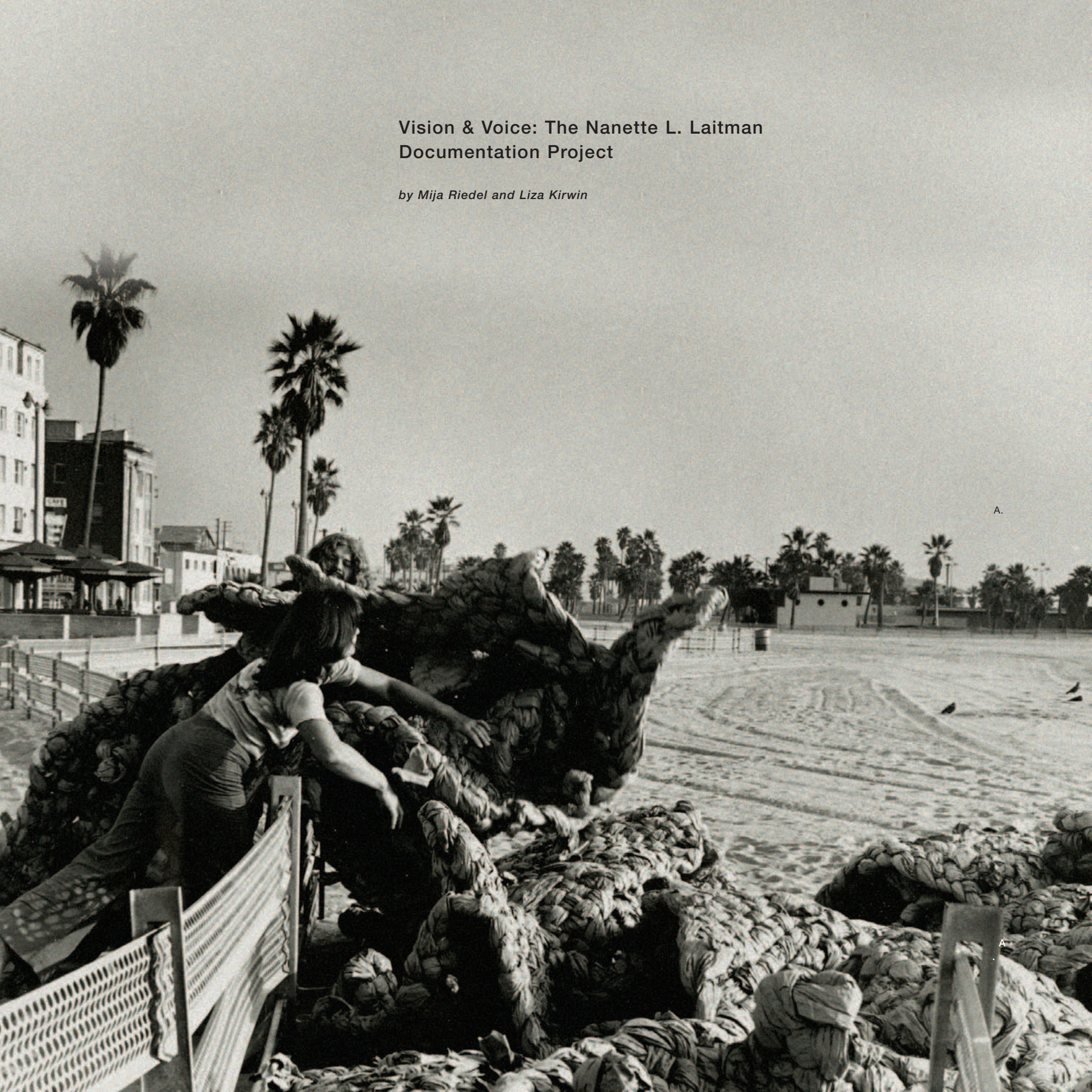


Vision & Voice: The Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project

by Mija Riedel and Liza Kirwin



A.

A.
Neda Al-Hilali
Beach Occurrence
of Tongues, 1975
outdoor fiber installation
Venice Beach
Neda Al-Hilali papers
1960-1995

B.
Ralph Bacerra
Sketch of Shoji Hamada at
a Hamada Workshop at the
University of Southern California,
September 1963
Ralph Bacerra papers
1959-2003



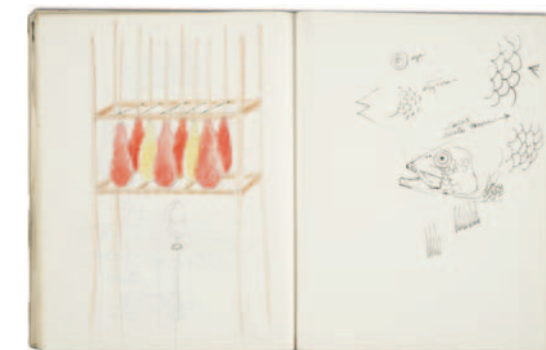
B.

C.
Helkki Seppä Sketchbook
Helkki Seppä papers
1944-1996

D.
Dominic Di Mare
Sketchbook, undated
Dominic Di Mare papers
1950-2002



C.



D.

"I just got to tell you this story," said Fritz Driesbach to Suzanne Frantz, during their lengthy interview for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project. It was 1964 and Driesbach had only been blowing glass for two months when he sought out artist and glass technologist Dominick Labino to ask for a formula. "There was this old guy," said Driesbach, "not old, but there's this white haired—gray haired fellow with a moustache mowing the yard in overalls. And I could see the house and I could see a shop way down at the end...it looked like it could be a barn rather than a studio or a laboratory."

And so I asked the guy that was mowing the yard where I could find Nick Labino—Dominick Labino—Mr. Labino, I think I may have said. And he said, "Yeah, I'm Nick. Are you Fritz?" And he made me welcome right from that very, very moment. And so we went out to the shop and we looked at things, and he did give me the formula."¹

Driesbach's firsthand account of meeting Dominick Labino and the early origins of the "Labino-style furnace,"² is just one of the thousands of stories documenting the events that are fundamental to the history of American art. These expansive

recollections, as well as the personal papers of many craft artists are now preserved at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art and available to researchers, thanks to the vision and generosity of Nanette L. Laitman.

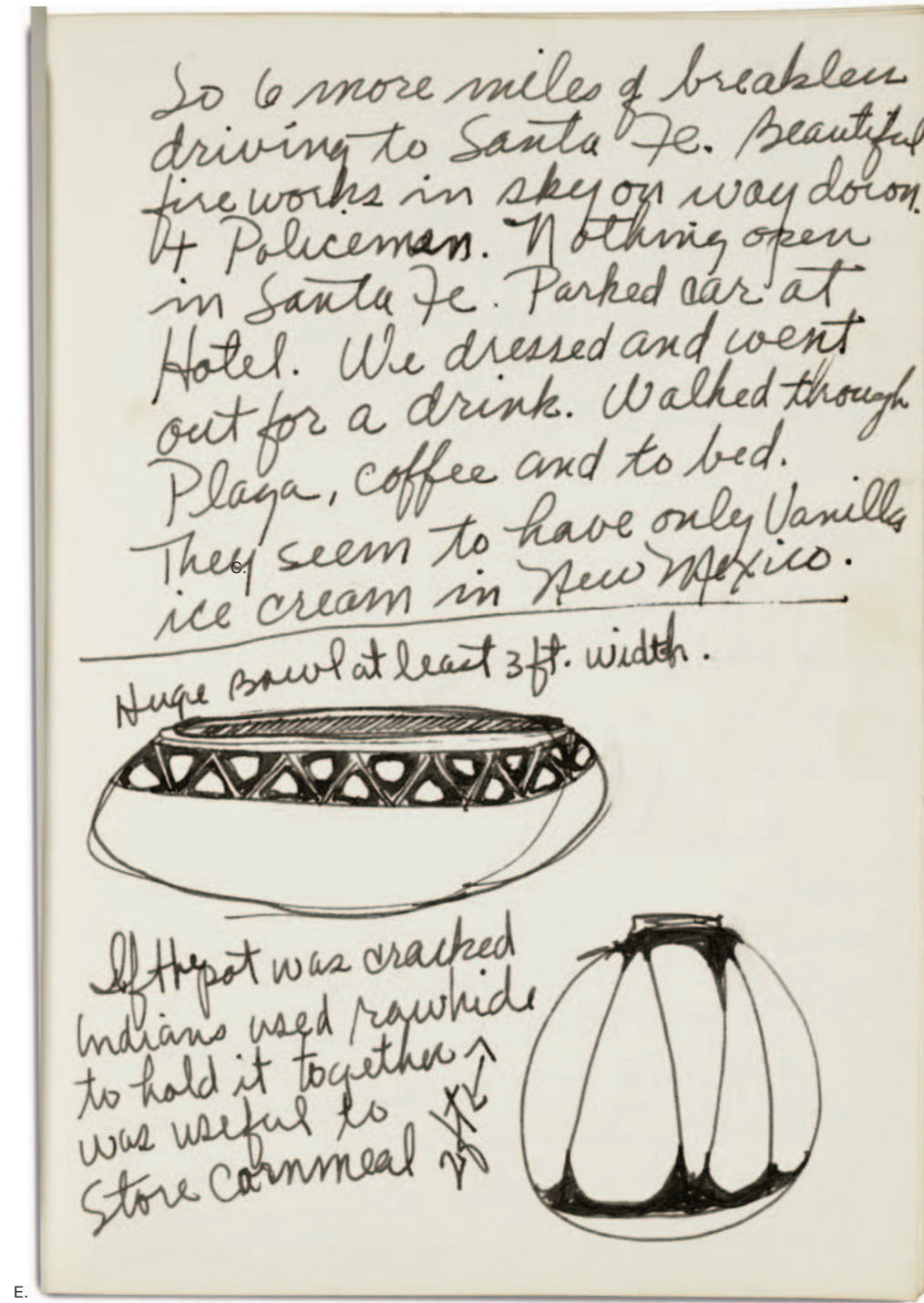
The Smithsonian's Archives of American Art is the world's largest single source of original letters, diaries, financial records, unpublished writings, sketchbooks, scrapbooks, and photographs created by artists, critics, collectors, art dealers, and societies—the raw material for scholarship in American art. In 2000, Nanette L. Laitman gave the Archives a grant to fund an important archival endeavor: the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, a five-year initiative to record and transcribe one hundred in-depth interviews of prominent artists working in clay, glass, fiber, metal, and wood, and to collect their personal papers. Through the accumulation of separate but related collections, the Archives now holds unparalleled primary sources for the study of American craft, placed squarely in the context of the history of the visual arts. Mrs. Laitman's vision is responsible for this rich and growing new group of research materials, which will allow curators, scholars, authors, and

students to further explore both the development and historical context of craft in America.

The oral history interviews, many of which are available online, are the more visible component of this project. The best examples provide a sense of detail, inflection, and character not found in written records. Each interview is recorded digitally in multiple sessions and is at least three hours long. The transcripts are edited in consultation with interviewer and interviewee. All the interviews start with a common set of questions that serve as a point of departure for individual lines of inquiry. Built around such topics as the artist's educational background, working methods, technical interests and innovations, and issues of patronage and influence, the interviews also touch on experiences and preoccupations that emerge across media—for example, apprenticeships, teaching, criticism, and sources of inspiration.

Under the auspices of the Laitman project, the Archives has also gathered more than forty collections of personal papers and gallery records including those of Neda Al-Hilali, Ralph Bacerra, Clayton Bailey, Garry Knox Bennett, William P. Daley, Margaret De Patta, Dominic Di Mare, Arline M. Fisch, Trude Guernonprez, Otto and Vivika Heino, Lloyd E. Herman, L. Brent Kington, Gyöngy Laky, Jack Lenor Larsen, Marvin Lipofsky, John Marshall, James Melchert, Paul and Elmerina Parkman, Antonio Prieto, Merry Renk, Heikki Seppä, Kay Sekimachi, Mary Shaffer, Jean and Hilbert Sosin, Robert Sperry, Bob Stocksdale, and J. Fred Woell, as well as the records of the Candy Store Gallery, Dorothy Weiss Gallery, Fendrick Gallery, the Gallery at Workbench, and Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand and the Spirit. These collections illuminate further the depth, breadth, and evolution of American craft, and illustrate clearly that the diversity of the field is not served by narrow or rigid definitions.

These primary sources lay the foundation for a more nuanced interpretation of craft. They reveal the variety of objects, paintings, sculpture, cultural traditions, and schools of thought that have influenced these artists and their work. Craft is a spectrum. It includes a range of media and a range of forms—from utilitarian vessels, to idea-based works, to conceptual and environmental installations. Borders in craft are porous and frequently in flux. Innovation and experimentation both define the field and make it difficult to define.



E.



F.



G.



H.

E.
Ralph Bacerra
Diary of a driving trip from
Los Angeles to Hopkinton,
New Hampshire with Vivika Heino,
1959 July 1 - September 5
Ralph Bacerra papers
1959-2003

F.
Dominic Di Mare at the
Macomber loom, 1965
photo: Studio Beeson
Dominic Di Mare papers
1950-2002

G.
Gyöngy Laky at UC
Berkeley, ca. 1971
photo: Lou Schneider
Gyöngy Laky papers
1912-2004

H.
Antonio Prieto in his
workshop, undated
photo: Robert John Wright
Antonio Prieto papers
1947-1967

As a group, these materials suggest that to understand more fully the twists and turns of artistic influence and intention, we need to apprehend each artist's aesthetic in his or her own language. James Melchert, artist, Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, and the former director of the Visual Arts Program at the National Endowment for the Arts, proposed studying the field with particular attention to mutable borders. "Somewhere there needs to be a space given to the area between categories, where the edges aren't defined—which is the most interesting to me, when the art/craft categories don't apply."³

In their interviews, Ralph Bacerra speaks of the influence of Persian manuscripts, Japanese prints, and M. C. Escher's interlocking shapes on his patterned ceramics, and Norma Minkowitz looked to Albrecht Dürer for inspiration. She said, "I adored Albrecht Dürer and the fine pen and ink cross hatching of his linear works and his woodcuts." When she makes her fiber pieces, she explains, "I'm actually drawing three dimensionally with the line."⁴

A 1979 exhibition of Alberto Burri's "cracked paintings" impacted Robert Sperry's ideas about content and technique, while referencing memories of nature from his own childhood. Burri "was working with plain fields of cracked materials both white and black. These were exactly like the mud which eventually dried up after the spring runoff sloughs had evaporated... I began to think of the technique which in clay would allow me to express the ideas about energy and impact and interaction which were more and more on my mind."⁵

Many of these artists cited nature as an influence on their work. Dominic Di Mare's father was a commercial fisherman and Di Mare spent much of his childhood at sea, watching the water's surface for signs of fish below. The fishing rituals of his childhood—the exacting crafting of nets, the repetitive casting and retrieving of fishing lines, and the rhythm of the waves—surface in his poetic constructions of wood and horsehair. They're also apparent in his sketchbook explorations of layers, transparency, pattern, and porous borders.

Borders—physical, metaphorical and international—are traversed repeatedly in the course of the Laitman interviews and papers. Frances Senska acknowledges the techniques and attitudes of potters in Cameroon, Africa, where she spent her childhood, for her overall theory of ceramics—from the value of digging one's own clay to symbolic

decorative brushwork. When Gyöngy Laky, at twenty-nine, founded the Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts in Berkeley, she already had lived in Budapest, Vienna, Ohio, Oklahoma, California, Paris, Canada, and India. She later wrote, "What made the textile arts movement of the 70s in Northern California distinctive was that the richness of ethnic diversity, interest in other cultures and other traditions was mixed right in with contemporary art explorations and endless experimentation."⁶

While experimentation was a cornerstone of this extraordinarily creative era, new art forms rarely were embraced outright. In 1991, James Melchert wrote to fellow artist and professor Tony Hepburn regarding his first encounter with the work of Peter Voukos at the Chicago Art Institute in 1957: "I walked in, took one look around and got out. Nothing had upset me before like those parched white wares that he had sent. I remember thinking that somebody in California would do that. The work revolted me and kept on irritating until a year and a few months later, I went off to Montana to sign up for a summer course that he was teaching. I didn't know how else to deal with it."⁷

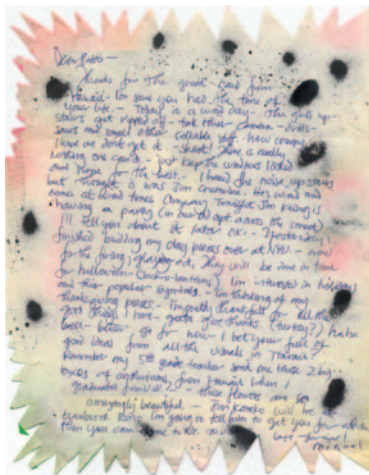
Among Laky's papers are the notes for a lecture in which she remarked, "Robert Hughes once posed the question, 'How can one prepare for the unexpected?' I believe that is what artists do all their lives. Embrace difference and search for change. Undo the order... Look for things that do not go together."⁸

Ron Nagle cites the paintings of Giorgio Morandi as a catalyst for Nagle's own, long-running series of cups. "A lot of ceramic people are very much influenced by Morandi, I think because of the way he rendered or represented dumb kind of objects... the pot was just a vehicle for something else... when you look at a Morandi painting, it's not about a vase; it's about a feeling."⁹ Nagle appreciated that Morandi "took a very simple format which he basically developed and just kept honing it down until it got more and more and more to the essence."¹⁰

While the idea of working in series emerges as a common means of exploration, experimentation, and problem solving, the artists work from different precepts. For J. Fred Woell, the greatest value of producing a series is the "serendipity element"—by allowing chance to enter into how he put things together, the process itself generates new ideas and surprising results.¹¹ Whereas Walter Nottingham works in series to limit his choices in a kind of



I.



J.

I.
Robert Ebendorf to L. Brent Kington, September 2003
letter: 1 p.
L. Brent Kington papers
1955-2001

J.
Michael Lucero to Patti Warashina, ca. 1983
letter: 1 p.
Patti Warashina papers
1961-1991

“structured freedom,” that is, the greater you limit yourself the greater the creativity.¹² Robert Ebendorf talks about his series of pectoral crosses as a means of articulation: “After twenty-seven different crosses, from gold and pearls to sticks and stones, the work had a presence. So I find that working in a series brings about that kind of odor or that kind of voice.”¹³

Often, a shift in intent or a new topic of inquiry necessitates a shift in material. Numerous artists interviewed for the Laitman Project worked with different media over the course of their careers. Robert Sperry made ceramic sculptures and award-winning documentaries; his “papers” contain thirty-nine reels of film. Ron Nagle wrote music. Clayton Bailey made burping ceramic mugs, life-sized metal robots, and ceramic fossils for the faux archeological expeditions of the fictitious Dr. Gladstone, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Bailey, and specialized in the little-studied “pre-credulous” era. Certain artists managed to create a spectrum—from useful to conceptual—in the span of their own careers.

One significant feature of the papers the Archives has collected in the Laitman project is their documentation of impermanent works that lasted only for a month, a weekend, or less. John Roloff’s kiln sculptures are a prime example of the conceptual installations that lie at the opposite end of the craft spectrum from utilitarian objects. Roloff’s work focuses on the interaction between humankind and nature, art and science, and the passing of time, both literally and metaphorically. His research collection contains videotapes of installations and events, some of which occurred in a single evening more than a decade ago.

Neda Al-Hilali installed site-specific constructions in a dozen locations from West Coast to East. The photographs of these pieces—*Cassiopeia’s Court* at Scripps College, *Beach Occurrence of Tongues* in Venice, California, *Feathers* at New York’s Artpark—are among the only records of their existence. Sketches can take impermanence a dimension further, allowing us to see ideas and designs that never cleared the drawing board. Al-Hilali’s proposal for a colorful snake rising up from the earth, looping through the air, disappearing back under the ground and surfacing repeatedly around a Los Angeles sculpture park exists only as a series of collaged photographs.¹⁴

Much of metalsmith John Marshall’s work was commissioned by private clients. One of the few public

records of these sculptures is the photographs and original renderings included in Marshall’s papers. Such drawings allow a rare glimpse of the visual mind at work—composing, assembling, and reconfiguring. Heikki Seppä’s journals illustrate the continual dialog between concepts and skills. Seppä advocated inventive techniques and the exhaustive examination of form as methods for evolving silver into an expressive medium; one of the more specific pages in his sketchbooks clarifies the requisite lines of a dripless tea spout. Margaret De Patta’s sketches illustrate the artist’s ongoing exploration of structure and open forms. Kay Sekimachi’s and Neda Al-Hilali’s papers include graphs of complex woven patterns.

Clayton Bailey’s ceramic evidence of the “pre-credulous” era existed long enough to be photographed and reported by Dr. Gladstone. Were it not for rare copies of *The Unnatural Enquirer*, a four-page tabloid found among Bailey’s papers, Gladstone’s contributions to science might have disappeared altogether.

Bailey’s more and less serious approaches to making art exemplify the playful investigations that figure prominently in numerous artists’ teaching philosophies. William P. Daley relishes the idea of teaching as experimentation. He noted, “I think in some ways the connection between information and formation and transformation is at the core of what education’s about... I’m always absolutely amazed by what students do when they give themselves to suspending their disbelief, and practice openly enough so that they can enter a domain where they are not worried about outcome.”¹⁵

Many teachers found working in the studio along side their students an essential part of the learning experience. Art Carpenter insisted that his work pay for itself. His studio became his classroom. “I became a teacher by precept,” he said. “That was my method of teaching. I went ahead and worked on whatever I was working on and let other people work alongside or just watch. And there was absolutely no formal organization.”¹⁶

Others like Ralph Bacerra found it difficult to teach and work at the same time. “I couldn’t really work in the studio during class/school time,” he noted. “It was difficult because my head was not there... Now that I have all this time and no students, no school, it’s probably the best time of my life right now.”¹⁷

Dorothy Gill Barnes realized that her best teaching was not in the classroom, but was out in the field

K.
Trude: The All American Girl,
comic strip, undated
Trude Guermonprez papers
1929-1986



K.

where she could show students how to properly harvest their materials—bark, vines, twigs, grasses and the like. “I knew from the start that if they didn’t have the material experience that [students] weren’t going to catch on to what we were talking about.”¹⁸

James Melchert wrote, “Bob Irwin used to talk so eloquently about art making as a means for acquiring new knowledge. Essentially, he argued that, unless we think that we already know everything that can be known, we had better attend to what we have yet to discover and understand. As you’ll see in his paper, Ed Levine [Professor of Visual Arts and Director, Visual Arts Program at MIT] goes into how science and art are complementary and gain complementary insights from research. I think that if we can justify spending federal funds on scientific research, we’re equally justified in supporting aesthetic research.”¹⁹

Historically, new art forms rarely receive a warm reception. Artists often depend on patrons, grants and residencies to support their work. Philanthropy, often flowing from individuals, continues to play a significant role in the American art world. In her testimony before a Congressional subcommittee twenty-five years ago, Gyöngy Laky described the kind of vision behind such generosity: “Support for the arts and for artists encourages a continuing regeneration and reformulation of meaning and symbols. When the arts flourish and when a society enthusiastically supports the arts, we have the possibility to constantly refresh our existence. We must not hesitate to make the essential investment.”²⁰ In this particular case, we are indebted and grateful to Nanette L. Laitman for her contribution.

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¹Interview of Fritz Driesbach conducted by Suzanne Frantz, 21-22 April 2004.

²Ibid.

³“Notes for craft essay.” James Melchert papers.

⁴Interview of Norma Minkowitz conducted by Patricia Malarcher, 17 September and 16 November 2001.

⁵Robert Sperry journal, undated. Robert Sperry papers.

⁶“Raising the Current” lecture notes, San Jose, February 1996. Gyöngy Laky papers.

⁷Letter from James Melchert to Tony Hepburn, 19 December 1991 (fax transmission). James Melchert papers.

⁸“Geometry of Form and Sculptural Constructions,” lecture notes for Art/Math at University of California, Berkeley, 5 August 1998. Gyöngy Laky papers.

⁹Interview of Ron Nagle conducted by Bill Berkson, 8-9 July 2003.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Interview of J. Fred Woell conducted by Donna Gold, 6 and 11 June 2001 and 9 January 2002.

¹²Interview of Walter Nottingham conducted by Carol Owen, 14, 15, and 18 July 2002.

¹³Interview of Robert Ebendorf conducted by Tacey Rosolowski, 16-18 April 2004.

¹⁴Proposal for Barnsdall Park, The Reappearance of the Snake. Neda Al-Hilali papers.

¹⁵Interview of William P. Daley conducted by Helen Drutt English, 7 August and 2 December 2004.

¹⁶Interview of Arthur Espenet Carpenter conducted by Kathleen Hanna, 20 June and 4 September 2001.

¹⁷Interview of Ralph Bacerra conducted by Frank Lloyd, 12 and 19 April 2004.

¹⁸Interview of Dorothy Gill Barnes conducted by Joanne Cubbs, 2 and 7 May 2003.

¹⁹Letter from James Melchert to Bill Barrett, Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design (fax transmission), 8 March 1995. James Melchert papers.

²⁰Gyöngy Laky typescript of testimony before the Congressional Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education, 16 February 1980. Gyöngy Laky papers.

All materials cited are part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. To view completed transcripts online visit the Archives’ website at www.aaa.si.edu. The authors wish to thank Darcy Tell, Joan Lord, and Erin Corley for their assistance with the preparation of this essay.