

Q: Hi, we're in the studio with Sono Osato. I'm Karen Nelson. I'm here with Karen Tsujimoto. Robert Boudreaux and Cedric Pound, are doing the video taping, and I want to thank you first of all for letting us come here and do an interview; we really appreciate this. This is for the exhibition "Meaning and Message: Contemporary Art from the Museum Collection" at the Oakland Museum of California. And my first question is, how did you get interested in art?

A: I got interested in art when I was very little, when I was a little girl. I started studying in this little tiny school called the Bemis Art School in Colorado Springs, associated with the Fine Arts Center in Colorado College. At the time, it was in a little white cottage, and my teacher Ms. Owens used to keep temper paints in the bathtub. We painted on our work surface picnic tables. And that's how it all started; and it just stuck. I studied art for the rest of my life.

Q: And then did you go to college and study art?

A: I got my undergraduate degree at Arizona State University and my master's degree here in Oakland at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1986.

Q: And then when you were first starting out, were you doing artwork similar to the *Fossil* that is in the exhibition?

A: Yes, *Fossil* was I think 1987 or 88. I graduated in 86 and the work I was doing by the time I completed my graduate work was sort of the opening to my mature work, relating to working with found objects and also with these heavy encaustic paintings that you see around you.

Q: Were there any particular artists or events that influenced your work or that you particularly liked?

A: I was not influenced in the sense of any kind of specific lineage or attempting to align myself with particular art movements. There was more of a general overall feeling of art history, but also living specifically in the Bay Area, being affected by for instance, Jay Defeo. This was her studio prior to me moving in. She tragically died as you know in 89 of cancer and about three or four months after Jay died, I moved in. There's actually a little piece up above the the door of the studio that is like a talisman or a small shrine that says "My Blob, Jay's Blob," because both of us have worked with very heavy paint, so needless to say, there's globs of paint on the floor. So I just took one of mine and one of hers and it's over the door to commemorate who's been here. So, she wasn't an influence from the beginning, but she's been somebody who has more and more of a presence. Also, I'm just affected a lot by my friends; a lot of my friends are writers, and I find a great deal of influence such as from the late Paul Metcalf and Rebecca Solnit, who's a Bay Area writer. She and I share a lot of ideas, and mainly just the ambience of the community.

Q: Because you do both paintings and sculptures, do you have a different approach when you're working on them, or what kinds of things are you thinking about?

A: That's an interesting question. The paintings themselves exist a lot like sculpture. In the sense that they, first of all, there's a lot of heavy encaustic, heavy material that has intense density so they exist in space either by being leaned on the floor, against the wall, or I've done whole installations with them, including an installation at the Oakland Museum in this show called *Oakland Artists 90*, where I made a room out of them. So there are sculptural concerns that are ingrained in the painting process and then in the sculpture process, which often is working with found objects. A lot of my classical training in drawing and painting (my undergraduate degree is in drawing and my master's degree is in painting) Of course it has to do with sort of a linearity and composition in form, these kinds of things. So I think there's a strong graphic sense in what would be traditionally thought of as my sculptures, things that are 3-D. There are examples around the studio, but I am very interested in the relationship between calligraphy and optics, and how specific shapes say things to us. I also mentioned that I am influenced a lot by writers and I've had a



of conversations with some of my friends about the relationship between flesh and language. So, that's something I'm interested in.

Q: You were talking about the relationship of your art to calligraphy, and how you were having conversations with writers. So, in talking about the relationship between flesh and language, does that somehow influence the materials you're using or techniques you're using in making your art?

A: Yes, it does influence my materials in that it influences what I look for because part of the art making process is often, what I talk to my students about; it is research. For me, it's like looking at the world around me. I am always scanning, it's a word that Arthur Okumura uses a lot; scanning; looking for things. I am always looking at the ground or things that I pick up. I'm attracted to shapes that are very linear. Also another thing I'm attracted to is old hardware; things that have to do with how things are machined. Everything is becoming so digital now. For instance, I am taking apart old typewriters and it's really amazing the way some of these old things were machined; the way they were fit together. So they have a kind of animation to them. That's another relationship that I find fascinating between language and machinery; how things fit together and gears; how things move about and how that has to do with the way we think. I find all that very fascinating.

Q: And with the *Fossil* piece, the piece that is going to be in the exhibition, do you want to talk a little about that piece and how it came to be?

A: Of course. The *Fossil* piece, which is in the exhibition and in the collection at the Oakland Museum, comes from a series of work that I did for awhile, and I still think I do somewhat, that uses furniture as an armature. The reason why furniture becomes the armature is because it creates almost, not exactly, a trick, because it occupies that space between life and art, where you're not sure if it's a table just sitting there or a work of art. I've used tables, there are some examples around the studio; I've used tables and shelves and little things like that as armatures and then there is an arrangement around it. It relates a lot to the intimacy of people's daily lives and in their homes or in their immediate environments. Everybody I think, when we get in the putter mode, we tend to shift objects around and how that sense of shifting objects becomes a form of poetry. *Fossil* is a pretty straightforward piece, there's not a lot of objects. It includes one of my old palettes with a palette knife that is stuck in the palette, and old paint can, and beneath is actually a found object that I think I found on the Oakland wharf. It clearly has an old pip encrusted in it. You can tell that it is something very old and it comes from Oakland history. I set up a relationship between what is found and then what came from my studio. The surfaces look a lot alike, which is something I do often. I take a human made or machine made, or things that are metal, and put them next to something that came from the earth, and there's a similarity between them. The other thing about *Fossil* as well, is that I often recycle all my detritus from the studio process, including the painting process. Back into sculpture, the spatula is stuck in there incidentally, it's something that happened. I picked it up and recognized it as something that is aesthetic and reincorporated it into the sculpture. So it is a moment frozen in time of the very last time I dropped the spatula onto the palette.

Q: When visitors are looking at your piece, is there something that you want them to be thinking about or know about or understand while they're looking at it?

A: Yes, what I would like for visitors to understand when they look at my work is a sense of time. A sense of time and density. That time is slowed down significantly and also the breadth of time has widened significantly. To start to stretch their minds beyond our lifetimes or how we measure time into something entirely different. The paintings themselves speak a lot about the geological history of the earth. Back again in terms of my relationship to writers: Paul Metcalf wrote a lot of beautiful poetry about the way coal is pressed to shale and the living memory of the earth and how it created itself. Which is what my paintings are about. There is that sense of constant accumulation and density, and the deeper you go down, the more things become compressed. Also, that sense of very long breath in time that nature experiences. Our lifetimes are very tiny in comparison to, for instance, how long it took to create the Rocky Mountains. I just came from the Grand Canyon and you can literally see the layers of the earth. The top layer is



20 million years old and the bottom layer is 500 million years old and you can literally see it. I think that's what I want for people to get out of it, is to move beyond themselves into a much broader area.

Q: How has your work changed since you've done *Fossil*? Do you see your work shifting?

A: There is a shift in my work since I've done *Fossil*; it's subtle. I do not work in a way where I do this series and another series and another series. It's not linear. I work on a lot of different ideas at the same time and there are ideas that I still work on now, which is I think 12 years since I did *Fossil*. One of the transitions is that my work has become more delicate. I think part of it is that when I was in my early 20's I just had much more bravado in terms of how much I collected, how much I lugged around, and how much I would try to transform into art. Now I am doing a series with old typewriter parts that have become almost lace-like as opposed to the *Fossil* piece which is fairly klunky. It's right there, it's right in your face. I think I've just become more subtle in my old age. For the most part a lot of the same ideas mean a lot to me. Fundamentally I have not changed my views.

Q: Do you have any questions you would like to ask?

Q: My whole perspective, looking back, I'll be able to see the 19th century. When I look around here, I get that sense of 19th century, early 20th century industrial. So, I will not be, 100 years from now, a participant of this time. What do you think I would get by going beyond the material of your art to the consciousness of you, what would I get from your art?

A: That's a very good question. What would you get from my art 100 years from now.

Q: How would that work hold up, because we're constantly going digital?

A: That's a very good question because the aspect of looking at something that's handmachined in a digital age brings up a possible sense of nostalgia. However, I also feel that again in terms of slowing time down, that in essence we're not really changing. For instance, there's the dialogue, how much the computer has revolutionized our future. But, if you think about it very deeply, the printing press which was invented 500 years ago, 600 years ago, completely revolutionized the culture. My hope would be, of course, the work endorses time. There are certain things that are timeless; in terms of form, composition, beauty, how the whole thing holds together. I still look at Raphael. I still look at art that was made 200-400 years ago. And it stands up; it assists people to understanding the time in which the work was made.

Q: There was a second part to it. I look at your paintings and there is a real sense of timelessness. I'm seeing beyond the strata of the earth. When I look at your sculpture, I am walked into time of the process of the pieces. How do you choose? At what point do you say I'm going to paint because I want to be timeless? Or do you do that? Do you find an object that is itself encased in a point in time, and then you take it and make it timeless?

A: Yes, that is part of the process. The word that is coming to me is alchemy. But, it is difficult. To me it is very challenging to work with found objects because you have to transcend the specificity of what they are. Also found objects, because of their antiquity, have an immediate charm. So it's really easy to do slap-dash sculpture, when you're just putting this stuff together and it looks cool. To actually work with found objects in a really meaningful way in which you're making work that is going to stand the test of time, that is not 75th generation Duchampian, that has an originality of its own. So, a lot of it for me is the concept of language; that objects are placed in juxtaposition to one another because there is the felt sense, and intuitive sense, of sound, of shape, of form. You can do that with any type of object depending on your sensitivity to it, how you bring that sense of arrangement and juxtaposition together. Just even on subliminal level, somebody 100 years from now would recognize at the very least, the forms and shapes and how it's put together. Somehow physically in their body, it would make sense to them, because it's resonant; it's speaking from that real deep intuitive place and it resonates. Which is one of the



Things that I think makes work timeless. Also, working with typewriters and these pieces of digital pieces of hardware, in essence it is talking about our digital age. In a sense that it is talking about the roots of the digital age, and also just that sense of texture and rhythm that computers fire, almost like neurons fire. It's interesting to me to explore that as almost a musical investigation. The flourishes and rhythms, even just the sound when somebody's typing. I play with all this stuff, I hope it doesn't sound too abstract. I really find it really interesting.

Q: What's interesting is you mentioning typewriter parts because of language being an important influence in your work. Have you ever thought about using words or language directly in your artwork?

A: I have thought about using words and language directly in my artwork. The reason why I have not is because I want people to feel the work, to intuit the work and feel it in their bodies. I rely a lot on the power of implication. If that makes sense.

Q: ?

A: The reason why my paintings have such heavy build-up layers; a lot of it relates to my process, I view it a lot as what I think of as the process of embodiment. When I look at the geological history of the earth, for instance lava, or substances like that, lava is something that I think about metaphorically. Several people have told me that I have to go to Hawaii. They have sent me photographs of the black beaches in Hawaii because it always reminds them of my paintings which is wonderful to me because that is part of what I'm talking about. I'm imagining often this sense of what created the earth's surfaces and in a way transferring that to the paint. So rather than viewing paint as merely a vehicle for pigment or a vehicle to make pictures, I view paint as a real substance. Which is part of the reason why it takes on such a sculptural feel. I had another answer for you and I'm trying to remember what it was. It's true there's density. Some people have said there is a relationship to late minimalism, but that's actually not the point. They're very subtle, so it's not a flat, same color straight across. There's a lot of subtle shifts. In the sense that they are a real thing rather than a painting of something. So, in essence it's a transference from the body, if this is making any sense, to the canvas. The fact that they are very topographical is fully intentional and mandatory. They speak about the surface of the earth, the surface of the ocean, the surface of the moon, the surface of our skin. What is of the body. I think if I did not build it up through that kind of movement, I wouldn't be able to truthfully convey that. So, my attempt is that they're kind of consistent all the way through. But I also would say that they are kind of rooted in the tradition of painting. I was speaking to a student a couple of weeks ago and I asked her if her painting began on the surface of the canvas or if it began right behind the canvas and came through. This is something that great painters have always been concerned with Caravaggio people like that where you can sense a light or an ambiance just coming. The painting is coming from the inside outward. This is a similar concern, that when you are looking at it, it feels as though it's real and dense and goes all the way through rather than just being applied on the surface.

Q: How do you approach colors? A lot of times machine parts, especially found are rusted and fatigued. How do you approach colors? What do you think about?

A: Color is something I think about. Again, it's deeply felt and intuited. The palette is informed by the earth. There's one painting around the corner in my apartment that's all red. That piece has to do with blood. I think a lot about iron ore. I think a lot about volcanoes, plate tectonics, the relationship between our bodies and the earth's body that we exist on. And how we have flesh and we have blood and the earth has flesh and it has a crust, it has blood, it has the volcanic lava. How that drives the surface of the earth. And, of course, the oceans. So, there's a sympathetic relationship between our bodies and the earth. That's what I think about in my palette. Actually, the underpaintings of my paintings start out using deep reds and oranges related to the earth's innards and our innards and then it works it's way out to a final crust through a series of colors. In some ways they're almost like impressionist paintings because the impressionists would create color by many, many layers of color; one on top of the other so they would vibrate and then it would create on whole sensation. These do the same thing as well, although they're dark. If you'll look at one of the payoffs, when you look at them very closely or spend time looking at them you notice the



subtlety and shifts of color by the time it finally gets up to the surface.

Q: You were talking about, earlier, about working at Point Reyes at the Headlands (Sausalito) and I wondered if you would like to share a little bit about that experience.

A: My final year of graduate school, 1986, was when the Headlands Center of the Arts first emerged down at Fort Cronkite at the Headlands, there were 2 buildings at that time. I was in a class with Dennis Leon and Linda Connor and it was a kind of collaboration of San Francisco Art Institute and CCAC. The class was about landscape, and I ended up having the studio there for the next three years. It was pivotal in my work because the Marin Headlands is some of the most ancient rock on the continent, or maybe even the world (we'll have to talk to a scientist about that). I do know that it is very ancient and geologists have come to the Marin Headlands to do research about plate tectonics because apparently there are traces the magnetic shift of the earth and all this other stuff. I view the Headlands as a power place; it's really an amazing place. That sense of the history, and also being next to the ocean constantly hearing just the sounds of the surf, completely affected my work. So it shifted from image based painting to painting that was heavily influenced by process. It was unavoidable but also it was the people I worked with. As you know I worked with David Ireland who's very process oriented as you know, and it was the people I was working with at the time Dennis Leon who I could say was an influence, who just tragically passed away actually last October. I was listening to different voices about what people were talking about and then being out in that powerful environment. You saw the shift of the seasons, time is slow there, all the evidence is there, I felt a need to respond.

Q: Since you talked about the rhythm of the waves and things, because certainly in your painting and even in the *Fossil* piece there is sort of a rhythm or a pattern in your pieces visually?

A: Part of it is the movement of the body, so the painting process is not just going like this. You know when I work with my students, I really try to get them to paint with their body. It's something that comes from my training. My teacher always use to give me a hard time about painting from the middle of your back in a way. Part of it is that when you look at the surface of the paintings you can see my rhythm of movement. In order to speak about physicality, to me it's very important to be consistent you know, to be what you say. The process is intensely physical.

Q: In your paintings there is this response to nature; the birth of the earth I look around and I see manmade coils, and wire and typewriter keys and I think in my own mind, I can reconcile that. But when we go around and take studio shots, can you help explain to our viewers how they can reconcile the two?

A: Again, back to the *Fossil* piece, where there's the palette and the palette knife that has the residue of the painting process, but it is clearly made by me. Then the found object that came from the Oakland Wharf, has an encrusted old piece of pipe, but through the aging process it looks like the palette. There's a juxtaposition between what is machine made and then what is natural. As Bob (Boudreaux) pointed out, it's rusty. Rust is a real substance. Even though these things have been machined, they too come from nature, they're made from ore. I think that for the viewer to reconcile it has to do with sort of contemplating how we find ourselves in the world and what we do. Even though you would think of something industrial and something that comes from nature as being completely different paradigms, in fact, industry would not exist if we didn't have the iron age. In a way it's sort of rethinking history, rethinking our place in history and how things are interconnected. The digital age presents a whole new ball game because it is pulling us more and more out of our bodies.

Q: What hit me was that somebody used that, someone typed on that. And that person is dead, long gone and yet what they did lives on this piece and it will also go on living. So it's a full circle. Does that factor into your thinking?

A: Completely. I mentioned the Impressionists, Duchamp, all those are true influences. But I really want my work to be part of a human dialogue so that people do think about "somebody did touch this". It's very tricky.

When you work with found objects you're working with something that is automatically charming; it has a sense of antiquity, it has a sense of wonder. But what Bob is referring to, in the sense that somebody did touch it or it came from somewhere, adds to its power. It's power I have a lot of respect for as an artist and I'm aware that it is in there when I'm working with it and how I guide that or how I create context. I think a lot of what artists are doing is not just making physical objects but you're building context. And I think that artists need to be very aware of it and they need to take responsibility for it and be very contemplative about it. So, I tend to be light-handed with the idea that the things I use have a history. I don't want to rely on that completely for the power of the piece. The power of the piece has a lot to do with how the things are put together in a certain way to cause somebody to first of all be interested in it long enough to look at it, long enough to have an experience and thoughts of their own. Definitely it's very important knowing that these things came from somewhere. I also think part of wondering where they came from contributes too. Another thing that I want to happen is a sense of reflectivity; reflecting about ourselves; that these pieces reflect something back to us about ourselves. I forgot the term, but that's pretty much what I'm searching for and I think is one of the greatest purposes of art is self-reflection. It's mirror held up to culture. So that it can check itself.