



Artists Documentation Program (ADP)
Video Interview Transcript

MEL CHIN
JULY 22, 1991

Interviewed by:
Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director,
Artists Documentation Program, and
Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection

Video: William Howze | Total Run Time: 02:57:02
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Location: The Menil Collection, Exhibition Gallery, “Viewpoints: Mel Chin”

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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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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; Mel Chin]

[BEGIN RECORDING, PART 1 of 2]

[00:00:51]

CM-U: Today is July 22, 1991, and I am Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. I am Chief Conservator of the Menil Collection. We are at the Menil Collection with an interview with an artist in our series sponsored by The Mellon Foundation. Our interview today is being taped by [William] Bill Howze with the assistance of Deborah Brauer of The Menil Collection. Today, we are going to be talking with Mel Chin, who has an exhibition currently on view at the Menil Collection. We are going to be talking about specific pieces, particularly with regard to their materials and concerns over their future preservation. For the purposes of our discussion, we are going to go through the gallery and discuss four works of art that span Mel's later career to this point; and then our second session will be a discussion about issues of conservation in a more theoretical vein. And then finally, time allowing, we are going to ask Mel to look at some of his earlier films and comment upon what he sees, or how things have changed...

Mel Chin: My experience.

CM-U: ...his experiences since then.

[00:01:56]

CM-U: So we thought we'd start with the piece that's actually owned by the Menil Collection. It's called (*Belief/Punishment*) [*Yaqin Saza (for Jam Sazi)*, 1986]. And, Mel, do you want to tell us where you made it, and why, and so on?

Mel Chin: Okay. The Urdu name is *Yaqin Saza*, and this was made in New York City, in 125 Rivington Street, Apartment No. 5, a fifth floor walk-up. And it was constructed in, when was this, 19...

CM-U: Eighty-six.

Mel Chin: ...'86. And what it was, was that the Houston DiverseWorks was sponsoring the Amnesty International Benefit ["Prisoners of Conscience"]...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...at the time. And, as we had done it before, I was sent by random a dossier, a prisoner of conscience.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And this was a fellow named Jam Sagi. So I looked at the file, and I started to get into it, as it would be. And the choice of materials was first determined by going into, as I would try to understand the language somewhat, and I went to the New York Public Library, and I started looking at his native tongue, which would be Urdu. And came upon the script for “belief,” which ends with this big flourish. *Yaqin*, the “qin” has this big loop and a dot in it. And then *Saza*, “punishment,” would be a stripe [sounds like]. Now why it was that way is because – well, the title had to – it may not come first, but I was thinking about what his particular situation was, and his torture as well as his incarceration...

CM-U: What was – why was he incarcerated?

Mel Chin: He was a, I would say, an organizer of a collective in – I guess – I can’t remember the town.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And he was found to possess banned political literature...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...like maybe a red book, or whatever. And that was enough to throw him in for – he had been in for eight years. And he was also a poet, so this – you know, looking into that he was a writer, I looked into the language and then books, and then started to think about what materials would be applicable to represent his case. And the title came about by looking at – trying to find the formal constraints for the piece.

CM-U: So you were looking into what he was doing, or why he was – what his situation was...

Mel Chin: What the situation was.

CM-U: ...to look for some sort of formal...

- Mel Chin: Yeah. Well, I was just trying to see what I could make for him.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And when it comes random like that, and you want to know the person, and you are breaking something in – if not his honor [sounds like], but something to represent him as well as something to represent the situation...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: I was also reading at the time Elaine Scarry's book, *The Body in Pain* [: *The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1987]...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...which talks about pain and imagination, as well as how objects of torture can just be held up and represent the act itself.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And with all that under my belt, I began to again start there at the library, and then to just – even the sound of words and things – and then to look at the script itself. And consulting with Pakistani cab drivers or shop owners...
- CM-U: (laughs)
- Mel Chin: ...whoever spoke Urdu, in order to say, "Does this look right? And what would you say is belief? Or what would you say is punishment..."
- CM-U: Huh.
- Mel Chin: ...in your language? Or could you write this script out for me?" In fact, I got some samples, I think, from the – when I was going to Houston and New York, from a gas station along that feeder, up 59, along San Jacinto, there was a person I would look at. I might say, "Are you Pakistani?" And he says, "Yes." I said, "Do you write or read Urdu?" He says, "Yes." "Okay. Could you write down *Yaqin* for me?" (laughs)
- Mel Chin: And he would do it. And so I took that. And then there would be discourses about what the real word for "belief" was. There's two words, and I settled on *Yaqin* because of its – it also means "sure belief."

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: To be sure.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:06:30]

Mel Chin: And the piece developed slowly, and it started with just the idea of a circle and a book, painted on. And then when I realized after it was being done on a porcelain plate, I believe, and I was just painting the book over and over, and it was not working out. And it just started with this piece first. And it was also a period of – I had maybe some economic problems at the time, and – but I was torturing myself, I guess, conceptually, what to come up with.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And so it started, I started taking some books out of my shelf to – I was cutting up my own books, and it started with [Karl Marx] *Das Kapital* – to paint...

CM-U: (laughs)

Mel Chin: ...the first “red book.” I mean, you know, I was looking at that because I probably – I thought, “Well...” And then I came upon the idea of, well, basically, you know, if he was put in for having books, and then he – surely he still believes, then you can’t – it’s not the physical presence of an object. So it is the idea of it. And I, in looking upon the word itself, *Yaqin*, I said that sound of that thing had a fullness and openness about it for what belief could be about.

Mel Chin: And I started – I went down – there was a furniture resale shop in the Essex Street Market there. I can say, you know, that they’ve been shut out and thrown out, but – so I can talk about them – but I befriended the fellow there, who ran this – it was like, resale furniture or a secondhand store. Big shop. But I was going through some of the books, because I didn’t want to destroy all the books in my library for this work. (laughs)

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And we negotiated. I wanted all hard covers, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and I started to slowly screw and glue them together into this pattern. And with the intent of just destroying them. And it was like a frenzy, what was formed [sounds like] back and forth again. So they are actually screwed together, and they were sliced to be a certain dimension so that I could compact them tight.

Mel Chin: I choose it with – so even just the textural differences...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...of books, and just – if you like books, then you look at the way they are made.

CM-U: And worn. Different ages have different periods of aging, and so on.

Mel Chin: Yes. Right. Yeah. And the hardcover notion [sounds like]. And so they were screwed together, and I got together some roofing tar...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...that had hog hair and glass fibers...

CM-U: Already in it? It was already used tar?

Mel Chin: And it was mixed in, yeah. No, it was asphalt that you patch stuff with.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: Uh, like leaks with. But I chose it – when I read the ingredients, I said, “Well, this is, you know, the pig and it’s a symbol of ignorance [sounds like], or whatever.”

CM-U: The hog’s hair, you mean, being a symbol of the pig?

Mel Chin: The hog’s hair that was in it. Yeah.

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: Oh well, let’s see, there’s the hog, and then Tibetan [sounds like], it has the hog, the snake, and the rooster. They chase each other.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And they all – and the first level of ignorance, or whatever, and lust, and anger.

[00:10:00]

Mel Chin: So, I thought that was a worthy thing. Also, there is about tar and feathering, you know, destroying the capacity to look at them. And to be sure to do it, I even – well, I cut – this is out of my fire escape. I was looking for materials...

CM-U: (laughs)

Mel Chin: ...and they had these shutters that, you know, were – they would – they were no longer being used, but they were still stuck on this very old building. It was probably wrought iron.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So I just yanked them off my fire escape 'cause didn't seem like they were being used, and I sliced them into these bands.

CM-U: Did you need the bands to hold it structurally? Or was it more conceptual?

Mel Chin: It's conceptual, and yet it also adds extra structural stability, I thought, to it. But I didn't think too much more. It's like, I want to be, again, sure that it was – you couldn't get it out again. So they were riveted together.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I just pounded them together after it was glued and...

CM-U: And of course this form means these books can never be read?

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: I mean, they are locked

Mel Chin: They are locked. Locked up, yes. And then, on the back, we – you know, I think, to really mount it, you know, I was thinking about – I found a piece of scrap plywood and used – went to the auto parts store to get the fiberglass mix, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and poured that on there. I had to negotiate for the books. I think I got them all for twenty dollars, and I brought in a broken refrigerator before to him. Like those old wooden, you know, nice ice chests, things...

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: I befriended him by giving him that...

CM-U: Oh, I see.

Mel Chin: ...and so – we had this kind of thing, you know. “Could I have this much books?” You know. So eventually this was just covered with the stuff, and then the band was riveted on, and I fastened it on the wall with the fiberglass and plywood.

CM-U: So you had the plywood attached to the back of it with the fiberglass as an adhesive between, and then covering it?

Mel Chin: Yeah, it was the adhesive, and then screws were driven into that as well. So I was trying to mount it that way.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: Now I see – if we were talking about problems or whatever may happen; it may come loose or whatever, I don’t know. But it would have to be fixed.

CM-U: So it’s both glued and screwed on?

Mel Chin: Screwed on.

CM-U: The support on the back?

Mel Chin: Yeah. Right.

[00:12:16]

CM-U: And it’s distanced away from the wall – was this – you wanted to have this space?

Mel Chin: I wanted to have this kind of floating circle of – it's an idea of it. But I felt the, you know, the power of destructive – that destroying this reading material to give it some presence and then to isolate it. And even the distance between the two things were calculated – because I think the constraints of the gallery was saying, "You have exactly six feet to do your thing."

CM-U: Oh, you mean, for the Amnesty show?

Mel Chin: Yeah. They said, "You are given only six feet."

CM-U: You were allotted six feet.

Mel Chin: So I said, "Well, I better get about six feet."

CM-U: (laughs)

Mel Chin: And I think I went over by three inches. But it was also to give distance between the pieces. 'Cause I didn't expect "belief" and "punishment" to reside together...

CM-U: Are these written this way, with this space? I wonder if we could come in on this? Because I think this circle, what you are saying is...

Mel Chin: Yeah. The actual...

CM-U: ...that the actual image of this writing...

Mel Chin: Um-hum. Um-hum.

CM-U: ...has a lot to do...

Mel Chin: The Urdu, yeah.

CM-U: ...with the form of the piece...

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: ...and in the space between.

Mel Chin: After I – looking at what to make, I think I – well, I had to; I started there.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Just looking at the language.

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: And I keyed in by just looking in, and said, “Well, this is what it seems to me.” Even the sound of Saza...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...has, uh, it just, phonetically speaking, has _____ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: Do you have your notes or records from that first – the people who wrote these down for you, or any...

Mel Chin: There may be some scraps. It was written on the back of a brown paper bag, I believe...

CM-U: (laughs) Which may have been easily garbage [sounds like]...

Mel Chin: ...and then a cab driver, they (extends his hand) – excuse me. And then there would be discourse, you know. “No, that’s not the word.” Then there’s religious belief, you know. I didn’t want to use religious belief.

CM-U: No, I just asked because any documentary information is always helpful.

Mel Chin: There may be some. And there is also – I requested more from the person in charge of Jam Saqi’s case, and they sent some letters that he had written to Amnesty people...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...words in English. And I wanted to see his handwriting as well...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...to try to understand this person, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum. And you think you may still have those? Or you don’t?

Mel Chin: Yes, I do have those.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: Good. And what about the white book? And what is it?

Mel Chin: Well, this is encaustic. A beeswax, my own mix of things.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And raw pigment – powdered pigment...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...that was put in. And painted on – on there. That was the stroke of saying, “It is the idea that is sure,” and I believe that it exists regardless of the destruction of – overall destruction of these things.

CM-U: The idea exists, still.

Mel Chin: The idea exists.

CM-U: Persists.

Mel Chin: And it is his belief that got him there to begin with, but it doesn’t fade because you torture and you, you know.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: So his – and his poetic notions that he may have been involved with.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And his – I guess his wife died. All these – you know, the things that happen to people. The horrifying reality of torture and incarceration.

[00:15:20]

CM-U: As trying to foresee or project what may occur to this...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...in terms of its condition, which is pretty hard to do...

- Mel Chin: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...but anyway. I could imagine fraying of the edges, or perhaps separation of the form in some point. Does the tightness of the circle mean a lot to you, or is that kind of natural aging? Something that you think would be in keeping with it?
- Mel Chin: I think the tightness of the circle is pretty much set. I don't think it will change that much unless the paper fibers break down.
- CM-U: I just meant these – yeah, the edges fraying a bit.
- Mel Chin: Well, I think that would be okay, I think, if it's – it's not okay, but it is okay in terms of just, some things will happen. I was more concerned when I remembered that when it was made, the wax was still very – or, no, the, the asphalt...
- CM-U: The asphalt.
- Mel Chin: ...was still very, uh...
- CM-U: Tacky?
- Mel Chin: Yeah. Tacky, yeah. And I think – I remember when I brought it down to hang on the wall, I wrapped it up with waxed paper. That was one of my directives, to use, like, Cut-Rite wax paper...
- CM-U: Oh, yeah. I use that. It's good.
- Mel Chin: Yeah. It was a good thing to handle this and the bat as well, because they are made very close, you know. And timewise, too, I would work...
- CM-U: Did you work on them simultaneously?
- Mel Chin: In my recollection, I think they were separate, actually, 'cause I wanted, again, to get that distance. And do – paint this very lovingly, and then do that another way.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: The bat was made later. So when this was completed, I set that aside. But it was a short time span. It was an intense, you know, there was something

about it. And it started making me think about – when I use the term, “inadequate metaphor,” [sounds like] and all these things – how I got so heavy into the making of an object, I was so focused on its execution, that you start fuzzing [sounds like] out what it was about.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Because, you know, you’ve got to make a show of it and do this thing. And that was a little disturbing, too.

[00:17:34]

Mel Chin: So that put me in the right motion to do the bat, which was construction lumber from the street.

CM-U: The bat was just lumber that you found?

Mel Chin: Yeah. It was a big beam...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and what I did was, I – and there I tackled it very much like screwing the books together. Very – I tried to get into the psychological framework of attacking it. I did it mostly by hand with a Chinese cleaver. Just hacking out this big log. And it was just – it was – so the chips would build up around, and you had this thing, and you’re just hacking at it. The...

CM-U: Was the shape, again, related to the written word?

Mel Chin: Yes. The *Saza*, this last sound of it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: The punishment aspect. And then I coated it in wax. Yeah, there was a lot of experience about what to – to not just make a bat. And what’s around here – I think I can touch it, since no one’s here. What’s around it is – this leathery looking material is actually brown paper.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: It’s a whole human figure that was made, and then, to appear like skin wrapped around _____ [word inaudible].

- CM-U: So the figure was cut out of paper first and then...
- Mel Chin: Right. And then crushed, and then coated with varnish and dirt from the floor to rub in so it would have the – you know, when you look at skin very close up, it has the texture to give it all these _____ [word inaudible]. Then I stuck it on with the asphalt, and then attacked it again as well. Anyway, I was thinking about the idea of punishment, and how a weapon actually lifts your – the shell of your humanity away from you.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And that's what I would try to express here. To draw the figure, though, I used Michelangelo's study of a leg to begin with because of his flayed figure...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...in the *Last Judgment* [Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican State] painting.
- CM-U: Right. Which is, some suggest, is him...
- Mel Chin: Yeah, right.
- CM-U: ...a portrait of his leg.
- Mel Chin: It's in – so his leg, this leg is part of that. Yeah. And so I used that, and then I rapidly tore a figure out, and that served as the – but the leg was the first part. I think the drawing around here shows...
- CM-U: Brown kraft paper or...?
- Mel Chin: Brown kraft paper.
- CM-U: Just brown kraft paper.
- Mel Chin: But it had to be the right kind of brown kraft paper. It had to have enough weight to it, you know.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But it started with just, like, paper bags that were glued together. And that was – but it was an attempt to give it that leather look.

CM-U: And did the wax come after you had attached it to the asphalt? Or you waxed it and aged it first and...

Mel Chin: No, it was aged first. It was just stuck with the asphalt.

CM-U: ...first, and then wrapped. [sounds like]

Mel Chin: And then I coated it and then wrapped it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And I wrapped so – and it ended up, well, see the hand is holding it below, and then trying to stop it above.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: It's like this – two hands.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: This one here.

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: And the other one here.

CM-U: That one.

Mel Chin: This left hand. So it's a whole figure just... And I wrapped it many times. And the study was actually an attempt to see how things fall.

CM-U: As they go around?

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: Is there a front? Or do you...

Mel Chin: I, I – it can go most any way. I kinda – when I put it, I guess, I kind of put the hand here. But it's been photographed many different ways. Sometimes it's best to keep it obscure.

[00:21:12]

CM-U: Now we've already noticed a change with just the kind of separation of the paper.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: Unless maybe that...

Mel Chin: That was intentional.

CM-U: That's your intention?

Mel Chin: Yeah, that was my – when I attacked the skin again, after it was wrapped on.

CM-U: What did you attack it with?

Mel Chin: Everything _____ [phrase inaudible]...

CM-U: Looks like a lot of little holes. Screwdrivers?

Mel Chin: Yeah, screwdrivers. But I make a lot of my own tools, and that was probably – I probably used a chunk of iron with a car spring. So I would sharpen a car spring up.

CM-U: Why do you make your own tools?

Mel Chin: Well, I think there's a linkage there with – sometimes, like in one of the pieces that we'll look at later, the *Jupiter* piece, it's like it's symbolic. Well, I read this thing about, you know, how you make a – I mean, [Chinese alchemist Ge] Hong [283-343 CE] brought it out in that discourse about the operation of the sun, the – to make a weapon to kill the fish with, you make a certain deity out of the thing. So this means it's about your control or something. I don't know. But it's – making your own tools, it's just – I think it makes the work more of a symbolic act or something when you're...

CM-U: Um-hum. It makes – it's more personal for you, maybe in a way, too?

Mel Chin: It is very personal. Sometimes also, when I was pecking at the wood, you know, it's based in the pelican pecking at the heart (taps chest)...

CM-U: Yes.

Mel Chin: ...then a screwdriver won't do, nor will a pick, or whatever. You have to make a little beak in order to do the job.

[00:22:47]

Mel Chin: One thing that *Yaqin Saza* – we'll just carry on from there...

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: ...taught me was the etymology, like words into materials, into forms. You know, linkages between them. So, jumping off into that wagon – jumping onto that wagon, this piece [*The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987] was an attempt to link scientific, alchemic, and mythologic structures, and their origins, and their forms, and their materials to one thing. And it was a mixture of two – it was cross-cultural, too, because it was Chinese and Greek texts that I was consulting...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...over a large period of time, in order to come up with these elaborate concoctions. Byzantine, it was described. And I felt Byzantine after it was done, but the – *Mercury* [*The Principle of Polarity—The Orbital Rebus from The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987], as far as material, is Eastern white pine that was mined, or logged in my assistant's grandmother's yard in McLean, Virginia. We cut the pine. We selected the trees that would be okay. She had a big spread there. And – sort of like the Ponderosa...

CM-U: So you cut it right from the trees?

Mel Chin: We cut a tree. We took fallen lumber as well as trees that were on the site. And so we did lumbering.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And then we would haul them out of the woods, piece-by-piece (holds arms out), logs. And there's about ninety-something sections that we took out of the woods.

CM-U: Had you ever done lumbering before?

Mel Chin: No, but it was...

CM-U: Was this – was this part of the intrigue, to do something that you hadn't...

Mel Chin: Well, it was part of – it just had to be done.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:24:32]

Mel Chin: The – you know, the shape of this is the inner orbital space – you know, expanded – of Mercury and its track around the sun, and the Earth around its track of the sun. And why the pine was important was because Mercury is involved with longevity, and a symbolic equivalent in Chinese. But also I was looking at Descartes' view of the world and the solar system...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and his vortices and an illustration in the – let's see, was it 1622? – It shows these very ring-like structures, very tree trunk-like structures locked in these configurations. In fact, this is an exact duplication of that particular – the key to the piece. But, yeah, the lumber was pulled out of the woods and then brought to Leesburg, Virginia, where his shop was. And we set up a band saw, so there was twelve inches high is the limit of the band saw. And each one was cut and then fitted. And it was random, so every one had to be measured.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: It took a long time to do it. It took months, to fit it.

CM-U: Oh, I should imagine.

Mel Chin: So I had a big pattern laid out, and it would have been impossible to draw it all, so I would just start it off and cut one by one, the inner ring, and start stacking them.

- CM-U: Did the configuration of the keystone have a certain, uh, meaning beyond the form?
- Mel Chin: The keystone is – right.
- CM-U: And from that, you just randomly made the other forms?
- Mel Chin: Right. Well, I worked it into – I knew it was going to go here. (points at keystone)
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: It was sort of the key to the piece. And sort of the relationship of this – the scientific thrust of his view of the solar system, and the fluids that move the bodies.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And the whole shape also is related to the *Men-an-Tol*. That is the great stone circles...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...like at Cornwall. Where you can – it was known that you pass babies through. So these are sort of the interests of the birth canal, and the healing canal, the caring aspects of Mercury. So the shape was also worked in.
- Mel Chin: And there is a slight little dish here, which is like the serpent swallowing its tail. This little hacking [sounds like] here...
- CM-U: oh yes. Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: ...was the *Ouroboros*, the classic idea behind the beginning of the work, the great work. And this was the beginning work – of a lot of work! (laughs) But the other aspect though, to give it more time – the other aspect, the feel of time – that all these were sandblasted.
- CM-U: Sandblasted?
- Mel Chin: Yeah, I sandblasted it to give the weathered look.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

- Mel Chin: Or to add greater age to the logs to bring out the rings. So it was...
- CM-U: What did you sandblast with? Do you remember?
- Mel Chin: It was just blasting sand.
- CM-U: it wasn't walnut shells or something like that? It was sand...
- Mel Chin: No, it was blasting sand.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: Like the _____ [word inaudible]. That was done as a final touch when it was somewhere in New Jersey.
- CM-U: Is there any coating on it, or oil, or anything?
- Mel Chin: No. There are probably some splotches of oil that came off the chainsaw...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...'cause I fitted the pieces – it was, like, consistent in width. And then we – you know, the great effort was to figure out how to connect it all together. And the final outcome of that was to pre-drill the outer ring and put hidden cables within to give it that sense of magic, or another sensibility, and to hold it all into tension. So it's a tension like a barrel, but hidden within, the cables run through all the logs. But it was stood up, and then I went around and just carved it out with a chainsaw.
- [00:28:24]**
- CM-U: Do you have a plan for this, or a drawing of how each piece goes? Or do you feel intimately involved as having to be the person who puts this together?
- Mel Chin: Well, there had to be a plan because there are so many chunks, and – but there is, on each log, a little nail and a little number. Barron my – Barron Brown, my assistant, advised to – because to put it back together, whatever, again. And there is a mapping of how this piece goes together.
- CM-U: It's been exhibited three times, is that right?
- Mel Chin: Yes.

- CM-U: Did you put it together each time?
- Mel Chin: I worked – yes. Well, I put it up, of course, in the first time with Barron. But it can be done without me. I think here it was done with me throwing a couple on there, or arranging it, but...
- CM-U: So your feeling is that your input was making it, coming to terms with it...
- Mel Chin: Yes. Yes.
- CM-U: ...creating it? And then the recreation of it as necessary falls in the hands of whoever is responsible?
- Mel Chin: Yes. That's fine.
- CM-U: Let's diverge for a minute and talk a little bit about Barron...
- Mel Chin: Okay.
- CM-U: ...and when he started working with you. Did he work on *Belief/Punishment*? No?
- Mel Chin: Uh, no, he didn't. He has worked on some of these pieces, but this one very intimately. And braved many things to get it done. Like going out – going out in the woods. The extreme effort, the summer, or whenever it was, and the spring, too. To go out into this heavily wooded area and then eventually cut the pine logs up and bring them out one by one. 'Cause some of these logs, to get this cut, has to be about this size [sounds like] (holds arms out) – maybe a hundred pound sections – that we would _____ [phrase inaudible]. We would walk...
- CM-U: How did you meet Barron?
- Mel Chin: I met Barron in Nashville, Tennessee. He was a computer science major, and somewhat of a recluse...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...back then, he was living with Helen [Nagge], my wife...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.

- Mel Chin: ...at the time. They were sharing a house...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...with some other friends. And so I met him there. And I think our first interaction is when I was stuck there – when my car blew up, and I quit making art and started working on cars.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: The '67 Plymouth convertible I called Sputnik, the...
- CM-U: It blew up?
- Mel Chin: Yeah. I blew the motor in Nashville, and so I was stuck. And it was good 'cause I got into *car-dom*, you know. I felt that that was the way of getting into the great American experience, to know, to be very involved with, you know V-8 motors.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. (laughs)
- Mel Chin: The nuts and bolts attitude. And right after I assembled the whole engine, and I had forgotten a very important aspect. A wire. And Barron came out to help, and he discovered the wire. And then we became friends slowly. But then, I think our first working relationship was in Bryant Park in New York City.
- CM-U: The *MYRRHA/P.I.A.* [*(Post Industrial Age)*, 1984]?
- Mel Chin: That's right. That was a six-week project that somehow I managed to extend into six months because all the parts, the metal parts, I had fabricated by hand on the park by using nineteenth century bending tools to bend the angle iron. And that was a big pattern. I laid a [sounds like]...
- Mel Chin: And to assemble it, though, I needed help. And his brother was an engineer. They were visiting, and they just loved the idea of putting it together. And it was bitter cold, and it was like, probably – uh, it was one day it was twenty below, wind chill, we were up in the scaffolding...
- CM-U: Wow!

Mel Chin: ...five levels, and thirty feet high, and lifting pieces of iron and bolting it together by hand. And I guess when you work through that kind of thing, you will forge a friendship. If not, you either become a friend or a permanent enemy for subjecting somebody to so much [sounds like]. But Barron saw a great desire to work on my projects, because they seemed to be different every time.

CM-U: Uh-huh. This project – before we go on – is the *MYRRHA/P.I.A.*...

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: That was a sculpture at Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library. You did it in '86, '87?

Mel Chin: That was '84, '85.

CM-U: Eighty-four? 1984–85. And it was up a year? Six months?

Mel Chin: It was up a year.

CM-U: A year? And then has – where is that piece?

Mel Chin: It's in this dealer called Max Hutchinson has a – up in upstate New York has a place called Sculpture Fields...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and it's sitting up overlooking...

CM-U: So it's on exhibition there?

Mel Chin: Yes. It's installed.

CM-U: Installed?

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And it was just a handmade...

[00:33:03]

- CM-U: Was that the first time you welded? Did you weld...
- Mel Chin: Yeah. I was on the job training. I was – that also was a time where I would say, “Well, what I don’t know about?” I didn’t know anything about cars, so I decided to do that. And then I said, “Well, the next logical step is, better learn about this welding. Everybody says that a sculptor knows how to weld, so I better learn.”
- CM-U: Right.
- Mel Chin: And so I tackled something very large, and metal forming, and all the things that were necessary to put it together.
- CM-U: This seems to be a pattern of trying new – teaching yourself as you go along, in terms of material and technique [sounds like].
- Mel Chin: Well, yeah, I consider it – it can be a perverse form of mutation or whatever that you impose on yourself. ’Cause I do see, when I describe my personal evolutionary process, I don’t see it as a, you know, a textbook flat tree where you would find my separation from the apes or from, you know, a horseshoe crab, or whatever. I see it, rather than flat, as a dimensional tree of experience.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And it’s fun to jump around, to limb, to limb; and by doing that, you actually get a greater view of the whole picture. The whole thing comes about. So, going to idea-to-idea, method to another method, is one way I have decided to tackle things.
- Mel Chin: Yeah, it’s a bit hard. It’s a lot more time consuming. But, just like this piece is, you know, my knowing that I had such a rudimentary idea of alchemy other than, like, whether gold – I remember Helen brought out a note that I wrote ten years before this piece, in a postcard – something I had been reading. Something about Duchamp’s interest in alchemy, and saying, “This is something I’ll have to check into some day.”
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: And then, growing up with my parents, and the whole relationship of Chinese alchemic ideas, like “five element theory,” these things all coalesce into something like this, I guess.

CM-U: Well, it seems the working out of the new process, or the new skill, is definitely all part of your coming to terms and getting to know both the form and material that you need to work with.

Mel Chin: Yeah. I think there is a – when people talk about the – what is it when he has a good sense of materials? I try to evade that by saying, “Well, it’s not just the – having, you know...” I believe that’s the sensate [sounds like] idea.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I think there is some information that is loaded in these materials, and that’s why the choices were being made. By going, thinking about the etymology of – not only the word “material” and all that, I said, “Well, there’s more to it in the form itself. There’s all kinds of information packed within things. And they can be further packed by your choices.” So I was more into the ability for the material to talk. So, anyway, here we have this.

Mel Chin: And also there is a relationship to the – of even the structure of these hexes. You can see it as the scales of the animal itself.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Or the structure of carbon, which this eventually becomes. So it’s about time as well, and the breakdown of elements.

[00:36:44]

CM-U: In the event one of these pieces broke...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...or was missing for some unknown reason, would you feel that this had to be hand cut from pine again? Or would a material that approximated the appearance of the other wood...

Mel Chin: I would...

CM-U: ...suffice?

Mel Chin: No, I think it would have to be pine.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I think it would be the easiest thing, too. I mean, it – well, not that easy! Come to think about it. But it would – I would suggest that they set up their band saw the same way, with a twelve-inch, you know. I think that's what we're using. We're using a fourteen-inch band saw with this block that raises the cutting depth to twelve inches. And then saw it to fit. And then it should be blasted and set back in [sounds like].

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I think there are – in fact, I have an extra log in my studio just in case.

CM-U: Um-hum. And what about a new piece of pine? Would that be a different color? It wouldn't have, necessarily, the aging. It should be artificially aged in some way to approximate? Or do you feel it's – or not?

Mel Chin: Well, in this case, I guess if it was missing, it would – that would be up to – that just doesn't – I think it would eventually age up, so it's okay, you know.

CM-U: Okay. Well, we'll talk about that issue more as we look at other things because...

Mel Chin: Yeah. That's a difficult one there.

CM-U: Yeah, that is a difficult issue.

Mel Chin: I know when you blast these things it appears very white.

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: You know, and the oxidation creates this yellow cast to it and brings it back to pinedom. But...

CM-U: Well, it's very beautiful pinedom, I must say.

Mel Chin: Thanks.

[00:38:23]

Mel Chin: Oh, yeah, this ball...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

- Mel Chin: ...for the track of Mercury, is made of silver, lead, solder, brass, copper, and is held – and has most all the metals except mercury and gold. These are two materials that I do not use in this piece.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: Within the alchemic idea, that's the beginning – mercury is the beginning, and gold is the end. And I said, "Well, no, I don't want to leave myself a lot of freedom on both sides of that." But it was a conscious effort to do this amalgamation of materials and include magnetism.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: There is a magnet buried within this block, and there is some rare earth magnets within the ball itself...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...to help it cling to the thing. I think here it is glued in for safety reasons, so people don't pocket it. But in most of the installations, that seal breaks. But it would still cling to it magnetically, the thing. And it was soldered and then hand inscribed. You can see all the little cuttings and things...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: ...the little – so it was hand-etched with a sharp tool.
- CM-U: What about the tool that you used to make that?
- Mel Chin: Well, this is just hammered brass, and the tool I used to – I can't remember if it was a dremel tool, just to cut this edge and then – but I just used a sharp scribing tool to...
- CM-U: Um-hum. And just worked on it – the writing?
- Mel Chin: Yes. To give it – and then this very quickly – not quickly, but it was just very randomized cutting thing. Though there was some, you know, inherent structure there. This was very intimate.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: This was – the ball that’s loaded with all the metals. And so that was done in a very different way.

[00:40:26]

Mel Chin: And it’s also lifted off the ground by a shoe to give it – again, I like things to be separate from – to defy gravity.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: You know. And just like to put it into tension, to load it with – very much, maybe, like the books, if we were to make a parallel. But it being bound by energy. Potential energy.

CM-U: It does relate to the books in that way.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: In a circle.

Mel Chin: I think, when you do certain...

CM-U: Space from the wall.

Mel Chin: Yeah. I think you could load it with this, with that kind of stuff as well. And this, indeed, it has to be pulled very tightly to keep it from falling apart. And I remember when we first installed it, some of the wood was still wet; and it would change, and we’d have to come tighten it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And it would be cracking, and making noises, and the splits have all – a lot of the pressure has been relieved ’cause a lot of these were, you know, of course, solid when – But I like that. I like that. I think the aging process is essential.

CM-U: So in this case the aging process is very much a part of it?

Mel Chin: Yes.

CM-U: Um-hum. What about the position of *Mercury* in relation to the other pieces we’ll be looking at in a moment?

- Mel Chin: Um-hum? In terms of why...
- CM-U: Yeah. Why is it there? And it should always be in that axis to – in relation to the others?
- Mel Chin: Yes. Because, to me, you have to go through Mercury – or, this is your passage to the rest of the solar system idea. Or the rest of the metals, or the rest of the ideas. And so your birth is through here.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: You peer through here to look at the rest. And it faces – there is some relationship to this arc and the arc of the *Uranus* piece, which was the – you know, the god of heavens, whatever – in the mythology [sounds like].
- CM-U: I see.
- Mel Chin: And a lot of things – should know that a lot of the measurements were based on, like, my height, or whatever. Like, it just happened to fall within ninety-three inches or something. Which, an inch per million miles, would be the relation of earth around the sun. And the shape of it was determined by mapping the elliptical. So it's slightly off. You see how it's wider at the top?
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And that was conscious, to add more weight at the top as well.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: But this happens to be the track of the planets themselves, kind of inscribed on this ball of wood – or this ring of wood. But a human measurement, the cult of the hand aspect, was brought forth from the African Ikenga, strength cults.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And I realize that they don't make hands. They make things to show the power of the hand. Like, you know, horns and stools and things. They pay homage to its ability to give life and take life away as well. And I felt like all these things indeed should be – is, in a way, a homage to what the hand can do. And, as I point out, it's not one of the most – it's redundant to say this – as I point it out – it is the pointing that intrigued me.

CM-U: The pointing of the hand to the inspiration?

Mel Chin: To something. Yeah. The story came from [historian of religion Mircea] Eliade. He was speaking of [Hernán] Cortés meeting the Indians. And they both have knives of iron. And Cortés had not seen any blacksmithing shops on the way, of course, to polish his – because by then, surely rusting – armor. And the first question was, “Where did you get those?” And the Indians pointed to the sky. I thought that’s a great leap in terms of, uh, something comes from the sky, then you make something from that to represent abstract ideas or things. And so very much it was this whole idea of the celestial vault here as well. I guess we should talk a little bit about the whole room because...

CM-U: Okay. Let’s do that.

Mel Chin: ...because the original installation that was in New York at this Loughelton Gallery, that had a vaulted ceiling. And I felt that that was very much a clue or a condition, actually, that made me decide to do this piece. Because it is a celestial vault made of metals that the ancients felt these materials came from. And it links things with – copper, or iron, and all these things, to materials. And when you do it in an astrological – or in astronomy – and all the relationships... So the vaulted ceiling was a very important relationship. And then the whole curve of the walls is like intersecting circles, is the *Vesica Piscis*. The intersecting fish symbol...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...was an ancient, you know, geometric device to lay out buildings as well. I mean, you can see it within certain sacred architecture, if you want to go into that mumbo jumbo with the – it’s there. You can see the plans and things. So I was just trying, again, to get into that frame of mind.

CM-U: And using, in this case, the vaulted ceiling kind of said, “Now is the time to do this piece.”

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: Or to think about this piece.

Mel Chin: Right. The vaulting becomes – the celestial, the top of the thought, the cap of the thought.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And then things fall from there.

CM-U: Well, let's look at some of the other pieces that are in this installation then.

Mel Chin: Okay.

[00:46:12]

CM-U: We've moved around the room now to some of the other pieces, and we are going to start with a discussion of *Venus* [*Conjunction and Entrapment* from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987], which is the piece at the top wall.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: Okay, what inspired the materials for this piece?

Mel Chin: Well, this is – the first step with all these works was to study – go back to the old texts, and look at the mythological constructs and the name Venus, and where she comes from, and perhaps also the alchemic equivalent of conjunction. This is called *Venus*. All the pieces have two names...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...it's the planetary assignment, which was *Venus*, and then the alchemic concept, which was *conjunction*, and then – and *entrapment*, which was a mythologic construct.

CM-U: I see.

Mel Chin: So all these things conspire to make an object. The metallic signature for Venus, is the copper that is all – this is all copper wire that is welded together. And these are copper plates that were made – with Barron by hammering down copper pipes and smelting them in a homemade furnace, and then pouring into molds. Sand molds. And then they were reformed where I have inscribed the path of blood through the heart. And the spike going through is another part of the fire escape, which was a locking bar that was sawed and then formed into this shucking knife. And it is going through an oyster. This is one of the more tastier pieces...

- CM-U: (laughs) So it's the copper _____ [word inaudible] over the oyster with another type – the shaft is another metal, or is it copper?
- Mel Chin: The shaft is iron.
- CM-U: It's iron.
- Mel Chin: 'Cause it's the mythological story that this comes from is, Venus and Mars in bed...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...and Vulcan [Roman God of Fire and Metalwork], the husband, coming in and throwing a net that he forges out over them.
- CM-U: So he entraps them in bed.
- Mel Chin: He entraps them and shows them off. And it's a big laugh on everybody's part.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: But what kind of net? You know, the configuration of this net is based on the Y and C [sounds like] cloud bands that encircle the planet, Venus, according to *Mariner 10* satellite photos.
- CM-U: Huh.
- Mel Chin: So I plotted this out very flat, and then you can see the grid pattern in all the Y-C formations.
- CM-U: So the actual configuration of the wires is very important...
- Mel Chin: Yes, it is. Very.
- CM-U: ...for installation and future preservation of it?
- Mel Chin: Right. Right. And how it is laid into this, you know – there's little pinholes where all the wires sink into the thing. This is half of the hemisphere, of the cloud patterns that go in here.

[00:49:03]

Mel Chin: The oyster shell inside is very important, too. I went to the Oyster Bar in New York...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and had, it must been two dozen oysters.

CM-U: Well, that must have been hard.

Mel Chin: That was hard. It's very difficult because I was looking for what the Chinese prescription for the two-part combustion chamber, which I thought this kind of activity of conjunction might be about. You seal it with six precious ingredients, and one of them was the left-handed oyster, or the left-leaning oyster.

CM-U: Oh. Okay.

Mel Chin: Which means – I don't know what that means. And neither did – even in the fourth century texts, they were scratching their heads about it as well. But I decided that there must – I was consulting with people like mollusk experts, and talked about, you know, the spiral formation of shells, and backward, and leftward. And they said, "Well, it is an aberration, because there are only several varieties that all consistently spiral left..."

CM-U: Huh.

Mel Chin: ... "and some that go – most of them go right."

CM-U: So it's actually the pattern on the shell?

Mel Chin: The pattern on the shell. In this case, it was the hinge of this shell. So I ate enough until I found one that was the – and sure enough, if you want to hold it a certain way – like I decided, the one that was most common, the right hinge – 'cause if you flip it upside down, of course, it reverses the hinge...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But when I would hold the shell and look at it, I would look for one that leaned left.

CM-U: Hmm.

- Mel Chin: So when I found the left-leaning oyster, that would be the one to be the sealant in this kind of act that they are performing. And so the metal bar is, again, from, as I said, the fire escape had a locking bar. And I was trying to use metals that were older, too, that were – that – the building that I was living in was like from the 1890s or whatever. I felt that there might – there was a greater possibility that that might be wrought iron.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And that would give it the relationship with forging, and you know – and from the bloom, and be closer to probably the metals that were used in the olden days. Right?
- CM-U: Let's just talk for a minute about you – you said you and Barron melted this metal, or shaped it at home in a smaller furnace [sounds like]...
- Mel Chin: Well, he had in his place, he has a little workshop, and it's like a homemade crucible, and a smelter.
- CM-U: But this was important to you, as opposed to going to a professional smelter and saying, "This is the shape I want."
- Mel Chin: I thought we had to make our metals.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: Like, I could have probably found flat copper sheets...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...but it was more important to mine it, to, you know, the word "metal" in Greek is from "to find."
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: "To seek out." And so we had to go and seek out, you know. In this case, instead of going to the ore, there was a rich supply of old copper pipes that we pounded and separated and had smelted down. And also, this interlocking plates, you know, I wanted to fabricate them a certain way to trap the oyster, as well. And the shucker that would go in.

CM-U: So in terms of actually doing this, that's what you did? You did entrap the oyster as you made this.

Mel Chin: Right. So it was – oh, the plates are wired together. It was also pounded, and – it's forged together.

CM-U: And what about the pattern on the copper?

Mel Chin: The pattern? I looked at a diagram of the flow of blood through the aorta and the ventricle, and so that's what – that's the pattern that is etched – those are the valves of the heart, those little things. And it's sort of like the – an association with Venus and the heart as a seat of emotions.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And the flow of blood in the sexual act. All these things were considered. And also, the oyster seemed like the right thing to be involved, too, with its associations. So – for two reasons, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: For both reasons.

[00:53:09]

CM-U: The color of the copper, at this point in its life, is what you would expect, the color of a copper penny.

Mel Chin: That's right.

CM-U: As it ages, as it's possible for it to change its color, what is the importance of the color...

Mel Chin: I prefer to keep it – try to keep it this way.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: It is coated with a light mixture of wax. You know, I use a lot of Butcher's wax, which has different waxes [sounds like].

CM-U: Do you mean like the Johnson & Johnson Butcher's Wax, or something like that?

- Mel Chin: Yeah. It's one of the – to coat it. Now this copper wire has oxidized a lot. It is all – it's not brazed, it's welded. All the joints are welded.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: And some may have snapped right there, but that's a matter of sticking it back together. And then it was treated – I wanted to turn it its envious color, so that was treated with the copper sulfate or whatever to...
- CM-U: To make it look green?
- Mel Chin: Yeah, to give it a patina. So there's _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- CM-U: Uh-huh. I see. Well, that's an important distinction, then...
- Mel Chin: Yeah.
- CM-U: ...between these two coppers.
- Mel Chin: It's all copper, yeah; but I wanted to have Vulcan's jealousy to be coated a certain way. And it is – my reality, it is a sulfuric acid cloud that surrounds the atmosphere of Venus in these YC patterns, so they are – these choices are being made. I tried to use the text to hone and restrain my imagination in a way, that I had to follow prescribed things. And they would verify or kick out decisions as well. Like, if I was making an intuitive decision – “No, I think I'll just make this net.” But then the problem is, what kind of net? What form will it take? And how will you treat it afterwards?...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...were being determined by a Mariner 10 photo and information about the reality...
- CM-U: So it's both what kind of material, and what form, come through your research and your...
- Mel Chin: The research...
- CM-U: ...coming to terms with...
- Mel Chin: ...as I describe the research – it would – research – to research and destroy preconceived notions about things.

- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: You know, like I could just say, “Let’s just make a copper thing.” But that’s not enough.
- CM-U: Huh-uh.
- Mel Chin: It was not just about metal. It was other notions that were put in. Even its placement of the walls, like the axis of this is 178 degrees. It’s slightly tilted.
- CM-U: Slightly.
- Mel Chin: It is the axial tilt. It’s two degrees off in Venus. And the placement of the embedding in this wall that we were talking about are kind of about the – the embedment of the wall – was for several reasons. Since these are planetary bodies, though, it’s grossly exaggerated scale. I tried to get them in relationship to astronomical units by pressing my hand as far as I could, into nine inches. These are like body measurement related pieces.
- CM-U: Before we get onto that a little bit more, can we just go back to the third aspect that I think is so interesting – your choice of materials, and then your choice of a form, and then the final one, you said, was treatment.
- Mel Chin: The treatment. Yeah. Well, some things we’ll allow to – there were materials that are assigned to the – not only to the gods, but to the reality like the planetary notions – always linking time to here. And the treatment in terms of – as this acid treatment to give it the patina, was determined by knowing that that was a sulfuric acid cloud. Even thinking about what jealousy might come...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...you know, the traditional...
- CM-U: So it’s kind of a modification of the materials...
- Mel Chin: Modification. Yes.
- CM-U: ...for _____ [phrase inaudible].
- Mel Chin: But really thinking about what it is. Even – we’ll talk about the *Mars* piece, or even that, as well...

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: Well, even this piece, we could talk about Earth...

[00:56:55]

CM-U: Well, let's go back into – or, let's think about those three processes of your creative process.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: And, as we talk about the others. But let's talk about *Earth* [*Ceration and Putrefaction* from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987], and let's get into this issue of it pushing into the wall.

Mel Chin: Well, *Earth* indeed has that. First of all, let's talk about the layers. The *Earth* piece I consider like a pet.

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: In a way, it's how we treat it. Horribly, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And it was maybe an ecological brewing – statement, I mean, brewing here. And *Earth* is called *ceration* and *putrefaction*.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Another thing in alchemy is how you decompose to be reborn again. But *ceration*, or the waxing as a condition in the crucible, as things are about to form and change apart, the ancients, as they are looking at the metals forming in the thing – and as we were looking at, you actually see these transformations happening. And the right material for this is cast iron. You know, cast iron, which is indeed the core of the earth. I consulted with scientists at Berkley to find out what is the depth, what is the latest soundings, you know. So I did a mapping of the mantle. Well, the crust is exaggerated, but the mantle, and then to the core. And how this was made is, I would – I carved this out of Styrofoam. We did a Styrofoam™ burnout, and the cast iron was...

CM-U: You mean first you had it in Styrofoam™?

- Mel Chin: I carved in Styrofoam™. And I embedded in pieces of carbon and charcoal to give it more of a textural, pitted look. But I liked the Styrofoam casting when I experimented with it because all the gases escaping also gave this, all this incredible activity to it. And there was also my belief that I wanted to describe these molecular processes. Processes, though they are static, they are not. They are active. And the levels here sort of relate to that. To the – this is pounded scrap metal with bedded in pieces of cast iron as well. I made it in little chunks to gradually do the transition into the mantle, which is a molten rock. This is granite that was collected from around here 'cause I wanted that pink granite.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: It's that "flesh of the earth" look.
- CM-U: Um-hum. You mean Texas?
- Mel Chin: Texas, yeah.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: Home boy stuff.
- CM-U: Yeah. Well, that's okay. It's part of the earth.
- (laughter)
- Mel Chin: But the core. It was done as sand cast, and it was done in these levels, and there was a bolt riding through. There's a wood form as well. It's all mixed together here. This material was collected in New Jersey, by someone who I assigned to go out in the woods. It was Helen's sister Carolyn [Nagge], she...
- CM-U: The surface material...
- Mel Chin: Just the fungus and everything. And I just said, "Just collect a bag..."
- CM-U: Wax. Is this embedded in wax?
- Mel Chin: Yes. This was just poured over and dropped, and poured, and poured, and poured, and poured. The ceration aspect, describing a condition of change, or possibility. And selecting all dead material, too. Or rotting...

- CM-U: Is there a significance of the fact this material is from New Jersey, this stone is from Texas, that, again, in terms of future preservation...
- Mel Chin: And the sash weights, and the engine block materials are from GM...
- (laughter)
- CM-U: GM, right. (laughs)
- Mel Chin: I guess...
- CM-U: Or was that just practicality?
- Mel Chin: It was practicality, but I did, like, a cross section – I remember, like I'll go into very specific materials that – like the olive branches here that came from wherever olives were growing in California. I wanted _____ [phrase inaudible]. At the time there was, you know, a conclusion that things should come from different parts of different animals and different places.
- CM-U: Um-hum. So there, again, we have the form and the materials coming from...
- Mel Chin: Right. And then...
- CM-U: ...and then the treatment...
- Mel Chin: The treatment, again...
- CM-U: ...the wax.
- Mel Chin: ...of the core had to be cast iron, of course.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And even the depths and things were – and the way it was cast. Not a smooth, polished chunk of cast iron, but something – when you look closely at the material, and the bubbles, and the pattern of gases as they are escaping, the marks of the heat as it goes through the sand, trying to escape when things are being burnt out. That was very well appreciated. And then the folding of the layers. They were just pounded metals, and compressing and compacting, the weight of the metal pushing down on the thing.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: All these are little slivers of sheet metal found in the streets of New York City, and then bedding in with chunks of little cast iron, too. It's not just transition, but the idea of things...

CM-U: Compressing.

Mel Chin: ...compressing.

CM-U: Yeah.

CM-U: And then what about its installation on the wall?

Mel Chin: It's tilted like earth's tilted twenty-three degrees. And, again, I saw it low like this – it's sort of like we're on it, and we're looking at it, and we have control over it.

CM-U: Hmm. It's within our sphere.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: Hmm.

[01:02:17]

CM-U: And what is – this is – we're moving on to the next...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: Are you ready to move on to *Mars* [*Fixation and Desecration* from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987]?

Mel Chin: Yes. Yes.

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: *Mars*...

CM-U: Sort of in keeping again, let's stay on this topic of installation...

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: ...coming from *Mercury*, to *Earth*, to *Mars*.

Mel Chin: Uh, *Mars* is *fixation*. It's _____ [word inaudible] *fixation* and *deseccration*. *Rudra*, the red-faced gods of India was the – and *Maruts* is where Mars comes from. They were the storm gods, and they lay in their wake – they are hurricane gods that lay destruction in their path. Later on I hear that they become – by Mars, becomes agricultural deities. You see the linkages in the Sanskrit to the Roman times. And even in the name itself. But that was the selection for the red clay.

CM-U: So these pieces are all made of red clay?

Mel Chin: Yes. Those were collected by the – what is it, the Albert Thomas Convention Center [in Houston]? 'Cause I was traveling around...

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: ...and I think I was finishing maybe this show. Wherever, I would collect materials as I would see it. And, you know, when you are born and raised in a certain area, you know what it has, and so you need it to get that together. And there was an attempt to get some Chinese red bole, too...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...to – some was thrown in there.

CM-U: So you did get some bole mixed in?

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: Now how thick are these pieces? And why are they set in?

Mel Chin: They are half of a club. These are two clubs. It was one long club that was broken up. There are two clubs of clay. So it's like one club split in half, and then cracked into these. The configuration is in the Chinese character *fa*, "to destroy." So this is a person being attacked by a halberd in the classical Chinese writing...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and so I thought that would be the right configuration. Again, language and...

CM-U: The form of the language dictates...

Mel Chin: ...gives me clues to that. The olive branches were chewed and masticated and pounded down, and then stuck into the clay. Again, the destruction of peace symbology, and drawing up [sounds like]. And then broken and cut. Fixation is where you violently [sounds like] – as depicted in alchemic texts, is the chopping of body parts and things, to fix Mercury from its – to keep it from escaping.

[01:04:45]

Mel Chin: The other consideration are these axe heads.

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: They have a long history. They are made out of a forged steel...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and that being an assignment to Mars. And what I finally decided on about the shape and the design of it, was to go back to the original murder tool, or the original tool itself. And after I made these, it was nice to see in the *Science Times* that they had found human blood on a prehistoric axe.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: So there is a possibility it was used then as a weapon against another human being, right? It was dated about a hundred thousand, but that's not that long ago.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But it verified some of the feelings I had. It's locked into the axial configuration of Mars.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And – but which axe head to make? And I was looking at photos of axe heads from Olduvai Gorge [Tanzania] that [archaeologists] Mary and Louis Leakey had discovered.

CM-U: Um-hum.

- Mel Chin: And I waited until I came upon their favorite, which is this half. This is a composite. Then I added my half, which was this coming out of stone. And then of course this fits very well into your hand, too, so I like to see the evolution of a tool from a rock into a cutting edge. And then they are locked in, of course, combat, relegating their uselessness and maybe a person _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- CM-U: So it's one piece?
- Mel Chin: These are two axe heads that are – yeah, but they are – have been...
- CM-U: But they are joined as one piece?
- Mel Chin: They are joined as one piece. Locked at this point, and cutting in self [sounds like] into it...
- CM-U: Making them totally useless.
- Mel Chin: Right. They have a long history of – we started at Jim Love's studio, where we had some metal blanks, and we tried to _____ [word inaudible]
- CM-U: Oh, yes. (laughs)
- Mel Chin: We started. And Jim and I talked about it, and it was just metal blocks they had. And we started cutting it, and...
- CM-U: This was in Jim's studio here in Houston?
- Mel Chin: Jim's studio. When I first decided to make the axe heads, I said, "Well, go to a man who knows metal."
- CM-U: Right.
- Mel Chin: And mess with him. Metal [or meddle] with him. And we were – so we sat – well, we sat around and talked about it, and then we started cutting the blanks. It was incredibly difficult. It was like two-inch steel. Must have been hardened steel. Whatever. And eventually pinched the blade, and we stopped.
- CM-U: It stopped.

- Mel Chin: It stopped. It fixed itself at that point. And before we even started to get the shape cut out. So we just sat and looked at it for a long while, and then we really acted and tried to chisel it out and free the blade.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: 'Cause they were stuck. And after a long period of frustration, we just said, "That's it. We'll just try something..."
- CM-U: So it's just remained that way?
- Mel Chin: I think that band saw blade – that block still may be in his studio.
- CM-U: (laughs)
- Mel Chin: I think we both got very angry at that piece of metal. And it would show that *Mars* was gonna be a tough one.
- CM-U: That stayed with you, though, clearly.
- Mel Chin: Yes. And then it went to another artist, and I found some – maybe I took some more of the blanks, and I went to – or I got new blanks, slabs of steel...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: ...because I felt that maybe it was the type of steel. We talked about maybe it was this hardened steel, or _____ [word inaudible]. And I took it. First I went to another sculptor who had a cutting torch, and, you know – again, I wasn't very good at cutting metal, but, you know, decided to try. And it was Jack Massing, I think, at Lee Benner's studio there and...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And, you know, when I was going to take it home, I said, "Might as well cut away some of this stuff." So they did the best they could, and the torch wasn't powerful enough, and there was a lot of slag, and that was a mess. And then they ran out of gas. And so I – before I was taking off, I planned to visited another sculptor in town, Tim Glover. You go to your connections.
- Mel Chin: "How much gas do you have?" And you pay him some money to buy more gas. And it was very difficult, just slicing the basic form out. So finally I had these ugly chunks of metal that were just not even carved down, and I took

them home and waited a time. Then we went down to Barron's, and we sliced it some more to get it – because I _____ [word inaudible]...

[01:09:02]

Mel Chin: By that time, people were saying, “Why don’t you cast them out of steel?” I said, “No, they have to be forged.” You have to be at the hammer, and you have to forge those facets [sounds like]. The intent was to give it the look of stone. To bury its [sounds like] reality of steel. To load it with the concept of flint and weaponry that – ’cause it evolved out this into hafted weapons, you know. Again, it’s about time and that...

Mel Chin: And, well, after we torched it and everything, then we started forging it; and there was not enough power behind our hammers, or not enough heat to even make the metal move the way it should move. It went to another blacksmith, and he tried. But eventually we decided that I’d have to find someone who had a power hammer, like a twenty-ton power hammer or something, to get these guys right. And so I made an appointment with a smith that Barron knew, and we worked together on that.

CM-U: In New York?

Mel Chin: This was in Washington.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And finally – he was very resistant to have me tell him what to do. He was a master blacksmith...

CM-U: This was the blacksmith? Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...but I told him it would be okay, that we’d just – like I told you, he said, “Well, I make thirty thousand dollar gates. I don’t need to be working on this thing.” And I said, “That’s okay. That’s why I’m here, you know. We’ll be fine.” And it was lot of work, and I would make more tools here. Like, “How do you get these little facets here?” So – and he couldn’t figure it out.

CM-U: Hmm.

CM-U: ’Cause they are used to using certain tools and dies, and cutting – all the blacksmithing paraphernalia. And I said, “Well, we’re going to get two rods, and we’ll bend them into big loops and little loops, and we’ll just heat it up,

and I'll hold it, and you hit it with a hammer." Went back to the hand forging up.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So all these were – I would look at the pattern and then try to translate it immediately into the hot metal...

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: ...by stamping it. So it's like, "Hold it. Hit it. Next. Hit it." And so it was like the old-fashioned way. And the final attempt – again, treatment. It has to go back into the fire, and we did it so that it would start scaling.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And usually you brush off the scale, and you – but I wanted to return it to its stone-like equivalent. And there was a battle...

CM-U: There seems to be a luster on the surface, too. Is that...

Mel Chin: I used camellia oil, which is Japanese samurai sword – it comes from a certain pine, conifer, in Japan. I wanted to go and use...

CM-U: Did you get it from Japan?

Mel Chin: No, I got it from a store in – that these specialty tools and things in New York. And it was – I'm not going to mention the name because I don't believe in free advertisement unless they...

CM-U: Unless it's The Menil Collection.

Mel Chin: Uh, that's right!

(laughter)

Mel Chin: Yeah, I got it through The Menil Collection. No, but the oil was special because I thought that it should be treated with something that had – a special oil that was – had empathy with the tradition of metal.

CM-U: So even down to the final treatment it was thinking about materials and...

Mel Chin: Yeah. I was trying to be consistent in saying that, yes, these took so much effort. I probably have forgotten some of the steps, but...

CM-U: This raises a very interesting issue that we'll be talking about later, with regard to – in future preservations or treatments of this work.

Mel Chin: Uh-huh.

CM-U: Is the conservator also restricted to these materials because of their meaning? We needn't get into it now...

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: ...but that's something, as we go through...

Mel Chin: Okay.

CM-U: ...let's think about it.

Mel Chin: Thanks for the warning.

[01:12:37]

CM-U: Okay. Do you want to say more about the metal, or should we get into the actual placement of *fa* into the wall?

Mel Chin: Yeah. Well, the – yeah, we could go with the – yeah, that's – you know, they're done. So we can move into the placement. The bedding of these things was – I saw it also as the planetary scheme of the planets being tossed into this celestial vault. And bedding them in the wall was another way I wanted to get away from pedestals and sculpture. Say, "Well, why can't they just be sinking, or be part of the whole installation?"

CM-U: So you mean away from the traditional pedestal object format?

Mel Chin: Right. From, yes... There was a great problem when I first – it took a while to figure out, "how am I going to install the work?" And I liked the idea. And I guess where it really started was that this Dominican restaurant, that they were remodeling their place, that I would depend on it for their *mofongo*, which is a plantain and a meat mixture, mashed up, you know. A concoction. An alchemic brew for my sustenance.

- CM-U: So you went there to drink that?
- Mel Chin: No, to eat that.
- CM-U: Oh, to eat that.
- Mel Chin: It was just a real – actually it was just because it was two dollars a bowl. And it would fill you up, real good.
- CM-U: It was good. (laughs)
- Mel Chin: It was good. And they had remodeled their place, and I was stunned when I walked in because they had brought all these plates with, like, crabs, and crustaceans, and _____ [word inaudible], and bedded them in the wall and plastered around them. So all these things were bedded into the wall. And I said, from a very, you know, wallpaper or something kind of _____ [word inaudible], they had transformed their environment. I said, as I was staring into the *mofongo*, I said, “This is it. We will do away with pedestals. We’ll do away with hangers. We’ll just sink them into the wall as a – in their configurations, and according to their astronomical, compressed astronomical units – and they will appear randomized and stuck in there.”
- Mel Chin: And so the clue came from actually braving some of their food, and to – the way they do things, I guess, in the island. They must do it this way a lot. Like, they have a precious object, and rather than hanging it, they put a part of their decoration.
- CM-U: It’s wonderful.
- Mel Chin: So that was the key to this type of installation because up to that point I was still worried about how to do it. And then it freed a lot of things up.
- CM-U: But it was sort of a natural development in what you were doing with *Belief/Punishment*. *Mercury* was floating, too.
- Mel Chin: Right.
- CM-U: So...
- Mel Chin: Well, *Belief/Punishment* still hung, and still away from the wall, but then when I started thinking like, “This is like the firmament.”

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And to, to – they are locked in there. They are floating, or by gravity (makes circular gesture with finger). Here, I thought that to actually just – like playing God, or whatever, and tossing them into the – bedding them would be fixing their position...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...as they are fixed in terms of their cycles and, you know, observation of the heavens historically. I thought that would be the way to go.

[01:15:58]

Mel Chin: So, anyway. So the toolmaking...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...process, the concern about the tool comes into, like, *Jupiter* [*Circulation and Self Sacrifice* from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*].

CM-U: This one is *Jupiter*.

Mel Chin: *Circulation and Self Sacrifice*.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: There is a very interesting parallel about this piece. At the top is – that's you'll see later – is bedded in tin, which is the metal equivalent for Jupiter, is the meteorologic patterns of wind velocity of the great red spot, the circulation gases that is the – what are they? The signs of Jupiter, if you look at it. So this is indeed – and an oak is – it's called the wood planet, *Muxing* in Chinese. So each of the planets is – Venus is the metal. Mars is the fire. Earth is earth, basically, in Chinese. And it's the wood star.

CM-U: Um-hum. So the wood is pine? No?

Mel Chin: This is oak. Red oak.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Of course, red oak for red spots. And so it's the East/West concoction in the middle. Venus also is attuned to science and alchemic lore. It's multiplication, and circulation in the pelican, the vessel that they would watch the gases circle through. And that's the selection of the blown glass. It had to be crystal that was blown, and that was a very difficult process to have a tube this large. Because it extends beyond that (points at bottom of work), it is one of the most difficult processes in blowing glass because it freezes about right here (points at center of work).

[01:17:43]

CM-U: Hmm. So, again, did you go to someone to blow this glass?

Mel Chin: Well, yes. I went to the New York Experimental [Glass] Workshop [New York]. But what was more important is to develop the mold to blow into.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And after consulting with most glassblowers, they said, "Well, you would probably need a three hundred pound block of cherry soaked for, like, a year. Then you have to carve this form out, and then – or you can make it out of clay. Because these are traditional or whatever materials you blow glass into. Because the glass will – you have to have that.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: You can blow it in wet cherry molds. You know, the carbon in the water forms a layer where it doesn't destroy the glass. But I remembered glassblowing from college in – not that I was any good at it, but I loved the idea that you used wet newspaper and just roll it between the blowpipe and form it by your hands. There was a connection. And it would be about this thick of wet newspaper. And actually the carbon, and again, the water vapor forms the barrier. It wouldn't burn you. Because you are talking about something about two thousand degrees or something like that.

CM-U: Wow!

Mel Chin: And it's a wonderful way of working with glass. And I said, "Well, that's what I'll do. I'll get a portable mold to challenge these people's ideas about molds, and also work with some assignment [sounds like] of tin, because I use a tin mold. I called it the "full metal jacket." It's a full mold for Jupiter, but as FMJ it's a full metal jacket, or it became. It's a tin mold lined with a

quarter inch of newspaper soaked in, like, wheat paste – which is highly saturated with water – and just laid in with a squeegee, sheet by sheet, till it was built up. It takes about four hours to lay up one mold that was good for probably just – this experiment took twelve sessions.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: Twelve hours to learn how to blow it. But it became this portable mold that I could carry around. Word traveled quickly in the glass world that someone was carrying around a mold that was a challenge. Because started at the New York Experimental Workshop, and you'd have to – you know, glassblowers are hot dogs. They've got to show how big and bad, you know, they can blow. So I would _____ [word inaudible] find hot shot – hot dog.

CM-U: Oh. (laughs)

Mel Chin: “Can you do this?” And I was not any M. C. Hammer, but, you know, it was a whole 'nother thing. That was before his time. But anyway, the mold was a tin form that would – it was lined with paper and drilled through for the escape – and then you would clamp it shut, and the glass would fall through. As far as – as predicted, you know, they could only blow about three feet, and that was it before it would freeze and stop.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So I heard there was a Wheaton Glass Industries had a school. When they had plenty – and they'd run out of glass because, you know, this takes an incredible amount, a thirty-pound lump of glass off the end of the pipe. You have to be very strong. And it was a two person – three person job to get it not only in the mold, out of the mold, blow it, and then pick it up and lay it into the annealing oven within, like, seconds before it would chill and shatter. So you had all these time constraints to get it right.

Mel Chin: So why was it necessary to make it out of glass again, the pelican is this form, double shaped form where you could see the circulation of gases. And the idea of the pelican was self-sacrificing by pecking into its heart to feed its young.

CM-U: To feed it – um-hum.

Mel Chin: Of course it was regurgitating as it was pecking its crop [sounds like]. But it would seem like it was pulling its heart out. And it became the ultimate

Christian symbol. But they also saw it through the glass the gases giving up its stuff to come back into itself, you know.

Mel Chin: So...But the mold was traveling with me, and the whole shape was – it's the form of the javelin, the connection with silk is the electrical-producing capacity of Jupiter, two and a half times the energy it receives from the sun. And, plus, silk would make the connection of the circulation. There's two levels of glass here.

CM-U: Silk and...

Mel Chin: Glass. It would make electricity. So there's a...

CM-U: And the pecking of the soul – of the heart is the center...

Mel Chin: The heart. Also, this is placed according to where my heart is.

CM-U: Where your heart is, in terms of height.

Mel Chin: Yeah. And it's about the size of my – the inner one, it's the size of my fist...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...which would be about...

CM-U: And how did you break it? Peck into it?

Mel Chin: Oh, this was blasted with sandblasting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Because to cut this would have been impossible after it was made. It was a kind of – it had to be filled full of newspaper, and then all covered – or the spray, you know, the sand would go everywhere. Then unpacked afterwards. But anyway, the mold – going back to just making the glass itself – this portable mold, I'd carry it down to – went down in a van. Borrowed a van. Went down to these guys at Wheaton, and it took two glassblowers – we had to work twelve hours in the development of the bubble. The shape of the bubble, and the coordination of the gravity so that it – to watch, to clamp it before you thought it was time, to allow it to seep all the way down to the bottom...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and not get too thin and pear-shape out. All these things you see in glass. Just to understand the dynamics of the glass, and to do it, and unclamp it, and get it into the annealer. It became like – we did it – we did so many tests, and so many failures. But eventually we were able to get three out of twelve hours of work.

CM-U: Hmm.

[01:23:26]

Mel Chin: And when it was done, the next day we pulled them out of the annealer [sounds like], I drove back, and what was nice was, driving back on the highway, in the middle of the road was a javelin. The sign from above.

CM-U: Bizarre.

Mel Chin: I didn't – I never – who knows where it came from?

CM-U: How bizarre...

Mel Chin: It was – well, we stopped. I picked up the javelin. I use it in my lectures. I wire it up, and it comes out of the heavens, you know. I push a button, and it shoots out and scares everybody. But that's supposed to.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: But it was – because it was related to this piece, a little like it was telling me – that's not getting into any New Age beliefs, but it was just a sign from a good toss. But the – so, materials, what's interesting is to know about the self-sacrifice aspect...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...is, Jupiter also circulates this energy and feeds a spark across the universe off of its own system into its own planet, Io, its moon, and fills it full of its electrical discharge. So there is this ancient idea of sacrificing and giving one's energy to its children, and then the planetary bodies have its own way of – they couldn't have known that, but it just happens to be that way.

Mel Chin: The tool that I made to do this was a pelican head made out of – it was a car spring that I carved into a beak, and I would hold it against my body and peck it like this.

CM-U: So the tool was made specifically for the construction of this piece?

Mel Chin: Oh, yes.

CM-U: Do you consider the tool a part of the piece?

Mel Chin: I miss it a lot. I gave it as a peace offering to the gallery that sponsored...

CM-U: Uh-huh. I see.

Mel Chin: ...the piece. But the – I don't consider it a part, but I feel it was – it is a part of it already by the marks it made.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I thought that, in order to get this pecking idea, I couldn't – I had to, I guess psychologically make a link with the animal itself. So I made this tool with a pelican head and just a sharp thing. And I did it in a way – it was very difficult, because, you know, you get into this ritual of making things, or – I don't if it's ritual or whatever, but it was something to – 'cause I knew it would not look right if I were to fake it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: There was even talk about me shooting it with a gun. I mean, there's all these things happen, but I said, "No, the only way to make it is to be the pelican. Be the animal, and get into this thing of pecking and pecking. And all these fibers will eventually fall apart." And it took a while, but it eventually got there.

[01:26:13]

CM-U: What about the silk itself? It's Chinese silk?

Mel Chin: Yeah. I wanted to keep with the Chinese – again, the texts were giving me, from the oyster, through the iron, to – all of the texts from both cultures were giving me assignments – a bill of materials. And to use Chinese silk, I thought, would be proper in this mixture of the Western style glass...

- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...blowing, to make the discharge or the potentiality factor to me real.
- CM-U: I see that, maybe as a result of travel, or shipping, or packing, or whatever, that some of the – there's fallout from some of the wood into the silk...
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...is that something...
- Mel Chin: That's perfectly okay with me.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Mel Chin: I mean, I think...
- CM-U: That wasn't originally that way [sounds like]?
- Mel Chin: It was – the cones were higher too, as well, but, you know, you fall – this works its way down, too. The one thing I worry about is this glass touching the other glass in travel...
- CM-U: Breaking it.
- Mel Chin: ...and it would shatter. But it's held up quite well. And, to me, this is also a sinking heart. It's descending.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: It's pounding itself into itself. Again, the notion of the spear, or the lightning bolt being his signature. Or that particular god's signature.
- [01:27:34]**
- CM-U: Well, in terms of the cutting of the glass, you were saying, you know, how in this central area – were you using the same kind of cutting on this piece? Or...
- Mel Chin: On *Saturn [Deception and Digestion from The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand]*, there was – this was rawhide. And, you know, it's the – these are the five – it's Saturn eating its children, and the stone being Jupiter.

- CM-U: Right.
- Mel Chin: This skin, this lead has been burned. It's cut, but also, if you look at its fingerprint, whatever...
- CM-U: Yes. Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: ...it's based on the thermal temperatures of the planet itself. I took sheets of lead, and I carefully used a torch and burned each, pooled each, using heat to put the temperature of its skin on. And then these cuts are lined up with the *Gray's Anatomy's* diagram of the veins of the human face.
- CM-U: Huh.
- Mel Chin: And then it's like, well, it's a left/right brain kind of thing 'cause you have to connect all the veins together to get – and there was a special system. It's wood over – lead over wood, a wood frame; and then there's a metal clamp to make the jaw come down and bite on the stone. If you look way in there, there you'll see a very crude mechanism to make the teeth come down. Actually trap it.
- Mel Chin: The cutting here, I used a chainsaw.
- CM-U: And this material is...
- Mel Chin: Rawhide.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: From – probably around the neck, or whatever, of an animal. The rawhide also is linked to Saturn. Also is the drumbeat in the Chinese calendar of a clock of the cycles, and it's one of the – it is the bull god. Where the god actually gets rid of the _____ [word inaudible] and makes a big drum out of the great celestial bull. And so there is a relationship – why rawhide.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And then the stone was a fieldstone that I found that seemed very baby-like to me at the time. And the wool here is related to – I read – Graves mentions how even the Omphalos Stone in Greece, the marking stone, the navel, or the marking stone, is still anointed with oil and wool to this day.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And I, “Why?” you know. But it’s a relationship to the cloth that was – the swaddling cloth that was wrapped around the stone to feed to Saturn. You know, the mythology is another aspect of the piece.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And the oil was probably some kind of laurel oil or whatever that was toxic, to purge the stone as well.

[01:30:15]

Mel Chin: Now, all that aside, you know, the hide – then here, I guess the most fragrant stuff I could find was the hide glue.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: This was probably another one of those “see and smell” pieces at the opening, but it’s all dried now.

CM-U: So you applied the hide glue on after it had taken its shape?

Mel Chin: The top of – well, it was cut...

CM-U: Or it was still pliable at this point?

Mel Chin: Yeah. This was all stuck together. I cut these things, and tortured the edge, and then bound them together with the hide glue actually. And, using the wool as a reinforcement.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And then, when they are all – the five skin, or the five children – are put together, I would stick it in and...

CM-U: What about – maybe you can get this later on camera, but there’s kind of flaking here of the glue separating from the hide. Is that what it is?

Mel Chin: Yeah. That happens. Sometimes also you’ll see this rock coming apart. I mean, it’ll actually come – flake around here. I’ve re- – I put more hide glue on it.

- CM-U: Is the hide – did you put the hide glue on as a protector, or just because it was – it was a binder?
- Mel Chin: As a glue, and also as a – it was more as a glue, and I wanted to keep with the hide...
- CM-U: But more as a glue, as an adhesive to hold the...
- Mel Chin: As an adhesive. But also to make something like the stew of the skin.
- CM-U: Um-hum. So it would be – in the future, it would be advisable to replace it?
- Mel Chin: I have looked at this a lot and thought long about this, and I think that, as it flakes, and it falls apart, I probably wouldn't be that distressed. Because some have already come off already. Because this is meant to be, you know, the rock salt...
- CM-U: Devouring.
- Mel Chin: Yeah. It is being poisoned.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: I see this as a – the lead, of course, Saturn poisoning, and all that. And even the blood, the salt in the wounds here. The – psychologically speaking, I wanted this piece to be very active.
- CM-U: So, other than structural reasons for it coming apart, there'd be no aesthetic reason to...
- Mel Chin: I can't think of any.
- CM-U: ...kind of revive or reform the glue in any way?
- Mel Chin: Yeah. I think it would be very difficult, actually.
- CM-U: It's very strong this way, I must say.
- Mel Chin: Yeah.
- CM-U: I mean, it really moves you to see this kind of breaking up into decaying...

Mel Chin: Um-hum. I think that the hide glue itself becomes another skin or something...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...that is coming apart. And...

CM-U: There's definitely a feeling of that here. Is the hide glue just on the top?

Mel Chin: No, I think it is some – it's in between, as well.

CM-U: It's in between? Okay.

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: All right. Is there anything else that we ought to focus on with this one?

Mel Chin: No. I think that's – that's enough of that, I guess.

[END RECORDING, PART 1 of 2]

[BEGIN RECORDING, PART 2 of 2]

[00:50:00]

CM-U: We are going to continue along now to the next piece in the series, which would be *Uranus [Castration and Concealment from The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand, 1987]*. Mel, do you want to go on about that.

Mel Chin: The full title for this piece is *Uranus: Castration and Concealment*. And, you know, in the alchemic series, after you get past Saturn, the ancients didn't know about Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. So I had to get to the spirit of what gave them their illusions and study the scientific aspects of now, and the mythology that would spawn, and the stories and the languages that would spawn, something like the correct material for this piece.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And I settled on fiber-related material, like silks, and cloth, and cotton, and things, as well as the mythology, because – first, the fiber, because *Varuna* was the goddess of the heavens, where Uranus comes from. And it means in Sanskrit, I believe, if I recollect, “the veiled one.” It's the veil of the night that comes over. Here it is kind of using the black silk. It's penetrated through, and it's the shape of a sickle form. Later, by the time the Greeks come up with it, it becomes a male god that is castrated. The testicles, by Saturn – his Saturn sickle castrates the sun, castrates the father. The testicles fall into the ocean and they propagate Venus.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And Venus is sacred to cuttlefish and sea urchins. So these things give me some clues of what to make and the forms to make them out of.

CM-U: So, again, here is the forms coming out of mythology?

Mel Chin: Right. Right. And also the way this is laid into the wall is, Uranus is also – is not, you know, when you are looking at the sun's rays going this way, and all the planets are axial, Uranus is tilted on its side...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...facing – so it's spinning like this.

CM-U: Huh.

Mel Chin: It's a quite unusual rotation. So I saw this as a plane, and here things are split, and facing in and out of the wall.

[00:03:08]

Mel Chin: This piece was also to go – to discover a dimensionality that doesn't exist in a lot of these things. To go beyond the wall and create another space that...

CM-U: Because so far we've been in the space...

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: ...and on the space – on the wall. But now we haven't gone...

Mel Chin: But now this one about half [sounds like]...

CM-U: Well, we started into it with *Mars*, I think.

Mel Chin: Yeah. We are sinking in. But here now we are creating a negative cavity that has a relationship because inside there is the same vault as we have above here. That's a vaulted casket where inside are little pins that are stars from – the same stars, of course – but according to Chinese celestial maps.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So all of these little pinpoints above _____ [phrase inaudible]...

CM-U: What are those pinpoints made out of?

Mel Chin: They are actually fluorite [sounds like] museum nails. Because the old – in Chinese diagrams, it's a circle with a dot is usually how they draw their constellation. I like the brass head pins with the little marking dot inside because it would be – and I knew it would be obscure, but it's also related to how stars are illustrated in Taoist mapping.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So those are laid into this Eastern heaven. Now, within these is stars that relate this in reverse, along the inside of the rotation of the earth, there is a set of stars like the Big Dipper and all that...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and these are where it's laid in here. Those pins relate to these rays...

CM-U: But these pins are not brass. These are...

Mel Chin: No, those are metal. Those are steel...

CM-U: Steel pins.

Mel Chin: ...pins. Those pins are brass rounded by the same kind of steel pin. You've seen them before.

CM-U: And the blue fabric that's in there, is that silk _____ [word inaudible]?

Mel Chin: That's not really blue fabric. That's – there is a silk layer there, but it's also blue chalk.

CM-U: Behind the fabric?

Mel Chin: Behind _____ [word inaudible]. Blue pigment chalk. And I used mud as a – mud and glue, as the binder. Mud – actually it was Texas gumbo that I would have – I always bring up quantities of the black mud. Because the mythology also says the black blood that fell to the earth created the ash tree nymph, and the Furies...

CM-U: And this is ash, this _____ [phrase inaudible].

Mel Chin: This is ash wood. And then, to maintain the cuttlefish relationship, I went to one of its cousins, the squid. Bought five pounds of squid from the Essex Street Market – butcher market – and extracted the ink sacs, and derived all the black ink that is on the pins.

CM-U: Did you eat the squid?

Mel Chin: Uh, yeah, we had fried calamari. Not all five pounds, though. It was too much.

CM-U: That's a lot.

Mel Chin: It was a lot. Good, though.

[00:06:06]

Mel Chin: But how I saw this is also not just testicle but as eyes looking up at what – these Western stars, looking up at the Eastern stars. That there was the frustration or the separation, the castration from a body of ideas...

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: It's looking up for what, as I say, it cannot see. That's in another plane, another way of thinking. So it was showing the agonizing differences between communicating ideas as well, and how you are separated from that. But this is made out of Chinese paper and gauze and, you know, thinking about fibers, again, but also thinking about, you know, bandaging it as well. But I see them as – but knowledge itself is like – visual knowledge, or whatever, is like the orgasm of the eye. I could see them as this information exploding out into the pins. And there could be also just sea urchins.

CM-U: Um-hum. It looks like it was formed around a round form and then cut...

Mel Chin: Yes.

CM-U: ...in half _____ [phrase inaudible].

Mel Chin: I think this – was it an apple or a balloon? In fact, I do remember, I carved a form. It must have been out of foam or some – or *papier mâché*. And then formed my material. Because I wanted to give it this extra cavity at the top.

CM-U: Um-hum. And the white is just pigment? Or is it just the color...

Mel Chin: It's actually the paper.

CM-U: The paper color?

Mel Chin: The paper color, yeah. And the...

CM-U: And what about the dots?

Mel Chin: The dots are the – again, the black blood, or the soil, the gumbo that was used to do the...

CM-U: Oh, I see.

- Mel Chin: So I used the same types of gauze and fabric material to build up the casket. It's wood strips. It's cherry wood strips that's all tacked together.
- CM-U: Is that a piece that's inserted in the wall?
- Mel Chin: This – it was mounted into the whole box frame, but it is a domed, lidded box I made that comes into a shape and then curves around into its – well, this would be the bottom of the casket.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. But I mean as it exists now, in the wall.
- Mel Chin: It's...
- CM-U: That's what it is. The wooden form. The casket.
- Mel Chin: Yeah, the casket.
- CM-U: Okay.
- Bill Howze: Excuse me, Mel. Could you describe – just repeat what you said about how that was formed and, the shapes that were involved in it?
- Mel Chin: The casket form itself? Whatever?
- Bill Howze: Yeah.
- Mel Chin: That I built like forms. It's very much [as] you would build a vaulted ceiling. And laid my material, my – I tacked all my material together. I built it very much like you would build a little model of a cathedral or a domed building.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: But it was a strange shape because it had – it followed along the sickle shape as its base. And I flipped it over and pulled off the base. I made a form that was curved for it to rest on to begin with 'cause I knew the dimensions of this curve before I started. That was established simply by the dimensions of the gallery that it was first going to go into.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:09:18]

- Mel Chin: So it was one of the first – no, I was working on *Mercury*. It was one of the first works that was started. This is about the beginning of the work, and this is...
- CM-U: That reminds me of a question I wanted to ask you before. We understand the order of these. It is very well set. But did you make them in that order?
- Mel Chin: No, not necessarily. No. I started them – well, let's say I did not start them in that order. When it came to finishing them, I very much worked toward that direction. 'Cause *Pluto* was the last one to finish because I wanted to consider again my psychological condition that I was putting on the piece. Though it was very hectic and very rushed near the end, with hair dryers blow drying the paint, and things not falling together at the last minute. The ideas behind the construction was to develop these different personalities that will pull out of myself into – try to project it into the pieces.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: I don't think, due to my last minute methods, I don't know how well that was followed; but there was a conscious effort that they be given, each to have, I would consider, some kind of erotic presence in terms of having a personality. When things – I feel when things have personality, then they have essential presence as well.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: As opposed to – and I don't want each one to have a different way of being. So...
- CM-U: Did you embed these in your wall at your studio? Or did you wait...
- Mel Chin: No, I waited...
- CM-U: ...for some you saw it was when you did it [sounds like] in the gallery?
- Mel Chin: The first section was put up in my studio because I, you know, I could have handled it. But this one, I had to wait until it was built. _____ [phrase inaudible].
- CM-U: I guess, in terms of aging, I guess we would continue – we would expect to see continued fraying of the fabric.

Mel Chin: Somewhat, yes.

CM-U: And that seems like that would be in keeping with the nature of it.

Mel Chin: That is. Here the veil has been cut open and revealed. The concealment has been opened, and...

CM-U: So the jagged edge is very much a part of it?

Mel Chin: Right. Right. And it's just stuffed in there a way, and it's not – it should be – you should be careful in terms of – if you were to pull it out and try to remember where [sounds like] it went in. It's been rearranged several times, so – that's one of the things, since it is – I used a lot of the drywall as my material...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and that has the propensity to, you know, fall apart on you as well. But I thought that that could eventually be rebuilt. You could rebuild the wall, too.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: If you are careful. We'll discuss that.

[00:12:09]

Mel Chin: One more thing about body relationships again. Here are the – I'm not going to drop my pants, but the height of the testicles relate to where mine fall. So there is a reality, again, about human measurement, and the human body being a measure of this work, and its relationship with the hand and the rest of your condition.

CM-U: So it's a relation to the human body. The human scale.

Mel Chin: Human scale.

CM-U: And the same with the arc?

Mel Chin: The arc, I think, has a relationship to, again, these kind of spreads and things (holds arms out wide). It's just like that piece.

CM-U: *Mercury.*

Mel Chin: Yeah. So I believe it might be a bit higher than – I think when I originally put it up, I tried to reach as high – it put it out of the reach of my hand.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: It was as far as I could stretch. Just so that you can't grasp what's above you.

CM-U: Just beyond.

Mel Chin: Yeah. Put it beyond your reach. So...

CM-U: So, again, it's a sense of the placement in relation to man and relation to the other objects?

Mel Chin: Right. Right. And it's – again, this scale is – if, you know, put each unit as far as you could stretch, which I brought it into like, nine inches. My hands are a little bit shorter now, but if I pressed it as hard as I could to get that as my gauge...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...as a marker for the compressed units.

[00:13:37]

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: Okay?

CM-U: Let's move on to the next one.

Mel Chin: Yes. *Neptune is Filtration and the Purification of Desire* [from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987]. Because Neptune and his trident, fighting with Athena and his desire for land. But the use of bronze here came from two sources. Is that if you were going to make a fitting trident head, what would you make it out of? It would of course be bronze, and I looked at the Poseidon, or some people call it also Jupiter, or Artemision in Greece from 473 B.C. This was one of my favorite statues. But he's not holding a trident. He's not holding anything. And I said, "Well, we will make something."

Mel Chin: But then, so I was encouraged to use the bronze, but the actual bronze that was settled on was around the same period being made in China. And I took the formula for this from the sixth part of the artifices record [sounds like] from the Book of Rites for the Zhou Dynasty. And they would recommend, when you are making a sword or a mirror or anything else, they had prescriptions of metals.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: I used that 80/20 – 80 copper, 20 tin mixture, specified it for this piece. Because it is – you know, what they were talking about, by following these prescriptions, you would keep order in your heaven with all the ritual. The Book of Ritual, you do this, you do that, you do this to preserve order. So, to me, it was a very much – it was very important that this be made out of that bronze because also you will see the Han dynasty tridents, and then you can imagine what they are made of. It was – I liked that relationship with history...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and ritual into this piece. The other medicinal aspects of this piece, the cured [sounds like] desire factor. I would have loaded – well, just, first of all, what's loaded inside these hollow barnacles – actually a straight pole that was covered with barnacles, was found around Galveston. Again, on these trips back and forth to home – my parents live here – I would bring back something. So on this trip, the barnacle pole was collected. I think I was on a fishing trip, and I was thinking about this piece. I said, "What could I possibly – what could I possibly make the trident out of?" And I think I must have just leaned over the pier and looked at this – the post that was covered with barnacles – I said, "That is what the *Neptune* piece will be cast. What I'll commit this precious material being especially ordered to."

CM-U: Was this a stanchion holding up the pier?

Mel Chin: Yeah. Well, I saw it, and then I went and found – I went to a junkyard of pier and boat parts and things; and they just had some laying around in the mud. And I looked for one that was heavily encrusted like what I had seen.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And we cut it. They thought we were pretty nutty. My brother and I – we went out and got it. Fetched it, and then wrapped it up carefully, washed it,

and then took it back to New York City, where I prepared it for its molds. They were wax – waxes were pulled off of it, and then that's what I assembled this into.

[00:17:09]

Mel Chin: This actually was cracked when it came out of the foundry – this I took to a foundry, because it was a large pour. It's about two hundred and something pounds of bronze. It's very thick. And I wasn't there when they pulled it out. I wish I was. I would have recommended patience...

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: ...because they were so unfamiliar with – you know, every bronze is different. And I think it suffered a great shock. It was not as resilient as the silicon bronzes that they are used to pouring, and it was cracked.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: So it was – they made welding rods out of the material, and they might have used some of their own welding rods to piece it back together again. But after they pieced it, I came back with a grinding and cutting tool and recarved by hand barnacles where there were...

CM-U: Can you – do you remember where the break was?

Mel Chin: Um, the breaks were in the background [sounds like]. No, I don't. Actually I don't. 'Cause I tried to do a good job of hiding their work. So that it was chased [sounds like] by hand in order to make things resemble the surface. So this took a great effort to get back in shape.

CM-U: Is this a continuous hollow? Is it – it's a solid form all the way around?

Mel Chin: It's all hollow. Yeah.

CM-U: It's a hollow form, all the way around – in the round?

Mel Chin: It's hollow. All of the piping. And there were, I think, about two hundred and seventy – I don't know how many sponges, but it was really dried, salt-soaked sponges...

CM-U: And these are natural sponges that you stuffed down in...

- Mel Chin: Right. From the Mediterranean, yes.
- CM-U: Again, for the reason, the form comes from some...
- Mel Chin: Yeah. Form comes from something. And also, to me, is the desire of those sponges...
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: ...it is just to – yeah, what sponges are about is something – where they are from. And to take them from the Mediterranean, and then they dry them in the sun with salt and everything. And then stick – stuff them in there.
- CM-U: Is it important to you that the sponges retain their shape? Parts of your pieces that are not visible, is it important over time that they remain to be sponges and not just a thick powder.
- Mel Chin: Powder. If they powder – in this case, I would say, if they powder, that's what happened to them. But it's the idea that the sponges were there. Or, this is the loading of the piece with an idea.
- CM-U: So sort of what you're saying as we've been talking today is that the loading of the piece is something the artist does up front as he makes it. As he creates it. As he conceives it. And...
- Mel Chin: Uh...
- CM-U: ...in terms of preservation, we said with *Mercury*, we would want to replace it with pine. We couldn't introduce another material.
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: But if the appearance changes slightly, or the form changes, that's okay?
- Mel Chin: In certain relationships here, the sponges were only meant to be barely seen, you know. So here they are sitting up there, around there. And they're there, I guess. I think I would like to have them just peeking at the top...
- CM-U: Over the edge slightly?
- Mel Chin: Over the edge like they are now. They have traveled. Maybe some have ridden up some, or whatever. But that – I'd like to preserve this.

[00:20:12]

Mel Chin: This material is marijuana or hemp from someone's property in Tennessee that I saw they had a big, big marijuana plant, and I said, "Well, what are you going to do with that?"

CM-U: They believed you were going to make rope out of it?

Mel Chin: Well, they – I – yeah, they're friends. And we negotiated that after they took all the crop, that they would send me the whole tree through UPS. And so that came in the mail. And this was rolled down the thigh [sounds like] as Paleolithic man did...

CM-U: And rolling of...

Mel Chin: ...yeah, rolling of – yeah, rolling the fiber _____ [word inaudible] to make the original twine...

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: ...to attach [sounds like]. Why? Because it was known that the Greeks did burn in Ma [sounds like], as with Chinese, it is a very important medicine as well. And we're trying to give medicines to ease the desire factor.

Mel Chin: The other part is the Gorgonian fan coral...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...which comes in beautiful fans. The – it is from the legend of – it was known in the sixteen – at least in the 1612 edition, which is the only edition. The only real lexicon of alchemy is Martin Rulandus's *Lexicon Alchemiae* that was done in 1612. I went to the Library of Congress to look at a 1622 edition in Latin and German. It was done for the King of Austria at _____ [word inaudible]. It must have been that, something like that. However, you know, looking at translation, I came upon the – I was looking for sea-related things, but they had to have a relationship to the pharmacological aspect that I was looking at. And the fan coral was more precious than gold during the...

CM-U: For its medicinal properties?

Mel Chin: To cure insanity.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: I think it had to have something to do with – like there are some current political figures in America that have some thyroid problems. I think they are insane, too, but – I won't give them that much credit. But that is related to iodine deficiencies and things. And it probably did have a real effect. You would wear this stuff around your – a locket. Shave it and make a soup...

CM-U: Like a tea, or a soup?

Mel Chin: Yeah, a tea.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And drink it. Also, it was also the concept that the Gorgon, that the Medusa, whose – one drop could kill all or cure all...

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: ...which is also a concept in alchemic literature of elixirs of life, which comes from the Chinese up into Arabia and to Twelfth Century Europe. But this is also the Tree of Life and its relationship to the veins and under the skull cap. So there was all these things pointing toward it as a filtration device.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Uh, and not so much unlike [Marcel] Duchamp's filtration cones in the large glass [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23].

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But to form these was a problem because the cones – I wanted to make cones out of it, but if you know this material, it's brittle like stone. The legend is, Perseus slays the gorgon. His head falls in the sea, and the sea nymphs drag it through, and these formerly pliable plants become stone-like when exposed to air. It's the gorgon's head caused these things. And all the people I talked to about this Gorgonia said, "Oh, you can't form it because it's too hard. It will just crack. So it's impossible."

Mel Chin: I decided to return it to the sea, so I made a salt bath and soaked them. And sure enough, these samples that are pressed flat became very pliable.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: And it didn't take long before they would start getting hard again. And then I made these forms and cones. I'd wrap it in a cone and stuff them together and clamp it and let it dry. Or let it, you know, turn dry. And they maintain their form...

CM-U: Is this the color that they came out?

Mel Chin: Yes. It's a black...

CM-U: Was this the natural color?

Mel Chin: Yes. Yeah.

[00:24:29]

CM-U: I see some pigment on the twine. Did you – is it wax?

Mel Chin: Yeah, this – there is some wax, as usual, to – I was using a lot of beeswax and stuff...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...to try to help preserve the hemp, to make it less brittle and not fray apart. And this, more is just a collar around the cone.

CM-U: And so there is no preservation otherwise? There is no treatment otherwise on any of it?

Mel Chin: No, no. Well, the only treatment is the wax on the bronze. It was, again, a light, light coating.

CM-U: Butcher's wax?

Mel Chin: Yes. You know, these also can be adjusted. There seems to be a chunk, and it's fallen off on the inside. I haven't noticed that before. We can lift that off and pick it up, or just leave it, as far as...

CM-U: Oh, you think it came from up here?

Mel Chin: It was probably part of the whole...

- CM-U: On the inside, maybe?
- Mel Chin: Yeah. That's the only – and this tying has come loose in certain areas.
- CM-U: I see that, yeah.
- Mel Chin: I have to finalize [sounds like] that. And you know how I would do it is use a tweezer and just thread it through and try to – you know, they are not really functioning so much as a tie onto the thing other than a collar.
- CM-U: So at this point they are really very – seemingly permanent? They are very stable, very hard.
- Mel Chin: I think they are very, yeah. Yes.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Mel Chin: They have not changed in the time since their...
- [00:25:54]**
- CM-U: The colors are very beautiful, actually.
- Mel Chin: Yeah.
- CM-U: The natural _____ [phrase inaudible]
- Mel Chin: Well, the color, the patina was a – I had to invent this. Well, I didn't invent it. The patinas always exist. But I wanted to simulate this – the Greek bronzes that I liked, too...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...here as a Chinese bronze. And also the Shang bronzes. You see a relationship to this encrustation. And I liked this blackening look. It's always a sulfuric – what was it, this – there's two treatments on this. The copper – nickel. Of course the copper for the green, I didn't like the bright green...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...that you would get like that.

- CM-U: Right.
- Mel Chin: I wanted – so it was a little more sophisticated in terms of blackening it first, then spraying it like salt and time would naturally mottle it the way you have these little pockets of green.
- CM-U: Well, I guess some of the green, over time – or at last a potential hazard is that bronze disease will develop on it if it's in high humidity. That's certainly a possibility.
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And the result of that would be pitting, as you know...
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...into the metal. That's something that...
- Mel Chin: That, I would be willing to allow to happen because this is, you know, this piece is about the acidic desire that is eating away at it. And I thought these barnacles, their emblem is functioning of the wood [sounds like] as well. And in a weird – I guess it is a very stationary kind of position to have, but it's – their active look, or whatever, propelled me to using them.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: To give it this trident form.
- CM-U: Here, again, we have the piece embedded in the wall.
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: But there is something very disarming, of not having the staff, you know.
- (laughter)
- CM-U: ...there's like a – it's recognizable.
- Mel Chin: Right.
- CM-U: And there is something very disarming about not having a support for this one, for some reason.

Mel Chin: Yeah. And this one does have...

CM-U: It's very moving.

Mel Chin: Yeah. I like – it's best not to have it for this one.

CM-U: All right.

Bill Howze: Mel, could you repeat what you said about the hemp and rolling it?

Mel Chin: Oh, the – in terms of – just for demonstration, the hemp was – well, we would strip it off – the, the bark of the trunk...

CM-U: Plant.

Mel Chin: ...that was – plant – and then I would just hold it, and just roll it...

Bill Howze: Can you turn so I can see it better?

Mel Chin: ...just like this. So this is the thing. It's this twining motion that you push down, and then keep working...

CM-U: And then you – and then it stayed together by the wax that you...

Mel Chin: Yeah. No, I didn't need the wax.

CM-U: No, just by itself. Just by rolling.

Mel Chin: It was wet, and it would just trap itself. You know how you make twine is, you do one and...

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: ...and you attach the other, and then it spins itself. Just like making rope. But this, I just wanted a single strand.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I felt that that was the most primitive. I was getting in touch again with the most primitive – like, from the flint tool idea, to the first rope.

Bill Howze: And what about the height of this piece?

Mel Chin: This piece was more to the point of my eyes just looking into the points of desire. These shapes, obviously, and getting into that area. So that you start seeing what's in them.

CM-U: Okay.

Mel Chin: Okay.

[00:29:19]

Mel Chin: Um, *Pluto is Projection and Permutation* [from *The Operation of the Sun Through the Cult of the Hand*, 1987], is – uh, there's three levels that you'll see in here. There's the helmet of gold in the inside, the ceramic shell coating it, and the coal on the outside. It connotes the blackening, the whitening, and the reddening, the processes of alchemic hierarchies to get to the gold. And then the inside shell is made out of – is alchemic gold that Barron and I constructed out of looking at texts. And, again, trying different formulas and using the projection powder of magnesium, different things, to add – to get the final look, the feel of real (laughs).

Mel Chin: One extra note about this that you might want to see – look underneath this thing...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...is the grate of arsenical copper, poisonous copper, that was made as one of the attempted golds – but unsuccessful. But I saw it as the fire grate...

CM-U: Hmm. Yeah.

Mel Chin: ...as the grate that this poisonous labyrinth – it's based on the labyrinth of Knossos, the labyrinth that you go through in order to get to the final product. The helmet – the clay helmet I made, and it was glazed at Sarah Lawrence College – 'cause I knew Sandra Jensen's daughter was there, and she was taking ceramics. So we called around, and we took it up there to get it glazed, and they fired it in the night, you know.

(laughter)

[00:31:06]

Mel Chin: And then the coal. This is the anthracite coal that was used to make the gold.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: So I – this was saved as the material. As we were making the gold, I asked Barron to preserve for me these pieces, 'cause they would go back. I like this, because if you were to reverse this whole thing, then you would have, again, the fire – I guess the fire grate would be back in place...

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: ...but it would be the crucible, and the gold within.

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: So it's a reverse. The earliest drawings just show coal in a crucible, but then it became the helmet of invisibility, and the actual discovery of the planet Pluto was Clyde Tombaugh and the blink comparator, sitting in a chamber that would restrict his vision, and project images back and forth, a million images, until he saw a faint movement in the sky. That's the discovery of Pluto. So its invisibility is legendary as well.

Mel Chin: This helmet, also, you can get in and look out at, back into the white [sounds like]...

CM-U: You mean you can look through it?

Mel Chin: Yeah, you should be – you can get in there yourself, and stick your head into it. (CM-U ducks her head into sculpture) Hi. (Chin waves) I'll get back. And you see through this chamber...

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: ...your vision is restricted into back into the white [sounds like]. To your first _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: It is very – it's focused and restricted, you know.

Mel Chin: Yes. Yes. And it should give a certain kind of feeling as well.

CM-U: I mean, it does.

Mel Chin: Because of the mass of it as well. And also, the danger of the arsenic that surrounds you. The collar of arsenic.

CM-U: So one false move and you're into arsenic city?

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: It's really quite wonderful in the inside of the piece where you can see this very clearly. So we'll get that later.

Mel Chin: Yeah. And the gold was pieced together with silver solders, and then pounded. See all the little strips of gold that...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: And it's maintained its color. I mean, it was one of the best formulas for it. Pretty much. There is some oxidation here, probably from the silver solder as well.

CM-U: How many times did it take you to actually get the gold?

Mel Chin: (draws a deep breath)

CM-U: Lots?

Mel Chin: Lots.

CM-U: Twice. Twice? That's all?

Mel Chin: No. Lots.

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: I think we tried – they are very difficult to do.

CM-U: It's very difficult to do.

Mel Chin: I would make up formulas. Chin's famous 1, 2, 3. That didn't work.

CM-U: Well, after all, they've been trying it for centuries. (laughs)

Mel Chin: Yeah, that's right! But once – but there are so many formulas available. I think that Barron was the one who finally – we were using a formula. I had to get back to unload this piece, but Barron was – called and said, "I hit it."

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: You know, finally. He kept trying. But it was after the essential ingredients, projection powder was actually a magnesium oxide. It was quite beautiful. We would be throwing these powders in there. Probably dangerous, too. But the flares of color, you could see how people were so involved.

CM-U: How enchanting all of this was as they were doing it.

Mel Chin: It was quite wonderful. Yes.

CM-U: Yeah.

[00:34:05]

CM-U: Why is this – tell us about the height of this again. I mean, you need to get down to get into it.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: And you can't see it from eye level.

Mel Chin: I – the height of this, I made it shorter than myself. I wanted to be a little more egalitarian, allow it to be more average height. I was thinking more of people that were shorter...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and so they could get into it as well, to experience it. So basically it shouldn't be so low or so high that you can't get into it. It's the idea or the possibility of peering through it.

CM-U: Well, it's wonderful on the inside.

Mel Chin: So...

CM-U: Do you anticipate any changes in the coal or – I mean, we've had one small fallout...

Mel Chin: Yeah. Because of the grate, it probably comes out. There has been some fallout from this side in travel. But Barron has been very careful to go back and fill all...

- CM-U: Is there a coating? Did you do anything?
- Mel Chin: There is some asphalt and rubber – Black Magic, I believe, was used as well. It's just a compound to stick a lot of these things on.
- CM-U: To secure them?
- Mel Chin: So a lot of these pieces of coal are secure. And one thing about the aesthetics is that I – different people were used to put this up, and I would make them switch sides so that it wouldn't be all lop-sided in terms of someone...
- CM-U: You mean different assistants were helping you do it?
- Mel Chin: Yes. Yes. So I tried to switch that out as well. In fact, like I said, this piece, I worked the least amount on in a way, other than coordinating it. And it's like projecting its final incarnation. And...
- CM-U: Was that because of matters of just timing or...
- Mel Chin: It was a matter of timing, but I just felt like I knew this piece already.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: And I wanted all these hands, like in the construction of Agamemnon's Tomb, I believe, or what is it? In Mycenae. With all the – you know, the idea of workers on this, and the effort it takes. I did help do this frame. I framed out this part...
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: ...with the larger chunks, and to suspend this middle chunk. _____
[phrase inaudible; might be *sort of hold*] this large lump there because there might be – I think there's a hidden wire to hold this middle chunk up.
- [00:36:25]**
- CM-U: Before we leave *Operation of the Sun*...
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...I think let's just talk generally about some issues that we've touched on.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: Because I think your feeling – well, I don't know; perhaps your feelings about restoring different pieces would be different, depending upon the materials. But certainly in the case of *The Operation of the Sun*, the materials, the actual materiality, the choice of the materiality is very pertinent to the incorporation in each of the images. And in terms of restoration, ah, in the future, do we use synthetic materials? Would that be an intrusion? Should we try to do, stay with the materials that are here?

Mel Chin: I would first try with the materials that are available. I...

CM-U: That you've already used, you mean?

Mel Chin: That I've already used. I have preserved, like, some cartons of coal.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: There is some more of the hemp. You know, I've made attempts to make note of what these things are, so there's extra of the material. So, you know, should it ever be in one spot or wherever, that should be made available. And enough notes, I think, exist on this piece so – and I'm sure Barron took some notes as well during the construction, that he would have a lot to say about what I used.

CM-U: Do you generally try to keep your notes with the pieces? I mean, it seems like it would be helpful.

Mel Chin: Yeah. I, unfortunately, feel like I am fairly just haphazard about it, but there are – I have been able to compile, like, booklets and things. Or files on some works. So they do exist.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: *Operation of the Sun*, over the years – unfortunately, there are a couple of lost notebooks that were critical, that was left in a cab, or something like that...

CM-U: Ohh.

Mel Chin: ...but that happens.

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: But in the ones that are around, there seems to be a lot of drawings, over and over again while I'm trying to distill the pieces. To bat them down, you know. To reform the ideas into their final...

CM-U: But I've also had the sense, as we're talking of different pieces, that natural aging of these materials is not something that offends you particularly.

Mel Chin: No. I expected that, you know, materials do have a life of their own. Sure, if it crumbles, and the idea no longer exists visually, then I was hoping that there may be some documents like this to help it along.

[00:38:50]

CM-U: As long as you are alive, do you feel – I mean generally – well, let me phrase this differently. I mean, generally our policy is not to ask the artist to do the restorations, but certainly to participate in the decision-making of what the restoration should be.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: Do you tend to like to do them yourself? Restorations? Or does that sort of sit with you?

Mel Chin: It depends on the work. I think there are certain things that – with this one, since it is the *Cult of the Hand*, perhaps the hand should have some say in it. I guess that, by extension...

CM-U: *The Hand*, your hand.

Mel Chin: My hand. And the extension. Like, if there was certain – there are certain aesthetic or subjective sentiments going into, you know, the construction of where something, the way something looks. Like even like, how would that be retied?

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: As I'm around, and probably when we take this down, I'd probably be very careful, if I were to look at it again.

CM-U: One of the aspects of my work that interests me particularly, and I've been thinking about a lot, is how the restorer – like the artist, but certainly to a lesser degree, or a different degree, a different way – uses the hand to try to

preserve what the mind has created. And it's trying to decipher what is the essence of that to preserve finally. I mean, it may not be just – I mean, sure, you know, tack – putting one of these back in, or tacking down a little bit [sounds like]. Those are the easy issues. But it becomes more complicated when the piece is truly in danger, and you're wondering, "What is the essence of this piece to preserve?" That's why I think it's so important to talk with you about that.

Mel Chin: Um-hum. Yeah. This is one of the more difficult ones of a lot of the pieces 'cause so much emphasis was saying – to me, what causes a lot of the pieces to take their form was not just the material. Because the material has a say so, but it's one part of the say so, the philosophy guiding it, as well as its original form, and the treatment, and all these things. They all combine to make the statement. So here the materials are very important, and it makes it very – it's just, you know, "What do you do?" I haven't figured that one out yet, but the preservation of the original stuff, or the matrix of this thing, is important.

CM-U: Well, that's good. Let's keep those issues in mind as we look at some other pieces.

Mel Chin: Sure.

[Break in video]

[00:41:27]

CM-U: After looking at *The Operation of the Sun*, and just sort of talking about what restorers in the future would do when you weren't around to do your own restorations, and we said that the choice of the materials, or the replication, or the actual duplication of the materials that you used would be appropriate, I can't help but think how different that is from the tradition of the visual artist, where, when we go to restore something, what we try to do is to restore the appearance, the external skin of it...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...rather than the material per se. For example, on an oil painting, we rarely would inpaint, which means put paint in the loss, with oil paint. We'd use another material that was, we thought, longer lasting, wouldn't yellow, wouldn't change. But in your pieces, as we've said so far, that doesn't seem to be the criteria. So, in a way, I see working on your pieces as quite different from the traditional work – to working on the traditional visual artist.

- Mel Chin: Yeah. It seems like it gives somebody a job over generations to keep fleshing those hides and to keep mixing up the glue. Maybe a permanent employment service like that would be good. But I think that, in some cases, you know, I think I weigh things intuitively too – you know, what is the concept, or what am I trying to translate. If it gives – if you can replicate the appearance of this – is that's what important? [sounds like] And this is a hard one for me because I was so much into those materials...
- CM-U: Right.
- Mel Chin: ...and what their potential, or their power to translate, to have their voice, have their say. And you've left me with a real question in my mind, what to...
- CM-U: Well, I have to say that my own line, in my own work, my own development right now, has led me to, uh, reconsider the tenets of my profession in terms of using materials that are only reversible – that is one of the tenets of conservation. And in keeping with that, we try to use materials that we can remove.
- Mel Chin: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: And so you could have a traditional oil painting, if we go back to that...
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...and we decide we need to put a second canvas on the back. So we use wax to do that, with the idea that you can heat it up and take the canvas off someday.
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.
- CM-U: But what happens is, we are introducing a completely foreign material into a work of art. There was no wax in the oil painting to begin with. Okay? And that has sort of been a traditional – has become sort of a traditional approach to the problems. Since I work on contemporary art primarily, which is so concerned with the surface – and what I put on is very visible; I can't hide things behind a varnish – my own mind is turning around and thinking that it's more important to use materials that are not so much reversible – because in fact, I don't believe anything is truly reversible...
- Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...but that are compatible.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: And so maybe that's sort of what you are saying.

[00:44:33]

CM-U: Maybe, with your restorations, it's in keeping with an idea of compatibility. Even though my choices are because of not wanting it to change visually at all, the impulse for your saying that might be because of all the meaning that are within objects' materials [sounds like].

Mel Chin: Yeah. I think if it would change to the degree where it would expose itself, then I think that's quite problematic. But as we talked about the aging of the bronzes, the pits and everything, that is something that time is offering and adding a greater vocabulary in the material itself.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: So, uh...

CM-U: You know, sometimes one of the things people say is that – you get a work of art into a museum, and they say, “All right. Is this the stage, this moment it enters the museum, the moment your piece has entered The Menil Collection, that state of the object then is what we are going to try to preserve for eternity?”

Mel Chin: (chuckles)

CM-U: Okay? I mean, this is one tenet where they say, “Well, what – you know, at what point of the object are you trying to preserve the age of the object?” But with your objects, we've been talking about just the natural aging of them, and that that's just part of the life of the materials.

Mel Chin: And also the life of the person who made them. I lean toward Mr. Rider [sounds like] that would say, “Well, it's not done 'til it's done.” And so what if you bought it seven years ago, and it's still in my studio 'cause it's not done? And if you dare change it, even though it's – uh, the face is melted off that portrait and is now at the belly, if you alter it, it is no longer my painting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I feel that I would like to come back – if I decide that, while I’m still alive, I think it might be against all the rules of documentation and what have you, if there are any rules to begin with – while you are alive, and you change your mind and things, that you can come back. And you make mistakes, ’cause it is the record of a human being’s existence. And mistakes are equally there for the record. I think that, should I want to change one of the paintings and make it articulate...” If I felt that it should articulate – after many, many years it’s not doing its job after – then I would probably come and do that, you know, or...

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: ...what do you feel about that?

CM-U: That gets a little complicated because – let me tell you a story. I started by saying I wanted to tell you a story.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

[00:47:01]

CM-U: I was once at – an artist was doing an exhibition, not here at The Menil Collection, but at the Rice Museum [Rice University Institute for the Arts] where we used to be. And he was a sculptor. And there were figures. And there was a finger missing. When they unpacked the sculptures, there was a finger missing on one of the forms. And so the artist recast a finger. It was polyester resin, and he recast a figure, but he didn’t have time to paint it. And so – and he had to leave town and wouldn’t be back until the night of the opening. So he came up to me very reluctantly. I mean, I was offered as the conservator who could do this, and so on. And he came up to me very reluctantly and said, “Well, look. I guess – I have to leave town, so I guess you have to do it. And I used oil paint, and this is what I did, and these are the colors I did. And that’s, you know, do that.” And he left.

CM-U: And I knew full well that if I did what he said, it wouldn’t have matched because I would have had one new finger and four aged fingers.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: So I dismissed everything he said, and I went about and did it in the way that I felt was appropriate, knowing that I could remove that if necessary...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...if he – at some point, if he was truly horrified. And I was very nervous about it. But I was – I really was convinced that this was the right thing to do. When he came back, he looked at it; and he came to find me at the opening and thought it was fabulous. And he said to me that he was very glad I had done it because if he had done it, he said, he would have done exactly what he told me to do, which would have been, repaint the figure with the materials he did. Then he would have noticed that this finger didn't match the others, so he would have had to paint the rest of the hand.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: Then he would have realized the hand didn't go with the rest of the skin tones, so he would have been into, in essence, reworking the piece.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: And I think that's the danger that we see – and also the pressure we see that you put on an artist, to ask him to come back...

Mel Chin: Uh-huh.

CM-U: ...I mean now, yes, we can ask you about *Operation*, but twenty years from now, when you are working on something completely different...

Mel Chin: Would I really want to come...

CM-U: ...if we asked you – first of all, would you want to? Which we don't have to answer now. And second of all, your aesthetic might be so different at that point that in a way we become the preservers of this, at this moment.

Mel Chin: Um-hum. Well, I feel, as far as the conservation measures that you are talking about, that's in keeping and in line with what I would expect a conservator to do. To do it. And I would take their suggestions, that if a finger were to break off of one of these things. Not this kind of figure, but some aspect.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I think you could probably do that better than I could, and I would take that.

[00:49:22]

- Mel Chin: But I was more or less thinking about – I guess it was out of the range of the discussion – actually reworking the conceptual constraints of the piece. Or understanding it after a long period of time, and saying, “Well, it never really worked that well. Can I come back and do it?” And then that would alter the whole – it would be altering...
- CM-U: It would alter the whole lot [sounds like].
- Mel Chin: The whole body, yeah. And it – I don’t see it was a danger in that respect, as other than just a lot of work for someone who was born old like me. But, yeah, that’s something to...
- CM-U: That’s an interesting concept.
- Mel Chin: Yeah. But I think that’s in keeping with one’s existence, that you do these things. I may horrify myself, and then the piece doesn’t work, then we’ll just get rid of the piece.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Mel Chin: It lasted as long as it lasted. I mean, these things _____ [phrase inaudible].
- CM-U: Have you done that? Have you started [sounds like]?
- Mel Chin: Yes, I have. In fact, one of these pieces in this place opened at a gallery in New York. I won’t say which one.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: And I went in the following day, after I thought about it, and looked at it. I brought someone with a truck and a hammer. I destroyed it on the gallery floor and hauled it back. And brought it back. I said I’d be back in three days. It took three weeks, but I brought it back totally different.
- CM-U: And would they – and it was in an exhibition at the gallery [sounds like]?
- Mel Chin: It was in an exhibition, but they had an empty spot for about three weeks. When it came back, it was much better. But it was about the constraints of time and deadline, and opening; and it was much more – I wanted to do so much on it. But they were happier. I mean, they couldn’t – they couldn’t see why I was so upset; but it was something that I said, “Well, let’s – you take

one slide of it, but that's it. This piece ends now." And so it was destroyed and taken apart. The components were the same, but...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...it was, I think, radically altered. And then I said, "Now, this is the piece."

CM-U: So that means you still might, twenty years from now, think of changing it?

Mel Chin: Yes. I think that I should...

CM-U: That happens.

Mel Chin: ...I would like that. I think that happens. I think that, uh, you know, it may or may not happen, but I'm saying that condition – I would like to think that's a possibility. That we do evolve in the mind – and go into different states of mind, and we can say that we are constantly being the ultimate critic of our own work. As you should be. That – if we are talking about the essence, sometimes in many of these pieces, perhaps in my mind, the essence was never quite reached. And, too, you let things go because of economic and time and all that. But what would it be like if you had all the time and – you know?

Mel Chin: You only have the time you've got, I guess. But I always think about – oh, of course people are horrified whenever I bring it up, like, I shouldn't remake those things. Or remake that thing. They say, "Don't do it. Go on to the next step." Which, I do forge ahead with other things. You're right. I may be into other things. But I do feel that – I would feel comfortable to think that there's the potential to come back. Or it's given that that's okay. In my case, I'd say it would have to be okay because that's the way it is. Yeah.

CM-U: I understand that.

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: I do. I mean, I understand that even from work that I – restorations I deal with. There are oftentimes I think, "It's not done even though it looks okay." In my own mind.

Mel Chin: Yeah. Well, in this, of course you have the critical opinion of the people of the gallery, where it's, "This looks fine. Well, what's wrong?"

CM-U: Yeah.

Mel Chin: Well, it just isn't right.

[00:53:22]

Mel Chin: I guess – I remembered one painting. That big painting at the Museum of Fine Arts [*Untitled [Terra Infirma]*, 1981-83, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston]...

CM-U: Sure.

Mel Chin: ...the pool, uh, the pool has to be hand-melted [sounds like] – it takes thirty minutes to draw, slowly draw the melted pool around. I had done it about four times. I remember when it was ready to go out of the – the truckers were there to pull it out and take it to the space – I stopped them the moment they were ready to come out of the door. I said, "You can't take it out. It's Mr. Jiggs."

CM-U: It's *Mr. Jiggs*?

Mel Chin: It's Mr. Jiggs. Because, you know, the cartoon character. What is that, the, uh, *Bringing Up Father* or something? It was the old – oh, it's Thirties style, or Forties style cartoon. Does anybody remember that? It was in the Sunday comics. It was *Bringing Up Father*. One of these things that dates back from the Thirties. It was an old cartoon. The pool of wax – I had not seen it in the light at this angle – had melted into that cartoon figure's face.

CM-U: (laughs)

Mel Chin: No one could see it.

CM-U: How bizarre.

Mel Chin: It was bizarre, that Mr. Jiggs was there. And of course I made them lay it down, and I sat back down and re-melted the face again. You have to just hold the lamp, and heat the wax, and pool it back to get rid of Mr. Jiggs. Because it could not go with a Mr. Jiggs.

CM-U: Have you seen it since? This is the piece called *Study for Houston*?

Mel Chin: No, it was actually *Untitled*.

CM-U: *Untitled?*

Mel Chin: And it was accompanied by a Latin prose poem.

CM-U: 1984?

Mel Chin: Eighty-two, '83.

CM-U: Eighty-two, '83?

Mel Chin: But Mr. Jiggs got melted out and it was okay. But...

CM-U: Have you seen it since it's been at the Museum of Fine Arts?

Mel Chin: No. No, I haven't seen it. They don't have it up now, do they?

CM-U: I don't think so.

Mel Chin: I think they've pulled it and put it...

CM-U: We've had it up here –no.

Bill Howze: It was at DiverseWorks [Artspace, Houston].

CM-U: It was at DiverseWorks. Right.

Unidentified: It was probably during the accessioned museum thing [sounds like]

CM-U: Oh, that's right.

Mel Chin: Yeah. That was recent.

CM-U: The new accessions.

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: I knew I'd seen it hung there somewhere. So you were still reworking the work when they came to pick it up?

Mel Chin: Yeah. If you see Mr. Jiggs, you've gotta get rid of him.

CM-U: Can't tolerate Mr. Jiggs.

Mel Chin: Not when he's looking at you. No one else saw it, but I think that's on tape. Now, we did – there is a film that was made about the making of that painting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But, uh...

CM-U: Well, that's interesting. I didn't know that. 'Cause you did that...

Mel Chin: I have a tape.

CM-U: You made it?

Mel Chin: Well, it was shot by [filmmakers] Lalo Obregon and Tony – what was her name, Bill? Tony? Haftner. Tony Haftner. And they shot it. And then [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, projectionists] Margie Glaser and Ralph Kaethner re-edited the footage 'cause they left all the tapes. It was shot – it was all about working at Studio One [Chin's former studio, an alternative space created by William Steen in Houston]. They worked getting that piece together.

CM-U: Um-hum. Hmm.

Mel Chin: But I think I said, "We can't let it out." They were shocked.

CM-U: Well, it's hard. We'll talk more about that.

Mel Chin: Yeah. Uh oh, do I...

CM-U: Let's talk about this next piece.

Mel Chin: ...do I see Mr. Jiggs here in this, too?

CM-U: Oh, I hope not. (laughs)

Mel Chin: No, he's not there.

[00:56:31]

CM-U: This is *The Extraction of Plenty from What Remains: 1823* [1988-89, Collection of the Artist]...

Mel Chin: Right.

CM-U: ...and Mel made it, '88, '89, in – parts of it in Houston?

Mel Chin: Most of all of it in Houston.

CM-U: Most of all of it in Houston?

Mel Chin: Yeah. Right. In fact, yes, it was all done in Houston. It was for the *Directions* program at the Hirshhorn Museum [“Directions: Mel Chin,” Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, February 1-April 23, 1989], and it was a commentary on the Washington – it was for Washington, because it was at Washington, and the configuration here is the full-scale replicated White House columns cracked off at what I call a signature line of ten U.S. presidents, five (points at left-hand column) – the silhouettes of their signatures on top here. Carol, you can see Ronald Reagan’s loopy handwriting on the other side. And it’s – they are made out of – it’s a wood internal frame. It was made horizontally by constructing an elaborate plywood and wood frame that was covered with traditionally the tar paper, the metal lathe, and the materials used were, like, crushed sandstone, little bits of – but not very much. It’s hard to crush it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: Uh, sand. Different types of plaster like Hydrocal, and a lighter weight plaster called Structo-Lite. Those are just common work – you know, industrial names. And it was mixed up, and my brother and I constructed these columns in my parents’ garage over an extended Christmas vacation. I told the curator I was going down to collect some banana trees to do the basket, and that began this long, extended, '88 to '89 piece of –

[00:58:23]

Mel Chin: How it was formed was, uh, I – there was hooked on two sawhorses very much like you would just lay a horizontal lathe, and pipe fittings were screwed onto the plywood forms. My brother would spin it while I would lay up the plaster. And there was a single board that served as sort of the mold, or the jig – not a Mr. Jigg, but a jig – that would be pushed against, to the side, and so that all these...

CM-U: The carving?

Mel Chin: ...the carving would be brought in. The surface is a quality of the columns. It is very much like the actual White House columns. If you were to visit, you would see all these strokes and cracks and pits. So that was consistent with the stone-like quality, or the re-plastered quality of the White House. I did a study on the White House. I visited the White House and measured the columns, and was chased out by the Secret Service.

CM-U: They didn't like you measuring the columns?

Mel Chin: Well, I was taking photographs. It was very funny. I was there during Nancy's Christmas decoration opening house. The place was packed. And I reserved – I had a special appointment with the White House curator, and had to pass through gate security. I had a passport. A U.S. passport. I didn't have a driver's license. It took me thirty minutes to get clear of security. A friend who wanted to come in and just – acting as an assistant – got in in thirty seconds with his Gold Visa card, without a driver's license. So I felt that had something to say about American – where American security, national interests are.

(laughter)

Mel Chin: But when I got through, we had the – it was funny because we walked through the whole White House from the back entrance, where everybody is looking – and they kept saying, "Would you – you want to see Nancy's..." I said, "No, we want to just..." And we just exited to go to the north portico, and there we were. And there was a Marine guarding – you know, there is all roped off, and they were restoring the White House – It was a perfect time for this – Washing off the whitewash. And stripping it down, so all the quarter-inch layer of paint was off. And through my friends, Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, I was able to get the type of paint they were repainting it with for the past year. It was Duron white enamel. Whisper White was the White House official paint.

CM-U: Made by what?

Mel Chin: Duron Enamel Company [Beltsville, MD].

CM-U: Duron?

Mel Chin: And Duron Paint Company in Washington. So – D-U-R-O-N. And you get it by the gallon. Whisper White is the official White House color. So, anyway, I was out in the north portico, and I talked to the Marine guard – 'cause I was

there with the curator. I said, "Can I get beyond here?" And I was telling them I was just studying architecture.

Mel Chin: So I had my, uh, cane, which actually a yardstick with a handle stuck on it to help as a measuring device, and my camera. And we started to document the columns. The moment we started, though, the Secret Service, the wired guy, came up and started yelling at the Marine very loudly and very, very strong language, as to, you know, who gave him authorization to allow anybody past this line. And I immediately stopped what I was doing 'cause I knew that he'd be coming to pull away my camera, whatever. And I just confronted him immediately. I said, "Well, is there something we could talk about, or whatever?" His only question is, "Why are you taking so many goddamned pictures?"

Mel Chin: I said, "Well, I'm an expert of American colonial architecture, and it is very rare to see a smooth Roman ionic. Don't you think so?"

(laughter)

Mel Chin: He didn't think anything. He just looked at me and says, "I think you're taking a lot of goddamned pictures." I said, "It'll only be five more minutes." And he just turned away and let me do it.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: But he was, uh – and I'd only taken three pictures. But he was on top of it because it was probably – he felt I was surveying the parts of the White House that should not be surveyed. He was doing his job. However, with the information intact, and meanwhile my assistant steals a paint chip off the side of the White House as it's peeling away – while we were discussing – good assistant! We leave the grounds, and we...

CM-U: And how did you get the curve? Just by measuring and drawing?

Mel Chin: Well, I projected...

CM-U: From photographs?

Mel Chin: ...the slide...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...and then also looked at the *American Vignola* and tried to get [what] the *entasis*, the entasis where it would be, because you would calculate the scale of the White House. It was very – I got White House plans, all that stuff. Even so, I think there may be some critical factors as far as the loops and everything, that, you know, some things should have been higher according to the classical dimensions. 'Cause I couldn't get a form and actually measure it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I was not allowed to do that.

[01:03:30]

CM-U: What about – it looks like the columns don't actually – they, too, look like they're floating. Is that just an illusion, or are they doing that?

Mel Chin: No, they are sitting on pads, and that...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: ...this is just one, logistically, of how do we raise and lower it? We should have it so you don't lift on the sensitive plaster ring...

CM-U: I see.

Mel Chin: ...below. I think there is terms for all these things, but I can't remember them now.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Mel Chin: One thing about this column. I know it was this one because this is James Monroe and James K. Polk at the top here – when I was forming this near the end, and finishing the signatures, I replaced some pipe fittings with larger diameters to make it easier. They were already at their full weight, about fifteen hundred pounds, and they were getting hard to turn in the small diameter pipes. So I replaced it with larger diameter pipe, but it was, like, uh, fittings that weren't as – they were cast, and not malleable fittings. After a couple of turns, after finishing it off, the fitting snapped while I had my hand under there. And it just went straight down. And now, luckily, I was just pinned and not – it could have just sheared something off at that much weight. And under the tight conditions of the garage. It was done in my parents' garage.

- CM-U: And did the metal – did the form crack as well?
- Mel Chin: Yes, it did. It did. And then we had – that was five days before pickup.
- CM-U: Oh.
- Mel Chin: So we had to lift it back up. And it was done under very difficult conditions for plaster. It was wet. There was, like, a monsoon or something at that period. And there was a lot of problems with the plaster not connecting.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: Using different plasters, and running out of materials, and money to buy the correct kind. I had a lot of problems with this plaster separating. Using bonding agents, whatever I could, to do it. To put it back together again. There is also a hollow section in it because I made these at first at a tapered fit. Then, realizing that, no, that it's not a taper. No, the entasis happens like ten foot two, and then it curves in slightly. I had to rebuild another section...
- CM-U: Hmm.
- Mel Chin: ...so there's a double wall construction in this. So there's many layers of plaster and additions. Like you're just learning and doing it as you go along. But it was completed, and then painted. They were brought over wet to the Hirshhorn and stayed in the basement where I noticed some of the flaking and whatever. But it's been pretty much stabilized now.
- CM-U: Where were they? From the Hirshhorn, did they go in storage or go right to the Walker?
- Mel Chin: They went into storage in a warehouse in New Jersey.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Mel Chin: And stayed there until the Walker. Now the warehouse has been sold, so it no longer is under the – it was under the generosity of a friend who had owned the warehouse.
- CM-U: Um-hum.

[01:06:36]

Mel Chin: The basket, the cornucopia form, is made out of Honduras mahogany. A Honduras mahogany frame was made first, and that is the strong ribbing. And then the fabric is banana trees, whole trees that were cut when it was time to cut them. And to preserve them, they were – uh we bought a washing hand wringer...

CM-U: Hmm. Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...to wring out the incredible amounts of liquids in the leaves, or because the first thing that would happen to the stalk, which I was basically using, would be that it would rot because of so much moisture. They were wrung out, and then tacked to my parents' rafters – you know, outside on the roof – to dry in the sun. So all these strips of banana were there.

Mel Chin: That was then woven around this mahogany framework. The mixture on it is goat blood, coffee, and mud, or topsoil, actually, from my parents' garden. Because I thought the issues there were land, blood, revolution, and as well as the crops that are a part of it. And the coffee, especially, was mixed in. And the blood was collected at a local slaughterhouse, where they were illegally slaughtering goats, and collected on site.

[01:08:07]

CM-U: You've talked on other occasions about the experience of going to the slaughterhouse...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...to collect the blood. And the experience of the separation of yourself from...

Mel Chin: Uh-huh.

CM-U: In the process of collecting the blood, you separated yourself naturally from the horror of what was happening. Or maybe from the artistic process, being involved with the horror of what was happening.

Mel Chin: Yes. Well, yeah.

CM-U: And how that had an impact on your work.

Mel Chin: Well, the psychic impact there was actually, I was conscious I was making art. But I – it was more not so much the slaughterhouse, but it was how you can transform your rationality and your repulsion and all this into a whole 'nother venue. And it felt very much – I began to project [sounds like] as if I were at, in war, or just doing violence...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...'cause how, to get the job done, I had to be like the person who was throwing these living animals that had their throats slashed at me, and be very cruel and very nonchalant, maybe. Not even cruel. It was not even – I think that would put too much emotional impact on it. I had to be nothing, other than just like him, doing a job. And yet I was shaken because, as I said, I'm doing this for art. But then I realized, under the right circumstances, or wrong circumstances, you – a human being is able, compelled to do most everything that they stand against as well. And, let's say that I might have known this intellectually, but to be in a situation while making a piece of art where it brings it forward to the surface so much, that was disturbing. So that, yes, I could possibly kill – or be a killer, or do this, and I would not even think about what it means. Because I have this other thing riding over it.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: In this case, could it be patriotism to go take another...

CM-U: Loyalty.

Mel Chin: Loyalty. What _____ [word inaudible]? Well, all these things come into play. And then I realized that there was no feeling at all. Perhaps that was the scariest thing, or the most psychically disturbing in the process of collecting this material. What I had to do is, what happened was, I was collecting the blood, which was pooling about an inch thick on the floor with a pile of animals dying around me. It was just trying to collect the blood as it coagulated so quickly of course, you know. The head killer, who was not very far, in a very tight and hot room, cut a goat and just laughed and threw a goat all the way across – a living animal. All the way across the room, and it fell, and he was shooting for the basket.

CM-U: So you had the basket there? You were...

Mel Chin: Yeah, it was right...

CM-U: ...just collecting...

Mel Chin: ...it was right – it was all clean and, you know, nicely woven; and I was trying to paint some blood on. He just picked up the animal and just threw it in there. And you hear the ribs of the thing crack. And he laughed. And this is somebody that you don't mess with, I had a feeling. Especially as he's hacking at these animals' throats and everything.

Mel Chin: But I looked at the animal, and it was just – that image on the wall (points) – that is what I was trying to describe. How memory can be affected two ways. That those – the panels I call biographic diptychs – show the fallen column...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and the goat in the basket. To me there are two ways of thinking about how you remember – the accident of the column dropping and falling and cracking and paring [sounds like], it was very clear and precise and clean, in a way. It's just an object that cracks, and you repair. And using the porcelain is about the fragility of it. With the drawing of the goat in the basket, however, that's a memory that is very foggy and very distant, yet it's more like it's a memory that smolders – it has a longer effect, a more nightmarish – or it can be peaceful, it can be not – it can be something entirely different.

Mel Chin: However, the goat did die right in the basket. And it bled. And then I said, "Well, to get out of here, I've gotta do it." And something just changed. I just started grabbing the animal from him, and was spraying the blood over the piece. So as the animal would die, I would drop it down and get another one.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: And that's how it was done very quickly. And then I gathered more blood and took it home, and mixed it up with the coffee and the mud. And there were some glues and things used. Like Elmer's or whatever. Just as another binder. I tried to – I was using the blood as a binder as well.

CM-U: _____ [phrase inaudible]

Mel Chin: Yeah. Well, we put it out in my parents' patio. They were very tolerant. They thought that something very serious was happening here when I brought in this bloody mess. And it was very – goat blood smell, which is very pungent-like, and it needed to dry. It was very wet. And we put fans right in

its mouth, and shut the door, and went in and let it be. It was outdoors. Then the next day I did – I added more of the mud and the coffee and the blood that was left over, and just wiped it all over the surface.

[01:13:23]

Mel Chin: The banana fiber, see, has some kind of wax to it that keeps it from sticking very well.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: But it has held up quite well under the conditions that it's been under. Well, as far as when it flakes off, I do see how it turns very bright and white [sounds like], you know. That is something where I think it should be coated again, or covered with a matched mix or something.

CM-U: A matched mix of mud...

Mel Chin: I think it would be hard to get the goat blood, in other words.

CM-U: Yeah, I don't think we could expect someone to do that.

Mel Chin: Yeah.

CM-U: What are all these materials related to? Or why did you choose these particular materials for this piece?

Mel Chin: Well, the theme behind this piece is, you know, *The Extraction of Plenty from What Remains: 1823*. The 1823 is the date, or the year, of the signing of the Monroe Doctrine, which I felt began a whole list of policies toward the area of Central America. The choice of the blood, the fruit basket, the horn of plenty, came from a goat, Amalthea, the goat god.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: And when it was broken off by Jupiter, I believe that that's where the legend, "Nothing but fruits poured forth." The whole region is very much shaped – from Mexico down, that whole Central American region was very horn-shaped, and it has been the source of fruit. Bananas – United Fruit – and a whole history of U.S. involvement in directing their life and their economy as well. So – and all of this was a commentary on how the horrors of war and

U.S. involvement have been one of the main, you know, prime motivators of those wars in the continuing struggle of Central America.

Mel Chin: And I saw these columns squeezing at this cornucopia that had nothing more to give, other than its blood, its land, and its fruit. And there's very little but blood. And the issues there are agrarian and control over their economic destiny and sovereignty. And how that's largely ignored by these policies from these presidents.

[01:15:42]

Mel Chin: Now how – they go from James Monroe to Ronald Reagan; and how these signatures were selected – conceptually, how I saw it, that these columns had to break off somewhere. It would be – it's these presidential signatures that are the weaknesses on our policies toward other people. Toward whole other countries. And they are the actual structural weaknesses in our government. And they are the leaders that put their names onto these actions, whether it's covert, overt, that have such profound effect. And the effect is that it is squeezing these very poor countries to maintain our control over them. So, I guess, that's what the piece is largely about.

CM-U: So it should be noted that the edges are not just kind of ragged edges.

Mel Chin: No.

CM-U: They are definitely the signatures or forms...

Mel Chin: It's the silhouettes of the tops of their signatures. So it's – the capital of these columns is the tops, the caps of the signatures themselves.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: How they were selected, to keep it with the crack in mind, you know, like a randomized thing, rather than selecting, like, signatures that would appear more cracked-like out of the – how many presidents have there been?

CM-U: Thirty-eight.

Mel Chin: I know more – thirty-eight? I decided to call Walter LeFeber in Cornell University, who wrote a book called *Inevitable Revolutions* [: *The United States in Central America*, 1983], which sort of served as a textbook for my research on this piece. I called him at home. I said, "Could you list off..." I

knew I had room for ten to make it, you know, ten of the worst, or ten of the most important – not necessarily the worst [sounds like]. What comes to your mind when I say, ‘American policy X toward Central America?’”

Mel Chin: And he just listed them for me.

CM-U: Hmm.

Mel Chin: I just took exactly what he said, and I said, “Thank you very much. I’ll send you a picture of the piece, or whatever, when it’s done.” He said he goes to Washington, and he’d take a look at it, you know. And so his collaboration was by giving me a list of names, rather than me subjectively looking at the visuals. And so they are, from James Monroe, running around to Theodore Roosevelt, and continuing on, Eisenhower, Carter, Ronald Reagan is on here as well. So it crossed – it was his opinion rather than my own, since he was the – he is the...

CM-U: His choice?

Mel Chin: Yeah, his choice.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

[01:18:26]

CM-U: With regard to the materials and the aging of the mud, for example. The cracking of the mud. Unlike what we’ve said about *Operation of the Sun*. It seems like this is – you’ve made this in kind of a worn, aged state, and that it might be desirable to preserve it at this state. I mean, that, as you were pointing out, there is a break in the basket from storage.

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: That that’s something that maybe should be repaired. Or if the mud falls off, it should be re-adhered...

Mel Chin: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...as opposed to allowing...

Mel Chin: _____ [phrase inaudible]

CM-U: Am I putting words in your mouth? Or is that _____ [phrase inaudible]...

Mel Chin: I think, in this piece – yeah, I think it was started – yeah, it was. It was not necessarily made aged. It was made the best we could do under the conditions. But it's more about, uh – yet it is at – this is at its finished state...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: ...and it should be – to answer your question very simply, yes, it should be kept in this – in this case, this way, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: And there is problems when you have to squeeze the basket to release the basket. So you're putting...

CM-U: Hmm. You mean in order to release it from these columns?

Mel Chin: I think if you will pull it very quickly out. But, see, I compress it to squeeze it in, to give it just a slight pressure.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: You know, the columns just touch at the base, and it's fitted within. And so it has that ragged look now that was intended.

[01:19:50]

Mel Chin: Well, one of the aspects of this, to make it a little more uncomfortable, I felt, was the – when I talked about the erotic presence of the work, this was intended also as a hermaphroditic, uncomfortable hermaphroditic condition of the smooth white columns and this very uneasy basket between. And how I view this, as this is the giving, feminine side. If you look at it from – let's go to this side – then you would, from – then it would have the appearance of the classic *herm* with the phallus sticking up, so it has a remark of the classic Greek...

CM-U: So you mean the tip of the basket, coming out the other side, is the *herm*?

Mel Chin: Yeah. The *herm* – if you look at it just like this, you see it.

CM-U: Right.

Mel Chin: And it's meant to be, like I said, an uneasy collusion of these two materials and forces. And they are very separate from each other as well. How you neuterize the country as well.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Mel Chin: I mean, I'm reading maybe more than I should into the piece. But I was conscious of the power of this piece, and its attraction, as I like to think of works being a trap or a lure to bring one into the understanding of what it might be. The intention was there.

CM-U: Um-hum. At this moment, the piece is still owned by the artist?

Mel Chin: Yes. Maybe forever.

CM-U: Think the State Department might buy it?

Mel Chin: I was going to give my – put my call in immediately and see...

CM-U: Right. Make sure they're the first bidder.

Mel Chin: ...if they could put it out in the White House collection of...

CM-U: Yeah.

[Break in video]

Mel Chin: ..._____ [word inaudible] and chopped up fiber thing to try to match some color [sounds like]. Remember that...

CM-U: Yes, I remember you telling me.

Mel Chin: It was just trying to get it – and it's very much like what you're saying. Try something to do it. But eventually I'd rather it be a new skin than reformed. Anyway, it doesn't seem like it's gotten any worse. It looks like...

CM-U: Huh-uh. It really doesn't.

Mel Chin: It's just one of those things.

[End Part 2 of 2]

[END RECORDING]