Society exhibition. It was held in Purchase, New York. And I knew that stuff was going to be real stiff, you know, pretty, sort of, you know, academic kind of furniture stuff. And I had been out in the woods collecting. I was actually looking for pinecones. And I came across this—I think they're the pine siskin trees—the trees that pine siskins nest—jack pines—in a jack pine tree.

And it had these burls on them. And this one—I collected a bunch of them. In fact, I think I still have some. There were burls that grew on these pine trees. And I didn't even know that pine trees grew burls out on, you know, branches the size of your finger. And so I thought that was kind of interesting. So I cut a bunch of them off. They were dead, you know. I cut a bunch of these off and then brought them home.

And I ran it through the band saw and it looked just like cutting an apple in half. And I said, "Oh, Adam and Eve just got their equal share." And I had just been invited to participate in this show. So I thought, "That's it, do a mosaic top and have the bent work underneath and they're holding their thumbs out like little Jack Horner put in his thumb and pulled out a thumb and said, 'What a good boy am I.'"

Well, Adam and Eve had kind of a rough time after the apple, you know. So that was their new adventure in agribusiness where it wasn't just picking the apple. It was, "We have to, you know, do the agriculture work now too."

MS. RIEDEL: That piece seems to have both political and religious commentary in it.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it does.

MS. RIEDEL: And none of the other work does.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Well, there's sort of part of me that has that in a lot of things. But it's—it's kind of hidden, you know. I—and this is kind of sort of my spiritual take on things but the—by possessing one of the pieces that my consciousness has gone into constructing, that gets passed along in a nonintellectual way. It may come in a physical way if you're sitting in a chair or, you know, you may have done it for someone. But it's their grand-grandniece that it inspired and maybe not about furniture. Maybe about—you know, it was a horrible day and they just met the chair at the right time, you know. You don't know. So I don't think it needs to be as literal as the political things which happen in agribusiness. But anyway, it just—it was just something that struck me at the time. And so—

MS. RIEDEL: That's the only piece I've seen like it before or since in terms of form and content.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, there are—

MS. RIEDEL: Were there others?

MR. MONTEITH: —there are some others probably. There's the—there's a table. There's a *Siamese TwinsTable* joined at the penis.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I haven't seen that.

MR. MONTEITH: You didn't see that one? Yes, you missed that one. That was sort of a similar time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: But it was one of those things that—they're maple leg, it's mosaic top, very small mosaic top table. And they're maple legs that are distorted because the deer eat off the maple saplings when they grow up in the field. Like this tree's planted all over the field now. And they're going to grow out there and the deer come and browse them. So they grow up and then they grow out.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And you cut them off at the ground and turn them upside-down and they're gorgeous, you know. So I had a whole bunch of them and I did a whole series of tables like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that related to the table that has multiple, multiple legs that look sort of like octopus legs?

MR. MONTEITH: Those are actually willows.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Those are actually willows. But these are—I think these actually came after those.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Those came—oh I have a story about this. Those came from—that was actually pretty—the multiple—21-leg table was the first one.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And when I would be out looking for straight willows—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —I would always find these wonderful contorted ones. So I'd just take it home and set it aside. And one day, I thought, "You know, I've got all of these that are all about the same size. I should probably do something with them." And I thought, "I wonder how many there are, though." And there were 21. I thought, "Ah, 21 sounds like a magic number, three sevens, why not, you know."

So I just made a little top that was about a foot square, upholstered in twigs and then I took these legs and started working on their composition. You know, that was kind of hard, because I put one in. You couldn't have a drawing of where they all went first.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: That was impossible. So what you did was you just put one in and then you went and asked how does number two relate to number one. And then you had to work around. It was a wonderful sculpture project. You know, it just—it took forever. But it was a real study of that little space underneath the small table, like how much could go on under that small space was just fascinating.

So I got that all done. And then I realized, oh, three points determine the plane. Most tables have four legs. Even getting those in the right plane can be tricky. What are you doing to do with 21 legs? I think it took me two-and-a-half, three days to trim the legs. It was wonder I had any table left when I was through.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. MONTEITH: What I finally discovered was I turned the table upside-down. I had a big piece of plate glass that I used as a painting palette, laid them on the twigs and I jiggled the glass and see—saw what moved and what didn't. Then I marked it and I ground it off and went back and did it again until I got all of them in the plane. This is before I knew Nancy. And I was living—it was the first year I lived in the house. There was no insulation, no heat, of course. There never had been any insulation in that house.

MS. RIEDEL: No heat and no insulation and you lived there year-round?

MR. MONTEITH: And—all there was, I had a woodstove. And I would go to bed and, of course, the stove would go out and I would wake up in the morning and my shoes would be frozen to the floor next to my bed. So the first thing you do, I mean, even before you pee is you start a fire in the woodstove. Well, the night before I had varnished the little 21-leg table, the first one.

And I had a fire going, you know, and it was warm. That was actually in the dining room because it was smaller. I could keep it warmer— close all the doors, you know, in the one room. And I heated it up and basically dried the varnish out that night. So in the morning, I went in and I started a fire. Now, I didn't have a refrigerator, I didn't have a telephone.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there power?

MR. MONTEITH: There was—there was an electrical line that went in. There was a ceiling light in each of the downstairs rooms. That was it. Oh, and the switch plates had a plug next to them. So there's a switch and a plug. That was it.

And that wasn't put in until the late '40s because Grandma Goin when she lived here, she wouldn't have electricity in the house because that was how the devil leaked out into your life, came out those sockets. And somebody said, "Well, what about you've got power out to the barn for the milking machines." And she said, "That's for the men and they've already gone there anyway."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: No risk there. I love that. That was—that was another Eber story, you know, that it didn't matter if there was power to the barn because those were the men. They'd already lost their soul to the devil anyway. But she wasn't going to have any part of that in her life. So anyway, the power was later. And so anyway, I was very cold. And I started the fire in the woodstove and you're sitting next to it as close as you can to get warm.

And it is unbelievably quiet. When it's, like, five below zero, there's no air moving, you can hear the rabbits walk in the snow.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you really?

MR. MONTEITH: You can. And you know, that was one of the things I first discovered when I came from New York City here—actually more than after I left mom and dad's and, you know, was living here—how quiet it was because in those days, there wasn't even the traffic, you know, on the road, on the big road down there. And nobody came down here. There wasn't any—there wasn't anybody here on this road. And it was so quiet.

And I remember waking up one morning in the spring and I could hear a rabbit outside the window walking by in the grass. And you could hear them in the snow. They would crunch, crunch.

And I realized that my hearing from living in the city had become stupid. I hadn't lost my ability to hear. I lost my attention of hearing. And I identify the birds, you know, by hearing them. And then I look for them because I've learned their voices. All growing up, even though I was interested in birds and stuff, I never did that before. Part of it was being extremely alone here, you know, and it being quiet.

So it's very quiet. I'm sitting there next to the stove as close as I can. On the other side, or kitty-corner across the stove, is the 21-leg table. And I'm just sitting there, quiet as I can listening to the fire. And all of a sudden, the table just goes and walks toward me. I about wet my pants. It was un—I don't think I've ever been so startled in my whole life. It was like the table was alive. And what happened was one side of all those twigs—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —that were bent—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —just touching the floor, they heated up from the radiant heat. So it was cold on one side and hot on the other side. And it got to the point of breakthrough and it just went like that. It took a step! And it was like the table was alive and it was spooky.

It was—I really don't think I've ever been that startled as I was by that thing. And it was—it was just— you know, it was one of those things that, if you had photographed, it would be, oh, cute animation, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But it wasn't. It was just you had to be in this really cold place and you had to have that fire, and everything had to be just right. And maybe if you'd had 20 legs on the table, it wouldn't have worked. I don't know. But that was so great. And—so I made several of those. Ricco Maresca, I think it is, in New York, they bought one. But anyway, I digressed. What were we at—what was the question?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we were talking about Adam and Eve and—

MR. MONTEITH: Oh. Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —the *Siamese Twins* piece.

MR. MONTEITH: Right, the *Siamese Twins* piece. And—

MS. RIEDEL: They all happened sort of in the mid-and late 90s and then you didn't work in that style any further.

MR. MONTEITH: I think after I came back from Japan—

MS. RIEDEL: The second time in '99 or the first time in—

MR. MONTEITH: Even after the first time, I don't think I did those things that were quite like that after that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, this one says '97, so one of these—

MR. MONTEITH: '97? Which one was that?

MS. RIEDEL: *Adam and Eve*.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, *Adam and Eve*. Yes, that was later. That was like a throwback, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And I think it was because I did it for the Furniture Society.

MS. RIEDEL: So that was the last in that—

MR. MONTEITH: I think so. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL:—more direct narrative style or direct narrative commentary style, I think.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. All the rest has been so subtle as to be out of sight. Also, an interesting thing about Greenhills was—you know, I had done the piece—they bought the chair and I did the bed, and I had done a couple of things for the bedroom when the house was expanded. And the house was under construction and, of course, I was going to be doing the porch, you know? And—or maybe I had just finished the porch. Yes, I guess I had just finished the porch.

And Carl Hammer wasn't very pleased with me because I wasn't turning out enough merch for the gallery, you know? I think he would have had a show for me every two years, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, as long as he was selling it all, why not, you know? And so I had a tall case clock that was in the show there, and somebody—I can't remember his name now—from the *New York Times* was in Chicago going around the gallery and liked it and took a picture of it and published it in the style section.

And Gayle Greenhill called me right away and said why—you didn't tell me about this clock. And I said, well, I did it for Carl in Chicago. And she said, yes, but you didn't tell me about it. She said, it needs to go in the entryway to the cabin; that'll be just perfect. And it's still there today.

MS. RIEDEL: That is a dream collector. [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah. It really was. I mean, I didn't even—I didn't tell her anything, she just found it herself, you know? And, of course, she really had real radar—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —really good radar. I mean, she would just turn up— the weirdest thing. And so I did—there was a SOFA show the next year, and—

MS. RIEDEL: In Chicago or New York?

MR. MONTEITH: In Chicago. This was before it went to New York. And that was a good—those early shows in Chicago were really, really good exhibitions.

MS. RIEDEL: When it first started, wasn't it *Chicago International New Art Forms [Exposition]* was the name?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes. And then it turned to SOFA, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: SOFA, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: That was the second one I think I was in was SOFA. And—so anyway, Carl had been after me—well, you've got to at least get something down here for SOFA. So I had this hutch cupboard that I had built. It was a piece of casework on the bottom that was mosaic but open grillwork doors, all twig work. And then there was a stepback hutch cupboard on the top—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —that was like bridges, all with perfectly straight twigs like that, but then completely structural so you could put dishes or whatever you want on that. And the twigs were all going horizontal so you could take a plate and set it on the side, you know, right in—in wherever. And the colors were good. I really liked it. It was a great batch of twigs.

Actually, I didn't know how good it was going to be until—quite often, I don't know even what color things are going to be because when they leave the studio, if they're bentwork, they're green when they leave. And I did two chairs one year, one went to a dancer in Chicago, one went to a stockbroker in New York. The stockbroker's turned coal black and the dancer's turned bright yellow, and they were from exactly the same plant.

And I worked on both of them in the studio—you know, back and forth at the same time. And after that, I decided it was your karma that colored the chair—[they laugh]—nothing that I did because—you know, I knew they changed from season to season—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —but—you know, and maybe one place had more air conditioning than the other or something.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was the same plant from the same season. So basically the exact same—

MR. MONTEITH: Same—at the same time because I worked on the two together.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Yes, so it must have been the environment. Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, I'd get stuck on one, I'd go to work on the other and then I'd come back. And one turned black and one turned yellow. [Bell chimes.] Does that mean we're up?

MS. RIEDEL: It means it's probably just about to end. Is there a finishing thought there?

MR. MONTEITH: So anyway, I did— I did that piece, finished it. And it was a real last-minute thing. My son was here, he was actually cutting nails for me. And as I was working, I thought I would never finish.

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mija Riedel with Clifton Monteith at the artist's studio on July 9, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc number three.

So you're taking this hutch down to SOFA for Carl Hammer—

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Down to SOFA.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And we'd just made it—it never went out even into the gallery. I don't—I don't know if Carl even saw it. He just said, "Take it." He knew—he thought he would like it. He was trusting me by that time I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so we unloaded it. And Nancy and I were pretty tired by then. It had been kind of a long drive to Chicago. It had been long nights before. And so we met Carl at the booth in the show and he said, "Why don't you guys stay over?" He said, "And I have two tickets tonight for the hospital benefit opening and you can go." And the tickets are very expensive. We would have never gone. But anyway, so we said, "Okay, fine."

So we went back to the motel and got cleaned up with what we had. We certainly weren't dressed like anybody else at the opening. And we went there and we're walking down the aisle toward the booth. And here coming walking toward us are Mr. and Mrs. Greenhill from New York. What are they doing—this is Chicago? And with them was John Bryan, who is president and CEO of the Sara Lee Corporation and president of the board of trustees, it is, of the Chicago Art Institute.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And Gayle says, "Clifton, what are you doing here?" And she said, "You don't have something here you didn't tell me about, do you?" And I said, "Well, you know, we just brought it down today." And she said, "Well, what is it? What is it? Come here, John. I want you to see this." And she said she wanted him to see it. She didn't know what it was. And she went in and we showed her the hutch cover and she said, "I really like that." She reaches into her little dress-up purse—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —pulls out a tape measure, goes over and measures the thing. And she said, "It'll fit right between the dining room hall door and the door out to the back. We'll take it."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And of course, Carl just loved that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: I mean, the thing hadn't even settled down onto the floor yet before it was sold. And so that was great. And John says, "Clifton Monteith." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Didn't the museum just buy a chair of yours?" John has a mind like a steel trap.

He remembers everything he's ever heard, I think. What does the president of the trustees or whatever—what

does he do remembering that? And he said, "I want you—next time you're in Chicago, to meet me at my office. We'll go out and I want you to make something for me," because he had seen the bench I made that I told you about—we need a place to sit here, a bench and a table.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —that was outdoors.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, for the Greenhills?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, for the Greenhills.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And so the next time I was in Chicago, he sent his limousine around to pick me up and met him and we went out to his estate in Lake Bluff, which is unbelievable, out of sight.

MS. RIEDEL: I can only imagine.

MR. MONTEITH: He is a collector of decorative arts. He fought with the museums and the museums lost. He has the best collection of Windsor chairs I have ever seen. Every Windsor chair that I think I've ever thought of stealing is in his house.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: It's amazing. And he has all kinds of things. And it's the old McCormick mansions, the McCormick—but it's not a mansion. It was their cottage out overlooking—it's so high above Lake Michigan that 150-year-old oak trees, you're looking 30 feet over the top of them. The bluff is that high. And it's this run-on sort of English-style cottage, just beautiful. There's no hallway, one room just opens into another, into another, into another.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And he has a pond with islands. And so he wanted a bench for—because this island had just had this bridge built to the island. And he said, "Now we've got this bridge to the island but there's no destination." He said, "You have to have a destination." So, oh, he was an amazing character. When we drove into this place, it has this big winding drive. I mean, it must be, like, 160 acres in Lake Bluff. I can't imagine what that—all I could think of was, "Wonder what the tax bill is on this thing."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And we're driving— he has his own sawmill. So when trees blow down in town, he just has the city crew bring them to his sawmill and cuts them up into things that he will find a use for. It was an amazing place. There are three barns on the property that were originally horse barns. And he has them—one of them all set up as an arts and crafts reproduction house museum. It's just amazing. It's just totally amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: What's an arts and crafts reproduction museum?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, he took these horse barns and he redid the interiors so that they looked like a house and then he filled them with all this Stickley and Rennie Mackintosh.

MS. RIEDEL: So they're actually originals?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. These are part of the things he fought with the museums and the museums lost.

MS. RIEDEL: And these are guest cottages?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: They're just—

MR. MONTEITH: They're just hold— and to walk through and be amazed at his collection.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's housing his collection. They're tableau.

MR. MONTEITH: That's what they're for, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a venue for his collection.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. It's like a museum tableaux that you walk through.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, wow.

MR. MONTEITH: Which is really cool because it's not just a tableau that you're looking at with one facet cut off.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: You're actually in it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Plus you can touch stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, great stuff, too. And of course Gayle Greenhill was always interested in arts and crafts things too and they had that in common. And they had an antique dealer, Paul Fiore, who is a wonder—was, he's no longer living—was a wonderful academic, you know, person for arts and crafts things. He just knew everything. And John loved that because John's a know-everything person too.

So anyway, John said, "I'd like—I'd like a bench over there about six feet long." And he said, "But I require a maquette." And I thought, "Okay." So I came back and the cedar that you could make the shapes with were not the right size. You know, you could make big pieces that size or that shape but not small pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So I looked around and I realized that the aspen grew in some ways I could find some interesting forms. So I built this little model about this big—

MS. RIEDEL: About a foot or so long, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, out of aspen and stripped all the bark off so it looked like stripped cedar. And I took it to him. And as a matter of fact, I think that Jack Larsen was there in the meeting.

He just—he'd just done some fabric for the board of directors' museum, or board of directors' room in their office. And of course, John had made this incredible art collection for the Sara Lee Corporation, and it has become the Sara Lee Corporation. And of course later years the shareholders required it to be all sold off and turned into cash that could be shared with them.

But anyway, it was—it was an amazing collection. So I got to see all of that, sort of like going to the corporate museum. And he said he loved the model, "Go ahead, do it." But I had no idea though. Where am I going to find—you know, I had this sort of form like this on the back that was a mirror image cut of this nice shape. Now I have to find a tree that grew that way. And I went through hundreds and hundreds of acres of cedar trees looking for the right thing. And I finally did find them. And it was so much work. And he was pleased, so that was okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And why cedar in this case and not willow?

MR. MONTEITH: Because it had to hold up outdoors.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Even the cedar will eventually rot. It is an ephemeral thing. But the cedar—or the willow would have gone faster and wasn't the weight that he really wanted in that. And he'd seen the Greenhills's cedar piece that I'd done.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And I knew that that was sort of what he wanted. And it would have looked too light, out under the trees.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back at the work starting in '85 through present day, thinking about the wood work and the furniture, not the lacquer of course, what percentage of the work do you think was commissioned and

what was not? I mean, would you say 50 percent of the work was commissioned, 20 [percent]?

MR. MONTEITH: Fifty [percent]. Yes, I would say 50 [percent]. And then, in the years that architectural things were done that required employed this crew—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —it was, like, 90 percent.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, I'd only get in, like, a couple of chairs or a table or something like that for a show someplace, like the *Penland Table*. The year that I did that *Penland Table* it took me a whole year to do that table.

MS. RIEDEL: How many years were spent really focusing on commissions? Would you say it was—

MR. MONTEITH: I didn't ever focus on the commission. It was sort of like I got involved and, like, the one with the five big porches, that one house that had those five big porches, that was—that was almost a year-and-a-half, even with all the help.

MS. RIEDEL: That was the Three Rivers house?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Even with all those, the Mittler's place, Charlotte and Tom Mittler. And great people—Tom just recently died. He died a year ago, I guess, maybe two years ago now. They had great builders, too [Dave DeVires and John Underhill], that we worked with and a very nice architect [Chuck Posthumus] too, although I didn't really have as much contact with the architect as once I had the plan I had the plan. And the builder brought a model of the house to try and coax me into saying I would do these porches because they had seen the published stuff.

And I said, "Well." They had this green asphalt shingled roof. And I said, "You know, this house is too big and too nice to have a green asphalt singled rood that's rolled, a rolled edge," you know. I said, "I'll do it if you switch and make the whole roof cedar shingle." And he said, "Well, that would—that would be a lot of work."

I said, "Yes, but those porches are going to be a lot of work and one— if one's deserving, the other is." I said, "You ask your clients about that." So he did and they said, "Sounds great, do it." So we not only had the roof roll at the eave but it waves too.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh my goodness.

MR. MONTEITH: It took 15 men 15 weeks to lay the shingles after the roof was all done. And it has eyebrow, you know, those dormers— those eyebrow dormers that roll and then the waves of the shingles.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh I have to see photos of that.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I have some photos for you. But yeah, that—that was quite, quite a project. And the builder was great. He was really good. Their whole crew was very nice. They were—I don't know what religion they were. But they all—they were all members—I think the whole crew, they were all members of the same church, the masons and everything.

And their children—you know, there was, like, father and son and maybe grandson, you know, working on the crew too. And there was—there was no coarse language. And everybody spoke to one another so nicely. It was really very nice, you know. I like that a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: A construction crew, that's amazing.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, it was kind of unique, yeah. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: I know it's getting late but I would like to just try—

MR. MONTEITH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: —and maybe get through the second trip to Japan, if you don't mind.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that—what inspired that? Had you been back since '94?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you decided that you wanted to go back? And how did that come about?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, in '94 I got the lacquer.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh you did get lacquer.

MR. MONTEITH: I brought it home—

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MR. MONTEITH: —because Natsuki Kurimoto wrote me the note.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And realized that it just didn't work. I didn't know what I was doing and I couldn't find anything in English. And so I had made this arrangement with Kofushiwaki-san to meet him in New York and he met Scott and all of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So then Kofushiwaki-san came here. And that was an amazing experience. He had only ever used natural lacquer, no color, just as a structural form. He came here, total city kid, only ever in the city. He came here in November on opening day of hunting season. And of course there are guns going off all over. And he's Japanese. He never saw anybody shooting a gun anywhere. And there are guns going off all over. And I said, "Well, we have to wear an orange vest and an orange hat so we don't get shot."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And we went cross-country skiing. Oh, he'd never been skiing before either. I took him cross-country skiing out across the field. Somebody shot a deer and it went across the field running blood through the snow. [Laughs.] And he—and after—

MS. RIEDEL: You saw that?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And he saw it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: After he went back from his year in New York, he went back home and did this exhibition that was in the museum and in the commercial gallery and he used red for the first time. See the little finch on that stick?

MS. RIEDEL: Oh yes.

MR. MONTEITH: They're desperate. They're eating the seeds off those—those bachelor buttons and they're destroying them because the plants won't hold their weight. So I put those sticks out there so they can get to them. And they're crushing all my cosmos because the weather has been so weird that they've had their babies six weeks too early and they don't have any thistle seed to feed them. So they're eating the cosmos seeds as they ripen. And see, they've already turned yellow.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: They shouldn't be turning yellow until the end of the month.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. The weather is broken, as Kiichi says. But at least we've got something they really like.

MS. RIEDEL: And I love the fact that you know all of that and have thought to put out this stick for them.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, it's either that or watch my flowers get crushed.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes. [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And look, there you go.

MS. RIEDEL: There we go. So you've been in this house now for how many years?

MR. MONTEITH: Let's see. I came in '85.

MS. RIEDEL: And bought the house in '85?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. So what, how many years is that?

MS. RIEDEL: Thirty-something, '85, '95 yeah—oh, 28 years.

MR. MONTEITH: Twenty-eight years.

MS. RIEDEL: Something like that.

MR. MONTEITH: And Nancy and I have been married 27 this September. So it's been—it's more time than I've ever spent in one place in my whole life.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: I really like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So—

MR. MONTEITH: So, Kofushiwaki-san came here and we had this experience with the blood in the snow. He went back and he said—and he wrote this essay for the catalog of the exhibition.

And he said he wasn't familiar with country life. He'd never been anyplace so cold. When he got off the plane in Traverse City, he had this loose-fitting wool coat that he had bought to keep warm in New York. And he got off the plane and his eyes just got bigger than any Japanese eyes I've ever seen before. And I said, "Are you cold?" And he said, "Little bit."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: Totally understated Japanese. He had a wonderful time.

MS. RIEDEL: How long was he here?

MR. MONTEITH: He was here for, oh, maybe a week or two. And so, I said, "I can't make this lacquer work." And of course he didn't have any lacquer with him. He just had this little bit that I had. He said, "Well, you need to mix some clay and some charcoal." And he went over to my fireplace and pulled out some charcoal so now you could rub it off and then mix that with the lacquer.

And that would make a surface that was porous that you could attach the next one to. And it was still, like—of course, his English is not that—it's pretty good but not that good. He's better at understanding what you're saying. But to explain what was happening here and about the catalyzing and not drying, I thought it was drying.

MS. RIEDEL: And what drew you to lacquer, so different from anything you'd worked in before?

MR. MONTEITH: Because it's all-natural.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That really called you?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Yes. And that it's better than the stuff that's chemical. It's all-natural. It's Mother Nature's material that fiberglass is just trying to be as good at but can't. And now, we've added carbon fiber to it and everybody thinks this is a tremendous step up. It's still not as good as the lacquer.

MS. RIEDEL: And it has tremendous sculptural potential.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, there's anything. You can do anything with it. So anyway, he tried to show me the stuff.

So then he went back to Japan.

And he said to Kurimoto, who he knew and knew that we had communicated, he said, "You know," he said, "I think Clifton would like to come back to Japan and learn about lacquer. Why don't you ask him if he would like to come and he could come and you could stick him in a corner in your studio and he'd be the odd American, and that would be nice, and maybe fun. And the students could practice their English on him, and stuff," which is exactly what happened.

So Kurimoto wrote and asked me if I would like to come. He would be happy to entertain me at the university. And it was a formal invitation. But it had to be at least six months to get anything out of it. And where was I going to get six months' of income again? Another student agreed to—a student from Penland this time—to come and stay in the house and work in the studio and he was doing—he'd been my twig student. Twig students support Cliff's running away.

And so he came and stayed here and took care of the place while we were gone. But how was I going to able to afford it? And I don't know if it was Kurimoto that suggested or maybe somebody I talked to at the U.S. Japan Friendship Commission because—oh, I said, "I want to go back to Japan," and that grant is only good for never having been to Japan before.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: It's an introduction.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So somebody said, "Well, the only thing that would be enough would be a grant from the Japan Foundation. But they are really hard to get." So I just wrote a letter to the Japan Foundation and told them what had happened, how I'd gotten interested in the lacquer. There was nothing really in English. I really needed to be there and see it done. And I had this invitation. Would they entertain a fellowship?" And they said—they wrote back and said, "Yes, for you and your wife."

And so we went again for six months. This time, we knew Kyoto. We knew how to go shopping. We had all that stuff done. And Jorie was going away for the summer again, so we rented her house again and stayed there. We actually had thought about living closer to the university and there was even a place that was closer and cheaper.

But after you know all the neighborhood and everything and how to get around and you knew you were going to be working as hard as you could and not going out every day, you know, getting around, that—so that's what we did. And then I bought a motorcycle. It was from one side of the city to the other. It wasn't bad. It was only about 20 minutes on the motorcycle.

But it was two hours on the train because you had to go all the way in from one side, cross over, go out and then take a bus. Or if you drove, it was really a long time, a long ways. It was over an hour driving, I think, just because the traffic is so terrible in morning and evening, you know. So it worked out well.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we should end the day with a description, too, about what urushi is and—

MR. MONTEITH: Ah, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Urushi is the sap from what we would call a poison sumac tree. And there are several different varieties that grow at different latitudes. The further north you go, the stronger the resin is that comes out. The tree is bled like a rubber tree, like latex.

So it's cut. The bark is cut and it bleeds not like maple syrup. It doesn't come pouring out like that. But it's thick and about the consistency of Elmer's glue. And it has to actually be scraped out of the cuts. So the workers who collect it also have to have very good, you know, immunity developed to it and—

MS. RIEDEL: Because otherwise it's like being exposed to full on—

MR. MONTEITH: To poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac, any of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, right.

MR. MONTEITH: The only thing is the urushiol—the organic molecule which is huge, the last carbon atom at the end, one is diagramed up or down, I can't remember which it is. But it's different for urushi that is the one that

we used from China and Japan. And evidently, that very slight difference in the structure or something allows everyone to eventually develop an immunity to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Everyone?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Some people, it takes a long time. And my friend Nhat Tran from Vietnam who is a wonderful urushi artist and has work in the Smithsonian and just completed a huge mural for the new international airport in Indianapolis where she lives, she contacted me because she wanted to learn to use the stronger urushi because the stuff from Vietnam never really gets hard. It's okay when you're in hot, damp climate because it's always okay. But the Japanese and Chinese, northern and Korean lacquer is much better.

So I started teaching her what I had learned from Kurimoto in the university. And since then—well, the point I was going to make about the urushiol is she had no reaction to the Vietnamese lacquer at all. But the Vietnamese lacquer is mixed with horrible— some toluene thinner or something really dangerous. And they use several different kinds of thinner that are dangerous. Gasoline is one of them they use. And so she liked the idea of this being healthier.

But she got a terrible reaction. And she's a very, very beautiful woman. And the idea of having her beauty compromised is not good when you're at all vain, you know. And I think it was probably over two years before she got over breaking out. She'd kind of go in waves. It would clear up and then it would come back and clear up.

But she had a studio with a lot of lacquer, you know, out because she was doing large-scale pieces. But even not is done with the rash. She has gone back and studied at Tokyo, at Geidai. And was just in—won a big award in the big Chinese women's lacquer exhibition and she'll be in the women's lacquer exhibition in Tokyo this year.

MS. RIEDEL: A couple of quick questions about related to the furniture, if you don't mind.

MR. MONTEITH: No, no I'm fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there particular—any particular artists or—other than what we've mentioned, clearly your time in Japan and the natural influences—any particular artists or movements that were influences for you and your work?

MR. MONTEITH: I always kind of liked Rennie Mackintosh's line quality in some of his more organic pieces. And when I was in England once and went up to see David Nash, the sculptor in bricks and wood, and David—David and I share several things in common, our interest in Japan. He's worked in Japan too. And both of our children are—his children and my one son—had gone to Waldorf schools at some point in their life. And David is a big supporter of Waldorf education in England.

And so I went to the Victoria and Albert and they had some Rennie Mackintosh stuff that they never had out. And they had it out. And there was stuff that had practically like drawing, you know, in it. And I thought, "Mm-hmm, yeah." And some of the Art Nouveau drawings I always thought were kind of like an attempt to be organic but they were humanly organic.

And one of the things I always tell the people in the workshops is when you're working with that piece of willow that has a certain flexibility because of—and we don't steam anything. You know, we're just using it with the green sap in it. It will bend so much at its thick end and more at its middle and even more at its upper end. And if you go too far, it tells you when you've gone too far and it breaks. But in those possibilities, there are an endless number of possible places to go with it.

And that idea of drawing in space is really something that I think what attracted me to the antique willow furniture. And all the time I was looking at it, I was thinking, "This could go somewhere even more, you know, than what it was." But it really took me quite a while before I maybe developed the skill to make it go where it could go because I had to do a whole lot of things the wrong way, you know, for years before I figured it out.

And I go to one of my workshops that I teach, I can tell somebody in two seconds, "Try it this way." "Oh, hey, this works." "Yes, I know, I did it the wrong way for a long time." When I made the first tables, I built the frame and I tried to nail down all of those sticks in a flat plane on the top. What a dumb way to be. I mean, now, I can't believe—that's so retarded. Now, I just do it down to a flat surface—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —work on it upside-down—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —and then build it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: I can just tell somebody that. "Oh, of course that's the way you would do it." Well, it wasn't the way I did it. [They laugh.] But, you know, they're—all those things that have—they're engineering things that have evolved to fit the needs of where your head was going with the material.

You can't sit down and do a drawing that is going to be the piece. Even if you're really familiar with the material. This plant, this year, this day is going to produce a different chair than the same plant a different year.

MS. RIEDEL: So none of the work ever starts with drawings?

MR. MONTEITH: No. Oh, I do have a good story about that though. Somebody once required a drawing. It's sort of like John Bryan required the model. And so I said, "Oh, I don't do drawings." "Well, I require one." This was somebody I wanted to do something for. So I said, "All right." So I came home and I built the chair. I did a really nice drawing of the chair and I put the chair up in the loft in the studio.

And I sent him the drawing. And he said, "Oh," he said, "That's wonderful. I really like it. That'll be perfect." And I said, "So can I go ahead." And he said, "Yes." So I saved the chair for two or three months. Then I sent them the chair. And he said. "I knew you could do a drawing of a chair." He said, "And it turned out just so like the drawing. I'm so pleased."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Did you ever tell him?

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: Why spoil his fun? He thought he'd proved to me that, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: He'd taught you something.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: So we just never know how these things are going to work out.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Shall we stop there for the day?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, sure.

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Clifton Monteith in the artist's studio in Lake Ann, Michigan, on July 10, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. And we're continuing on card number three this morning. So yes, let's start the morning with any follow-up thoughts from yesterday before we move forward.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: All right. One of the things that we had talked about yesterday was about important commissions. And not that it was specifically a commission, but the Peabody Essex Museum's *Inspired by China* exhibition was in a way kind of an important commission because they brought together contemporary studio furniture makers to take a look at their Chinese furniture collection.

And they actually put—the curators put together a group of furniture from their collection that they wanted us to examine. And unlike the museum where you can't touch the stuff, we got to take it all apart and look at it, turn it upside-down, do whatever. And it was a wonderful opportunity. So then we were to go back and make a piece inspired by what we had seen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And in a way, that was probably the most important commission that I had had from a study perspective because I really got to think about what I had seen, what I wanted to do and John Lavine's article I think that you have read from *Woodwork Magazine* in 2006, he wrote an article about the *Inspired by China* show and an interview with me about that. And that was a great project because it was really kind of the first one that I had done that involved both lacquer work and my twig work—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —that I had brought them together.

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Alter Altar* table?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, the *Alter Altar* table.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And that—that piece, the piece I worked from was a very old house altar table that was a very pedestrian wood, which was like my twigs—they're very pedestrian wood—and then completely coated in urushi lacquer. But it was also not a real high class job. So it was worn off. It didn't endure time as well as if it had been a really fancy job.

And I really liked the way that it was worn off. So I made my new piece and then I wore it off so that the structure of how the lacquer work was done showed through. And everybody liked the piece and I certainly did. And it was one of three, I think, that the museum purchased for their permanent collection from the whole exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have marvelous documentation photographs—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, of that.

MS. RIEDEL: —of that entire piece being assembled, constructed.

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was wonderful. It'd be nice to—

MR. MONTEITH: And I don't think— I should do that more often, but—especially for a teaching, you know, situation. It would be nice to pull out pictures like I have for that. I did it for the museum, you know, because I knew they would be interested in it. And it has been a really good tool, you know, to have for show-and-tell when I work with students.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: And not only from a technical standpoint but from a conceptual standpoint of how you responded to the piece you were looking at, how you made it your own and how what you thought was your concept evolved over time. And in the altar table there is a boxed section at the top. There are two drawers underneath that you would keep tools for the altar like candles and incense and things like that, matches and things.

And then but it wasn't the right height. So it has this box that raises it up so that the altar surface is at the appropriate height. But that box was completely sealed in lacquer. There was no way that you could see into it. And of course my first thought was, "How was the box constructed? How was it made?"

And once it's coated with fabric and lacquer and mixed with clay and all this stuff, there's no way of knowing, because you can't see. And I thought that it becomes this closed mysterious place. And so looking into the closed mysterious place would be a really good thing to be able to do, to open up that which is hidden.

So in my piece, I made a twig grillwork for the center inset of the tabletop so you could see into the enclosed space. That was not my original idea though. And my original idea is still here. This is the panel for the original idea which was book matched pairs of willow sticks that are ripped. And they're embedded in a huge layer of lacquer that's holding it in place.

MS. RIEDEL: Very beautiful, very beautiful.

MR. MONTEITH: And every piece here is related to its mate on the other side.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And the altar table was used for worship of the gods and the relatives. So it's like the relatedness of the relatives in the—in each individual stick. That's like—

MS. RIEDEL: Duality.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah. It seemed like a good idea at the time. But in the three years that previous—preceded that museum work, I had lost all of my parents and my wife's parents. And since it was about thinking

about your relatives, maybe what you really would like to be able to do is look into the hidden space.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so that changed the whole design of the table.

MS. RIEDEL: And does that frequently happen to you as you're working?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So the idea evolves, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: And when we were talking yesterday about—about, you know, the political and the even humorous and anthropomorphic references in my work, they are much more hidden now in a way but they're much more structural now.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you give an example of a piece?

MR. MONTEITH: Like this where the structure of the table was actually changed by the evolving concept of what the purpose of the table was, how it relates to your own experience and no one's going to see that table and know that story.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But yet it's there and it passes somehow just like when you build a chair and it gets to reach out and hold on to somebody in a way that you might not feel comfortable doing yourself.

MS. RIEDEL: Well and also it seems that the chairs, and looking at the piece that we're talking about now, there's so many layers.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And metaphorically they function engineering-wise, structurally, geometrically they function. So something about all those layers, almost a veiled quality of what's revealed and what's not—

MR. MONTEITH: What's not.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, what's obscured, what's clear.

MR. MONTEITH: One of the reasons I like working with the sticks and the openwork is because the structure and the layers are revealed and yet at the same time not everybody sees them all. And isn't that sort of like the whole world? The whole world is a very, very complex, unified system working in a way not everybody sees or appreciates unfortunately.

We could all probably see, you know, better, the inner relationship of everything. So that—that was a very important piece because it actually—what it did was it told me what I was doing. I was doing it all along but maybe didn't necessarily intellectualize it well enough to be able to say that that was what I was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: And what in specific was it that you were doing that you learned from that piece?

MR. MONTEITH: To look inside.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: That you are looking inside when you do the engineering of the design that is going to come out, visually appealing and structurally sound.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. That's it, yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Even like with the lacquer work when they broke all those bowls in transit which was heartbreaking, I learned something very, very important about that and about its structure and how to go about, you know, making it—making it better. It was a really hard lesson to learn but— and it was also about insideness is awfully important. Surface alone isn't going to do it. You know, the whole story is much more a unified structural entity than just a surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So with the felt bowls—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —more fibers have to come into the lacquer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And just in reference, this was a shipment of 37 bowls that you took on the plane to Japan for an exhibition. Homeland Security opened the crate, inspected them, put them all back together differently and broke more than half of them.

MR. MONTEITH: Right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So that was kind of a frightening experience. I still have pieces to repair from that. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And as you mentioned yesterday, it's harder to repair them sometimes than to start all over again.

MR. MONTEITH: Because when you repair them, you're trying to fix their appearance, their surface. But what needs repairing is going back to the beginning and starting—almost starting again. I've learned something very important out of that experience.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting too because there's such a level of transparency in the furniture. I mean, you can see everything.

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: You can see immediately all the way through to the inside and you can inspect them from all those different angles. And really in many ways it's completely transparent. At the same time, there are some joints and some things that are slightly obscured and you don't have a real sense of how it's all actually come together, even though it's all immediately apparent.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. And after I did the *Penland Table*, after the altar table for the Peabody Essex, and I decided not to have any wood in the top at all. It's just fibers and the true, clear urushi lacquer.

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Penland Table* from 2010, something like that?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's made of seven layers of hemp fiber and just Ki-urushi which is straight urushi. And it appeared completely black when it's done, but it gets clearer over time and even in the two years since the table was done you can start to see into the fibers.

And one of the ways that they date how old a piece of lacquer is is how transparent the surface of it is. One technical conference I went to in Japan, they said they can tell a difference in density for 200 years. So it's a work in progress I like to think of for 200 years.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds almost like the rings on trees.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, only it's going in the reverse way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Instead of building up more opacity, it's becoming more transparent—

MS. RIEDEL: More transparent. Isn't that fascinating?

MR. MONTEITH: —over time, yeah. And it's fun to see the table come clearer so you can see inside it.

MS. RIEDEL: We seem to be in an appropriate place to ask—I want to address some of these questions that the archives would like us to be sure that we cover. Do you think directly of religion or spirituality playing any sort of role in your work?

MR. MONTEITH: You know, I've sort of wrestled with that question. I made a couple of notes here and I think I'd better look at them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I mentioned before that I was raised as Christian Scientist. My family were Christian Scientists. And I don't know how familiar you are with that. But Mary Baker Eddy, who founded Christian Science, her big contribution to the philosophy—religious philosophy—is probably that matter is not real and spirit is the only real.

Well, that's a hard pill to swallow, and it's always a conflicted thing to try and impose on contemporary life at all. And when I was in Japan, I tried to become familiar from reading and experiences there with the very sort of elemental concept of Japanese religious philosophy which really is based in Shinto—pre-Buddhism. And that is almost the yang to the yin of Christian Science in that spirit is in the object.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So until very recently when they tore down a house in Kyoto, the entire—all that beautiful wood, all that craftsmanship, all the work that went into it went to an incinerator and was burned or it went to a sento, the public bath, and was cut up in pieces and fired the bath to heat the water because the life that—the thought was that the life of the person who lived in that house now permeated those pieces of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And you don't know what the karma of that person was. And you're not sure that you want to have it glued onto yours by living with it. And that's why kimono—used kimono did not get sold until recently. Now you can buy used kimono at every flea market in Japan and people have just sort of gotten over that idea as they've become more westernized.

And that's how you used to get these beautiful kimono. You could buy by the bale. At the University of Michigan, they used to have kimono bale exhibitions. And you could go in and you could buy these gorgeous silk kimonos. The fabric in and of themselves, no matter what you wanted to do with them, you know, were fabulous for cheap, cheap, cheap. They were just rags because no one would wear them—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: —because you're putting on somebody else's physicality to which their spirituality had gone into and could be then passed on to you which sounds in a Western way kind of superstitious. And so I've struggled with those two views of the material is totally unreal, the spiritual is the only real and the idea that the spirit and matter are cohabitating, at least in this life. And consider that.

And I remember once hearing a lecture by a man from Emerson College, the Waldorf college in England —when my son was in elementary school attending a Waldorf school in Massachusetts. And he had talked about the philosophy—Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of education. And Steiner believed in reincarnation. And he thought that that was an important part of the way you went about teaching a child, that a child came with baggage from his former life and you honored that baggage.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And you didn't think of a child as a clean slate but as one that you were "buffing for the new life" sort of thing. And there were quite a few parents at this lecture who had—who were not interested necessarily in Rudolf Steiner's philosophy but they liked the school and they liked what it did for their kids. And this one man who during questions got up and asked—he said, you know, he said, "We really like what this does for my son."

And he said, "But I have a real hard time with this reincarnation thing." He said, "It just flies in the face of everything that I was brought up with and I don't like it. It makes me uncomfortable. And I don't want this to be glued onto my kid even though I like everything that the kid is having as an experience here." And the fellow who was speaking said, "I know exactly what you mean."

He said, "I was not raised by parents who were anthroposophists," a Rudolf Steiner philosophy. He said, "I came to it because I liked the people that were living with this philosophy. They were attractive to me." And so, he started studying. But he said, "Oh boy, this reincarnation thing just rubbed me the wrong way."

And he said—so he said to a very old man that he had met, he was kind of whining in private about this. And the old man told him, "Well," he said, "You can look at it this way. You can live your life as if it were true or you can live your life as if it wasn't. Imagine those two lives and which one would you prefer." And he said, "So it doesn't really matter. Just pick the best one." [They laugh.] And he said, "I've believed in incarnation— in reincarnation ever since." [They laugh.]

And I have a similar feeling about the matter and spirit conflict, that spirit is not in matter—I don't see it as being

in matter—in the same way that the Shinto people may have superstitiously almost dealt with it. To me, anyway, it looks a little superstitious. But then when I look at how people relate to their material objects, I'm not sure that that's superstitious at all. So many people in their relationships with the physical world are controlled by their objects. Their spirit is formed and evolved by their relationship to their objects.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And now, we have a new level, since the Industrial Revolution at least, where we are evolved by our relationship to our technology. So it's not just that the spirit is in the object and the object is influencing who you are, but the way you communicate, the impermanence of the digital realm has taken things that were pictures and so ephemeralized them that all we need is a sufficient power failure and they'd all be gone.

And I have two external hard drives that I back up things from my computers and my digital photographs. I lost one of them. It just stopped. And they—I wrote to the manufacturer and they said, well, they could retrieve them, $1,600 to retrieve them off a device that I probably paid about $300 for. And that's kind of a new—a new layer of obfuscation—how do you say it?; I can never pronounce that word. But this has now become part of our identities.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: That we are more ephemeral than we were when we were painting on a cave or when we were carving on a stone tablet or even printing on paper. And so there is a difference. The material is of the spiritual but it does make a difference. And our spiritual identity is passed along through the objects that we build and live with in ways that we never know. And that they communicate who we are to other people through what we've done to people we'll never know.

And I think that that's one of the things in a conceptual way that really appeals to me about the transparent nature of making furniture out of little sticks, out of little sticks of no value. You know, there's nothing precious about these little sticks of willow. Their only preciousness is in the forms that they make. And they're not even that permanent. They're much more ephemeral than a piece made out of teak, you know, or keyaki or Zelkova, you know, whatever those things are, or out of ceramics, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: In the same vein, do you think of the work as having an environmental or social commentary?

MR. MONTEITH: Absolutely. You know, who was it—Marshall McLuhan said that the medium is the message, it's become the message. And I think that that's a whole, whole—we've almost got a missed generation with that concept. The medium is in the message. But should it be? I think appropriate for the message and that's why I like to work with natural materials. And that's how I got interested in lacquer because finish is some of the most toxic stuff that woodworkers work with.

And here, the urushi lacquer is as natural as the tree was itself. That's all it is is just a part of the tree, and it hasn't been altered in any unnatural way at all, and it's really quite wonderful. But the willow twigs are— they're structured to make a surface out of all these little round things. It takes a tremendous amount of consciousness. And I like to think of our work, whatever it is that we do, as a residue. The product is a residue of the consciousness that went into it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And that consciousness is a collective gluing together of who you are up until the point you were doing the work and then when the work goes out of your environment out into the world, it takes that record of that consciousness to influence the world in some totally unknown way.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think about it at all in terms of process art?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I think everything is process. I think process art that people get really kind of excited about the idea of calling their work process art. Everything is process. Everything is coming into being and degrading simultaneously all the time, just like a carbon-dated atomic degrade, you know. And that's another reason I like working with the wood. And it is ephemeral. You—trying to make it last forever is a joke.

And if you can get the consciousness to hold together long enough to be an influence somewhere, it's served its purpose. And that's where its reality exists, not in the object. And the object becomes the medium for who we were when we were doing it to pass that on to someone else. And whatever that identity, that consciousness, that collective consciousness was, meets every person differently.

And when my chair sits out in the yard and the bird comes and poops on it, it's met the bird in a different way than the chair meets somebody who is going to sit in it. But it's encountered just the same. And I think that we

—if we thought of things in a more holistic way, we might have a better appreciation for what's in front of us and maybe we might even change the sort of ecological way that we think about what it is we're doing.

And my willow trees, the root ball that I cut from, there's one over here not too many miles away, that I have made something from every year for over 20 years. And the tree is still alive. Every year it grows something new for me to make work from. And all the time it's growing, it's inhaling carbon dioxide.

It's right next to the road as the cars go by. And it's exhaling oxygen. And I haven't killed it. I've actually made its root ball multiply. The road crew even tried to spray it with Agent Orange and kill it. And it almost died but it hasn't. It keeps coming back. Willows are very, very tenacious, very strong.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have images of those 20 different pieces? It'd be fascinating to see.

MR. MONTEITH: I wish I had kept them as well as I kept the documentation for the altar table for the museum. Had I known—when I cut the first one—in fact, I sent you the picture of that big chair.

MS. RIEDEL: That very first one from '85?

MR. MONTEITH: That very first one. That was the first cutting from that '85, '95, in 2005 it was 20 years. And every year I use that for something. Even the altar table for the Peabody Essex, the bent pieces that come up—there aren't many but those bent pieces come from that tree.

It's kind of like a touchstone, you know, that you can go back and— yeah, it's still alive even though—even though we've tried to kill it and even though it lives in a horrible place next to this busy road. It's still tenacious. And I have made some cuttings from it. You see there are some growing there in a vase in the other room. I'm rooting those right in the windowsill. And I have a couple of big plants now growing out here that are 12, 15 feet tall.

MS. RIEDEL: From that tree?

MR. MONTEITH: From that tree because it's in such an endangered place. And then these I can make cuttings from and grow them out so that I will keep the tree alive.

MS. RIEDEL: It's such an interesting fusion of environmentalism and your grandmother's gardening, experiencing and great-grandmother's gardening experience and then furniture-making. It's really—really it's almost an organic process.

MR. MONTEITH: It's kind of—it is an organic process. And all of—all of us are alive, you know. We're all an organic process. And to try and overcome organicness maybe is foolish. And I think that that's one of the things I really appreciated in Japan. I don't think I really—I don't think I really understood it as being valued until I went to Japan.

Here in the United States I always thought of maintenance of architecture was to fix it so that it was—it was, like, repaired. And there you just have this beautiful moss garden and you just pick the weeds out of the hillside, the mountainside. And you repeat that process for 1,200 years and you end up with a really great moss garden.

But what it is is it's this beautiful soft, green bed of moss that changes with the humidity. Its color changes with the humidity every day. And it's the result of all of those people for 1,200 years pulling little weeds out of it. And it's—that's wonderful, you know. And that's maintenance, you know. It's not cutting something out and gluing something on so that it looks right or it looks like it did in the beginning, you know. It's evolved.

And the gracious decline—I never thought that decline was gracious until I went to Japan. And you'd see these old tree stumps that were in a temple grounds that the tree started to die. So they trimmed it down. And then it died a little more and they trimmed it down. And then the tree died and then they kind of cleaned it up. And then the tree started to rot.

And so they made a copper or a bronze cap over the end wood of the tree so that when it rained it didn't rain and rot the tree completely and we'd have the rotting stump with us longer because 1,200 years ago somebody important planted that tree and we're going to remember that initiative that was made. And I thought, "Whoa, that is cool." [They laugh.] You know, it was goose bump time! It really was!

And so I've got to admit, the internationalist style was very impressive to me when I was a kid, and when I was in college and thought the color field painters were great and all that stuff. And I still do. But I have appreciation of the evolution of organic things that I never had before I went to Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Or maybe you had but just didn't—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Maybe I did have, yeah, yeah. I think I probably did have.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: But I didn't have it intellectually brought to my attention in the way it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Or developed in such detail that you could really see where it could go.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, see what it was and what it meant to me, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And clearly it meant something because you've been going back relatively every year since for the past 10 years or—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, since '99 I've been back every year.

MS. RIEDEL: Every year. That's 13 years now.

MR. MONTEITH: Thirteen years, yeah. And it becomes ever increasingly more difficult to go because it's so expensive now. When I went the first time when I had the U.S.-Japan Friendship Commission fellowship, I thought this was my once-in-a-lifetime chance because it's so expensive. I would never be able to do this if it wasn't for this foundation grant.

At the time, that was true. But the way, the path to go again and again and be renewed by my experiences there and with the people that I've come to know, those connections and those interrelationships are much more important than some financial cost of making the trip because the path to do the experiences that our work requires, that opens up in the most unbelievable way. We could never imagine how the connectedness of things occur.

I remember when I was in engineering school and I had a girlfriend at the time who was also in engineering school. And we had a big fight about my artistic vision of things relative to a course in topology that—which is the science of connected lines. And it's like—sort of like geometry only more abstract and heavily argued. And I remember this just as clearly as if it was yesterday walking down the street and saying, "Well, the V's in the trees were much more important to me as connected lines."

Well, they just didn't have anything to do with it. They weren't a closed system and they were random and all of that. And we had this big disagreement about that. And since then, I've thought about that disagreement many, many times in my life in different ways. And not too long ago, maybe a couple of months ago, it came up again and I was thinking about rot and degradation of organic substances and how that is where the restoration comes for the new plant.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: If we didn't have any rot, if we sterilized everything, if we Purell-ed the world, we're dead.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, because the life is from this cycle.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and in many ways trees are almost a closed system.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And it isn't random—

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: —because everything that looks like a random growth, whether it's cancer or whatever, those things are not accidents. They're a result of something. They're influenced by something. And you know— and when I was thinking about that whole idea, it came to me that, you know, our whole society seems to be having a really serious problem with cancer and the growth and the commonness of cancer turning up everywhere.

What is a better metaphor for a growth in the ever-increasing rate of growth which is the very thing we would like to base our economy on in this country? Maintenance is not enough. We want growth. And next quarter we want a growth in the increase of the rate of growth or we say that the corporation hasn't matched up to the projection. So we're actually wishing upon our culture a cancerous decline that will bring systemic failure.

So when I make a chair and I'm making it out of these very pedestrian materials and it goes out and it lives its life as a chair and then becomes compost and then will grow a new tree, its image as a chair gets passed on in a totally non-material way. And it's not lost. And everybody that got to experience it, the chair isn't one chair anymore. It's as many as the number of consciousnesses that saw it or that experienced it. It doesn't even have to be seen. You can be blind and experience it really well.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of the titles of the chairs—*Waiting for the Sunrise*, or *Moon Viewing Chair*. They seem to really capture the essence of what you're going for.

MR. MONTEITH: I think so, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I do.

MS. RIEDEL: With all this emphasis on Japan, do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition, as part of an American tradition or do you not think about it in those terms?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I have thought about the way I've approached things from originally when I started doing the twig work. I thought of it as an American folk craft kind of tradition because of the material. And it wasn't until I started investigating who did this and where did it come from that I realized it really came from Europe and the Bohemian people that brought various serious willow work with them and also the Celtic tradition of people that came to the Carolinas and the Appalachian Mountains.

And they used to—on the Erie Canal they made whole, whole barge loads of twig chairs that they shipped up and down the Mississippi and the canals and stuff. And so those came from a European tradition. So I guess it wasn't as American as I thought it was. And then I realized that it really was kind of a function of what the material was at hand to the people who had to use plebian materials.

And it didn't matter whether it was cane in Indonesia or rush in Iraq— the water people in Iraq that Saddam Hussein drained and forced their culture into almost total extinction—they were working with what they had. And they made these wonderful forms, those boats and their houses and all kinds of things out of these great—the dhows that were made out of what was at hand.

And so really—I belong to an international school that's thousands and thousands of years old and informed by poverty, a lot of it, because if you— if you had unlimited substance you could buy or use precious things. But I kept thinking the substance is not in the preciousness of the materials but in the consciousness that's brought to bear on what you have at hand. And that doesn't matter whether you're a nuclear physicist or whether you're a twig bender. It's the same thing. It's the record of your consciousness.

You don't—CERN's super-colliding experiments that have come up with the image of the Higgs boson, how organic is that. It lasts, you know—talk about wabi-sabi, I mean, it lasts, like, a gazillionth of a second. And yet, here it is, the record of most of the substance of our universe. It's where all that mass is that we can't find. Well, it's just degrading faster than we can notice. And all that's left is the organization of the relationships among all the parts. And to me, that's just—that's just exciting.

And in thinking about it, oh, just a few years ago, I thought, "You know, I probably, had I known where I was going to end up with this particular work, I would have wanted to study textiles when I was in school instead of painting because I would have really been interested in the textures, the fibers, how to go about weaving and pattern-making and all of that." But I probably wouldn't have ended up where I am now if I had done that. But it would have been interesting.

And I think that I was interested in engineering things the same way. I just didn't want to be an engineer. And all of the complexities of my work as I do it, that's where the excitement is. And going back more specifically to the question, I see myself as not part of an art movement but part of this much bigger tradition of working with what you have at hand, and going back to Irwin Whitaker's statement, if you are an artist you'll make art out of shit if you have to.

And being an artist is probably not a choice. It's something we're sort of condemned to in this life. [Laughs.] And if we try and escape it, which I have tried to do from time to time, it's almost fatal. It's not a good idea. You should run with what, you know, you're called upon to do. And so that's how I see myself fitting in to the world of the international tradition. I know in Japan it's very popular among contemporary artists to be doing work that looks Western. I actually see them getting over that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I'm happy—I'm happy to see it. They're not embarrassed by their tradition and thinking that to be contemporary you have to be Western.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you see as the similarities and the differences between your earliest work and your work now?

MR. MONTEITH: I'm much slower now, much, much slower

MS. RIEDEL: Well, much more complex.

MR. MONTEITH: I mean, the work is slow. It takes longer to complete a piece of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that because they're also so much more complex?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, they're so much more complex. And earlier on, there was a greater need to make more pieces, not—and maybe in a way I didn't understand that wasn't true. But that was my context. So you know, you always fill up your own context. You know, whatever your own opinion is, you work to that. So we had to make a lot of objects. So we sold a lot of objects. And that worked.

MS. RIEDEL: The vast majority have been chairs, correct? I mean, there've been tables and—

MR. MONTEITH: Probably, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —occasionally a desk or a hutch.

MR. MONTEITH: Probably more chairs than anything, right. And early, early there were—I told you earlier about how I saved all the little pieces that I cut off that were similar and I made baskets and shelves and whatever. And a humorous thing a couple of years ago, Nancy and I were walking down a street up in very sort of fancy resort area and there was an antique shop.

And we went by it and I thought, "Gee, there's somebody who made a little shelf just like one of those early ones that I made." And I looked at it and I thought, "You know, it's not new. It's in an antique shop." And there was a card on it with the price that was—it was in the window. The store was closed and we were just walking by. And it said, "An original early Clifton Monteith." [They laugh.]

And I don't remember what the price was but it was about 500 or 600 times what I had gotten paid for it when I made it. [They laugh.] And I felt like such an antique when I saw it. [They laugh.] But you know, it's kind of interesting how that, you know, has come around. So there were many more objects, objects I don't even remember because there were so many.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you sign all the work?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I did. There are no dates though.

MS. RIEDEL: I know. [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: Much to many people's chagrin. Time is kind of a funny thing. Order, to me, is not real related to time or it's not related to time in the same sense that it is to the general public. And you look at the mingei movement in Japan, the ceramics were not signed. They were not even signed let alone not dated.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And I kind of like that anonymity thing. People didn't like that though if you don't attribute it. But which came first is really important in an art historical sense to a lot of people. But to me, it's not because I often go back and look at things that happened a long time ago, and, oh, that really is the next step to tomorrow. And I know it may sound obscure but it's almost like—I don't want to jinx it by saying where it appears in the timeline.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. MONTEITH: Because—

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds superstitious.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, it is. That's why I use the word jinx because it's almost like that superstitiousness of the Shinto concept of the spirit being in the object. If the spirit is in the object, you can say that this spirit came before this one. Well, it didn't. They all are here at the same time. It's you select from one today and another

one tomorrow and then those two former selections form the next day. So the next day, did it precede the other two because you just weren't paying attention? Where did it exist? Where was it in the timeline? It's like chaos theory.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: You can either ask is it here or is it what but you can't have the answer to those questions at the same time because in a nuclear physics way, as soon as we locate where that object is, whoops, it's not anymore. Everything is that ephemeral except for the idea. So the idea is the only thing that maybe has a timeline. But it's not the object.

MS. RIEDEL: So then to go back to that question, do you see similarities or differences in the work over time?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Like I said that things were less complex because I had to go faster.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, my concept about that changed and the path to making that possible came with the change in my concept because I can get more income from fewer pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: That wasn't what I was trying to do. I wasn't trying to work less and make fewer pieces. That wasn't the motivation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Although I have had other craftsmen say to me, "Boy, I wish I could get away with only doing six pieces in a year." Go ahead, do six pieces in a year and maybe the road will come to you that will make it possible. And it just evolved. It wasn't something that I set out to do.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't sit down and say, "Let me make this more complex."

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: "Let me see—" Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: No. It just evolved. And actually, one of the things that caused the evolution, I think, was the material. I kept getting more and more fussy about the plant from which I was working. That one's too stiff, this one's—this one's too fat. I mean, I need something that's more flexible and thinner and then I went from using the nails to using wooden pegs because I could make smaller joints. And when the thing dried, it would actually crush the peg.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember when you made that decision to shift from nail to peg? Was it before or after—

MR. MONTEITH: It was as the pieces got smaller.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And in fact, the *Waiting on the Sunrise* chair, that's part wood—part wooden joints and part metal joints. And the *Moon Viewing Chair* was all metal.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And that was only a few years earlier. And then that last big bench, it's all wood. And that's the first huge piece that I've done that was all wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, okay. Is there anything else that's significant to you that separates or distinguishes the earlier pieces from the later pieces or is there a thread of continuity that connects things significantly?

MR. MONTEITH: Of course, the sort of idea of being able to do a three-dimensional drawing with the lines that the twigs allow you to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And that's one of the things I like to share with students when we do a workshop is you can't have—you can't sit down and do the drawing first and then go out and band saw these pieces to come out just the way you designed them. It's a cooperative activity between you and what the material will allow you to do.

Even when I was working on—testing a new paper for stretching over the lanterns, I was reminded that this new paper has different tensile strength than the old and it's going to change the design of everybody's work because it's going to require a little bit more structure to work against the tensile strength of the paper. And oh, exciting stuff. And so that—that I see as a continuity thing, that this drawing in space from the organic potential of the materials, working with them, being willing to be limited by their possibilities.

MS. RIEDEL: That's an interesting point. We're just talking about what your ideas that you were introducing to students at workshops, which leads to a few questions I want to ask about teaching. Are there specific skills or concepts that you are working to introduce at your different workshops? Does it vary based on the school or on what you're ready to teach? What are your goals and your thoughts about teaching?

MR. MONTEITH: Actually I probably bring the same thing wherever I go.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: No matter what the background is, whether it's an architectural design program or whether it is, a woodworking school like the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, which is very sort of tool-oriented and a lot of traditional techniques. I'm the real outsider. I have very few tools. I really like the idea that if I had a drill, a needle and thread, a little urushi and I could go anywhere and do anything. And I like electric drills. It's really nice.

But it wouldn't be necessary. You could—you could drill it with—and [Toshio] Odate, I was just reading an article of his. He's showing about attaching drawer handles. And he's drilling the hole for the metal drawer handle through the wooden front of the drawer box and he's doing it with the drill bit attached to, like, a dowel stake and he's doing this.

And he's a world-famous craftsman. He certainly owns a battery-operated drill. But no, this was how he was taught how to do it. This was what was from his tradition. And that hole is different than mine with my little beautiful Milwaukee tiny battery-powered drill. But you can do it that wa.

MS. RIEDEL: You've taught over the years—we can look at the CV for the entire list—but you've taught at most of the craft schools, right—Penland, at Haystack, at Anderson Ranch.

MR. MONTEITH: Right, Anderson Ranch.

MS. RIEDEL: Arrowmont?

MR. MONTEITH: Never at Arrowmont.

MS. RIEDEL: Never at Arrowmont.

MR. MONTEITH: Arrowmont was really kind of a funny situation. I was supposed to go to Arrowmont once.

[End of disc.]

CLIFTON MONTEITH: —and it's the only place I ever had a class listed in a catalog and no one signed up for it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And I thought, "Why"—

MS. RIEDEL: How long ago was that?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh it must have been about eight years ago maybe, nine years ago, something like that. And I couldn't figure out what it was. And then there was someone local who was applying for a scholarship to go to the class. And she—but it was right at the end. And she called and talked to someone in the office.

And it turned out the person in the office was asking each person who called about the class, "Well, do you know where to get your willows and to bring them to the class and how would you be able to do it? Do you have access to the willows,"—scared everyone off from the class. And of course I always bring my own material or we go and get it as part of the class. And there was this total miscommunication that everyone was too terrified to come for fear they wouldn't know what to get, you know, what was going to be needed.

And so it's the only place I've never been. [Laughs.] It's really quite strange. And of course everybody that I know, all the woodworking people, all the wood turners and everything, they've all been there and they can't understand, "Why have you never been there?" And it was this really, really weird thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And they never thought to reschedule it?

MR. MONTEITH: No, no. It was just, like, "Oh, no one comes to his classes." [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: You were educated at a university with both undergrad and graduate work. What place do you see for universities in American craft movement?

MR. MONTEITH: I would like to see everybody have university educations. And I think it is—it's good. But you could have your education in sociology would be a good background for being a craftsman. One of the things that—got me thinking about this. Everybody's education is valuable. And we should all have as much of it as we can and keep gathering it as long as we have consciousness that has room in it.

But one of the things that really kind of interested me when I went to Japan and was at the university and talked to other—people from other universities around. And the Japanese university experience is so much less career-oriented maybe. It's education-oriented and it's social education-oriented. Those people who are your friends in college you're going to know forever.

It's not been my experience. And the people that were in the lacquer studio, they will be in touch with each other for the rest of their lives. And if they were in law school, it's the same thing. If they worked for the corporation and my wing of the company plays golf, we all play golf. Well, I don't know if I'd go for that.

But the upshot of their university education is that when you go to work, you'll learn at work what it is you're going to need to know. And the important thing about your university education was how to learn what you're going to need to know next. But the idea that you are learning what you're going to need to know is such a joke.

And focusing on technique is actually limiting because we're informed by the tools that we use. And if we get our tools stuck in our head, it'll wreck our creativity. So for craft education—I think it's really important to have a real education first and maybe simultaneously or along the way techniques and tools and materials are good too.

MS. RIEDEL: So in this case you're using craft education, you mean a more technical skill base or—

MR. MONTEITH: Right. Like if you're going to be a jeweler, how to work with metal, how to raise metal, how to solder, you know, all of those things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And there's woodworking stuff too, that gets so techie that you can spend all of your life needing the next new, new thing and it can actually cripple your work, I think, not that it does. But it can.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's a balance it sounds like.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And I think that the general liberal arts education—and when I say liberal arts education I mean arts and sciences. Science is a liberal art too, because that informs part of a way of thinking.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONTEITH: And we should all have that. And I think that we're losing that with this focus on technology.

MS. RIEDEL: Which leads to the next question is has technology affected your work in any way?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. One thing is I can find answers to my questions faster than I could even six years ago or eight years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: When we went from dial-up to high speed Internet here, my world expanded amazingly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Just like answering your questions this morning, I just went over to the laptop there and with the high speed connection I can have an image that answers my question so quickly. And that's the way it has influenced my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Also email, you're constantly emailing, I would imagine, all your colleagues in Japan in particular.

MR. MONTEITH: I do, yeah. Everywhere. In fact, that has impacted my work in that it takes away from my work. The time that I spend answering emails and writing to people and sometimes it's an encouragement, you know. People need some encouragement. People who are doing wonderful work that isn't finding an audience needs encouragement. And I don't mean to find them an audience.

I don't think that's my capacity or what I'm called upon to do. But if the work is good it'll find its audience, you know. And people need to know that and be encouraged about it. And like right now every day I'm corresponding with this friend who I've been teaching lacquer to who's a metalworker and his wife has leukemia and she's in the hospital and needs encouragement.

Well, everyone knows somebody who has leukemia needs encouragement. But the person who is doing wonderful woodwork and not finding an audience for it may need the same kind of encouragement that the leukemia patient needs. And so I spend a lot of time with that. And I can do it because of the email. If I had to sit down and with my engineer's spelling technique write a letter out by hand and mail it, I might not do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And so that is—to the point your work is your life and your life is your work. The technology has expanded my life.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you find yourself keeping in touch with some of the students from workshops over the years?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh absolutely. Today I got emails from two students, Matthew Mosher and Alison Croney, who were students in a workshop, ran into them again when they were in graduate school and after they got out of graduate school they wanted to travel the world together and I put them in touch with some of my friends in Japan and they had wonderful experiences in Japan with them.

And they're going to meet me at my workshop at Anderson Ranch in Colorado at the end of the month. And this was—this started—this started out maybe 10 years ago. And I get to watch their work and see them develop and we keep in touch. And look at Scott Reynolds, look how long that's been.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Two questions that come directly related to this is talking about education, can you point to an experience that you would define as your most rewarding educational experience?

MR. MONTEITH: Probably—

MS. RIEDEL: We can come back to that.

MR. MONTEITH: Probably it was Irwin Whitaker's lesson.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? More than the first trip to Japan?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: Because it was—it was a realization of some—like a seed that was put in and took so long to germinate and that I finally got it was—and I resisted it for so long. Sometimes the very things that we resist for so long. Now as far as the things that you knew you were going to like and, you know, I didn't know I was going to like that experience at all.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: But the Japanese experience I knew I was going to like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And so, as far as the heartfelt richness of it, I don't think I can say that is definitely my most emphatic experience. And meeting Kurimoto and his inviting me to come and hi initial introduction was all very, very important. But actually it was his willingness to share his institution which he—because he was chairman of the department at the time. He had the capacity to do that because of the total off-the-book kind of thing, the experience was.

But he had the capacity to cause it to happen. What I learned I didn't learn from his teaching lesson step-by-step kind of thing but I learned in the studio from watching all the students, being with them. And that was amazing. One of the most amazing things about that experience was the students were all so nice to me. I was this old geezer, and they're all young and beautiful and can do anything, right? And so we would work all day.

And somewhere around maybe 4 o'clock in the afternoon—they would always be eating something in the middle of the morning too; I didn't join them on that. But I was so amazed at how these little tiny skinny girls could eat all the food that they did and wonderful things too. So we would stop in the late afternoon and have tea. And the people would bring stuff and we would have something to eat.

And it was kind of like it was questions and answers in English with Clifton. And it wasn't all in English because they would discuss among themselves and then the question would get translated to me and I would answer it and then it would get restated—and it was really very fun for me and for them too. But the amazing thing is Kurimoto would come in and he would do a demonstration and a lecture kind of thing all in Japanese.

So all I had, knowing no Japanese at all almost, was what I saw visually. So I'd make notes on what I saw. And they were making notes on what he said and everything. And then he would go away and then we'd all go back to work. And then later on in the day we would have tea and we would discuss what the lesson was. And I'd say, "Well, I had a question about did this mean this and did that mean that."

They realized in this discussion they didn't understand what had happened, but they never talked about it with one another. They didn't question what was meant. They thought they knew because they knew the language. And isn't that often the way when someone tells you what's being done and you're seeing it being done.

You can miss both points, the visual ones and the audio ones. And—but our discussion would clarify it for all of us and we needed the two languages, one that we didn't really understand very well to make what we had seen and heard to become clear. And I thought that was great. That was a great experience.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a question here that I think relates to everything we've just been talking about which is is there a community that's been important to your development as an artist. I think in your case it's a question of is there an instance when there wasn't a community for you as an artist.

MR. MONTEITH: I really think that being an artist, like I said, is not necessarily a choice. It's sort of a sentence that we're living out.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And all we have is our fellow inmates in this sentence.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Gee, I hope it's not that grim.

MR. MONTEITH: No, no it's not grim at all. My relationship with my grandmother was anything but grim. It was, like, continually inspiring yet I didn't pick her. She didn't pick me. We were just thrown in together although Rudolf Steiner would have said in your former life—between your former life and this one you, did pick your parents.

And that's why this interconnectedness of community that is now worldwide for me, in Europe and here and through my son and his work in Europe and here, all of those things are part of this big whole that I wouldn't have had otherwise.

And one of the things that I worry about a little bit is this lowest common denominator of communication and how we really do need to be together. We need to come together in a physical space. And artists have a wonderful opportunity to do that because we're making stuff, whether it's prints or paintings or photographs or what. And doing it together or coming together after having done it and giving each other a hard time about it is great.

I know at the Furniture Society they always have a section one night out of the conference where they have "slide wars." That's what they call it is "slide wars." And people go and they put up a slide and they tell what it is.

And people from the audience will give them a hard time about it. Sometimes it's humorous. Sometimes it's really serious, but—and sometimes it's really hard to take, and it can be difficult. But it's a great, great experience. It's like really fast-fire and you only get, like, I don't know, a minute-and-a-half. And people just blurt out stuff. And it's great.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's meant to be some sort of critique?

MR. MONTEITH: It's like shotgun critiques.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: It's really great. And not everybody fares well.

MS. RIEDEL: I can imagine.

MR. MONTEITH: You have to have the right tough-skin personality. But I've noticed a lot of woodworkers are pretty tough, or furniture makers in that case. And I've always enjoyed it.

Also there's a community that I met in Canada through the Emma Lake Symposiums. And they meet every two years and it's by invitation only. And I got invited, oh, a long time ago now. And the opposite two years there's a symposium that meets in New Zealand, a lot of the same people. It's a long way to New Zealand.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And after we'd been a couple of times to Emma Lake, which is in Saskatchewan, way, way far out in the middle of nowhere and all these craftsmen get together and they work together

. And they get together over a period of, oh, four or five days a week and they make things in the presence of one another. And the only rule is that you can't do anything by yourself.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And at the end of the symposium, all of the work is put up for sale. And they have a gigantic auction and people—

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Clifton Monteith in the artist's studio in Lake Ann, Michigan, on July 10, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is disc number four.

We had just been talking about the Lake Emma Symposiums.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Emma Lake Symposiums.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, Emma Lake, and the auction.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. It's a very expensive proposition to get that many people, about 100, 120 I think was the largest one that they had.

MS. RIEDEL: And are they all working artists?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I mean, so they come together to work collaboratively for a week?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, sort of a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: The times are varied somewhat. And the University of Saskatchewan has this campus at Emma Lake and that's how the name Emma Lake came along. Well, it became problematic to continue there and so it's moved to a new venue. And I haven't been to the new venue yet. But it's even further north, I think. We're, like, four-and-a-half hours from the nearest city. And it's really up there in Saskatchewan. But it's in the summer and, you know, when the weather is nice and everything.

MS. RIEDEL: This is associated with the university?

MR. MONTEITH: No, it's from the Saskatchewan Council on the Arts.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And they have a wonderful organization. You have all this huge land and you have so few people and the craftsmen live very, very far from one another often. And how are they going to make their work and sell it? They certainly can't put a sign out by the road, "Stop in and see the potter."

And so the Saskatchewan Council on the Arts has a gallery in Saskatoon and it's a beautiful gallery. It's really well-managed, maintained and it's—part of its goal and objective is to bring together these people, have a place for them to show their work and encourage them. And so this symposium kind of came out of that. And there are a lot of really gregarious people up there.

You have to be just to survive! So the invitation to the symposium, you have to be somebody that they figure would be able to make a contribution, somebody that's vigorous in their work and also social, socially skillful enough to participate in the collaboration in a short period of time and not get their nose out of joint if they disagree with somebody.

MS. RIEDEL: And you don't have to be Canadian?

MR. MONTEITH: No, no. And the last time I was there people were from France, from Germany—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: A lot of people from New Zealand because, like I mentioned, the alternate year there's a thing in New Zealand called the New Zealand Collaboration. And so we got to go to the New Zealand Collaboration after I'd been a couple of years to Emma Lake. It's a really big deal to go to New Zealand because it's so far.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I realized that this was going to be a really good experience. So my friend Oya [ph] in Japan, I invited him to come with us.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this—do they give you any sort of travel expenses, Clifton, or you have to just pay for the whole thing yourself?

MR. MONTEITH: No, no, and the expense of attending the collaboration too. Now, the first—the first time that I went I had met a fellow teaching in lacquer by email. [Laughs.] Who lives in Elliot Lake, Ontario. And he—Andrew Curle. I mentioned him in the article that was from the Japan symposium about how craftsmanship connects people from cultures and things through mediums.

And Andrew, we corresponded for a long time. But I had never met him. And so we met at the Emma Lake Symposium. And they wanted to know since Andrew had talked to people about my interest in lacquer and he had been working with lacquer and we'd been doing it together. And then he told the people at the symposium and they said, "Well, why don't you bring some of your lacquer stuff with you?"

Well, lacquer's not fast, right? But what we did was we did bring work that we had worked on together, even like mailing it back and forth to one another, in preparation for going and then we actually took lacquer and did stuff live there in curing boxes and stuff. And everybody sort of stayed away from us, you know. And when the piece was done and it looked great, you couldn't touch it, only with, you know, rubber gloves.

And it was fabulous. The experience was great. The pieces sold really well. And then they had this big auction at the end. And you're going to have an auction out in the middle of nowhere? Who's going to come? Well, that year that we did the lacquer work, the Society of American Wood Art Collectors, or something like that, came in these gigantic motorhomes.

And they brought tents and everything. And they came—and they came for the auction and they bought all kinds of stuff at high prices. And there was the money for the next symposium. And so it's the work that is done gets auctioned that underwrites the next symposium.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And you talk about a community.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: These people—of course, most of them are Canadian. It really brings them close together. And a lot of them probably, that live in unusual places, they weren't together in a group since they'd been in school. And so they kind of save up and maybe go to New Zealand next year.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So we went to New Zealand. And we took Oya with us. And he really is into traveling. He travels—or he did before he had children. He traveled a lot. And every year he would make an attempt to go somewhere. Well, it was a little bit more than he could do going there but by us taking him with us it worked out that he was able to come too.

He had a wonderful time, met all these people and in one of the collaborative pieces that he did there—and this must be four years, five years ago—was a wood turner had done some pieces that they'd assembled, a couple of different wood turners had worked on it. It was a pillar for a balanced piece. And he made some wooden

feathers that went on this. And he worked with a jeweler that did this balance beam thing.

And it was this sculpture that was very, very—like, almost like stabile but very, very ephemeral and beautiful thing. He went back to Japan and he's been doing this form all out of wood himself. And he just had his first adult one-man show in Kyoto and had several of these pieces that came from that experience of going to New Zealand.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So it's this collaborative concept that's really good. And the New Zealand people are extremely social and gregarious folks. And there were quite a few people from Australia there as well at that time. It was a really, really very, very interesting thing. And of course I love that.

And I can go there and—oh, and also there's a concept of the parts pile. Everybody brings something and—something from their studio, something that maybe they worked on and didn't work out. They just bring it and throw it in a heap and then people look at it and they'll pull it out and cut it in half and do something. And it's just so exciting.

And then in New Zealand they had a real big auction too in Auckland. It's up in the country where it's right on the ocean, gorgeous place on the ocean where the conference was, the collaboration. But then the auction was in Auckland and really well attended. And then that's what raises the money for the next one in two years.

MS. RIEDEL: There's nothing like this in the States at all, is there?

MR. MONTEITH: No, there really isn't. It really is—here we have the permanent schools like Penland and stuff like that. But this—all of the legwork, there's no staff. It's all done by the fellow craftsmen. They bring their own tools on trucks and trailers and stuff and set up a—I think this place where we were was a Baptist summer camp. So there were no tools.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Everybody brought what they could. Up in Emma Lake, there's this guy who actually is a retired fireman from Saskatoon. He brings an entire blacksmith shop on a trailer.

And all these metalworkers come and bring—they even had drop hammers that they brought in. And we're working under a tent. I mean, it's like—it's like a camp meeting of craftsmen. It's really quite exciting. And it sort of charges your battery for a couple of years when you live in the woods with the hermits.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. I was just struck by the contrast of how you are out here in such an isolated space but have—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, really isolated.

MS. RIEDEL: —such fully evolved multiple senses, multiple communities.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's really—I know my neighbors hardly at all—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: —but I have friends all over the world that I feel really close to.

MS. RIEDEL: Are you involved with any national craft organizations in the U.S.?

MR. MONTEITH: Just—well, the American Craft Council I'm a member—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —but I don't—I don't participate in any of the shows. I've never done shows. I've only — like I said, I've only had a few gallery shows ever—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —that were, you know, about my work. And then one thing led to another. And I've been able to continue doing the work that I like and it seems to find its way out there. And in fact I think probably Carl Hammer is not very happy with me.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you still exhibit with him at all?

MR. MONTEITH: No, not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there writers or periodicals, magazines that have been significant to your development?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, the interview that I did with John Lavine in *Woodwork Magazine*, that happened to come at a really, really good time, not that he's necessarily a critic, you know. But he did a good job with that. He hit me at a good time. We did the interview at the Furniture Society's conference in Indianapolis.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you belong to that?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so you do.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you go to that annually?

MR. MONTEITH: I try to. But I haven't been in the last two years.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And my friend Kiichi in Hokkaido, I even got him to be a member and to come. And he came to the one in Philadelphia. And yeah, that—that is—and Ned Cooke was involved in that, you know, when it first started. And I think that he kind of inspired me. Well, and actually, Gayle Greenhill, she had collected a lot of the work from the people that were in the *New American Furniture* show that Ned was curating in Boston.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And I think her friend Barbara, whose name I can't remember, I think maybe she underwrote that show somewhat. And so Ned was involved in that and kind of encouraged me to participate. And I did.

And I would like to do more with them, but I don't have a university teaching job like many of them do. And I need to be in the woods with my work in order to keep inhaling and exhaling— and then one year I was—I was in Japan when the conference was and another year I was—I was installing some major work. So I go when I can.

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds like *Woodworking Magazine* may have been—was that significant to you or were any periodicals significant in the development of your work?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, you know whose writing I like is Janet Koplos's.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And Janet did something for me that was—that was so generous. When Patrick Dougherty had been to Japan and I knew that she knew Patrick and I didn't know Patrick.

And so I wrote to her and I said, "Janet," oh and I met her—actually we shared a train ride in New York kind of by accident after a furniture conference that we were both on a panel together for one of the panel discussions after someone's lecture. And I mean I had been reading her stuff. I had never met her before. But I liked the way she thought and very clearly about things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It's not just art-speak.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: It's not just verbiage to fill a page. I mean, she really has an idea. And she thinks about many different things. And I like that too. It's that sort of diverse education that she has that's so good. So we shared this train ride back to Manhattan after the conference and sort of I realized then that that's how—that she knew Patrick Dougherty and that he'd been to Japan.

So then when I got the fellowship, I wrote to her. And she said, "Oh," she said, "I would love to be helpful." And she spent a lot of time in Japan, visiting Tokyo and stuff. And she said, "When Patrick was going," she said, "I wrote something for him." She said, "Why don't I just find it and give it to you?" And I said, "That would be great."

I got, his 36-page letter: "You're going to be at the international house. You go out the front door. You turn

left. You go down the hill and there's a bus there and it'll take you over here and you change the bus there. And you'll get to this paper gallery that is just fabulous." The whole letter was like that.

So you could be a total ignoramus, unable to read anything in Japanese and you could find the way from her description. It was amazing. She must have a mind like a steel trap. It was so generous. And Nancy and I just had the best time with her instructions. It was like having a tour guide. It was all written out.

And so her letter was actually an introduction to Tokyo that we would have never had otherwise. There was nobody there. The program has been downsized, downsized, downsized, downsized. And that was what we needed. And it was on that first day when we'd taken the bus and we were going back on the train that we met the man that taught us how to use the subway.

So if Janet hadn't given us the letter, we probably never would have done the bus. We would have tried to go on the train probably first. Or we wouldn't have gone where she sent us and we would have never met him, you know. So the path is very circuitous. So her writing has always been important to me I think because of the connection that it made. And not just that but because you have that connection then you pay attention to what the person is saying.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: So you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Anyone else come to mind in terms of writing or—

MR. MONTEITH: No, not really.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, now that's not true. There is a book by a Japanese author called *In Praise of Shadows*. I don't know if you're familiar with that by Jun'ichiro Tani.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm not.

MR. MONTEITH: He is—he's a writer and I have the book on the shelf.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll look for that.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, *In Praise of Shadows* is the title of the book.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I read that book probably once every couple of years. And then there's another writer who is an American but lives in Japan and wrote a very small book called *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designer, Poets, and Philosophers*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, I know that book.

MR. MONTEITH: By Leonard Koren.

He also wrote another book called *Undesigning the Bath*. And it appears when you're reading them that it's about the objects that he's writing but it's not. Even the bath one is about his fixation with Japanese baths, I'm sure, but not just Japanese baths, all around the world, Turkish stuff, and everything about public baths.

And of course after having been in Japan, I am, wishing Lake Ann, Michigan, would get a public bath. It's a wonderful thing. It's a wonderful thing as an institution. And I just—I feel like a culture without one is deprived. The Finns have their saunas, you know, that—there are many Finnish people in Northern Michigan that—and if you're going to build a house you have to build the sauna first or the carpenters won't come.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And it's sort of like that because this is sort of the basis of the community. And when I first went to Hokkaido, they have a wonderful volcanic-heated—so it's free hot water, right, in a public sento. The town got together, levied a bond issue tax on themselves to build this hot springs resort in the town.

And when I first went there with Kiichi, I realized here we are, everybody's naked. Nobody has their badge of "my clothes are better than your clothes," right? Everybody's in their birthday suits—little tiny children, very,

very old people all there together. And the doctor, the lawyer and the Indian chief are no different than the truck driver.

And there's just something wonderful about it. It's sort of like a form of democracy that we don't have when we have unis. And anyway, *Undesigning the Bath* is a good book for that as well. And *In Praise of Shadows* talks about the importance of light. And light has always been important to me too. I think that's how I got interested in doing the lanterns. And about looking toward the light which was actually the title of the exhibition I had at the Midland Museum after I got back from Japan in '99.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the lamps because that's one—we haven't talked about them yet.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay, we haven't talked about them yet.

MS. RIEDEL: And those started in '99 as well after Japan?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So the frameworks were of willow that I collected in Japan. And I built these lanterns by learning about how the lacquer worked as a structural medium, like Mother Nature's fiberglass and with natural fibers and the natural resin and how you could bond things together.

And I was fixated with how they—took a joint that you would have had to architecturally build really nicely and just turn it into stone. It was just wonderful. And well, I kept doing so many of these things that I never got anything completed. So when I brought them all home at the end of the time, the six months that I was there, I finished them in the studio here and had an exhibition at the Midland Center for the Arts in Michigan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And the title of the exhibition was *Looking Toward the Light* because with a lantern you're not necessarily lighting your room.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But it becomes a point of attention, like a candle would be. Many of them—of course, originally they were candlelit. And this—the book *In Praise of Shadows* talks about this fellow who is very—who's a writer who's very fixated by aesthetic questions.

And he's going to design his house. And he just agonized over everything. He'd like to have a traditional house but it's not very convenient to him. And what kind of light is appropriate? And low light in a Japanese house he realized was really, really important. You have these huge verandas that keep this hot sun out. And you have these deep interior spaces with a fire pit in the floor. And the light is from the fire.

And there's smoke that's going up through the roof. There's no chimney. It's just going up through the roof. And the smoke is keeping the vermin out of your thatch and all those things. But all those things contribute to the light and the subtleness of the light. So you're evaluating very, very slight changes in things.

When I got thinking about that, the paper and the lanterns and the way you overlap and join a piece because it won't fit and the torn edge and the way it halves the amount of light that comes through it and looking at that, it's like a painting. But it's not a painting. It's a light experience to your eye. So it's coming directly through this semitransparent thing. And is that what my furniture is like? It's a semitransparent thing, too.

So this interest in the things that are brought to us in a semitransparent way is important to me. And really isn't the physical universe kind of a semitransparent thing? We just think of it maybe as too solid. And we're learning. The people in CERN are helping us learn that things are not as opaque as they appear. So this *Looking Toward the Light* was an interesting idea. And I love the idea of multiple layers of different materials influencing the light that is coming to us as it's coming to us.

When we do a painting, the light is going to the painting and it's reflected back into our eye. With the lantern, the light is coming through the physicality to us. And in a way, isn't that what we're doing when we're developing an understanding is we're seeing through the thing that's material into its organizational true identity?

So the lanterns become metaphors for what's happening in our life even though we're not necessarily paying attention to it and I love the idea that that would be a focus of a tea room or even a much bigger space in a home where that light isn't—that isn't bringing you light to read by. But it's more like the sun god, Amaterasu,

that started the whole universe in the Shinto belief and that the Ise Shrine is dedicated to.

Well, in the Shinto concept, I don't know if you're familiar with it, but the sun was causing the world to go along and be regenerated as it does. And then there was a famine of light. The sun went away. And the sun had to be coaxed back out of her—from behind her cloud, after the storm, after the flood, whatever it was and was coaxed out by showing her her beauty in a mirror. And the mirror still exists that started the world in the Shinto religion. And it's enshrined at the Ise Shrine.

So every 21 years the shrine is completely torn down, cut up in little pieces, sold off as souvenirs. And there are two building sites at Ise and they're exactly the same size. One is torn down and the new one is built. And it's absolutely all raw, pure materials.

I think I heard that there were 230,000 craftsmen all over Japan that contribute to that building. It is the ultimate make-work, national works program. And they don't have to wait for a depression to have it. It's been in their culture from the beginning because the craftsmanship, the craftsmen and artisans' work is valued as part of the society's cultural worship.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: It's a worshipful activity to be a craftsman, which I always felt inside me. And I think that's what I was relating to there. And you almost feel here kind of like, well, you have to kind of keep that as a secret. People think you're—as one of my mother's favorite malapropism women said, "It's so egotistical."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: But it's not.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: It's just paying attention. And it's kind of interesting. My friend Oya [sp], who is an artist, deliberated and deliberated about what to do when he graduated from school. And he came here. And he wanted me to tell him what I thought he ought to do. And of course I wasn't going to tell him. But we had great discussions about it.

And he ended up—I said, "Well, who would you really like to work for if you could have this job, your ideal job?" Well, he would like to work for this company that's the number one temple—or teahouse architect company. They have three divisions. One does architecture. One does furniture. And one does what they call accessories, the lanterns and all of this.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: But the company is very old. It's very prestigious. And they did the new imperial guesthouse at the emperor's home in Kyoto. So, you know, that's the level we're dealing with, which by the way is all lighted with laser lanterns. Unbelievable.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: Just unbelievable of the ultimate high-tech stuff. I have a magazine with images from that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'd love to see.

MR. MONTEITH: Anyway, he said, "But you have to work someplace else, like, for 12 years as an apprentice." And he was just a college kid. In the tradition, you don't come out as a college kid and get a job working in a situation like that. And I said, "Well, I know it sounds terribly American but if you're not going to ask, you're not going to get."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: "Just go for it, go make an appointment with the president of the company and lay it out and tell him this is what you'd like to do." And so he did and he got the job. And the first project that he did was the big lantern over the emperor's bed at the new imperial guesthouse.

And he also had to do one that was two-thirds the size for the number two bedroom. And the first person who slept in the imperial guesthouse was not the emperor. It was George Bush on a state visit to Kyoto. And he wrote to me and he said, "I hope his being the first to sleep under my lantern doesn't dent my karma." [They laugh.] So it was kind of interesting. —

MS. RIEDEL: Doesn't dent my karma. I like that.

MR. MONTEITH: It's been very, very interesting how that has worked out because the company is in serious difficulty because of the economic situation. And they have a large group.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Their architectural crew is a serious number of people. And he works in the accessory division. And oh, how this came up was the Ise thing. When I was there last year, they are working on the next Ise installation. And they were building an umbrella about this big that is carried over the mirror as it is taken from the one to the new one. And this thing was sugi and bamboo.

And one of the fellows that I had met that works with Oya [sp] there was playing with, like, a violinmaker's plane, you know, this little tiny plane about this big, the end grain of bamboo that was sticking through the cedar. And the plane shavings were so fine that—and they had—it was cold. It was in December.

And there were heaters in the room. And the shavings would come off and they would float across the heat from the heater, float across the room. And I mean, I feel like—I feel like my planes are coal chisels to compared to that man's planes. It was just—it was like a religious experience the making of this object.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONTEITH: And this is going on all over Japan. And the people who have to find the trees that are going to be the posts for the next building, these are timber guys, right? And they're out literally searching the forest on foot all over looking for the right piece of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And I thought that's very similar to what I was doing with my cedar porches.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: And I thought, "I totally relate to that," you know. But people here think of it as an economic activity rather than a cultural identity activity. But that is where our cultural identity is expressed and carried along is through the work of our artists and craftsmen and musicians and dancers and theater. It's all part of the same thing. And that's why I don't want to see it get reduced to the lowest common denominator.

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't really gone into any detail of the urushi work and that maybe this would be a good time to do that.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: We touched on the lanterns but maybe we could talk about both.

MR. MONTEITH: Right. When I mentioned Kofushiwaki-san was here and he tried to show me some things and I realized it was really pretty complex and there was no way I was going to know. We actually kind of got laughing about it, like, to tell you in an afternoon how to do urushi is just kind of really a joke.

MS. RIEDEL: And was there anyone else in the States doing this work that you were aware of?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I looked for somebody. And I couldn't find anybody except there was a man in New York who was very old and he used urushi to do restorations on Chinese and Japanese furniture.

MS. RIEDEL: Purely restoration?

MR. MONTEITH: Just restoration things. But he knew and understood stuff. So I don't know how I found him and I don't remember his name, but by the time I got to him or found out who he was and stuff, he was very old and I think he got sick and went back to be taken care of by family in Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: So I never really found anybody. And then Kofushiwaki-san went back and told Kurimoto that he thought I would like to come and learn more.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And that's how— that's how I got to go. And I didn't really understand until I got to the university that the lacquer didn't dry, that it actually is catalyzed like epoxy is catalyzed. You have two parts—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —that interact. And it is catalyzed by moisture at a certain humidity density, not too hot, not too cold, not too damp, just right.

MS. RIEDEL: One quick question because when you look at this transition from the outside, the urushi looks so different from the bent willow work. But was it the material itself that was compelling to you in the same way that the willow had been? What was the—what drew you in the first place?

MR. MONTEITH: It was just like— it was jumping out of the—out of the world and just grabbing onto me and saying, "Come look at me."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And I thought initially—I thought that it was the intellectual concept of this is an all-natural material that evidently works and would supersede this toxic stuff that we shouldn't be dealing with. We shouldn't be making it. I mean, the process of distilling it is bad for everybody that works with it and the environment and everything else.

I thought, "Well, this would be a way to sort of elevate the purity of what you're doing." So then after I started working with it and saw how it works, which is tricky but almost magical. It so speaks to me when I open a tube of urushi and I smell it in the room, I get all excited.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And it kind of smells like a cross between cow manure and silage. You know the pickled smell of corn silage? I don't know if you're familiar.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know it but—

MR. MONTEITH: Farmers will store chopped corn, the whole plant with the cob and the kernels and everything. And then it ferments which allows it to be kept. It makes a pickle. And then that's what they feed to the cows in the winter—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —was the traditional thing. That's what the silo next to the barn was for.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, that has a very, very distinctive organic smell as is the cow exhaust. And if you blend those two together, that's a similar—well, there's the ammonia attack on your nose that's kind of a sharp sensation and it's a similar kind of thing. And once it becomes part of your experience and the experience was delightful, it's like smelling a delicious perfume of somebody you really liked and you're reminded even though it's on someone else.

And the lacquer does that for me. It really—it really does. And at the university there are some trees that they have planted right along the edge of campus that they actually bleed and they grow them to show the students how it works.

And I'd go up there and I'd see those trees, and they're not bleeding. They're just growing there. But they're—it's like as thrilling to me as these pink phlox. And it's kind of a mundane tree, but it just speaks to me and for good reasons, you know. And I feel good about being there. I's sort of like when somebody's speaking your language. So that's the way I feel about them.

So I went to the university and actually got to sit in on the lectures. It was wonderful because I went there at the beginning of the school year, so I got in on the real foundational things that Natsuki Kurimoto was teaching. And I also found out that it's not just the perfect temperature and humidity, although that's important, but there's another way to cure the lacquer. And that's that it catalyzes with protein so that if you mix the raw lacquer with tofu, which is, you know, soybean protein, it will turn to stone. And it cures from the inside out. It doesn't dry from the outside in. To see that happen was totally different experience than if you had tried to explain that to me; I don't know, maybe I wouldn't have even believed you, you know—[laughs]—because it just sounds too weird.

And then traditionally, in Japanese culture, they use rice paste, tofu, rice paste, wheat paste—paste just because the moisture with the paste that you make with the wheat paste or the rice paste, or potato starch, too, that moisture helps the catalyzing action merge together where— you could do it with just the raw—the raw rice

powder, but it works better if it's—if it's [paste].

And how much? How do you do this? Well, no one ever said it's a teaspoon of this or an ounce of that. You do it on a palette. And you have a lump of this and then you put it in and you stir it till it's the right consistency and it feels right with this special piece of wood that's a spatula called a hera. And you have to know how to prepare this piece of wood that you stir it with. I've been working with this now ever since '99.

One of the fellows that I met,Uchiyama-san, through the university—he's actually a friend of Oya's [ph]—came to visit last summer. And he came, and he looked at my mixing sticks that I'd been using. And he said, "Oh, Clifton, these aren't right." I said, "What do you mean, they're not right? " He's a real, real serious right-and-wrong kind of guy. And he said, "Well, they don't bend right." And I said, "What do you mean, they don't bend right? They work fine. I mix this stuff all the time." And he makes these beautiful bowls out of folded pieces of paper just coated over and over and over again, and he doesn't use a brush. He brushes the lacquer on with this piece of wood. And the piece of wood has to be the right thickness and the right bendiness to press the viscosity of the lacquer that's just right. And it goes across like that.

So he showed me in 10 minutes how to prepare this piece of wood—it's just a wooden spatula—so it could be different for every situation—10 minutes, he showed me. I tried to observe everything that I could observe, and I never saw anybody, so—

[End of disc.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Right before we took a break for lunch, you were describing that new tool for spreading lacquer.

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And how you had the wrong tool for all these years.

MR. MONTEITH: [Laughs.] Well, I had the right tool. I just didn't have it tuned right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Kind of like sharpening a plane or a chisel at the wrong angle. And but with a wooden tool that's called a hara—H-A-R-A—and—only you have to say it like you're angry, "Hara!" And Uchiyama said, "Well, that's how I put the lacquer on my paper bowls, no brush but with this like a spatula." And he said, "Your spatula," he didn't say it was stupid.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: But I think it was something like—it was dumb or a retarded kind of thing. It wasn't flexible enough to put on a good finish. Well, I didn't realize that that made so much difference. I was just thinking of it as a tool for mixing the lacquer on the palette and not for applying it, although I'd used the tool for applying.

But I didn't realize what a difference applying would make. So he showed me about sharpening the tools so that it was variably flexible, more flexible at the end, a little bit more flexible—less flexible as you got further and further up the handle. And I tried it and I couldn't believe it. It was just like this whole brand new thing, same material and all but was a little bit more cut away. And it was great. I loved it.

So I tuned up some more and it was so exciting. And I immediately when I went through New Hampshire told it to my friend Terry who I'd been teaching lacquer to, "Look at this great new thing I learned." And he was very excited about it. And it was very interesting. And then after I got home and was by myself again and was fiddling with the tool, I realized it's the same response as a willow twig. It's thick at the end and as it grows out and becomes thinner, it's more flexible at the end.

And it's that sort of asymptotic curve that you get from the spiral. And those things are just so kind of exciting in a way and yet they seem very, very abstract. But when it comes down to a tool in your hand that you're feeling in response to an organic material, all of that is kind of extra special magic that I don't feel when I'm using a cold chisel and a hammer. I know that blacksmiths do. But I'm not a blacksmith I guess. So that was really a great lesson.

MS. RIEDEL: How did—how did the collaboration with the felt work with Jorie Johnson come about?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, that is very interesting point relative to what lacquer is about. In '94, we rented Jorie's house while she was gone and stayed. Then in '99 we were able to do it again when we went back.

And by this time, we'd gotten to know Jorie because the first year she was only there for about a week with us,

took us to the grocery store and told us what was in those cans we couldn't read and stuff. And then she left and the rest of the time we were on our own. So we didn't have really any connection to anybody there. Did I tell you how we met Jorie?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-mmm. [Negative.]

MR. MONTEITH: All right. So we didn't have a place to stay. I knew we wanted to stay in Kyoto. And Walter Mondale was ambassador to Japan at the time. And so who better to call but Joan of art. [Joan Mondale],

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And so, she doesn't know me from Adam, right, but I knew that she could be helpful.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so, I wrote to Joan and I said I had gotten this grant, I wanted to live in Kyoto, I didn't know anybody. I didn't know where to look. I need a place to live. I'd like to have a place that I could live and work, and all these things as an artist. And so she wrote right back.

And she said, "Oh, congratulations on getting the grant and everything. I know you're going to have a wonderful time doing all these great things." But she said, "Frankly, I haven't a clue nor would I know how to." But she said, "Or how to get a clue," but she said, "But, there is this really nice couple who are our consul in Kyoto."

They had a consul in Kyoto at the time, and, "Chris Ward and his wife Saaraliisa Ylitalo, here's their phone numbers. Just call them and talk to them and say that I sent you and I will send a copy of this letter ahead." So I called them. I got Chris on the phone. And he said, "Oh my gosh," he said, "if there was a place like that, do you know how many people would want it?" he said, "That I already know in Kyoto."

And he said, "But I'll see what I can do and I'll let you know." Well, I don't think it was an hour and he called back. And he said "My wife, Saaraliisa, is a textile artist and she knows this woman, Jorie Johnson, who is also a textile artist. And she has a great big house that she sometimes will rent to someone she knows when she goes away in the summer because she does workshops in Europe and Scandinavia and then goes to Mongolia because she works with felt."

And he said, "I'll have Saaraliisa ask Jorie if she's going to be away. Would that be something that you might be interested in?" And I said, "Sounds good." So I'm not sure Jorie really wanted us to do it, kind of was risky because she didn't really know us. But frankly, I think it was because Joan had asked Chris.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Everything worked out perfectly. She has this kura, the storage building. And there's this little raised stone walkway between the two buildings, between the house and the kura. And it was just the right height for kneeling Japanese style and using the walkway as my bench.

And I worked in the garden. And it was the hottest summer that they'd ever had in Kyoto, the hottest summer on record. And I had this beautiful old plum tree that hung over my stone bench. It was just so romantic. And it was right on the Uji River.

And our bedroom was on the second floor overlooking her beautiful garden and out to the Uji River. We hadn't been there but a couple of days. When two white egrets came flying in the morning over the garden and out to the river. And I thought, "This'll do. This'll do." [They laugh.] And it was such an impossible place to find and it was perfect. So when we went back in '99—

MS. RIEDEL: And you had it for two months and then—

MR. MONTEITH: Six months.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh you had it for six months?

MR. MONTEITH: A whole six months.

MS. RIEDEL: She was gone for six months?

MR. MONTEITH: We were about a week-and-a-half in Tokyo.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And we spent all the rest of the summer there. Well, actually she came back in the fall and that's when we really got to know her more.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh so there was room for everyone.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh yeah, the house is huge.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh you lived there at the same time as she was there.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. MONTEITH: And we had the rooms upstairs, offices. There were actually two rooms with big sliding screens between and we entertained. We had people come stay over with us there. Even after she came back.

And we were able to introduce her to other Japanese artists that she didn't know even though she lived there for over 20 years because we were going in a different direction. And some of those people have become very important people for her to have known, which was nice.

And there was little room off those two rooms that I had as an office that I sat at a desk and wrote every day. And this was before I had a computer. And I would write up stuff that we had done because every day we went to a different temple garden or a shrine.

And then I had people here in the United States that wanted to know what I was doing. Well, now you'd write a blog or you'd send them an email or whatever. But this was too soon for that. I realize now it wasn't that long ago.

MS. RIEDEL: No, it wasn't at all.

MR. MONTEITH: So every couple of weeks I sat down and I wrote out—printed in my little printing and writing as much as I could get on two pages and I took them down to the 7-Eleven and I double-sided copied—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Our local 7-Eleven in Kyoto had a double-side copy machine and I made these "Dear all" letters and sent them home. And then people would write back and say what they found interesting.

And it was sort of like a hand crank blog. And it was miserably misspelled and everything else. And I decided that what we were doing and what we were seeing and the experiences we were having, they were too good to be self-conscious about. So I just did it.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have copies of all of those?

MR. MONTEITH: I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Those would be perfect.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, especially with the creative spelling. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And the letters that came back were interesting too. And some of them—some of the people that got these letters were out of my generation. They were people who were maybe related to my family, people older than even my own parents. And some of these people, even my parents and my grandparents, had very bad ideas of the Japanese—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —and of Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And my father's mother always referred to the Japanese as "Japs." My dad didn't do that. But when I told him I was going to Japan, his response was, "Well, what would you want to do that for?"

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: Which is maybe I'm sure the reason that that beautiful old book with the wooden—first frontispiece never got transferred to my dad's collection of books. It just—it's just wasn't something you saved.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And so, the amazing thing was to see their attitude change—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONTEITH: —because it was me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: You know, it was okay if I thought it was okay. And for my folks it was a really big change in their attitude.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

MR. MONTEITH: And you realize that is why we have these cultural exchange things.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure, of course.

MR. MONTEITH: It's not about the artwork.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: That's just the medium through which minds change, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. MONTEITH: So that was a good thing.

MS. RIEDEL: What a powerful experience to see personally on that kind of level with your own family—

MR. MONTEITH: With your own family.

MS. RIEDEL: —and to see—and to see their minds change.

MR. MONTEITH: And you know, it doesn't ever hit home as well as that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yeah. And to their credit, they were willing to change their minds.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. In fact, the woman that I was telling you about, ego-testical, her word, she was one of those people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And I think maybe she enjoyed the "Dear all" letters better than anybody.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And she would send you recipes that she had enjoyed in her letter back, about you add these ingredients as if we're cooking. [They laugh.] I mean, here we are but here's a good idea, and you stir them until they're the right constituency. [They laugh.] And I thought, "Oh there's a political lesson."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes. That's great. We're making good progress here. And you know, one thing we have not touched on at all is the working process.

MR. MONTEITH: Oh—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, please.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, we have to back up a bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: Because about the lacquer and how it—about meeting Jorie, that's how we met Jorie. And then we went back and she was willing to let us come again—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: —even though that year I don't think she was gone quite as much, but almost, you know. But we knew we could get along with each other even though we're very different kinds of people. We knew how to do it and we practiced.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So that worked well. Then I came home after the lacquer work and had the show at Midland and finished—before the show at Midland, actually, I finished the first piece that I actually ready for show-and-tell. Some of the professors and the graduate students at the university were having an exhibition at a beautiful gallery in the Gion district in Kyoto.

And they said, "Clifton, do you have any of your lanterns done? Would you like to come and bring one of your lanterns or if you can't come send it for the exhibition." Well, I hadn't been home all that long. And going back was kind of a hard thing to do. But I did it anyway. And I was so glad that I did.

And I realized after—that was only about six months after we had returned. In fact, it wasn't that long. It was December when we came back in September. I had just finished the one piece. It was one that was the closest to being done.

So I went back and when I went back at that time it was the first time I had realized that I was going to be going back, that it was as if this was sort of part of my—it was sort a part of home. You know, it wasn't like in another home, but it was a conceptual part of home. And there was something that I was getting from being there that it would be worth going again to be renewed.

So now, when I go for just a couple of weeks or three weeks or whatever I can manage, I'm getting that thing even if I never saw any of my friends, which of course there's no possible way you could go and not see them. But there's something about being there that is good. And in '99 when I was there by myself—Nancy had not gone with me and—

MS. RIEDEL: This was for the six-month—

MR. MONTEITH: For the exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh for the exhibition.

MR. MONTEITH: For the exhibition at the Kyoto Konishi Gallery, which is still there and thriving. It's K-O-N-I-S-H-I. And it's in a beautiful old geisha house that was, you know, redone by the woman who is the gallery owner. She was an ikebana teacher. And she has great interest in ceramics and other artwork too and unbelievable design sense. She's a good picker.

I've never seen anything in there that I wouldn't have liked to have brought home that kind of thing. While I was there Jorie and I were having dinner in Jorie's kitchen. And Jorie said, "Well," she said, "I never really liked lacquer." She said, "It's all kind of shiny and it sort of looks like plastic."

And she said, "Your lantern doesn't look like that." She said, "It's much earthier." And I said, "Well, I like the textures, the way it can come out when it reacts with the other materials." And she said, "What do you mean reacts with the other materials? I don't really understand how it works."

And then I was trying to explain to her that it's either the moisture in the warmth that catalyzes the reaction or it's protein—like tofu or rice paste. And Jorie says, "Well, wool is protein." And I said, "Well yeah, I guess it is." She said, "Well, do you think that the protein in the wool would catalyze the lacquer?"

And I said, "Well, I don't know. Nobody ever did it, you know." And I said, "But being the crazy American, why not?" So it took me five years to figure out how to do it and a lot of experimenting. And the first bowls that we tried, I have a picture of myself holding the first five bowls on a board.

MS. RIEDEL: I think I've seen that photo. Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It's with that silly hat that Matthew brought me back from Paris.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And those she shrunk-fit the felt over a ceramic bowl she just happened to have in her kitchen and sent me the felt and then I did these experiments on, some of which were dastardly failures. And finally I got it to work. And so then with my friend from Emma Lake, Andrew Curle, who lives in Elliot Lake, Ontario, who

is a wonderful wood turner.

He came down here and worked with me at my lathe in here and I designed the forms. He turned them out of wood. We packed them all up and shipped them to Japan.

Then Jorie shrunk her felt that she was making—to the bowl forms and shipped those bowls back to me here and then I lacquered the insides and brought them up and over to make the lip and reinforce the lip. And the one that the Cooper-Hewitt got for their permanent collection is from that original group. It's one that did not get damaged in the trip.

MS. RIEDEL: In the Homeland Security debacle.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah. So we had this show first in Tokyo.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it clear from the start that you were going to collaborate on tea bowls?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, they're not tea bowls.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh they're not?

MR. MONTEITH: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And some of them— unfortunately some of the bigger ones that are like this big—

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think I've seen those.

MR. MONTEITH: —they're still in the broken-repair stage. But—oh, I have a joke that I make when I do my show-and-tell about, our life takes us in strange sort of directions. And we often don't know where we're going to end up.

And I show this picture in my slideshow of me standing in a ditch with all these willows growing around me and the line is, "We all want to be outstanding in our field, we just don't know which field that's going to be necessarily." And that's—in life that comes in many ways.

And so Jorie said, "Well, then let's call the exhibit *Out Standing in the Field*. And so what we did was she worked in extraneous fibers, like pieces of grass and pieces of hemp, fibers into the wool and it became—in fact, the one that the Cooper-Hewitt has is one that has some of the most, outstandingly strong extra fibers, showing in the felt. She even felted in some of those leaves that have been acid-etched so that all the chlorophyll and the fleshy parts of the—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: —leaves are gone and it's just like a skeleton?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, if you use fine enough merino wool, it will felt right through the holes in the leaves and it will actually become part of the felt. And then those were shrunk onto the bowl forms, too. It's sort like field detritus got into the wool felt and we were finally "outstanding in our field." [They laugh.]

And that was in 2004, so it took from '99 to 2004 to get it figured out so that it would work and I could actually produce a group of work. And that was tremendous investment on my part because I had to keep doing all my regular work and doing this stuff that I knew no one was going to buy. In Japan, it freaked everybody out. One of the people that came to the show in Ginza there said, "Who told you you could do this?" like that was a criticism. Well, where's the precedent for this? Where is the historical work that said that this is a way that lacquer can be used?

Since then, I've kind of decided there is a little bit of history, not necessarily in wool felt, but hardening fabric and paper and leather as part of samurai armor.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that makes sense.

MR. MONTEITH: So it's sort of like I've gone back and found in historical context, I've found ways to answer that question in case I get thrown that again. You know, there is a tradition for it. And what it is, is if you have a need, you look what you have around you to work with and you make art out of shit if you have to! And that's

sort of how the wool lacquer came about. That whole project came out of trying to explain to Jorie how the lacquer worked.

So the act of explaining became a creative process. And I think that that is really important for our sort of lifelong continuing education.

MS. RIEDEL: That actually makes me think of something we were discussing over lunch that I wanted us to touch on now, which is one aspect of the commission's process, it enables you to try something completely new —if you get—

MR. MONTEITH: If—with the right commission, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And I've been so fortunate to have some people give me commissions to do things where the only limitation was it's got to work and fit the space and please come up with something interesting. And that's awonderful gift. And in the process of doing that, I have tested my limits. And maybe the first piece didn't work. I'd have to break it a couple of times before I got one that worked. Or I didn't like it after I tried the new thing.

But then when I go and do a workshop, I've tried this thing, because somebody has invested in this commission that has brought me the luxury of expanding my limits, and then I can say to the people who take my workshop, "Go ahead, try that, it's going to break. I've done it six times." Or like the process that I did with the first tables, I built the legs and the frames and tried to make a flat surface on the top, did that a whole bunch of times. Then, when I did a workshop with table students, I said, "Look, we're going to skip the three years of stupidity that it took me to figure out that we're going to build the top first and put the legs under it." But that came from all that experimentation that went before. And the wealth of the commission was not the money that came to me to be able to live through the experience of building the piece, but the wealth went through me to the person that I could then share what I learned. And then it goes out into the world, like a great big wave and it's not limited by, a financial constraint.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think—to me, one of the things that's so interesting about that is because you make a living as a studio artist and you—and you're not supplementing your income with a full-time teaching position or any regular part-time teaching position—because you're a full-time studio artist and much of your income has come from these commissions, to think about those commissions as also just a way of advancing education in your field or your particular technique, which then is passed onto all the students that you would encounter in your workshops around the country and internationally and I'd never heard anybody describe that sort of byproduct of a commission as an education, in advancing education or technical skill, conceptual skill. It's interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: I have always thought that way, which is one of the reasons that I want to do the workshops. I enjoy them, as an enjoyable experience. I like being with other people when I spend so much time alone. So it's sort of like the busman's holiday kind of thing, but I think it's really important.

And I'm thrilled to be rich enough to be able to pass that along. A fellow that—who will remain nameless—who happens to be also a furniture-maker—said to me when we were at one of the Furniture Society conferences, he said, "Well, how did you do thus and so?" And I told him. And he said, "Well, you don't tell people in your workshops that, do you?" And I said, "Well, of course." And he said, "Well, yeah, but then it isn't your exclusive technique anymore." And I said, "Well, why would you give a workshop if you weren't trying to give away what you have learned?" What is the point of it? It's certainly not to get paid for the workshop. It's costing you to go to the workshop. [Laughs.] And so it's whole different motivation, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: And did he hear that? Did that change his mind? Or did he just think that was a crazy idea?

MR. MONTEITH: No, he understood that, but he felt as though he had a few secrets that were too precious to share and that if he shared them, there might be somebody with better technique out there with his secret, that they'd outdo him. And I said, "Well, maybe you're right about that." But you know, the kite rises against the wind. Cut the string, get rid of the tension and you don't have much lift left. And sometimes, if that's your fear, that is holding you back.

The ability to be grateful, to have the opportunity to give it away, everything is a gift. This other stuff we call financial arrangements and all that kind of stuff—that's just sort of like the casters underneath the real stuff that's being moved, because the real stuff that's being moved is not money. We could do a lot politically if we were to understand that more.

MS. RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed over the past two and a half decades? Or have they remained fairly constant?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, they've gotten broader, I think, well certainly, going to Japan was a big one, going to New Zealand and to Saskatchewan, which are two extremely different things. That was two. So I think it's sort of being a scattered, divergent kind of person. I think there's kind of two kinds of people: There are convergent thinkers and there are divergent thinkers. And I'm glad that I'm still capable at my age to keep diverging. [Laughs.] And my vision becomes wider and wider.

And I feel like I'm taking in more things, even though they may be in the same locations, not necessarily physical locations, but from plants and from natural relationships and environmental concerns. Those are still sources of information. But I'm looking at what's happening at CERN and I'm putting it with the hummingbird moth that I'm seeing in my garden and with the sticks in the orchard that I'm using in my work. And it's all a very much bigger picture than it was even a couple of years ago. But it's still from kind of similar sources, I guess. You have to have a limit somewhere. [Laughs.] But I think that's probably what mine is. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You haven't talked at all about your working process and I think it is important to note a few of those specifics. For example, that you don't work from drawings at all. We sort of touched on that—

MR. MONTEITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —but that's never been your process.

MR. MONTEITH: No, the only thing that, probably, I would do a drawing for would be to work out scale issues. And—which is one of the reasons I built the model for the Peabody Essex project was because I really liked the proportions of the old piece and I thought that would be my constraint, would be its proportions. So I built the little model and actually worked from it and measured from it, but I never do that. I'll just maybe do a dimensional thing so that it fits the space.

But then I'll think about the scale of something and then go hunting. And in hunting, quite often, I'll be looking for, you know, a size of material but not colors—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: — because I don't know what the colors are going to be until next year.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That's fascinating.

MR. MONTEITH: It also is a kind of a leap of faith. I don't know—I sent you the picture, but I probably didn't have any writing that went with it. There's a couple of chairs that are kind of rosy peachy color. The seat in the back and the arms on the chair and the big hoops that go around and form the frame of the back, they're all willow, they're all from the same plants. And the arms and the hoop around the back turned black when they oxidized. And the seat in the back turned to peach color. It's all the same plant. All cut the same day, everything.

MS. RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MR. MONTEITH: And how did it know to do that?

MS. RIEDEL: And it didn't—some peach, some black—

MR. MONTEITH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —all mixed in together?

MR. MONTEITH: No. No.

MS. RIEDEL: That's so interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: It's really interesting.

And the chair that the Chicago Art Institute has in their permanent collection, it's all kind of a rosy peachy brown color. And I didn't realize this until after I went to visit the chair when it was on exhibit at the museum. It had been in my studio. I had prepared for a whole show. So it was one of the earlier pieces from that group that was in the show at Carl Hammer's. And—so by the time it was actually out on the floor, in the museum, it was probably close to two years.

My son Matthew and I were down delivering something else and I said, "Oh, let's go by the museum and see it." And there was also a photography show— [laughs]—he wanted to see there too. So we stopped and went and looked at it and here the—I had a picture of it, a photograph, that was in its peachy color, but what I didn't realize is it wasn't even. The back—on the back, there's this peachy color and on either side of the center, there

are a few sticks that—all from the same plant—a few sticks that are slightly lighter than the others and they're perfectly symmetrical. And it was all brilliant green when I put it together. I had no idea—I didn't see it until two years later.

How does that happen? Why does it happen—it seems just beyond explanation like the black pieces in that one piece. And the very, very subtle change in the peachiness of it. That's one of the things that's so much different about working with the green wood, you never know where it's going, you know. You never know. And sometimes I have to know. And then I use old wood.

MS. RIEDEL: How does—how does the work evolve in the studio?

MR. MONTEITH: I have this idea. I go out and I look for material that's the right size. We do a lot of driving around, looking in the ditches. In fact I was already doing this when I met Nancy and she always felt as though I was a hazardous person to drive with—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: — because I was never looking at the road, I was always looking in the ditches. And she didn't think I couldn't drive fast until we went to New York City. And she said, "You're driving like a maniac in New York City. What is wrong with you? You're scaring me to death." And I said, "Well, there are no willows to look for." [Laughs.] "What's the point? Nothing to see." And I've gotten so I can see willows that are of my, maybe, liking, a mile ahead down the road, by their color and their texture and the way they reflect the light. There's so many things to know about plants that are your friends that you can spot them at a great difference—distance, sometimes by the way they move in the wind: These are good ones, these are not the ones I like, those are icky, those have bugs,. You can tell because you know them well.

So I go out and I collect the materials and then I bring them back and I sort them, small, medium, large, extra large, in between. And then, if I'm going to do a chair, I need 600 pieces to begin. So I'll take the small, medium, large. Well, the extra larges are this many. Well, I couldn't do that with those. But I got a lot of mediums and a whole bunch of smalls so how's this going to go? And then the chair grows out of what's available. And sometimes it's really hard because you really like this collection of sticks, but it's not quite enough or it wasn't quite enough for what you thought you had in mind. So what you had in mind has to change to fit what you have. And it's not even like a potter that can go out from the same clay pit and get another batch of clay that's pretty similar. It's really quite different.

MS. RIEDEL: And then can you harvest once a year only?

MR. MONTEITH: No. In fact, one of the things that I liked and discovered early on was, I would just cut enough for what I was going to do. So I might go back to the same plant and cut—maybe you only need 100 pieces for what I'm doing right now. And then I'd go back a month later and cut 100 pieces, another 100 or 200 for what needed to be done then.

And I realized that they changed different colors just between a month or two in when they were harvested. That's when I realized that it was how wet the year was, where the plant was located. There was one that was located near golf course runoff and if the golf course had a lot of rain, they fertilized more.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: The plant grew faster and it was—it was a different color than in a dry, slow year where they couldn't fertilize more or they would burn the grass.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's kind of interesting, all those things, how they work out.

MS. RIEDEL: And then in the studio—I love that we keep getting out of the studio.

MR. MONTEITH: Sorry. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Even though I like it. I think that tells us—I think tells us a lot.

MR. MONTEITH: So much of it has happened—[inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

How does it evolve in the studio?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, like you see over there in the corner, I have a bundle of twigs over there, I have a bundle of twigs over there. They're sort of talking to me about what's coming next.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I got a project that I've got to be working on the day you leave.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: [Laughs.] And I've been thinking about those two colors and the patterns that they're going to be. And then all of these surfaces—

MS. RIEDEL: Is it a chair? Is it a table? Is it—

MR. MONTEITH: No, it's actually—it's actually a bookcase kind of shelf—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: — that's not very big. It's going in the same small building that the wood box—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: — that's going to be in, as I explained. But I still don't know what I'm going to do with this and I've got to know pretty soon. But what I'll do is I'll take these and I'll lay them out, on the floor, on all these table surfaces. All these table surfaces are not for working on, but for laying out and examining what I have to work with. And then, like I said, when I get them green, I'll sort them, small, medium, large, extra-large, however many divisions look like it makes sense for. And sometimes that's a big job. If I have a whole U-Haul truck filled with 8,000 sticks—

MS. RIEDEL: Is that possible?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, yeah, many times. I will have to spend maybe more than one day just unloading the truck carefully so that things get all organized. And a lot of people think I'm not a very organized person, but there are some ways I'm very organized— [laughs]—because all the time you're sorting these things, you're working out what's possible with them, the way they feel, the texture. So I'll lay these things out in the studio, and then I'll realize, oh, okay, this is a relationship group; this is another relationship group. But now that I've got it out here, I know kind of gut-feelingwise, I have enough to do the whole concept. And then I'll pick them all up so I have enough room to work and organize them into little bundles and start— pick a place to start. And I'll just start, and when I get through this group, I open up a new group and lay that out and see how it fits. It's really an organic process.

MS. RIEDEL: That's exactly what I was thinking just listening to you talk about it.

MR. MONTEITH: And you can see why it would be impossible to do a drawing first.

M. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR MONTEITH: Because it is a drawing. The piece itself is the drawing. And the compound, complex curves that are generated by this process of working couldn't be described in a drawing anyway. It couldn't be described in a CAD program.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I actually have been thinking about that. You've never been tempted to try that?

MR. MNTEITH: Well, actually, I did a workshop at the Minneapolis College of Art, and they have some fabulous technical tools there. They have these little tools, you know, where you can—you can generate a three-dimensional object and just change its scale by typing into your computer. It's really quite amazing. But I have the computer already. Mother Nature grew it in the stick, and it's got all its potential for what it can do and what it can't do inside there. So you are making this compound, complex curve in physical reality. And you can take a photograph of it when you're done, or you can do a drawing of it when you're done. But those are both approximations of what it really is.

MS. RIEDEL: So interesting to me. I just came from an interview with Anne Wilson in Chicago, and you both are originally from Detroit. I think—

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, I didn't know Anne was from Detroit.

MS. REDEL: Yes, and I think the work probably couldn't be too much more different, but you both talked about

aspects of work as physical drawings. And so it's interesting to see how—just the different interpretation, the different ways—

MR. MONTEITH: Of what a physical drawing is, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, I like—

MS. RIEDEL: And the drawing is so much at the foundation of what you're thinking about and what she's thinking about, though comes completely different—

MR. MONTEITH: From—yeah— [inaudible]—

S. RIEDEL: Different places, and ends up different places.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. Well, I always liked the idea of drawing. Well, I love to draw, for one thing. You know, I showed you those pencil drawings that were hundreds of hours, you know, in the pencil drawings on the watercolor paper. And—

MS. RIEDEL: And very organic—

MR. MONTEITH: Very organic.

MS. RIEDEL: —content— [inaudible]—

MR. MONTEITH: And the drawings—

MS. RIEDEL: Very pattern-oriented.

MR. MONTEITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And when I do those drawings, they're quite often landscape-related. And I always refer to them as imaginary landscapes from life. So you start out from where you are—and I was doing those drawings before I was ever making bent greenwood furniture. But in a way, it's the same kind of thing because it's an imagination, but it's from life. So they're imaginary landscapes from life. And that's definitely an organic sort of drawing. And the idea of a drawing is to draftbut it's also to draw out.

And working, I was a graphic kind of person. That was my education. That was my experience. But when I started working with the physical objects as a drawing, I really felt like the object was not the thing that I was making. It was the medium, and the message was getting me outside, into the ditches. I spent so much time at a drawing board. And your world gets drawn in around you, and you're only working from things that are in your head or trying to interpret one that was in someone else's head, and then making it seem real to somebody else, where this was drawing from nature, and I was being drawn into nature.

So it was like inhaling and exhaling from nature as a form of drawing, and to me, it seemed not just sort of healthier, because I got out into the environment, although I think it probably was that too, but it also reminded me that, whether we're making a print or a drawing or a painting or a chair, that it's an inhaling and exhaling process. So you take the materials, you put them together, you give it to the client or the world, or maybe the client never looks at it again but somebody else will engage with it—so that's the sort of exhale. So it's kind of that yin-yang balance. It's not positive and negative, really, but it's inhale and exhale that is both being drawn in and then being drawn out by the things to put it together, and it gets drawn out again as it's expressed to whomever is being engaged.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. I've never heard anything described quite that way.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, you know, when you—when you work alone in the studio, you have a lot of time to think about what this foolish thing is you're doing. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Shifting gears completely for a moment, what sort of changes have you seen in the market?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I guess I have never been real market-related, although early on, marketing a whole lot of objects was pretty important because I wanted to be able to stay here.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, also market in the general sense of the world, you know—

MR. MONTEITH: Right. We had kind of a shock relative to that recently. The gallery where I first showed my work, the Tamarack Gallery—David tragically died of a heart attack just a few years ago while his wife and her sister were on a trip to Antarctica, and they couldn't even get back. They only have the one daughter, and she

had to deal with everything all on her own.

And David was, like I think I mentioned before, this really gregarious, great gallery person because he was really good at dealing with the public, who he may not even have had the greatest affection for, but they were part of his existence. [Laughs.] And he was really good at being gracious about that. And I didn't—I have always been grateful for what a gallery can do because it spares you. A lot of artists will whine about their 50 percent they have to give up to the gallery, and to me, it's like, hey, I just bought myself 50 percent of the time on the next piece, you know, because I didn't have to go and deal.

And David was great like that, and he loved meeting artists who would come to the gallery and try to sell him on their—the idea of showing their work. And they really didn't go to shows and look at other people's work, they just sat there and the work came to them, more than any other gallery person I've ever known. Maybe a couple of times they went out looking, but all the time I knew them, they didn't—they didn't go to shows, they didn't go to the Craft Council shows, nothing like that. They would see somebody's work that they really liked—some potter, someone's work they really liked—and then the potter would come and deliver stuff and they'd say well, who have you talked to? Who did you like—oh, I met this dollmaker down in Ann Arbor. This woman and her husband, they're totally off the wall. They make these dolls out of fish skins that they cured and yarn and stuff them and throw them together and they're fabulous. And David would say, great! What's their name? [They laugh.]

It was just like Jewish geography. Everything fitted together by who you know. And so this gallery just grew organically, and he had paintings, he had prints, he had my work, he had fine furniture, things that were sort of high spit shine things, he had glasswork, jewelry and all kinds of things. And it was in this little obscure, obscure place.

People would come in their boats, these huge boats. They would come down from wherever they were traveling—up and down from Chicago and come in just to make a stop to see David and Sally's gallery. And so their gallery had a following, and it's kind of like—there's another potter, Karl Spork, who actually was a graduate student at Michigan State when I was there and had the unfortunate experience of having Irwin Whitaker for my class.

And Karl, he's just a little bit older than me, I guess. And he—when he graduated, he wanted to be a potter. And he got married to a woman who had a job working for the phone company, and she had insurance. And it worked out perfectly. And he stayed at home, bought a farmhouse up here in Leelanau Peninsula, which is where he liked to be; this was the—his country. He traveled around a lot of places and this is what he liked.

Moved in, built a studio and made pots. And it's an old farmhouse he lives in and there's a granary next to the farmhouse, and he just made the pots and he put them in their granary and he put a sign out by the road "Pots Here" and put a "put your money in the box." And—well, it was probably—I graduated from undergraduate school in '68 and he was probably here by 1970, and he just recently retired. His son is doing ceramic tiles now. But all those years, that's what he did.

And one person bought a pot from him and—oh, he does this great blue glaze. You're going to love this blue glaze. And then they would tell somebody and they'd come through here on vacation, you know? And his clientele just kept expanding and expanding and expanding. Well, David and Sally Viskochil's gallery there did the same thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And I'm sure they ran a little ad in the paper that said the Tamarack Gallery, but they certainly didn't outdo themselves with advertising. And that was a really, really important thing to me to have this place. Every time I went up there, it seemed like there was some new artist that was showing something more berserk than the last time I was there, and yet beautifully done because they all fit with their sort of aesthetic concept. Not exactly sure where or how that ends up with what we were talking about.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, just how you've seen the market change—

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, the market change. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —or stay the same. Incline? Decline?

MR. MONTEITH: Nancy and I were up there—no, Nancy wasn't with us. It was Matthew and Margaret when they were here the weekend before you came. And we went for a drive up there and Matthew wanted to go visit some places that we had stayed when he was three, and wanted to take some pictures of those places.

So we were up there, and I said, do you mind if we stop at the gallery? I haven't been there in a couple of years

probably. And I went into the gallery and I was—oh, I was just devastated because I had been there maybe three years ago. Everything was the same. It was the same work because David's gone, Sally still owns it, I think, and they have a manager and they know what sells, and that's what they're showing.

And not to be critical because it's successful—and successful is important to a lot of people, not the least of whom the craftsmen whose work are being sold—but they're selling a ceramic coffee mug that the same artist is making exactly the same as 25 years ago. That would've never happened before, and I see more and more and more of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: It's sort of like the—I don't want to say it's the lowest common denominator, but there becomes a standard to which the most amount of money can be made for the easiest amount of labor that is still aesthetically design-pleasing. And that even is extending now to paintings. [They laugh.] I know this sounds crazy—do you know the work of Russell Chatham?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: Well, Russell Chatham is a landscape painter. I think he's from Montana maybe, or—and James Harrison*, Legend of the Fall*.

MS. RIEDEL: He wrote it?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, the book, the original that the movie was made from. Oh, shoot. Well, Nancy will know.

MS. RIEDEL: We can figure that out.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I'll ask that question of Nancy. She'll remember. Anyway, he lived just up here, just north of us. And he's written lots and lots of books. He's very famous. Anyway, he somehow—

[End of disc.]

CLIFTON MONTEITH: I met Russell Chatham and his books are a lot of them northern, you know, from Montana and out West and a lot of them involve sort of rustic locations and maybe even severe landscapes and things. And Russell Chatham does these beautiful paintings that are landscapes that are almost simplified. But the landscapes— but they're often of places that the landscapes are simplified. And Jim Harrison. But anyway, he liked them.

And so he bought them. He bought paintings and then he got Chatham to allow him to use paintings for his book covers and—because they fit in with his narratives quite well. And could even have been used by Hemingway, too if they were living in the same generation. But they're not. And I don't know Russell Chatham. But I have seen his work around here because of the connection to the writer, I think.

Well, it's become a local style, for God's sake. And there are all these people that are doing merchandise paintings in this style. And I can see this—when you talk about the change in the market, I never thought of as a painting relating to a market. But then, of course, I have a weird idea about that anyway.

But anyway, so I see that as a little bit disheartening in a way, especially in craft work when I see people not taking big risks. Dale Chihuly's glasswork is really interesting for what—his early work was especially I liked. A fellow who's a collector in Pennsylvania that I have done pieces for—Bob Pfannebecker—he has an incredible collection—you know Bob?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, he's a real piece of work. But Bob has Chihuly pieces that he bought from Chihuly I think when he was, like, in graduate school or something—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONTEITH: —which is how he does. He goes to every ceramic—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: —all the Alfred shows. He goes through and he always picks out the best people's work and then he has their first great piece, you know. Bob's got it in his collection. So I've done a couple pieces for Bob. And he pays you over six years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: And every month you get a check from him. And every month he gets a thank-you note back from you and it becomes a relationship and a correspondence. [Laughs.] But I like Bob. There's no one else quite like Bob. But anyway, he has some early Chihuly pieces that are really, really interesting. And now, where were we?

We were just at the Toledo Museum, I guess, and they have some amazing wads of Chihuly-ness. And one can be suffocated by Chihuly. And I always thought if you became that powerful and that notorious in your work, couldn't you take a little risk, do something that was really over the edge. But this business of the artist becoming an industry is a dangerous thing I think. You look at what's his name, Mr. Piss Christ—Andres Serrano.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh right.

MR. MONTEITH: The economics becomes part of the artwork. And I think that's kind of an unfortunate thing too. But those are market-related sensitiveness that I've always had a problem with. I think I got that—[doorbell rings].

I think I got that from early relationships with why it was a bad thing to be an artist because it was an economic risk not worth taking. You should be an engineer where you know you'd have a job and you could support your family and you could live in a nice place and you could travel. And you could meet interesting people. And these were all things that you needed great wealth for. And I have none of that. But yet life has been good.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you've actually got a lot of that.

MR. MONTEITH: Exactly. And it wasn't at all related to not taking the risk of being an artist.

MS. RIEDEL: I think we'll pause that and swap the disc.

[End of disc.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Clifton Monteith in the artist's studio in Lake Ann, Michigan, on July 12th, 2012, for the Smithsonian's Archives on American Art. This is card number five.

CLIFTON MONTEITH: Kakishibu has become a really important part of my work. It's an amazing material—also, once again, completely 100 percent organic product that has no—needs no synthetic accoutrements to its production at all. And it's a traditional Japanese material that was originally used to waterproof cotton garments for fisherman and for farmers, because they didn't have oil cloth, like we would have oil cloth. And there really isn't a good record of how old a material this is. It's made from fermenting green kaki, yes. [They laugh.] Green persimmons.

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm, right. [Affirmative.]

MR. MONTEITH: So the persimmon, when it's ripe, wouldn't work. You've got to get it when it's in its green stage. And it has a lot of tannin in its greenness. [And—oh, are hummingbirds out there?] And the persimmon get ground up, fermented, and they make this slimy, gooey, brownish, tea-colored—kind of like English tea-colored goo. It's a beautiful color. It's a color I just really like. And it's used as dye, too, just for the color. And it's very organic.

So I first saw some paper that had been treated with it. And I liked that it was made for stencil paper, notfor like quick stencils—heavy-stenciled paper, for long—many operations. That would be done with kakishibu, and then urushi.

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

MR. MONTEITH: Turns out the protein in the kakishibu catalyzes and bonds with the urushi. So some woodworkers would prime the wood with the kakishibu, and it would seal it up in kind of like a waterproofing, like you'd put on shellac. And then you could put on the lacquer—and it didn't take as much lacquer as if you put the urushi lacquer on at the beginning. You've got to invest a lot more lacquer. And it's very expensive, in the process. So it was a way of working with the lacquer, too.

So—I didn't really know I was ever going to be working with lacquer. And—but I liked the kakishibu. I liked the color. And I liked the idea of the light going through it. I had seen some fabric— noren, you know, the—noren is a fabric piece that hangs in a doorway when the doorway is left open. N-O-R-E-N. And there's a split down the middle. So you could leave your door open but you have privacy, and you can go through it. Well, some noren are painted—calligraphy characters of a season or a greeting or something—in kakishibu, or the whole noren might be dyed in kakishibu. And when I saw the light going through that I thought, oh, this is kind of cool. It's

kind of like Jell-O, if you can imagine light shining through a super-microscopically-thin sheet of Jell-O. So you're getting this almost stained glass on fabric. It wasn't at all glass-like, but it was bending the light. And I thought, oh, lanterns would be great out of that. And of course I'm looking at all these formal, white lanterns.

And then I found some kind of real rustic things that people had done that the wood, like vines and things, had been coated with the kakishibu to make the—pasted of our a whitewash—stick, because it was like proofing, like you would—like you would shellac something before you varnished it, so you had a better surface for contact. So I thought, why not do it right on the paper and shine the light right through the paper? So I got to get some kakishibu. Very expensive.

So I thought, well, maybe I can make kakishibu myself. And so I wanted to know how kakishibu was made. So I got Kaneda-san to call the dealer—I had found out who the dealer was and tell them this crazy American was here visiting, and could we come and see their factory where they made it, and could we learn about how it was made? And he said—the owner said "Yes, we could do this." So we went and had an appointment. And we went to the town, which is south of Kyoto, where they had this factory.

Well, it turns out that bitter persimmons, the ones that make the strongest kakishibu, are pollinators for the super sweet persimmons in orchards. They don't have an orchard of all the same tree, but the kakishibu company plants a few trees and tends them in orchards all over. So it's a big job to go and collect the fruit at the right time—you don't want them they're ripe, you know, and all of those things. So it's a really complicated thing.

They bring it back, they grind it up. And we got there—well, we did eventually get there. But on the way there, I was so excited about actually having this event, that I could have Kaneda-san translate. I was going to meet this guy. He agreed to tell me his which I had heard from mostly Western people that this was going to be hard, to get a Japanese person to tell you secrets. That's baloney. They're happy to—especially craftsmen telling other craftsmen, they're thrilled to have you be interested in what they're doing. I never found anybody who said they wouldn't tell me.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So—but I didn't know that then, so this was my first encounter.

So we go. We get on the train. We're going down. We're talking like crazy; Kaneda-san's English is very good. And we get to our stop, and we almost talk right through the stop. The train stopped, and I said, "This is it!" And here, we jumped up and we ran out of the train. And zoom, and the train went off. And my backpack—with all money, my passport, all my credit cards—everything was in this bag. And it is on the overhead rack in the train.

And I said, "Oh no, my backpack!" And I just screamed it out on the train platform. And this woman came running over to me and she said, "Are you Mr. Monteith?" And she was Japanese, and she was speaking to me in English. And I said, "Yes." She said, "Can I help?" I said, "I just left my backpack on the train." And she said, "Don't worry!" And she just ran off. And I thought, A, how does she know I'm Mr. Monteith—[they laugh]—and where did she go? There were so many people on the platform. I was so upset, I couldn't even see where she went, you know? And then Kaneda-san runs off after her, and I'm left there standing by myself.

She ran to the station master of the train stop where we were, got him to call the next train station, got the conductor of that train station to get on the train . By the time it got to the next stop, he got on, and holding my backpack, came back on the other track. Came across—it wasn't 15 minutes. He came out, he walked right up to me, and handed me my backpack and apologized for my inconvenience. [Laughs.] And it was like, whoa, now here's something for the travel section of the *New York Times*; you know, what better place to go? And I thought—and he hadn't talked to the woman. I didn't even know where she was. And here he is and he hands it to me.

And so then Kaneda-san comes back with the woman. And she said, "I'm very sorry, I have to go. He will tell you." And so while they'd been waiting with the train guy, and I didn't know where they were and everything, she is explaining to him: She was the company president's secretary—who spoke really good English, right? And she said she had this—I think it was a doctor's appointment or something—she had to go to. So she was on her way away from the company, getting on the train, when I happened to get off the train. Kaneda-san, when he called and talked to the president of the company, said, "Oh, this guy is really kind of an interesting character. He looks just like Santa Claus. He has a big white beard"— right?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So the company president thought this was really funny—anybody with a big white beard, you know? And he had told his secretary just before she left the office to go to the train platform when she saw me

screaming, I left my backpack on the train!" [Laughs.] She said, "Are you Mr. Monteith?" And I mean, what are the chances, you know? What are the chances? And I had my bag, and we weren't even late for our appointment.

So—and then when we got there the president said, "You know, I got thinking about— since you were coming," he said, "we made a videotape of the process, thinking that someday we might have a place to share it. Would you like to see it?" So we went up into their apartment, up above the company. And he had one of the first huge-screen video—huge-screen TVs I'd ever seen. And he pops in this video, and there was the whole process of how they did it. And you didn't need any language—of course it was all in Japanese—but you didn't need anything. There it was. It was all visual. And we knew.

And then he took us around and showed us the machines where they did the grinding. And then some things, it was kind of unclear the scale of these things; I didn't realize what a big business it was. Turns out that the kakishibu is used in part of making sake. There's a cotton filter bag that the sake lees are poured into. The lees stay in the bag, and the sake drizzles out. The kakishibu is used to reinforce these bags. I actually have some; I should show you. I bought some in a flea market. They're very expensive. It fact, it was ridiculous that I spent this much money for them. But they're old, and they've been repaired because they were so valuable. And some of the repairs have different levels of kakishibu stain on them, and stuff. And they're really, really amazingly gorgeous pieces of heavy fabric.

And that's where the huge quantity of—I thought, where is there enough market for this stuff? It's sake. There's enough market for anything that's related to sake. And what happens is the leaves stick to the fabric that's been treated with the kakishibu.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're using it primarily for lanterns?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes—well, yes, primarily, although I've used it with lacquer for priming, too, just mostly to test. I also found that if you want something that's going to be paper and the lacquer is going to bond the paper, I like to put the kakishibu on the edge because my feeling is that is bonds better—I'm sure you could do it with the straight lacquer, but I like the way it works that way. And that very first lantern that I did, I stained all the paper with kakishibu and then I lacquered over the edge, that first lantern that was in the '99 show.

But after I went to Mr. Mimasu and got the whole treatment—and it's M-I-M-A-S-U—who was so kind to tell me all his secrets, they even—their house is there by the factory, and they paint the siding of their house with kakishibu. And the rain washed it off eventually; you just redo it every four or five years, or two or three years, depending on the monsoon or the typhoon, how bad it was. And the bugs don't like it. It's a natural insect repellent, including for mosquitoes. And the farmers would wear—those Japanese hats with the big apron over your neck to keep that hot sun off your neck? Those things would be made, and coated with kakishibu, and it would keep the mosquitoes away—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: Because it has a weird smell, the kakishibu. It doesn't smell once it's completely dry, but it has kind of a silage, farmyard smell, too—not like cow exhaust, but more like silage, really. In fact, some people don't like it fresh, but once it dries it's okay.

And there was a period in Japan where cotton was scarce—well, cotton's always been scarce relative to the number of people. Peasants were forbidden to wear cotton, so that there would be enough for the upper class. It came to a point where you just can't have it. So you forbid people to have something—and they've got to have clothes, right—so they're going to do something else. So they took wastepaper, like newspaper and stuff like that; treated it with kakishibu, tore it in strips, twisted it in twists and wove with it, and made the most gorgeous garments. And now those are the most valuable, high-class tea ceremony garments that you can have—out of paper treated with kakishibu, from poor people. If you had nothing, but you had a bunch of fermented persimmon and scrap paper, and you made it into—

MS. RIEDEL: When do those date from?

MR. MONTEITH: Those are old. That's old. I think the cotton garments—Jorie might know—well, I think Jorie does know. Actually, Jorie had a boyfriend, who didn't work out—but his family she's stayed close with, and his brother, too. But his father died. When his father was sick with cancer, Jorie made him a paper kakishibu vest garment that was just gorgeous. And she'd never worked with it before. But she saw my interest in the kakishibu and she knew it was around, and it was part of her vocabulary from having been there. But she'd never worked with it. And she made—it was quilted paper, and it was just—and it turns the paper to—I have a piece—

MS. RIEDEL: Then if there's a Japanese term for that clothing, it would be nice to know.

MR. MONTEITH: It is. Kamiko. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we can maybe look it, because that would be—yeah—

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, the woven paper clothing is called shifu, strengthened with kakishibu. Yes, we should have that in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONTEITH: So after I went into deeper study, and I realized that I could make kakishibu—but the "right" persimmon doesn't grow here; it's too far north. And I would have to go to southern Indiana. They do grow persimmons down there, and they make canned persimmon, like pumpkin, like for pumpkin pie, or then they make a pudding out of it. And it's kind of a local thing down there. And there are canning factories that can them. But— and I called around—and the thing is, you don't want the sweet persimmons; you want the sour ones. And there's a lawyer who is growing some persimmons. And I guess he had some for the pollinating—he did have a few—and he was willing to have me come. And I just never did it because I really wasn't interested in doing it so much as having it for what I wanted to do with it.

And then later on I found out, when I was having difficulty working with some lacquer, and when Uchiyama-san was here, that there are paper filters for straining your lacquer so you'd get—don't get any dust in it, after you've mixed it and it's been out in the air. And the last thing you do is put it through a twisted paper filter. I knew about that. I'd learned about that at the university. The part I missed was that the really good part, you treat the filtered paper with kakishibu before, and the imperfections stick to it as it goes through.

So when Uchiyama-san was here he said, "Where is your kakishibu filter paper," because he wanted some. And I said, "Well, I don't know." "Why don't you have any? Well, we must make some." And so wegot out the kakishibu. And I had my plain filtered paper, and we made a whole bunch of it. And we've sent it off to our friends, now, that we're teaching lacquer to. And so they now all know about it and everything just because in 10 minutes he told me about the spatula; and another 10 minutes, and you knew about that. And these are all things that if you don't have the community, you never know.

It takes this—there's one English woman who—Suzanne [Ross] that lives in western Japan in wajima– she works in lacquer. She went to Japan, liked it, stayed, learned, everything. She says it takes—she was told by her teacher that it takes 200 years to learn. So that's where the 200 years—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I knew you had mentioned that.

MR. MONTEITH: —yeah, 200 years comes from. And I believe it. But—and you also need several thousand people over 200 years, each one telling you the missing link.

So anyway, the kakishibu story. Got the backpack, got that; came back here to the United States and did the show at— did a show at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, after '94. And those, I built twig lanterns, and just stretched washi and kakishibu over them. And I did them mostly for the art students at the—they have a visual arts program there, too.

MS. RIEDEL: '99, right? The first lamps were '99?

MR. MONTEITH: No, the first lacquer lanterns were '99?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONTEITH: This was right after I got home in '94.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay, okay. Good to know.

MR. MONTEITH: And these were just sticks and kakishibu.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: And there are—I think there's only one of those that I know where it is now—some of them sort of biodegraded. There's one, I know a collector has it over on Lake Michigan, a little south of here. And actually, I think I probably sent you—it looks like a—it looks like a human heart that got wrinkled.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it the red one?

MR. MONTEITH: It—

MS. RIEDEL: It looks like a lampshade—

MR. MONTEITH: No, no, it's not that. It's—it looks like—it's round like this and it's all crinkled at the top, because what I discovered was that kakishibu will shrink anything, because what it does is it goes and penetrates the fiber, and then it itself shrinks. And it just pulls the fibers closer together, which is how the waterproofing process worked.

Well, when I saw this, I realized that I could build this framework just out of my willow sticks, and by painting more here and more there, I could control the torque. And it just crushed the framework itself; it just pulled it right together. And you should have a picture of that. Maybe I didn't send you that one. But there's one that I started out—I made like a bull form. And then I took a piece of ash splint, and I just ran it all the way around the top. And then I attached the washi to fit this form, and then I started painting the kakishibu—oh, it must have 60 coats on it. And by where you—

MS. RIEDEL: Inside and out?

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

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

MR. MONTEITH: I started out—I think I just sort of primed the inside, but mostly it went on the outside. And by where you put it on, you could cause it to shrink in an organic way. And it looks like someone took a human heart and, like, torqued it like that. And then with light on the inside, oh, it's really beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I bet.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. And—but it's very fragile.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: It's very, very fragile. And so it takes a person who is willing to conserve it, you know, like under a glass box or something, you know, to keep— because you—I mean, dusting it would even be a huge issue—

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

MR. MONTEITH: Where when you have things stretched tight, you know, it's not a problem.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So the first kakishibu work was from '94. And I learned that, you know, while I was there. And —

MS. RIEDEL: And is that work—that work is still ongoing, the lacquer work is still ongoing?

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And the furniture is all ongoing, right?

MR. MONTEITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: And the kakishibu, I'll use this in my workshop. That's what the test of that—the—that brown that you see up there. And the one face of the lantern has the cotton gauze, has been treated with the kakishibu so that it's dark. And then the paper was over it. But we're going to do those in two separate processes in the workshop. So that was the kakishibu is lighter.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, good to have that. A related question—really, I guess this is probably related more to the furniture than anything else—because you've traveled so much up in Canada—I'm thinking of the Emma Lake symposiums, and then in New Zealand, and of course in Japan—where do you see American craft, and in particular would be furniture or woodworking, on an international scale? Do you have a sense of the field moving in any particular direction?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, I think it's becoming— there's sort of two directions. You're going the Odate direction, where you're drilling a hole for the handle on the drawer with a hand drill, or you're going to CNC machines that are so technical that—you know, and it's run through a computer. And then you have the people like—do you

know Silas Kopf?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONTEITH: Silas—I can't spell that name—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we can get it later. Not to worry, we can get it later.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay, yeah, later. Write that down, Silas Kopf. He does marquetry.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And he is—he was one of the people in the [China] show. And I knew Silas from The Furniture Society—but you know, I would just see him at one of the conventions. And you always remembered Silas because he's like 12 feet tall and he wears—[laughs]— always a Hawaiian shirt, every day. [They laugh.] He has—he has more Hawaiian shirts than they have in Hawaii. And he's a great guy. He has—he has a wonderful personality. And he's kind of not the person that you would think of that would be sitting down and doing these little marquetry things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONTEITH: So you have the people who are doing that, and are committed and invested in that skill. And there's still that going on in Europe, too, and there's definitely that going on in Japan. But the market for it in Japan has just evaporated. I think more so than the United States and in Europe.

But then you have—how hi-tech can we get? And a lot of that is motivated by how many objects can we make or how perfectly can we make it so we don't have to dort with it? Like, we can make a perfect dovetail that doesn't have to have the hand of the craftsman even involved in it. This kid from high school that has some number skills, we can teach him to run the CNC machine, and he can do a better dovetail drawer than you can.

Well, Odate, in this article that I was showing you about, he was talking about— [laughs]—things didn't always fit. He never dry fit anything when he worked with his master in Japan. They just laid them out, and they fit as they fit. That was part of it. And the imperfection was your personality coming through a standardized activity of making a dovetail. And you got better. You had a good day, you had a bad day. It's recorded. Their—the CNC machine is the filter through which the humanity is removed.

So I see things kind of going in two directions. And there's still a lot of people sort of my age that are there in the middle, that still have a market for what they are doing, that are these highly developed skill techniques. And you look at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine, they are teaching the skills of the people from my generation. And there is—there is a market for that among young people. A lot of them—[laughs]—are rich. And they want to have the skill—this is a— may be a—may be a crude and terrible thing to say—kind of like a bracelet. [Laughs.] You know, I'm a woodworker. And I know how to sharpen my chisel, and you don't. [Laughs.]

An ironic example of that. I saw a sale in The Japan Woodworker Catalogue for some chisels. I knew—I had recognized the chisels. And I had wanted to have some, but had never popped for that much money for these chisels. And I wasn't going to buy a whole set of them, but there were some sizes that I use—I'll get this size, that size and the other size, because it was a real deal, and the craftsman who made them was retiring, and they were not going to be available anymore. And I had just finished a project, and I had some cash burning a hole in my pocket, which is a bad time to look through a tool catalogue, you know?

And so I bought them. And I got a phone call from The Japan Woodworker, and they said, "Well, two of these chisels you want are quite a popular size. And we only have very few left. Are you going to be using these in your work, or are these for your collection? Because his labels are perfect on some and not on the others; would you be willing to take one with an imperfect label." [Laughs.] And I realized there are woodworkers out there like Bob Greenhill, you know—completely stocked woodshops—that he never goes into. And they have all of his chisels there; complete set, you know? All the original stickers on them, which to me is almost an obscene sight, you know? A chisel should be used, you know?

So I told them, "Oh, no, no, no. [Laughs.] I will use them, and maybe even abuse them. So feel free to send me the ones without the perfect stickers on them." So I still have the stickers on some of them; they're damaged—they came damaged. But I never took them off. I just left them on—[laughs]— because I thought it was such a fun thing to remember, that there was anybody who would buy such a good too to not use, just to possess it. And there are skills that people develop just to possess, and not use. And I—it's not that I don't have the patience with that, or I certainly understand where it comes from, but there is some of that that goes alone. I don't know if Lie-Nielsen could even survive if there weren't all those people out there who bought one of

everything they make and then only use them very occasionally, and certainly not relative to what they paid for them, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That's interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: So there are actually people that are—

MS. RIEDEL: Gentleman furniture-maker, or something.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, yeah, very— [inaudible]. There's a fellow—it's terrible, I can't remember his name. I think he's from Philadelphia. And he does these—he's a member of The Furniture Society, and he does these unbelievable, like, historic reproduction things of Philadelphia's high-style furniture. But they're his own designs, but they're done like that. And he even looks like an old German Philadelphia furniture guy—you know, like from a couple hundred years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: And he's like really, really into it. And he's so good at it, and it's so amazing. And it like totally doesn't inspire me at all. [Laughs.] You know, it—but so there is that. And he has clients waiting in the wings, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: So there are those directions. And the CNC people, you know, are—and there a lot of people doing things with odd materials, you know, and things that don't traditionally relate—but trying to garner an interest in their work by using something tricky new, you know?

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

MR. MONTEITH: I guess I'm sort of stuck pedestrian old, you know? [Laughs.] But yeah, I—and I don't know that much about the European contemporary furniture other than what I read about the Milan shows, you know? And there's a lot of, you know, really quite technical stuff that's going on there, and a lot of kind of silly stuff, too. It's sort of like if it were an installation it would be art—you know, there's that whole thing. If you can't sell your pots any more, you can always make them into—the broken pots, into installations. And then it proves you're a real artist, you know? There's sort of some of that school of thought that's kind of rubbed off on an installation artist, you know? And that's sort of a cachet that— [laughs]—that gives you sort of street cred somewhere, you know?

But there's some of that that like real young kids are doing in fashion, you know, in—Matthew was talking about it in photography, and I think in craftwork, too. You know, you look at *American Craft*, there's a lot of things that are in there that I see and I think, just because you can doesn't mean you ought, you know? It's different. But is it compelling, you know? And I think—I think we're going to work through that. Hopefully, it won't be a lost common denominator that the communication, you know, via text message— [laughs]—in—you know, craft text messages are not all that interesting.

Also, there was—I think we may be kind of passing out of it now, but if we put text on our work, it was so much better or so much more relative. And I even threatened to peel all the bark off one of my chairs, and take an old chronograph pen. And my grandfather knew tremendous amounts of poetry by heart, and he was also quite a gardener. And he would say—and even when he was old, his memory was just amazing. And he would go out and he'd say, "You know, Clifton," he said, "your education was seriously short and slightened because you learn your Latin by heart." He knew the entire *Aeneid* by heart. He knew Greek, big works, by heart. And he said the great thing about the *Aeneid*, though, is he said, "When it's really, really hot and you really don't want to hoe," he said, "you can go out there," and he said, "hoeing is perfect iambic pentameter: Arma virumque canō, Trōiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs,/ Ītaliam, fātō profugus, Lāvīniaque vēnit." And he said, "And when you get to the end of the stanza," he said, "there's always a good big piece of—[inaudible]—or something you can whack off."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That is quite an image.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. So you know, he felt as though—that learning his Greek and Latin poetry was part of his toolkit for living, you know? And we were talking earlier about university education and how does that fit with a craftsman or an artist's work, as opposed to an apprenticeship? That should be there. And I always feel like I was slighted because, first of all, I've always had a mind like a sieve, so nothing sticks. But— and grandpa remembered stuff, you know? But he practiced remembering, and he was—and he was taught to learn how to remember. So yeah, that's sort of I think where things are going, those directions.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we have done an excellent job covering most of these questions. I had a few summary

questions—

MR. MONTEITH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you're certainly welcome to any summary thoughts you may have. So as sort of a summing-up at this point, do you have any overall thoughts about the importance of wood as a—as a unique means of expression? Any particular strengths that it has? Any weaknesses? What it does better than anything else, and the essence of it that appeals to you?

MR. MONTEITH: Mmm. [Affirmative.] Something—that's good—a good question to ask because it brings up one of my most important points that we haven't touched on, and that's that one of the things that I learned in chemistry, in engineering school, was that materials have specific heats. Do you know what specific heat is?

MS. RIEDEL: In general, but not—if you go over it—

MR. MONTEITH: Okay. It's sort of like if you have a piece of wood sitting here in the room, and you have a piece of iron sitting right next to it, they're both sitting in the same temperature. But when you touch the two, they do not feel the same; they have different specific heats. Part of that is the way it conducts the heat away from your body, taking it in—and this one doesn't take it in so fast. So everything has its own specific heat. Furniture. Architecture, especially if you sit on the floor or you lean against the wall or the post or whatever. Wood has a specific heat that is more in keeping with the organic qualities of our body. And that's because it is organic as well. Wood is fiber. Fiber has the same kind of sense for me than the wood does. And wood should be saved for those things for which it's appropriate, I think. And from it there's a lot of inspiration, in its pattern, its color, its weight, its durability. Some is soft, some is hard. Each has a different personality. But its specific heat is important.

One of the things I realized about lacquer that I like was the urushi has a completely different specific heat than the plastic that it looks like.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, interesting.

MR. MONTEITH: It's a tree. It's a liquid tree.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And it shares that organic sense that relates to organic life. Now, if we become so bionic that we are putting in brain chips to remember our *Aeneid*, then maybe we won't appreciate that anymore. I think that would be a shame. And that's why I really like wood.

When you sit in one of my chairs, it's not a cold feeling. It's not even a hard feeling. And—

MS. RIEDEL: That was surprising, how not hard it was.

MR. MONTEITH: How not hard it was, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's not because it's bending; it's because of its shape and its texture and its—the form of its members. I had a fellow who came to the show at the Museum of Art and Design, where the *Sun Chair* was. And that show finally opened I think the finally—the following June or something; it took all that time before they were ready to go with it. And I was in New York for something, and I went over to see the exhibit. And there was this guy there who was a taxi driver. And he was looking at my chair. And he said, "Boy," he said, "that looks like that shape of that back where they"—he said, "they want me to sit in that." Well, then, I said "no." And he didn't know it was my chair.

I have another he didn't know it was my chair story—but he said, "It looks like it would be comfortable on my back." He said, "I'm a taxi driver." And he said, "Man, your back and your bottom side can get really tired driving a cab in New York." And he had a real New York accent that he's telling—he's saying this. And I said, "Well, actually, I'm the guy who made the chair." And he said, "Really?" He said, "And it's all wood, true?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well"—he said, "it looks real comfortable, and it's pretty, too." And he said, "And you know, I was looking at those sticks on the bottom"—and he said, "I've got one of those wooden beaded roller seats in my cab to keep my butt from going to sleep." And he said, "I bet the shape of those sticks works in a similar way." And it does—

MS. RIEDEL: I bet it does, yeah.

MR. MONTEITH: Because you have a varied pressure point.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And variableness and non-sameness is one of the joys of things organic. So when you have wood, it's never all the same color, you know? It's never even all the same pattern. Even the best— [inaudible] —that is perfectly straight, you know, there's variations, you know, in it. And I always like that business in the Japanese house where they—we—there was a house built across the street from us while we were living there in '99. It was wonderful to watch it. It was called a PanaHome. It was all ceramic and steel. They brought it off a truck like a—like a— what do you call it—like a mobile home, you know, sort of thing. It was put up in a day—all the doors, windows, metal frames. All the surface was ceramic, would never have to be painted. And it's made by Panasonic.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

MR. MONTEITH: And it's all designed in a computer. And you can have the house any shape you want, any combination. They just all do it in the CAT program. All goes in, all the panels get backed with the ceramic on it, everything. And it comes out, and up it goes. It's done. Then the craftsmen came and spent six months doing the interior trim— [they laugh]—on the—just little stuff around the windows and the corners of the room. It took six months. They were there all day, every day. Six days a week. And it took that long to do it. And here it was, it was a tin and ceramic box with all this woodwork inside. It must have been extremely expensive.

So you go into this room. And it has a plastered wall, and it has this real simple, straight trim at the corners, along the baseboard and everything. And the whole room will be absolutely blank wood, completely plain and everything. And three-quarters of the way across the back wall, there's one knot amidst the whole thing. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: One final question. When you think about your career do you think about it in terms of distinct periods, or do you think about it completely as a thread of continuity? Do you think about it in terms of both? Have you thought about it, and what about it in particular matters to you?

MR. MONTEITH: I think there's definitely a division of before- and after-Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MONTEITH: I mean, that's probably obvious, you know? And there was— there's also the early and late, relative to the speed of working. And it's not just because I'm older, and it's harder to stand 16 hours a day; we still do that. So it's not just that. But the attitude has changed about how many pieces I do, how much time I have the luxury of investing in the pieces that I'm working on. That has—that has changed. So there's this early and late, as far as the—it's gotten slower all the way along.

One of the things that really made it slower was doing the architectural things because they were so difficult, just physically difficult. And you had to work with other people in a huge scale, you know? That helped me be slower, in kind of a weird way. Actually, I know a lot of people find, you know, when they look at me at work, they find this very difficult to believe, but I'm an extremely impatient person. And my work is sort of a meditation against my natural proclivity, which is to rush off in 87 different directions. And you just can't do that and do this work, you know? And the lacquer is just one more layer of slowness.

So that is sort of what I see as early and late. But what I also see is the older I get, the more things I want to try. And you had mentioned earlier about artists often don't think about their past and where they've come from and, you know, what they've gone through. And it's kind of almost shocking—more so yesterday than what we've talked about today—but in seeing the relatedness of things that are very, very early, you know, to what's come now. But the thing that you're so right about is we're thinking about tomorrow and not—and not yesterday. And my list of gots-to-dos are just amazing, you know? I mean, they're amazing to me. They're almost frightening, you know? And I've got a lot of work to do.

MS. RIEDEL: What's on the list?

MR. MONTEITH: Well, the miniature altar tables, with all of these patterns and textures of the reactions to the lacquer and the structures of the—and what happens—these are—[inaudible]—you know—what happens to these structures and what they—these—I'm going to start working with the surfaces—and what these surfaces suggest to the frameworks that uphold. Like the *Penland Table*, that top is so smooth and the bottom is so anti-smooth. And yet they're related. They're the same material, just in different—just in different forms. And something is going to happen with every one of these little ones, that's going to be like that. And every one's going to be an adventure. And if I have somebody that's interested in looking at them, I'll be happy to show them. But they're going to happen, you know, no matter what.

Jorie [Johnson] wants to do some more work with wool, and I would like to do that. The problem is she can work

so much faster than I that I'd rather have two really good forms to work with than maybe 27—

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any upcoming commissions?

MR. MONTEITH: Yes. There's the box I'm working on right now, and bookshelf that is coming at the same time. And then these drawings that are on the whiteboard over there, and there's pieces of paper—a client who required a drawing. And this woman's mother happened at Christie's upon an auction of an amazing collection of arrowheads. And years ago, her mother asked me if I would do a way to present these that was functional. I'm thinking what would that be? And it was a lot of arrowheads. I don't remember how many now, but it was a lot of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Dozens?

MR. MONTEITH: Oh, no. Maybe 150 or—

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MONTEITH: Somebody had made a big collection over their lifetime. And the family didn't want it, and it got sold at Christie's. She happened to be there, at the auction. And there wasn't anybody there that wanted them that day. And she got a pretty good price, she said; who knows what that was. But anyway, she wanted a functional way of presenting them.

So I made a series of trays—the biggest for a full tea service—all the way down to two high ball glasses with tempered glass frames, completely encased in mosaic patterns of wood saved from pieces that I had made for her over the years. So they were all colors and patterns and things that whether she knew it or not related—well, they really looked beautiful. And they fit one inside the other. And you could set them in the center of the dining room table, and you had this pyramid of these forms. And as you took them off you got to see, you know, each one, and examine them. So— and the arrowheads themselves are mounted on suede inside these little shadow boxes that are the frames. And the frames have little legs. But—and it was the tedious work, but it was—it was really cool. Oh, and the last frame that holds the glass is spalted maple. So the little black lines in the spalting of the maple goes with all the colors in the—in the trays, too.

So there was that. This is her daughter. Her daughter, a year ago, went to Sotheby's, I think. Here comes an arrowhead collection for auction. And she and her mother are competitive collectors.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONTEITH: It's a bigger collection. It's a better collection. There are 4,000-year-old Clovis spearpoints and stuff in this. And she's the one I told you about, who had just bought the house in Virginia.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: The room that the collection is going in is—was the Hessian general who was stationed in the house when he was there during the Revolution. And he had the ceiling painted. And 20 years ago, the previous owners actually had the paint taking off the ceiling, and found it under there. And it's all been restored. I don't know if you know that much about Hessian design, but it is way over the top. Decorative, decorative, decorative, decorative.

So I made these series of shadow boxes into sconces for either side of the mantle in the Hessian room, and made them extremely decorative. And it worked out pretty well. There are cherry frames that are completely twig-encased and—with tempered glass, again, and candle sconces on either side of the bottom. And fit into the room just perfectly. So those are done.

But it turns out there is a little bit more to the collection. There is a group of fishing arrowheads for—spearpoints for fishing that are extremely fine, and burned things. And—but the fish collection is going to go in a fish box—there it is—brown trout fish box over there; there's the drawing on that. And so it's going to be a box about this big—

MS. RIEDEL: Two feet long, sort of? Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: Yes, 2 feet long. And maybe 6 inches wide.

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

MR. MONTEITH: And it'll have a shadow box in the bottom of the box and in the lid of the box, as it opens. And it will be a functional place to put things, but also it will be the display of the fish-related items. And it will all be mosaicked with fish scales made out of willow twigs, of course. [Laughs.] So there's some of those things that

will pay for these other things. [Laughs.]

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

MR. MONTEITH: So it's sort of, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: That balance. It's the struggle—yeah—

MR. MONTEITH: The balance of one work feeding the other, yeah. And yet those are fun projects, too. And they will be well-appreciated. So—and I'm going to—I've already learned some things from the first set of arrowhead things that I'm going to talk about at my class in—at Anderson Ranch. So there's the thing we were talking about, is the interest on the principle that was invested is in the idea that you can pass it along to someone else.

MS. RIEDEL: Any final thoughts, or shall we leave it there?

MR. MONTEITH: I think we can probably leave it there, except to say that one of the things I was thinking about last night was the Native American prayer that was "All my relations." And you realize—[laughs]—especially of this whole summation of what we've talked about—

MS. RIEDEL: What was that Japanese phrase you said before you we started lunch?

MR. MONTEITH: Ah, yes. "Itadakimasu."

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I couldn't even spell it.

MR. MONTEITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] "I" is I-T-A-D-A-K-I-M-A-S-U. It's "itadakimasu," only it gets pretty strung together in our—"itadakimasu."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONTEITH: And usually just "itadakimas," but—"itadakimasu." So then to extend that gratitude as far as you can conceive of the universe, and then the people can tell you that it's so much more fleeting than you thought. The substance of what you've considered substance is so short. Be grateful for what you got right now, for this instant is the whole thing. And when you do that, then if you're paid or you're not paid, or if you're rich or you're not rich, it really doesn't matter. All you need is the path to the next thing, the next idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you, Clifton.

MR. MONTEITH: Okay? Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...October 7, 2015