Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

ARTHUR DROOKER

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2016

© 2016 by the Mill Valley Public Library

TITLE: Oral History of Arthur Drooker
INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 25 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: December 6th, 2016

In this oral history author, photographer and cultural anthropologist Arthur Drooker discusses his life, work, and love for Mill Valley. Born and raised in New York City, Arthur first visited Mill Valley during his continental travels as a high school student in the summer of 1971. He was struck in particular by the tall redwood trees growing right downtown. After finishing a degree in American Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania, Arthur moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to become a filmmaker. For the next few decades he wrote, produced, and directed television documentaries on various historical subjects. In 2010, he left Los Angeles, moved to Mill Valley to be with his future wife, Ivy Ross, and began to devote himself to photography and writing. Arthur discusses the books he has written, the research trips he took in writing those books, and what he has learned through his work about the cyclical nature of history, the human yearning for community, and the true value of diversity and empathy. Throughout this oral history, Arthur applies his historical awareness and anthropological gaze to Mill Valley, the unique community to which he is proud to belong.

© All materials copyright Mill Valley Public Library. Transcript made available for research purposes only. All rights are reserved to the Mill Valley Library. Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the:

Lucretia Little History Room
Mill Valley Public Library
375 Throckmorton Avenue
Mill Valley, CA 94941

Oral History of Arthur Drooker

Index

Oral History of Arthur Drooker
December 6th, 2016

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Arthur Drooker, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:01 Debra Schwartz: Today is December 6th, 2016. My name is Debra Schwartz, and I am with the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society. And today, I'm conducting an oral interview with author, photographer, filmmaker, history buff, and all around anthropologist from Mars, on behalf of the Oral History Program. Arthur, thanks so much for sitting with me today.

0:00:29 Arthur Drooker: Thank you.

0:00:30 Debra Schwartz: On my lap, Arthur, I'm holding your latest book. You presented this book at the First Friday at the library the other day. *Conventional Wisdom*, it's a wonderful book.

0:00:42 Arthur Drooker: Thank you.

0:00:42 Debra Schwartz: It's a unique and original concept to capture. I really, really like in the introduction, where you're described as a lens, not the camera you carry. You are a cultural anthropologist, and you've studied American civilization. You go out with this mindset into the world, and you bring into focus the cultures and the subcultures in the world today, correct?

0:01:17 Arthur Drooker: I like to think so. Thanks for saying that. It's not something I do consciously. I think it's just part of who I am, being curious, and even back when I was in elementary school, social studies was one of my favorite subjects. I think that was embedded in me, early on, and maybe even growing up in New York, as well, where it is somewhat of a melting pot, with the different cultures and different kinds of people there, and everybody has to get along on some level. And there's always something to see, something to taste, something to hear. I think it's the way I've always been. I don't think it was something that I acquired, in terms of a skill, a talent, something along those lines. I just think it's part of who I am.

0:02:13 Debra Schwartz: I'm hoping today, in this interview, that we'll be able to use your experiences, as you explore the world. It's also to turn the lens, you, towards exploring Mill Valley, as well. But let us first start with exploring you. Can you just tell me a little information about yourself, where you were born, a little bit about your education, please, and what brought you to Mill Valley?

0:02:39 Arthur Drooker: I was born and raised in New York City, specifically, the Bronx, the northernmost borough of New York. I grew up in a little neighborhood called Riverdale, which, in some ways, is analogous to Mill Valley. It's what I would call a leafy, suburban neighborhood. A lot of well-to-do people live there. There was an

element of creativity there, on the part of some of the people who live there. It was a very tight community. I grew up there during the ’60s, and I’ve nothing but great memories of growing up there. And every day, I’m that much more grateful for growing up in that neighborhood, in New York, at that particular time. I went to the University of Pennsylvania. I majored in a discipline called American Civilization, which was part history, part anthropology, part sociology, part literature. It was a wonderful early example in education of using multiple disciplines to create a singular academic pursuit, which I absolutely loved.

I moved to Los Angeles from the East Coast in 1978, because at that point, I aspired to be a film director. And after being in LA for a couple of years, I got a bit disillusioned with the motion picture business, but I still enjoyed that type of work. I was working in television and, long story short, I, for many years, became a freelance writer, producer, director of television documentaries. That coincided with the rise of cable TV. I did a lot of work with production companies that had deals with A&E and the History Channel, mostly, and that was great because I love history, always have. And the idea of making, producing, writing about, directing historical-themed documentaries to me was — it didn’t even feel like work. I just felt it was more like continuing my education. The idea of traveling some place, whether it was a battlefield, or some other historic site — I make a very emotional connection with these places. It’s not just about facts to me.

And interviewing historians or authors who wrote about famous people or events, eras, etcetera, to me, it wasn’t even like interviewing them, it was like having a conversation. And for many years, I did that, and absolutely loved it. Really. I felt myself very lucky to have that kind of work, because it’s very easy, in that world, TV, to just punch a clock and get a paycheck. Because some of the work can be very dispiriting. It’s not that emotionally engaging or anything like that. But I was very lucky in that I was doing work that I was very engaged in. I lived in LA until about 2010.

0:06:13 Debra Schwartz: May I ask you?

0:06:14 Arthur Drooker: Sure.

0:06:14 Debra Schwartz: Just cut in. Can you give us some of the names of some of the history shows you —

0:06:19 Arthur Drooker: Sure. I was one of the regular producers of episodes for two big series that were on A&E and the History Channel. One was called *The Real West*, which was about the American West. And the other series was called *Civil War Journal*. I worked on those series for several years. Then I worked on specials. They included *The Long Gray Line* about West Point that was produced to coincide with the Military Academy’s Bicentennial in 2002. I did a special about George H.W. Bush’s World War II years to coincide with a book that had come out about that. I got to meet him twice, which was interesting. It’s just so many. God, I’m just trying —

0:07:15 Debra Schwartz: Well, first of all I have to interrupt.

0:07:16 Arthur Drooker: Sure.

0:07:17 Debra Schwartz: Okay. What was interesting about meeting George Bush?

0:07:21 Arthur Drooker: Well, I had never met a president before. And even though I did not vote for him and didn't necessarily care for his politics, there is something about being in the physical presence of power, what that looks like. Going to Washington D.C., being surrounded by his staff, and then actually having some one-on-one with him. He was a very nice man. Again, I didn't agree with 99% of his politics, but he was a very nice man, he was very nice to me. The show actually turned out quite well, which surprised me because I took that job — I was a freelancer — I took that job because it would allow me the opportunity to meet a president. Again, even though it wasn't one I completely endorsed, I felt that would be interesting. And so, I did it mainly for the experience. By the way, the show did turn out well, so that was good.

0:08:34 Debra Schwartz: Okay, I just couldn't let that one go. [chuckles]

0:08:37 Arthur Drooker: No, that's okay. That's okay. And I did a bunch of others. If anybody's interested, they can look me up on IMDb and they can see a whole roster of shows.

0:08:49 Debra Schwartz: You bring this perspective of historical significance, this personally-engaged way of looking at the world with history always in the front of your mind.

0:09:00 Arthur Drooker: Yes, that kind of enters into it, putting things in certain kinds of context, absolutely. I think a lot of people think that the times they're living in or what they're doing is completely unique, and most of the time it isn't. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's good to know what came before you, so you know who your ancestors are and whatever it is you're doing, creatively, professionally, what have you. I almost see it as if it's the passing of a baton, really. That you're extending a tradition, you're putting your own spin on it, but you're acknowledging those who came before you and taking it one step further, perhaps on their behalf, which I've done in a conscious way on some things, and in other ways, you influence me. I'm going to take how you influence me and incorporate it into my own thing, and push a little bit further.

When I talk about this kind of thing, I make the parallel of, in some ways, with the Beatles and Chuck Berry. They loved Chuck Berry when they were teenagers forming the band, but they came from England. Skiffle was a popular form of music in England, or Northern England at that time, and they married Chuck Berry with a skiffle-like sound. It's the same kind of thing. They took it further, and then they evolved and did their own thing. But in their way, they were acknowledging their antecedents — Chuck Berry or Little Richard, what have you — and did their thing with it and moved it forward. I think in a parallel way. I think I do that as well in my own work.

0:11:03 Debra Schwartz: Arthur, we're going to talk about your latest book, *Conventional Wisdom*, later in the interview, but I understand that you've written other books, as well.

0:11:12 Arthur Drooker: Yes, prior to *Conventional Wisdom*, I had written and photographed a book called *Pie Town Revisited*, and that book was the fulfillment of a long-time desire. When I was 16, 17 years old, I became deeply enamored with Farm Security Administration photography. To those who don't know what that is, it probably sounds like —

0:11:45 Debra Schwartz: Probably smiling. [chuckles]

0:11:46 Arthur Drooker: Yeah. It probably sounds like, "Huh? What's that?"

0:11:49 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, what?

0:11:49 Arthur Drooker: But every time someone has that reaction, I always say, "You've seen those remarkable black-and-white photographs of Depression-era America." And most people say, "Oh yeah, right, like Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, etcetera." And I say, "Those are Farm Security Administration or FSA photographs." During the Depression, FDR tasked the Farm Security Administration with documenting the effects of the Depression, as well as, the Dust Bowl on America, as well as, the impact of New Deal programs helping Americans. So there was a little bit of a propaganda side to it also. But in hindsight, the FSA photography unit, for all intents and purposes, really established a foundation of documentary photography in America. You had people like Walker Evans, like Dorothea Lange, among others, traveling around the country, documenting Depression-era America. And when I was 16 or 17, that's when I first saw these photographs, and it really had an emotional and intellectual deep impact on me. And I swore to myself that when I got older, I would go to a place that an FSA photographer had been and see what it's like now.

0:13:21 Arthur Drooker: Flash forward to about 2002, I'm working on the movie *Seabiscuit* as a co-producer of the documentary segments within that movie, and I got reacquainted with FSA photography, and even more so, with Russell Lee, who was an FSA photographer. He visited several places, one of which was Pie Town, New Mexico. And as it turned out, he made more photographs of Pie Town, New Mexico than any other single place in the FSA file. He made about 600-some odd photographs of Pie Town, some of which were in color, which in 1940 was highly unusual. These were photographs of homesteaders who escaped the Dust Bowl in Texas, and basically moved west and settled in this part of New Mexico and were basically living like 19th century pioneers, living in log cabins that they built, drawing water from a well, and doing dirt-farming, which is the simplest agriculture you can do. It's basically waiting for rain to irrigate your crops. I was working on *Seabiscuit*, I came across some of his color photographs of Pie Town, and I said, "That's where I'm gonna go."

0:14:46 Arthur Drooker: *Seabiscuit* was over, several years passed, and in 2011, I embarked on *Pie Town Revisited*. And I cold-called the woman who runs the Pie-O-Neer Cafe in Pie Town. To call it a town at this point, I think is a bit much. It's really a community of about 70 people, the core community. The post office serves a larger area, so you're looking total, maybe 120 people, maybe. From 2011 to about 2015, I was working on *Pie Town Revisited*. I went to Pie Town about, I don't know, five, six, seven times, sometimes for a few days, sometimes for a week. I got to know the people there very well, some of whom had relations who were around when Russell Lee visited in 1940, even photographed some of them holding photographs that Russell Lee had made of their relatives, so it was like a double portrait. And it was fascinating just to see how the town changed, which wasn't in essence all that much. It still was this little slice of Americana, and to me, it was a little bit of how America used to be or how we would like to think America used to be and what we wanted to be.

0:16:21 Debra Schwartz: You say a slice of Americana, that's not a pun because the town's name Pie?

0:16:27 Arthur Drooker: Oh, it's a pun. [laughs] It's a pun. If it works, use it.

0:16:31 Debra Schwartz: Because it could be mathematical —

0:16:31 Arthur Drooker: But it's true.

0:16:32 Debra Schwartz: It's pie, P-I-E.

0:16:34 Arthur Drooker: Yes, that's true. And by the way, March 14th, 3/14, is a big day there. That's when they reopen a couple of the pie cafes, because pie is —

0:16:47 Debra Schwartz: Just briefly, will you tell us how a town can be called "Pie"?

0:16:53 Arthur Drooker: It got its name in the early 1920s, there was a prospector who thought there was some gold to mine in the area, and he staked a claim. To underwrite his mining operation, as modest as it was, he was also a car mechanic, so he opened up a garage. And for people driving by on U.S. Route 60, which was essentially a dirt road, he would fix their cars. And while they were waiting, he made pie. And his pies became very popular. Slowly but surely, a community developed, and it got large enough to justify a post office. They petitioned the postal department, and this was in the late '20s, like 1927. And I guess, the postal department in D.C. said, "Come on, get serious. If you're gonna have a post office, we need a more serious name to your town." And the people said, "It's Pie Town or no town." And now we have Pie Town, New Mexico, which does have a post office.

0:17:54 Debra Schwartz: How's the pie there?

0:17:56 Arthur Drooker: It's great. It's very hearty. If I'm being honest, you can get more gourmet-style pie in San Francisco. But if you're biking the Continental Divide or

hiking the Continental Divide, if you're passing through after driving for a couple of hours, believe me, a slice of apple, or blueberry, or a coconut cream pie at the Pie-O-Neer Café — and there's a couple of other places there — and a cup of coffee —

0:18:26 Debra Schwartz: Does the job.

0:18:27 Arthur Drooker: Does the job quite well.

0:18:28 Debra Schwartz: How's the coffee?

0:18:31 Arthur Drooker: It works. It's fine. It washes it down. [laughs] It does what it has to do.

0:18:37 Debra Schwartz: Oh well, I'm going to have to see that firsthand.

0:18:39 Arthur Drooker: Yeah.

0:18:41 Debra Schwartz: And how about the next book after that?

0:18:42 Arthur Drooker: Well, the next book after that was *Conventional Wisdom*.

0:18:46 Debra Schwartz: Oh, well, we're going from today backwards.

0:18:50 Arthur Drooker: *Conventional Wisdom* was the latest book. Just prior to that was *Pie Town Revisited*, and prior to *Pie Town Revisited* was *Lost Worlds: Ruins of the Americas*. I was very enamored with ruins. The book that had come out prior to *Lost Worlds* was called *American Ruins*, and that did quite well. That was about historic ruins within the United States. So then I thought, "I love photographing ruins. I'm a history buff and I like being among the ruins." I thought, "What would be a logical next book to do?" I thought, "Ruins of the Americas" — *Lost Worlds: Ruins of the Americas* — and that would be Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America and South America. I worked on that from about 2008 to 2009, or '10. The book came out in 2011.

0:19:49 Debra Schwartz: And so you traveled to all of these places?

0:19:51 Arthur Drooker: There were about 30, yes. There were about 30 or so sites in those areas. And it was a fascinating experience.

0:20:02 Debra Schwartz: You are somebody who observes the world. You're the lens. And you're traveling from place to place. Any special adventures? Any wisdom learned? Any surprises?

0:20:15 Arthur Drooker: Well, the wisdom I gained from being at all these places is just the cyclical nature of history, I think. Westerners have a tendency to think of history as a straight line, always making progress, always moving forward. And I understand that. But when you are working on a project of this nature and you are going to ruins of

different civilizations that existed at different times, what you really take away from it is that civilizations rise and fall. And within their time frames, it appears that they make progress, but that's part of the cycle, too. As societies, cultures, civilizations perfect themselves, they're almost moving towards their obsolescence. Then I can understand how that might seem contradictory, but that's how it goes if history is any teacher, while we, right now, think we are in the most advanced culture technologically —

0:21:26 Debra Schwartz: Therefore, perhaps, immune from that obsolescence.

0:21:28 Arthur Drooker: Immune. We have these scientific advances and medical advances, and it's easy to think that, yes. But guess what? The Maya thought the same thing. The Incas thought the same thing. And look at how they rose and fell. Again, when you're working on a project like this, you can't help but think that in time, this will happen to us, as well. And by the way, a lot of these cultures rose and fell in very similar ways. It was almost like this chorus when you think about depletion of natural resources, scarcity of goods.

0:22:22 Debra Schwartz: Same as climate change.

0:22:23 Arthur Drooker: Climate changes. The Maya predicted this 2,000 years ago. While I do believe in climate change, I can tell you that the Maya predicted this in their cyclical calendars 2,000 years ago.

0:22:43 Debra Schwartz: Predicted this?

0:22:44 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

0:22:45 Debra Schwartz: Can you be a little clearer? This, you mean what? Today?

0:22:48 Arthur Drooker: Yes. The Maya calendar is an expression really of how sophisticated the Maya were. And even though they engaged in things like human sacrifice — things we would abhor today, and rightfully so — on the other hand, astronomers today will tell you how sophisticated and accurate their calendars were. They had different types of calendar based on Venus, based on the sun, based on the moon, and they erected temples for all this sort of thing. They devised different types of calendars that worked within themselves. It was almost like small cogs working with bigger cogs, working with even bigger cogs.

They had time frames like Katuns and Baktuns which could be 20 year periods or 40 year periods, and then, bigger periods that were 200 years in length. But they all were cycles within cycles. People have looked into this to a much greater depth than I ever would, but based on my knowledge of what they've done, they've indicated that the Maya were able to look into the future and see when there would be famines, when there would be what we would call climate change. Knowing that, I'm not surprised that we're going through what we're going through right now. It doesn't mean I'm not alarmed, it just means, if you were a student of history, you knew this was going to happen. When you go to a

place like Palenque, or Chichen Itza, or some of the Maya sites in Guatemala, that were just really sophisticated, like the Paris of their day. There's a Maya site in Honduras, the name escapes me right now, but it was called the Paris of the Maya.

0:25:09 Debra Schwartz: Chichen Itza?

0:25:10 Arthur Drooker: No, that's Mexico. I'm just drawing a blank right now.

0:25:13 Debra Schwartz: It'll come through.

0:25:13 Arthur Drooker: Yeah. But anyway, these were very sophisticated for their time places and yet they're ruins now. And some day, I'm telling you, somewhere deep into the future, we will be a version of a ruin. That's just how it goes.

0:25:33 Debra Schwartz: You've traveled to places so different from the Western world. You've gone, I imagine, into jungles — of course you have had to if you've been looking at Tulum, in that area.

0:25:45 Arthur Drooker: And Angkor Wat, by the way, I've been to Angkor Wat. Actually going to Angkor Wat in 2004 and 2005, that's what really got me into ruins, because that is one spectacular place.

0:26:00 Debra Schwartz: Talk a little bit about that.

0:26:03 Arthur Drooker: Angkor Wat, it held like this mystical power for me. It's in Cambodia. It was the Khmer Empire, goes back to about 900 AD. Just absolutely spectacular. And because Cambodia has stabilized politically in the last 10, 15 years, it's safe for tourism now. They get hundreds of thousands of people every year going to Angkor Wat. And rightfully so, it's just one of the great civilization sites in the world. The temple structures, the carvings on the walls, the overall sophistication of the layouts and symbols, it's just overwhelming. And that's what got me interested in going to ruins, I'd had some friends who had been and it piqued my interest. I went three times within two years because it was just that incredible. And that got me to thinking, "Well, hmm, I wonder what ruins there might be in the United States?" And that's what got me going on *American Ruins* and then subsequently *Lost Worlds*.

0:27:25 Debra Schwartz: When you go into the *Lost Worlds* or the *American Ruins*, I've been to some of these, they're like outdoor museums.

0:27:31 Arthur Drooker: Copan, that's the name of the ruin in Honduras. Copan, C-O-P-A-N. Just a beautiful, lovely place.

0:27:39 Debra Schwartz: Time release remembering.

0:27:40 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

0:27:41 Debra Schwartz: When you're going to these historical places, and I've been to many myself, you always wonder if you're going to turn the corner and you can travel back in time or have some kind of mystical moment, perhaps you hope for it or fear for it. Have you in your experiences in your research, you've been to so many places, ever had a mystical-type experience?

0:28:01 Arthur Drooker: I would say, yes, and when you asked the question, I immediately thought of Palenque. I was staying in a very simple hotel just outside the entrance to the grounds of the ruins. And there was one early wee hour experience I had when, as sure as I'm sitting here talking to you, I saw a ghost. And I'm not one to get into this woo-woo ghost stuff at all, but as sure as I'm sitting here at this table, I can tell you I saw a ghost. I was sleeping in my little hotel room, and I got up and there was — it looked like a hologram of a Maya woman. And I couldn't tell if she was ancient or present day. She was small, she was maybe five foot, and she wore very simple dress, but again, it could've been ancient or it could've been present day.

0:29:27 Debra Schwartz: I mean, the clothing would have been different hundreds of years ago.

0:29:29 Arthur Drooker: Well, I don't know, but it was like simple cloth. In my memory of it, it didn't necessarily strike me as ancient, but she could've been, and she was not threatening at all. It was almost like she was in the room, pausing, and then just moved forward. She didn't even look at me. She just was there and just moved on and that was that. And I was just stunned. I was like, "Wow, what was that?" But I wasn't alarmed. I wasn't scared. I was just shocked and amazed, shocked and awed. What can I say?

0:30:17 Debra Schwartz: In the wee hours, did you wake up to see her?

0:30:19 Arthur Drooker: I remember there was sunlight in the room, but I was still in the process of getting up, so maybe it was sometime between 6:00 and 7:00 AM.

0:30:30 Debra Schwartz: Did you talk to the front desk about it?

0:30:33 Arthur Drooker: I don't think I did. In hindsight, I probably should have because maybe they would have said, "Oh, you're staying in room blah-blah-blah, that's the haunted room." But again, we're going back about eight years, nine years now, so my memory isn't super crystal clear. But it's very clear that I did see that apparition, that ghost. Yeah. [chuckles]] You're looking at me —

0:31:01 Debra Schwartz: I'm looking at you. I'm trying to determine how one might feel. Privileged, cursed? You just were shocked and awed.

0:31:11 Arthur Drooker: I didn't feel cursed. I didn't feel haunted. I didn't have any negative feeling, whatsoever. Now that we're talking about it, maybe I should take it as some expression of my being deeply immersed in the subject, and fully invested in the

project, and deeply respectful of these different civilizations, in this case, the Maya. I think it's all to the good.

0:31:46 Debra Schwartz: Perhaps, you just paused in time for a moment.

0:31:49 Arthur Drooker: Yeah.

0:31:52 Debra Schwartz: One never knows.

0:31:53 Arthur Drooker: One never knows. But nothing like that has happened since. I don't know if that means anything, but there you have it. [laughs]

0:32:06 Debra Schwartz: That's how many books?

0:32:07 Arthur Drooker: There were four. Was it four all together? We had *American Ruins*, which was the first book, ruins within the United States. Then there was *Lost Worlds*. Then there was *Pie Town Revisited*. And then *Conventional Wisdom*.

0:32:20 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

0:32:21 Arthur Drooker: Right.

0:32:21 Debra Schwartz: Which we'll talk about in a little bit. Is there anybody you met along the way in all your travels? Because it's not just writing a book, you were living a life of travel and exploration in order to write the books. It's not like a fiction writer who's writing a story about people or anything. You're a researcher and a journalist. Is there anyone you met along the way that stands out to you in some fashion? Because I noticed you very much are an observer of people.

0:33:02 Arthur Drooker: Right. Well, when I was working on the ruins books, I was really very determined and was on my own. I did have guides here and there. Some of the guides I definitely bonded with — I'm thinking of Alex in Mexico, he was a great guy, just wonderful. And I had a really good guide in Peru. When I'm in these places, I'm there for like two or three, maybe four days. You're hanging out with a guide and again, some of them you bond with because they're naturally interested in what you're doing and they're very appreciative that you're coming to their country to photograph, that you're not a typical tourist. When it came to those books, I would say some of the guides were great. I'm no longer in touch with any of them, but when I think back on the experience of doing those books, like I'm doing now talking with you, I do think back on them.

When I was doing *Lost Worlds*, I was thinking more about the photographers and explorers who came before me, 'cause I really felt that I was traveling in their footsteps. For example, with *Lost Worlds*, I was thinking of John Lloyd Stephens who wrote a book called *Travels in the Yucatan and Central America*. And he did this in 1840s. He really blazed the trail. He traveled with a British artist — his last name was Catherwood — who

was a watercolorist. Between Catherwood's watercolors and John Lloyd Stephens' text, his writings, I just soaked that stuff up, because they were the first white men, the first Europeans, to visit some of these places, when they were truly ruins with vegetation intertwined and all those kind of things.

0:35:18 Debra Schwartz: You machete your way through the —

0:35:20 Arthur Drooker: Yes. And they would pay some of the locals to machete some of the vegetation from the ruins, so that Catherwood could make more detailed watercolors. I really felt that I was extending the tradition that Stephens and Catherwood had started. Then, you have someone like Hiram Bingham, who is the white man who is given credit for "discovering Machu Picchu." Even though Machu Picchu was well known to everyone who lived in that area, but he's the one who's credited with making it known to the rest of the world.

And by the way, Bingham, he was modest enough. He gave credit to the little guide boy who took him up to Machu Picchu. But I felt I was in his footsteps also. And there was a British photographer, whose last name is Maudslay and he's credited with making Maya ruins in Central America well known to the world. Again, I felt I was walking in their footsteps. I was proud to do so. And in my introduction to *Lost Worlds*, I make mention of all these people who came before me, and I feel like I'm passing on the baton, which is the camera. And with *Pie Town Revisited*, I certainly felt that I was there because of Russell Lee. And I felt that I was most definitely extending his work.

0:36:56 Debra Schwartz: I appreciate that your entourage seems to be the past, the people that were before you, the people that have inspired you, all these [people] you bring with you to every project that you seem to take on.

0:37:08 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

0:37:11 Debra Schwartz: And now, you're going to be segueing, I believe, in your own life. There's going to be a change as you start thinking about going from Southern California and making a move. So that is where we'll go next. When you left LA, you were disillusioned, and yet how did you end up here?

0:37:39 Arthur Drooker: I think it was a perfect storm, really. To pick up on your point, I was disillusioned with the TV business. At that point, I had been freelance documentary producing for roughly about 16, 17 years. And the business had changed. It had become more "reality-oriented," which didn't interest me at all. And at the same time, I reconnected with a woman with whom I grew up in New York. She grew up three blocks from me. She dated my best friend from high school, and she lived in Mill Valley. So for a year, we did the back and forth thing. One weekend I would come up here to Mill Valley, and the following weekend, she would come visit me in LA. We did that for about a year. And at the end of the year, I was like, "You know, this relationship is going great." My work life in LA was winding down. Even though I love my friends in LA, there was nothing really keeping me there.

And Ivy, at that point, my soon-to-be wife, she said, “Look, why don’t you just move up here and concentrate on your photography.” And I did. And I haven’t looked back. I love living in Mill Valley. I think it’s a form of heaven on earth. The only thing that would make it even better for me is if some of my friends from LA would move up here, and those who have been up here love to visit. Who knows, maybe that will happen. I moved up here in February of 2010.

0:39:11 Debra Schwartz: But you have — actually, I saw you on the street — and you have a friend from your hometown here.

0:39:15 Arthur Drooker: Yes, Peter Englander, who moved here several years before I did. He’s been here for quite a while. And yeah, it’s great.

0:39:24 Debra Schwartz: So that’s got to feel great.

0:39:25 Arthur Drooker: Every time I see him walking around, we always stop and chat.

0:39:34 Debra Schwartz: You’ve got this perspective that you’re bringing to Mill Valley that I’m curious about. You’re a historian. You like to research things. You like to delve into the personal rather than the theoretical, because these interviews you’ve conducted aren’t really interviews in the past about subjects, they’re conversations. I think it’s an interesting perspective. So you come to Mill Valley.

0:40:00 Arthur Drooker: Right.

0:40:02 Debra Schwartz: And is it a change for you being raised in New York and then to LA?

0:40:09 Arthur Drooker: Well, it’s definitely a change.

0:40:10 Debra Schwartz: Tell me about the first time you came to Mill Valley?

0:40:14 Arthur Drooker: The first time I came to Mill Valley actually was in the summer of 1971. I was between my junior and senior year in high school, and I had been traveling around with a very close friend of mine. We had been traveling around, hitchhiking and taking the train across Canada. He decided to stay in Canada and I decided to come down the West Coast. And my English teacher from high school, he had moved out to Berkeley. I contacted him, and he and I got along great. I said, “Hey, can I come visit you?” He said, “Yeah, come on down.” Again, I did a combination of bus and hitchhike to Berkeley. Again, this was the summer of ’71.

And he was so nice to me. I ended up staying at his place in Berkeley for about three weeks. It was like he, his girlfriend, and me. And we just had a ball. I remember just hanging out in Berkeley, and we would drive to Santa Cruz and Monterey. I remember

we came to Marin and that's when I came to Mill Valley for the first time. I have a very short but clear memory of being in downtown Mill Valley right around Throckmorton and Miller Avenues. And I remember these incredible tall trees, these redwoods. I was like, "Wow," right in the middle of town. I have a very clear memory of that, and these nice, quaint, little shops. And that's when my memory of Mill Valley stops. But it was a very nice memory that clearly stayed with me.

0:41:52 Arthur Drooker: But I was aware of Mill Valley around that time, maybe even a little bit earlier, because in high school, actually, with that John Conger that same English teacher. That's when I really got into the Beats like Jack Kerouac and Ginsberg and those guys. And in fact, Jack Kerouac went to my high school for a year. He graduated from Horace Mann, he came on board as a football player for the senior year. And in the alumni book shelf in the library, all his books are lined up there. When he died, when I was — I think he died when I was a sophomore in high school, that's when I really got into the Beats. And as a result of that, I became aware of Gary Snyder. And I really liked his poetry and I found out about him. And lo and behold, he lived in Mill Valley. So that's how I first became aware of Mill Valley. And then, as I mentioned, I did a little day trip to Mill Valley with John, my former English teacher.

0:43:00 Arthur Drooker: And then, I kept hearing about Mill Valley off and on years later, when I was in LA. Because a couple of guys I worked with had lived in the Bay Area and had moved down to LA and we worked together at this TV station in Los Angeles. And I always liked the Bay Area. My sister moved up to Berkeley in 1975, and when I moved out to LA in 78, I would come up here and visit often. I always liked the Bay Area, I was not one of these people who decided, "You either like the Bay Area or you like LA. You can't have both." And I say, "BS. Of course, you can have both." I like both for two different reasons. Although, I do have to say having lived in Mill Valley now for almost seven years, it's just gorgeous up here in a way that as much as I can still like LA, it's not the same thing. Mill Valley is just a wonderful place, I have to say. I describe it as some kind of heaven on earth.

And in some ways, it reminds me a little bit — I mentioned this earlier — about where I grew up in New York. It was in the Bronx, and people think of the Bronx as being kind of rough. And there are rough areas of it, but where I lived it was in the northwest corner and it was like this leafy suburb. It had a similar proximity to Manhattan the way Mill Valley does to San Francisco. In 15 or 20 minutes, you're there. And yet, when you come back to Mill Valley or go back to Riverdale, the section I grew up in the Bronx, you're surrounded by lots of green. It was more apartment buildings clearly than are here in Mill Valley, but it still had that kind of nice, natural decompression that you can enjoy and get away from hard-core urban stuff.

But then, going back to when I was in LA and working with a couple of guys who spent a lot of time in the Bay Area, I remember Mill Valley coming up in conversation, because some of the Grateful Dead lived here and that the guy that started Peet's Coffee, I think, lives in Mill Valley. I think the couple that started Esprit, they might have lived in Mill Valley. It just seemed like Mill Valley kept popping up here and there in conversation

and always in a very positive way, and it always stuck with me. When I found out that Ivy, my now wife, lived in Mill Valley, it was like, "Ah, finally. I get to live in this place I've been hearing about off and on for years." And even now, when I tell people, like, "Hey, where do you live, Arthur?" and I go, "Oh, I live in Mill Valley," almost to a person, they'd go, "Oh." It's like everybody knows that Mill Valley is this wonderful place.

0:46:09 Debra Schwartz: Originally, you're coming from the East Coast which has a very rich history. It's the first parts of North America over here that were settled. But now, you come to the West Coast which also has an interesting history, and I'd like to hear your perspective on the history of the West, as it captures your attention. You're working in LA, you're writing this historical thing to get these historical films for television, and now you're living in Mill Valley which is contiguous to San Francisco.

0:46:44 Arthur Drooker: Right. One of my favorite eras of history is Gold Rush California, this whole Bay Area, and I've been interested in Gold Rush California since college. Yes, the American West in a general sense, this whole notion of, to use that term again, "manifest destiny." But part of that is this notion is that — at least for white Americans — it almost seems to be divinely preordained that we have been given this land to expand onto, at great cost and exploitation, but there it is. And I think California, in general, really represents America in a very essential way, perhaps more than any other place. I think geography has a lot to do with it. And I think, again, that California, in a general way — but if you even make it more microscopic, it's San Francisco, 'cause I think San Francisco is almost California on steroids, in terms of it being the place where dreamers go to make dreams come true.

And Gold Rush California was the first time that happened, that's when California became California, not only literally a state in 1850, but as a state of mind. When you tell people you're going to California, a whole host of things pop up, especially if you're coming to San Francisco. There's a great book that was written about Gold Rush California by J.S. Holliday called *The World Rushed In*, and that's a great title 'cause it wasn't just Americans coming cross country, it was people from South America, it was Europeans, from all over the world, Asia. In some respects, New York, as a colony — New Amsterdam — that was a bit of an international settling place. But that paled in comparison to San Francisco, the Bay Area during the Gold Rush.

I mean, San Francisco and the surrounding area went from being a few hundred people in 1847, let's say, to a year or a year and a half later, 30,000 people from all over the world, and they needed to be serviced in many ways. Places like Mill Valley or Marin became the place that supplied the lumber, supplied cattle for not only food, but for transportation. It was a boom town. And it still is a boom town in terms of — if it's not gold now, it's technology. But it's the same kind of thing. Expensive real estate — gentrification, one could argue, is a form of discrimination or economic conflict. And that was going on during the Gold Rush and it's going on now, where you see neighborhoods being gentrified and transformed. They're just becoming something different, and people

talk about the "old San Francisco" losing its character and it's becoming something else. But being a student of history, it's really the cyclical trends of history.

This is happening all the time. It's happening now most noticeably because it's in a very concentrated way. But even if it's a slowly-but-surely way, it's still happening. Even my old neighborhood in the Bronx, it used to be mainly a lot of middle class reformed Jewish families, that was the main thing. But now, it's like a lot of Asians have moved in, a lot of Orthodox Jews have moved in. On rare occasions, I go back to my neighborhood, it's like, "Wow, I can see changes. It wasn't like this when I was here." So that happens anywhere. There's always some kind of a gold rush happening out here, literally and figuratively.

0:51:40 Debra Schwartz: Think of the changes that you've seen since you first came as a student to Mill Valley and what you see now, and then I'm going to ask you to use that as a lens to describe what you see.

0:51:53 Arthur Drooker: Well, when I came to Mill Valley in 1971, it was more of a hippie-ish place, and now it isn't. I don't know if any place is hippie-ish, but that kind of vibe — I think it has a whiff of that still, but it's a lot more well-to-do from what I've noticed, it's a lot more family-oriented, because it is a great place to raise a family. There's also a lot of tech people who live here, so these are different demographics than back in the day. You can lament it, but lamenting it isn't going to bring them back. What is nice is that even though it is a different demographic now, what I observe is there's still an appreciation for the hip history, let's say, of Mill Valley and Marin.

I'll give you a very good example close to home, very close to home. My wife bought a house that was formerly owned by a guy who was a roadie for the Grateful Dead. She bought that property, took it down to the studs and built her own thing, but she loves telling that story because it's part of the cool factor. You can just pick it up, you just get the sense that even though, again, it's very well-to-do families that generally live in Mill Valley now, that there is still this appreciation for its hippie heritage, and I think that there's that boho — "bourgeois Bohemian" — kind of a thing. I guess, there's a lot of that here, *haute bourgeois* hippie or something. I noticed that. You go into different places and there'll be pictures on the wall. You go to the Depot Café — the book store there — and it'll show authors who used to live in Mill Valley, and several of them go back to the hippie days and what have you. There's still, again, that appreciation. The Sweetwater goes back to that period.

0:54:31 Debra Schwartz: In your book, you talk about how although in the culture that we live in today, in many ways, we're separated from each other — through the internet or whatever — you also describe how there seems to be a response to that. And that more than ever, as evidenced by your experiences — going to conventions, and having these people connect, and having an actual, as you've described it, primal need to connect — to be a part of the community is a human thing. Here we are living in the community of Mill Valley. We have a lot of individuals, there's a lot of technology that

separates us, but yet there is an aspect I think of this community needing to connect. How do you observe that?

0:55:25 Arthur Drooker: I observe it in several ways, everything from casual to well-organized. The casual will be something as simple as going either to the Depot or to Equator. And going in there at certain times of day, and seeing similar faces there at certain times of the day, for example, going to Equator café in the morning. I'm not, myself, I'm not much of a coffee drinker, but I met a friend there recently to reconnect. We hadn't seen each other in a while, and it was very clear to me that there is a morning scene at the Equator. And that is an expression of community, it is. You could tell that there were regulars that go there, they meet there, they socialize, they talk about the issues of the day, whatever it is. So that is certainly a form of community, perhaps in a micro way or a casual way. And then over the weekend there was some sort of a winter, for lack of a term, winter festival. I saw you there on the plaza by the Depot Café, and that was a wonderful thing, it was just great. Some of the residents of the Redwoods, they sang —

0:56:51 Debra Schwartz: "Rock of Ages."

0:56:52 Arthur Drooker: "Rock of Ages." I thought that was absolutely wonderful. And then, the kids were sliding down on the artificial snow. [chuckles] And some of the stores or restaurants in the area had their little booths. I mean, I didn't even know that was going to happen. I was with my sister and we were walking around downtown from Mill Valley, and there it was. It's almost as if Currier and Ives were alive today, painting sketches or scenes of community life in America.[1] They could have done something of the little winter gathering, holiday gathering, on the plaza in Mill Valley.

And then, something I've become recently a lot more familiar with, both as a participant and as an audience member, are the programs that the library puts together, which I think is just sensational — the classes they sponsor, the First Friday gatherings. I was flattered, honored, to be asked to present there. I have to admit, honestly, I wasn't really aware of it prior to that, but Anji Brenner the librarian, she invited me to attend a First Friday before the one that I actually gave a talk at. And this had to do with — was it naked storytelling?

0:58:22 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:58:22 Arthur Drooker: They had a great crowd. They had about 250 people or so, on a Friday night. I mean, think of that, on a Friday night, when a lot of people, they worked all week, it'd be very easy for them to say, "I just wanna chill, stay at home." Or just the opposite: "My weekend's starting, I wanna get partying now." For 250 or so people to show up at your local library, for a program, I think that is spectacular. And I think it says a lot about Mill Valley, that there is an audience for that kind of programming. When I gave my talk, there were 160 people there. I think Anji expressed a little bit of disappointment about that, but I was thrilled. When I give book signings, I get

[1] Currier and Ives was a 19th century printmaking firm that sold hand-colored lithographic prints of paintings.—Editor.

anywhere from, let's say, 40 to 60 people, so if you're telling me 160 people are going to show up, that's fantastic.

And it was wonderful, the audience was really engaged, there was a very lively Q&A afterwards, and I was happy to be a part of it. I mean, yes it was nice to promote my book in that fashion, but it was a way for me to connect with the Mill Valley community in a way that I liked doing — an exchange of ideas, presenting something new to an audience that was receptive. To me it was a very nice personal reminder, or personal evidence, that people here in a general sense, they like to be with it. They like to be up on what's going on and talk about it and share it, and I think that's what gives Mill Valley, if not unique, then certainly a special character, even within Marin.

There are very nice communities in Marin, but I don't know if these other communities have that same vibe that Mill Valley does. Perhaps San Rafael does on some level, but to me I think San Rafael is a much bigger community. I see it almost like the capital of Marin. [chuckles] I just don't know if it has that as much of an intimate feeling the way Mill Valley does. Fairfax maybe has more of the hippie thing still going on, but again, I don't know if the community there — and I maybe wrong — but I don't know if the community there, again, has it on the same level as Mill Valley does, in terms of active community activities to bond and to come together over.

1:01:31 Debra Schwartz: If San Rafael is the capital, and Fairfax is where the hippies live, what is Mill Valley?

1:01:38 Arthur Drooker: Oh, what is Mill Valley? I would say: creators, movers and shakers, thought leaders. There's a lot of interesting people doing interesting things tucked away here and there. And what I find cool about Mill Valley is you have to know where they are or know friends of friends. It's not something that people brag about or make a point of putting it into your face, which I love. There's a certain kind of modesty about it, I observe, that I like. I've always liked that about people and the fact that Mill Valley to me seems to be that way, or maybe I choose to see Mill Valley that way. But I'll meet people at parties or through my wife or through friends, and they look like "regular people." And then afterwards you say, "Yeah, I'm just curious. So what does so and so do?" And you find out they do incredible work in whatever their field is. It's like, "Wow, really? Oh wow, who knew?" You know what I mean? [chuckles] I really like that because it adds a certain mystery to the place 'cause you never know who's over that wall or who lives at that house, or who's that guy sitting by himself having coffee in Equator, or Depot, or something like that. I don't know, I like that.

1:03:29 Debra Schwartz: I guess, it's stimulating for a social anthropologist like yourself who is investigating —

1:03:36 Arthur Drooker: Yeah.

1:03:36 Debra Schwartz: I appreciate your perspective on Mill Valley. The lens, you bring for us to see our town through. Let's talk a little — before we end this interview,

because I know you have to be somewhere — let's talk a little bit about lessons learned from making this book *Conventional Wisdom*. Not everybody's going to have read your book. But briefly, can you give us the synopsis of what this book is?

1:04:03 Arthur Drooker: Well, the book is basically a chronicle of my travels to unusual, quirky conventions over the course of a three-year period. I went to gatherings for mermaids, fetishes, Lincoln presenters, clowns, Santas. 10 groups all together.

1:04:34 Debra Schwartz: You forgot to mention the furries.

1:04:37 Arthur Drooker: Oh the furries. How can I forget the furries?

1:04:38 Debra Schwartz: Please don't forget them.

1:04:39 Arthur Drooker: How could I forget the furries? [chuckles] Because I always like the alliteration of, "I went to gatherings ranging from furries to fetishes," so thank you.

1:04:49 Debra Schwartz: Furries.

1:04:50 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

1:04:50 Debra Schwartz: I did not know what furries were before I saw this book.

1:04:52 Arthur Drooker: Right. Well, do you want me to talk a little bit about furries or just continue about the general —

1:04:56 Debra Schwartz: Well, I think maybe just a little bit of description —

1:05:00 Arthur Drooker: Well, furries are folks who dress up like furry animals. There's a negative stereotype out there perpetuated by the media that they like to dress up as furry animals and have sex, and that's really not what they're about. They wear their fur suits to express their fursonas which is more like an alter ego.

1:05:24 Debra Schwartz: Fursonas, you say?

1:05:24 Arthur Drooker: Yes, fursona. Like a persona but a fursona. And they wear them to express their fursona, which is like an alter ego to model traits that they aspire to have, or in some cases, it's an animal expression of who they are. There's a team of psychologists studying this fandom. On first blush, it looks like a mass case of arrested development, but if you scratch the surface, scratch the fur a little more, and get to know them, and gain their trust —

1:06:04 Debra Schwartz: [laughs] That made me laugh. Scratch the fur.

1:06:05 Arthur Drooker: Yeah, it's okay. And you get to know them a little bit deeper. There's a lot going on there on a psychological level. But to get back to your question, my point that I learned from —

1:06:17 Debra Schwartz: The experience of going as an outsider, of coming in to this cohesive mass of individuals united in a single interest, that predominates their world in some way, but which, generally speaking, would have to be suppressed until the opportunity comes when everybody converges together, this massive convention of like-minded individuals.

1:06:46 Arthur Drooker: Right. Well, it was basically proving my overarching theme, which was that all these conventions — even conventional conventions that are more based around professional group, but it's more fun with these folks because these particular conventions are more grassroots organized: it's the upgrowth of a passion that developed amongst people. But what it confirmed for me is this notion that, as humans we have a basic urge to belong. We do. And what I find fascinating now is that a lot of these conventions have started in recent years because of the online communities that develop as a result of — for example, using the furries. Some furries live in isolated communities, towns, what have you. And they're very private about their interest because they don't want to be ostracized or thought of as weird in any way. Some of them have even been rejected by their own families. But then, they go online and they find out that not only are they not alone, there are vast communities of people who are just like them, who get them, who you don't have to explain yourself or defend it. But what's even more interesting than that is that in spite of "connectivity via online communities," there's still that need to connect physically, being in the same brick and mortar space, hence the conventions.

And when I was at these conventions, whether it was the furries, the fetishists, the Lincolns, clowns, mermaids, ventriloquists, what have you, even though these are clearly separate and distinct interests, a lot of people I met at each convention would talk about it as being like a family reunion. I remember distinctly at some of these conventions — like the furries, the mermaids, BronyCon, the fans of My Little Pony — is the vibe, people talk about the vibe. Let me tell you, it's a very real thing. A vibe is a very real thing. You can feel it, positive or negative. And in a lot cases at some of these conventions, you can feel the vibe so much. I described it as you can feel the heat in the room. There's no mistaking it, you can feel the heat in the room. And even I, as an outsider, and again, as a photographer — who likes to be detached, and as a cultural anthropologist, so to speak — you're there to observe, and you want to be as clear-eyed as possible to see things from an "outsider view." But you're also a human being, and it's very easy to get sucked into the vibe.

I had to walk that fine line between being a human being and getting caught up, like "Wow, check out what's going on," versus being like, "Arthur, get that camera in front of your eye and start looking at stuff with four borders around it." I like to think I walked that line just right. But in my acknowledgements — and I really have to mention this, because as soon as I get emotional about it — I thank the conventioneers for allowing me

to spend time with them, and making photographs of them, and interviewing them, because they're there to have fun and be with their own people.

The fact that they would take time out to let me photograph them or talk to them at length, I really appreciated that. And I said that in the acknowledgements that, "Your passion, creativity and fearlessness inspire me." And that is not a token expression, that's very real. They're all in, and when they get together they're freely expressing the deepest part of them. And it's a wonderful thing to see, to observe, to be a part of. And as a result of working on this project — aside from the experience as a photographer, that was great — but on a more personal human level, I became way more empathetic than I was before.

1:11:28 Debra Schwartz: Empathetic in the sense that?

1:11:30 Arthur Drooker: That, I guess, being a New Yorker, it's very easy to be cynical about stuff. And I still can be cynical on occasion, like the night of the election, [chuckles] but that's another story. The reason I'm hemming and hawing — because I hate to admit it — it would be very easy if I hadn't worked on this project to shake my head or dismiss a lot of the people I photographed or met. But having met them, it's like, they're wonderful people, and it's great that they have this deep passion for something. Everybody has their thing. For example, my thing is the Boston Red Sox. And I remembered this when I was at BronyCon to kind of get my head into what was —

1:12:21 Debra Schwartz: BronyCon?

1:12:22 Arthur Drooker: BronyCon, that was for fans of My Little Pony.

1:12:24 Debra Schwartz: Oh right.

1:12:25 Arthur Drooker: My Little Pony was an animated series that's target audience was young girls. But through a change in production, the real avid fandom now are young adult males, Bronys. Bro, pony — put it together, Brony. It would've been very easy for me to go like, "These guys are weird." And some of them are a bit unusual, they just are. But the way I could make the beginnings of a connection to their passion for My Little Pony was by making a connection with my passion for the Boston Red Sox. You were at the talk at that point, so you know.

1:13:09 Debra Schwartz: Yes, I was.

1:13:11 Arthur Drooker: Talking to a couple of psychologists that we're studying the fandom, they gave me some more insights, like they said, "Let's look at it from like a Doctor Phil perspective. How is that working for you?" If it's adding positive value to your life, then that's a good thing. And guess what, we need more groups like this. It's true.

1:13:33 Debra Schwartz: I hear what you're saying, and I'm coming to realize that there are certain parallels in the sense that this is an acceptance of diversity.

1:13:44 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

1:13:46 Debra Schwartz: The empathy you felt, I think — if I'm not being too bold to make an assumption here — the empathy you felt for these people doing what others may consider to be quirky, bizarre, and perhaps even unbalanced — focused on wanting to be furries, the S&M stuff — this is a true appreciation for individuals and diversity.

1:14:10 Arthur Drooker: Yes, now more than ever.

1:14:13 Debra Schwartz: Your empathy strikes a chord because culture reflects so many things. The study of culture tells us so much. It's like looking into a mirror. It tells you about yourself, good and bad. And the resistance we may have for one thing tells us about the resistance we may have for another.

1:14:37 Arthur Drooker: And sometimes you don't know until you encounter it. It's like, "Oh, I didn't know that would hit me that way," or something like that. I have to say yes to all that you just said. And what I find gratifying, I guess, on a personal and professional level, is that when people look at the book — and it's not just the photos — when they read the text, they say, "You really were very accepting. That really comes through in your writing and the photos." It was very important for me that that comes across. Assuming I get that feedback from people, it's like, "Good, you get the book as I intended it." Because what I didn't want to do was come off as judgmental.

1:15:23 Debra Schwartz: Or patronizing.

1:15:24 Arthur Drooker: Or patronizing in anyway. On one level it just would have been bad form because the organizers of the convention allowed me to come to their convention. Quite a few of them are pretty much private events. It would be almost biting the hand that feeds you or just being a bad guest.

1:15:45 Debra Schwartz: Kind of a jerk, honestly.

1:15:46 Arthur Drooker: Yeah, definitely. It was important for me to present like, "Here they are." Now, if you, the reader thinks it's strange, that's up to you. But this was my experience of it, and there it is.

1:16:07 Debra Schwartz: How do you bring this way of seeing the world — of embracing, being more empathetic — into your daily life here in Mill Valley?

1:16:17 Arthur Drooker: That's a good question 'cause there are still times where I catch myself, maybe going down a judgmental or dismissive path. It's kind of like a joke between me and my wife. My wife and I come from, in some ways, different worlds. She's very much a business woman involved in the tech world, but she definitely has this very deep creative side. In the course of her work, she works with people, meets people that I certainly wouldn't necessarily have anything to do with. It's like this running joke

because sometimes these folks would come over for dinner, and I'll go like, "Okay, who am I making dinner for tonight?" And she'll tell me, she'll remind me, and then they come over and 99.9% of the time, it ends up being a fascinating evening.

1:17:14 Debra Schwartz: The dichotomy of resistance and reception.

1:17:17 Arthur Drooker: Yeah. And at this point, it has become a running joke. Now I'll say to her in a very joking way, "Now, who's coming over for dinner tonight?" Because she'll know what that means. Yeah, as I said, 99% of the time it's people who are very interesting, and in quite a few cases, actually become friends. There you go. What I find a bit of a challenge now is with this election we've just had. I don't know if you want to go into that at all, but —

1:17:51 Debra Schwartz: We probably shouldn't go too much into it.

1:17:51 Arthur Drooker: Yeah. Let's just let it go, 'cause I still have some resistance. Anyway, that's a whole other thing.

1:18:00 Debra Schwartz: As we're getting closer to the end, there's one comment I want to make about this book, but before I ask my final question, I'd like to ask you, second to the final question, is there anything that we haven't talked about today in our conversation that you wish you had, about Mill Valley, about your experience here, about anything at all?

1:18:18 Arthur Drooker: It's interesting, when my sister from Berkeley comes over here — and she's been to Mill Valley a lot and likes Mill Valley — she reminds me, in the flow of conversation, just how white Mill Valley is. I almost don't even notice that anymore, but it's really very white. I guess there are some Asians here and there, but I personally, and I don't know about other people, I personally don't know of any black people who live in Mill Valley. Do you?

1:19:00 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:19:00 Arthur Drooker: Okay, so there are African Americans living in Mill Valley. I don't personally know, I'm just trying to run through people I know. I don't think I know any Hispanic people who live in Mill Valley. I know Hispanic people who work in Mill Valley, but I don't know of any who live here, which is not to say that there aren't any, it's just that in the flow of my daily life here, I don't encounter any residents of Mill Valley of color. I don't necessarily know what to make of that, 'cause I like to think of Mill Valley as a very welcoming place. I've never heard of any incidents of "minority people" having any negative experiences in Mill Valley. There's whole mix of students at Tam High. I don't know where those kids live; maybe they do live in Mill Valley. But again, as an anthropologist, semi-detached observer, resident, it is something I note. It seems to be a very homogenous community — racially, perhaps, background-wise, politically, etc. I don't even say that to be critical, it's just something I notice, that's all.

1:20:28 Debra Schwartz: Do you remember that Robin Williams' skit, now that we have the Robin Williams tunnel, where he talks about the rainbows being the white detectors as you're driving in?

1:20:38 Arthur Drooker: As the white detectors?

1:20:39 Debra Schwartz: The white, it's source. [chuckles]

1:20:40 Arthur Drooker: Oh I see.

1:20:41 Debra Schwartz: Going into the Marin County.

1:20:42 Arthur Drooker: That's very funny.

1:20:43 Debra Schwartz: It's an interesting observation.

1:20:44 Arthur Drooker: Yeah.

1:20:45 Debra Schwartz: And an important one.

1:20:46 Arthur Drooker: It is.

1:20:47 Debra Schwartz: It's a loaded observation, and it says a lot about the area. Things to consider.

1:20:54 Arthur Drooker: And I would love to be corrected if I'm wrong. But I think, when I take my walks around town, again, I see people of color who work in Mill Valley, but I don't see residents of color when I go into stores or restaurants and that kind of thing. I say this because I live in Mill Valley, but now that we're talking about it, I'm thinking about Marin in general, perhaps outside of San Rafael. I think one could perhaps make the same observation about San Anselmo, Fairfax, Larkspur, maybe Sausalito, I'm not sure.

1:21:42 Debra Schwartz: It says something about our culture and the stratification.

1:21:45 Arthur Drooker: Right. I think there's an economic issue associated with that. I think the East Bay's got a lot more diversity going on. Again, my sister, she lives in Berkeley, so she just opens a door and there's the world in all its rainbow array. [chuckles] But I love Mill Valley and there you have it.

1:22:16 Debra Schwartz: Well, I wanted to say that, with your book, something that I appreciate so much is in your interviews with individuals of the various convention participants, you were *seeing* them. It seemed to me that they were feeling seen.

1:22:36 Arthur Drooker: Yes, thank you.

1:22:37 Debra Schwartz: And this is very important. It is one of the reasons why we have oral histories, to see the individuals in our community. I agree with you. I think that there is also a human desire to be seen.

1:22:55 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

1:22:56 Debra Schwartz: And you've done a really wonderful job of showing and allowing others to be seen, a subgroup of people that — who knows, there may be furries in our town.

1:23:09 Arthur Drooker: That's right.

1:23:10 Debra Schwartz: Or mermaids.

1:23:11 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

1:23:12 Debra Schwartz: Or Lincoln impersonators.

1:23:12 Arthur Drooker: Absolutely. Well, I know for a fact there's a Lincoln impersonator or presenter who lives up in Petaluma, because I met him.

1:23:23 Debra Schwartz: Well, I'm looking at the cover of the book right now.

1:23:24 Arthur Drooker: Oh, actually, it's in the bigger picture on the book.

1:23:29 Debra Schwartz: Okay, yes.

1:23:29 Arthur Drooker: The Lincoln group shot.

1:23:32 Debra Schwartz: This book doesn't necessarily exclude anybody. There could be our community members at these conventions. Look amongst ourselves.

1:23:42 Arthur Drooker: Yes.

1:23:42 Debra Schwartz: One of the directives of the oral history program is to see the people in our community, to know them, and I'm so very glad that we had the opportunity to see you and to hear your story.

1:24:01 Arthur Drooker: Well, thank you very much. I enjoyed our conversation, and I'm glad to be a part of this effort to bring people together in our community. That's what you're doing, too. Because it all spreads out, and it's a way for people of getting to know each other. It helps, even though it's on a one-to-one basis, there's a multiplier there. It scales upward and outward, and I think that helps make Mill Valley what it is, this wonderful community.

1:24:35 Debra Schwartz: Well, thank you very much, Arthur. On behalf of the Library and the Historical Society, I thank you and I'll see you in town.

1:24:44 Arthur Drooker: You will. [chuckles]