

Interview with Michele Oka Doner

[city noises interspersed throughout]

Interviewer
Kathy Hersh:

My name is Kathy Hersh, and I'm interviewing the artist Michele Oka Doner under a tree on Miami Beach. Today's date is May 24, 2016. This is for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project archive. Thank you so much for being flexible. We really appreciate that.

Oka Doner:

My pleasure.

Interviewer:

So why are we here under this tree?

Oka Doner:

We're under this tree that was planted, if not by Carl Fisher, by his personal gardeners, because this is the old Orchard Subdivision, and this is where Russell Pancoast had his home and his mentor, Mr. Geiger. It's walking distance from here. I was born in a Russell Pancoast house on 30th Street. There were two: 515 West 30th Street, and I think it's 535 West 30th. One was a Mission Revival. The other was Spanish Revival. And in 1951, my parents built a house that is across the street from this tree and in the new style, so to speak. And it was a new era, post-World War II. It had poured Cuban-tile floors, an open plan. It was seamless, open, no barriers for living room and dining rooms, skylights, a Florida room.

Really very modern notions that were being experimented with for the first time. Of course, what happened to the orchards is, in 1925, the Great Hurricane knocked down everything. This was avocado and coconut, and they were going to be harvested and taken on the canal, the Collins Canal. John Collins and Carl Fisher realized this was a folly, and then they went to Venice, got the gondolas, put them in the canal and sold real estate. This was the first area. This tree was planted. Being here is sort of, in a way, ground zero. This was a park. It's where we played. It was not a par-three golf course. It had swing set, one swing set, and we could literally roll out of bed and come over here.

It was safe. The neighborhood was safe. Every place we could walk, there were empty lots. TV came in, and *Tarzan* was one of the big programs. So imagine having this banyan tree with hanging roots and tropical birds. It was just a great place to grow up. So I come to this tree all the time, and I had my 50th birthday here. It's, for me, a piece of architecture. It's timeless. It's been here as long as I have, one of the few anchors of unchanging Miami Beach, and it's like me. We're getting older, and we're getting older together, this tree and I.

Interviewer:

You think that your life and your art would be different if you had grown up in Wisconsin or someplace different than Miami Beach?

Oka Doner:

Zora Neale Hurston, the wonderful writer, is also a daughter of Florida. I was born and raised in Miami Beach. She was born and raised in

Eatonville. She starts her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road* with this wonderful sentence. I'll quote her, because it applies to me as well. "I have memories within that came out of the materials that went to make me. Time and place have had their say. These are the shapes I know, and this is the light I know, and these are the forms I know, and these are the materials I know."

For me, materials aren't bought in the art store. They were sand. They were dirt. They were wood. They were stone, rock, the patterns in the oolitic limestone. I could walk, and I did every Saturday morning, to what's now the Bass Museum. It was my public library. I had my own library card from the time I was maybe in second or third grade. I could walk myself across this field, stop at this tree, stop at the fire station, and then go over the little bridge, and I was there. Maybe 10, 12-minute walk. Safe.

Ronny was the librarian. She knew me, and there was a book cart there of what was new and what was in. I got three books. I headed back. The next week, I took them back. I wasn't the only one. I knew other children. Sometimes I would sit and read there on the floor, but not often. I would mostly return and sit under a tree in my own backyard. It became where I studied in high school, too, the library, so that's another place. But it has changed. It's now an art museum. The wonderful stone in the building is still there, but this tree is more untouched and more primal a reminder and a thread, a golden thread, for me running through my life.

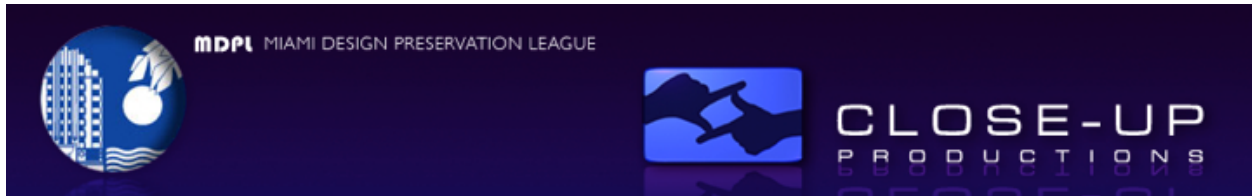
Interviewer: As a child, did you pick up little artifacts from the ground and haul them home and do things with them?

Oka Doner: Yes, and if you have a moment to go and see my exhibition at the Perez [Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM)], which is going to be there all summer, you'll see there's two exhibitions. There's the one that is curated by the museum and insured and packaged, and then there's a shadow exhibition of all the things that I find and pick up and collect. Thom Collins, in his wonderful wisdom, was the curator and now the director of the Barnes Foundation. He said, "You have everything together, and this is as important a display as the curated display," so we called it a shadow exhibition so it wouldn't have to be insured and give the registrar at the museum a nervous breakdown because there's hundreds of items.

Interviewer: I wonder how children have responded to that shadow exhibit.

Oka Doner: I think that people do what E. M. Forster — I love these words as well. You can see I was a reader from early on, and I still am. He said, "Only connect." I'm not sure, I think it's the end of *Passage to India* or maybe *Howard's End*. I have to go look that up. I can no longer be fuzzy about that. Yes, I have two sons, and I have two grandchildren. My son commented last week, one of them, that everything was around the home and nothing ever got broken.

So what they learned was to manage their bodies and to respect the world as I saw it, through my lens, while they lived in my home. When they complained now and then about something, I always said, "I understand that. One day, you'll curate your own life," and I used the word. Of course, now they love everything, but sometimes when you're a teenager and your home is different than other people's, it could be rigorous.



Interviewer: So their home was different then.

Oka Doner: I was a hunter-gatherer.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: Our life was not - my studio wasn't purchased at the art supply store, and the things in our home weren't purchased in a gift shop. I found most of the things, and I found other things and cultures I traveled to, that also looked at primary materials and saw possibilities, saw roots that were connected, about connectedness. Two eyes in the stone and saw a face. This is as primal as it gets. I love Sir Herbert Read's [Sir Herbert Edward Read] essay in *The Art of Sculpture* called *The Amulet in the Monument* [The Monument and the Amulet].

So here we're sitting in the monument. For him, the monument was the cave, and the amulet was that stone that was carved by nature. It had a hole in it. It had a crack, that our ancestors would have said, "That looks like a face. The crack is like a smile." They would resonate with natural objects. That's in our DNA. We're wired to do that. I started that here, and I continue that wherever I live, wherever I go.

Interviewer: Growing up here, we were talking earlier about your father being a judge and then had one term as mayor or more?

Oka Doner: Two.

Interviewer: Two. I love what you were saying about how that influenced your thinking. Could you expound on that a little bit please?

Oka Doner: When I was born in 1945, and that was the first year my father ran for judge, and so my childhood, my first 12 years, were three elections. I remember very well having to pose for the pictures and having to be told that maybe other children could wear their skirt too short or their hair too teased or smoke, but not me, because I represented something.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: The idea that life was sacred, really, and that you had to pay attention to monitor what we were given as humans, the rights to take care of ourselves and other people, to behave fairly, to in a way mind your own life, to master yourself instead of wanting to appropriate what somebody had — these were very interesting ideas for a child. Even the notion of self-mastery today is something that is coming in from the East, but 60 years ago, this was very sophisticated thinking. My mother read a lot of psychology, and she was very interested in how the mind worked and how the mind and the body worked.

One of my most wonderful memories, though, of those years was, because my father practiced law here, he had clients — I think his name was Harry Torum — who provided the vegetables for the hotels. On Saturday morning, I used to go with my father down Ocean Drive to Harry Torum, where they had the dog track. It was First Street. It had a big facility where the vegetables were brought up in these wood-slatted baskets from Homestead. They were in these refrigerated lockers that you could walk into. There I would be — it would be 80-degree day — in my little dress.

The door would open, and all of a sudden it was Siberia, and I remember how cold I was but how fascinated I was by all of the vegetables from Homestead. And people who brought them were black, and I remember how polite my father was to them in the process of getting the Homestead tomatoes. The ritual of what the community had to offer was so accessible to the families that lived and worked here. And that was really a privilege.

Interviewer: There weren't so many middlemen [crosstalk][13:48] in those days.

Oka Doner: No. No.

Interviewer: You had more direct contact, I imagine.

Oka Doner: No, what he would do after Harry Torum is he would stop on Washington Avenue at the ButterFlake Bakery, which was run by a European Jewish immigrant family, and they made a challah. I remember how they would call it, which I can't pronounce, the "challah."

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: How they would say a language. My father would come and, with great joy, cut a fresh challah and then take one of the Homestead tomatoes and make a tomato sandwich. He said the Homestead tomatoes were the best in the world. He extolled their virtues for about 20 minutes.

Interviewer: [laughs]

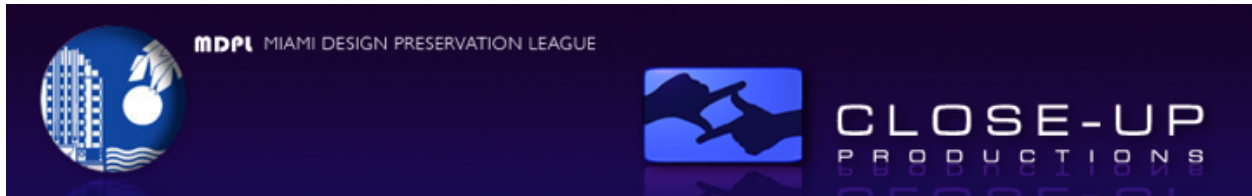
Oka Doner: [laughs]

Interviewer: Sounds like he enjoyed simple pleasures.

Oka Doner: He did. And that was really part of life here, too. We had no air conditioning, so we had the Florida room. Summer evenings, we would sit outdoors. We had Sam the Fish Man on Alton Road. That was the name of the store: Sam the Fish Man. August 7 was the beginning of the Florida lobster season, legal fishing, and from then on in we'd get the Florida lobsters, and you could buy them cooked. We had them cooked, and my mother would get them and make a sauce and warm butter rice. I remember this so well. We would sit —

Interviewer: What about stone crabs?

Oka Doner: Stone crabs wouldn't start August 7. I don't remember. The season started October 15th.



Interviewer: Were those things- they probably didn't cost as much as they do nowadays.

Oka Doner: Interestingly enough, they never were part of the stone crab cult. Joe's was sort of a hangout. They had the Fifth Street boxing. Chris Dundee. The Chris Dundee kids were in my high school, Angelo and Chris Dundee. So there was like a rougher- Miami Beach was so interesting in those days. My father and mother were considered intellectuals. They had a music crowd. They met over there, right across from where we're sitting. There's a house with a big circular library. That was Leo Fishbein, the first psychiatrist in town. It was lined with books. When I understood what he did in there, every time I drove by after I got my license, I used to look at it [laughs] and wonder. I was so fascinated by the whole thing.

Interviewer: Well your mother was fascinated by [crosstalk][16:44] it.

Oka Doner: Yes.

Interviewer: Psychological [crosstalk][16:45] things.

Oka Doner: The mind. How the mind. She played piano. He played violin. They were not part of the boxing crowd. The dog track was down there. That was the Joe's crowd. They would hang out on the bridge that's now on 23rd Street. There was a place called Zenia's.

Interviewer: Zenia's.

Oka Doner: Zenia's. Zenia was Italian.

Interviewer: It was a restaurant?

Oka Doner: Yes. They were a small little restaurant. We'd go there Sunday nights, and the family would be there. They were the kind of people who had us then in South Miami, which was a whole day drive in those days, to come in at their own table. If you went to their restaurant, you'd be invited home to their family. The same with Moseley's on Lincoln Road, the linen store. The Moseleys had us to dinner on Alton Road. They were Lebanese. They made kibbeh and tabbouleh and lamb.

We knew all the people who we would eat in their restaurants or my father would work with. We were in their homes. After dinner, many times, he would make house calls. He was a lawyer, so what does a lawyer do? He'd go to the widows. One was infamous. Roberta Zager. She was part of that synagogue on 40th Street that is on Chase Avenue. I used to say, "Can I go with you?" And my father would say, "Ask your mother. Have you done your homework?"

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: But by now, I'm like 13 or 14. I used to love to go. He would sit there, and they would discuss her problems. One daughter here, and the son didn't marry, and this and that, and what's she going to do? I just loved to be the fly on the wall. It was so incredible. We knew all the clients. We were invited to the weddings of their children. My sister would be the flower girl. I once went in Pinecrest, to the synagogue there. What's it called?

Interviewer: There's Bet Shira. There's Beth Am.

Oka Doner: Beth Am. I went to Beth Am as a guest of one of the trustees from the Perez, and an older woman came up to me, and she said, "I was the daughter of Louis Davidson, your father's client." We remembered him, too. She thought I was the flower girl at her wedding, but my younger sister, when I got home — I said, "I don't remember this." She says, "I was the flower girl."

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: "Don't you remember? We have the picture of me in the taffeta skirt." It was wonderful, really a wonderful place to grow up.

Interviewer: What made your father decide to run for mayor?

Oka Doner: People asked him, the community. The same with judge. My father moved down here in 1940 when he was finished with Harvard Law School, and he was a very, I'd say, high-minded, elegant person. He set up a practice. Community leaders — he told me they came, and they solicited him and asked him if he'd be willing to run. How many Harvard lawyers, graduates, were in Miami Beach in that time? He ran for judge, and he enjoyed it. And I used to go. We used to go to court on parents' teacher day, when there was no school. We were taken to the Alton Road Pharmacy, which is on Alton and — what is the street you've turned to go left, where the Gary Building is now? Is that 15th, 14th?

Interviewer: I don't know? We're not that familiar.

Oka Doner: Yeah.

Interviewer: I mean we've gotten somewhat [crosstalk][21:08] familiar.

Oka Doner: The Alton Road Pharmacy is still there. It's, I think, a motorcycle or a Vespa place now, but it used to be a soda fountain. After court, we used to be taken to the soda fountain, and we had an ice cream soda.

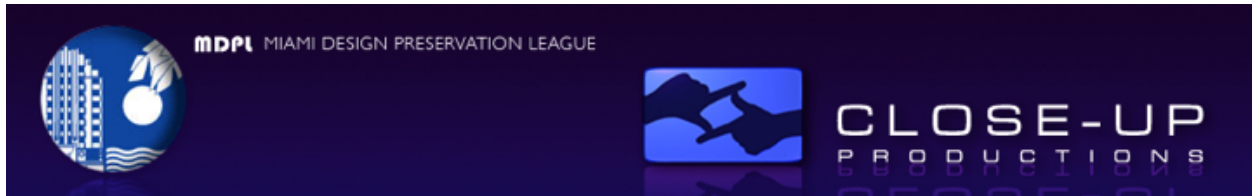
Interviewer: Let's talk about, well, he was asked, then, to run [crosstalk][21:29] as mayor...

Oka Doner: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you involved at all in campaigning?

Oka Doner: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Interviewer: What was your role then?



Oka Doner: We were really always ambassadors for our family. We were told that, that we had to set an example. We couldn't do anything that would compromise him. This was very clear. That did set us aside from our peers in a way. It was pretty profound. The other thing was, because my father was speaking so much in public, the emphasis on public speaking, on enunciation. Now how many 8-year-olds know that word? We were taught at the dinner table to have something to say. It wasn't just, "Where's the butter?" It was a topic. Politics was often the topic.

My father had a cousin who was a professor at the University of Miami in political science. He was for many years — he married late — a bachelor. He used to stop by at dinner time. It was very old world. My grandfather, who lived at Lincoln and Meridian, would walk over and have breakfast sometimes and boss everyone around. We were multigenerational. I try now, with my grandchildren, to give this experience.

Interviewer: Are they here?

Oka Doner: No. I was just with them three days in California, and I'll see them in New York in June. They'll come here in August.

Interviewer: I think the multigenerational thing was very common then, more so. Well, now with the Latin influx...

Oka Doner: Yes.

Interviewer: You see a lot of that.

Oka Doner: Chinese. The reason why they do so well.

Interviewer: Where did your grandfather come from?

Oka Doner: My grandfather was born in Stravitch [phonetic][23:36], which is a small village outside of Kiev. He knew every animal in the Russian woods. He could whistle like a bird, and he could sound like a fox and a wolf. When my parents went Sunday nights to concerts at the Miami Beach Auditorium, he came and would babysit, as our housekeeper was off Thursdays and Sundays. We always had a live-in Spanish woman, so the cuisine in the home was always Latin, even before the Cuban influx. So he would tell us stories that really terrified me actually.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: Because the stories were fraught. Life there was much more dangerous. They were living with animals that were wild, and used to sometimes beg him to stop and want to hide under the dining room table.

Interviewer: [laughs] I'm sure that probably delighted him.

Oka Doner: It did. He was great. He really had a big personality and a lot of love for Miami. I would visit him. I'd walk over after school many times, and he would take an orange and peel it, or a grapefruit. He took tremendous joy in the physical life of this community.

Interviewer: When did he come over?

Oka Doner: He came over in about 1908, and my younger son just found where he reentered after World War I, when he went back to get his mother and sister. Found the boat. Found everything.

Interviewer: Oh my.

Oka Doner: But I have his letters when he went back to his wife when my father was young. I have a lot of documents. I have the name change documents. I have so many things that they were in a box. These were important and put away, even though nobody looked back in those days. They only looked ahead.

Interviewer: They did put things in a box.

Oka Doner: They left things for us, which I think, on some deep level, they wanted us to touch.

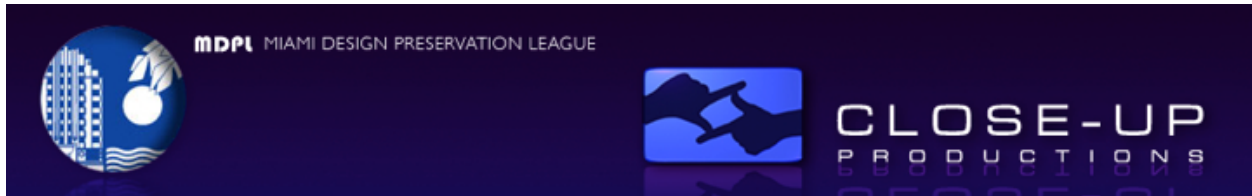
Interviewer: They once were rooted in another place.

Oka Doner: Yes. They were rooted. I was raised with a foot in two worlds, no doubt about it. People came from Scarsdale, from Shaker Heights, from Highland Park, from the cities. The first son would go into the family business. The second son was a lawyer, a doctor. The third son, the no-goodnik, was sent down here and told to - given some pocket money for a hotel. They were all naughty boys. It was a community filled with red cars and convertibles and fast, fast people. That was a very interesting way to grow up also. My home was strict, but most of my friends were very laissez-faire. Their parents were very busy. Their fathers were in the hotels. Their mothers were having their hair done for whatever was going on that night.

Interviewer: What were your high school days like at Miami Beach High?

Oka Doner: Strange to say, they were like a blur. That was the least important time. It was already I knew I was going to leave. What was missing here, even though I had all of the things that I mentioned that I love, was the intensity and the dialogue. I almost held all of that gathering in suspension for 10th, 11th... by 12th grade, I was already hanging out at the University in Miami. I was in another life already. Curious. It's funny how I left and didn't miss it. I needed another world, and I found it right away in Ann Arbor.

It was a wonderful time to arrive at a big, open university. Tom Hayden had just left. The music scene was great. Bob Dylan came to the Ann Arbor Auditorium. Odetta [Odetta Holmes] was in the folk house. I mean, the scene there. In a strange way, I went from one, this Eden, to a place that was much more suited to my maturing self. I loved the school, and I'm a Miami Beach High School Hall-of-Famer, and I've sent books there, but I don't have that same passion that I did, for example, for the library or even North Beach Elementary School. Nautilus [Nautilus Middle School],



my science teachers, were really wonderful. It's curious, isn't it? I was already detaching from here, from the place.

Interviewer: Yet it really indicates it sounds like you were well-grounded, and you knew what you needed next. You went for it.

Oka Doner: Yeah. I knew it wasn't here. I didn't share the values, and the values —

Interviewer: What were those values that you saw?

Oka Doner: The values are the same ones that are here now. You live in the moment. It's a beautiful day. You go to the beach. You go on your boat. It's not a thoughtful community. It's not a community that, for example, is understanding that we are in a paradigm shift, and maybe we should plan for this. Maybe it would be a good idea if we, as a community, had some gravitas. It's like, "It won't happen today. I don't want to think about it today. Let somebody else do it." That has always been the DNA here.

Interviewer: It was kind of designed for that, in a way.

Oka Doner: It was designed for that. Exactly. I feel I've had the best of it. I still have the best of it. It gave me a language. It empowered my voice as an artist. I have an unusual voice as an artist. The combination of being a woman ahead of my time and being from a place that nobody had exploited visually in any way helped me navigate a very narrow channel from a 17-year-old art student to a 70-year-old woman that has been able to actualize many things of note and interest.

Interviewer: That singularity that you're speaking of seems to resonate with people because you've been successful as an artist.

Oka Doner: Well it's, "Time and place have had their say." I mean, look at Zora Neale Hurston and the brilliance, the masterpiece of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Interviewer: One of my very favorite books.

Oka Doner: Oh my gosh.

Interviewer: Such a powerful voice.

Oka Doner: In fact, the ending of it, the very ending, is exactly what we're doing now with the trees, what all of this is. I have it somewhat. It is in my iPhone if I want to go get it, but she says something like, "She pulled in her net from the horizon of the world, from the waist of the world, and draped it over her shoulder. All of the" — I'm going to get it — "wonders."

Male Participant: Look at the text.

Oka Doner: I can't.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: I can't. Hand me my basket.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: This is the greatest quote, and this applies. Right there. The relevance of it is: Yes, she was singular. What does it take to carry the gift? The gift of time and place. Let me see. You can take that away now, and I'm going to turn this and make sure it doesn't bother us. Here we go. Okay. Here we go. All right. I just added it, because I had been carrying it around in my purse, and I haven't had it in the right time. Pretty sure I put it in here.

Interviewer: She also was kind of a hunter-gatherer.

Oka Doner: She was a hunter-gatherer. Okay. Here we go. It's not in the notes. I know where. It's in the pad. All right, I don't know if the pad is in there. It might be, because, you see, this is why you have a pad.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: Yes, it's here. I have it. Now we're all set. You're a very generous man to indulge me like this. Here we have it. Okay. It was worth the wait. Here we go. [flips through book] "She pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet, pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see."

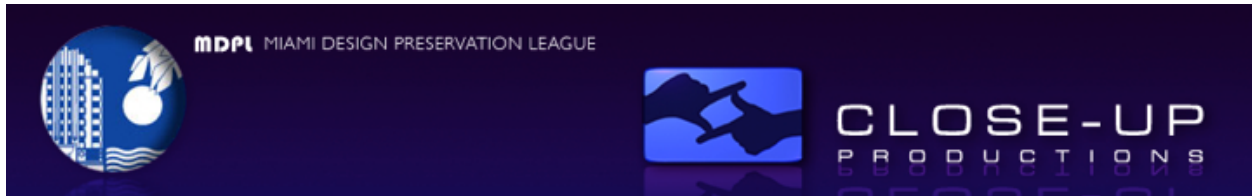
Interviewer: Amazing.

Oka Doner: I'm about to cry. I mean, this is really what I've done. This is what one does. This is what was asked of me, really, by responsible parents and by great teachers. I heard, and I answered. That's what kept me going. That was the singularity. It's the respect, really, for all that. I didn't have to start from zero. I didn't have to conjure up. There was paper. There was charcoal. Someone already figured out how to use a burnt stick. Somebody made paper. The Egyptians made paper out of plants. I mean, think about the thousands of years of human culture that have allowed me to take this and shape it.

Now I look at my granddaughter, who's 6 years old. She was here when the ballet opened, and I see her, and I know when she's my age, this will be underwater. Yet I have shaped a vision of it, and I have remembered it, and this is what Homer did. This is what we do. This is what civilization is. Years ago, when I was in Ann Arbor, Kennedy announced the Peace Corps in '61. I came in '63.

By '65, the first Peace Corps people were coming back. They went to Nigeria, and they brought back gunny sacks with Igbo twins, with beautiful things I'd never seen in my life. One of them told me that the benign chieftains that cast in bronze — it was a big civilization — said the definition of a barbarian is someone who does not pass on knowledge to the next generation.

Interviewer: That is very telling about what's going on now, I think.



Oka Doner: Yes. The answer is, “What’s it about?” It’s not about Miami Art Basel. It’s not about success. It’s not about auction prices. It’s truly about civilization. It’s so huge. That is the responsibility we have to the education we’ve been given in the food on our plate. This is what I was taught, and this is what I have held. I think it’s really what energizes me. I think it’s my spark plug.

Interviewer: Is that why you come back here and visit your tree a lot?

Oka Doner: I think that Miami Airport [Miami International Airport], when they hired me in 1990 — which was 25 years ago, so I was 45 — I think, in a way, it was a bouquet I felt I was throwing back in gratitude and thanks. Then I felt every time I came down here, I was recharged to go back to New York. The Hamptons, I didn’t feel recharged. I always felt tired after a weekend there, so I knew that that wasn’t my place and that this was my place. Even though I’m in SoHo and Spring & Mercer and the middle of it all, somehow I’m just so centered in all of this that I am not tired, am not worn out. I actually feel full of energy and looking at the next decade with some very wonderful projects.

Interviewer: What is it like for you to walk on that floor at the airport?

Oka Doner: You know, so interesting- I have my mind on so many things now that are out there that it almost seems like you’re asking me about Miami Beach High School. It seems like another life, and there’s been wonderful closure on it in that, in fact, I’m publishing a book of installations, and all of them are about transforming space. They all go back, actually, to *The Amulet in the Monument*, the cave, the big tree, the embracing of a structure that gives us shelter and defines our spiritual longings. What did Martin Buber say? What is that? He says, “We invent it. We need it when we became conscious, an I-Thou dialogue.”

He said, “It wasn’t enough. What is this life? You eat. You shit. You sleep. You eat. You shit. You sleep.” He said that they couldn’t understand that this was it, so we invented an I-Thou dialogue, a higher voice. I love what he says about I-It dialogue. He said, “Okay. You can’t live by that alone. You’ve got to kill to eat, an I-It dialogue. What defines character is how much I-Thou there is against how much I-It.” That is something that applies to the art world. For me, that was always clear, that the voice is — you read Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*, which is a book you’d love? Did you ever read that or hear of it?

Interviewer: Which?

Oka Doner: *The Gift*.

Interviewer: The...?

Oka Doner: Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*.

Interviewer: No, I've not read it.

Oka Doner: It's really about understanding how much we're building on others and giving back. The airport, that's like a completed entity. Now I'm looking ahead into so many interesting notions. What happened other times in our history. I'm looking historically in a way, and facing the fact that this won't be here. It's as simple as that. I'm thinking about Pompeii. This is Pompeii to New York's Rome. That is clear to me also, and the party goes on.

Interviewer: The Bacchanalia.

Oka Doner: Yeah. The Bacchanalia.

Interviewer: That's what it feels like on South Beach. [laughs]

Oka Doner: It's everywhere, though. It's all over. We're living in a very strange time, but we've been there before. We will come out of it, and we'll be there again. This is just the big wheel is turning.

Interviewer: You have any questions?

Male Participant: Yeah. I would like to sort of get your perspective on aging.

Oka Doner: On aging?

Male Participant: Yeah, because you talk very positively about the future at a time when we're almost the same age.

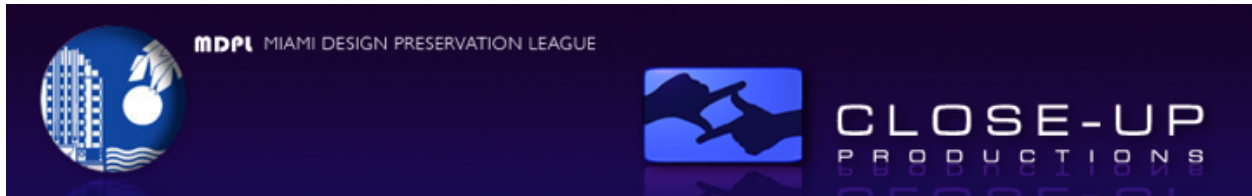
Oka Doner: Yeah.

Male Participant: So it resonates with me. Yeah, we're always looking ahead, but what does that mean to an artist, and how does that change from where you were a few years ago?

Oka Doner: I think that every decade, I've set out a new set of goals, an awareness that, "Oh, well, that's something that I've already — I understand that, but this is interesting, and I really want to move in that direction, or I had to set this aside to finish that, but I'm able to move there." Seventy to 80 is a wonderful time, because you bring with you mastery, which you don't have in your earlier decades, in your 20s, your 30s, your 40s.

Those decades, too, are more aspirational. This decade is much more focused. You see what the possibilities are. You see which of the cards you're holding, so to speak, are the ones left that are the strong ones that you want to play. You have to have strategy anyway, so it's a strategic decision, and I see very clearly what I've turned to since I turned 70. The Perez show gave me a wonderful opportunity to put out 50 years. Thom Collins said, "What would you show me if I said, 'Show me 36 pieces over the arc?'"

What's wonderful is it wasn't about the greatest hits. I've put out the pieces that were the "aha" moments that opened doors, that made me think, and then I liked the fact that that's what I wanted to do. That was what was relevant. Those were the interesting things. Then, it was such an interesting process to realize that I had held on to them as the



interesting, curious, provocative ones, and then I would sell the next one, where I solved the problems, but I wasn't as interested in that, but it was the better piece, you see?

Then I said, "Great. People who collect my work have a better piece, that they come here and see mine has a crack. It has a dent. It's unresolved. They'll always feel that they have."

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: It works. Aging, we're the first society that thought it wasn't a good thing. Everybody else, every other culture — India, China — looked at the elders of the tribe and understood they held with them customs, wisdom, knowledge. They knew what plants to eat, how to pull the roots, how to do things. This is a very curious moment. I think nothing goes back. Everything moves forward in a spiraling way, like a helix, like a vine, but with this I think there'll be a return to respect for elders, if nothing else because the baby boomers are going to reinvent aging the way they reinvented many things, their attitudes toward sex and marriage, their attitudes toward the family, the nuclear family.

So many things have changed, have opened up, been re-thought-out, have been sifted. We understand sexuality, as a result of this exploration on their part, is a spectrum. That is a huge discovery. It's really huge. I think it's one of the most interesting discoveries of my lifetime. Things like race, also, is a spectrum. These were monolithic entities. Now they're not. Aging is finite. We can reinvent it in the way of how we choose to conduct ourselves and die.

Indeed, we're going back to natural burials. We're going back to no embalmings, so we are moving back to two generations ago, I think. This little experiment of injecting us with everything is not going to sustain. It's really poisonous actually, in every way, physically, mentally, spiritually.

Interviewer: I hadn't thought of being embalmed as we live to preserve us. It's an interesting thought, because it does interfere with natural processes.

Oka Doner: Absolutely.

Male Participant: Your perspective as somebody who has seen the changes. You grew up with without the Bass, without the PAMM, without Wolfsonian, without a number of museums which are now part of —

Oka Doner: The fiber.

Male Participant: Yeah.

Oka Doner: Yeah.

Male Participant: Of a lot bigger community. I'm wondering how you sort of see Miami's change or development with the arts from your perspective as somebody inside this.

Oka Doner: Well, I grew up, there was nothing here, no museums. I think it's wonderful that this moment has happened. I also wish it wasn't happening as we're aware that we're not happening. No. It's a tough thing. We're the first generation who could see ahead, ever. We're the first human beings with computer-generated models, with what we know, and what does that mean? For me, it means we have a responsibility. Here we have these wonderful museums. They're acquiring, curating. They're doing all these things.

What's going to happen? What do they have, two more years? Five more years? The Wolfsonian already has had water in the lobby. What happens when the mold and the mildew comes? What happens when a surge comes? What's going to happen? What is the right thing to do now? What is the prudent thing to do? Look what happened during Katrina. We aren't going to have to wait for an incident. We already have many things nibbling around this cookie.

Interviewer: Well, and when there's a king tide there, [crosstalk][49:58] people have to put on their boots to walk their dogs because of the flooding

Oka Doner: Yeah. Well, you've got toxic leaks from Turkey Point. You've got water already in the aquifers. What can I honestly say? How could I speak as somebody who loves this community, a daughter of this community, and not deal with the reality that I am watching an elder. The questions about how wonderful the museums are here, it's poignant. It's a poignant situation, because, yes, they are coming, and it's hitting a moment. At the same time, I can see the edge of the cliff.

Interviewer: [sighs]

Male Participant: I was also thinking in part about the business of art, that Miami and Miami Beach were never really part of the global art world. Now they somehow have been, and during that trajectory of your career as well. Do you have a sense of this change in the business of art here?

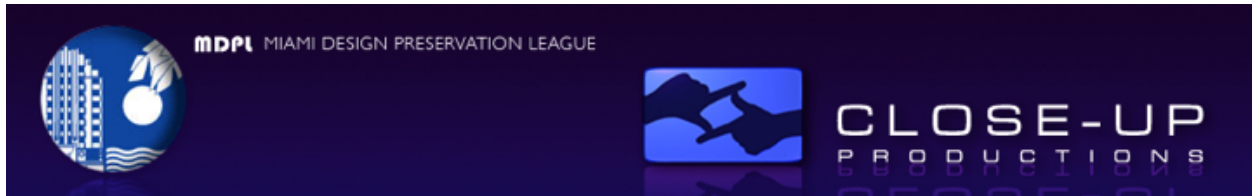
Oka Doner: Well, I think had art not become a business, it wouldn't be there.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Oka Doner: That's true. That is an accurate statement. It was of no interest.

Interviewer: Yes.

Oka Doner: Like poetry. I mean, poetry, they haven't figured out how to commodify it, so it's sort of the last thing left standing that has the soul intact, but this became a convenient place for Latin Americans and other people to exchange. This became, as Lewis Mumford would say in *The City in History*, this became the fork in the river, where people came to trade and swap, and the banks came and set up, and the jet companies. The horse, the hustlers, everybody followed, just like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It's very medieval. In that sense, I love it. In another sense, I know what's



really going on. It's too much "it" voice. The I-Thou voice is a little bit hard to hear or find.

Interviewer: Especially when you care.

Oka Doner: Well, we have to care. You can never, ever not care. When you don't care, you stand outside of that circle of humanity.

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