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Oral history interview with Tom Wudl, 2019 November 22-24

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Annette Leddy on November 22–24, 2019. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Tom Wudl for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Tom Wudl and Annette Leddy have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

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ANNETTE LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy, interviewing Tom Wudl at his studio in Los Angeles on November 22, 2019. Okay. Here's what I know. You were born in 1948 in Cochabamba, Bolivia. So, why were you born there?

TOM WUDL: That's a good question. In 1938, my parents left Vienna at the––on the very last boat at the very last hour that they could get on one. They were obviously Jewish, and the only place that they could get to was Bolivia. My father told stories of how he would go to these various consulates, and even tried to bribe them. He would put the money in the––in between the pages of the passports to see if he could get somewhere else. But one of my mother's brothers had already come––he had already made it to Bolivia; the other one had made it to Argentina. And I guess, eventually, that's how it happened. And––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Just a question. So, both your parents were from Vienna?

TOM WUDL: Correct.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And they had grown up there? And their families were from there?

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what did your father [do –ACL]––what was his occupation? [00:02:04]

TOM WUDL: Well, in Bolivia, he––they had a couple of different businesses that they managed. My father knew––he was a very good craftsman. He was a very smart person; not necessarily too entrepreneurial, but he had a business with someone else, and I don't know how his business originated, but they had a textile––they had a textile business, where—it was a shirt-cutting factory, basically.

And then, at home, my parents had a business where they had dairy products, so that they would have milk delivered, and they would make butter and cream, and even casein, I remember. So that's how they made their living. That was for a part of the time. And then––and that was even before I was born. Then, later, when I was about seven or eight, some Turkish businessmen came to Bolivia, and they wanted to set up, and did set up, a denim-producing factory because denim was starting to be big.

My father was the only person around who not only could read and write both English and German, who knew about machinery and textiles, and so they hired him to set up this textile mill, basically. They built an entire factory outside of Cochabamba about––I don't remember the distance now, but it was a couple of hours' drive out in the country. [00:04:10] They built this factory. And they built a house for us to––so that we could move there. And that house had a luxury I don't remember any other houses in Cochabamba having at the time, which was running hot and cold water.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: So my father––they built the factory. We moved out there. He set up all the machinery, and we were there for several years. And I don't know what ensued, or why that

period came to a close, in his employment. When we moved back to the city, my father had large looms built to his specifications. Wood looms. And he wove cloth out of llama and alpaca wool. And there was a woman down there. Her name was Eleska I don't remember her last name, but she's interesting, too.

But she would contract with my father to make––weave these cloths. And that kind of material was very popular in the '50s in the United States, apparently. And they made coats and skirts and shawls, and even handbags out of this material. And she would bring it to the United States and sell it in boutiques here. So, that is what I remember about my father. That's how he made his living, yeah.

And then, when we came to the United States, his first job here––he was already over 50 years old, was in a house cleaning crew. [00:06:04] So––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Let's go back to Bolivia.

TOM WUDL: Let's go back.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, now, so they were exiles from––

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––Hitler and so on. Could you just describe them, what were they like? Both your father––

TOM WUDL: Yeah, I'll tell you.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––and your mother.

TOM WUDL: I'll just say one other thing. One little anecdote that was a rather serious reality check for my father. When they first arrived, they were getting off the boat, and he sees that the Nazis are here, too. That we've––nothing has changed. That the––you know, these were Nazis [who] were obviously escaping what they knew would be a bad fate for them, anyway. But regardless, this entire generation of Europeans, both the Nazis and the Jews, they knew who they were. But they worked together. They needed to, in order to survive. They did business. My father had to do business with people who he knew were Nazis, and they knew who he was. But that was just a little incidental anecdote.

You know, my parents––this was a rather strict European upbringing I had. I mean, compared to what I saw was possible when I was a little boy when we moved here. So my father ruled the house with an iron hand, but, you know, he was a sweet, kind, and intelligent person, but was very limited in his capacity for communication. You know, like that old generation, generally, of people. They both worked very hard. And they were definitely––not only European, but Viennese, and proud of that. [00:08:11] And no one could ever come up to that standard, right? They were very critical of the local people. The––not only the indigenous people, but also those who––the Bolivians who came from this noble, Spanish heritage. Everybody in all the other cultures, even when we moved to the United States, were definitely inferior, you know? So––

But––and my mother was very––she could be very kind-hearted, but she was also selfish in many ways, and did have a strong tendency to being a hypochondriac, and that carried through all the way to the end of her life.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But when you say that he is strict, you mean––for example, it was that when you were––at the table, like you weren't allowed to speak unless someone asked you a question, that sort of thing?

TOM WUDL: Children were meant to be seen and not heard. Definitely, definitely. And so, you know, I could never––I always felt too intimidated to speak about anything personal with my father. And even though, in retrospect, now I know that it would have probably been okay, there were just––the tools weren't there. You know? He certainly didn't have them to invite a conversation like this. And so, even growing up, even when it came to very personal things, I would discuss them with my mother, and never––never bring them up––

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, she could––you could discuss with her.

TOM WUDL: Yes, I could. I could.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you have siblings?

TOM WUDL: Yes. [00:10:00] I was really an unexpected child, and when I found that out, that was a little bit traumatic. But my mother was pregnant with my sister on the voyage over from Vienna to Bolivia.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you have one sister?

TOM WUDL: And one brother who came along two years after my sister. So, they're both––you know, my brother will be 80 this year, which kind of blows me away.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you were––they had already been in Bolivia for 10 years––

TOM WUDL: Yes––

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––when––

TOM WUDL: ––by the time I was born, correct. And I was an––

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I see. So, they were very settled, then.

TOM WUDL: They were pretty––as settled as one could be, yes. And that's––

ANNETTE LEDDY: But when you say that, in other words, they were never happy? Being [there –ACL] felt––

TOM WUDL: No, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––they belonged to Vienna.

TOM WUDL: And Bolivia––and I guess the other thing that I meant was that it was always politically unstable.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Ah, yeah.

TOM WUDL: You know, there was a revolution every other month, or something like that. You never knew what was going to happen. And, for instance, you never knew when there was going to be electricity. When there was going to be water. And that's why the bathtub––there was a huge bathtub in the bathroom. And that was filled with water all the time. And as a matter of fact, when I was––I don't remember this, but I've been told this. That I fell in there and my brother saved my life, because I could have––I almost drowned, you know? When I was an infant. So, you never knew when we were going to have the lights. We never knew when we were going to have water. So, you know, everything was pretty much like that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what language was spoken at home? [00:12:00]

TOM WUDL: German. And Spanish. So, my initial language was Spanish. And so, to this day, if I need to, I can make myself understood in German. You know, I could go to Germany or Vienna and get along, but not, you know, I'm not fluent by any means. I'm much better in Spanish, and I [could –ACL] read and write Spanish 'til about the 5th grade, or something like that, yeah. So––

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, do you––what are your earliest memories?

TOM WUDL: Well, my––one of my fondest memories is when we lived out there, the location where we moved out there when they built the factory was called Coña Coña. And––which is obviously a Quechua word–– [. . . –ACL]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

TOM WUDL: ––the little tilde thing over the N. Coña. Anyway, I was basically a single kid at that time, in the sense that my brother and sister were in school, and I had a lot of time by myself as a kid because my parents were working. And I believe this has had a lot to do with my temperament, eventually. [00:14:01]

Directly across this dirt road from our house was this awesome lagoon that was basically a reservoir to irrigate the crops for the community all around. And once a year, around Christmastime, in December, which is summertime down there, they would empty this lagoon.

And that was very exotic and dramatic, because you could walk down into it, and the mud would crack open.

But during the rest of the year, it was filled. And I would spend long hours just wandering around the perimeter of it, sitting by myself and it was, you know, a quite idyllic setting. The birds would build their nests on telephone poles, and they would make these mud––beautiful mud structures. And the indigenous people there would build ovens out of adobe in the same way as these dome structures, you know, to bake their––you know, their food.

So, these––this is––you know, I don't have many memories from my childhood, but this is one that's certainly––

ANNETTE LEDDY: So beautiful.

TOM WUDL: ––beautiful.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how old were you?

TOM WUDL: Oh, I was probably seven, or eight, at the most. Six, seven. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that's––that would be the earliest memory?

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Well, that's the one that comes to mind right now, yeah. And you know, I have other memories of the city itself, Cochabamba.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What was it like?

TOM WUDL: It was like any other colonial city or town that you might visit, you know, in Latin America––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mexico.

TOM WUDL: ––in Mexico. [00:16:04] So, many times, when Henry was growing up, we would go to Honduras or go to Mexico, and it didn't matter whether we were in a smaller civic environment or a larger city. The first thing I would say to Mel and Henry is, you know, "You don't have to go to Bolivia. This is exactly what it would look like." The buildings are made out of the same materials. They have the same proportions, the whole look. The inventory in the stores, I mean, that was definitely a very strong recollection, you know, when I visit these places. It was just––just clearly reminded me of Bolivia in that way.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And where you would have, say, the government buildings and the main drag––and a fountain and a plaza?

TOM WUDL: A fountain with a beautiful cathedral, and parkways. Now, one of the other really important memories, and––was that, a few blocks away from our house in the city––in Cochabamba itself, I remember walking up the––a couple of blocks, if I had to go on an errand or something, and turn a corner. And there was a small storefront. And I could see, in the window, that there were artisans working in there. They were clearly making tourist little knick- knacks and stuff, but they had the brushes in their hand, and they were working.

And to this day, I could tell you, I loved walking by there. I was too shy. I mean, I was just a petrified, shy kind of kid. And so, I could never––it would never occur to me to walk in there and say, hey, you know, what are you doing? [00:18:02] What's going on? But secretly, I knew this was the kind of place I wanted––I would have liked to have been in.

You know? There was something that I felt a kinship with there. That was special. And, you know, obviously, in retrospect, I can see why.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, if you could just describe, like, your neighborhood. So, there's sort of this main area that's like––

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Well, you know, there––it's difficult for me to remember all of this, I have to tell you, because it's been some time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you haven't been back.

TOM WUDL: No. My brother's been back several times, and every time, he––he hasn't been

there for some years now. But he's been back periodically. And every time he would come back, the reports would be more dire, more dire, you know? Like this beautiful plaza with the cathedral where there was a fountain with flowers and everything. All decimated. And you know, everything has been decimated by the drug cartels. It's just, you know––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —in Coña Coña, not far from our house, up this dirt road, there was a wood. And we used to go, very early in the morning, to hunt for mushrooms. And that's definitely a memory I have. And he said, you know, now that wood is like––it's gone. Everything is just––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, developed? Or just––

TOM WUDL: —no, just––

ANNETTE LEDDY: —just trashed?

TOM WUDL: ––it's been trashed, you know? I mean, the––I guess the trees have been all cut, and––so, that's one of the reasons I––you know, I never felt like going back because of these precious memories that I've had, even though they're very few. [00:20:06] And I didn't want anything to get in the way. And I also––even after we left Bolivia, even though I was so young, I thought to myself, you know, I don't ever have to come back here. I would rather––there's plenty of other places in the world I would like to go to.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But is that because your parents experienced it as a kind of––a place that they didn't like, and that they were sort of forced to move to, do you think?

TOM WUDL: I don't think so. I think it's just a personal kind of attitude on my part.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But even though there were these beautiful things––

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––it felt maybe––I mean, there were Nazis there. There was certainly a lot of political tension. The place wasn't great. Is it that?

TOM WUDL: Which I was oblivious to, frankly––

ANNETTE LEDDY: You didn't know any of that? I see.

TOM WUDL: ––as a kid.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: I think, you know, one of the reasons my parents––you haven't asked me this question yet, but you might come to it. Why did they move? You know, why did you come to the United States?

ANNETTE LEDDY: We're getting to that.

TOM WUDL: Okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's about 10 questions away.

TOM WUDL: All right. So, well, I'll save that for later. We're staying in the childhood––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, I just want to know a little bit more about, like, your home and how it was––like, did your parents have artwork on the wall, or what was it like?

TOM WUDL: Yes, they had prints, and there was music. There was definitely a record player and, you know, music.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what kind of music did they listen to?

TOM WUDL: There was popular European music, like operettas. Things like that. I remember Mac the Knife, you know? That kind of thing. Sung in German, of course.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: And I do remember––I mean, my father could be affectionate. I remember "Mack the Knife" playing on the record player, and me sitting on his knees, and him bouncing me on his knees. [00:22:03] So, you know, there was an opportunity, briefly, here and there, for these moments of affection and tenderness.

And the house was a, you know, a Spanish house, and it was big. And I do remember, in the living––in the dining room, or it was the living room, my parents had the furniture built for them. And there was this gorgeous, huge, circular mahogany table. You know, beautiful wood. Beautifully crafted.

My parents were not––my mother came from a very observant Jewish family. And apparently, her parents were quite well off, but they lost everything. And my mother basically––you know, my parents escaped with the clothes on their back, and they left––

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what happened to the their––rest of their families?

TOM WUDL: Gone.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean––got sent to the camps?

TOM WUDL: Yes. Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, my God.

TOM WUDL: To the best of my knowledge. And my mother, you know, never really talked about it. And in retrospect, I can imagine, you know, there was a considerable amount of psychological tension in the house. Nothing like instability or anything like that. And there was definitely, you know, it was not a dysfunctional household, but I inherited a certain amount of a kind of underlying tension.

And you know, and years later, I thought to myself, well, you know, gee, what if I had to leave my home and start into a new life and not even know where the hell I was going, or what was going to happen, and a new language? [00:24:05] And leave the parents behind––and never knowing––

ANNETTE LEDDY: What happens.

TOM WUDL: ––what happened.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So tragic.

TOM WUDL: You know––

ANNETTE LEDDY: But it's kind of interesting that they didn't share that with you.

TOM WUDL: No, because––

ANNETTE LEDDY: There was––

TOM WUDL: ––there's a double thing going on here. One is that thing about children should be seen and not heard. And children are children. And you don't share things that are adult matters.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That could damage them––

TOM WUDL: Or it's just none of their business.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: They won't understand, it's more like.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: That's––there's a certain condescending attitude. They're not capable. They're children. It's not that you'll damage them. They're not capable. And that was something that stayed with me––you know, that had another part to it, which, you know, had a certain twist to it. But being the youngest, I was, on the one hand, absolved of a lot of responsibilities. And on the other hand, I was also denied opportunities because I was just too young, and I wasn't going to know.

So, for instance, if I got a gift like a––that required assembly of any sort, my father or brother would automatically say to me, "We are going to build it for you." You know? This was––you're incapable. The message I got was, "You're too young, and you don't know how to do this, and we're going to do it for you."

Now, I don't know to what extent I'm exaggerating this as a memory. But I don't remember ever—things being any different than that. [00:26:01] And just to jump forward a little bit, after my father died, I went through a period of building these stretcher bars for myself, for these wood panels. And I knew what was happening at the time. I cut the wood myself with a miter box. I glued the stretcher bars together and used brass screws. I mean, I made––I still have one of those panels back there. They will last forever, right? And it was a kind of revenge, I guess, you know, or a kind––a way of saying, "Well, I'm free to do this now, and I'm going to show you that I can really––I know how to do something like this." So, that's just a little incidental anecdote regarding that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, because of course, you make things of great––that require great skill.

TOM WUDL: Right.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And dexterity, so––

TOM WUDL: Right, right. So––

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it's––yeah. So, one question. Was there a synagogue in this town?

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, there was?

TOM WUDL: Well, and it was totally orthodox.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Men sat on one side. Women on the other. Now, my father had a rather conflicted relationship. First of all, you know, even though, as I said, my mother's family were Orthodox, she told me that they used to have two sets of dishes at home, and you know, that was a––it was a serious matter. And my mother lit the Shabbat candles every Friday night. We didn't have a formal Shabbat dinner, or anything like that. No synagogue––my parents forced me, literally, against my will, to have a bar mitzvah. I didn't want to. It was a––you know, it was really––

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that was still in Bolivia? [00:28:00]

TOM WUDL: No, that was––

ANNETTE LEDDY: That was in the U.S.?

TOM WUDL: ––shortly after––

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: ––we came here. But regardless, so, I didn't know anything about any kind of Jewish observance, basically, although my mother did make a point of lighting the candles all throughout her whole life. My––the––I've been told this, it's not something that I recall, obviously, because nothing––none of these matters were shared with me because I was too young, blah, blah, blah.

My parents sent my sister to a Catholic school that was run by German nuns. And they did so because my parents wanted her to get the best education. They didn't feel––and my brother went, partially, to a local school, and partially, for a while, if I remember correctly, to an American school.

But my sister, throughout her whole––for most of her, like, what would be junior high school, and high school here, she was at this school. And he was called in to the synagogue, I guess by the––not only the rabbi, but you know, subcommittee, who had, you know—Cochabamba is a little place. Like *Peyton Place*, everyone knows everything. Who's having affairs with who, and everything.

And so, Robert Wudl is sending his daughter, Liz, to this school. And they basically, you know, gave him an ultimatum. [00:30:00] And he, from what I have gathered, basically said to them something like, look it––I barely escaped with my life from, you know, a place. And I have my life, and I'm going to lead it the way I think is best. And you guys are not––I escaped from a place where people were going to tell me how I was going to live, and what I was going to do. And I'll be damned if you're going to––you know, forbid me from educating my daughter in the best way that I can.

And that pretty much, I think, soured the, you know—it created a lot of tension there. So, that––so, there was a synagogue. It's still there, but it's not basically operational anymore. The last time my brother visited down there––

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TOM WUDL: —he had to find somebody to find somebody else to open the place, to see if he could visit it, but it's not—to the best of his knowledge, it's not functioning anymore. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, now, I read somewhere in some of the material about you—that you really felt you wanted to be an artist when you were pretty young.

TOM WUDL: Very young. By the time I was 10 years old, I was—even before we left Bolivia. We left when I was 10, but I already knew. And I don't think that's unusual. I'm sure you've interviewed many people, or spoken to a lot of artists. I mean, there are—yes, there are people who come to it late in life, but it was somehow just obvious to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, when you saw the people painting in the shop, you were pretty young, though. You were seven or eight.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, and I longed to do it. But, you know, I do need to make—go on the record here to say this. I had this inclination, but I was not one of those talented kids who could draw anything and—where some adult would look at it and say, you know, gee, this kid's got talent. Not at all. As a matter of fact, even though it's true, I had a certain amount of skill when I was in school, junior high school, high school. There were kids around me who could draw and paint, and who had certain insights about art and methodologies that I knew were far more sophisticated and mature than myself. [00:02:00]

So, I think somehow deep inside there was—there's been an instinct that's carried me through, and it was already present as a child, but I've had to work very, very hard to develop the skills that I have. They didn't come naturally to me. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I've heard that story many times, and it seems that maybe sometimes that natural facility is almost, like, an impediment—

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to achievement in the arts. I don't kind of understand how that works, but—

TOM WUDL: Yeah, it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it almost, like, displaces it from, you know, from a vision to a skill, or something.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. No, it's interesting because when I think about all those kids who were the really skilled ones, I don't know whatever happened to them, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: And I—and, I mean, their skills were impressive by any standard.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But when you were in Bolivia then, did you know—did your parents foster this interest at all, or did they—how did they feel about it?

TOM WUDL: You know, I have to say this. It—that—you know, my real engagement with artistic matters didn't happen until later, but they were supportive, and definitely, compared to other stories that you hear. They would have rather—they would have rather I got an education so I could make a living, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Be a professional of some kind.

TOM WUDL: A profession of some sort.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: But they were definitely supportive. When I was in high school, they allowed me to use the garage as a studio, for instance. So, you know—and I have to say something here about my brother. My brother is a world-renowned organic chemist. [00:04:03] He's retired now. He's a person of many talents, a very skilled craftsman, and was a pretty damn good draftsman as a kid.

Are we okay?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes. I'm sorry, I get distracted by the equipment sometimes, I'm sorry.

TOM WUDL: I just wanted to make sure we were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —okay. My brother used to take me out drawing with him, and he bought me my first set of oil paints.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And he would draw, like—

TOM WUDL: We'd go out in the landscape, and he was good at it, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you would go out to the reservoir—

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and you would draw the—

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —or the woods, or whatever.

TOM WUDL: Or the trees, yes, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's—so, that's—that was—how old were you when you did that?

TOM WUDL: Must have been eight or nine, or something. But, it didn't happen frequently, but I do have that recollection. I can also say that he bought me my first set of oil paints. He used to force me. He used to lock me in our room—we shared our bedroom together and force me to listen to Beethoven, you know, and Mozart on the record player. And so, you know, I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: His parents—your parents gave him that authority over you?

TOM WUDL: Yeah, because they weren't even aware of it, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, it's an interesting form of bullying. [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: It is, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: "Listen to Beethoven and Mozart."

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: "It's for your own good." But it—but he really felt that way. You know, he—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —had that sense of responsibility towards me. And then, there—when I was an adolescent, of course, I was really rebellious in a lot of ways, and even into my early adulthood. [00:06:03] And so, there was a lot of tension between my brother and myself at that time. It was

competitive, and I have to say, it's not until very recently that I always had a definite inferiority —sense of inferiority in comparison, comparing myself to him. You know, he was—he's always been very accomplished, very successful, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And very disciplined, it sounds like.

TOM WUDL: —oh, yes, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You know.

TOM WUDL: You know. But, happily, that estrangement with him was short-lived, and over the years he and his wife have been very supportive. They have bought work from me out of every exhibition that I've had, practically, and not just some token purchase. You know, they've—they really stepped up and—so, they actually have one of the best—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —a better collection than I have of my own work, at this point. So, he's been generous and supportive. And so, there were—you know, it's always tough. There is no instruction book where—in retrospect, looking back on my life, I know that, compared to other stories I've heard and also read about, you know, I had a very supportive environment. As a matter of fact, there's a story that I usually tell students all the time. In my adolescence, I had anxiety as to whether I could actually ever become an artist and do meaningful work because I had a relatively normal upbringing. [00:08:03]

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And there wasn't any, you know, psychic trauma of any sort. And I—you know, it was this being inculcated with the myth of the association of suffering with creativity, which is the most pernicious, horrible myth that has been perpetrated on humanity, as far as I'm concerned. And—but when I was an adolescent, I thought to myself, "Well, God, I'm not mentally ill like Van Gogh."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And so, you know, in the—you read about Michelangelo being a tortured soul, and, you know, of course, we all have our natural period of tortured adolescence. So, I—during my adolescence, I thought, well, possibly I could be an artist because I'm tortured. But later on, you know, there came a moment where I—where all of this got clarified, and I feel part of my job as a teacher these days is to do everything I can to rectify that misconception about this association with suffering and creativity.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you know, what you say about the psychological tension in the family—

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that's more what I associate with people who become—

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —creative. It's not psychosis, and it's not trauma.

TOM WUDL: Right, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's more that level of—

TOM WUDL: There's an underlying rumbling, where you're never exactly sure what's going to happen, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, and there is a kind of—it's just my sense from what you've said. I mean, indirectly, a connection to history and, you know, civilization. Like, your parents were directly impacted by this war—

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and this whole—

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —thing. And I think that that connects you to culture in a broader sense. [00:10:10]

TOM WUDL: Yes, but then there's also a whole other aspect to it. You know that there's this terror, but you can't really—ever really know it. But you know that somehow, you're supposed to be responsible for something—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —that you're not capable of understanding or knowing in detail, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I see what you mean. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: That's very curious.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That can be it too. Okay, one thing I want to ask you, do you know—do you remember your first artwork? Do you remember?

TOM WUDL: Well, I do remember, yes. The—well, let's put it this way. The first artwork I remember—you know, I don't remember my first artwork. Or—yeah, no, I do!

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I do.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yay.

TOM WUDL: And I had to have been around five.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Couldn't have been older than five or six. It—I don't know how this occurred to me, but I remember one day getting ahold of a pencil and then just start drawing on the wall of my bedroom. I mean, just scribbling, you know. And to this day, even thinking about it right now, I can't—I don't believe that I had that audacity—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —but I couldn't help myself. You know, what was it that—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: It was scribble, or was it an actual design?

TOM WUDL: No, I wasn't—I—it was just—it felt good to just run the pencil across the wall.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you liked defacing the walls of your—

TOM WUDL: But not really. I thought I was drawing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: I wasn't defacing. It wasn't an expression of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Hostility.

TOM WUDL: —hostility. It—no, no, I liked doing it, but I didn't know what I was doing, and I don't—in my recollection, it's not like I thought I was painting or drawing a landscape or anything like that. [00:12:09] It just felt good. I did this thing. And I said nothing, and eventually, of course, my mother came upon it. And by the time I came along, my father had already sort of tempered himself regarding corporal punishment, because I know that my sister and brother certainly had received it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Blows, yes.

TOM WUDL: Blows. And by the time I came along, I don't think he could just—he couldn't bring himself to do it anymore. I used to get some pats on the behind, but they were just, you know, nothing like what they had experienced. I mean, seriously. And, luckily, I wasn't around to even

witness that, but I've been told. So—but I was definitely punished. You know, there—for me, there were punishments. You have to go to bed at six o'clock for the next month, that kind of a thing. And, you know, don't do it again.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that's what happened after you did this thing on the wall?

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: That—I—it was not—it wasn't traumatic, where, if you ever draw again—you know, you shouldn't draw because you're going to get punished. I don't think I got that message. Just don't draw on the wall. Right?

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: That was the message.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you know, that makes sense. Yes.

TOM WUDL: That—fair enough.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: Okay. And, as I said, later, they were supportive.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: You know, completely.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But that is such an interesting memory, yeah.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, that was my first. That's my first art memory, drawing on the wall.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And then, I remember making a little watercolor about this big, eight-by-ten or so, of a figure sitting on a throne. [00:14:07] He was a king, and he had a little crown on his head. And those are the two—

ANNETTE LEDDY: How old?

TOM WUDL: I think I had to have been eight or something. Not older than—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was that in school, or was it at home?

TOM WUDL: No, no, that was at home.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you used to draw and paint at home.

TOM WUDL: I could, yes, I—yeah. At school in Bolivia—I got to tell you that school I went to didn't have—you brought your schoolbooks with you. We had a leather pouch, and I have to say, you know, I did have a very strict but very good early education, which I didn't follow up on later. I was a very good student as a child, and in Bolivia—well, I interrupted myself. The school I went to basically had dirt floors.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow.

TOM WUDL: And clearly, it wasn't a Catholic school, but it's a Christian community, and so every room had a crucifix in—on the front wall. Floors were dirt. Had to wear a white smock, had my shoulder—my pack, and it was like a briefcase with straps. And even from first grade on, you had really serious exams where—the final exams were conducted by teachers who didn't know you; they came from another school. And it was an all-day exam, and there was writing and reading. [00:16:02] And then, there was an oral exam, and that used to be, you know, the most frightening thing. And even—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And your advancement depended on passing that exam.

TOM WUDL: —yes, yes, and even from the first grade on, that was a part of the ritual of education. And so, when I came here, you know, none of that existed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I—in those days, in 1958, there was still schools—the school—you know, I would arrive at school, and they would give me paper and pencils and, you know, all of that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, right.

TOM WUDL: It was very different, although I have to say this. And I knew it, I knew what was happening; there was nothing I could say or do about it. When I—when I first came here, enrolled in school, the wisdom of the educational community in those days was, "Well, this kid doesn't know any English."

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: "So, we're going to put him in a class with kids who have disabilities." You know, I knew right away—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Unbelievable.

TOM WUDL: —I'm in the—I'm not one of these kids, but that was—that was the mentality.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's so awful.

TOM WUDL: Pretty amazing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, let's talk about that, then. What—now, why did your parents decide to come—

TOM WUDL: Okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to the U.S.? Let's go back to that question because—

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you're 10 years old; it's 1958; they've lived there for 20 years, in Bolivia, at that point.

TOM WUDL: Right. Yeah. Well, they would have come earlier if they could.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Why didn't they go back to Europe?

TOM WUDL: I don't know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Just the trauma.

TOM WUDL: Possibly.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And, you know, the United States, ostensibly, to everyone who lives outside of it, is a place where the streets are paved in gold. [00:18:02] You know, or in—there's opportunity, and all of that. My parents essentially wanted to come here for two reasons, to the best of my understanding. One was that they did—they realized that the opportunities for their kids were very limited in Bolivia, in terms of education and a future for their life. But, more importantly, unquestionably, without any doubt, they were determined that my sister was not going to marry a Bolivian. Even if he were a doctor or well-educated, it just was not going to happen.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that was a racial—or, is that a racist thing?

TOM WUDL: That's—that—yes, yes, yes, that was that European thing, you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: It doesn't matter where we live; we are—you know, you are—you—we are not going to admit this into the family. This element.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. Okay.

TOM WUDL: Yet my sister had a serious boyfriend, who eventually even followed her up here, and he showed up one evening at the door.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, my God.

TOM WUDL: And my father answered the door and made it very clear to him that he wasn't going to be coming in; he never wanted to see his face again. And, you know—so, I can just imagine how traumatic that was for my sister. She was already 18 or so. And so, that's the other side. That's that harsh European, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, did they want her to marry a Jewish guy?

TOM WUDL: I—yes, of course.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

TOM WUDL: And you—well, not necessarily even Jewish, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: He just had to be European and white.

TOM WUDL: —yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: He could even have been American—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —but not a Bolivian. [00:20:03]

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Yeah. I think, in later life—no, no, it's true. It—the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: That never changed.

TOM WUDL: That never changed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: So, those are the two reasons.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, they move here.

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, where—what part of LA did you move to?

TOM WUDL: West LA, basically.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Not far from where I live now. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you went to—

TOM WUDL: I went to Palms Elementary School.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And then, I went to Louis Pasteur Junior High School—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Where's that?

TOM WUDL: —which is now called LACES.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, LACES. Oh.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. And then, I went to Hamilton High School. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. So, this—I just—it's hard to just imagine how different it must have been. What was it like?

TOM WUDL: Well, it took me a while to figure out that this—you know, that I had experienced, like anybody—I'm not the only one—the whole family—it's culture shock. So, let me tell you this: Before coming to United States—and this is typical—my father was an extremely organized person. I mean, you know, once a month he sat down to do the bills. He was very rigorous about—and meticulous about these things. You know, he—this was serious business, never miss a payment, you know, et cetera.

And part of this sense of being as prepared as possible for any eventuality, I remember him sitting us down at the dining room table and saying, "Well, okay, it's imminent. [00:22:07] Now, we're actually going to be going. But it's going to be really hard when we get there, and if we don't stick together and all work together, we're not going to make it." And it didn't matter to him how young I was at that time. You know, everybody was to get this message.

And something else that I remember, sitting around the dining room table. Previous to that, my—part of the entertainment in the evenings—you know, no TV, no radio, nothing—my father—they would go to lectures and discourses, and things like that, and then he would tell us about them. And not long before we came to the United States, the—Thor Heyerdahl had published *Kon-Tiki*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And that is a very fond childhood memory I have, because my father read the entire book to us every night after dinner, and it was really magical. And, years later, I remember reading it for myself. And, you know, that was a very special kind of thing. But, anyway, we sat at the dinner table. "We all have to stick together." And, in fact, we did, when we came here. Not long after we got here, my sister, who was still, like, learning English, got a job as a live-in nanny for a family in Brentwood who had a special-needs child. My brother had a couple of different jobs on the weekend, and he also had a paper route, and I had a paper route.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, it was like an immigrant family; everybody worked. [00:24:02]

TOM WUDL: A total immigrant family. And we did, and we pulled the money together, and that—I think we were still lucky—one could still do it in a less harsher way than immigrant families have to do it today, is my feeling. But still, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But still, that's all two, three jobs, the whole thing.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, and really, you know, keeping a tight fist on finances. My father was very—you know, he really took his responsibilities seriously.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, then, you said his first job was as a housekeeper?

TOM WUDL: A house—in a house-cleaning crew.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: Going to people's houses and cleaning them.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, oh. And then—

TOM WUDL: And then, eventually, he became a shipping clerk in some place. He never—you know, when I think back on it, if my parents had both been more entrepreneurial, they could have done other things. My mom was a superlative baker. That Austro-Hungarian gene—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: She would make strudel. She would roll out the dough on the dining room table and make—you know, she was a—to this day, I'm completely spoiled when it comes to pastries, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: I mean, I'm really Viennese about that. I mean, people bring pastries, and I say, "What is this? You have to be kidding."

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: "You know nothing." So, you know, and if they had been more entrepreneurial, they could—I mean, I could see them having—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But they were entrepreneurial in Bolivia.

TOM WUDL: Yes, but by the time they get here, the whole culture—it's a whole new thing you got to learn to negotiate. [00:26:03] You know, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And they didn't even speak English.

TOM WUDL: —they're already older. Right. My father spoke English.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, he did.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. But my mom didn't. She had to learn it, and she did.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how did you learn it?

TOM WUDL: I longed to learn it even before we left Bolivia, okay? This is another chapter. You didn't have a chance to ask me this. We didn't—the conversation went another way, but if you want to go back to my pre—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, sure. We don't have to stick so much to—but yeah.

TOM WUDL: Okay. One day, this American couple arrived, and the—the Hammonds. Maurice and Trixie Hammond.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And this was in Bolivia.

TOM WUDL: In Bolivia.

ANNETTE LEDDY: How old were you?

TOM WUDL: I was—you know, before I was 10.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: You know, it was somewhere—six, seven. They were Protestant missionaries. I guess they came to the house in order to get dairy products from my mom, or something like that. I don't know exactly how the meeting took place, but anyway, they were—they were missionaries, and they had a mission not far from where we lived. And Maurice was an airplane—model airplane fanatic. And he had—I guess it was an international thing. He had one of the franchises down there in Cochabamba, of the Sky Pilots of America. And they—it was basically a model airplane club. And, of course, my brother, being the kind of craftsman that he was, et cetera, he just gravitated toward this immediately. I mean, he eventually—when we got to know them a little bit, we realized they had Sky Pilots of America. [00:28:01] And my brother started going there, but one of the prerequisites—and this was another thing that probably got my father in trouble over there at the synagogue—was that, if you wanted to be a part of the Sky Pilots, you needed to come to Sunday Services, right? Protestant services.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: So, my parents said, "Who cares? That's fine."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: My father, at this point—so, you know, they were—there's no way they were going to let my sister marry a Bolivian—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —but you can go ahead and go to Sunday school with the Christians and build the model airplanes. It's okay. And the other thing is, Maurice and Trixie were okay because they

were white, and they were Americans.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And of course, you know, they were automatically respected in that way.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: I can tell you how primitive things were down there. One night, we looked—one evening, just at dusk, we looked up into the sky, and we saw these trails, you know, and we thought, "My god, we've never seen anything like that," these flying saucers, or whatever. And I remember my brother and I running over, you know, to Maurice and Trixie's and saying, "Look at the sky!"

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: They started cracking up. These were vapor trails of jet airplanes. Might have been one of those early, round-the-world things that those jets—[laughs]—planes were doing. There's—that's how it was. So, anyway—I don't know how I got onto that, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, because we were talking about why you wanted to learn English.

TOM WUDL: Oh, yes. And so, they spoke English, and I immediately loved the sound of it. I used to love to listen to when they would bicker with each other, or something.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: I thought, "This is—I can do this, and I want to." [00:30:01] And so, I was ready. Although I did not know one word of English when we arrived here, within one year, certainly within the first two years, I was completely fluent.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you take English lessons, or you just picked it up?

TOM WUDL: Picked it up. Watching T.V.—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. Watching—

TOM WUDL: —and listening, and just mimicking.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, here's the thing I wanted to know, though. Okay. So, you're—

TOM WUDL: [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you get here in 1958, and, I mean, it must have just—the impact of American culture. You know, that's the TV, and movies, and comic books, and—

TOM WUDL: Okay, listen. Yes, and other things. Even before getting to America, I remember arriving in Lima, Peru. Oh, this is the other thing. We took the train from Cochabamba to La Paz, and our hotel room was across the—

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TOM WUDL: —street from military headquarters. At night before we turned the lights out, my father comes into the room and says, "If you hear any gunshots during the night, just get under the bed."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: So this is the kind of an—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: It's still fraught, you know, with this tension. From La Paz, we took a bus ride to Lima, Peru. And now that is a hell of—those buses were like the old school buses here, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And basically held together with chewing gum and wire.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And there were—there were roads up in the mountains, and this is not an exaggeration. The road was just wide enough for the tire tracks, and there were heights in these mountains where you could look out the window and you just see clouds down there. So, it was a really dramatic, beautiful ride. But one of the things about this ride was this anticipation I had, because I knew that we were coming to the ocean. I had only fantasized about the ocean until I was 10 years old. Well, Bolivia is completely landlocked. There's no major bodies of water, that I was familiar with. Because Cochabamba, especially—you know, I had a rather kind of restricted childhood.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You didn't travel or anything. No.

TOM WUDL: No, no. Or camp or, you know, anything like that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: No.

TOM WUDL: And I remember just, you know, I think even asking my brother, like, "Are we going to get to the ocean? Is today the day?" [00:02:03] You know, and I remember the bus rounding a curve, and there was the ocean. And it just kept going and going and going. And I thought to myself, this is unbelievable. I couldn't even believe what my eyes were seeing. The scale, the scale of this horizon and all that water blew me away. So, that was, you know, the first kind of culture shock of having to come to terms with something of that scale.

We arrived in Lima, and on the way in the cab, on the way to the hotel, it's dusk. And out of the corner of my eye, we're at this plaza, and the lights are coming on. And out of the corner of my eye I see something magical. And to this day my memory is magical. I see a Canada Dry ginger ale bottle, a neon sign. The bottle is tipping over—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —and pouring the ginger—oh, man.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: You know, that's how sheltered I was. This was something. Not only have I just seen the ocean, but now this magical thing. How—what is this? It just blew me away. And then we get into the hotel, and for the first time in my very, very contained life, I'm riding in an elevator, which also blew me away. There were no elevators that I—in Cochabamba, at all. [00:04:05] The other memory I want to tell you about, that is a very important one, in Coña Coña. This woman, Eleska, who eventually contracted with my father to make the llama wool, et cetera. This is the one thing where I wish I had more memory. You know, it is one of the great frustrations of my life.

This woman, her name was Eleska. She was German. From what I know today, I realize that she was a very sophisticated person, much—my parents were not sophisticated, you know. They were educated. They were middle-class, educated Jews, but they did not have a nuance of sophistication. They were not literary. They read books, but not, you know, philosophy or anything like that.

This woman, Eleska, obviously was a person of education, and we might call artistic, you know. She had an aesthetic education. The very, very vague incidental little snippets of recollection I have of her house, is that she knew about the Bauhaus. She had built herself a house out there that, you know, from the little I remember of the lines of this house and everything, I think Bauhaus, you know. So, there's a vision there. She wasn't just going to build some—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's modernist, a real modernist house, yeah.

TOM WUDL: —yes, yes. With a, you know, with intention.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And apparently, she had been the mistress of a very popular German author in her younger days and traveled all over the world with him. And when you walked into her house, there was a small atrium. [00:06:03] And on the ceiling she had had someone paint a map of all the places that she had been to in her life. So, this was a person who had, you know, for my father, it would never occur to him to do anything like that. You know, a person that does that,

you know, has a certain vision about their life and how to commemorate it or, you know, let it continue to be part of it. So—and the lines I remember. And, you know, I remember dark wood, very clean lines, and walls, very clean walls.

So anyway, Eleska, the last memory I have of her was that I had come down—I was a kind of sickly child. And on one of these occasions when I had been confined to bed for a while, I remember she had sent over these immense children's coloring books. And they were already old at that time, because the pages were yellowed and crumbling. But it was big, and the pages were blank. And so, this was a gift for me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Blank. It wasn't like ones where you color in—

TOM WUDL: No, no. They were—the pages were—they had illustrations to color in.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what were they of?

TOM WUDL: I don't remember.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: I do not remember. But so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But it wasn't Donald Duck. It was—

TOM WUDL: —I don't remember.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I don't remember—they must have been German. They must have been—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, yeah.

TOM WUDL: —you know. But I think she was a person that somehow recognized something in me, is how I would like—that's my—at least it's a fantasy. It's a recollection that's—it's difficult to sort out the fantasy now of what I would have liked it to be, or whether it actually was that way, I don't know. [00:08:10] But I sure as hell wish I had known more about her, had more time to spend with her, in retrospect. Because to me, she was, you know, she was a particular kind of source. She could have been a source material of, you know, this is what life—what you can do with your life, something like that. Okay. [Laughs.] That's kind of it for those recollections.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, wait a minute then. We were at, I guess, the reaction to American culture, TV, movies, comic books.

TOM WUDL: Well, scale.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: You know, in Lima, I saw the little Canada Dry ginger ale bottle.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: But when I came here, the gas stations in those days had these immense neon signs. The Richfield and the Mobil stations, the flying horse. I mean, it's one thing to see a little Canada Dry bottle way in the distance. It's another to drive right up to one of these immense things. And yes, the scale. I was terrified. I remember going to the supermarket with my parents. I'd never been in a place this large before, and I really was seriously traumatized. I was afraid that, if I lost sight of them, I would never see them again. Yeah. That's how sheltered a child I was, right? And for many, many years later, I had serious fright about being lost. [00:10:04] I remember even having a paper route when I was already 12 or 13. And in those days, once every few months, the boss would come around in his car or station wagon, and you were supposed to go. In the evenings he would drive you to certain neighborhoods, and you had to go door to door to get new subscriptions.

And I remember being terrified, you know, because he would drop us off, and then he'd say, well, I'll meet you two blocks away over there. And I would—and even—you know, and each kid was assigned a certain area. And I was terrified that he would—I did not—and I was already 12, you know, but that he would not find me, or I would not be able to locate the place where we're

supposed to meet. So, that terror was with me for a long time. And the other terror took a long time. And this created some issues for me when I was an adult.

I remember Melanie and I, when we first went to Europe on our honeymoon, I was so terrified about the passport and, you know, the crossing borders and stuff. That whole thing, from my heritage, even though I had never personally experienced it, something was inculcated into me that this is—every time you're going to go and present your passport or cross a border, this could be a life-threatening incident. [00:12:07] And, you know, she couldn't understand it. She'd say, like, God, chill out, you know, really.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: There's not—everything's fine. We're okay. But that definitely stayed for a long time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But despite those feelings of terror and everything about the scale, were you glad to be here? Were you happy you had come here?

TOM WUDL: Oh, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You loved it.

TOM WUDL: I loved it. I loved it. I've always loved it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did you love?

TOM WUDL: Oh. Well, I guess a certain freedom. You know, the kinds of formalities that had been imposed. For instance, when I would go to friends' houses, and they would just sit there and put their feet on the table—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —I was aghast, that kind—you know. I was aghast on the one hand that, God, how could you do this? And on the other, aghast that, wow, I'm so envious that you can do this, that you have this casual sense of your life, you know. There was an undercurrent of life being something very serious, that these kids—there was nothing serious. They had no worries whatsoever. They could just do whatever they want to, anytime. And I loved that, even though I couldn't bring myself to fully participate in it, absolutely. But I've always loved that kind of, you know, even libertine sort of potential, yeah. I loved the language, all of it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what about TV? I mean, your parents let you have a TV, and they let you watch TV and such.

TOM WUDL: I love it. Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. In those days it was still black-and-white TV, you know. [00:14:03] And—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But I mean, that didn't conflict with their European standards to have—they were like, fine, just watch—

TOM WUDL: No. Yeah. Because you're in America, and everything's good now. Whatever influences—even though the Americans themselves are inferior to us—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes. [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —they're not Bolivians! And so, anything that happens here is okay. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: Also, they were already in their 50s. And by that time, you know how it is, you're just exhausted. They had to work long hours, and, you know, I escaped a good deal of the tyranny that had been imposed on my brother and sister growing up because of that. Now, there were other issues, I think, that, you know, we would never permit that, with our kids. I mean, the—I remember being—going to summer camp only one year. Obviously, either my parents weren't even aware of it, or they couldn't afford it, probably. And so, many a summer I would be at home by myself, and just the TV. And—but it gave me some time to draw, too.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You used to draw while you watched TV?

TOM WUDL: Oh, yeah, yeah. Or turn the TV off and draw.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And so, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So that's—this is—okay, so you come here when you're 10. They put you in a class for kids with disabilities.

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I mean, this doesn't sound like a great experience.

TOM WUDL: And I didn't have a home life where I could go home to my mom, like, you know, Henry might have come home to us and say, hey, I don't know what's going on, you know? [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: They wouldn't go to the school and say, sorry, he shouldn't be in this class? [00:16:03]

TOM WUDL: No, no, no, they wouldn't go to the school. The only—the one thing that I—there were a couple of times when I engaged them. They didn't come to the school, but there were two incidents. And one happened right away, the first day. My mom dressed me in my best formal wear, which in those days was short pants, you know, with suspenders. These were my best clothes, send me to school for the first day. Little did she know that, you know, all the other kids were a little bit dumbfounded by this outfit. And I got the message really quickly. And coming home that day, I said, I can't go back dressed like this, you know. And that was good. My parents understood that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You had to get some blue jeans.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Or something. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And then I remember, you know, my mom would get up in the morning. She would make lunch for everybody. And, you know, I took my lunch to school every day. And then, but after lunch, kids could buy ice cream or orange juice or chocolate milk. And so, at a certain point after a while, I did get up the courage to speak to my father and say, you know, I wonder if I could also buy an ice cream. And he was good about it, because it was a nickel. And, you know, we could afford that. That was fine, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But once you learned English, were you promoted out of the classroom for the kids— [00:18:07]

TOM WUDL: Yes, yes. But you know what? I can't—I don't know how it happened. As I said earlier, I had a kind of education by the time I was 10 years old that was—[laughs]—so far beyond anything here. By the time I got to grammar school here, I could do multiplication, division, all of that, you know, blah, blah. I was a really good student. That whole—the transition had its effect. And from that moment, I basically became an underachiever, you know. And I don't know what it was. I think it was a combination: the trip, the entering adolescence, the limited capacity for my parents to be engaged and involved. The upshot of all of this is, my best friends were always kids who were in the honors classes, and I was always in, you know, what was known as dumbbell English or whatever, simply because I just—at the end of every year you had to take those aptitude tests that would determine what, you know, what classes you were going to take the next year, and which grouping you were going to be in. And so, it became very clear to me right away, oh, okay.

But I was fine with it because I realized, you know, I'm not going to make friends with any of these kids I'm with in these classes because I—it was just automatically I gravitated towards these other kids. [00:20:11]

ANNETTE LEDDY: But wait a minute. You couldn't pass the aptitude tests?

TOM WUDL: Exactly.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But why not?

TOM WUDL: Because—I don't know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because they're culturally biased? Is that sort of what it is?

TOM WUDL: I don't think so. I can't say that. That would be inappropriate, I think.

ANNETTE LEDDY: No, that's not the reason? Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: I think I just tuned out, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. So, it was more like an emotional—

TOM WUDL: Drawing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —kind of shutdown.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: Drawing—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —things on the margins of the paper.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. Huh.

TOM WUDL: It's true that occasionally I would get into—like, I remember being in a biology class and getting an A because I liked it. And I didn't mind studying and passing the tests. But, you know, I have to tell you. The report card day was always traumatic. And I'm not exaggerating. I mean, there were—[laughs]—Cs and Ds all over that report card. And then there was always an A in art. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, so now you're finally having art classes—

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —but you had never had that in Bolivia.

TOM WUDL: Right, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, what were those classes like?

TOM WUDL: Great from the very early—even in grammar school, every teacher I had recognized that I liked it, and they encouraged me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's great.

TOM WUDL: And they were really good. And to this day, the teacher, who was originally my junior high school art teacher, then she transferred to the high school that I went to.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, from LACE to— [00:22:01]

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: To Hamilton.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: She's still alive. She's 80-something. She's still teaching at Palos Verdes Art Center.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I see her once a year.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's so nice.

TOM WUDL: And she really took custodianship of me, you know. I have to say, I owe this person a lot. I'm even getting emotional about it right now. She, I know, used to go to faculty meetings and tell the other faculty members, well, Tom is not really a retard, you know. He's not a damaged kid, trust me, you know. So, she looked out for me, and to this day, you know, she's really encouraging. And every time—she was here a couple of weeks ago, and, you know, she comes in the studio, and she says, that's great. It's really good. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: Really a sweet person, who was very important during what could have been a very difficult time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you went from Palms. Then you go to LACES—

TOM WUDL: Hamilton. No, no, LACES—it used to be—no, I went to Palms Junior High School.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I see.

TOM WUDL: Then I went to Louis Pasteur. I went to Palms Elementary School.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

TOM WUDL: It's over there on Motor—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

TOM WUDL: —and Palms. Then I went to Louis Pasteur Junior High School, which is now LACES. It was still the junior high school at that time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: And then I went to Hamilton. [00:24:00]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And when you were in junior high school, you had this teacher.

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then she also went to Hamilton after that.

TOM WUDL: That's right. Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then Hamilton had probably pretty serious art classes, right?

TOM WUDL: They did.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: And I certainly, you know, excelled. I mean, she made it easy. Like, I got to have all art materials I wanted. I could bring my own canvases into class and paint there if I wanted to. And, you know, she was, you know, she was happy to have a student like me, obviously. And she was great.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Now, you probably know that in the book about the CalArts Mafia, Jack Goldstein says, "At Hamilton, Wudl was the big star in the art department. He knew how to draw and had the rap down. He used to say I reminded him of Jackson Pollock."

TOM WUDL: You know, that's very funny because I don't remember Jack Goldstein at Hamilton. My recollection is that I know that I met him at Chouinard. And I know that he did go to Hamilton, and I do know that he had a really tortured upbringing, sadly. Are we going to be able to take a bathroom break? [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: We can actually stop now if you want.

TOM WUDL: Okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, because we've done—we're kind of to the end, pretty much of—

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm. [affirmative]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then we can start CalArts and the transition next time, at Chouinard.

TOM WUDL: How's that? That's great.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because, yeah. I'm sorry.

TOM WUDL: It's all right. No problem.

ANNETTE LEDDY: We've done really a lot. Okay, wait a second. Stop it. Okay.

TOM WUDL: Great.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Fantastic, I think, but—

TOM WUDL: Well, good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I hope you feel that way.

[END OF TRACK wudl19_1of3_sd_track05_r.]

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ANNETTE LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy interviewing Tom Wudl in his studio in downtown LA on November 23, 2019. Let's go back to just Hamilton High for a few more moments.

TOM WUDL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: Could you say something about who you knew there, who was important to you there, and how it felt to have come so far from, you know, your situation in school when you first arrived in the U.S.?

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Well, I was certainly much more comfortable and, you know, I could speak the language fluently, and as we spoke yesterday, you know, academically, I was definitely in a very different league than most of my friends, and that was something interesting. All of my friends were high-achieving honor students continually, and so I would be in these, what––in those days, we called them dumbbell English and math classes––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Even at Hammy?

TOM WUDL: Yes. And then at recess and lunch time, I would be there with my other friends. And yes, I did not know Jack Goldstein at Hamilton, although I guess he knew about me, and I would say I had a pretty normal but not extensive or, you know, active social life. [00:02:02] I had my friends; I had girlfriends, and, you know, pretty basic.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you were really assimilated into American culture at that point.

TOM WUDL: Well, definitely. Definitely. And then we can talk about that a little bit later––

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: ––because I thought I was assimilated into American culture.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you still couldn't put your feet up on the table, I bet.

TOM WUDL: I couldn't put my feet up on the table, but I was getting close to it.

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay. And then, of course, you go to art school, where everybody puts their feet up on the table, right?

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: That's right. Or under it. Everybody was crawling under the table in those days.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Right. So let's describe that transition between high school and college.

TOM WUDL: Right. Well, you know, I definitely knew that I didn't have the grade point average to get into a regular college or university unless I went to a junior college or something like that, and I was already aware at that time that I was just not an academic candidate whatsoever. And I remember my brother trying to encourage me to––"You should go to college instead of art school." And when it was time to go to art school, there were two choices as far as I was concerned. One was Otis, which was a very different kind of place then than it is today.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And Chouinard, of course. In those days, Otis was run by Joe Mugnaini. He, I believe, was in the film industry. He was a designer, and he ran the school like an old-fashioned academy. [00:04:05] And I had met––because of some acquaintances I had in high school, I had met a couple of students who were graduate students over there at Otis. The place was pristine: the polished floors; there was no paint anywhere, and you know, drawing was the most important thing. And I remember going––they used to call the second floor "The Ivory Tower."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I remember meeting one of these students up there, and you know, he was a remarkable academic draftsman. There's no doubt about it. But, you know, I had heard through the grapevine, and perhaps even in my conversation with him at that time, that––and I don't know whether this was correct information or not, but I was given the impression that in order to graduate from one course to another over there, they would give you drawing exams and, you know, I felt that was not me. I wasn't going to do it. And there was just a feeling about Otis. It was just not right. Now I have to say that I had been to Otis, and I had also been to Art Center in high school, because I had gotten scholarships to summer programs there, and so I was acquainted with these two places, and I used to go Saturday mornings to Art Center to a regular live drawing class, and it was more of a hands-on––it was also a live drawing class, but a little bit looser over there at Otis. [00:06:01] So I was acquainted with those, but I had never been to Chouinard. And the minute I stepped into Chouinard, I loved it. I knew this was the place for me because it was a mess.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I could hide there, right? I felt, God, if I went to a place like Otis or Art Center, there was no place to hide. You were really continually, you know, on the spot. You had to present yourself, and I wasn't going to have any of that. Now, perhaps others would disagree with me, but the other––within the first year over there at Chouinard, I came to the conclusion that everyone here, from the administration all the way down to the students, that this was the last place of respectability for any individual, and if you—[laughs]—didn't make it here, you were––you know, you were on a bus bench. That was your next phase. That's kind of how I felt, although I know that wasn't true. There were some very respectable people––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, in fact, the whole generation of artists that you went to school with, who came out of Chouinard, became these—

TOM WUDL: ––became very, you know, well established.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. Yes.

TOM WUDL: But, you know, and I believe we were the first generation, because there weren't any luminaries that had come out of there to the best of my knowledge before, you know. I mean, not––or let me put it this way. Not the number of people that––

ANNETTE LEDDY: There were certainly some artists who had important careers, but they were not––didn't have the international stature––

TOM WUDL: Right. Right. Right.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––that the artists who went there in the '60s began to get, you know.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Yeah. [00:08:00] And, I mean, and out of all the faculty members that were at Chouinard, the only one that eventually became well known and, you know, rightfully so, was Fred Hammersley.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What about Robert Irwin? He taught there.

TOM WUDL: Well, yeah, but you know, I never associated him with having even––I remember him coming to speak at Chouinard, but somehow, I never even think of him as, you know, as having attended there or anything, but certainly––

You know, really briefly. Though one of the teachers whose class I really enjoyed there was John Canavier. He taught this class called "Methods and Materials," or "Materials and Methods."

ANNETTE LEDDY: How do you spell his name?

TOM WUDL: I think––well, it's probably a French pronunciation. Canavier. I don't remember.

ANNETTE LEDDY: C-A-N-A––

TOM WUDL: C-A-N––Canavier. I would imagine––

ANNETTE LEDDY: V-I-E-R-E––

TOM WUDL: ––that there was I-E-R. Yeah. You know, it was a freshman class, but I really liked it because it was hands-on, and we worked with a million different kinds of materials. You know, he had us cast plaster and do this and that, and of course Stephan von Huene was one of the other instructors there who was really influential and eventually, you know, Emerson Woelffer.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Emerson Woelffer is the one most people mention––

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––when they talk about people who were really––who really had impact. [00:10:00]

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Yeah. You know, Emerson and I had––did not have the kind of camaraderie that other students had with him. I remember he actually failed me in a class. He was––

ANNETTE LEDDY: My God.

TOM WUDL: He was very upset. He was really pissed off. This was my next to the last year at Chouinard. I had gotten some pieces into the art rental gallery at the museum at the time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: At LACMA.

TOM WUDL: At LACMA. And he got wind of this, and it just pissed him off.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Why?

TOM WUDL: Because he felt, you know, I had no business being exhibited. He never made it really clear, but he made his displeasure very clear to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But what business would it be of his?

TOM WUDL: Doesn't matter.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: Who knows? Who knows? I mean, we have to understand that in those days, Emerson, you know, was basically a forgotten person in the art world, there's no doubt about it. And, you know, it's only through, I think, the eventual reputation of many of his students that his stature has been elevated, and rightly so. He is deserving of recognition. But in those days, to the best of my knowledge, you know, we respected him because there was this association with, you know, Bauhaus, and New York, and his class was rightfully very popular because he used to––he had treasures with him. [00:12:01] He had recordings of Kurt Schwitters reciting––

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: ––his poetry. You know, that was really important, and he had––I guess he knew Motherwell pretty well, and the other artists, so there were anecdotes that he would relate.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, I've heard from various of your contemporaries about being invited to his home and seeing his––

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––art collection.

TOM WUDL: I never went there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So he just––you two just didn't click.

TOM WUDL: Right. That's right. It wasn't––there wasn't any enmity between us, but, you know, and especially after this thing that happened, there was just no way.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: I mean, we had a friendly enough relationship in school. It wasn't like––that incident didn't mar my appreciation of him, or anything like that. I was surprised. But I was never invited to his house or anything like that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So who of the teachers who were there––you would say Hammersley was the one?

TOM WUDL: He's the only one whose studio I actually went to visit a couple of times. I really respected him, and I got a C from him—[laughs]—in the design class, you know, so my sort of academic underachievement continued throughout my years. Ralph Bacerra failed me in ceramics, and––

ANNETTE LEDDY: How do you spell that last name?

TOM WUDL: Bacerra. B-A, I believe, C-E-R-A. I'm not sure. Ralph.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yes. Oh, that's right. Yeah. [00:14:00]

TOM WUDL: Eventually, later, professionally, when we met again, we got along fine, you know, but––

[They laugh.]

—I just wasn't performing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So how was it structured then, Chouinard? [Y]ou were a painting major? Was that your––

TOM WUDL: Yes. Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So how––what would the sequence of courses be?

TOM WUDL: Well, the first class that was also really terrific because the students got to do whatever they wanted to, was with Watson Cross. He was a crippled person. He walked with crutches. He had a special boot on one of his legs. He was a hunchback. Really astonishing, and yet there was something endearing about him, and I think he lived vicariously through these young students. He could hardly move, and yet he encouraged everyone to make these murals on the wall, like this, you know, like 10 by 20 feet across. We would put up the paper and he encouraged it. And that was really fun. It was––I mean, I didn't have necessarily any kind of special rapport with him, but I appreciated that opportunity. And, you know, I really respected Hammersley because I felt he had a certain poetic intellect––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: ––that I really appreciated.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And also––

[Cross talk.]

TOM WUDL: ––and the discipline, because that was something that I had longed for, you know, it wasn't until many years later that I became really aware of classical and romantic temperaments and, you know, I was one of those very romantic artists in whose chest beats the heart of a classicist. [00:16:01] You know, longing––

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: ––to have some control, and when I saw those Hammersley paintings painted with a pallet knife, just—and, you know, he gave some lectures occasionally at lunchtime, and I remember one in particular where there was a tree in the patio there, and he employed the tree as a metaphor for the subject of his chat, which at this point—I don't remember, but I just remember how he did that, and I appreciated it, you know, so––

And, you know, I respected von Huene, but he was kind of unapproachable for me. I would have liked to have had perhaps a little bit more contact, but, you know, he really did the professor thing on steroids at that time. He used to have this white smock. He, you know, tried to be kind of European, or something like that. And you know, eventually, he moved to Germany, and I think had a pretty good reputation. Sadly, he died, I think, prematurely, you know, I mean––but I respected him, although we didn't have any closeness necessarily, so that was––and then, you know, there were just so many really talented people over there. It was really terrific.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean your peers.

TOM WUDL: The students.

ANNETTE LEDDY: The students.

TOM WUDL: My peers. I mean, I remember––I don't know what ever happened to him, but I remember one class, a print class. [00:18:05] Michael Maglich and—he was a student, and you know, all of these people, that was a big eye opener for me, because at Hamilton, all the kids—they were smart, but they were very good boys and girls. You know, they wore clean clothes; they came from very stable, middle class environments to the best of my knowledge, upper middle class; and I got into Chouinard, and, you know, that was an eye opener for me because these kids were wild in a way that, you know, was, frankly, a little bit intimidating. I wanted to be absorbed into this thing, but I was also a little bit intimidated. I was intimidated not only by their talent, but by their abandon.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: You know, totally. And Al [Ruppersberg] was one of those people that I admired from a distance in that regard because it wasn't just putting your feet on the table, it was just your general engagement with life that was [explosive sound effect], just blew me away, right?

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Give me an example of what would be wild behavior at school.

TOM WUDL: Well, just a certain kind of freedom to just feel like you could do whatever you wanted to any time, and of course, the drugs. [00:20:00] I was very cautious about it, I have to say. Always. I did have, you know, I was a heavy pot smoker, but as far as other drugs, I was more timid. You know, I was cautious about that. Just the fact that these students would just saunter in at any given time of the day, you know? I mean, class would start at nine in the morning or eight in the morning or 10, and some of these guys and girls would come in, you know, at one o'clock. Who cares? And just do––and just leave any time they wanted to. This kind of abandonment, that's all I can call it, to their own instinct and indulgence was really healthy for me to witness, you know. I admired it from a distance, although I couldn't bring myself to be so completely––by comparison to my family, I mean, I was the black sheep and––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Were you still living at home while you were at art school?

TOM WUDL: In my first year and a half at art school, and then I moved out. Yeah. So I remember one of the first people I met––and then I'll get back to this thing with Michael Maglich. One of the first people I met there was Raul Guerrero, and he and his cousin Valo were living together in this place, and I went to visit them, and it just blew me away. They were already artists as far as I was concerned. They were doing things and engaged in a practice that, you know, I knew nothing about.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So even though these fellow students were wild, they were deeply committed to art? [00:22:00]

TOM WUDL: They were talented, and they were committed. They already were doing things as if they were artists, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And they were hip to things that I was just completely naïve about and, I think, remained that way throughout my tenure, and to some extent, I think I still am fairly naïve in those matters. But I admired this and respected them for it. I remember Valo was working on some painting and, you know, in those days, in my eyes, it might as well have been a Van Gogh, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: It had authority, which I knew nothing about.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And a certain maturity.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: It was the same with Raul and––

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how did the faculty react to these wild kids? I mean, was it––

TOM WUDL: I think they––I don't remember that, but I felt––I don't know. I can tell you I don't know how they reacted. I don't––you know, it was Chouinard. I think––and they let them be themselves.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yep. That's great.

TOM WUDL: I mean, here's this incident––now I'm going to get to Michael Maglich, who I thought was a really talented guy, another guy I sort of admired privately from afar. I remember he had just not been in class for one fucking day of the whole semester, and this is what blew me away. The last day, the crit, I walk into that class. I had made some dumb, innocent little etching, you know, or some lithographs or something, just nothing. [00:24:00] I walk into class, and there is this print that must have been––it was composed of various sheets of just newsprint of these huge shoes, pair of black shoes, just pinned to the wall. Okay, this is my final project. Do you want to––this is the crit, you know. And I was––to this day as, you know, you can tell as I––the way––the sound of my voice, I was so impressed with this performance. He had––it was okay with him to just be up all night, knew exactly what he was going to do. He printed these big, black pair of shoes, and that was it. It was awesome. That was not going to happen at Art Center. That was not going to happen at Otis. And it was a really good eye opener for me, too, that that is one of the characteristics of a really engaged, creative person, you know. To be able to perform that way was impressive. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative]. And so who were some of the other peers that you had and admired, or who––I mean what––maybe talk about your whole process there of becoming part of a social group.

TOM WUDL: Well, I didn't have much of a social group there. I did not socialize. I didn't go to all the parties. I knew they were there, but I'll tell you, a good friend of mine at that time was a guy named Steve Shear. [00:25:59] And he was also kind of timid and shy like myself, and so you know, we partnered up together in that way.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: But towards the end, you know, after my second year––and one of the things that I neglected to mention is that I did get a partial scholarship to Chouinard, and I remember there––and this reflects a little bit back on my parents and their complete oblivious approach to my life at that time, or you know, from the time we arrived here. I'd gotten this scholarship and there was a luncheon at the music center and Walt Disney and Gale Storm were the presenters, and Walt Disney, you know, shook my hand, and gave me this paper, but my parents were oblivious. They wouldn't––you know, if something like that happened with Henry, I mean––

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —Mel and I would be there and make sure that he's all combed and, you know, blah, blah, blah. They weren't even present. So I was pretty much on my own, and I had to figure all of these things out. There wasn't any kind of guidance that I know we have given Henry, you

know, as his parents, or some engagement there. Let's see, we were talking. I had just had that thought but we––where were we in our conversation? Steven Shearer. Oh yeah. And then at second year, I signed up for work study, so I could make some money and that's when I met Al Ruppersberg, because he was on the crew there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I met Chuck Arnoldi sweeping the floor. [00:28:02] We both had brooms in our hands and he was coming in from one end of one room and I was coming in from another end, and we sort of met in the middle of the room and—you know, Chuck and Laddie Dill were impressive in their ability to transition into the real world out there, you know, that was also an eye opener for me. So I––both of them were valuable––sadly, I have no acquaintanceship with either one of them anymore and sadly, my acquaintanceship with Chuck has soured over the years, and it's too bad, but I admired and respected, you know––we had a good friendship in those days, and even for some time after school, and I admired and respected how they were able to negotiate this transition from art school into the art world, you know? They had this studio down here on Pico, not far from here.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: A loft that they put together. They had a business making frames and, you know, they had a parade of the women who were then engaging in the art world, the collectors and museum and gallery curators. [00:29:59] They really set, in my opinion, the pace.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But was this while they were still students, they started this?

TOM WUDL: Towards the end, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: The last year or so. And actually, I have to thank them for my first show. They––I was working––I had an apartment, a kind of basement apartment, and at that time, I was making these paper bags, gold leaf paper bags, and I had designed a piece for which I didn't have any room in my place, and they had a studio like this, you know, with high walls and high ceilings, and they let me install this piece. It was 100 sandwich-sized paper bags. 10 on a shelf, 10 shelves going up, kind of like a Donald Judd stack, you know, only––

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: ––made out of sandwich bags, silver leafed, or gold leafed. And unbeknownst––

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TOM WUDL: —to me, you know, they let me keep it up there for a while. They were very generous that way. And unbeknownst to me, the late Eugenia Butler was one of the many visitors traipsing through their studios, and apparently, she was really impressed by this piece. And she didn't call me; I heard from somebody else that she was interested in giving me a show. I don't remember; I think maybe it was David Deutsch who told me that at the time. You know, I had a very difficult relationship with David.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, he was a student at Chouinard—

TOM WUDL: He was a student at Chouinard at the same time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —at the same time.

TOM WUDL: And as a matter of fact, when I first moved out of home, he had leased an entire––you know, he was very wealthy. He was a trust fund kid, and he had leased this huge series of storefronts on Olympic boulevard, right near Vermont there. They still exist; it's all Korean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —businesses now. And he had leased, like, four storefronts or something. He had three of them, then he broke through and everything, had a huge space, and then he leased one of them out. And he leased it out to me for a while. And––but, you know, he always made it clear that the—I like David, and I respect him as an artist. I think he's done some really terrific work. But, you know, he was very conflicted in terms of, you know, his wealth and relationship to

everyone and whether he was going to, you know, impose his capacity to dominate a situation or not. [00:02:13] I think––I think he had a tough time with that. And everyone else had, it was challenging. So, this is––just let me say this final thing, then this was a typical thing of David, where I had been in that studio for about a year, and then there was another student. I forget his last name; his name was David also. An incredibly gifted guy who was making these tremendous sculptures, very, you know, mature craftsmanship. And David decided that well, this guy's more deserving than I was of that studio. And he made it very clear to me. You know, "I'm going to lease it to him." Because it was important for David to be associated with, you know, performers, with winners, and I was clearly not coming up to the bar. So, I had to vacate that studio. That was, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Hurtful

TOM WUDL: —hurtful, challenging. I mean, people behave in ways because they just don't know any better. [Laughs.] That's just how it is. But anyway, there was that, but on the other hand, we had a certain comradery. Obviously, I wouldn't have been in that studio in the first place if we hadn't. Okay, go ahead.

ANNETTE LEDDY: No, I simply want to say this. So, I'm just wondering how we get from these paintings that you're doing when you first get to Chouinard, to these gold leaf paper bags. I mean, that sounds like quite a trajectory. [00:04:01] So, talk about the work you did at Chouinard and how it evolved over those four years.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. You know, it—eventually, it––I painted, and at one point––and this was in Emerson's class actually––I discovered that I really loved collage. And I was painting these paintings and collaging things on them. I did a whole bunch of these paper pieces where they were just paper.

And I would take the brown wrapping paper and start painting on it, and then tear it up and re-glue it together and, you know, was really excited about what was happening. So it was––it was––it didn't occur to me until much later that oh, you know, paper is my medium. The—so I made quite a few paintings, but my recollection is that there was always some kind of collage element involved here. So, it wasn't so much that I wanted a tactility; I think I just loved the casual approach I could have with the paper, how easy it was to work with it, to tear it, cut it, glue it, paint on it, stuff like that.

Then, in my––the summer before my last year at Chouinard, or maybe even a little before that––maybe it was in between my second and third year––I got to go to Europe. [00:06:02] You know, I had saved up money, and I––there was a kid at Chouinard whom I had met in one of those high school scholarship classes.

His name was Anthony Richmond. Sadly, he's deceased; he died many years ago in a motorcycle accident. But this kid was one of those gifted kids, you know. He could render; he could draw. And he came from a very different background than I. He was––he lived in the ghetto over there in Watts, or close to it. He was raised either by his mother or his grandparents. The father had been African American and the mother, Japanese, you know. So, they had met, you know, at the end of the war. So, he was a product of that relationship. But he was smart, and he was really talented, and I liked him a lot. Sadly, when we met up many years later, I went to visit him, and I was so crestfallen. He was making these paintings that were, basically, like biker illustrations, you know. And I thought to myself, how could this have happened? You know, you were really so promising, not only, you know, gifted with your hand, but intellectually. He was aware of art history and you know, in an impressive way. [00:07:58]

So, Anthony and I went to Europe together, and—[laughs]—there we were one day at the Uffizi in Florence. In front of the immense Giotto––*Enthroned Madonna and Child*, and the Cimabues, of the equal gold leaf panels and, of course, one of my favorite paintings in the world, the Simone Martini *Annunciation*, that thing. So those things really resonated, and they stayed with me much more than anything else that we had seen, you know, and we saw a lot.

And when I came back, that was the trend—you know, being—actually having an experience of magnificent masterpieces, as you know, has an effect on everyone because I'd never seen anything like that, but whatever I had seen here at museums [laughs] was nothing. This is what art could be, you know, and it just blew me away. And that began a different trajectory for me, where I started to become aware that––I wasn't able to formulate what I'm about to tell you now until many years later, but the instinct was there, that if I stayed the course with this romantic

temperament, where, you know, by that time I had developed a very loose wrist and a certain authority and elegance, you know, in being able to move the paint around. [00:10:06] I, you know, certainly. But it occurred to me––it just instinctively–– that, if I continued that way, I could end up being a pretty good artist when all was said and done.

But I would never be really able to fulfill my full potential; that something else was required, a different trajectory. That I needed to start really boning up on a different kind of technique. And one of the first things that I did regarding that was I made some renderings, some copies, of some of the paintings I had seen in Europe. But I rendered them with pencil on paper bags. So, this was this kind of infantile idea, but you know, it was meaningful to me at the time, where I would take a throwaway item like a paper bag and deliberately do something that would change it into something precious and valuable by spending a lot of time. So, I copied Renaissance paintings, and to this day, my sister still has the one paper bag that I rendered, Vermeer's *Lacemaker*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Her countenance, and you know, the actual size on this paper bag. And then, it was, you know, my—[snaps fingers]––my memory was going like this—[snaps fingers]—and I remembered the gold leaf panels, and I thought that, you know, okay, I'm rendering these things on paper bags; why not gold leaf a paper bag? [00:12:10]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And so, I taught myself how to use the gesso. I used to gesso the paper bags and then paint them black because I knew that, when I applied the gold leaf, eventually there would —cracks would appear where the folds of the paper were, so by the black coming through, it would have a graphic kind of quality. And that's how that happened,

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how were those received at Chouinard?

TOM WUDL: Well that was at the very end—I never showed those at Chouinard. I'll tell you what I showed at Chouinard, and they––I don't know. To the best of my knowledge, it didn't make a big impression, but I liked it. My final graduating piece at Chouinard was as follows: I had bought sheets of tissue paper, colored tissue paper. And I had columns of braided––I would just pin these sheets, like blue sheets, one going at an angle and the other one overlapping it. So, braiding them and pinning them with map pins on the wall. Just these columns and then there would be––there were those that were yellow and like that—I don't have any photography of that. I do have a photography––there were other things that I was doing at that time because that was already the beginning of process art, of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, that's what I was—

TOM WUDL: —of processing materials.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —thinking.

TOM WUDL: One of the pieces I did was, I took plaster and just put it directly on the wall, troweled in on the wall. And while the—you know, let's say a patch about 24 inches by 24 inches, very uneven, casually plastered on, but thick enough so that, while the plaster was wet, I could inscribe an oval into it, just very casually with a nail. [00:14:15] When it all dried, I went in there and painted the––that––inscribed oval with red paint, and then applied aluminum leaf over the whole thing. So, there was this little red line around it, and there was, you know, the texture of the plaster and the, you know, aluminum leaf. So that's what I was doing. There was already this engagement with the gold and paper, for the most part, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you know, I mean, I'm thinking also that—1966, that's when you started, correct?

TOM WUDL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, so you know Rauschenberg. I mean, you know collage was somehow ideally—

TOM WUDL: Oh, Rauschenberg was a big hero, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Much more so than Jasper Johns, although you know that has reversed itself over time.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: Obviously. But oh man, you know, for a young artist, you know, Rauschenberg is so important. You know, he's––to me, he was like the same influence that Hermann Hesse has on—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —boys, you know, adolescent boys. He knows them, and he's telling their life story. And I felt, you know, Rauschenberg, you know––I could really relate to the immediacy, the playfulness, but at the same time, the elegance—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —the eloquence of it, you know, was impressive.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what about Warhol?

TOM WUDL: You know, I had a difficult time with Warhol. [00:15:59] It took me a long time to come to terms with that. And that's because I'm, you know—there was just a certain innocence on my part, and I––you know, there would be moments where I was, you know, genuinely impressed or excited. But I also felt there was an element there, perhaps it, you know––there was something taboo about it. I don't know, that I felt I just couldn't go there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: He did use a lot of gold, also.

TOM WUDL: Yes, but in a different way—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —in a vulgar way.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: You know, I mean, in retrospect, of course, yeah, you know, those things are striking and very important. I would say, you know, I was starting to––I was not––and to this day, I think that's really part of my character––I was never precocious, I would say. That's how I think of myself anyway; whereas people like Al Ruppersberg, you know, Raul––they were precocious in being able to tune into these things. Who Duchamp was, who Warhol was, and understand the import of this at this moment and feeling they had the capacity to enter that conversation. I remember Raul making the, you know, this replica of the Duchamp rotating machine. That was impressive. And these gorgeous silkscreens—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —you know, that were, in my mind, precocious. [00:18:07] He––these people were hip. I mean, by the end––by the time we got out of school, what I was doing couldn't compare to *Al's Restaurant*, that was already, you know, that was––he was just a little bit ahead of me. So—but I was in my last year at school—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean *Al's Café*.

TOM WUDL: —*Al's Café*, yeah. Sorry, I think of it as the restaurant [laughs].

ANNETTE LEDDY: Although it does feel like you kind of––there's a quote somewhere about how you straddled both worlds, painting and conceptual. It does—

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —feel like that to me.

TOM WUDL: Yes, I was.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you feel that way?

TOM WUDL: Do I feel what way?

ANNETTE LEDDY: That you straddle both worlds, painting and conceptual?

TOM WUDL: Well there's definitely ideas—[laughs]—that guide my work. But I think they seem, by comparison to other ideas around, kind of old-fashioned. I mean, even that essay that I just wrote. I––it is definitely a declaration of who I am.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: But look at what I'm talking about in that––in that essay. When I think about it, there isn't––yes, there's mention––the artists––the modern artists that are mentioned are, I mean, in my opinion, great artists, but rather conservative. You know, Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, conservative in their—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Enough to be who you are, yeah.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, I'm not saying that that's––it's just a kind of marker of a certain intellectual disposition that I have. [00:20:04]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. Now on the other hand, I would say, you know, when I speak about being—oh, what is the word I need, that I'm looking for? I don't know. There is a side of me, especially in relation to academia, that I would say is subversive, you know. So, I do have that part of my temperament, but it's so—[laughs]—specialized that it's hardly worth mentioning in that regard.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Still, it sounds like right after you finished art school, you got a gallery, right?

TOM WUDL: Right away.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You graduate—

TOM WUDL: Before––I wasn't even done. I was still officially in art school at Chouinard when I had that first show at Eugenia Butler. Yeah. And then the following year, I had my show at Riko Mizuno, and that could have been the start of what could have been a career. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: What do you mean by that?

TOM WUDL: Well, we can––[laughs]—I'm sure we'll get to that at some point.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Well, okay, I guess I was actually going to––we go into the years after art school. I mean, it can be a very hard transition. In one way, it feels like it wasn't for you, but—

TOM WUDL: It wasn't for me at all.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: And again, I have my––I was doing the work. [00:22:02] And in retrospect, you know, even though I'm––I think of myself as rather conservative and naïve and everything. When I think back on it, those perforated paper pieces were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Beautiful

TOM WUDL: —not nothing—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —and they were innovative to a certain extent.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: So I had the work, and I still had a very valuable friendship with Chuck and Laddie and, you know, it was through them that I sort of made connections in the art world. I really will forever be grateful to them in that regard. It was through my friendship with them that I was able to. Chuck certainly was at Riko's gallery before I was, and it was through him that I met her. And, of course, the very first time I met Stanley and Elyse Grinstein was at *Al's Cafe*. And so, you know, that was the beginning of a long and very important relationship.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did they––were they––did they collect your work? Were they sort of your patrons?

TOM WUDL: They bought––they bought something right out of my first show at Riko Mizuno's.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Which piece was it?

TOM WUDL: Oh, it's at the Hammer now. It was a perforated piece.

ANNETTE LEDDY: The gold one?

TOM WUDL: No, it––it had––no, it's a fairly large piece, you know. It's about eight feet high by five or six feet across. It's on white paper, all perforated. It has a kind of diamond-shaped grid to it. So, they were––they were––they bought a piece right out of that first show. [00:24:05]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you go to the parties at their house?

TOM WUDL: Oh, yes. At that time, then I wasn't that shy anymore.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And you know, yes. As a matter of fact, I remember getting––this was already a couple years after art school, but not that long after––I remember getting a call from Elyse one Saturday morning, saying, "We have these musicians coming over this afternoon. Why don't you, you know, come by?" She was trying to get people to come over there. And it was in their living room in those days. They had taken––they had moved the Carl Andre brick piece over somewhere else, so that they could make room for Philip Glass and his ensemble.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And they set up their––they set up their amplifiers and their little keyboard and, you know, who knew? Who knew? And I can say that I was there for one of those very first performances.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: You know. And of course, they became lifelong patrons and close friends with Philip Glass.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Right, right. So, let's talk a little bit, then, about what the gallery scene was like at that time.

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because that would have been around 1970.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, well, my recollection of it is that there were maybe three galleries at that time that––I can't speak for everyone, but I thought that I might want to show with. At the top of the list, of course, was Nicholas Wilder; I mean, the most substantial. And then the newcomers were Riko and Eugenia Butler and, you know, originally they had Gallery 669. They were partners together, and then they broke up. You know, that was the extent of the art scene.

And I remember––well, I already knew about the galleries because my late friend Murray Kaufman and I were very close; he was an artist, too. In high school, we used to go to the galleries Monday nights. La Cienega Boulevard was––the galleries were open, and we would go to all of the galleries. So I was––certainly Nick Wilder wasn't open for those things, but I took note that there was a gallery there, and I remember going there and seeing my first Bruce Naumans and the holograms, and huge John Hoyland paintings and stuff like that. And by the time––I didn't know anything about Nick Wilder or the whole hierarchy, you know, of importance. But by the time we got out of art school, it was pretty clear, you know. As a matter of fact, I was sharing a studio with a guy––I forget—Tom Dixon who, at that time, his job was––he was Nick Wilder's chauffeur. [Laughs.] [00:28:08] And when Leo Castelli would come to town, you know, Nick would have limousines and pick him up and drive him around, that kind of thing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: So, Nick Wilder would have definitely been––but that never happened. I had the

show at Eugenia Butler, and then a year later over there at Riko––and there weren't any other, you know––there were lots of galleries. The one gallery I remember, and that was when I was still in high school, was David Stuart Galleries, and he had a kind of emporium where he had antiquities; he had some pottery here. He had baskets there. And then he would have art shows. The two shows I remember there, one was Laurence Dreiband, and the other one was—I thought to myself, who is this guy with this weird name, Vija Celmins? What kind of name is that?

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And I remember seeing Vija Celmins over at David Stuart's.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That really is her really early—

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —works, with the fans and the heater, that stuff?

TOM WUDL: They were––they were already––I forget now. But they were drawings, and they were good. And eventually, of course, she was at Riko's.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: So that was––that––in Tom's very, you know, conservative and recluse sort of universe, that was the––those were the galleries. And then eventually, and this was already quite a few years later in my opinion––I mean, time flies, but it seemed—then all of a sudden Doug Chrismas came into town and Jean Milant. [00:30:12] And you know, Jim Corcoran partnering up with Nick Wilder and Margo Leavin, with whom I eventually ended up having one exhibition. And then there was a gallery in Beverly Hills, Cynthia Comsky. But I almost had an exhibition with her, but that didn't work out.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, but you showed with Riko for several years.

TOM WUDL: Several years, until—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And who were the other artists in the gallery?

TOM WUDL: —she closed. Oh, at Riko's? Oh wow, well, Ed Moses, Billy Al Bengston. I don't remember if Larry Bell had a show there, but it's possible. And she was friendly––you know, Vija — [00:31:03]

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TOM WUDL: I eventually became really good friends with Vija, sadly that relationship is, you know, not what it was, but she was very good friends with Doug Wheeler, and I think he had some—he showed some work there. And, you know, Riko was fantastic, as—as I'm sure you've heard. She was the best, and she would let any artist do whatever they needed or wanted to do. And eventually, because these really gifted people had their way over a period of several years, they ended up putting together the most pristine, beautiful showing space anywhere.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: It was a box that was perfect in its proportions. You know, Ed Moses would come in and say, "I want to raise the ceiling."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: I mean, literally, you know,—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —three feet, and it was, "Okay, okay we'll do it."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: And then Irwin would come in and say, "Well, okay, but I want to put these skylights in, and I want to close this window off."

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And, you know, blah, blah, blah. And eventually, by the time I had my shows there, I mean, you know, how could you miss? You could put anything in that space, and it would look beautiful because it was aesthetically perfect. It was the beginning of Light and Space art, you know, already being rehearsed there by these artists.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: So that was—that was, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So that ended about, what, 1975?

TOM WUDL: I think so, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—and then—so—so during that period '70-'75, you're no longer a student?

TOM WUDL: Right. [00:02:00]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you have a studio?

TOM WUDL: I had a studio. I had Doug Wheeler's old studio. Which was on Pico Boulevard, that building no longer exists. And then, eventually, I moved to Venice. And my first studio there was —I shared a building with Laddie Dill.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And the way I transitioned financially was that one of my high school friends' father owned an optical supply place, downtown LA, and he was kind enough to give me a job there for over a year as a shipping clerk. And then when I—this was when I was still in school, and when I —and till a little bit after school. And then, finally, when it was time for me to move to Venice, I asked him if I could go on unemployment, and he was very generous. And through that unemployment it—that allowed me to—cause in those days my rent was $50—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —a month, and so, you—you know,

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —you could do it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —you could do anything. It was really wonderful.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, that freedom.

TOM WUDL: And I remember one morning after I'd just moved into that place, there was a knock on my door. I was upstairs. I go downstairs to answer the door and there's Larry Bell. And he says, "Are you interested in a job?" I said, "Sure." Well, John Chamberlain had been staying at Larry Bell's studio, and he was going to move back to New York, and he needed someone to help him pack up. [00:04:09]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And, this is a funny anecdote; and so I said, "Great, that sounds really good."

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: I was so naïve. So, "Be there tomorrow morning at nine o'clock." Okay. At nine o'clock I knock on the door. There's no answer. I knocked on the door about five times. I was getting ready to leave.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And then the door opens slowly, and there's Chamberlain stark naked. Bleary-eyed. It was like—it was like a scene from Cat Ballou—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —you know, Lee Marvin—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —that character.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: That was John Chamberlain, and—at that moment anyway. And he's trying to focus, and he says, "Okay, come back in a couple of hours." Okay. I come back in a couple of hours, and we started, and I worked with him for, I don't know, it must have been a couple of weeks. There was a lot of stuff to pack up, and then he had this huge moving truck that he drove himself. A big moving van. We loaded it all up. And, you know, he had pot. He had literally mountains of pot on this billiard—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —table, so it was like, you know, the best of both worlds. I don't know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —how we did it, but we got it done. And every morning, you know, my job was to go there and make sure that we were going to get to work, and at the end of it all—he wanted to know where the nearest gas station was, so I—we drove there. [00:06:05] I showed him, and then pointed him in the direction of the freeway, and he gave me a $100 bill, which was a good sum of money in those days. A big cache, and—and that was it, you know. That was sort of when I—my introduction to living in Venice. There—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —and Ron Cooper was there at that time, and Robert Graham—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —and, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And did you—what were your aspirations at that point, I mean, for your life?

TOM WUDL: Well, I was ambitious, you know. On the one hand I'm telling you that I see myself as being rather naïve and innocent. Which I—which I think is correct and not precocious whatsoever, but I—I had a sense of my potential, and I had ambitions—so—and aspirations, but I also had a big revelation at that moment. We spoke yesterday about my European background. My upbringing. And that came back to me in a very dramatic way. The way Riko finally decided that she would show my work, is that she actually sold a painting of one of the first perforated pieces that I ever made. She sold, actually, two of the first ones to the late Patrick Lannan, father of the son—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. The Lannan Foundation. Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —the Lannan Foundation. What eventually became the Lannan Foundation. She brought Patrick Lannan to my studio, and he bought that piece, you know, and it was the most amount of money I had ever seen in my life, you know. [00:08:07] My—I forget how much my share of the piece was. It was under a thousand dollars, but it was still a lot of money. And that gave her the confidence to show my work. But the next piece I made—which he also eventually purchased when I had my show. And he purchased it for his mistress at that time, who was a fashion designer. I forgot her name. I eventually went to her apartment in New York to restore it a few years later, I remember. But anyway, when I finished this particular piece—it has a Spanish title, *Agua Llamarada,* which is sort of "flaming water." It's this perforated piece that's all copper and gold leaf. It was intended to look like some archaic textile, you know, unearthed somewhere.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: I remember putting this thing up on the wall, because you asked me, you know, yesterday about, well, you know, "Do you—did you feel integrated into American culture?" And I did, and I thought of myself, well, like, you know, I'm an American artist now. I'm going to be like Jackson Pollock—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —and David Smith and everybody else,

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —because I'm—this is who I am. I put this piece up one afternoon when I'm done with it and it was—it was like a shockwave, you know, like a sonic boom. You hear it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —and then [explosive noise] you feel the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —the vibration. [00:10:03] I looked up at that thing and I had to say to myself, "You're not Jackson Pollock. You're not even close. What are you thinking? Your ancestors are Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele." It was like, you know, I saw it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs] Yeah.

TOM WUDL: God, what are—what are you thinking?

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: And, you know, years later, not—a few years ago, when the Adele Bauer picture was shown at LACMA—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —Melanie and I went there, you know, to see it, and we're standing in front of it, and we both looked at each other, and we've had the same thought at the same time. This is you, you know, so—

[They laugh]

TOM WUDL: It's just so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's Vienna. But it— [Laughs.]

[Cross talk.]

TOM WUDL: —it's Vienna—it's so obvious, in Vienna—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It came through.

TOM WUDL: —in every way, the decadent Vienna, the intellectual rigor of Vienna, all of it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: God! I’m like—[explosive noise]. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] It's just, we can't erase these childhood—

TOM WUDL: You cannot, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —stamps, you know.

TOM WUDL: —oh, the genetics, you know, there's more than that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's something, yeah.

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I notice that you did a show at Ron Feldman at some point. Did you have the ambition of going to New York like so many painters from LA?

TOM WUDL: No, I went—actually, Chuck and I went to New York—this was before the Ron Feldman or anything. This was when we were still at Riko Mizuno and stuff, when we were in our

early twenties. Janet Webb was really kind. She eventually was married to Larry Bell. I don't think they are any longer, but Janet Webb was a designer. She was married at that time, in the early days, to Jim Webb, who was a printer at Gemini. [00:12:06] He eventually came out of the closet and got—was associated with Rauschenberg. He was a master printer over there at Gemini. Anyway, Janet was a really sweet person, and very generous, and she invited us to come and we could stay at her loft in New York. And I thought, okay, this is—this is good, you know, I'll go there for a few weeks to get a feeling for this situation.

But I knew; I remember one day, I was all alone. It was, I think, a Sunday afternoon. Everybody else was gone. I was alone in her loft, and I just had this feeling that, you know, if things didn't go well here, this would be a really tough assignment. The New Yorkers are, I mean, a whole other level of—all the things that I told you about earlier that impressed me so much about my colleagues at Chouinard. They're innocent kids by comparison to these people in New York. I mean, now that is the real world, with authority and—on steroids. And I thought, you know, this—I just—I don't think I can do this. And especially, in those days, I don't know how to say this, because I don't want to unnecessarily exaggerate it. That would be inappropriate. But I could get depressed, and I thought to myself, if I ever get depressed in this place, that could be the end of me. You know, I—there was just some voice that said, "This may be more than you could handle." [00:14:05] So, like, and that was clear, you know, I—I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But then you got this really good gallery, Ron Feldman.

TOM WUDL: Well, what happened—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —was I—Harald Szeemann came to town—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —and he saw my work at Riko Mizuno's and, you know, included me. And I—Chuck was in the show, and Ron Cooper. The three of us went to Europe together, because we were in documenta.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —and at documenta is where I met Ron Feldman.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: And he—this was a—

ANNETTE LEDDY: This is *documenta 5*? Yeah.

[Cross talk.]

TOM WUDL: *5*. Edward Ruscha made the cover for it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And this was a big, fucking deal,—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —which I was incapable of appreciating at the time. That is how naïve and really dumb I've been often—[laughs]—in my life. [. . . –ACL] To walk through the show in my recollection now, it's hard to believe that there was any coherent theme, because everybody and their grandmother was in this show. I met—I remember meeting Joseph Kosuth. He was one of the exhibiting artists. Then, you know, Joseph Beuys was yammering and pontificating hour after hour over at his—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —I'm just going to say at his studio, which was, you know, a gallery space. And Dorothea Rockburne, if I remember correctly, meeting her. [00:16:03] So, you know, the spread was really wide. And, you know, that was fortuitous. I met Ron there and he was willing to give me a stipend. And, I mean, this was a big deal—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: —big deal, which I believe, you know, I was incapable of really appreciating. I had a show with him and then he was—he partnered up with John Stoller in Minneapolis. He ran the gallery at the department store there. I forget the name of it now. It doesn't exist anymore, but I had a show there. And it seemed at that point that there was actually the promise of a career of some sort. I don't think Ron felt that I was performing according to what he would have expected of me, in terms of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean he wanted you to produce more work?

TOM WUDL: Yes. Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because you're getting a stipend?

TOM WUDL: Yeah, and—and so that came to an end, and, I'm—it's really vague to me what happened afterwards, but I can tell you soon—soon after that, there was a transition in my work. A very dramatic one. And that was, in fact, the end of what might have ended up being a career, so to speak. [00:18:09] And I was still showing with Riko, and I had that last exhibition with that work there, and that was, you know, a kind of catastrophe, so we—we can go to that part at some point, if you like.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What—what was the catastrophe?

TOM WUDL: Okay, so, you know, while I was getting the stipend from Ron, I mean, everybody knows it, you know, everybody knows when there's money around. [Laughs.] One morning, just like a few years earlier, Larry Bell knocked on my door one morning. There's a knock on my door, and two guys are standing there with big smiles on their face, like Cheshire cats. Laddie and Brian Hunt. And they knew that I had money, you know, and they were going to lease another building down there in Venice, on Speedway. And they needed, you know, they could use my help. And so, we moved into that studio together, and divided it up into three studios. But it wasn't long after that, that the stipend ended from Ron, and—around that time, though, I—one evening, I had this contemplative moment in that studio. [00:20:04]

And I thought that the paper pieces were starting to become very intricate and less and less spontaneous all the time. They were becoming more design projects, where I had to think ahead ten steps of how am I going to perforate the paper and, you know, blah, blah. And I was longing to just be able to do scribbly, squiggly—something spontaneous. Painting. I wasn't sure what it was, and I had this thought that—I don't know why I thought it—about it this way, but it seemed to me that this was one of those Robert Frost moments about the road not taken. And I thought, this road is going to diverge soon, and if I don't take it, I will not be able to catch up with it later. I don't know why I thought that way, but I did.

And I knew it meant stopping all the paper work, because it was becoming problematic anyway. It was becoming contrived and I didn't want that, and I—there was this longing for just painting—painting. And I started to do these crazy images. Drawing them first, these squiggly things, and then I started to make watercolors of them, and, eventually, I decided I needed some real privacy. [00:22:05] Even distance from my own studio. And Vija, at that time, was going to vacate her studio temporarily. She was going up north, she had a boyfriend, a mathematician that she met, and I took over her studio for several months so that I could work privately there and develop these crazy things. And I believe, you know, I should have never shown them. It was premature, but I was ambitious, and I was desperate. You know, desperation and ambition, as you know, fraternal twins.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: And I showed these paintings. [Laughs.] Even the heavens conspired to really—[laughs]—accentuate the—the transition of my life at that point, you know. It—the day of my opening at Riko's was one of the stormiest days in the history of LA—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —and it was dark in the gallery, cause, you know, it was always just lit by natural light. And everybody came in. I naïvely thought that people who had been supporting me up until that point, collectors, would be happy to know that I wasn't just a one-note person. [00:24:02] That I had other ambitions, you know, to—to develop the work, but obviously the

work had—had not been developed enough, in retrospect. And nobody knew what to say or do about this situation, you know. I know everybody was really uncomfortable and that was it, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, what did Riko say?

TOM WUDL: I don't even remember, you know, she was supportive, but not, you know—I think they sold one or two watercolors out of that show. She did, but, you know, interestingly enough, Paula Cooper came to town around that time. She saw those things, and because they sort of fit a certain mentality of New York, of the things that were unacceptable here were—could have been acceptable there, and she decided to put me in a group show. Eventually, sadly, she ultimately decided she wasn't going to show my work, but, at least, and she sold that painting to a person here in California.

[They laugh.]

But regardless, I don't know where I was going with this—and around that time I also met Jennifer Bartlett and we had a good acquaintanceship for a while and, actually, I stayed at her studio. And, at that time, Allan McCollum, who I also knew here—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: —in Venice, he was first one of her studio assistants, I believe. [00:26:01] And, you know, that was before she became, you know, the artist she is today. You know, a very different echelon of respectability. But that thing, that work, the mistake of me showing it prematurely. And then I made another mistake after that. A really horrible blunder.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Excuse me, it doesn't seem like a mistake if Paula Cooper saw it—

TOM WUDL: Right.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and put you in a show.

TOM WUDL: I know, but—she did, but nothing came of it, eventually. But I continued, you know, I had—and so this was this very abandoned, effusive expressionistic period. And then, you know, that was a dark period in my life also where I was separating from my first wife, Puko, who I've met through Riko—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wait a minute. We didn't even talk about getting married yet, but— [laughs]—so when did you—how long were you married?

TOM WUDL: A few years. Yeah. But, you know, Puko is very sweet, but that was a doomed relationship and I should not have married her. And I was advised not to, but I did for the wrong reasons. I thought I was being a good person. Yes, we were a couple, you know. We had been living together, and I had told her that if she ever had an immigration issue that I—no problem, I would marry her. And, in fact, that situation did arise, eventually. [00:28:02]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: And that's why I married her.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

TOM WUDL: But that also shifted the whole dynamic of responsibility and everything. So, you know, it's always so painful to end a relationship, whether you're doing it or the other partner is doing it. And it's really bad. But I was going through that transition. And, you know, I've mentioned Vija, and I have to say she obviously—it was really—I really appreciated my friendship with her. I have only the highest regard for her as an artist—sadly, you know, we don't have an acquaintanceship anymore. And I learned a lot from being around her and, you know, her work ethic and certainly the work itself. And that relationship was influential in, again, you know, shifting that trajectory of my work, where that whole—that issue of romantic and classical temperaments came back. And I—with my acquaintanceship with Vija, that it made it very clear to me that, okay, I really have to start paying attention now. I really have to start cultivating a more rigorous—just rigor. Let's just leave it at that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: Just some element of rigor that is directed in a particular way and requires, you know, attention of a very specific order. [00:30:12] And I know it was my association with Vija that—it may have happened anyway, sooner or later, but I can't disregard my association with her as having that kind of effect on me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, certainly, a lot of, you know, similarities in your approach to work.

TOM WUDL: At this point, yeah. So there's this technical, and a rigor—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And a research [foundation –ACL]—

TOM WUDL: Yes. Although our attitudes, our intellectual deployment is completely different, you know. But regardless, you—

[END OF TRACK wudl19_2of3_sd_track04_r.]

TOM WUDL: I'm glad to be able to say this, and if anybody wants to be able to track that influence, they can. You know, because even though I'm a very different kind of artist than Vija, that moment of knowing, okay, rigor is the order of the day. Now, in order to become fully mature, to be able to become a complete artist, so to speak.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, it seems like, for a while, you wanted to be wild.

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: You wanted to cultivate wildness. And then you come to some point where you go the other way.

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you want rigor.

TOM WUDL: Where—and ultimately, what I want, and what I believe I have, is the synthesis of both.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: You know, having the capacity to be spontaneous when required, and the capacity to be very studied also when required, and integrating it all in the work, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Should we stop there?

TOM WUDL: Yes, that's good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I think that's good.

TOM WUDL: All right.

[END OF TRACK wudl19_2of3_sd_track05_r.]

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ANNETTE LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy interviewing Tom Wudl in his studio in downtown Los Angeles on November 24th, 2019. Okay, you went through your realization about your work, and this venture into new work, which was these watercolors. And what year––

TOM WUDL: And eventually oil paintings, too.

ANNETTE LEDDY: ––and what year would that, did that revelation––?

TOM WUDL: That was sometime in the '70s. It's hard for me to recall, but, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So then, and was that, that was before or after your episode with Ron Feldman?

TOM WUDL: Oh, well, after; definitely, after, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, so then that puts it probably in––well, were you teaching at that point?

TOM WUDL: I started to teach, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, okay.

TOM WUDL: Once that the income from Ron stopped and there were ostensibly no sales, then I remember calling Craig Kauffman. And he was a tenured faculty at Irvine [University of California, Irvine] at that time. And I let him know my situation, and he was really nice and got me a job there, part-time, basically—I mean for a year, or something like that. And that was—and eventually, Laddie Dill had been teaching at UCLA, and he put a word in for me and, so I taught there for a couple of years. [00:02:14]

And that started my academic tenure for a period of about 20 years, where I taught at just about every single art school and university art department in Southern California—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: —I think, with the exception of USC and Long Beach State.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: But I was everywhere else in that period of 20 years. And for a long time, you know, one of my favorite jobs was at the College of Creative Studies in Santa Barbara, yeah. That was a good, good gig.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what made that a good gig?

TOM WUDL: You could do anything you wanted to. There was no curriculum. There was no syllabus, and you could determine how many students you wanted to work with. If you only wanted to work with one student, that was fine with them. If you wanted to work with 20, that was fine with them.

So, the College of Creative Studies was started by Marvin Mudrick. He was in the English department. And, at some point, I don't know how he did it, you know, going up against the whole UC system, but, he realized that there were lots of students who were just not suited for the regular academic environment, and that they could flourish if they were given a different kind of opportunity. [00:04:02]

And that's really why he started the College of Creative Studies, and it was in all disciplines. There was an art department. They had sciences, humanities; anyway, it was really a great place to work. I mean, it was a beautiful setting out there in Santa Barbara.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you lived there?

TOM WUDL: No, no. I drove once a week. And occasionally, Chaz Garabedian and I taught there, you know. And we would drive out there together.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes, and—Garabedian also seems to have played a role in your development.

TOM WUDL: Oh, boy. [Laughs.] Yeah.

When I was in high school, I took an extension class at UCLA for high school students and Chaz was the teacher. And he was very, you know––that was the beginning of a long, wonderful friendship that sadly came to an end a few years ago, with his death.

The first day of class—[laughs]—Chaz sets up this––we had to stretch the canvases with thumbtacks, you know, tacks, you know, nail them in. And then, prime them with rabbit skin glue. You know, that was, like, the start of it.

And it was pretty daring, I mean, of him to expect high school kids to do that. But, as far as he was concerned, if you were serious enough, you were going to do this.

We did it. Then, finally, the day came when we were allowed to paint. And he sets up the most uninteresting, the ugliest still life. [00:06:02] It was this old table with one of those old green, institutional, metal wastepaper baskets, and that was it. "All right, paint this."

Not only that, after three hours, at the end of the day, you have to wipe the canvas down.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: That's it. You don't keep what you're doing. And this went on, you know; then we did the chair. And then we did something else. Until eventually, we got to keep the painting.

And I remember I used to go and show him my drawings that, you know, I did when I wasn't in class. And I didn't see Chaz for many years after that.

And, eventually, we ended up showing at L.A. Louver together. He, Peter [Goulds], took him on a couple of years before I joined the gallery. And I remember meeting him at an event one night. And it was, you know, really wonderful to see him, and we reminisced about those days.

And, he said, "Well, you know, Tom, I actually thought you were the least promising of all of the students there." [Laughs.] "And the drawings you brought me were just terrible." [Laughs.]

Of course, eventually, Chaz was a really important mentor to me. Not in the sense that he did any—gave me any advice. But, after that, whenever there was a studio visit, either at his place or at mine, he was always really encouraging. And, you know, he had a different opinion about me as an artist. [00:08:02] And I really appreciated it. That was very important.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, that began in what year?

TOM WUDL: That must have begun shortly after I arrived at L.A. Louver in the '80s, you know. And, we would get together, you know, every couple of months. We'd either have lunch or drinks or studio visits. And they were really important to me. I mean it, I still, as you can see, am––I don't, you know, you just never get over that kind of a loss. He was a very, very important, yeah––so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what did he bring to the studio, to his critique of your work that other people didn't have?

TOM WUDL: He was just encouraging. And he was encouraging in our chatter. We would talk about––there was never any talk about real estate, or this or that. We, sometimes, would piss and moan about Peter. [Laughs.] But other than that, it was always about art, about opera, about literature, you know.

And, one of the things that was interesting between ourselves and we spoke about this was that I loved the *Odyssey* and just have a very difficult time with the *Iliad*. And the *Iliad* was his main source, you know, for many years.

ANNETTE LEDDY: For his paintings.

TOM WUDL: Yes, for his paintings. So, you know, there's that temperamental difference in that regard. All that violence and––

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I'm with you.

TOM WUDL: ––relentless––the *Odyssey* is just, you know, an enchanting thing. But, nonetheless, you know. [00:10:02] And he was always very affectionate and caring about Melanie, you know––

TOM WUDL: Anyway, Chaz was always, he really was very fond of Melanie and of Henry and, you know, whenever we'd get together, "Make sure you say hi to Mel and how's she doing, what's going on?" So, it was more than just shop talk when we worked together. We had a certain kinship and that was, you know, very much appreciated.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's great, and so when we had—so this came up because he was, you mentioned that he was teaching also at the College of Creative Studies.

TOM WUDL: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, is that part of your, how you got to know each other?

TOM WUDL: A little bit more, yeah, because we would drive up. It was a two-hour drive up, then he had his own class.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, that predates your time at L.A. Louver actually, that's—

TOM WUDL: No, it happened around the same time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —the same time.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, yeah. I started teaching at College of Creative Studies before I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: 1979, but you continued, you mean, through all that time. I see.

TOM WUDL: I continued, yeah, for a long time, and then once I met Chaz, and then, you know, he would be hired out there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Now, I think this might be the point to take on a kind of major issue, which is your—the role of religion in your life and your work, and I'd really like you to just tell me—

TOM WUDL: Yes, okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Just talk about that at length.

TOM WUDL: Fine. So, I remember with my late friend, Murray Kaufman, as I mentioned to you, I mentioned him to you before, when we were in high school, Friday nights, we used to go out to places. [00:02:06] And one of the places was on Fairfax Boulevard, the Free Press Bookstore, which was a very cool bohemian hangout where I first encountered *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg, and —

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean a reading of it, or the book?

TOM WUDL: The book, yeah, and, you know, for my first encounter with the the Tao, and*Zen Bones*, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And this was when Bob Alexander was running it, is that when?

TOM WUDL: I don't remember, you know, I was a kid, I don't know who was running it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

TOM WUDL: But anyway, there were frequent forays over there, and I would pick up books and among them, you know, eventually there were books about Buddhism. But, you know, I was pretty distracted, so it wasn't anything that I thought, "Oh, this is a revelation," or anything like that. And, but somehow there was an instinct and a kind of affection or longing, some inclination towards Asian aesthetics and, you know, that was definitely there. I already was aware of Japanese brush paintings to some extent, and so that's sort of the beginning.

Then, I had mentioned my first wife, Puko, who I had met through Riko. During this interim period of, you know, that dark period where I transitioned with my work, I got a small NEA grant, and Puko and I went to Japan. [00:04:04] That's the first time.

And, of course, as it generally tends to be with almost every person that goes there, it was a revelation. And there were a couple of very— there were three incidents that I felt have had a lasting, you know, impact.

One was, you know, we were there for nearly two weeks or something like that. One was immersing myself in this culture where I didn't know the language at all and so it was as if I was deaf because there was— I couldn't understand anything that was being said around me. We lived with her, we stayed at her family's, they continually spoke Japanese. I would read Japanese novels in English translation. So, it was this immersion in this culture.

And after a couple of weeks of this, I had a couple of experiences. One day, while visiting the Katsura Villa in Kyoto, walking through the garden, I came upon this huge boulder, and I can't describe it. I don't think this is an unusual kind of incident. But, you know, people have these sorts of experiences all the time, but this was something unexpected for me. I looked at this rock and I felt infatuated with it, you know, the way I, when I—I'm easily infatuated by women all the time, and it was the same kind of thing. This kind of longing and desire for—[laughs]—some contact. [00:06:08] And I thought, this is really interesting, because it's such a vivid response to this rock.

And then, on a following visit to another one of the gardens a few days later, afterwards, I was sitting in a Japanese bathtub, looking at my body, and it was very clear to me that there was no

difference between this body and all the gardens that I had visited. There was just— the garden wasn't a metaphor for my body, my body wasn't a metaphor for the garden, they were one and the same entity. So, this was noteworthy, you know, and it wasn't one of those things where, you know, there were lightning bolts and I lost consciousness or anything like that; it's all, it's very subtle, but certainly striking.

And then the other incident was being in one of the museums. I don't remember whether it was in Kyoto or in Tokyo. And, after a couple of weeks of being immersed in this overwhelming aesthetic. And, you know, the Japanese were put on this earth to bring aesthetics to mankind is my feeling. [00:08:06] You know, they learned it well from the Chinese but, you know, just took it to a whole other level. And all the work that I had seen, everything, every building, every garden, every painting, every piece of calligraphy, and on the buildings there are these tablets of carved calligraphy that's gold leaf, you know, everything was uncompromising in its quality, and I just couldn't ignore that.

And I remember being in the museum and thinking to myself, you know, well, I've been to Europe, and I've seen a lot of wonderful things. Now, I've had this experience of, you know, something that is of such high accomplishment, an endeavor that is so uncompromising. I can't ignore this. And I'll be damned if I'm going to go back home and just keep filling the world with a bunch of trash. And I'm going to really buckle down, and if it takes me the rest of my life to just finish one artwork, that's what I'm going to do, because there's no point in doing anything else. And although I've made a lot of—[laughs]—crap since then, that has been an underlying motif for me, and certainly these days I can say that I am doing my best to be as uncompromising and —you know, the work is taking longer and longer all the time, et cetera. [00:10:03] Not that that makes it any better, but it's just something that I can't ignore, you know, to have this attitude.

So, I come back from Japan and I'm just, you know, I have to become Japanese.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: And I started—you know, I go to visit my friend, Ed Wortz. Dr. Ed Wortz. And he puts me in touch with Shinzen Young at the International Buddhist Meditation Center.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Shin—?

TOM WUDL: Shinzen, S-H-I-N-Z-E-N, Young, Y-O-U-N-G. You can YouTube Shinzen these days, he has quite a following, you know.

But in those days, he was eking out an existence. He was already a monk over there at the International Buddhist Meditation Center, which was started by the late Dr. Thích Thiên-Ân, Vietnamese Zen master, and the place was, you know, just basically run on a shoestring, quite impoverished and everything. But Shinzen was giving English classes, I mean, he was giving Japanese classes. Well, it didn't take long for me to start sitting in meditation there, right? I mean, so I would go to weekend retreats, and that was the beginning of my sitting. But, you know, as everyone who sits knows, those things, they are very tenuous, those periods. [00:12:01]

But, anyway, it was the beginning, and I will forever be grateful to him and to Dr. Thích Thiên-Ân for having this place and providing this opportunity for me to be initiated in there.

And so, that was the beginning, and I have—you know, for years I meditated off and on, but, you know, fairly regularly. All— since then. Let's just put it that way.

And as a matter of fact, Shinzen married Melanie and I. And then eventually, we also had to have just a regular civil ceremony, because we didn't know whether this was legit—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what year was that?

TOM WUDL: Oh, God, I can't—[laughs]—there you go, there's a married man for you. It's certainly been about 35 years, 30 for sure, but we've been together longer. And I met Melanie when I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like 1987? Something like—

TOM WUDL: [1979 –TW]. I know it because I remember the etching I gave her around Christmas time.

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

TOM WUDL: And I was separated from Puko at this point, but still married, but separated. And one evening I went to an opening at Margo's, it was a Jud Fine exhibition. And I had already been showing with Margo, but I hadn't been there in a while at the gallery. And here I was introduced to this young woman, Melanie. And somehow, she just really made an impression on me, and so by the end of the evening, before I left the gallery, I tried to locate her. [00:14:05] I looked all around and finally saw her, and I decided I just needed to have some physical contact with her, and I reached out my hand and said, "It was nice meeting you." [Laughs.] And that was that.

But, you know, I was still married. And I didn't even really think that much about it after that. She was really cute. And then a few weeks later—and this was very unusual, Margo invited me for a luncheon at the gallery, and Joel Wachs was there, the councilman, he was a collector who bought work from her, and I forget who else. There weren't that many, it was a rather intimate thing, and I sat next to Melanie. And, you know, the electricity was obvious. So, as soon as I left the gallery, in those days there were no cell phones. I was driving down Santa Monica Boulevard, "Where's the nearest phone booth? Where's the nearest phone booth?"

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: I found one and it actually worked, and I called her at the gallery.

ANNETTE LEDDY: She worked at the gallery?

TOM WUDL: Yes, yes, she was a receptionist there. And asked her if she was busy that weekend, and she said yes, she was. "Are you busy next weekend?" "Yes." "Can I have your phone number?" "Okay." And I figured, "Okay, she's busy." [00:16:00] I have no business getting involved with anybody anyway at this point.

And I let a long time go by, and then one night, I mean a couple of months, two or three months, and then one night around nine or ten in the evening, I was thinking of her, and by this time I had forgotten what her name was. I didn't know if it was Melo-dee or Melo-what.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: But I wanted to speak with her, so I called her and she answered the phone. "Hi." "Hi." And we talked for about an hour, and I asked her if she was busy that weekend and she said, "No." And that was the beginning of our relationship which then went through—we had a couple of separations, you know, she had been living with somebody, and so we were both in that state. But anyway, eventually we got together. And we're still together, to this day. And we just had our most recent argument this morning.

[They laugh.]

TOM WUDL: That is very [inaudible] in the old days.

In any case, eventually we had our son, Henry. And Henry is, always was, really precocious, and by the time Henry was 11 years old, I had to compare myself to Picasso's father who had to acquiesce that his son had already far exceeded him in any possible way. And certainly, that's true in terms of Henry's intellectual capacity. By the time he was 11 it was obvious to me, you know, I— whatever I think I'm going to accomplish in this lifetime, it was going to be minor compared to his capacity. [00:18:15]

Henry was, and is to this day, a very charming, sweet, but, you know, eccentric kid, as is the case with gifted kids. And, you know, for instance, he'd have a birthday party and all the kids are running around the house like crazy wondering, "Where's Henry? Where's Henry? Where, where, where?" Henry's in his room and he's reading and, you know, that was him. Today, he's still reading for his Ph.D. dissertation. He's just started a program at Brandeis.

By the time he was going to go to high school, I got sick and tired of the public school system. And he had been in junior high school at Palms and, you know, the campus was just a shambles. And I thought this—you know, we're going to bite the bullet and whatever it takes he's going to go to private school. We applied to several private schools and he was not accepted except to Milken, which was a Jewish school.

By the way, just prior to that, when he was about six, we moved to our house where we are now. And, you know, the move and all of it, the buying the house, the move, et cetera, we forgot totally summer is coming, and what's going to happen? What's Henry going to do this summer? [00:20:09] So, my mom, who was still alive at the time, Mel was talking to her one night and Mom said, "I belong to Temple Isaiah, and I know they have a summer camp. Why don't you call this person there and we'll get him in?" Which we did. And this was the first big—[laughs]—alert.

Henry comes back from the very first day at camp at Temple Isaiah, looks at Mel, and says, "I want to have a Bar Mitzvah." I don't know where this came from, because I related to you earlier, how, you know, that did not suit me at all. "Okay, fine," but that was still a few years away, so let's just not even think about it. But he was serious about it and when the time came, he studied for his Bar Mitzvah. And, you know, by the time he finished the Bar Mitzvah, as far as he was concerned, they were lightweights over there at Isaiah. They're reformed, they're not even Jews, for Christ's sake. Of course, he wasn't a Jew either, because his mom is not Jewish, and he knew that.

The next thing, because a friend of his, an acquaintance of his, the father had been going to this Orthodox Sephardic temple on Pico, Pico-Robertson, and Henry started going there, and he really got into it. And I think there are two reasons; well, there's three reasons ultimately. To this day, he loves the culture, the tradition. [00:22:00] Also, you take a kid like Henry, who is super smart, who has an innate gift for languages. Also, you know, by the time he was in first grade he had this little friend, Anthony, whose mother was Japanese, and so the kid spoke Japanese. Henry came home, he said, "I want to learn Japanese," and I used to take him over to Kumon and he took Japanese classes.

Then, by the time he was 13, he came home one day and said, "I want to learn Chinese." And so, Mel and I, once a week, used to take him to Beverly Hills Lingual Institute where he was there with adults studying Chinese, and he did that for a year. We would go and have dinner for that couple of hours and then pick him up.

And, so, you know, he has this gift for languages, so Hebrew is not a problem, you know. To this day, Henry can walk into any synagogue anywhere in the world, it doesn't matter whether they're Sephardic, whether they're Ashkenazi, he knows all the cantillation marks and the appropriate way of reciting the Torah, no matter where he is in the world, and it doesn't matter even if they're Ethiopians, because he knows that they have their own traditions and he's, you know, fully learned in all of this.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What is his dissertation going to be on?

TOM WUDL: Well, the general, the umbrella thing, is Middle Eastern studies, but with a real emphasis on medieval poetry, literature, and biblical studies. You know, and that includes Islamic literature. Just when we were in Boston, you know, he's reading the Quran, and he's reading it in Arabic, and translating it to me. [00:24:02] So Arabic, he's fluent.

I'll just tell you one last other—well, the thing is about Henry—so, he gets into this whole thing, and then Mel starts freaking out because it's starting to get really serious and he's, you know, there's no sign that he's backing away from this, but he's getting more and more into it. And she started to get really upset, because obviously these alarm bells go off. Is this a whole cultish thing? What the hell's happening here? And now he wants to start keeping kosher and, you know, so I said to myself, "Well, you know, I do have some spiritual inclinations, I've been meditating. I've never really known anything about Judaism. This kid's really in there. I'd better go and see what's going on."

And I started going with him. And it got to the point where, for a couple of years, this was—this stopped when he eventually went off to college, but eventually I got into it to the point where I was going with him every morning, at five o'clock in the morning, we would put on the tefillin, I learned the services in Hebrew, and we had Shabbat at home and all of that. And all the time I did this to negotiate between Mel and him for one thing, and also because I was curious and, you know, I just felt it was important.

But that, ultimately, was really a fraught situation on every level because I could never, you know. And to this day there's a certain tension between Henry and I regarding the whole premise of Judaism. [00:26:10] But that—so, just, you know, once he left and went to college, I stopped going to synagogue and really started to move, you know, with a new emphasis into the meditation.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Was that—here was a question I had, so you turned to Buddhism?

TOM WUDL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: -essentially, but what I'm wondering is about the interface of those two religions, Judaism and Buddhism, and how that connects to your art?

TOM WUDL: Well, my art is primarily Buddhist-oriented, and I have to clarify for the record here, I can't call myself a Buddhist. I've never taken Buddhist vows. I haven't joined a Buddhist organization of any sort. But, you know, I've been to retreats, I meditate, I'm as educated as I can be about not only Zen, but also Tibetan Buddhism, you know, so my meditation is primarily Zen meditation, but everyone who meditates knows, you know, there are a million billion—[laughs]—ways to approach it. But it is sitting meditation.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how do you feel that relates to your painting, your artwork?

TOM WUDL: Okay, well, you just read this essay that I sent you.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I know, but I'm asking you so you can explain.

TOM WUDL: Right, okay, it relates in various ways, and this also ties into my teaching. [00:28:04] You know, eventually, I stopped teaching at the institutions for several reasons. One of them was that I realized I was never going to be a tenure candidate at any place because I'm not a team player, you know, and everybody knew it. It was obvious.

So, then I started—but even when I was teaching at those places, there were some things that were occurring to me regarding art. And this goes back to our earlier conversation when I said when I was an adolescent, I thought I would never amount to anything as an artist because I wasn't suffering enough. When I started the private instruction, one of the things that became really clear to me very quickly was this confusion that people have between struggling because, you know, any endeavor is going to amount to struggle of some sort. That's inevitable. Just getting up in the morning and tying your shoes is a struggle, but it's not suffering.

And people—I got to see this very quickly, people mistook, they confused, very quickly, the difference between struggling and suffering. Now, struggling ultimately makes you better, you know, it makes you stronger and noble and, you know, clearer. Whereas suffering is enervating, it destroys you, you end up losing in the end. Whereas a struggle, if it's true struggle and not confused with suffering, is ultimately going to lead to clarification and accomplishment of some sort. [00:30:13] So, to this day that is part of my practice as a teacher, is to— whenever I see that going on with students, is to try to get them to understand the difference between these two.

And then, of course, through my studies of Zen and my practice, other things started to get really clarified. So, one of the things that I want to cut in here is that there—

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TOM WUDL: —for a long time, while Henry was growing up, we were really struggling financially. Mel had the job, she went to work every day, and I was Mr. Mom. And I—during all those years that I was teaching, I wasn't—at the schools, I wasn't really making that much money. And occasionally, there would be a windfall if I had a successful exhibition, and that money always—usually went to pay for the next year's tuition, especially, you know, when Henry was in high school. But we were struggling, and it was a, you know, a very difficult time as you can imagine in the marriage. And I would have to make these occasional calls that I hated doing, asking people to buy work from me. And at some point, I just—I came home one day, and Mel made it clear to me that she had actually been out looking for an apartment, because this just—she wasn't having a good time anymore, you know. This wasn't—this wasn't fun anymore, and wow, that was—that was a wake-up call. And I also didn't like that way of living.

So, it was right here, right there on that stairway. I was sitting here by myself one afternoon thinking, you know, this is—this can't go on. I do have two abilities; I am a good teacher, and I'm a pretty good artist, and from now on I'm going to not try to be an artist 100 percent of the time and a teacher just enough percentage to get by. I'm going to turn things around. I'm going to see what happens. I'm going to be a teacher 100 percent of the time, and whatever time is left

over, I will be an artist, and let's just see what happens, what that does. [00:02:26] And, you know, within a two-month period, I'm telling you, there was just a turnaround. There was a turnaround. All of a sudden, I get a phone call from somebody, oh, so-and-so is taking classes with you, they're really, you know, they recommend I taught—they think—blah, blah, blah.

I initially started the private instruction with five students on Monday mornings for three hours in the morning. They decided that's what they wanted to do for a month. At the end of the month, they all decided, well, three hours isn't long enough. We should do—we want to stay, and we want to do six hours. And that was—that was the beginning of my private practice. It was five people. Today we have, continually, between 35 and 40 people coming on a regular basis.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what level are they when they come here?

TOM WUDL: They're all—I hear three different scenarios when the phone rings. One is, I'm an artist, I have exhibited and, you know, I have a degree, but something happened. I don't know, a couple of years ago, and I've lost my way, you know. Or writer's block, whatever, and I just don't know how to recover from this. [00:04:06]

The most frequent scenario is, well, I've done work off and on, but, you know, and I actually went to art school, I got a degree, then life got in the way. I want to get back to it now and I just don't know how to get started. Or sometimes I hear, I've been doing this work for many years, but I want to take it to another level. I know that something is missing and it's just, you know, I don't know where that place is.

And then the last scenario is, I've always wanted to do artwork, I don't know a thing. I don't have any education at all, but I'd like to see what I can do. And so, those are the people that are here and they're all at different levels, yeah. So, the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, they all have some kind of experience?

TOM WUDL: No. Most of them. Quite a few, none at all.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

TOM WUDL: But that doesn't matter to me because, you know, given my own, sort of, checkered track record since a kid and, in the sense that, as I told you, I wasn't—I was not one of these talented kids. That—and so that means nothing. And manual skills can be learned if someone teaches you how to do it, and you are willing to do the work, then you can learn that. [00:06:03]

But, you know, then there are intellectual skills. and then there's the other less clearly definable aspect of it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, I was interested in how you define, in the essay that you wrote, the history of the connection between spirituality and artistic creation. Pretty much throughout Western culture you trace that. And then you define this spirituality as a core vitality.

TOM WUDL: Well, and the sacred; you know, spirituality is one thing. The sacred is something else.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's true.

TOM WUDL: And the sacred, clearly, is undefinable but it's there, and it is always—it is a refuge, and it is a place of well-being. That—those are the characteristics of—you know, when you think of a religion, there's usually some kind of building that you go to, or a place whether it be indoors or outdoors, there is a—it's a refuge from the flames and daggers of the world. And it's a place of redemption. It is a place of healing, and ultimately, of well-being and nurturing. All of those things that, you know, that we would associate with.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, that way of—that philosophy is part of what you communicate to your students.

TOM WUDL: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yep.

TOM WUDL: I say to them things like, you may not know what you're doing, but while you're doing it, you know who you are. [00:08:10] It—just holding the pencil, holding the brush in your

hand, is already—gives you a sense of gratification that cannot—by the way, this is the other aspect of it, that cannot be quantified, that cannot be monetized, that cannot be qualified in any way. And that is the sacred aspect of it, without a doubt. And it may be hard to do, but it's a lot harder not to do it. If you don't do it, there's—if you want to kill an artist, just keep them away from their work.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: Every time they want to get to their work, just say no, no, no, no, no. We have to go shopping now.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

TOM WUDL: No, no, no, no, no, you know, you have to do this. No, no, no, no, no. Sooner or later, this person will either become seriously ill, or they'll have an accident, or they'll have a breakdown. You know, it's inevitable. And my—it's not my contention, it's my full, complete, understanding. My entire life is based on this, that every person is creative, it can't be any other way, because—and, you know, some of my colleagues disagree with me. I know this, but I don't care, because I know it to be true.

If—you—everyone has to create their body in order to be here in this world. If you can create your body, I mean, what—[laughs]—what other qualifications do you need in order to be creative? It's—the same intelligence is at work. It's inevitable. [00:10:08] It's inevitable. Creativity is inevitable, it cannot be any other way. But people have been tormented for, you know, millennia with this delusion.

There's something, and—you know, people call me, and I have the conversation, I have an interview. Sometimes they come here, they want to see the studio. I talk, they show me their work, et cetera. Okay, I want to start in a couple of weeks and I'm really excited about it, et cetera. In those two weeks, something terrible starts to happen. They begin to think about it, and they begin to wonder whether they're qualified, and blah, blah, blah, all of this stupidity that has nothing to do with creativity.

And they—they basically distance themselves from this thing that—that is sacred. And it's innocent, and, you know, that moment when I was sitting here and I said, okay, from now on I will be a teacher 100 percent of the time, and whatever time is left over for my art, was the defining aspect of that, was that from then on, until now, I own every single moment that I am doing my artwork. I never have to call the gallery. In years, I haven't had to call the gallery and ask them if anybody had been in, was anybody interested, were they selling any work. Nothing. [00:12:03] I don't need to, because this is what's doing it.

And so, one of the other things that I learned from Zen practice that I'm—try to instill in the students is, don't make your art more important in your life. That was the big lesson, that moment, and don't make your life more important than your art. You and I know that 99 percent of most artists make their art more important than their life. It's the most important thing, and then there's trouble. There's a lot of trouble, and they're suffering, and, you know, that is the thing. One of the things I realized was well, you know, yes, I was suffering. And there's that silly, kind of mythology that artists themselves—the delusion they operate under which is, oh, I'm special. I'm struggling and suffering for the world. I'm sacrificing my life for my art, and I'm giving it because the world blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Bullshit.

You're suffering, and what you're doing is you're causing everyone else around you to suffer, too. And somehow that's okay. Well, if you really look at suffering and what it—what the implications of it are, it's not okay. The whole point of Buddhism is to eliminate suffering. The first Noble Truth is life is suffering. To engage in life is to engage in suffering. But happily, you can do something about it, and what you need to do is change your behavior, that's for fucking sure. [00:14:09] So, that is where the religion, if you will, or the spiritual practice, dovetails with the art.

Suffering is the link, and I am not interested in suffering. I mean, suffering is inevitable. No matter what you do, you're going to have a situation where you're going to be dealing with it, but you don't have to—you can see where you are being really responsible for not only your own suffering, but causing suffering all around you. And art should never be a source of suffering, it should be the opposite, and that's one of the differences, you know.

In my—in the essay I'm—I—cite that quote from—God, I can't think of his name right now. The

late critic, who when writing about Mondrian, he wrote about the marriage of aesthetics and mysticism. Hilton Kramer, yeah. And now, that's a brilliant connection. So, that's the connection between art for me and spiritual practice. I'm—I would like, to the best of my ability, to do whatever I can to eliminate suffering. And that doesn't mean that I have some messianic fantasy or anything like that, but once you—once you really experience suffering in your life, and I haven't by any means experienced, you know, excruciating suffering like many people are right now, but enough to—for it to be a wake-up call, so don't make your art more important than your life, and don't make your life more important than your art. [00:16:19]

They'll—and that works and that—and the way not to—and the way to keep that balance is, don't make your art work for you. Don't depend on your art to make a living and to be—find some sense of accreditation and, you know, some way of validating you. That is not the function of art. It is—it has a sacred function, which is to keep you sane, to give you this gratification that cannot be quantified in any way other than a sense of well-being. It has nothing to do with being monetized or accredited or anything like that.

And it certainly—the older I get and the deeper I'm in my practice, you know—I end the essay with that quote from Sol LeWitt: "Artists live in a society outside of society," that's not true anymore today, you know. I think it's a nightmare the way artists are trying to be part of society, you know, with their whole political engagement and everything, which is anathema to me in every way. It's just throwing—throwing yourself into the fire in—with a huge tub of turpentine along with it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I wonder if—so, in relation to this whole exposition of your religious beliefs, can you talk about how your work took this turn in the early 2000s towards the lotus flower, and what has been the result of that. [00:18:09]

TOM WUDL: Yes. Yes, because one day I was visiting my friend— my late friend, Ed Wortz, and as I was leaving his house, he hands me this book over at the door. And I say, "What's this?" He says, "Do you know this?" I said, no. "Well, why don't you take it with you?" Well, it was the—at that time it was the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and at that time Thomas Cleary had all—Cleary had only translated half of it, and that's in this book which was nearly 800 pages, or 500 pages, was only half of the *Sutra*, because he was still working. And it wasn't until quite a few years later that the full translation came out. In any case, it was a while after Ed gave me this book. You know, I took it home and didn't even think about it, but eventually I sat down to read it, and as I say in that essay, you know, by the time I finished the first paragraph, I just knew it. This is it. This is what—this is what I've been looking for all my life. There—this is what I've been practicing to do. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but this was it. That I just knew that there wasn't going to be no regression from this moment on. That this was going to set the trajectory for my art, and I think that was—that was available. That thought was available to me, because by then I had already cleared the decks. [00:20:04] I had already made myself independent from the marketplace and I had liberated my art from the obligations of my life, and liberated the obligations of my life from my art. So, that I was ready to—to let it be this.

Now, that still entails all sorts of challenges, but, you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I just want a little bit of a timeline here. So, when you had that revelation and you changed your life in that way, was that—what work was happening at that point? That's long before the flowers, that's—was that around the Laurel and Hardy time?

TOM WUDL: You know what? Yes, the Laurel and Hardy. And those Laurel and Hardy paintings; you know, Stanley is my alter-ego. He's basically—that's me. And there's one—there's a couple of paintings that I made where Stanley is in—wearing an apron, and he has this totally befuddled look on his face, and there are lots of clocks behind him.

That was my life at the time. I was Mr. Mom, incredibly frustrated. This was before I had this liberation, right? Incredibly frustrated. Everybody else is having a career, everybody else is making all this serious art and being serious artists, and I'm wearing a goddamn apron, going to the market, cooking dinner, taking the babysitter and Henry to the park and picking them up, and my life is going by. [00:22:03] And at the same time, nobody's buying my work, or rarely buying it and so, you know—[shooting noises]—that was what was—that was what was happening.

And then this moment came and from the—from the time that I started to own my own time and not let my art be beholden in any way, I was able to slow down considerably, and really consider

what I—what I wanted to do. In the paintings is—if you look back at that time that the first paintings—that were moving in that direction, I remember, you know, when I had this revelation of the *Sutra*, I thought, well, this is a big theme. I'm used to doing big work. I got myself all tooled up to make these large drawings and stuff, and something very interesting happened. I started to make the—I thought I was going to work on a large scale, and nothing was happening. I just— I was blundering along and suddenly I—it occurred to me, you know what, the opposite.

In order to be able to communicate this immensity that is being represented in the *Sutra*, you actually have to go down to a microscopic level, and it was very fortuitous, I thought, for me to have that insight, and that's when the scale started to come down. [00:24:04] And the first day that I tried to draw one of these tiny, little, you know, clubs—ugh, God, I almost had a heart attack when I understood—I understood that the entire page would have to be filled with them. That that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Such an interesting motif, though, the clubs. They go towards religion, towards nature, and towards just popular culture, really.

TOM WUDL: Yeah. They're both emblematic and organic at the same time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes, that's it, yeah.

TOM WUDL: And because of that, they serve two purposes, and they also have—they're very easily recognizable as perhaps having a molecular quality, or atomic quality, so it's a very, you know, very useful little thing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [It’s like –ACL] the vibration of life in the work.

TOM WUDL: And made out of every little unit. And so when I realize I needed to draw these small and that I had to proliferate them, that was the next incremental step in my meditation practice, because I knew that—because I—even though I had that—I had come to that conclusion, I'm going to now not make my art work for me anymore, you know, you just can't stop on a dime. There—these impulses, these habits are still there for—that have to do with ambition and accomplishment, you know. That needed to be—I needed to come to terms with that.

And so, incrementally, I've had to really not only talk the talk, but walk the walk, as they say, in terms of—today, I couldn't do the work I'm doing if I didn't have the meditation practice that I have. [00:26:12] And as time has gone by, meditation practice increases every day. So, unless I'm meditating a full hour to an hour and a half every morning, I'm not even ready to—for the day and to meet this challenge. Just, you know, the people often comment, oh, you must be incredibly patient, and my answer is, if I were patient, I would be dead right now, because patience means tolerance, and everyone knows that tolerance has a limit, whereas attention has no limit. So, it's a matter of attention.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I was just thinking about this, that the Laurel and Hardy ones already have the clubs.

TOM WUDL: Yes, and the clubs—they had clubs and they had hearts and they had diamonds, because I came to the clubs when I started to do the Laurel and Hardy thing. I came to Laurel and Hardy by way of Beckett. You know, there's always been a literary anchor for me, and for a long time it was Beckett. And then I understood very clearly, well, Laurel—that Didi and Gogo, Estragon and Vladimir, are really Laurel and Hardy, that's so obvious.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TOM WUDL: And then I thought, well, let me find out more about the history of comedy and *commedia dell'arte* and street performers and carnivals and fortune-tellers and cards, you know, one thing fell to the other. [00:28:03] So then, all of a sudden, I got interested in card imagery, and I made a few paintings with that, but they were still, you know, something was missing. Something was missing. And out of all the pips which, you know, are the hearts and the diamonds, the spades, it was the club, I realized. No, it's not about those symbols anymore, it's just the club as this particular, very effective, little, image.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Well, yeah, I mean, to me it's just interesting how though you're so given over to religion and religious philosophy, at the same time there's this popular culture imagery mixed with this spiritual. And then when you get to the flower, of course, it seems like an

essential image, but there's also something about the way it's bright. I mean, it almost—almost connects it to popular culture too. –ACL]

TOM WUDL: Yes, and that is—one of the reasons I wrote that essay is because it puts me in a very weird zone, and nobody knows what to do with me, because—you're right in identifying this characteristic of my work. I—the mandalas I'm making are—are not ritual mandalas and they're—they have—they don't follow any prescribed orthodoxy, because I'm an artist, and artists have—that's the funny zone that artists have always been in. They're free agents. They, you know, they are scavengers. [00:30:06] They read science, they read literature, they look at art, and then they feel free to just take all of it and do whatever they need to and want to. That is—that is the essential difference between art and science. They both have employed certain creative principles, but art is never obligated to any kind of orthodoxy whatsoever. It can't be, otherwise it's not going to be creative. Then that's the irrational aspect that I try to emphasize in the essay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, so, one question I have is—so, when you came to this point, and you—you really were able to divorce—

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ANNETTE LEDDY: —art from, you know, commerce and so on. And you got it down to this flower, which has been pretty much the work for almost 20 years now.

TOM WUDL: Well, certainly around 10 years, for sure.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Ten years? Yeah. Then it seems like—so then, what I want to know is, well, how did the world receive that?

TOM WUDL: Well, it's been pretty well received, up until recently. And perhaps something else has come into play here that must, you know, in all honesty be admitted, is that people were willing to pay a certain amount of money for these paintings, but not more than that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: All artists hit that ceiling.

TOM WUDL: Yes, that's right. You hit that ceiling, and that's that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

TOM WUDL: I think the work has been well-received, you know? I don't want to be disingenuous here, in the sense that I may not have the kind of career that other artists have. And one of the reasons is because, they have their career because they've worked at it. They wanted the career, and so they deserve it and they should have it.

I have voluntarily not gone to openings, not socialized. I mean, Mel and I made that decision long ago for a variety of other reasons. I always was more innocent, thinking that, well, I just need to do the work rather than work extra. But I don't want to get off the subject, I know that within certain circles, I'm very well regarded by artists. [00:02:04]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And even—I have to say the critical response to those works was extremely good.

TOM WUDL: Yeah, I know. But the—I'm in this funny zone because, you see a lot of Buddhist art today, and, you know, it's silly. All it is is, people think that if they just—it has to be a Buddha somewhere.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs]

TOM WUDL: It has to be—you have to see the silhouette of the Buddha. He can be a psychedelic Buddha, it doesn't matter. But that, to them, means Buddhist art. And they're not getting the fact that there could be a different model. That it's time, perhaps, to update. That we're living in a world where even the very traditional orthodoxies are being questioned.

And, you know, there's a big revolution happening out there by a lot of people who had been longtime monks and nuns who left the establishment. They're still serious Buddhists and meditators, but they understand that there is no need for a lot of those protocols anymore. You don't need to have those boundaries.

And I would like to think that the work I'm doing somehow dovetails with that approach.

Although, you know, a lot of those people don't know very much about art. And that's the funny—I'm in this weird place because I'm an artist. And I belong to a particular tradition, and part of it is the modern tradition of art. And all of that gets swept into the work. [00:04:00]

So, on one level, people do appreciate the work aesthetically, I think, which is fine, because that's my prime—that is my mandate, you know, as an artist. Because that's where the sacred is.

But there's more to it than that. There's connoisseurship, there's craftsmanship, there's mastery. And there's an underlying understanding, you know, an encoding as one would expect in art, of my understanding of Buddhism and its implications in the work. Now, it's my responsibility to try to make sure that that is in the work.

Whether others, and I do my best to make it accessible, but whether others are receptive to it or not, there's not much I can do about that. [Laughs.] Yeah, that's a good place.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]