A’Dora Phillips & Brian Schumacher
The Vision & Art Project

An Oral History with Tim Prentice

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As a follow-up to our 2019 interview with kinetic sculptor Tim Prentice, which you can find under “Features” on our website, A’Dora Phillips and Brian Schumacher jointly conducted this oral history with Prentice on July 11, 2020 at the artist’s home and studio in Cornwall, Connecticut. Over the course of two hours, we talked to Prentice about his work in architecture before he became a sculptor and how architectural thinking infuses his artwork; some of the public art commissions he has taken on (including the new Sandy Hook, CT, elementary school; Renzo Piano’s Aurora building in Sydney, Australia; and 11 Times Square in New York City); the complexities of making public art; the four years he spent as a bombardier navigator during the Korean War and how it influenced him; his favorite tool, the spot welder; Philip Guston’s idea that you can only truly get to work once all that has influence over you—people, ideas, history, even your own self—has left the studio; and what it’s like to work with the wind.

Due to COVID-19, the entire interview was conducted outdoors. At times, wind blowing across the microphone caused interference, making some passages impossible to hear and transcribe. Although we lament missing any of Prentice’s words, it’s impossible not to feel a kind of poetic appropriateness at play here, in the conversation with an artist for whom the wind has been a constant companion.

Tim Prentice during the V&AP interview, July 2020

Brian Schumacher: We're curious if you've ever taught.

Tim Prentice: I taught at Columbia, actually, in architecture. It's the only thing I'm qualified to teach, in the sense of, I never studied sculpture. I taught that for five or six years after I left my architectural office when I was in transition, when I switched my major to kinetic sculpture.

Schumacher: What was the experience of teaching architecture like?

Prentice: Actually, I loved it. It was my first language, in a sense. I loved asking the students in an *un*-tense moment how they happened to make the choice to go into architecture, because for me, it was my father. I mean, he was the model. But a lot of people had other reasons, and I was kind of interested in what drew them to something so specialized. But I can't imagine teaching architecture the way you have to teach these days on the Web, via Zoom, because it involves hands-on drawing.

Schumacher: In what way has that training in architecture influenced your sculptural work? Do you find that there's a similarity, that there's an extension of your architectural training?

Prentice: Well, architecture is claimed historically to be mother of the arts. So sculpture is a subset, and kinetic sculpture is a subset of a subset. The training is very valuable, absolutely, because it's fundamental. It starts in the most simple way, like playing with blocks, really, and you move on from there, and then finally the students, the senior students, find themselves deciding that general hospitals are really complex, demanding buildings, very demanding programs. But you can't start there. You start with cabins, basically, and as I say, playing with blocks, thinking about sculpture and spatial relations. Both fields are concerned with spatial relationships.

Schumacher: I would imagine the foundation studies you taught would have been similar to the spirit behind the sculptures you're working with now, in the sense that you were presenting ways of thinking about how things go together.

Prentice: I think the difference between sculpture and architecture is, sculpture has no practical assignment, physically speaking. It doesn't have what architects call a program. To get back to your earlier question, the first appearance I made at Columbia was as a guest critic. And when the students have been working on a project, and this is the day… they have to defend and explain it, and the judges and so on respond in whatever way they choose. And I remember one of the students had been a client. He was actually a lawyer who had worked for a big firm in New York that we had done work for. Plus, he was a friend. So he was already a lawyer, and had been a client of mine, and now the field was reversed, and I was the teacher, and he was the student. At the end of this course critique, he came up to me and said, "a fine critique, a fine critique." And an axe went through my head, and half of me said, oh, thank heavens. [LAUGHTER] And the other half said, I don't need this from students. So that's kind of the relationship in a nutshell. Well, you must experience the same thing.

Schumacher: Very much so. The same systems are in current place. What are your kids studying? Or your grandchildren, I mean?

Prentice: Well, one is studying engineering, and the other hasn't decided yet. She hasn't actually, she's on her way to college for her first year, but that would be the fall, and who knows

what's going to happen. So she hasn't had to decide. She's very artistic, so maybe in that direction. But I haven't influenced them, I don't think, that much. My father was an architect, but he influenced me in a sort of backwards way, because he was very old fashioned and very much eclectic. The modern movement—when he came out of school, he was hit by that, which he wasn't prepared for and never approved of.

Schumacher: He was an architect?

Prentice: He was an architect. But his great love was carpentry and cabinetmaking. He expressed more love for that then he ever did for his profession. Which is maybe the reason I did something that involved making things *and* being artistic.

A'Dora Phillips: Did you have a close relationship to your father? Did you want his approval for what you did?

Prentice: It was less than ideal. How should I say? Plus, he away during the War. See, he came out of the École des Beaux-Arts in France at exactly the wrong time, because the modern movement had taken over while he was being a student studying premodern, and then he comes out and, first off, there's the Depression, and second off, the world had changed. And third off, there was the War. Sort of like now, kids coming out of college.

Phillips: Right. So the war created an abyss between his old life and the kind of new life, for lots of reasons.

Prentice: Yes. So all my heroes—Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe and so on—he considered them charlatans, which was a little bit of a bother, a little bit of a problem.

Phillips: So would you just avoid the subject with him? Or would there be heated conversations over dinner?

Prentice: Well, mostly, I guess, I avoided it. We were both of us inflexible. So that's just the tip of the iceberg. You know.

Phillips: Yes. [LAUGHTER] I'm just now noticing, by the way, the bird's nest. The birds keep coming over for the nest up there.

Prentice: Yeah, it's actually a duplex. There's two type of birds. They're right next door to each other. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: Oh, I see, yeah.

Prentice: Yeah, it's quite integrated.

Phillips: I love it. What kind of bird is it? A finch?

Prentice: One is a wren. I don't know what the other one is. They've adopted that balafon as their condo.

Phillips: That's called a balafon? It looks like a xylophone.

Prentice: It's like a xylophone, and the resonators are gourds. We got it in Africa. You know, it's a folk instrument. I've made some handmade instruments and loved doing it, but if you're making a balafon, and you've got everything but an E flat, I don't know how you'd stand… [WIND INTERFERENCE 11:37-11:57].

Phillips: So maybe the talking about your father brings us to the next question, maybe not, why did it take you so long to become a sculptor?

Prentice: Aha. I was afraid… I sort of bought into the convention that artists have a hard time. [Though] you know, a lot of people have a hard time, including a lot of architects. But I thought that was pretentious and arrogant to say, I'm an artist. Who's to say you have the right to be an

artist? Or are free to do it? Or can afford it? I mean, it's not an easy question. I guess it was because I got to the level of recognition that my father had gotten to as an architect, and I convinced myself that I had some value on the market, and when I accomplished those two things, I was free to sort of go my own way.

I don't know if I told you earlier the story about the first Calder experience. When I was in high school, I was taken to the Addison Gallery in Massachusetts, which has a terrific collection. It was a school trip, and all the other kids in the trip went into the museum and looked at 19th-century landscapes and portraits and I never got past the lobby, because there was a Calder in the lobby, the first Calder I'd ever laid eyes on. And when they completed their tour and went back out, there I was, still staring, frozen by this Calder experience, because it seemed to be defying gravity. It was just such a *blow* to see this thing. It's sort of a slick story, but I mean, that's where the hook went in.

Phillips: Yeah. It's amazing, to see how that initial response bore fruit over time.

On a different note, on the subject of transitioning from being an architect to working more with sculpture and art, was part of the decision made possible because of finances? Had you found yourself in a position where you could afford to make that step?

Prentice: [WIND INTERFERENCE 14:19-14:27] Sculpture was like beginning from the beginning. The other advantage, back to the advantage of having had the architectural training was—I tried to describe the situation with the student who is making presentations to the senior members of the guild and all the other students who were curious about that—learning to be articulate about your work, and learning to sell it, and learning to talk about it. Selling—you know, there are a lot of awfully good designers out there who aren't good salesmen, and there are some hellish good salesmen out there who aren't that good designers.

You want them both, and they both can be learned and taught to some extent. We're suffering from that at a national level at the moment.

Phillips: So in a way, you're saying that architecture also gave you that confidence and those skills to sell your work.

Prentice: Public speaking. Yeah, it's not on the agenda, per se, on the curriculum, and I always get frowns from architects when I say that, but that was very valuable to me, that experience.

Schumacher: Can you talk a little bit about, bring us back to a moment, maybe, that's very specific, like a day in your life or the experience of actually transitioning? Did you decommission your office, for example, and rent a studio space? How did that actually transpire?

Prentice: Well, I had a partner from I.M. Pei's office, Lo-Yi Chan, by name, who was a very fine architect himself, in my architectural practice. That's how we began, the two of us, and it grew slowly, much too slowly for us, but it did grow in an office to some 30 draftsmen. We had a lot of work.

Phillips: In New York City?

Prentice: In New York City. We were doing government-financed public housing. We did a lot of that. And that's not inspiring work, because we had to be very precise with your square footage, and it was very closely watched. [WIND INTERFERENCE 16:44–16:52]

The clients aren't asking you to create wonderful things. It's very limited. But the volume kept us going, and we both had the reputation for it, and we got a lot of work in that area. I was meanwhile doing houses up here in Connecticut. I mean, one-on-one personal, individual private houses that were custom designed. Which is where my true love was. And that went on when I quit the office. I continued to do those houses up here. So for years I did both, the sculpture, which was beginning to catch on, but slowly, and the houses, which kept going. And some years one would support the other, and the next year it would be reversed.

Phillips: And you went into the city, too, it sounds like, to teach. Did you have an apartment or something in the city?

Prentice: Yes.

Phillips: Has your studio always been here? Or did you ever have a studio elsewhere?

Prentice: The only other studio I ever had is the living room of the apartment, which became unfit for company as a result. We had this place when I was still an architect. And my parents had a place in this part of the world, since 1930, so Cornwall was always my spiritual home, even if I was living in the city. And this old farm lends itself ideally to what I'm doing now, because it's kind of a lot of room outside to put pieces out and look at them, and a lot of little buildings to use as shops and storage and so forth. It's an old farm.

Phillips: Yeah, I personally couldn't imagine a more ideal place for you to have your workshop. In the video Ellen (Tim's assistant) sent us a couple of weeks ago, the "Studio Visit," you speculate about place and its influence on your work. What effect do you feel this place has on your work?

Prentice: Well, you know, the classic references for kinetic sculptures are flocks of birds, schools of fish, patterns of grass with the wind passing across it. Those are all here. The reflection of the sun on the water and the reflections that the water makes on the hull of a boat in a pond, let's say, or in a lake, all those things. But I can't evaluate how much of an influence that is in contrast to all the work that I see in a study from Calder and from George Rickey, who is not as well known by the public, but had an equal influence on me. The next most prominent kinetic sculptor, probably, after Alexander Calder. And I knew him, actually. I'd met Calder, but I didn't claim to know him, but I got to know Rickey quite well. And the thing about him that's interesting is, unlike Calder, he did not study engineering. Calder studied engineering at Stevens College, but Rickey had been a painter. Never studied engineering at all. But just like people have a certain gift, he had a gift for engineering that was way ahead of Calder.

Phillips: So, do you know the story of how Rickey made that movement away from painting and towards sculpture?

Prentice: I don't really, except that when he was in the military, he was assigned, because he was artistic back then, to do photo reconnaissance analysis during the War—you know, aerial photographs of the ground with troop movement—and he was in that department that analyzed aerial photographs that had been taken. And he got a little bit in the equipment that they used for that. So I think that that was his entrée, at least as far as I know. He started as a painter. And actually taught at a school for years. I mean, sort of like me during that period when he was working up to leave. He was an English professor at the Groton School in Massachusetts.

Phillips: Oh, is that right?

Prentice: Yeah. Surprising background.

Phillips: Yeah, he was a fascinating figure.

Prentice: I was intrigued with him, because, unlike Calder, who was a storyteller and a joker and an entertaining sort of guy who had made it okay for grownups to play, and set an example in that sense—people would ask him questions, like, "Mr. Calder, since the work is abstract, how do you know it's done?" "When it's dinnertime." [LAUGHTER] Rickey, on the other hand, was an intellectual, wrote about kinetic sculpture, wrote about the Russian constructivist period, and taught all his life. When you asked him a question, you got a serious answer.

Phillips: That seems like the ideal two mentors to have as an artist, someone who's very playful and someone who's very serious.

Prentice: Yeah.

Schumacher: You have an interest, also, I believe, in the Russian constructivist work. Can you talk about that a little bit, and what sort of connections there are between what was happening then and how that's influenced you, or what interested you about that period?

Prentice: Well, that's vast and complicated. My parents, you know, were very proud of their aesthetic judgment, which was quite conventional. When I went off to school, the library at the boarding school I was at, had the usual distinguished collection of books. [WIND INTERFERENCE 23:22-23:29] That's where I came across the constructivists, sort of by accident. [WIND INTERFERENCE 23:35-23:40] And then when I got to Yale, I was exposed to Josef Albers, who had been at the Bauhaus himself, and had been brought to Black Mountain College, a very experimental college, just before the War. It was arranged by Philip Johnson, who is also credited with arranging for the Albers to get out of Germany during World War II. Black Mountain no longer exists, but it's a celebrated experimental college. He came to Yale about the time I did.

I took his famous course about the interaction of color. His famous symbol of his work was the whole series of paintings he did later in his life called *Homage to the Square*, with just color. He eliminated the subject. He eliminated texture. He eliminated everything one by one. So he had his theory, he took all the choices away, and as he did that, he found more and more interest in what was left. And I thought, you know, that was very essential Bauhaus simplicity and discipline. And I thought, well, if I follow, I don't use color that much, actually. But if I follow those rules and apply them to movement, maybe I would be able to find something original with it, with the same discipline. You know, if it's not about movement, forget about it. Get it out of there. [LAUGHTER] It's a hard analogy to describe but that's the way it worked on me.

Schumacher: That makes a lot of sense, actually. I can really see that. You're translating, in some way, to a different medium. Transposing.

Prentice: Yeah. The great fortune of my life was that when he retired, he and his wife, Anni Albers, selected a friend of mine to be their heir with their tradition and their house and their collection and their reputation. It was Nicholas Fox Weber, who had raised and had money from Anni Albers's brother, who was well off, to found a foundation devoted to them, to buy the land and to build the buildings and to run the place. And happily I was hired as the architect to deal with that. So I got to know Alber's legacy extremely well in working on that project. I was very proud of that.

One of the buildings designed for the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation by Prentice and his former architectural partner Lo-Yi Chan on a woodland site in Bethany, Connecticut, near New

Schumacher: With your exposure to so many painters, and obvious awareness of painting, was that ever something that interested you? Or did you sort of choose one over the other?

Prentice: Well, I tried it when I was in the service. I had time to dabble in it, and I went at it with great enthusiasm and confidence, and the minute I sat down to actually do it, I got quite discouraged. I didn't have an idea. I think every artist goes through that. You can't make paintings unless you have an idea. Particularly as an architect, you've got to have an idea. A concept. You've got to say something outside of just solving the immediate problem, which is easily solved, generally speaking.

Schumacher: So you would say that you were sort of drawn into the media that you're working with now in kinetic sculpture, because you had a vision, in a way.

Prentice: Well, I had the Calder vision, and I had the Rickey vision. Rickey wrote one of the most authoritative books on the Russian constructivism period, and I still admire it. It's still in my head.

Schumacher: What is the title of that book?

Prentice: *Constructivism*.

So all this, all the lazy triangle forms that Calder used, they're kind of easy to use, because if it's a little too heavy, it's metal, you know, if it's a little too heavy, you can shave a little off with a pair of shears, and it's lighter. You can't do that if you use Bauhaus discipline, where it's square.

Schumacher: Right, that makes sense. So the organic and eccentric forms —

Prentice: Of Calder come out of surrealism, and the forms that Rickey used come out of the Bauhaus. They're rectangular. They're disciplined. They're geometrically very deft, you might say. Because he was more interested in the movement, actually. He really thought about how the wind would affect different surfaces, how it would affect different weights, and you don't see that from Calder. Calder's about balance.

Schumacher: And so the asymmetrical and eccentric shapes enabled him to more easily achieve that by pruning and paring and letting the form be what it needed to be to achieve the balance he was striving for?

Prentice: Exactly.

Phillips: So are you trying, or have you been trying to forge a kind of middle ground between the two visions that these —

Prentice: I would say, yes. You know, the trouble any artist has is, you're inspired by the giants that reach you and speak to you, and then you spend the rest of your life trying to get out from under them. Somebody brought back a piece the other day that they had gotten from me over 25 years ago, and it needed a little fixing. I looked at it, and I was amazed how Calder-like it was. I don't remember ever making that piece. It's so unlike what I would do today that I could disown

it and convince anybody who wanted to be convinced that I didn't make it, because it's not like my work. But I had to have made it. Because they got it from me.

Phillips: Can you describe it to us?

Prentice: That would be hard. It didn't have soft triangles, but it had circles. I don't know, the number of pieces and the way they were organized… I liked it, but I was sort of embarrassed to like it, because it was so influenced.

Schumacher: You've talked about this in the past a little bit, and I'm now looking at your piece over here that you've hung from the rafters — I look at it, and it's so distinctly your work. I would know that that is your work for certain, and for me, there's a language that you're using. Is that something that you've consciously arrived it? Like, I could look at the particular bend on the metal and identify it almost as a taxonomy, like, that's a leftward-leaning knuckle wrapper or something. Are you thinking that way?

Prentice: You can come back any time. [LAUGHTER] It's true, I guess. I sort of use these things without perhaps articulating them myself. One of my patterns is to make a few of the elements. It could be nine. It could be more. It could be hundreds. The elements are all the same. And they're organized in a way that they're held up by some system, structurally. But they're free to move, and as they move, that's the expression of the art. The wind moves them and makes the art. I don't make the art. The wind decides to move these over here and not those over there. And that sweeps across the surface. And you get that idea that the ultimate artist is the wind. And I'm not in charge of that. I just make something that receives that and makes that visible. Making the air visible is sort of the Zen way to put it. You don't hear that from Calder or Rickey.

Schumacher: I can see that. I was also thinking, too, and as I watched this piece change and move, that in a way, the wind is making your work visible, too. There's a symbiotic relationship.

Prentice: Right. I hope you'll be available to write that frontispiece to my next book. [LAUGHTER] You know, they don't all work out. There are a lot of little pieces around here that try to do that, what I described. And they succeed with varying success. Now, the piece that I described, that the people brought back, to be safe, had zero on that.

Phillips: So was it hard to go back and fix that piece, given that it seemed so other to you?

Prentice: Oh, no. It's a mechanical object. Fixing it's like fixing a leak in a boat or something. It just caught in certain ways. It needed some more paint here and there.

Phillips: Just a little tune up.

Prentice: Yeah, a tune up, a 5,000-mile tune up. Speaking of paint, I don't paint things generally speaking. I like to use the material as it comes. And there are plastics and PVCs and various materials that come colored, which is fine. But the nice thing about using aluminum, for example, or stainless steel, is it's reflective. So, if it moves, it reflects different colors around it in the environment. So in a sense, that's enough color already. And it's also associated with the movement. If you paint it red, it's red. The red can change in tone with the light, but it doesn't change that much. If it's reflective, it changes a lot. The other material is Lexan, which is a polycarbonate, which is like obscure glass. It can be clear. It can be obscure. It can be various thicknesses. It can be various opacities. And it glows in the light in a way that you can't say that, for example, aluminum glows in the light. So I like to use materials the way they come. That's a Bauhaus tradition, also.

Phillips: Since we're on the subject of influence, aside from Albers, Rickey, and Calder, did you have any other influential influences and mentors?

Prentice: Agnes Martin. She's a kinetic artist without the movement. And what a triumph to patience. Holy gamoly. You know? That's awesome.

Phillips: So when you changed careers, you didn't have any trepidation, really.

Prentice: Oh, I did. I was full of them. Nothing but. As I say, I had a period that I could survive on what I had in the bank. I've been in the military, and I had been getting extra hazardous duty pay for being a bombardier navigator off the carriers, and I had a little money from my parents. But it was a time-based experience, because sooner or later I was going to have to get a job if it didn't take. But actually, just like my father's timing was terrible, my timing was, I didn't deserve to have such good timing. [LAUGHTER] Because, and I didn't figure it out, but public art was beginning to be the norm, and at the moment, every state in the union had some form of public agency that runs the public art for that state. Some states are very busy with it, and some aren't, depending upon what kind of construction rate was going on at the moment. But there's now legislation in most states that says, if there's public money in the construction project, which is to say, state or federal, that the state is obliged by legislation to put a small percentage of that budget into art.

Schumacher: The 1% for art?

Prentice: The 1%, yeah. Would that it were 1%. [LAUGHTER] It was called percent. And so that's what I've been living on for all this time.

Schumacher: And that program, that kind of thing had just taken hold when you changed careers?

Prentice: It was pretty new. And also companies, private companies, private like AT&T, were catching on to the idea of art was part of their duty to society, I suppose. Or to aggrandize themselves, led by Chase and the Rockefellers. Any companies the Rockefellers had to do with had big art collections. And a lot of other companies were trying to keep up with the Rockefellers in all kinds of ways, and that was one of them. So they were setting an example for the private sector, as well as the growth of the public sector. And so, I fell right into that, because this was part for architecture, and I had the architectural background, so I spoke the first language of all the architects involved. My ability to speak to them in their language, as gained from my experience as a teacher, was very helpful.

Schumacher: That must have been an exciting time to be making public art, I would think. It was also a time of great change in the country in the sense of forward thinking, wasn't it?

Prentice: I would say so, and the economy was doing fine. Public art is not lively… well, this is a delicate subject, but it's public, which is good. But it's also elected by the public, which is, well, you might then wonder how good it is, because it's not elitist. Now it's considered anti-elitist. And from the point of view of the aspirant artist, who's a finalist and spends a month working on a presentation for a big commission, to a layman, and he or she has 20 minutes with a committee that he doesn't know anything about, they may have a pet artist in town who teaches in the high school, or has a gallery in town, or is just a great guy, who has got an advantage that you're not going to overcome. You may be the wild hare in the group, and everybody is extremely conventional. Or it may be the other way around. You may be the exception to the rule, or not the type of thing they really want, but you're selected as a finalist, because they want to show that they're open-minded. You don't know any of this. You go in cold. And the questions they should ask, they generally don't ask. [LAUGHTER]

So it's a crapshoot. And if I ever get to that point, I had an advantage in the whole presentation process, which you learn in architecture school. You've got to make a project coherent to somebody who's not trained to look and think visually. And I've had architectural clients who were so arrogant that they had to pretend that they understood the drawings, and others who were even smarter who were centered enough that they could say, I don't get it. You know? I've had this experience with some who visit me here, and go through the studio. You know, some people are twigged to it, like you do with your questions, and other people, you know, they're just friends because they're friends. They're not required to be art-wise.

Schumacher: You must have seen a lot of change over the decades, I would assume. In administrations, dynasties, paradigms? Have you ever needed to adapt your practices to the times?

Prentice: You can't let these things. You have so many needs to serve. And one is to grow as an artist. And if people, if the world has all gotten to nothing will sell unless it's painted red, does that mean you have to go red the next morning? The answer's no. But you have to also meet the needs of the community. And you get these diatribes — the committee wants to be sure that the piece expresses the culture of the original indigenous settlers. And we are not sociologists. We're artists. They have these preconceptions that democracy requires them to put that in, even if they only half believe it. We're dealing with that now in a very big way with all these statues that are being torn down. My goodness. And I'm even looking at myself questioning some of the great ones, like the Augustus Saint-Gaudens *Shaw Memorial* in Boston. Which is a wonderful piece of art, never mind the message that people are now complaining about.

Phillips: Do you feel there are public works from an earlier point in our history that need to go because of what they represent?

Prentice: It's complicated. You could write a book about it, and people will be, I'm sure, because it's, I mean… I never had it in for, say the Roosevelt Monument, which is famous, and I wasn't even aware of it. I don't know if you're familiar. There's Roosevelt looking big and proud and white, on top of a big and proud and white horse that's magnificent, and on the left of the horse, walking right by the saddle, is an American Indian, and on the other side is an African. And they're what, guiding him and protecting him and utterly subservient in the sculpture to him. And it's a monument, therefore, to white supremacists, and therefore has got to go. Applying that to the Shaw Rebellion in Augustus Saint-Gaudens's monument is the hardest I've been pressed on this subject. Because it's a terrific piece. But most of them aren't.

Well, anyway, it's a field of art that is not my forte, needless to say. There's still a demand for it in this public. I mean, without embarrassment, you can ask for figurative work celebrating the life of somebody whose life is worth celebrating, even in this day and age, and even with public funds.

Phillips: It seems like the work that you do meets a need that doesn't fluctuate with the time.

Prentice: Public art is a job, and it's complicated. I think people sit around the table, and I can't blame them. They have an important and responsible decision to make with public funds. It's a serious problem, and a difficult decision to make when you're looking at three or four presentations that have been worked out by the people whose lives are devoted to this, and whose hearts are exposed, you know. And each member of the committee has to decide how to vote on it. The thing that's going through their mind, the question they're asking in my hunch on this is, will *they* like it? Will their constituents at the moment, the people who are going to see it, like it? [UNINTELLIGIBLE 46:48-46:59]

And the question [the juror] should be asking, which is a much harder question, and one of the more appropriate questions, is how do *I* like it? How does he or she like it? That's not easy at all, because they bring their experience to bear, and their thinking is filled with prejudice of all kinds, and it's a disservice to the public decision. And my hunch is, they don't ask that. And I can understand why. It's too difficult. But it's the only valuable decision they could make, because the other one is that wild guess, and they can't possibly know how *they* would like it.

So they make the decision out of fear rather than out of love.

And, if you get the job, you're thrilled, and if you didn't get it, you don't know what went wrong. Sometimes I'll get a glimpse of what went wrong. I tend to be successful with the architect on the committee. And sometimes he's somebody I know well enough to call up and say, "So, what happened?" Sometimes they're kind enough to tell me. And people ask me, do I look at who got it? Generally I can't resist looking at their website if I don't know their work. But there are a few people out there, you know, that are colleagues. Like, sometimes I get it, and sometimes they get it. And that's fun. We have a chat afterwards. And you know, gritting my teeth, I congratulate them.

Schumacher: Who are some examples of contemporary colleagues and/or competition that you were working against or with or maybe still are?

Prentice: Well, anybody figurative, clearly is out. Actually, the day is sort of dominated by LED lighting and high-tech stuff. Right? I'm more interested in actually making an environment rather than putting an object in a space. So I come off the architecture much more. I take more room, and stuff is very light. It has its limitations, because it has to be light to move, because I'm using trapped air, mostly in an indoor space. In the big, big public space, but still, it's not like sitting here with the air moving freely through the space, not like working outside where I have to design for thunderstorms and high winds. So therefore it has to be out of reach. So there are a lot of limitations, but I've lost the question.

Schumacher: Oh, I was just curious if you had any names in particular.

Prentice: None of these people are all that well-known, because that's their specialty. You don't get published in the magazines for these pieces. And I have never been probed by someone who said, "I saw your piece in the Dulles airport. I want you to do something for me." That has never happened.

Schumacher: How did that piece come together that you were, last time we were here, you were creating a piece that you were sending to Australia. Is that correct?

Prentice: To Florida. That was a private collector.

Schumacher: Is that someone who contacted you? Or did you reach out?

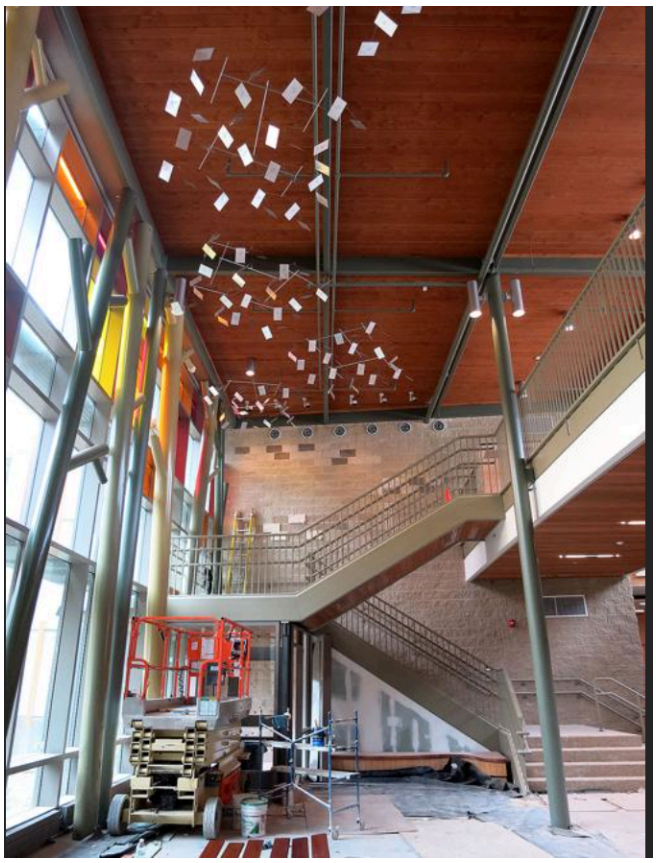
Prentice: That was somebody who contacted me through a sculpture gallery. I don't get much work through galleries, actually, even when I had one. [LAUGHTER] I had a gallery in New York for 35 years, and the only gallery I have now is in Kent, but most of the work comes straight from these percent projects, or actually through the architectural world. If an architect doing a big building for a corporation or something, I often get contacted or recommended, so we've gotten big projects that way. They're in a sense the best, because you have the architect on your side from the beginning.

Phillips: So are there any commissions that you didn't get that you were particularly disappointed by for some reason?

Prentice: Well, they're pretty equal. They're all sort of disappointing I guess. You never know why.

Schumacher: Is there a dream commission out there? Something you would love to do?

Prentice: Well, I've never been asked to do anything a church, for example. That would be interesting. That would be, you know, I would work longer and stay up later for that than anything I can think of. The Albers commission architecturally was a great pat on the back, but I can't get a rise above that. We did one for an architect in New Haven who we'd already done a school for, and he was selected to do the new Sandy Hook school in Connecticut. That was a great pleasure to get that sculptural commission. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 52:42-52:48]



Prentice mobile being installed at the new elementary school in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, 2016

Schumacher: Are you familiar with the work of Steven Holl?

Prentice: The architect?

Schumacher: I think of him because of his chapel in Seattle.

Prentice: Oh, he's terrific. The most famous architect I did something for was Renzo Piano, in the building he did in Sydney, Australia. But that came through an art consultant, not through the architect. [LAUGHTER] It was a lucky fluke, and it was a great piece, and it was a great building, and it was a nice commission. It was a big office building downtown. I think it's called Aurora, actually.

Schumacher: Did you have a chance to work directly with Renzo Piano?

Prentice: No, I was just given the space.

Schumacher: Did you have to fly down to assess the space?

Prentice: No. See, that's the other advantage of having studied architecture. I can read the drawings theoretically like Mozart could read the sheet music. So I did from the drawings, and actually the building was far enough along that there were some photographs of the partially completed space. I never even went to install it. We sent it. They didn't want to pay for it. I've never been to Australia.

Schumacher: When would that have been?

Prentice: Oh, I don't know, 15 years ago.

Phillips: You brought up having been in the service. Can you talk a little bit about that? When you were in the service and what you did?

Prentice: In the late, or early 50s. Hang on.

Phillips: Was it during the Korean War?

Prentice: It was during Korea, yes.

Phillips: Were you drafted?

Prentice: I was going to be drafted, yes, but I had maintained a position in the naval reserve on the theory that if I were to get drafted, the family thought it would be better to be able to say, whoops, I'm in the Navy Reserve, put me on active duty in the Navy and that would suffice, which is what happened. And I went in as the lowest of the low, which is seaman apprentice Prentice. And I was selected to go to officer's training camp in Newport, Rhode Island, because I

was a graduate, and I took a three-month course in getting to be a commissioned officer. And then I was a trained as a bombardier navigator off the carrier as the second seat in the biggest planes that the carrier could take. Which was extremely demanding.

Navigating generally is a matter of solving the wind. If you're at sea, it's solving the tides and the wind. And if you're in the air, it's just solving the wind, and that's not necessarily easily done, particularly under military conditions, where you're not allowed to use your radar. So I had that experience with the wind, and I had the experience of loving to sail, which we did a lot of cruising off the coast of Maine, which is again navigating and using the wind. So I had the wind going in a bunch of a ways for a long time.

Phillips: That's very interesting.

Prentice: The most valuable thing being in the military did for me was to get me out of my New England, pompously self-important Ivy League bubble.

Schumacher: To my ear, in just hearing you describe that, that seems very significant, that you would have had a relationship in the military, for example, navigating and understanding wind, and then having that become part of your métier in your work later in life. I don't think I've read about that in anything that you've written. Do you think about that?

Prentice: Yeah. I mean, that's when I learned, that's the skill or the gift or whatever, the training I got. Boy, is that bird loud. Nice job. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: It's been replenishing its nest.

Prentice: Yeah, it's got kids. They're probably wondering whether to go to college or do what, though.

Phillips: Gap year.

Prentice: Like everybody else. Take a gap. It's a good idea. But I think the social experience in the Navy was the most important thing.

Phillips: So once you went through officer training, where did you get stationed?

Prentice: We got our training in Florida, and then I was in the Mediterranean the whole time. And that was great, because we would put into places, and I could go to shore and explore.

Phillips: So you were still with Americans, but a wider group of Americans? Is that the way in which your social group expanded?

Prentice: You're either on a base, in Florida, which has its own society [UNINTELLIGIBLE 58:06-58:12]. The career officers were very skilled at getting to know people fast, and being friends quick and all that, and then moving on. Because every three years, they would move for their entire career, which is like *rending*, because I grew up in this town here, and I'm still here. That's a very different thing. And the other thing is, you're on a ship, where first off, there are no women and second off, it's a floating city of 3,000 people. You know, with barber shops and shops and a whole society. The carrier is so big that it doesn't move. The Earth moves around it. When you look out the porthole, you see different things. But the world you're living in is inert. It's a weird experience. Interesting.

Phillips: Did you get married after you got back?

Prentice: After. She would have never put up with that. [LAUGHTER] Well, plus, it was, you know, it was a little bit hairy working off carrier decks. It's extra hazardous duty. Even in peacetime. It was during the Korean War, but I never saw any action outside of line.

Phillips: It was a two-year stint?

Prentice: I had to go on for an extra year for that job. So I was out of commission for four years.

Phillips: That's a chunk of time out of your life.

Prentice: Yeah, it was worthwhile.

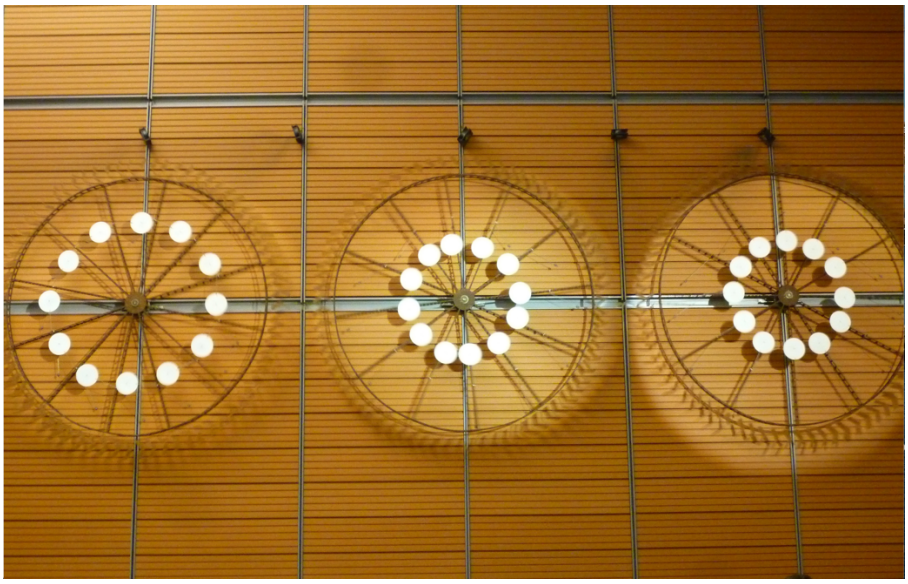
Schumacher: I'm actually just going back to Renzo Piano and the piece that you did for the Aurora Place. I looked it up online here as we were talking, and I'm curious, maybe specific to the Aurora Place, but also generally speaking, how you present your work. Do you have a template of drawings and sketches and video? And you talk a lot about story and narrative. Do you create a specific story, for example, in the Aurora Place? How did you present your idea that was unique to Aurora Place to Renzo Piano, for example?

Prentice: Well, I remember a certain part of it. Let me start in a clumsy way. When I was learning to ski, my left turn was much better than my right turn. So if you're in trouble, you always do the one you know better. That's a trick that you use to save yourself. [LAUGHTER] All artists have these patterns they use, because they worked in the past, and you don't want to repeat yourself, so you want to alter the patterns, but you have approaches [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:01:20-1:01:24]. That space didn't call for a piece overhead. The space wasn't high enough. So it was a wall piece from the beginning. And then we're good at doing certain things on the wall that we knew how to do with endless variations and no end to it. And so, you know, we closed it down kind of step by step and came up with the idea that, I guess you see there.

Schumacher: Well, I see the building. Not the actual piece.

Prentice: Well, you saw in the barn [Prentice's studio], we have wheels that turn. And in the wheels there are patterns of dots. And the dots move in curious ways that you wouldn't expect because of the movement of the wheels. So I thought, that's the way we'll deal with it. So that piece consists of three wheels. And each wheel has the same pattern of dots in it, a circle of dots which gets bigger and smaller as the wheel turns. That's it. It's staged to be a circle and just gets bigger and smaller. And they're all the same, but they're all a little bit off kilter with each other in terms of timing. And they're never going to catch up. So this one is big, and this one I small,

and they're moving against each other, and so on and all three. You sit there thinking, maybe if I sit here long enough, all three will do the same thing at once.



Kinetic sculpture by Prentice installed in the foyer of Aurora Place, Sydney, Australia, 2010.

Schumacher: And they never do.

Prentice: Well, hopefully. [LAUGHTER]

Schumacher: Hopefully they never do.

Prentice: Well, that's the promise that they would do it. It keeps you sitting there, theoretically. I mean, that's the interest. I mean, that's somewhere in the interest. How it works is somewhere else in the interest. So I thought that it would work in that space. And we wanted the dots to seem to float in space, so the wall was terracotta tiles, which is a sort of rusty, earth color. We made the wheels out of iron that would rust and had them outside here in the rain for a couple of months so they got nice and rusty. They were almost the same color as the tile, so the dots were really quite prominent.

Phillips: It sounds beautiful.

Prentice: White against the terracotta background. That was the idea.

Schumacher: The way I'm imagining it based on your description is that you're designing or engineering randomness, basically, into this movement.

Prentice: Yeah. Yeah.

Schumacher: Do you encounter that it's actually quite difficult to do that, because at the same time, you're also thinking very rationally and organizing your efforts. I would think they work against each other.

Prentice: If you're working outside, it's not a problem. It's tough inside. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:04:03-1:04:39] Making random, when there's no air, you know, can really be tough. That's where I spend a lot of my time. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:05:06-1:05:12] With a lot of commissions, they're big enough, you either have people in the shop or hire people to help fabricate it. So my question when I make stuff today is how can I get randomness out of non-randomness?

There's always air moving. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:05:41-1:05:49] … coming down off [cold windows], hitting the floor, sliding across the floor, going up over and around again, and that sets up a spiral. Not a very strong pattern, but it's there. There's air-conditioning pumping air, cold or hot, depending upon if there's people coming into auditoriums opening and closing the outside. There are people sitting in groups like this, each giving off a little bit of heat, not too much, but a number of people could get together, and I've actually had a piece move by the heat of my hand. So if you use all that… Sometimes [the forces] are in competition and canceling each other out. Sometimes they're working together. And they build a really usable energy pattern. That's what you use when you're working inside. And most of the commissions are inside. We've done outdoor pieces, and I'd love to get more, but there are other people working in that area who are more or better known for it.

Schumacher: Have you ever heard of or are you a fan of Theo Jansen?

Prentice: Oh, boy, am I!

Schumacher: His work is amazing, isn't it? [LAUGHTER] I actually see a lot of correspondence and kinship in your efforts.

Prentice: Oh, yeah! We have email conversations. He is amazing, a genius. Now, the interesting thing about him—one of them—I mean, you wouldn't think of it, is that you never see any assistants. He's like Henry Moore. That has to be a positive decision that he's made. Because he cannot build those things by himself. That's just too complicated, too elaborate.

Schumacher: How did you come to know him?

Prentice: Well, I knew about his stuff. I went to a conference of collectors for the first and last time about 20 years ago, and met him. He was there giving a talk. And I was there giving a talk. And we hit it off. And he's a neat guy. So yeah, oh, yes. Now, how, he's a MacArthur grant recipient, and how do you make a living doing that? People don't collect those things. They're just too big and weird. And who has the beach, you know? [LAUGHTER]

He talks about them as animals—and different species. Oh, he's terrific. And his energy is wind. I can't say enough about him. He has a cousin here in Cornwall. And distant enough that she's not fully aware of how prominent he is. So I tell her about him when I hear something new. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: We were really interested also in the "Studio Visit" link that Ellen sent us with your idea of "making a machine that has no opinion." What do you mean by that?

Prentice: Oh, I can't say I'm entirely sure. I sort of like the thought. It's inert. It doesn't speak. The wind speaks through it. The wind has an attitude, has an idea, has a point of view, you could

say. But it's okay. I mean, it works, it seems to me. It has an opinion. It's a funny way of saying it.

Phillips: It's very evocative.

Prentice: Good, well, thanks. I mean, I've always, I looked at that thing the other day, and it struck me again. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:10:12-1:10:18]

The engineer in me wants to eliminate friction, to make the air visible, to make the *air* visible. The sailor in me wants to know the direction and strength of the wind. The artist wants to know the changing shape of the wind. Meanwhile, the child wants to play. [LAUGHTER]

Schumacher: Musicianship and music has obviously been very important to you. And in some ways, when I'm, as I've gotten to know your work, it seems like in a way, you are sort of an instrument maker for the wind, and the wind is the musician. Does music have a relationship to your work?

Prentice: Well… in terms of composition, perhaps. Repetition, restatement of the theme with variations. I mean, there's structure of music, perhaps, more than anything.

There are people who make chimes, of course, and use the wind to make sound. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:11:55-1:12:14]

And it wants to be interesting and be kinetic on a day like this. But it also has this violent storm, of the kind that shows up every three years. Well, that's two completely different things at the opposite ends of the spectrum of the energy. But there's a kind of romance that, well, you could design a machine that could tell you by listening whether the wind is coming from the north, because it will be in the minor key, and if it comes from the south, it will be in the major keys. And all that. There's a set of brothers in France, the Baschets, who make musical instruments that are sound, but also use the wind. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:13:08-29].

We were asked by a bank in Texas to do a piece in that lobby, a kinetic piece, and in the contract, it had to be silent, so it didn't distract people from making out their checks, I guess. [LAUGHTER]

Anyway, that's a big subject you've got there.

Phillips: In a similar vein to the question about music, how about literature? I notice that you not infrequently quote poetry, like Yeats, and I was wondering if literature has been an important part of your life and work.

Prentice: The answer to your question is very simple. It hasn't played much of a part. And part of it is, I've never been much of a reader. I'm actually dyslexic, which a lot of artists are. Anything I know about poetry basically I got from my late wife, who was a poet herself, and so I know about Yeats and all kinds of people I wouldn't know about otherwise, and read him because of that… Certain things catch my fancy that I don't go looking for. And Yeats is one.

The idea Yeats had [Prentice is referring to the line, "How can we know the dancer from the dance," in his poem "Among Schoolchildren"], it's a real puzzle, because you make an object because you want to show or talk about. How are you going to talk about it without an object? If you just have air and nothing else. As I say, how do you make the movement be the attention and not the object? And Yeats asked that question. And had I never heard of it before. I never heard anybody ask the question before. So it's interesting.

I don't think he solved it. But he was one of the great poets of all time, Lord knows. The one about the center cannot hold—there was a poem for today.

Phillips: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood tinged tide is—"

Prentice: You got it. You can't beat that. [LAUGHTER] And what was it? Passionate intensity. That's the core of it.

Schumacher: Well, it's called "The Second Coming." I actually have it here.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, Etc. Etc.

Read the whole piece?

Surely some revelation is at hand.
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man—

Prentice: Fantastic having that kind of vision.

Schumacher:

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all around it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Prentice: We didn't get the killer phrase there. How pleasant a thought it is that you've come all this way to read poetry. [LAUGHTER]

Schumacher: What a pleasure to have the opportunity to read it.

Prentice: And a lovely day and a good place.

Schumacher: On a completely different subject, I'm curious, as a sometimes maker myself, if you have any favorite tools.

Prentice: Oh, yeah. Well, the shop has nothing exotic in it except for one. I mean, there's a hammer and a nail. We have a zillion pliers, as you may have seen. For various reasons we need different kinds, but also sometimes three people want the same one. But the great machine is the spot welder.

V&AP: Of course.

Prentice: And it's just terrific, because it's so fast. The way I use it, it's not that strong, but it makes a joint using a tremendous amount of energy over a tiny amount of time; it's all very carefully controlled, which you can adjust. So it welds metal. It welds stainless to stainless. But it's not so strong, so you develop a way of telling it things, so you can hit it twice very close together, something like that. You develop a vocabulary. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:20:02] Once you weld it, it's filled with solder, and that makes it, the two wires are crossing each other, they're not a joint. The joint disappears. This is the same wire. Right? But that takes a lot of work and skill of its own. And it's very time-consuming. So I'd develop a way of getting around it gracefully, because it will not weld because of that. If you can do lots of things really quickly, terrific.

Schumacher: It's also very unforgiving in the sense that once you pop that welder, the pieces are not able to be moved around at all anymore.

Prentice: Depending on how it's set. I'm using a sometimes very fine wire so the connection is not very strong. And then I walk around the piece, if it's set well, I just tack weld it, make it in the right place, then hit it again. Anyway, it's a terrific machine.

Schumacher: Are you familiar with the ideas or the principles around French scribe timber framing by chance?

Prentice: No.

Schumacher: The idea, as I understand it, is that it's an apprenticed learned craft that is notable or distinguishes itself because of the very loose but consistent tolerances. So working with rough-hewn timber, joiners and tradespeople will learn, using axes and adzes, a language and a craft that is very forgiving in the sense that it has very loose tolerances for joinery to move, and it has gaps, and it can also be very quickly, relatively quickly assembled.

Prentice: What do you do, wedge it to finish it?

Schumacher: Well, you wedge it to finish it, but the mastery of the craft is one of being consistent. Consistently inconsistent. [LAUGHTER] And I see that in your work, and I wonder if that's something unconscious that you work with, with regard to time. Like as you would work on something more quickly, you would necessarily have eccentricities against a deadline, for example.

Prentice: Yeah, well, in the shop, there's a constant unresolved battle between my attitude and David Covert's attitude. He's in your department. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm in your department, of looseness. Because I want it, I want the wind to be the big player. And the looseness is going to be lost, and the fact that the wind's going to push it around more than you would. Anyway, enough to hide the looseness. He's a precisionist. He's got to make it perfect. Lots of things, but perfect is the killer of the good, or something like that, or some comment to that effect. If there's a flaw in the piece, that's all he sees.

Schumacher: That's interesting. So you're sort of working in isometric relationship together.

Prentice: Drives me nuts. [LAUGHTER] And I drive him nuts. It's been going on for 40 years.

Schumacher: I guess that's inherent to any handcraft, is it will have some degree of imperfection, and that's what makes it, in a way, function.

Prentice: Well, I always thought, the mythology I got handed down about these barn constructions and early constructions—timber frames, they call it, or what—was that it was precise. In fact, when you were putting a mortise together, and it goes into, it has a hole in it, and the thing being gone into has a hole, and you drove a peg through it. The people who knew what they were doing, put the hole slightly opposite, not quite opposite each other.

Schumacher: So it pulled together.

Prentice: So it pulled together as you'd bang the peg in. And that's really my idea of cool.

Schumacher: That is.

Prentice: We have a bridge in Cornwall. Do you go through Cornwall?

Schumacher: We're familiar with that bridge having visited Robert Andrew Parker's place.

Prentice: Right, of course. Yeah. Well, that's pegged that way.

It was designed by a very early US architect from New Haven, who patented it, that basket pattern. And made a brochure that advertised it, but didn't give you enough to be able to do it from the folder. What was his name? Clatterdell. But anyway, that's the way you build a bridge in New England, for sure.

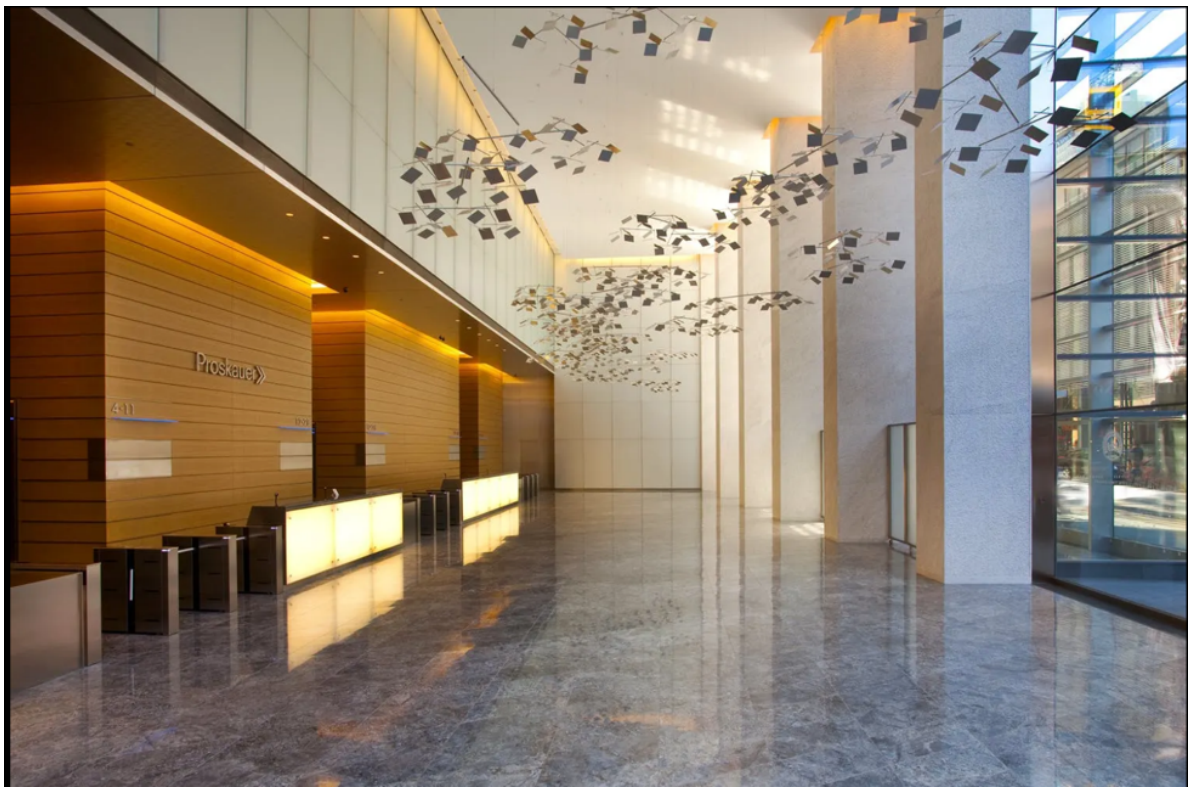
Schumacher: In a way, your challenge is to anticipate what the wind will do. And so you must have come to know wind pretty well in a way. Do you *see* the wind? Or do you envision the wind as you work?

Prentice: As I say, if there's a lot of glass, you can guarantee that there's going to be a current caused by that, depending upon the seasons, for example. We got a really nice commission in the building called 11 Times Square, which is a little bit of a stretch, because it's not actually on that square, but it's right nearby, and the developer named it.

Right. And the architect was tip top, and we got the job through him, and we did, I think, one of our better pieces there. During the warm-up process, they had selected me. We hadn't made the presentation yet. But I asked him the do a study of the air moving there, because it was huge space, with very few sources of energy. Like it was double doors to get into it, so there's nothing poofing in from outdoors when people came and went. And the elevators were not nearby, because they give their own, you know, you often feel when the elevator's going, you can feel the air coming or going, depending upon whether—it's a piston, the elevator. I asked him to make a study of the air, and they hired an engineer… it was beautiful. They had page after page of these wonderful amorphic shapes at different levels. And I was like, oh shit, I don't understand this at all. [LAUGHTER] So we thanked them profusely. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:27:05-1:27:28] [Prentice was describing the piece, which is pictured below.]

[We used] zillions of squares of aluminum about yay big. Or very close to that size. But hundreds of them, all linked together. Scattered all around, like an invasive plant. The space was very pompous, very austere, almost fascistic, impersonal, the scale was. And I didn't sell it on this ground, but I thought the sculpture we put there was like an invasive species, something that ignored the pomposity of the space.

And the thing went poof in its own way through the space. And the plates moved just enough that the reflection from the sun on the floor, or the angle it took of the light, moved just enough, and the plates moved left and right, and going out a little bit. And there's so many of them that there was movement over here sometimes, and not other times, and movement over there, it worked perfectly. And I was, thank heavens. Which raises another question, which is lost in most discussions, and I didn't see it as an issue until fairly recently. Things can move without changing, and change without moving. And you want to do both. But if the thing just sits there and twinkles, it's not moving. And that's not that interesting.



Prentice sculpture, *Swarm*, at 11 Times Square, New York City, 2011

Schumacher: So is the relationship between those two elements, the changing and the moving, is that something that's considered, that's kind of a shared understanding amongst kinetic sculptors?

Prentice: No.

Schumacher: Or is that something you've arrived at yourself?

Prentice: I arrived at it, without benefit of my assistant. [LAUGHTER]

Schumacher: That's a very interesting idea, and I can see that that's a very liberating to have come upon that clarity, in a way.

Prentice: Yeah. Can you imagine how late it came? Jesus Christ. It's really frustrating to be an artist. [LAUGHTER] The hardest thing you can do, which I've almost never done, is to go in a shop and say, okay, today's a vacation. I haven't taken any national holidays in 16 years, or knocked off for Saturdays and Sundays. So today I'm going to go on vacation, and I'm going to go out of the shop and play.

And that's impossible. I did have a bunch of workshops in the past, and I've had schoolteachers come, and they get extra credit of some kind because they've taken this course. And I've never had the gall, the courage, to say, okay, we're going to spend all day making stuff here. And everybody has certain materials that they brought, and they all have to have a certain plier, you know—they can't all have one plier. So it's a set up. It's a piece of work setting it up. But anyway, at the end of the day, whatever you make, we're going to put on the floor right here, and stomp on it. And I will throw it away. I've never had the courage to say that.

Phillips: But you feel like doing that.

Prentice: Every time I feel like doing it.

Phillips: For what reason?

Prentice: Well, because what they all want to do is make something to take home and show how clever they were. They want to make something, make a piece of kinetic sculpture. You know, not knowing any of the problems or issues or what or what. And then hang it up back home in the kitchen. What I want them to do is learn something, which is different. Right? [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: So no attachment to their results.

Prentice: Yeah. So we had an earlier interview. Did I tell the Philip Guston story?

Schumacher: No.

Prentice: This is my favorite story. Art story. It's because we saw a movie of him taken rather towards the end of his life. And do you know his work?

Phillips: Not really.

Prentice: Okay, he was one of the abstract expressionists in New York when that was flying high. Not one of the most prominent ones, but definitely one of the good ones in that group. And his paintings were successful and recognized, but I didn't know anything about him at all. I never met him or anything. But the legend is, and the truth is, that he suddenly left the city, and he went up to Woodstock, and found a place in the country, and didn't join the Woodstock society, as I'm told, but just worked on his stuff, and he remade himself from scratch, from the bottom up, became a different artist altogether. Didn't go to his friends' shows in New York, just stayed there and redid himself.

And in the story that he tells for the film we saw, he says, you go in the studio, and you're following everybody you ever met. Your students, your family, your fellow artists, the critics, your neighbors, your parents. And they're just staying in there with you, and you can't move. And if you are really, really, really patient and disciplined, if you do that, they start leaving one by one. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:34:39-1:34:52] And if you're really lucky, finally you're all by yourself. Then you're not done yet. You have to be even more disciplined for yet more time. And if you're really lucky, eventually, you will leave. And you can get to work.

Phillips: Wow.

Prentice: I find that just eerie. So the person who has a pliers and some aluminum in front of him and wants to make a mobile today, is doing it for somebody. You know, why are they doing

it, is the question. Because that's the basic question. Why are you doing it? Who are you doing it for?

Phillips: So thinking about Philip Guston, do you feel that people have been leaving your studio over the years? And if so, who's left?

Prentice: I have never been alone there. I've never gotten that far.

Phillips: So who's there with you?

Prentice: Oh, all of those people.

Phillips: All of them are still there.

Prentice: Well, my father, for example. Yeah, they all, they've gotten smaller. [LAUGHTER] I mean, come on. Something's happened. But you know what I'm saying.

Schumacher: Do you believe in the presence of spirits, like your father, for example?

Prentice: Not really. I haven't thought about it. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:36:29-1:36:36]

Schumacher: As I watch your piece move in the wind here, lots of images and thoughts come to mind, one of which is the belief in the animate nature and spirit of the natural elements, which many cultures have held.

Prentice: On further thought, I guess I do… I believe in spirits in the following context. You know the architect Louis Kahn. He's a fascinating character, a brilliant architect, brilliant model. He would say things like, "a brick wants to be an arch." I believe in that kind of spirit.

Schumacher: I mean, in a way, for example, I can see this piece that we're looking at here as something that you have brought to life. You're bringing together, I mean, material and spirit in a way that moves on its own now.

Prentice: Well, I like to think that things that I make have needs. You know? You feed the need to help them do their thing better.

Phillips: Being in this place, I don't know about ghosts, but there is very much a sense of history having happened here, other people having existed here, other people having built here. Do you sense the presence or influence of the people who were here before?

Prentice: Yes, absolutely.

Phillips: In what ways?

Prentice: Well, the buildings. They speak through the buildings. This, there was no floor, there was a floor here that rotted, literally. There was a window here like that teeny tiny window there. There was no door here. There was an opening here you could drive a tractor through, and the tractor destroyed the floor. But when it was built, it was probably a dirt floor. There was a second floor. You can see by the notches in the beams, particularly over there. So there were probably chickens upstairs and a lot of chicken crap. And there were pigs down here, probably, and maybe a horse. And maybe a cow. This was the only barn for the longest time. That part of the living room that sticks out this way was built in 1790, so this was the first barn. That was the only house for 40 years.

What did they eat in February? [LAUGHTER] You know, how did they live? The water, the outhouse. What was their pattern? The barn was much, much later, so how did they deal with the animals? How did they get through the first winter? And this was woods. I mean, I think about that a lot. That doesn't tell me how to make sculpture, but it's the spirits of the place. Now, I mean, the thing that's fun for me is everything has a different use. They're all using. They're all being used, but totally differently. My wife wrote a poem about what the farmer would think if

he walked into the barn, because the stones that he put there were from a glacier. And how did he put them there? They're big. How did he do that? What did he think about it?

[UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:40:37] Light, fluffy toys. They're temporary. How did they get down to the barn and back when there was no electricity? And you know, it was black outside? They didn't have a flashlight. I mean, he probably knew the paths in the dark, but then he had to go milk the cows. I guess you could do that, and he probably did it all in the dark, because he knew it so well.

Schumacher: This isn't entirely off topic, but again, I have the privilege of being able to sit here and also watch this piece that you've got here beautifully move in the wind. And also, I have corrective eyewear. I'm shortsighted, and so when I take off my glasses—

Prentice: You see it the way I do. [LAUGHTER]

Schumacher: Well, I don't know that I do, but I do wonder about that, and they're two very different experiences of seeing your piece when I look at it with my glasses, and when I take my glasses off, it changes. Can you describe in some ways, like how you actually see that?

Prentice: Well, that's actually not a piece. That's a study, and the question that's being asked is, is it worth making more of it? And is it doing the trick, which is, are they first off, not getting caught? And I can't see if they're caught right now.

Phillips: It looks like one may be.

Prentice: At least one caught. And is it worth making more of it? That's the basic question. You know, is it working? First of all, it can't get caught. Second off, would it work if it was bigger. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:42:24] I haven't decided. That's why it's there.

Phillips: It's quite successful. It's freed itself a few times on its own.

Prentice: Yeah. But it has another one over in the shop. It's a similar one, not identical, but a different wire system. See, they're all going left and right together, which is a good sign.

Schumacher: How would you describe your vision loss, though? Is it something that's a losing a focus? Or is it fuzzier?

Prentice: Probably pretty standard. I see everything as fuzzy. I get the big picture, not a problem. I mean, if you smile or not, I couldn't see that from here. I can see your face and where it is.

Schumacher: Up close too?

Prentice: Well, then you put a pair of glasses on, and there's your focal plane, and I have that. The focus lens is like that, which is ridiculous. My nose is already on the page. But I have to do that to read with these glasses. They've had one higher power than this, which is, they don't make glasses like that, so it's a jeweler's loupe. And I can get even closer with that. But by that time, I'm only getting three letters at a time, so I don't have the help of a context of the word it's in. [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:44:03-1:44:1:43]

There are people that I know and don't know. I can't tell them apart. So I sort of walk around until somebody recognizes me, and then we have a conversation. I can't go across and say, oh, there's Bob. I'll go talk to him. I can't do that. But the biggest problem I have is working with wire, like the wires there. It involves looping all the time. One wire connects to the other with a loop. And you make a loop, and I can't tell whether this wire is over or under that wire. I can feel it. So *feeling* suddenly has a huge role that it never had before.

Schumacher: That's interesting. I wonder if your work has evolved because of that, do you think?

Prentice: I don't think so. But that's what surprised the dickens out of me is that I didn't realize how much I could do with just feel. You can see with your fingers, in other words. I mean, for

instance, people have to do their hair behind their head. They just, don't think about it. They don't have to see it. They don't have to look at your shoe to tie it. We have all these things that we don't realize, that our fingers know how to do.

V&AP: So it's interesting, you've gotten to know your work through a different sense. You've gotten to know the nuances and potential of your work through your hands rather than your eyes, in a way.

Prentice: There's some nuisances that come along with that. It's very critical, we have nine different diameters of wire we use. Those are probably a six, on a scale of nine, six big, at the heavy, at the thick end. Maybe five. And I can't feel a difference. I can tell they're thick or thin. I can tell a nine from a five. But I can't tell a four from a five. So I have a caliper. I have to put the caliper on it, and then I have to read the number on the caliper. And then the caliper says five. And then I have a chart that says, five means it's such and such. So it's elaborate. [LAUGHTER] It's a workaround.

Phillips: Speaking of reading, I just wanted to go back briefly, you mentioned being dyslexic. So nowadays there are reading specialists in school to help, you know, kids who are dyslexic. They intervene—

Prentice: Yeah, oh it's recognized, which it wasn't.

Phillips: Yeah, it wasn't. So what was that like growing up?

Prentice: I didn't know I had it. I just thought I was dumb. And I took an aptitude test when I went in the service, actually, for them to help figure out what to do with you. And I got 99th percentile in the verbal reasoning department. Which surprised everybody, including me.

Phillips: Because you'd had trouble reading.

Prentice: Yeah. And I still have it. And I still surprise myself… [UNINTELLIGIBLE 1:48:12-1:48:17]

Now there's a competition between that and short-term memory loss. [LAUGHTER] I make something out of number five wire and put it over here, and I'm going to make another one out of five wire over here. And I make the thing out of five wire, and then I wonder which wire size that was. I have to put my thing on it to find out. So that's not the same problem. Get ready to grow old. It's not for beginners, you could say. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: I find it interesting because from an early age, presumably, you may have had the experience of learning to adapt. Of dyslexia impacting you.

Prentice: It did just in terms of lack of confidence, generally speaking. I thought I had an idea, but it popped out of my head. [LAUGHTER] So it's gone. The other thing to do is, you learn to just say, Okay. Forget it. [LAUGHTER] Because people, you know, my age now, they get together and try to remember something, and they all work on it together, and they can't get there, and by the time they find it, they forgot what they were going to do with it. [LAUGHTER] My wife and I were trying to think of the name of an actor one time. And we went to bed, and we're going through the alphabet. Woke up in the morning, afternoon, it took us three days. [LAUGHTER] We got there, but—

Phillips: That must have been satisfying. I guess one last question before we go, I didn't get through all the questions I wanted to ask. The Louis Kahn quote about bricks wanting to be archways. You know, that there's a desire of materials to become a certain thing. And, thinking about what you said about new materials, because a brick is kind of an older thing, right, and so it has all of this life force or absorbed energy. Can you talk a little bit about the choice to work from new materials? It's a need to work from new materials, right, because of the kinds of things you build?

Prentice: Well, they don't have any weight. People love to make things out of found objects, for example. And that's play for me, because I don't consider that serious, because it's not going to

help me tell the story that I'm obsessed with. Well, I don't go that way, except to make jokes. I like to make jokes.

Phillips: Right, like your Groucho or the piano, isn't there a piano player?

Prentice: That's right, yeah. Yeah, those are jokes. Those are play. Okay, but even if I went to the shop to play, to say I'm going to play all day, thinking up jokes is work. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: I guess it is.

Prentice: They have to pop into your head. That doesn't answer the question, I don't think.

Phillips: It was about the lightness of the materials you're working with.

Prentice: Oh, they have to be light. They have to be light, and Lexan is light and strong and doesn't break. So it's perfect for us.

Phillips: It also doesn't break down, degrade with UV exposure.

Prentice: Well, it used to. It's designed by GE not to. And you know the early Naum Gabo studies and all that? They were made out of plexiglass and plastic, when plastic was new and wonderful, in the 30s, I guess. They all got yellow and green and cracked, and they all look terrible. Lexan did a little bit of that, but not as fast. It wouldn't do it in a year. It would do it in five years. And now they're getting better and better at it all the time. So it almost doesn't do it anymore. But probably some. It breaks down. It doesn't become weaker, but it becomes discolored.

But if you take, the birds that are made, the flock of birds, out of milk cartons? I made some frogs. I made 20 frogs out of the milk cartons. I think it's called the 21 frog, lined them up in a military pattern and called them the 21-frog salute. But the sun will turn them totally into paper, into potato chips, in a couple of weeks. And in a month, they just fall apart of their own volition.

I mean, that's just the bottom of the line of plastics, which you would expect, because you use it and throw it away. The Lexan is used for making lamps in public parks, lamp shapes. Kids can throw stones at those lamps, and they won't break. So it's very strong. And in the clear form that's between you and the teller in the bank with the round hole, or you and cabbie. So it's great stuff. But I started off by resisting it because it was plastic. [LAUGHTER]

Phillips: Right. And so what kind of materials were Rickey and Calder using?

Prentice: Calder used metal, just metal. Nothing else.

Phillips: But not aluminum?

Prentice: Well, he also had the big commissions made by a foundry down in New Haven, near New Haven. And they were thick steel. Yeah, the big one in Washington, National Gallery, is steel. It has an interesting story, because it was one of the last things Calder did. He died while they were putting it up. He designed it in steel. And it weighed too much. It was Henri Matisse's grandson who lives in Boston, outside Boston in a church — the church space is his studio, and he lives downstairs in the office space. And he's a technocrat. He advised the Calder family to redesign that piece and make a sandwich. It has thin steel on the outside of the sandwich and Styrofoam [inside]. So it actually moves. But that wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for a standby engineer.

Phillips: Well, I was just wondering if one of the things about working in a new material, and then we should go, is that you're not working with the same materials that the artists before you worked in. Did you have to kind of come to terms with that or think about that?

Prentice: No, no. Not at all.

Not at all. A curious example is, Calder, I'm sorry, Albers, for all his color studies, those paints on the squares that he made, *Homage to the Square*, which he did for years, are right out of the tube. They're not mixed. He just bought paints from all over the world, and on the back of every

one of them, it says exactly what paint it is. So you could reproduce it. It would be a fake, strictly speaking, but you could make the same pattern. So all of the nuance, they're not nuances that he thought up. It's odd. He wouldn't have to do that. But he did that. It was a Germanic thing. I don't know what it is.

Schumacher: That's interesting. This has been really interesting to hear you talk about all this stuff. We may have to do part three. [LAUGHTER]

Prentice: Well, you're very kind. I just love talking about myself. [LAUGHTER] Rarely do I have the license.

Phillips: Well, one of the things we'd be interested in talking more about at some point is ego. Not today, but I'd like to hear your thoughts about artistic ego, because you give a lot of your ego over to the wind.

Prentice: Well, it's all a matter of, you know, love my art, love me. And people play different things. Love my pet, love me. Love my house, love me. There's all kinds of variations on the theme. But you know, if you think, what can I do that will be loveable? [LAUGHTER] If you can't do anything else, you've got to be an artist.