



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**LARRY BELL
APRIL 18, 2006**

**Interviewed by:
Laramie Hickey-Friedman, Sculpture Conservator, The Menil Collection**

**Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 01:35:21
Location: Larry Bell Studio, Taos, NM**

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This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

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About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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ADP Archive
Menil Archives, The Menil Collection
1511 Branard Street
Houston, TX 77006
adparchive@menil.org

[Speakers (in order of appearance): Laramie Hickey-Friedman, Sculpture Conservator, The Menil Collection; Larry Bell, Artist.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[00:00:42]

LH-F: Today is Tuesday, April 18, 2006. I am Laramie Hickey-Friedman. I am the Sculpture Conservator at the de Menil Collection, and I am with Larry Bell, artist. And we are here in Taos in his studio. This is a little bit of an unusual aspect of these artist interviews, in that this one is being filmed in the artist's studio rather than in the conservation studio at the museum. I thought that it would be a great opportunity for us to film the artist in his environment rather than in the environment of the museum. And it is mainly because your work is so integral to the process of it, and that the creation of the pieces that you've made really has a lot to do with the machinery that we see behind us.

Larry Bell: Hmm.

[00:01:56]

LH-F: And so that's what it is. And maybe the first question that I have for you is, if you could give us a brief introduction as to what this equipment is...

Larry Bell: Yes.

LH-F: ...and how you came about using it.

Larry Bell: Okay. What I work with is technically called a high-vacuum thermal evaporator. Essentially that is a bottle that I can remove the air from and heat up various materials until they reach a vapor pressure and evaporate. When it does so in a vessel that has no air, the atoms of the evaporite don't collide with atoms of air. And so, let's say I am evaporating a metal like a nickel chrome alloy. As the material evaporates, from a very hot tungsten wire, the atoms are driven off the filament, the tungsten filament, by the electrons that are making it really hot. When the material has melted and becomes a molten reservoir on this strand of tungsten, a heat increase on the tungsten will cause the material to evaporate off of it. The reason for the evaporation is to deposit that same material onto another surface.

[00:04:02]

Larry Bell: My work has basically to do with the interface of light and surface. Whatever the surface is, whether it's glass, or paper, or something else. What the films do is that they change either the reflectivity, or the absorption, or the transmission of light through the surface, but not change the quality of the surface. So if I put it on a piece of glass, it still looks like glass. If I put it on a piece of paper, it still looks like paper. But the way the light comes off of those surfaces has been changed.

Larry Bell: And so by evaporating various kinds of materials onto the particular surfaces that I enjoy working with – glass being the main one – I make components that will fit together to weave an interesting structure with the light. The composition is made by improvising the relationship between reflectivity, transmission, and absorption.

[00:05:35]

Larry Bell: I discovered the process when I was about 22, 23, in Los Angeles. At the time I was looking for a way to make a mirror that was reflective on both sides out of a single piece of glass.

LH-F: Is that when you were thinking – is this before or after you created *Death Hollow* [1962-1963]?

Larry Bell: It was for *Death Hollow*.

LH-F: Before...

Larry Bell: No, it was for *Death Hollow*.

LH-F: Oh, it was for *Death Hollow*.

Larry Bell: I was looking for a way of doing something with the surface for that particular composition and a couple of others that I was working on.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: And I hired a small firm that did this process commercially for camera lenses and things that had to do with photography or the Hollywood film business. And he treated some panels of glass that were ultimately used in sculptures such as that. *Death Hollow* and a few others.

[00:07:05]

Larry Bell: When I moved on in the work to a simpler shape, the cube shape, and started using the process on the inside of the structure – in other words, I mitered six pieces of glass so they would fit together to become a cube, and the surface that would be inside the cube would be coated with something. And I hired this firm to do these pieces for me. In shipping the first group of this work for an exhibition at the Pace Gallery in 1965, several pieces broke in transit. We located a glazier and somebody who did the vacuum deposition in New York and decided to try and repair them before the show because we had about three weeks. And we got it together, and did it. And the man who did the plating process charged a fortune for doing it for me right then and there, and suggested that I get into doing it myself. Because if I was going to do a lot of this stuff, it would be way more cost effective to get the equipment 'cause it would allow me to do all kinds of tests and whatever it would take to get to where I was ready to do something much less expensively.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: Ultimately I bought from him a used piece of equipment that he had. Along with it came a book called *Vacuum Deposition of Thin Films* [L. Holland, 1956], which he most happily presented to me and said, “You start on page one,” and walked out. (laughter) So I had never even held a wrench in my hand before, you know. I didn’t know what I was looking at. But a couple of days later I spoke to him, and he said I was too enthusiastic. People can get hurt being that enthusiastic. He was sending somebody down to help me. And that man came and showed me how this piece of equipment worked, and that, and explained what the book referred to in relationship to the equipment and so on. And, you know, you just do it enough times, you get familiar with what it’s all about.

[00:10:16]

LH-F: So this was in California?

Larry Bell: No, it was in New York in 1965.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: The winter of 1965–6 is when I set up my studio there in New York to try and see if I could work in the city. Ultimately I decided to not stay in New York

and moved back to California 'cause that's where all my friends lived, and I wanted to hang with them.

[00:10:54]

LH-F: Did you – when *Death Hollow* was made, did you do the vapor, the vacuum...

Larry Bell: No.

LH-F: No? You had hired somebody...

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: ...to create that piece itself?

Larry Bell: No, I did all of the assembly. I did everything. Just the surface treatment is what I paid for.

LH-F: The surface preparation _____ [phrase inaudible].

Larry Bell: So I brought in the shaped glass, and they coated it the way I wanted it.

LH-F: They coated it for you with the pattern...

Larry Bell: The pattern. I had to apply the resists to the surface – the stencil, in other words – to the surface, so that when they did the evaporations, it didn't stick to the places where we wanted to be able to see through the glass.

LH-F: Okay. So do you know what the metal was that was applied to that?

Larry Bell: Yeah, it was aluminum.

LH-F: That's aluminum. Okay. We haven't talked about this yet, but you have an ability with this equipment to apply different types of metals onto the – onto whatever material you are actually choosing to use?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

[00:12:07]

LH-F: What are the materials that you use the most often? And why do you choose to use them?

Larry Bell: Almost everything that I've worked with had one of three, or some combination of three different materials. Aluminum, because it evaporates easily and is quite bright. Inconel, which is a nickel chrome alloy which evaporates easily but is very hard, but not quite as bright as the aluminum. And another material called silicon monoxide, which is like quartz, but it is one atom short of oxygen. It is silicon *monoxide*, and quartz is silicon *dioxide*. And the reason I use the silicon monoxide in this process is that it acts as an interfering layer for me. In other words, its thickness will determine what wavelength in the spectrum it will begin to interfere with.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: The same phenomenon as a little gasoline on a puddle of water at a filling station. The varying thickness of the gasoline gives the rainbow colors, because the varying thickness is interfering with different wavelengths.

LH-F: So we have – I know that we haven't...

Larry Bell: That piece has color to it, yeah.

LH-F: This piece has color to it, and this – we have in our records that this has the silicon monoxide in it.

Larry Bell: Yes.

LH-F: And the Inconel – so the Inconel are the darker, the more metallic-looking layers?

Larry Bell: Well, the Inconel is a metal.

LH-F: Yes.

Larry Bell: So if the Inconel faces a white wall, it will reflect the white wall, and it will appear white. If it faces a dark wall, it will appear dark. The picture that you are looking at, we are seeing this part of the image is reflecting something dark over here.

LH-F: Yes.

Larry Bell: And this part of the image is actually reflecting something light over here. So it's as if this piece was sitting on a table, and the angle of the camera was such that it was – the areas of the surface that were coated with a reflective film

were reflecting the tabletop; and the point of view of the camera is such that this area that appears to be dark is reflecting darker areas of the room. Okay.

[00:15:31]

LH-F: One of the reasons why I ask this is that oftentimes in our records, we don't have the information that tells us what was used...

Larry Bell: Uh-huh.

LH-F: ...and I know that it is interesting for, at least conservators, and maybe for other people, to know what was used. So I wonder how we know by looking at a piece...

Larry Bell: If they know the date.

LH-F: Okay. So if you have a piece that was made from '66 to '67...

Larry Bell: It would have chrome on it. Chrome and silicon monoxide.

LH-F: Okay. And then an earlier piece made in '62 – sorry; no, this one would have been in '66 again.

Larry Bell: I don't believe I did the coatings on this. I think that these parts were coated by – this was done – the cube may have been assembled in '66, but the parts were coated by somebody else for me.

LH-F: Oh, okay.

Larry Bell: I took the parts to a vacuum metalizer in Los Angeles, and he coated these for me. This is – does this have sort of an orange-green color to it? This piece?

LH-F: It does. Yeah.

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: And this is the small one.

Larry Bell: Yeah. And so those are what's known as dielectric films, and there's probably multi layers of magnesium fluoride and zinc sulfide.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: Those two films are what is normally used to create these kinds of dichroic effects.

[00:17:32]

LH-F: The dichroic effects on it. But you fabricated, or you had – you fabricated...

Larry Bell: I gave them the mitered glass, and then after it was coated, I assembled it. And then I had that metal – this is silver, I think – had the silver machined to fit the piece and glued it on.

LH-F: Okay. So any time we see a metal frame on these pieces, they are all glued on?

Larry Bell: Yes. With the silicone rubber.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: Well, not all of them. The very first cubes I did, I epoxied the metal to the glass.

LH-F: That would be like *Death Hollow*. Is that when you say very...

Larry Bell: Yeah, that would be – it would be after *Death Hollow*, but before these kinds of cubes.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: A lot of the early ones that have an elliptical pattern on them. You don't have any of those in your collection, but the first ones had either checkerboard or ellipses that were imagery on each panel. And the complex interaction of the way the light reflected and transmitted through the parts that had this pattern, it's hard to tell which was mirror and which wasn't mirror. But there was a jungle of beautiful things that happened within – when you looked *into* the piece. You know, the closer, the more intimate you were with bringing your peripheral vision into the scope of the limitations of the piece, the more engaging the patterns were.

LH-F: Yeah.

Larry Bell: Now the later pieces are just the opposite. They actually are much more interesting from standing back and looking at them, in my opinion, than getting very close to them.

LH-F: That's interesting.

Larry Bell: I don't know what the significance of that is, but it's a fact.

[00:20:00]

LH-F: That would be very interesting to sort of, to put them together and think about the significance of them. You oftentimes will – do you always send a cube with a plexi base that it sits on? And that's to allow the light to reflect through and...

Larry Bell: Yeah. It's so that there's no strong architectural barriers to the light. I just want these things to appear to float at a particular height. With plexi bases, you can light the ambient space and put no light on the piece whatsoever, which is the only way to deal with these things. You don't put any light on the cube. You only light the area that the piece reflects.

LH-F: That's very interesting.

Larry Bell: Guys go crazy trying to get them lit right. And you can't do it. There is no way to light them right. You have to light the area that they sit in.

LH-F: Right. That's interesting.

Larry Bell: And the best way to know whether you are doing it right is to see if you can see a shadow of the piece anywhere.

LH-F: And should you be seeing a shadow or no?

Larry Bell: No.

LH-F: No, there should be no shadow.

Larry Bell: There should be no shadow of the piece. Then the light is right.

LH-F: Okay. And what about – so all of the light that surrounds the piece should be completely ambient, so that even you don't see any of the joints and...

Larry Bell: No. You light the wall.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: You light a corner.

LH-F: Um-hum.

[00:21:50]

LH-F: And are there specific heights that you like to see these pieces displayed at?

Larry Bell: Yeah. I – for some reason, the pieces exist between 50 inches and 55 inches for pieces that are roughly 20 inches square. On larger pieces, which is a few of them around, 36 inch, they actually want to be a little bit lower. They want to be about 48 inches to the top of the piece to the floor. You want to be able to encompass the whole thing at an intimate distance but not – you want it to fill your peripheral vision, in other words. Whatever it takes. And those heights work for me. So everything is sort of gauged on how I feel.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: But, I don't know, there's something about – it's just an empty box, you know. I think it should have a humble presence. I don't think it should pretend to have the significance of a human scale to it. It should be something that a child might look up to, and an adult look down on. And somewhere in the middle there is the right place for it.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: And when they are at the right height – and 50 inches seems to be about the best for any of them, but I have gone up a little more where people thought they were too low. The thing is that they start looking like an appliance when they get too high. You know, they start taking on the characteristics of a radio on a table, or a TV on a something, or a microwave on the kitchen. Something like that. So, for me, they don't have that connotation when they play in this range (waves hands up and down in front of face).

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: And that's irrespective of the size of the piece. So a 10-inch piece should also be at 50 inches. And a 20-inch piece should also be. So what changes is the height of the base.

LH-F: Should the base always be plexi, even on the smaller pieces?

Larry Bell: Yeah. I like it. Usually plexi is relatively colorless. It's kind of water clear. And that's what I want. And, you know, it's a not expensive way of dealing with some way to get the piece up to the right height without any distractions around it.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: We've done shows where those things absolutely disappeared. And that was just because we lit the room right.

LH-F: They must almost appear to float within the room.

Larry Bell: That's exactly what they do. All at the same height. So it's quite a beautiful installation. It's like a garden, you know. It's sort of like a...

[00:25:25]

Larry Bell: ...and when I do an installation, I'll normally place one thing in the room, and then come and put another one down somewhere. I'm counting on my first hit for the placement. The first one went *there* for some reason. I put it there. So then I go and look around the room with the second one sort of in my peripheral vision. And then start adjusting that to the relationship of the first one. Many times I'll begin an installation without neutralizing the light in the room, but using the light that the former artist, the artist that was there before with their show, what they left me.

LH-F: Huh!

Larry Bell: You know? And then at a certain point the ambient light of the former installation will determine something about the relationship between the pieces as I bring them into the space. And then, at a certain point, it's not going to work. And that's when we start changing a few things. Make this part a little darker. Smooth this out. Or something like that. But it's easier to start with the artifact of the artist's decisions before.

LH-F: Yeah. That's interesting.

Larry Bell: Sometimes, a lot of times the dealers have attendants in the gallery, and they take down the other show, and they sort of make everything all even. Which is okay, too. But, you know, we start doing the same thing, whether it's that way or going with – it's easier to start when they've neutralized the space, actually. No, that's not what I meant to say. I meant to say it's easier to start when somebody else's thing is – you know, when I'm working off of some condition in the space that's not totally neutral.

LH-F: That there's a preexisting condition in that space that...

Larry Bell: Yeah. Where there's light differentials. Where it's darker in one area than it is in another area. Because the guy put all the light on his paintings, or something over here, or something like that. So over here is darker, and there is dark. Well, that's great for me. You know, when it's sort of even all around, then that's when I put the things in and start trying to figure out how to make it more interesting than that, you know. Sort of a gift when you get one that's already rolling.

[00:28:17]

Larry Bell: Conservation issues!

LH-F: Conservation issues. (laughs) Getting us back on track...

LH-F: We have – and maybe what we should do is talk about the process that's used to prepare the glass to coat it because that is – from what I understand, that's very critical to how the lamination process occurs.

Larry Bell: Very critical. Glass is a great surface. It's relatively inexpensive. It's available anywhere. There's a jillion different varieties of it. There are excellent fabricators who can do just about anything you want with it. And it does those light things that we were discussing. And probably does more things than those three things, but I'm only playing with those three things, okay?

LH-F: And those three things are, once again?

Larry Bell: Reflection. Transmission. And absorption. Of light by the surface. My media isn't glass; it's the light that hits that glass.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: The coatings interface with that light before the glass interfaces with that light. Do you understand?

LH-F: Yes.

Larry Bell: In a weird way, that means the element of time is a critical factor inherent to the work.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: Because light travels at a very specific speed. And so my things interface with the speed of light. What you perceive is a surface that is doing something to the light that is striking it, and that's all I want you to see. I don't want you to see stains on the glass. I don't want you to see fingerprints on the glass that are part of the glass. I don't want you to see anything except the light that is reflected, absorbed, or transmitted.

LH-F: Okay.

[00:31:00]

Larry Bell: Those are the things that I want you to look at. I've never thought that much of the craft of my assembly, but I think quite highly of what I've figured out in how to control the surfaces. So we have to clean that stuff, to get everything off the surface so that the coating that interfaces with the light before the glass does will not show anything but the light.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: So we have to wash it. Now we're getting this stuff from a fabricator. I don't know where he's getting it from, and I honestly don't care. The stuff has to work for me. I can tell right away if it is going to work for me, and I'm not particularly interested in the glass other than its support for the light activities that are my compositions, my experiments with this.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: Well, we wash this stuff. We spend a lot of time just trying to take off the residue of the little pads that the glazier provides us to keep the glass separate so they don't scratch with a piece of dust or something on the surface. Danger lurks everywhere. There is nothing that doesn't threaten what we are doing in

terms of looking for something really simple to look at. I'm not looking for perfection. I am just looking for something that looks right, okay?

LH-F: So even a scratch on the surface is enough for you to throw away...

Larry Bell: We have to throw it away.

LH-F: You throw it away?

Larry Bell: A lot of times we'll put all kinds of work into the thing, and we didn't see that scratch. We looked – four people looking bug-eyed at these surfaces to look for problems, and nobody saw it.

LH-F: Has that always been the case?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: You've always been that particular about...

Larry Bell: Well, there's no two ways about it.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: It's either there or it isn't. I mean, there is no guesswork. If there is stuff down there, then that means probably the coatings will lift off eventually in that place. If it goes down on a clean surface, I think those coatings last a very long time.

[00:33:44]

LH-F: We haven't seen any delamination in our pieces.

Larry Bell: Yes.

LH-F: But have you seen it happen with other pieces?

Larry Bell: Only one. Two. Two pieces I can recall seeing it.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: One, it was an 18- or 20-inch cube, so it was a large one for me. And it had been left outside in a crate over the weekend on a loading dock in the winter.

So it went from a--whatever ambient was to the crate, and left to sit outside in the extreme cold for a weekend. When they opened it up, the coatings were peeling off of one of the panels.

LH-F: Oh, no. What do you do? I mean, does...

Larry Bell: Well, I suspect we repaired it somehow, but I think that Arnold, Arnold Glimcher, who was the owner of the Pace Gallery, was livid. They had actually loaned the piece. I remember he had a big fight with the lady, reminding her, when she said that they weren't informed that it couldn't be left outside – that the crate couldn't be left outside. And I remember Arnold screaming, “You wouldn't leave a sack of potatoes out in that weather!”

(laughter)

LH-F: I love this story. Did you replace the glass? Or is there a way to...

Larry Bell: No, I think we provided a replacement panel. And their people took it apart and put it – you know, and fixed it.

LH-F: Because I'm curious if that is the only way – if you start to see a delamination occurring, if that's the only answer to resolving the issue, or if there is a way to re-adhere the laminate layer?

Larry Bell: No. No. No way. You have to either live with it, accept it as part of the life of the piece. Which changes what we are talking about in terms of a simple thing. But it makes it no less honest. A part of the investigation. I'm not interested in making masterpieces. I am just interested in doing the things that are interesting about these things visually. Okay? So I try and figure out what's the least amount of ongoing headaches, and do it so I do it right the first time, and everybody is going to be happy. But just like a lawn, if one wants to keep it nice, you've got to mow it now and then. You have to tend to it. There's a little bit – even an empty glass box needs some attention. It has gases sealed inside. When we close them up, the ambient air, whatever it is, is closed inside. On the early pieces.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: Plus then, remember this glass is glued together with some kind of rubber stuff. And so as we put the last part on, where that gas that's underneath, that's between the glass parts, is gassing into the closed cube.

LH-F: Onto the surface.

Larry Bell: Right. Well, it's going somewhere. The gas is going in there somewhere. As, when we sealed those pieces with the silicone rubber underneath the chrome plating, or the nickel, whatever we put down on it, it ensured that whatever was inside was going to stay inside. At least for a while, you know. Some of the earlier cubes need to be opened and cleaned out because the accumulation of the recondensation of whatever water was closed.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: Remember, I did this – I wasn't working in New Mexico in those days. The first cubes that I made were done in Venice Beach, where the humidity is considerably different than it is here. So there's the moisture in the air, plus the gases of whatever the materials were that hold the sculpture together also.

LH-F: Right.

[00:38:55]

Larry Bell: They have to just be washed out. So you pull off the frame. You try and remember which side came from which side. And remove the top by simply cutting through the rubber. Take off the old rubber. Clean them out, and put it back together.

LH-F: Put new – do you have a recommendation for adhesives now to use on them? Or do you use the same kind?

Larry Bell: Well, we do them different now. I use something that is not anywhere near as easy to take apart. Jack uses – I think Jack Brogan, who is a conservator out in California – although I don't – he's more of a genius kind of "Mr. Fixit" kind of figure-outer. But he does a huge amount of conservation, sculpture conservation for MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles] and for LA County [Los Angeles County Museum of Art – LACMA] and – I mean, he is Mr. Fixit. He knows how to do it. I believe he puts the final parts together with a silicone glue.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: Which means that, again, there is some kind of gas going to be trapped inside. Recently we got into using a 20-mil thick pressure-sensitive crystal clear tape.

- LH-F: Oh.
- Larry Bell: Which doesn't outgas too much, I don't think. And if it's just holding one panel to an already set structure, I think it would work pretty good. We found that it – we tried to assemble these new cubes that I'm doing with that. Originally, I thought I had found the fountain of youth with this double-sided pressure-sensitive crystal clear tape that didn't seem – you could never pull it apart.
- LH-F: Oh, wow! Hmm.
- Larry Bell: But, it had its limitations in weight load. It needs a certain amount of inch coverage, square inch coverage, per pound.
- LH-F: Ah.
- Larry Bell: And our glass parts exceeded by a little bit the weight limitation of the combined adhesive.
- LH-F: Hmm.
- Larry Bell: Okay? So let's say it would hold eight pounds. Our parts were nine and a half pounds. Okay. So what happens? We put them together. Remember all these glass edges are mitered.
- LH-F: Right.
- Larry Bell: Forty-five degree. Nine and a half pounds time five is the weight on the seam of the sixth part. It was too much. So what was happening was, it was slipping down. The tape was flowing, and since it was slipping down on this mitered edge, was acting as a wedge and separating the cubes on the side. So the whole thing was just sort of...
- LH-F: It was flowing outward.
- Larry Bell: ...flowing out. Oh, dear. I didn't discover it until I had my first show of these things.
- LH-F: Oh, no.
- Larry Bell: And every one of them was splitting open (laughs).

LH-F: Uh-oh.

Larry Bell: Well, we just took them all apart and went about trying to find out how to put them back together so they looked exactly the same.

LH-F: Yeah.

[00:43:35]

Larry Bell: And we figured it out. But to take them apart now is much more difficult.

LH-F: Did you use an epoxy to--

Larry Bell: No, I used a – I forget what the word of it is. It's a kind of a material that is catalyzed by ultraviolet. You hit it with a black light, and it instantly changes to something else.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: And we figured out a way to maintain a consistent 40/1,000th of an inch gap between all the seams. And that allowed for the slight unevenness in the – the glass is not perfect. It's off. Each one is a little bit different. Not much different, but enough different that we have to have something that will absorb those kind of differences.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: And so we figured out a way of doing that. And we've left a couple of breather holes in the – tiny little holes that will compensate for pressure changes. We're at 7,000 feet, so if I have to bring, let's say, a 36-inch cube down to Houston, boy, we're talking a lot of pressure difference across the surface of a quarter-inch piece of glass, you know. They break. But with the breather holes, they don't break.

LH-F: It releases the pressure as you go down.

Larry Bell: The pressure goes into it as you – as there is more air, there is more air going into it. If you seal them completely, then as the weight of the air increases across the surface, eventually some flaw somewhere on the edge of one of the panels will break. It will just go across it.

LH-F: If we, on some of your earlier pieces, like the ones that we have in the collection, if we – do we know – is there a way to tell if they have breather holes in them?

Larry Bell: This one would have a breather hole in it somewhere. May have more than one.

LH-F: It's the one. It's the only one...

Larry Bell: This one is assembled with the same glue we are using now.

LH-F: It is?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: So in '92 you had already started using this new glue?

Larry Bell: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, we ended up – see, I thought I had discovered the wheel. With this tape that was so wonderful, we could put these things together in no time flat and look at them. If I didn't like the composition, we'd just pull it apart and slap it back together in a – it just worked perfect, except it wasn't working. We were being deceived by the enthusiasm of being able to end this tortuous labor of assembly. Well, I was wrong.

[00:47:20]

LH-F: This is the first – this is the only piece that we have that doesn't have a frame on it. The metal framing on it. If at some point the adhesive starts to turn yellow, how does that affect your perception of the piece?

Larry Bell: I don't think it will with this stuff. No.

LH-F: You think that it...

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: ...that you wouldn't – if it goes yellow at the seams...

Larry Bell: I don't think you could see it.

LH-F: Okay. If we started to see it, though, would you want us to consider taking it apart and redoing it?

- Larry Bell: No.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: The only thing I would like you to look for is any separations in the seam.
- LH-F: Um-hum.
- Larry Bell: And the way you can – you might be looking at it and not notice it. But, depending on how you look at it, remember, you’ve got – this is two 45 degrees that make that. You’ve got to sort of get right on the angle and look at that very – at that seam straight on to see if you see any light coming out between one piece of glass and the seam.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: If you do, then you know that the glue that is there is no longer there.
- LH-F: It’s starting to fail.
- Larry Bell: Yeah. Well, it has actually separated.
- LH-F: Okay. Separating. And that’s not so critical with the pieces that have the frames on them?
- Larry Bell: No. No, I think these are going to – these will stay. This is – yeah, I think these are there for a very long time.
- LH-F: Okay. And there’s no...
- Larry Bell: Unless there is – you know, some of the earliest pieces look as fresh as the day that they were made.
- LH-F: Um-hum.
- Larry Bell: And I have no explanation for why that is because they were all essentially assembled the same way. What I am saying is that it may well be that the conditions that they were kept under didn’t – were like keeping wine a constant temperature. If the pieces weren’t exposed to any radical changes in temperature over a long period of time, they probably would look the same. That’s my guess because it’s the only way I can explain the few that I’ve seen that are from ’63, you know, that are perfect.

LH-F: Right. That's interesting. I have just a few more questions regarding the cubes before I start asking...

Larry Bell: I'm babbling on a bit, aren't I?

LH-F: It's okay. We like the babbling on.

Larry Bell: Hmm. Okay.

LH-F: It gives lots of information.

Larry Bell: Well, you know, this is very – I like – I'm very happy to be able to discuss these things.

LH-F: I'm thrilled that you're willing to discuss them. So we are right there.

Larry Bell: Well, it's interesting that I can remember details of some of this stuff pretty well.

[00:50:50]

LH-F: Yeah. These, the frames that were used for these two pieces here, the four-inch cube and the 14-inch cube, and even *Death Hollow*, they have a fairly high polish on them.

Larry Bell: Uh-huh.

LH-F: How much does that polished surface, in the sense that it's reflecting light, how much does that play into the aesthetics of the piece? And should we be meticulous about maintaining that high polish? Or does the – what there is with...

Larry Bell: You mean a patina of age?

LH-F: Well, there's a patina of age that occurs, especially with silver, that you have to maintain it or coat it to be able to keep that high polish finish because it oxidizes...

Larry Bell: Well, I like the silver. I like the whiteness of silver in reflected light. You know, it has very little color. It's very white.

LH-F: Yes.

Larry Bell: When it turns black, I like that, too; but it's not what I was after in the first place. Although I've seen – you know, I sort of like – just, the pieces have a life of their own, and they tell you a lot of story about their history...

LH-F: Hmm.

Larry Bell: ...by how many scratches or stuff like that you'll see in them. Gosh...

[00:52:38]

Larry Bell: I saw a show in Chicago, and the fellow had a piece he had borrowed from somebody. And it was from the pieces just in front of that 20-inch one with the pattern on it.

LH-F: The vapor drawing?

Larry Bell: No. The one with the grid. This one.

LH-F: This one.

Larry Bell: Before I did these, I did – referring to this (points at sheet of paper), I did pieces that had a gradient kind of feeling like the newer pieces on the surface. They were – but a more defined edge to the reflective area. In other words, maybe half of the piece was highly reflective and half wasn't; and the little space, that little edge, wasn't really a line, but it wasn't really a gradient either. It was sort of a fuzzy edge. Let's say it that way. And those pieces had a – I've completely lost track of why we're talking about this.

LH-F: We were talking about the metal frames that were used on the boxes, and the idea of – I think that we got into this because you were talking about a patina of age that occurs on pieces.

Larry Bell: Yeah. And on people, right. Well, on the surfaces, you know, the edge of – the silver, when it turned black and gray, was quite beautiful. But I didn't intend to make a block of white held together with a black and gray frame. I actually wanted the frame to be reflective, that color of the silver. So, yes, and the answer directly to your question, if you want to cater to my feelings of the piece at the time...

LH-F: Uh-huh.

Larry Bell: ...yeah, it should be polished regularly.

LH-F: Okay. Well, we ask these questions to be able to...

Larry Bell: I mean, I just don't think about things like that very much. The piece represents – it's a piece of evidence, is what it is, of a particular investigation in an ongoing series of things that we're to look at for something. You know, the interactions of the surfaces, and the way the light passed through, reflective, absorbed, so on. I had a different story in mind for each one, whatever that – whatever it was, was curious about it.

LH-F: Um-hum.

[00:55:47]

Larry Bell: The frame was to hold the parts together and allow it to sit down on something without sitting right down onto the glass.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: I decided that was sort of a decorative element because it was the shape I was interested in to support this imagery you see, which is totally the reflection of something else.

LH-F: Um-hum.

Larry Bell: You are looking at the reflection of something else.

LH-F: I see. Even looking at this piece here [*Glass Cube 20- 1 -92*, 1992, The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of the artist]. I think I hadn't even noticed it before until we started talking about this frame, but how you still are incorporating the frame aspect.

Larry Bell: Yeah. But you don't need a frame to do that.

LH-F: But you don't need the frame because you've now discovered a new way to assemble.

Larry Bell: And also, the edge of the structure, how the edge of the structure itself interfaces with the light is much simpler than having another line around it, with another edge on the edge of it, and a mitered line, and so on. And the inner edge, and a shadow, and all the rest of it. So by doing this I simply simplified everything that I was looking for.

[00:57:25]

LH-F: Yeah. Are there tops and bottoms to these pieces?

Larry Bell: No. It's pretty arbitrary. In seeing some early pieces, I've noticed that I remember the pieces and remember how I oriented it originally when it was still my possession. And after it left, people turned them any way they wanted it. You know, somebody would pick it up at the gallery; and when they set it down, they may not have liked the way it looked, so they turned it over.

LH-F: That's funny. I know that now when you coat the pieces of glass, you coat both sides of it.

Larry Bell: Not always.

LH-F: Not always?

Larry Bell: Sometimes I do.

LH-F: Okay. And I am wondering, have both sides of the glass been coated consistent? I mean, we've just answered that question; but throughout the process of making these cubes? Or do we know when something has a coating on both sides? Is it easy to tell?

Larry Bell: Yeah, it is.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: You can see, when you go back and look at this piece, you'll see that it is coated on both sides. And you'll notice that the color stuff that you see that appears to be part of the coatings – the color that you see that's not a reflection of something else will be a quarter of an inch away from the metal coating, from the metal color.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: It's the thickness of the glass that is separating. And you can see the coatings. One coating is on one side, and one coating is on the other side.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: On the gradient piece – that's because there's a pattern, you know.

- LH-F: On this piece there's a pattern, but in these pieces there's no pattern.
- Larry Bell: No.
- LH-F: And how do you – do we know?
- Larry Bell: You know, on all of these pieces with the frame, the coatings are on the inside.
- LH-F: They're all?
- Larry Bell: All. Every single one I ever did. The coating was on the inside and not on the outside. And not on the outside and the inside. Only on the – the coating was always on the inside.
- LH-F: Always? So we have...
- Larry Bell: If it has a metal frame on it.
- LH-F: Okay. So we can clean the surfaces of the glass without worrying about disturbing the coating on the glass?
- Larry Bell: Yes. That's correct. Right.
- LH-F: But on the piece that has the patterning on it, there is coatings on both sides of it. Is the silicon monoxide on both sides as well?
- Larry Bell: No. It's just the metal films on the outside.
- LH-F: Okay. So the Inconel?
- Larry Bell: Yeah.
- LH-F: And how durable is that to a cleaning? Like we would – normally when I think of cleaning glass, I would use a mixture, a solution of 50–50 ethanol and water. Is that possibly disturbing the surface of the Inconel? Or have you...
- Larry Bell: I wouldn't think so. It just keeps getting harder and harder the older it gets. And I just use a commercial spray. You know, something like Windex, or a commercial pressurized can of something that C. R. Laurence sells.
- LH-F: So just like a Windex or a...

Larry Bell: Yeah. I think they're tough as hell. I don't think you're going to – you're not going to wash that coating off. Nothing will wash it off except maybe an acid or something like that. But I don't know even then what kind of acid would take it off.

LH-F: Um-hum.

[01:01:53]

Larry Bell: That's the reason I chose to use Inconel. I thought it was the hardest material that I could practically evaporate. It's pretty easy to use – almost as easy to use as aluminum, which is the easiest of all of them.

LH-F: But the aluminum is – does the aluminum – does that get soft?

Larry Bell: Yeah, it's soft.

LH-F: It's pretty soft?

Larry Bell: Yeah, it's pretty soft. So I don't use it for surfaces that are going to have any sort of handling. I might use it on the inside surface, but not on the outside surface. In other words, I might use it on a pattern that would coat it inside, but never aluminum on the outside.

LH-F: Okay.

[01:03:00]

LH-F: When you make these pieces, do you keep records of what you've used on which piece and...

Larry Bell: I keep a journal. A journal pretty much will, in the journal will say something like, you know, "Shot 12 pieces of glass today." And might spell out what I was doing. But as far as keeping a written narrative on each – you know, a document for each piece, no, I've never done that. But I ask all of my people to keep journals, too. My plan was to, at some point, just match them all together by date, so to see what everybody was thinking and doing during...

LH-F: That would be pretty great. That's nice. Nice to know that there's a record of this...

Larry Bell: Well, they are all supposed to be keeping a daily log.

LH-F: Oh, they are?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: Okay. Do they?

Larry Bell: I don't know. I told them to do it. You can ask them. Why don't you?

LH-F: Okay, I'll ask them.

Larry Bell: And tell me who isn't.

(laughter)

[01:04:26]

LH-F: And the last big question that I think would be very interesting for conservators to know...

Larry Bell: Um-hum.

LH-F: ...in terms of what your intention is with these pieces. What happens if, in the process of shipping or doing something, there is a chip, or the glass breaks, or there is a fracture that occurs, what would you like to see happen to that piece? Because that's a true physical damage that's occurred.

Larry Bell: Well, I would hope that what you are doing right here is going to give anybody who is interested in my stuff some access to how to go about thinking of repairing something.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: Simple as that, you know. Here's the equipment. All somebody that does that kind of stuff, has to see is... Or just know that it was vacuum plated. And then go to somebody who does that process, and show them what has to be done, and they would figure out how to do it.

LH-F: And that's okay with you?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: And if we have a piece...

- Larry Bell: I mean, I'm not giving anybody license to crank out my stuff, but...
- LH-F: And that becomes a big question is, you know, how do you – and that's maybe *not* a question that can be answered in an interview here; but it does...
- Larry Bell: Maybe I should... Right? (laughter)
- LH-F: But I wonder, you know, can pieces be – how would you feel about a piece that has lots and lots of scratches on it from being mishandled over the time? Would you want it to be completely refabricated? Would that...
- Larry Bell: Yeah. Why not? If it was interesting enough to stay around that long, you know.
- LH-F: And how do you – I mean, do you think that it has to be done by you?
- Larry Bell: No. I don't care who does it. I don't particularly *want* to repair my old stuff.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: I mean, I'll do it. I'll help Jack, let's say. Like this guy Jack Brogan, when he has a piece that needs a replacement part, I can make something for him. And he can fix it.
- LH-F: Right. But you do quite a bit of fiddling with the coating process on it.
- Larry Bell: Yeah. Fiddling is a great word.
- LH-F: I should use a more technical term.
- Larry Bell: No, it's a perfect word. Finally, you know, it's all finesse. I mean, what – this fiddling stuff is strictly finesse, you know. It's finessing the strings. That's the fun part of doing this thing. I'm not that interested in the mechanics. I always sort of figured if I could do the stuff out of balsa wood and cottage cheese, I'd do it because it would be a lot easier.
- (laughter)
- LM: What if one of your pieces was in a museum, and someone came and chipped one of the edges, would you want a conservator to re-miter all the edges? Or would that be something that would have to be done in your shop?

- Larry Bell: You know, I think you could probably take one panel off and replace it.
- LH-F: Well, one of the things that conservators do with small chips is that they often – if we can find it – and usually with 20th century or modern glass, there are adhesives that match the glass transition of the glass itself, so that you can actually...
- Larry Bell: Grow a new piece on it?
- LH-F: You grow a new piece on it with epoxy without having interference. How would you feel about that if instead of...
- Larry Bell: Oh, I'd love to see that.
- LH-F: It's pretty amazing. With a large piece that's been cracked, it's much more difficult to get it perfectly aligned. But with smaller pieces, you are capable of filling a small area. The problem with it is that over time the epoxy will yellow.
- Larry Bell: Oh.
- LH-F: It will change color, which, you know, it leads to the – you know, if it's a very small chip in the corner, is it noticeable? How much does that affect the piece 40 years from now, 60 years from now, 80 years from now? A large crack in the piece, we might be able to get it to disappear without being – I don't know, with all of the layers that you have already because those epoxies only really work for the glass itself. And so when we start to deal with the other layers, I'm not sure that fixing large cracks would work. But maybe for small chips in the corner, a glass conservator might be able to fill it.
- Larry Bell: Well, I would hope they could. I would give them all my best, you know. I would love to see the mechanics be just dealt with handily...
- LH-F: Without having to replace a panel?
- Larry Bell: Sure. Yeah. And then if I were to see it, and decide it was not fit – which I can't imagine. I mean, I just want the work to have a clarity to it that doesn't include a lot of distractions. Now little things that are in the life of the piece, if they don't threaten the piece, it's just part of the deal.
- LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: If you've got a little chip in the corner, well, is it – in the aggregate of what you're looking at, does it take away from the presence of the piece?

LH-F: Um-hum. Does it interfere with the observer's ability to keep that?

Larry Bell: Yeah. If it doesn't, then it's just in the life of the piece.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: That's the way I see it. It doesn't lessen the fact that it is evidence of a particular aspect of a moment. Just 'cause it's got a little chip in it, or a crack in it, it's no less honest a piece of the moment.

LH-F: Right.

[01:12:45]

Larry Bell: But I suspect that people that want to collect those kinds of things want ones that aren't chipped up. Or without any cracks in them, or something like that. They all start off looking – they all start out of here as good as we can do it, and if they're not any good, we bring them back and do them again.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: But things just change, and you know. Things age. People age. Time goes by.

LH-F: I had to ask that question because these pieces are so fragile in their beauty, but in the materials that are being used _____ [phrase inaudible].

Larry Bell: Well, I think that's part of the charm of those things, is that people that are – there are people that collect things because of how fragile they are.

LH-F: Oh!

Larry Bell: You know, people that are willing to take the risk. They believe that that's part of the thrill of owning something, is that it has some soul to it. There is risk to it.

LH-F: There certainly is with these pieces.

[01:14:30]

Larry Bell: Well, I couldn't think of making – I don't know how I could have experimented with the depth that I have with this stuff if it wasn't for how practical a material glass was as a substrate.

LH-F: For using light?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: There probably isn't another material that does that.

Larry Bell: No. And it's everywhere, and so on. You know, I think that part of the charm of the pieces also has to do with – every day we look through windows, we look through lenses, we look through glasses of water, and so on. We are confronted with a ubiquitous material, and we don't see it. We only see its utility. When you take that material out of the context of the window and make something with it, you have some – the material is already charged with a certain kind of improbability by its presence not where it is supposed to be. And then when you play around a little bit with the surface of that improbable material in that place, you end up with a combination of very interesting improbabilities. A crack and a scratch and a chip and so on, I don't think changes any of those improbabilities.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: Unless it destroys the piece for some reason, I can't imagine it. I mean, I have kept – I have in my warehouse a couple of ruins of pieces from the sixties that I kept, because as a ruin they were so incredibly beautiful.

LH-F: Hmm.

Larry Bell: You know, just the way this cube broke. I couldn't bring myself to heave it. So, there's something else about the work that is engaging to me. That doesn't necessarily have to do with all of the parts being "poifect."

[01:17:01]

LH-F: I wish we could end on that because that was beautiful. But we do need to ask a few questions about the paper pieces that you've made.

Larry Bell: Okay. I'll tell you, I have no secrets.

LH-F: Okay. Great.

- Larry Bell: The first vapor drawings came out – around 1978.
- LH-F: And they were made in California?
- Larry Bell: No.
- LH-F: No?
- Larry Bell: Right here.
- LH-F: Right here? In this big... [referring to large vacuum deposition chamber]
- Larry Bell: The very first ones were done in a little system that I had in the back room. I since gave it to the high school here, that particular...
- LH-F: Do they use it now?
- Larry Bell: Naw. They took it. You know, they were going to set it up, but then I don't think anybody ever did anything.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: And then I went to this [referring to large vacuum deposition chamber] because it's so handy. The surfaces – you could put so much. You could put so many different kinds of things in there at once. In other words, 20 different kinds of papers. One evaporation source. So it would show you what 20 different locations, collecting that same vapor, coming from one place, would look like.
- LH-F: Oh.
- Larry Bell: So you've got 20 different surfaces. Twenty different kinds of deposits. And each one tells you something else about what you are doing in there. So that's how I do this stuff. It's strictly seat of the pants, you know.
- LH-F: I don't think so. (laughs)
- Larry Bell: And what I found was that the coatings – huh?
- LH-F: I don't think so. I think that there's something more scientific about it.

[01:19:14]

Larry Bell Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Larry Bell Studio/Taos, NM (Produced by The Menil Collection), 04/18/2006

Video: adp2006b_bell_001va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2006b / TRT: 01:35:21

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- Larry Bell: Well, the coatings, I found one thing that was interesting, that the coatings stick very well to paper.
- LH-F: Better than to glass?
- Larry Bell: No.
- LH-F: No? Okay.
- Larry Bell: I don't know that they stick any better to glass than they do to paper, but they are easier to put onto the paper because you don't have to clean it.
- LH-F: Ah. And what are the – did you use different types of coatings for the paper?
- Larry Bell: I usually used only aluminum, or aluminum and silicon monoxide.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: There was one series I did that I called the Noble Metals, where I evaporated gold and platinum and silver, and I think lapis lazuli.
- LH-F: Hmm. How do you know which series are which? We have two of your drawings in the collection, and they are gorgeous.
- Larry Bell: Neither of those are vapor drawings.
- LH-F: Neither of these are vapor drawings.
- Larry Bell: No, these are collages.
- LH-F: But they are titled “Mirage Vapor Drawings.”
- Larry Bell: No. “Mirage” means it's a collage.
- LH-F: Oh.
- Larry Bell: It's a collage. It's a metaphor for sealed – for the heat-sealing treatment that fuses all of this stuff to a substrate of paper.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: A vapor drawing is quite different from that.

- LH-F: But are any of – are the papers that are in this, in the collage, are any of them applied with the vapor deposition?
- Larry Bell: In the case of this, from what I can tell...
- LH-F: It's difficult, I know, in this. Yeah.
- Larry Bell: Yeah. This is– this black is a piece – that's a piece of black paper. I don't know. I can't tell what I'm looking at here.
- LH-F: It's difficult in this – maybe we shouldn't...
- Larry Bell: If I saw the piece, I could probably figure it out.
- LH-F: Okay. All right. We'll remember the next time that you – to ask you to look at it, if you come to Houston sometime soon.
- Larry Bell: Mmhm.
- LH-F: So, just to finish these. Even though we know that they are torn papers, and painted...
- Larry Bell: Let's see what that says (reaches for paper).
- LH-F: It says, "Torn painted papers and synthetic resin on paper."
- Larry Bell: That's not correct. It's torn metalized papers. They are plated papers.
- LH-F: They are plated papers.
- Larry Bell: Done in this process in that tank.
- LH-F: Okay.
- Larry Bell: Yeah. Vacuum-deposited papers in combination with acrylic laminate films. And in some cases Mylar. So each one of those different materials has the vapor deposit on it.
- LH-F: Okay. And it would all be metal?
- Larry Bell: It would be aluminum and silicon monoxide in every case.

LH-F: Aluminum and silicon monoxide.

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: There's a – and no – were there any other pigments or paints used?

Larry Bell: Well, I can't tell what that is (points at paper). If that's – that could be a piece of printed paper.

LH-F: Yeah.

Larry Bell: 'Cause I did use some printed paper that had this gradient on it. And I combined it with other kinds of paper that had the metalized coatings on it. And sometimes the paper was metalized with laminate film attached to it that also got metalized at the same time. So you could see – you'd see how the surface would determine how the light came off.

LH-F: Hmm. Okay. They have a very three-dimensional quality to them, almost like cloth that's...

[01:24:00]

Larry Bell: Well, the papers, when I used them, when I plated them, I would sort of wad them up and put them into the vacuum chamber in some random manner, clipped usually with bulldog clips or clothespin kind of clips to something that held them in front of the filaments that do the evaporation.

LH-F: Okay.

Larry Bell: When I would take these wadded up pieces of paper off of the fixture, and then spread them out flat, they contained a memory of the condition that they were in when they were coated because the coatings went onto the part of the paper that the vapor stream could see. And since the surface being coated was not parallel to the evaporation plane, some of the wadded up paper was closer to the filaments. Some of it couldn't be seen because there was a slight radius where it tucked under itself, where it was scrunched...

LH-F: Yes.

Larry Bell: ...and so on. Well, all of those conditions are recorded by the nature of how the deposits go down. They are not going down onto a flat surface. They are

going down onto a convoluted surface. And so that's what the convolutions look like. Sort of like tie-dyeing in a weird way.

LH-F: Yeah. It is like tie-dyeing. It was what it reminds me of more, or stretching the papers. And I couldn't – that makes a lot of sense now. And then, how did you get it to be so flat?

Larry Bell: So what?

LH-F: Flat.

[01:25:49]

Larry Bell: They were assembled in a laminating press. A Magnapex. It was made years ago by the Seal Corporation. It was something they used to use to mount posters and maps onto canvas, or make menus with. You know, laminate stuff. I don't know how much use it was for any archival things.

LH-F: Horrible. Horrible.

Larry Bell: Yeah. For me, it was great though, because well, I managed to incorporate it into my little studio rituals, you know. I mean, there were times when I went through here doing a lot of compositions. And from '96 to 2000, we created and photographed over 10,000 pieces that were collages. Little 10-inch pieces. I called them "Fractions."

LH-F: Oh.

Larry Bell: I'll show you some here. They were a lot of fun. That was – I don't know, it was crazy. I wanted to do something big, but I was broke. So I decided to chop up a whole bunch of old work and recycle it into new work. And so out of a about a hundred or so large collages like that, I actually generated a whole bunch of beautiful little compositions. The ones I cut up were not very interesting, but they were already charged with a lot of energy. You know, the shards of these things, when we cut them down to little pieces, were much more interesting than the pieces themselves. So then you've got this piece of energy. It's got all this stuff going for it. How do you re-release it into something else? And that's what my 10,000 examples were of.

LH-F: Ten thousand is a lot. What was the resin that you used to adhere the layers together?

Larry Bell: It's a thermosetting acrylic film with a pH of 7.

LH-F: And is that what sometimes we see, looking at these?

Larry Bell: Yeah.

LH-F: We see little clear bits of the resin sticking out. That's the thermosetting resin?

Larry Bell: Right.

LH-F: Okay.

[01:28:42]

Larry Bell: I use that film in everything. I not only use it to adhere things, I use it – I coat it also. And then melt it again. So that a lot of the things that you'll see in the compositions are coatings that have been deposited on a thin piece of acrylic and then allowed to break apart.

LH-F: Ah. Right.

Larry Bell: As the stuff flows, the metal films or the quartz films tear apart according to the crystalline structure that they had when they were formed on it. The nature of this plating process is that, if I evaporate a material that has a very specific crystalline structure giving it its optical qualities, as the film grows on the other surface that I am trying to coat, it goes back together with the same crystalline structure that it had before as a solid.

LH-F: Hmm.

Larry Bell: Except now it's a thin film, but with the same optical qualities that it was chosen for. There's a lot of little – that's where the finesse stuff is, you know. In playing around with how stuff pulls apart, and how it sticks together. The laminate film was a perfect vehicle for the coatings. They went down on it beautifully.

LH-F: Paper.

[01:30:37]

- Larry Bell: But the laminate film also allowed me to change the way the surface of a piece of paper or the surface of a piece of coated Mylar looked by adding a micro-thickness of this acrylic and diffuse the light off of a bright piece of Mylar.
- LH-F: Hmm.
- Larry Bell: And then I could implant an architecture to the surface of the acrylic film. So it has the texture – it looks like it's woven, or a fabric, or something like that.
- LH-F: Yes.
- Larry Bell: In fact, it isn't a fabric. It's just an architectural pattern that's been implanted in the surface so that it disperses the light the way I want it.
- LH-F: Hmm.
- Larry Bell: It's the final surface that disperses the light. We've got – remember we talked about absorption, reflection, transmission. All that is part of the something that disperses the light to your eye that you see.
- LH-F: It's all part of your body of work that creates your...
- Larry Bell: Yeah. No, I'm not sure that's what I meant, but... If you look at that wall, we see it a certain way because the surface is dispersing the light. Not only reflecting the light...
- LH-F: It's absorbing it.
- Larry Bell: It's doing all that stuff, but it's also dispersing it back to us.
- LH-F: Um-hum.
- Larry Bell: So that's what the acrylic films – the compositions that you say seem to have a lot of depth to them. In fact, they do have some depth to them. There are layers of transparent stuff between different things that are doing different things with the light. They are reflecting, absorbing, and transmitting within the composition at different rates. And that's what makes up the visuals. What gives off that dimensional look has something to do with the architecture of the surface, in combination with whatever the imagery is. How the light – in other words, if I didn't impart that architecture to this thing, using the same technique, it would look like it was printed on a *Life* magazine.

LH-F: Right.

Larry Bell: That's the difference.

LH-F: This has been really great.

Larry Bell: I'm sure it's been a bore.

LH-F: Oh, it's been very boring! (laughs) I want to thank you...

Larry Bell: Not at all.

LH-F: ...for allowing us to come into your space and...

Larry Bell: Maybe some of the other footage that we have around here can somehow be ingested into what you've got here and give a little clearer picture. 'Cause it shows the equipment and the procedures.

LH-F: That would be nice if we might be able to try to work that out.

Larry Bell: Yeah. You've got to work with my son, though. He's rough.

(laughter)

Larry Bell: I'm a patsy. He's tough.

LH-F: Larry, thank you very much.

Larry Bell: You're welcome.

[END RECORDING]