



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rosanne Somerson

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Rosanne Somerson
Identifier:	AAA.somers06
Date:	2006 August 7 and 2007 June 22
Extent:	61 Pages (Transcripts)
Creator:	Somerson, Rosanne, 1954- Michie, Thomas S. Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Language:	English .

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Biographical / Historical

Rosanne Somerson (1954-) is a professor of furniture design and furniture designer and maker in Westport, Massachusetts. Thomas Michie is a curator of decorative arts, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Rosanne Somerson conducted 2006 August 7-2007 June 22, by Thomas Michie, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, Rhode Island. In part one of this interview, Somerson speaks of growing up outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; attending RISD beginning in 1971; being asked to teach there nine years later; creating a new department of furniture design; tailoring that furniture design program to encompass the development from design to manufacture; introducing materials other than wood into the program; garnering international attention through worldwide exhibits; her first show at the Richard Kagan Gallery in Philadelphia; participating in a group show in New York City for female woodworkers; making connections through the Snyderman Gallery and Pritam and Eames Gallery; working directly with clients on commissioned pieces; the financial stability of teaching; designing a piece for the headquarters of Khon, Peterson Fox, and Conway in New York; the sculptural elements present in many of her works; moving from a small studio in Boston, Massachusetts, to a larger studio

in Westport, Connecticut, and finally to a shared studio in Fall River, Massachusetts; the supportive and proud reaction of her children to her work; creating a production company with colleagues and designing furniture for the RISD dormitories; attempting to make these designs both flexible and environmentally-friendly; putting aside teaching for an administrative position in the department; recent travel to Japan, Australia, England, Israel, and France; enrolling in summer programs with art schools like Haystack Mountain School of Craft in Maine and others; and excitement for her upcoming sabbatical.

Scope and Contents

In the second portion of the interview, she discusses living in a house built by her father in Wyncote, Pennsylvania; enjoying the location of the house on a former cherry orchard and consequently being drawn cherry wood as a medium; the feeling of her parents that anything could be accomplished with a certain amount of study; her mother's interest in weaving and spinning later in life; the creative pursuits of her older brothers, including creative writing and photography; verbally communicating the outside world to her blind grandfather and gaining an aptitude for interpreting visual imagery; being more academically than artistically focused in her youth; visiting art museums and having other cultural experiences with her family; being fascinated with photography by seeing her brother's work; deciding to put off college in order to spend a year in Denmark studying photography; enrolling in RISD and feeling overwhelmed at first by her inexperience; taking a winter course in wood-working and preferring it to photography; being advised by her teacher Tage Frid to gain a wood-working education by pursuing sculpture at RISD; transferring into industrial design later; learning a great deal from and being extraordinarily influenced by Tage Frid as a furniture designer and teacher; taking a semester off to attend Peters Valley Craftsmen in New Jersey; spending a few years after graduation assisting Frid with the writing and publication of his articles; working as an assistant editor for Fine Woodworking magazine; being offered a job at RISD in the furniture department; creating the furniture design program; using RISD's collection as inspiration for her work and as a teaching tool; moving towards using more local woods in her designs; her recent lecture and travel in China; and looking forward to focusing on her work in the new studio.

Scope and Contents

Somerson recalls John Dunnigan, Dick Kagan, Ned Cooke, Jonathan Fairbanks, Wendy Maruyama, James Krenov, Dan Jackson, Jere Osgood, Alphonse Mattia, Peter Joseph, Ron Abramson, Charlie Swanson, Eck Follen, Peter Walker, and others. In the second part, Somerson recalls Merlin Szasz, LeRoy White, Hardu Keck, Gracia Melanson, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Paul Crot, Paul Capanigro, Tage Frid, Hans Wolfe, Mark Sfirri, and others.

General

Originally recorded on 5 sound discs. Reformatted in 2010 as 2 digital wav files. Duration is 3 hr., 3 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Decorative arts
Educators -- Rhode Island -- Interviews
Furniture design -- Study and teaching
Photography
Women artists

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Abramson, Ron
Callahan, Harry M.
Capanigro, Paul
Cooke, Ned
Dunnigan, John, 1950-
Fairbanks, Jonathan L.
Follen, Eck
Frid, Tage
Haystack Mountain School of Crafts
Jackson, Dan
Joseph, Peter T. (Peter Thomas), 1950-1998
Kagan, Richard
Keck, Hardu
Kranov, James
Maruyama, Wendy, 1952-
Mattia, Alphonse
Melanson, Gracie
Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Osgood, Jere, 1936-
Peters Valley (Craft center)
Rhode Island School of Design -- Faculty
Rhode Island School of Design -- Students
Richard Kagan Gallery
Sfirri, Mark
Siskind, Aaron
Snyderman Gallery
Swanson, Charlie
Szasz, Merlin
White, Leroy
Wolf, Hans

Occupations:

Furniture designers -- Rhode Island

Functions:

Artists' studios

Preferred Titles:

Fine woodworking