



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with David Shaner,
2001 June 17

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with David Shaner on June 18, 2001. The interview took place at the artist's home in Bigfork, Montana, and was conducted by Gerry Williams for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

David Shaner and Gerry Williams have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

GERRY WILLIAMS: This is Gerry Williams, interviewing David Shaner, at the Shaner's home in Bigfork, Montana, on June 18, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. David, I'll ask you some questions, and you'll just follow with an answer. Let's start with the first question. When and where were you born?

DAVID SHANER: I was born on November 11, 1934, in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, which is about 40 miles west of Philadelphia.

MR. WILLIAMS: And your parents?

MR. SHANER: My parents were basically pre-Revolutionary German-Swiss immigrants, the Pennsylvania German, and a very industrious background on both my parents' sides.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you feel you've gotten a good deal of the genes from your illustrious past?

MR. SHANER: I think maybe I was overdone on the industry part.

MR. WILLIAMS: Tell me a little bit about your childhood and your family background.

MR. SHANER: Well, my childhood was fairly typical, I guess, looking back. However, we all had our chores, and I took an early interest in gardening and growing things. I remember I was given the responsibility for caring for the gardening at an early age. We were not what we would call poor people, but we were not affluent people either, and hard work was part of our everyday existence. And when I was 12, my father took me out and bought me a new coat and told me that from then on I would be buying my own clothes. They lived through the Depression, and they were very proud of the fact that they didn't have to take relief from the government, but they were sure that the depression was going to arrive sometime soon, and we all had to prepare for it.

I was one of five children, and I was the youngest one. I suppose it was easier being the youngest one, and for some reason or another, I always had my eyes set on going to college. I saw what was happening with my brothers and sisters—they quit school in order to work—in one case to go to war—and so I decided I wanted to go to college and go in a different direction.

MR. WILLIAMS: Before we get to your education, were your parents religious in their orientation?

MR. SHANER: Yes and no. We went to church. We were not fanatics, you know, we were Brethren, and religion was part of my youth.

MR. WILLIAMS: Tell me then, about your early education.

MR. SHANER: Well, I went to public schools, and I always was able to get good grades in school. I enjoyed school. I was a very serious student, I guess, and beside my interest in the school, I had other interests like astronomy and gardening and things of that sort, too.

MR. WILLIAMS: What motivated your interest in clay in particular?

MR. SHANER: Well, I really didn't get involved in clay until I went to college. However, looking back, I remember if we had to bury any dead birds in the garden, if we dug down more than 18 inches we hit clay. And I'm not going to tell you that I made pots with that clay, but I do remember modeling little animals and birds and stuff out of the clay that we would find in our own yard. Clay always felt good to me. Whenever I would start a project with a painting or a blank sheet of paper, there was always a certain fear about what am I going to do. But with a piece of clay, it just seemed like it was automatic. You just started working and it was a wonderful thing. I sensed that early on.

MR. WILLIAMS: But you did explore other media such as painting and drawing?

MR. SHANER: Yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: But not extensively, or have you always kept up with it?

MR. SHANER: Well, no, after I got involved with the clay work, I saw that it was all time-consuming. I did a lot of work in the theater in my undergraduate studies, simply because the one professor who was also the pottery teacher taught the theater arts. He's also the man who sent me, told me to go to Alfred [Alfred University, Alfred, NY] when I graduated. I enjoyed other materials, but I soon realized that I couldn't be good at everything. I always enjoyed woodworking, though, and I always thought that someday I'll probably have a pot shop and a wood shop. After you realize what all is involved in the pottery, you soon forget all the other things that are necessary with the other disciplines.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let me ask you a question about traveling. Have you done much extensive traveling abroad, or have you mostly traveled here in this country?

MR. SHANER: I've done very little traveling. My overseas traveling has been to Mexico and Peru, and I did a lot of traveling in the Southwest, did a lot of hiking in the southern canyons of Utah and Arizona. And although I always enjoyed art history, and I suppose if I really wanted to go to Europe, I would have gotten there, but somehow I wasn't ready; I wasn't interested in taking on the Renaissance or the church and the patronage and all the hierarchy of the Western art scene. My interest was more in the Native American studies and I particularly liked going to Peru and following the culture of the Incas and so forth.

MR. WILLIAMS: What impact do you think that had on your work?

MR. SHANER: Well, certainly when you see the volumes of work they produced, you can't help but be impressed with the sheer numbers, and the closeness to the land. I remember as a kid I always admired Native Americans. If I went to the movies, I was always the kid who was rooting for the Indians and not for the cowboys. And I remember actually trying to make arrowheads out of stone as best I could. And so I always had an interest in native people, and it just sort of stuck with me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you feel any sympathetic impact from their mythology or their sense of design in relation to-

MR. SHANER: Well, I always admired their sense of design. Looking at all that geometric, I was not a disciplined enough person to be able to do that on my pots, but I liked the idea of the closeness of the nature and the clay, and the symbolism of some of their designs.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think that because of your travels in South America and Mexico, you feel yourself to be part of the international tradition, or more particularly one of the American?

MR. SHANER: I think definitely American. Again, I could have gone to Japan if I'd really wanted to, but I noticed early on that with a potter goes to Japan, two things seem to happen: either he makes Japanese pots after that, or he quits making pots at all. And so I was always in tune to nature and simple things, and subtleties, and I thought, if I go to Japan I'm going to get more of that, and so I never really put it on top of my list to go to Japan like I did to Peru.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why American, then? What do you find in the American tradition that is so important for you?

MR. SHANER: Why American? Because I am an American, and I guess I left the East Coast purposely wanting to leave all that tradition behind, and as Thoreau said, I went into the woods to see what life had to teach, not come to die and realize I hadn't lived. And so I wanted to come out here and sense all of this, and get away from all that tradition and that approach to art, I guess. I mean, I love the Renaissance paintings, and when I go to cities I love going to art museums, but I began to look at that sort of thing as being kind of dead, and I was more interested in an art form which would be more personal to me and the time in which I lived.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you picked up a sense of the intellect from other cultures and people that is sympathetic to your own intellect? Do you like the ideas as much as the object design?

MR. SHANER: Well, I like the ideas. I like the idea of creating a level playing field in our society rather than the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, and I think in primitive people, that's very evident.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you written a lot?

MR. SHANER: No, other than occasionally for *Studio Potter*.

MR. WILLIAMS: And very well I might say. In that perspective, you don't really have to explain your work

intellectually to other people.

MR. SHANER: I suppose not. I think when I gave workshops I tried to be as direct and as honest as possible. For a long time I was fearful because I thought, this is not the thing that people want to hear, but I soon sensed that was the very thing they were interested in seeing and hearing. And I guess I wanted to do my thing, and I wanted to be good at it, and then I wanted to share what knowledge I had. And I don't know whether the intellectualism was there, but I think the honesty and the integrity I tried to reflect in what I chose to make and how I chose to do it, and where I chose to live. Early on, I remember reading-[Shoji] Hamada said something about the kind of life we live each day is reflected in every piece of pottery we make, and we sort of thought, oh, that's romantic, and we sort of laughed about it. But as you become older you realize that this is true, you know. Not that only good people make good pots, and bad people make bad pots, but everything reflects what you do, and I think that very thing is a very beautiful thing, that it can affect your work in that way.

MR. WILLIAMS: What is the essence of being American?

MR. SHANER: Well, some people would say it has to be gaudy, it has to be loud, it has to be obnoxious. And we live in a very diverse country, and you can be anything you want to be. And I think subtleties and naturalness is as American as New Orleans jazz is. It's a matter of finding what you want to latch on to and pursue.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is America connected with newness and exploration rather than tradition and-

MR. SHANER: I think it's-sure I think it's a certain newness and experimentation, but I think again that can fit in your overall scheme of things. It doesn't have to be something that's divorced from your whole approach to things.

MR. WILLIAMS: If you had to be someone from a foreign country, what country would you choose to be from?

MR. SHANER: If I had to identify myself I'm sure I'd be-I'd want to come from the United States.

MR. WILLIAMS: But another country. Choose one that you admire.

MR. SHANER: Maybe New Zealand, or-

MR. WILLIAMS: Why?

MR. SHANER: Again, because it's a very beautiful place, and there's not a lot of hubbub there. I just think I've always enjoyed the people I've met from New Zealand.

MR. WILLIAMS: They are similar to Americans in many ways.

MR. SHANER: I've never been there, I don't know.

MR. WILLIAMS: A lot like Montana.

MR. SHANER: I have an affinity for people in the North, I think. As I travel around the country, the Northern people seem to be very special to me. Other parts that may be-although I love the Southwest and other places too, but there's a certain kinship without a little bit of struggle in life.

MR. WILLIAMS: You believe in living on the hard edge of survival?

MR. SHANER: I suppose you could say that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is survival a necessary ingredient for being a potter?

MR. SHANER: I think to a certain extent it is, yes, because if you're too comfortable, maybe you're selling your soul and not doing the things that you want to do. I think uncertainty is good.

MR. WILLIAMS: Struggle is an important element in developing who you are as an artist.

MR. SHANER: Yes. I think if you don't give it 100 percent, you're not fulfilling your whole duty as an artist. And I used to get concerned when I'd give workshops. It would seem like each one was like the first workshop that I gave, until I understood that Rudolph Serkin felt the same way when he would to out and give a concert. Unless you felt you were really pouring yourself out each time, you weren't struggling, you weren't doing it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk about function for a little while. There's a great dichotomy in American ceramics between function and art. Does that enter into your thinking at all?

MR. SHANER: I suppose it really doesn't. As a matter of fact, I don't even make a distinction between art and

craft anymore. I mean, I was functional potter for years, and most of my work was functional, but-

MR. WILLIAMS: It doesn't put you on one side of the-

MR. SHANER: I would hope not, no. I mean, a teapot can be a beautiful sculpture, and I would be more concerned whether it was a good teapot or whether it is a bad sculpture than I am which is which.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is there any of the Japanese Mingei philosophy in your background?

MR. SHANER: No, I was always told I sold my pots too inexpensively; that's part of that movement. Again, I had to sell my pots to survive, and I had to be sure they were selling. But as years went on, my prices came up commensurate with where I was in my career, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: But how do you regard the seeming split between those who believe in functional ceramics and those who believe ceramics should be an art form. Does that bother you, or is it something that you've taken in stride?

MR. SHANER: Who was it? I'm trying to think of the potter in Seattle [Howard Kottler] who said either you're making palace ware or you're making peasant ware. I suppose I was more on the peasant ware side because I was making basically pots to use rather than things to be put on shelves. I think that's why, again, the European art was always kind of a tour de force, and I was more interested in the materials and the process and the earthiness of someone using my work rather than putting it on a pedestal somewhere.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you still like to make teapots?

MR. SHANER: I did, yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why did the teapot appeal to you? I notice you have made many of them in the past.

MR. SHANER: Well, it was at the time when we were first introduced to it, I was told the teapot was the most difficult thing to make. And so I thought, well, okay, I'll get with it, and I found it wasn't the most difficult thing to make.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why was it considered difficult?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think because you had all these parts that you had to assemble, and it was kind of an organization problem, and we were still trying to get things to work together, not like trying to make things be distracted, and oversized and not working.

MR. WILLIAMS: What is the essence of the bowl?

MR. SHANER: The bowl? Well, the bowl is the act of containing something. It can be as simple as cupped hands. I never said this to anybody, but I always thought of my mother when I made a bowl.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why?

MR. SHANER: Because she was kind of special, and she was round, and-I don't know, I just when I made round bowls, I always thought of my mother.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you let her know?

MR. SHANER: Can't say that on the tape. No, she died when I was 24.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that respect, then, the people on the bowl have some special quality, that puts them aside from, let's say, a piece of sculpture, or-

MR. SHANER: Sure.

MR. WILLIAMS: So what do you think that special thing is?

MR. SHANER: And you know, there's a certain spirit about it that I-I mean, I'm not in for making religious things, but a bowl and teapot was a spiritual endeavor for me when I was making them.

MR. WILLIAMS: Spiritual in your own personal sense, not so much in an organized belief system.

MR. SHANER: Right. I mean, I think all works of art if they're good are spiritual. I mean, it's the spirit of the maker.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is that a sense that you have brought to your work from your family's past, or is it something you brought into your work through your own interests?

MR. SHANER: I'm not sure I understand that question.

MR. WILLIAMS: You said your parents were Brethren, and they came from a traditional European background. Did that leave sort of a path for you to follow and explore in individual ways and not organized religious ways, your art?

MR. SHANER: I don't know that there's anything-any relationship between established religion and what I do in art, no. If there's anything spiritual, I think it comes out just naturally. It doesn't have anything to do with praying or anything like that. I mean, naturally I've always-my mother was wonderful, and I always felt close, and that warmth, and the same thing that was reflected in the bowls that I made. They were round and full and it had to do with food, and-

MR. WILLIAMS: Along with the question of religion, there is the question of gender and race and ethnicity. How does that relate to your work? Let's take gender in particular. You spoke of your mother being in your mind when you thought of a bowl. Is there a masculinity that you use in some of your work?

MR. SHANER: Well, I guess generally you can say anything angular is masculine and anything curved is female. But I don't think it was as prevalent or as obvious to me, as the bowl was to my mother.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did your father relate in any way to any forms?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think of your father in any of the forms that you have made? The rock forms or whatever-

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is there any special character that is brought to your work by your white, Anglo-Saxon background as against, if you were, say, an African-American?

MR. SHANER: Well, it's kind of hard to answer that because I've always been white. But I had some limited experience with the Civil Rights, and one thing I wish now that I had done more was to-if I could have done more with the Civil Rights movement.

MR. WILLIAMS: In what way?

MR. SHANER: Well, I've often-when I give workshops if there would be a Negro in the workshop, I always found myself giving them special attention or trying to help them along, because I think it was my way of paying back a debt that a Negro family did for me.

MR. WILLIAMS: So it was a matter of feeling sorry for them or being guilty about your own heritage.

MR. SHANER: Well, certainly not feeling guilty, but I, even to this day, I'm glad to see, when I see a Negro person getting ahead. I mean, I think Tiger Woods is wonderful.

MR. WILLIAMS: Please can you relate that episode that you just referred to about that family?

MR. SHANER: Well, I worked at Ocean City, New Jersey, and I had to earn enough money to get back to school each year, and I remember going in this restaurant, this fancy restaurant, and asked the owner for a job. And he told me he had this job and it was busboy and it paid, I don't know. And I said, I thanked him, and I said that I needed more money than that. So I was leaving and he called me back and he said that he had another job. And he said, are you prejudiced? And I said, no, I didn't think so, and it turned out that the whole kitchen was black-I was the only white person that worked in the kitchen. And I was a little scared when I went in there the first day and they were all standing around with butcher knives, chopping on stuff, and I asked-I became close friends with some of them, and I asked them later on, and they said, oh, no, we knew you were scared, too. They would invite me to their parties. At that time they were on the other side of the tracks, and it was just about the time when the desegregation was taking place in the south, and I remember asking one of the guys I worked with to go to the movies with me one night, and he couldn't thank me enough. He kept looking around because here was a black person with a white guy in the movies.

And I was just-job was to take-I was a swing boy; took people's job on their day off. So one day I would be in charge of making all the beverages, and one day I would be in charge of the storeroom and so forth. And besides earning my tuition, I wanted to buy a new suit. And I didn't quite have enough money. And they took up the collection, and I couldn't thank them. And the one woman said, well, you can in your own way someday, because

she knew what was ahead because this was '54, '55. And so that experience did help me out when I was teaching in public schools, the fact that I could understand some of the problems that the average white person did not understand.

MR. WILLIAMS: Beautiful story. Are you bothered at all by the lily-white context of American crafts?

MR. SHANER: I never really thought of it, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: For the most part, that is.

MR. SHANER: I'd have to give that some-

MR. WILLIAMS: But I think one might say there are more black ceramic artists than there used to be.

MR. SHANER: Certainly. Right.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why do you think there aren't more?

MR. SHANER: Well, I've always wondered why, when you go in the national parks, you don't see more black people in national parks hiking on the trails, either. Is it because they do not have the money to travel to the parks, or why it is, but I've always had kind of a mission to-if I could put in a good word or do something for an Asian or a black or a Native American, I always felt good about it.

[END SIDE A, TAPE ONE.]

MR. WILLIAMS: Dave, how has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime, as you've seen it?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think it certainly has improved, you know. In the beginning we almost had to put jam in the jam pots and wine in the wine jugs to sell them, and I think the market for American crafts is very healthy. I think the reason for this is because I think the excitement going on in the crafts supercedes anything that's taken place in painting and sculpture in the last decade or so.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why do you think that is?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think there are more people interested in the crafts, and I think that it is something that you can pour yourself into and work with almost in a more intimate way than a big slab of concrete or canvas, you know. It's something you hold in your hand.

MR. WILLIAMS: You don't subscribe to the conventional theory, hierarchical theory that painting and sculpture are way up here and crafts are way down here.

MR. SHANER: No. I think painting is very difficult, probably more difficult than making pots, but then again, there's degrees of everything, you know.

MR. WILLIAMS: Has the public become more aware of craft and its context than it had before?

MR. SHANER: Yes, and I think the technical revolution has increased the interest in crafts. We were led to believe that things would be so industrialized that there wouldn't be anything-a need for anything handmade, and instead, the people are hungry for something handmade. And you know, my son works for HP [Hewlett Packard], but he comes home and wants to work in wood, do other things. My other son wants to play the piano. So I think the distinction between the two is there, and I think it's been healthy.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that relationship has the market expanded through galleries in particular, as in difference to the galleries or kinds of things that were first being done when you started? Look at America House, for instance. Do you remember America House? Did you ever sell there?

MR. SHANER: I never did, no. It was always the top green, you know, to sell at America House, but I never really sold a lot in New York, other than a show, maybe.

MR. WILLIAMS: But why has the gallery concept risen in the last 25 years? Why is Garth Clark so successful?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think people have discovered it's an investment; they have discovered that you can buy a pot and in ten years or so it's double or triple-museums are now public collections. They see more crafts on display, and so I think it's become the in-thing, and important in people's lives.

MR. WILLIAMS: What else besides investment has contributed to that?

MR. SHANER: I think an expression of a love a doing something. I mean, I think that no matter what you do, if

you're enthused about what you're doing, it's going to show, and I think this comes through particularly in the crafts. If you're a good teacher and you love to teach, it's obvious. If you love clay, and you love working in clay, I think it's reflected in what you do, and I think people are more keen to understand this than sense this, and people want the best. Maybe they were just satisfied with something that would hold water, but now they're-I think the average American's aesthetics have improved, and we're seeing more visual things and relating them to everything, you know, whether it's film or sculpture or gardening or what have you, you know.

MR. WILLIAMS: What role has the university played in this new consciousness?

MR. SHANER: I think an important one. I've never regretted the time I spent in the university. I wouldn't be a potter if I hadn't been to the university. I think if nothing else it gives you time to think and to see, and develop some of the things that you might not have time to develop.

MR. WILLIAMS: Has it developed a buying public, too?

MR. SHANER: Yes, I think so.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you have a dealer to whom your work was sold when you were-

MR. SHANER: Not a dealer. I had galleries, but I never had someone who had an exclusive right to my work. I felt I couldn't afford that because I had to keep an income coming in, and I didn't want someone telling me I couldn't sell anything on the whole east coast other than through them. I just couldn't take that risk. Some people did, and it worked out very well for them.

MR. WILLIAMS: What were some of the galleries that you worked with?

MR. SHANER: Well, oddly enough I was thinking most of them were no longer in existence. They were good galleries, though, I mean, I always enjoyed my experiences in Scottsdale [AZ] with the Hand and the Spirit, and the Northwest Craft Center in Seattle [WA], and Foster White. You know, a lot of people say, how do you get galleries? Oddly enough, I think the most difficult thing is for a gallery to find good work. When I was teaching in Illinois, I sent pots to a show, and I'd forgotten who the guy's name is anymore, but he was at the Des Moines Arts Center [Des Moines, IA] and he wrote me a letter and said, you know, can't we have some of your work for the museum shop. And so that's how I got a lot of my galleries, just by being in shows and people seeing them, and they would approach you. And I always tried to send the best work I could to all these people.

MR. WILLIAMS: What were the conditions under which they sold your work?

MR. SHANER: In most cases, it was consignment.

MR. WILLIAMS: And they took what percentage?

MR. SHANER: Well, it started as a third, then it went up to 40 percent, then it went to 50 percent. After it gets to 50 percent, you have to raise your prices considerable. But I don't feel like you have to particularly sell your soul to the marketplace either. I mean, we live in a diverse country, and you can find a market for almost anything you want-you want to make, and I think the important thing is doing the quality of the work.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you tend to work for yourself, or for a market?

MR. SHANER: I think I always worked for myself.

MR. WILLIAMS: You didn't make 14 blue jars because Des Moines wanted them?

MR. SHANER: No. I had an aversion to doing things like that, and even when I succumbed occasionally to do something like that, I always screwed them up, and it never worked out.

MR. WILLIAMS: Were the dealers upset when you came up with a whole new genre of work different from what you did last year because they were selling that work from last year very well?

MR. SHANER: Yes and no. The good gallery people knew that that was the way it worked, you know. Artists change, and good galleries were encouraging change. I mean, I had a glaze that was kind of like a turquoise stone, and I could put that glaze on a pot and I could sell every pot. I put that glaze on and I finally reached a point where I said, I'm not going to do any more of those, and that was the end of that glaze.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you have an apprentice or apprentices?

MR. SHANER: I was never an apprentice or did I have an apprentice.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why?

MR. SHANER: Well, for one thing, my shop was never big enough to accommodate more than one person, and at Archie Bray [Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MT] there were always people around working, you know. But I didn't want to make someone else's pot, and I didn't want them to make my pot, either.

MR. WILLIAMS: You had been through the university by this time, anyway. What do you think of apprenticeship as a mode for learning?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think it's good if there's a freedom between the master and the apprentice, you know. I remember Stephanie Alexander telling me her parents had a pottery in Switzerland, and she was saying that they had all these apprentices, and they could make her father go around and say, flare this out more and make this narrow here, and they could do whatever they wanted, and then on their lunch hour, or whenever - off-hours-they could make their own pots, and they made the most god-awful ugly pots because there was no carry-over between what they were doing for him and what they were doing for themselves. I think each person must develop their own sensibility, and if that's lost in the apprenticeship program, then it's not a good program.

MR. WILLIAMS: What would a good apprenticeship be, then?

MR. SHANER: Well, I never felt that-I mean, I always enjoyed everything about the pottery. There were times I didn't feel like throwing, and I enjoyed mixing clay. And if I had all my clay mixed for me, it wouldn't have been the same for me. So I always thought to really have an apprentice, you needed someone who could work on your car, or do some carpentry, or do something other than work on your pots.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you had any involvement in some of the well-known schools around: Penland, Haystack, Arrowmont, Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA]? The Archie Bray-where is that?

MR. SHANER: That's that remote place out there in that brickyard in the wild west of Montana.

MR. WILLIAMS: Tell me how you first became-

MR. SHANER: Well, I've given workshops-not at Pilchuck, but I've given workshops at all the places, the Penland, Haystack, and you name it, and over the years I've been there at one point or another. But I spent seven years at Archie Bray; I was the director for six years, and it was a very crucial time, and got them through some tough times.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why did you go there in retrospect?

MR. SHANER: I went there because I was 28. I began to look at all the old professors who were kind of tired of what they were doing, and weren't necessarily doing anything vital, and I asked myself do I want to be this way when I get to be that age? And so I thought I'd go out and test the waters, and be an artist, and then get back into teaching someday. And Ken Ferguson was at Archie Bray, and I met him at Alfred University, and he convinced me that I should do this, and I was tired of the university politics so I quit my job, moved my family-in that case it was three children-to Montana, and we had a good experience there.

MR. WILLIAMS: If you could describe your experience at the Archie Bray in a couple of sentences, how would you describe it?

MR. SHANER: Well, I was totally on my own. At that time the foundation was really not a foundation. I had full responsibility for everything. It was a tremendous amount of work, but it was a tremendous self-satisfaction when you're able to do it. I was able to produce a lot of work at my own pace, and at my own sensibility, and I could sense I was growing, I was becoming at ease with the material, and so it was a unique experience. I wish now I had those seven years ahead of me that I could produce, but-

MR. WILLIAMS: So it was both a working and a teaching environment for you.

MR. SHANER: Well, it was teaching in the fact that you taught yourself, which maybe is the only way of teaching anyway.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you mold the Archie Bray into your own interests, or were you bringing someone else's philosophy and making it their fruit?

MR. SHANER: Well, having read this book [*A Ceramic Continuum: Fifty Years of the Archie Bray Influence*, University of Washington Press, 2001]now that they've published, Kurt Weiser said that Ken did the Alfred thing and so did Shaner, and looking back I suppose we did, but we did it differently. And in essence, when I was there, it was the Shaner Foundation, and when Weiser was there it was the Weiser foundation. So we molded it almost however we wanted it to go.

MR. WILLIAMS: But it has had enormous influence on many people. Why has it had such an influence on so many people?

MR. SHANER: Because you had to make it on your own, and the people there were successful-the ones who were successful were the ones who made it on their own, and people gravitated to find out, to work there, had the desire to go there. It was a place where you could go and make a lot of mistakes and no one was looking over your shoulder. You weren't working for any-you weren't working for grades-

MR. WILLIAMS: Was it difficult working under conditions where money was tight and everything was a challenge because you didn't have enough resources?

MR. SHANER: Sure it was, but somehow you always managed. We never really felt that we were starving.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you have an uncle to write a check at the end of the month if it was not doing well?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you really had to make it on your own.

MR. SHANER: Yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is it uniquely American?

MR. SHANER: The Archie Bray Foundation? Well, I think initially when it was set up there was supposed to be this subsidy from the brickyard, and that was-that's not American, and I think when I was there the board left me alone, but it never occurred to them that they should be raising money for me or helping me in any way. And I guess that they approved of what I was doing, you know. They never really told me, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you save it from disappearing into the ether?

MR. SHANER: Well, there was no question it was on the auction block, and some of the people who were very intensely interested in the beginning, their interest had waned-don't ask me to give you names here. So in essence, I kindled the idea of what it was all about, that it wasn't just a group of Helena locals, that it had wider impact and those are the attributes that we should build on.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you started to bring people into the-

MR. SHANER: I tried to bring people into the-

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk a little bit about your university experience. What universities were you trained in, first?

MR. SHANER: I went to, well it's now Kutztown University [Kutztown, PA], but it used to be Kutztown State Teacher's College for four years. And I got a Bachelor of Science in Art Education. Then I taught one year in public school and then started at Alfred.

MR. WILLIAMS: Alfred University?

MR. SHANER: New York College of Ceramics.

MR. WILLIAMS: Who were some of your instructors at Alfred?

MR. SHANER: Well, the Chairman the first year was Charles Harder, which was his last year of teaching. And then my instructors were Daniel Rhodes, Ted Randall, Val Cushing, and my last year Bob Turner, John Wood, who was a photographer/ printmaker. It was a wonderful group of people and they were all intently involved in what they were doing. They believed in what they were doing and that excitement just filled the whole school.

MR. WILLIAMS: It was sort of the Athens of America wasn't it?

MR. SHANER: I suppose, yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you consider yourself lucky that you were there during that incredible time?

MR. SHANER: Certainly. I had no way of knowing how long it would continue, but Ken Ferguson was there, Norm Schulman, Bob Winokur was there. It was a very-when I applied I didn't even have slides. I approached Harder and he said, "Well, come and do a summer session and we'll tell you at the end of the summer." So, that's what we did.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was the most rewarding experience from the Alfred years?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think my-I don't want to use the term apprenticeship, but my Saturday job with Bob Turner was very important to me.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was that?

MR. SHANER: Well, I was his-I would just go over into his shop and did his clay mixing and glazing and helped him, you know, with chores around there. And it sort of put in perspective what the University was doing versus someone on his own was doing.

MR. WILLIAMS: Was Turner a uniquely seminal figure in your life?

MR. SHANER: Mm-hmm.

MR. WILLIAMS: In what way?

MR. SHANER: Well, he has always kind of been the god of clay to me. Voulkos is king clay and Bob Turner is the god of clay. And, I just had a lot of respect for him as a person. I remember taking-Ferguson said, "Why don't you take this-take some pots over and show Bob Turner," and I look back and I think I put them all in a peach basket and went over there and had him critique the pots. I thought, gee, that was kind of brash, but that's the way you do things-he did things.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was the nature of his spiritual radiance that you liked?

MR. SHANER: Well, everything he did was done with such simplicity and integrity, and he was so honest in his approach to clay and his approach to human beings. He was just a gentle, kind person, and he still is. A lot of people don't understand, you know, when he maybe gives a lecture because he loses a lot of people. But there's so much there, you know, you just keep going back and realizing the depth of the information that he has. Why he wasn't on that *Ceramics Monthly* popularity sheet, I don't know.

MR. WILLIAMS: So, what do you see as the place of the university in the American craft movement, especially for artists working in clay?

MR. SHANER: A chance to experiment, a chance to develop their sense of seeing, thinking, exposing themselves to other people, other working habits.

MR. WILLIAMS: Does it make them, however, become more interested in their ego than their art?

MR. SHANER: I think it does. I think the period we're going through right now is very ego-oriented, and I think maybe our technicalities have gotten ahead of our sensibilities. We have so much, so many techniques, so many materials, so many tools that we don't have enough time to sort it all through.

MR. WILLIAMS: So ego is not synonymous with art?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: How would you improve the university teaching if you had a-if you could become czar?

MR. SHANER: Well, when I was teaching I always said that they should throw them all out after seven years and make them work on their own for a year, and struggle on their own and they'd come back and become better teachers.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are you against the, what is the term?

MR. SHANER: Tenure?

MR. WILLIAMS: Tenure.

MR. SHANER: No, but I think it's terribly abused.

MR. WILLIAMS: All right. Tell me some of the leading university departments in clay that you'd like to mention. Would Alfred be at the top of the list?

MR. SHANER: Yes and no. I haven't been to Alfred for a long time. It's certainly high on the list, whether it's the best any more, I'm not sure. It was for me at the time.

MR. WILLIAMS: What are a few others that you have recognized?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think more than the school, it's who is teaching at the school at the time, and this

fluctuates. You know, one time you have a red-hot department and everything is falling into place. The salaries may not be the greatest, but it's a good place to be. And then again, you can have a school that has every thing stainless steel and brand new, and nothing is taking place, so-

MR. WILLIAMS: Who are some of the good teachers that you've admired and come across?

MR. SHANER: Well, Daniel Rhodes is certainly a good teacher, Ken Ferguson was a good teacher, [Peter] Voukos certainly was a good teacher in his own way.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is the younger generation capable of carrying on the high quality of teaching that you have spoken about?

MR. SHANER: I think it is, but maybe we need more time to sort it all through.

MR. WILLIAMS: What do you mean by that?

MR. SHANER: Well, we're not aware where all of this good teaching is taking place currently.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is there some hope for the few?

MR. SHANER: Well, certainly.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist?

MR. SHANER: I don't know whether it has been a community. I think the state of Montana has been important to me.

MR. WILLIAMS: In what way?

MR. SHANER: Well, it gives me sustenance to be able to live in such a vast place. I feel the humility of where you fit in in the whole scheme of nature. And the people here have been basically supportive of me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Question, where does American craft rank on an international scale in your mind?

MR. SHANER: I think it's probably the top right now as far as diversity, visual interest.

MR. WILLIAMS: As compared to, say Japan or England?

MR. SHANER: Well, we always thought the best ceramic work was always coming from Japan, but I've noticed now that most-not most of them, but a lot of Japanese potters want to get out of the country so they can do some other things. And so I'm a firm believer that there is an American craft and it's nothing that we have to feel ashamed of or feel-take a second seat to anybody.

MR. WILLIAMS: How would you characterize this American quality? What is it?

MR. SHANER: It's a visual vitality.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you mean color, do you mean design?

MR. SHANER: Design, color.

MR. WILLIAMS: What about form?

MR. SHANER: Form. I think we've gotten it all together.

[END SIDE B, TAPE ONE. BEGIN TAPE TWO.]

MR. WILLIAMS: This is the second tape-side one-a conversation with David Shaner, June the 18th, 2001, at his home in Bigfork, Montana.

David, tell me a little about your working environment; your studio space where you worked, how it was laid out and what was done there.

MR. SHANER: Well, I'm a firm believer that a craftsman should have the best working space he can possibly have, because I figured I'd be spending 12 hours a day, in some cases, there, and the more pleasant you can make it, the better off. So I tried to-when I built my studio I had lots of light, and listen to good music, hang things on the wall that I was interested in seeing.

MR. WILLIAMS: What do you mean by good music? What kind of music did you listen to?

MR. SHANER: Well, I tend towards the classical music, and I have quite an extensive collection of CDs, and prior to that it was LPs and then open-reel tapes.

MR. WILLIAMS: What I meant is, who is your favorite composer?

MR. SHANER: Probably Mahler, Schubert.

MR. WILLIAMS: Pretty deep, dark stuff.

MR. SHANER: I suppose so, yeah.

MR. WILLIAMS: You were continuing to talk about your studio space.

MR. SHANER: So I think, you know, as far as equipment, I think you should get the best equipment you can have or afford. You know, a lot of people will build something simply because it's cheap, and they can make it cheaper than they can buy it but it's not as good. And I've always felt that you should buy the best mixer, the best wheel, because, in my case, they've lasted me my whole life. And so why put up with a piece of junk? So I've always tried to have good equipment and whatever I needed. I did this for the long haul, so when I bought something I bought it to last. I mean, it's in my philosophy with building a house, or whatever it is, you know.

So my studio was about 30' by 40' deep, and I had high ceilings because I didn't want claustrophobia-I mean, I didn't want eight-foot ceilings, I wanted more generous, you know, and the lighting was always good. And of course I kept it warm in there and so it was cozy because I was going to be spending so much of my time there.

MR. WILLIAMS: What kind of wheel do you use?

MR. SHANER: I was taught on a Randall wheel, and so that's essentially what I use. However, I built a kick-wheel modeled after the one at Archie Bray. I also had a Soldner wheel-depending on what pots I was making as far as which wheel I would use.

MR. WILLIAMS: And your kilns?

MR. SHANER: My kilns I built myself, and they were-my reduction kilns were soft brick kilns-sprung arch, downdraft-no experience with updraft kilns, essentially. And my wood kiln, of course, was a hard brick kiln.

MR. WILLIAMS: What does having a studio in the middle of the beautiful Montana mountains do to your aesthetics?

MR. SHANER: Well, I can look out the window and watch the hawks circling over the mountains or the birds coming to my bird feeder. Seeing is so much important, and I think you can learn as much looking at birds as you can looking at other things, you know. You develop a certain sense of that listening and seeing, and it applies to everything in life.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you work alone always?

MR. SHANER: With the exception of Archie Bray, other than when Ann would assist me in the shop. But yes, I worked alone.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did the children help in the studio at all?

MR. SHANER: They helped with little jobs, but not to any great degree. I mean, they would-when we're getting ready for sales they would help clean and do things of that sort; help with the sales.

MR. WILLIAMS: They didn't tell you you're using the wrong glaze, you're using-

MR. SHANER: Oh yeah, sure. And at one point, they all made pots, but not to any great extent, you know, other than, the cat needs a bowl, I think I'll go out and make a bowl for the cat, and that sort of thing.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I had this class in Helena, and these women were struggling for years throwing pots, and Cedric was about five and so he was into throwing pots, so he was out there one time and I said, Cedric, why don't you throw a pot for them? And they were really put down, you know, to see this five-year-old could sit there and throw a pot.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you give him a permanent job on the spot?

MR. SHANER: But they all loved pottery and they all were enthused about pots. And they still go to pottery

shows and they're interested in the pots that I've made, and other people's pots, the same as they're interested in hiking and looking around at what's growing on the forest floor, you know.

MR. WILLIAMS: Describe a little bit for me your working process and how it has changed over time.

MR. SHANER: Well, I always had the kind of hours because-I mean set hours, particularly when Ann was teaching school, because I would try to go to the shop when she left for school and then try to have most of my work done so that at 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon I would be ready to take a break when the kids were coming home. Then I'd go out in the evenings, depending on what I had to do. I didn't like to throw at night. I always thought that I couldn't see as well. I mean, when you're sitting in front of a wheel and having all this light coming in, and then you're under a light bulb. But I did most of my kiln stacking at night and my decorating and things of that sort. But I worked every day. I had to. And I had a cycle of-about a two-week cycle. I figured I had to fire my kiln twice a month.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is this both the wood kiln and the-

MR. SHANER: No, this is just my reduction kiln.

MR. WILLIAMS: How did you get involved in wood firing?

MR. SHANER: Well, I sensed a need to do something other than what my reduction work was all about. I wanted something I could maybe play around with. I was not intrigued with Raku in any sequence. And the salt always-the pollution aspect of the salt always bothered me. And I just liked what the wood would do to the pots. So I, again, feel fortunate to have started right when the whole resurrection of the wood firing was taking place; learned a lot and built a pretty successful wood kiln early on.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was the essence of your wood firing aesthetic? What did you want to see from the pots?

MR. SHANER: I wanted to see a history of the fire take place on the surface. It wasn't necessary that they'd all be covered with ash, but I liked the kind of-the patterns and the flashing and so forth. As a matter of fact, some of the Anagama pots are a little too burnt out for my tastes.

MR. WILLIAMS: We might talk a little bit about other powerful influences in your career-people, art movements, the environment, technological developments. What sorts of things have had an influence on your work?

MR. SHANER: Well, I joined the Sierra Club in, what, about 1960, because I always had an interest in the land and the conversation and the environment, and I went on many hikes with them. And I think that the whole ethics of taking care of the Earth has been important to me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are you an active member in the movement now?

MR. SHANER: Mm-hmm. Well, I keep paying my dues. I mean, I'm certainly not hiking with them, but at one point I was writing a lot of letters to save the Grand Canyon from damming, and save the Redwoods, and doing this and doing that.

MR. WILLIAMS: What do you think of the death penalty?

MR. SHANER: Well, when I was in high school I was always the one that was arguing against the death penalty. Now you're going to ask me about Timothy McVeigh. I suppose there are exceptions, but basically I think every human being can be rehabilitated in some way. So basically I'm against it, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: We've spoken about the Mingei movement and its effect on American pottery. Has that had any impact on your work?

MR. SHANER: I like the spontaneity, you know, the idea of making pots quickly and spontaneous-simply, and that certainly has had an effect. But I never went to street fairs with a pick-up load of pots and sold them off the tailgate and things like that. That never appealed to me, yet that's part of the Mingei movement.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you escape the abstract expressions of contemporary potters or not?

MR. SHANER: Well, I got into a little bit of that in Illinois because I was more exposed there to contemporary painting. As a matter of fact, one of the pieces in the Bray collection you'll see has more of that quality to it.

MR. WILLIAMS: One of your paintings?

MR. SHANER: No, one of my clay pieces.

MR. WILLIAMS: Oh. And generally have you eschewed movements and styles in favor of your own inner compulsions?

MR. SHANER: I don't know where I got all the simplicity from; whether that had anything to do with Minimalism or what. The first time I went to the Noguchi Garden Museum [Long Island City, NY] I thought, my heavens, this guy is copying me.

MR. WILLIAMS: What did his work look like that coincided with your own?

MR. SHANER: Just kind of the massiveness and the simplicity and the sheer. He was using a black stone and I was using a black glaze, and just the softness of a lot of the forms.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are there other sculptors or ceramic artists that you've liked that you felt sympathetic to?

MR. SHANER: I've always like Daniel Rhodes's work. I've always liked the earthy quality he was able to impart in his work. I've always liked Peter Voukos's work-not that I would want to do it, but I always liked the explosive power and the freedom to do whatever you wanted to do, whatever it chose to do.

MR. WILLIAMS: But you've not been especially seduced by the technological interests in our field?

MR. SHANER: Well, I've always figured out what I had to know to do whatever I had to do. I never wanted to computerize my glaze calculation or anything like that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think there's some hope for American ceramics in the 21st century?

MR. SHANER: Sure, why not?

MR. WILLIAMS: Okay, let's talk about how your work has been received by your public. Did you always "spring fully honored from the head of Jove" and make pots that everyone immediately liked and wanted to buy, or did it come up a long, arduous path?

MR. SHANER: Well, my pots generally had a pretty good market.

MR. WILLIAMS: Who was buying your work?

MR. SHANER: Who was buying it? Housewives liked my pots.

MR. WILLIAMS: To use or to set on the mantelpiece?

MR. SHANER: Probably to use. I began showing in craft shows very early, and somehow your reputation gets around and they begin to associate a certain pot with you, and maybe they look for that pot later.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you liked any special writer in the ceramics field in America-perhaps descriptive writing, perhaps criticism?

MR. SHANER: One of the things I felt, we did not have enough critics in the ceramic writing. It seems to be a few people who seem to monopolize the whole field, and that disturbs me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why?

MR. SHANER: Well, because I think we need more diverse opinions.

MR. WILLIAMS: Who are the writers that you pay attention to?

MR. SHANER: This is a difficult question for me, you know, when I was reading them. I guess I really look to the makers more than the writers. I had more respect for the person who was doing something himself and maybe writing about it versus the person who was sitting in an office somewhere, trying to intellectualize about why he did this and why did that, and knew nothing about the process.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that context, which of the ceramic texts have you liked in particular, either older texts or newer texts?

MR. SHANER: Well, the [Daniel] Rhodes books have always been important to me. Henry Varnum Poor's book, *From Mud to Immortality [A Book of Pottery; From Mud into Immortality, 1958]* was important to me. I never really had a lot of how-to-do-it books because I always thought it was a poor way to learn how to throw, by a book. I look at a lot of historic books, you know, historic pottery.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did [Bernard] Leach have any effect on you?

MR. SHANER: I'm sure he must have, but he was not a strong effect.

MR. WILLIAMS: Were you at Alfred when he came to visit?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: What about some of the new texts, Susan Peterson's text, for instance?

MR. SHANER: I used to go out and buy every book I could that came on the market. In the last 10 to 20 years I find I don't do that anymore, so a lot of them I really am not aware of-who is doing what anymore.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is that because you've internalized your own direction and don't need anyone else to tell you what's going on?

MR. SHANER: I would hope that would be the case, yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: So why don't you write about that direction and inspire other people to do it?

MR. SHANER: Because I don't consider myself a writer. Writing is difficult.

MR. WILLIAMS: You speak well.

And what critics can you identify as having anything proper to say?

MR. SHANER: I guess I'll stay away from that one. I'm a little annoyed if a critic owns a gallery and then talks about only the people that are in his gallery. I think a critic should be someone who is totally impartial.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is that ever conceivable?

MR. SHANER: Who was the guy from England that wrote a book on ceramics-Rawson?

MR. WILLIAMS: Philip Rawson.

MR. SHANER: Philip Rawson. I thought he did a good job.

MR. WILLIAMS: Fortunately, he wasn't a potter.

What periodicals in the craft field have you read or liked?

MR. SHANER: Well, I've always gotten *Craft Horizons* or *American Craft*, and *Studio Potter* and *Ceramics Monthly*. I only get one anymore, though; it's *Studio Potter*.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why is that?

MR. SHANER: Well, because I felt that it deals with the subject in depth. I get annoyed with all the flashy advertisement for all the fancy shows in some of them. And it seems like there's so much ego in the writing in some of the others, and in many cases the writing is down to zilch and it's all PR and advertising.

MR. WILLIAMS: Does that say a lot for our field?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think the fact that they're all surviving says a lot, you know. Or maybe none of them are that well. I don't know what the inside of the publishing field is.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are you sympathetic to the importance of archival preservation of the writings of individual potters and craft artists to be preserved?

MR. SHANER: I suppose I'd have to say yes to that, otherwise I wouldn't be making this tape.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you and your wife, Ann, archived your own papers?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: If not, why not?

MR. SHANER: Well, some things you just never get around to doing. I mean, it's hard for me to even keep my resume up to date let alone save every gallery or every show announcement and all of that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let me switch slightly from that subject to an interesting question. Can you discuss your views on the importance of clay as a means of expression, or of the strengths and limitations of that medium?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think it's probably the most responsive material available to man. You can't touch a piece of wood or a piece of metal or a piece of plastic or glass-the nature of just touching a piece of clay you leave a thumbprint, and I think it's so responsive. In some cases it's too responsive and then you-people try to do anything with it. It's been thought of in the past, lots of times, as being kind of a mundane material. A sculptor works in clay before he can afford to do bronze or something else, but to me it is a material in itself. In most cases it has to be fired, although in some cultures it wasn't even fired and it was important. A whole history of the world is in clay.

MR. WILLIAMS: What is the conflict between that and technology in our society?

MR. SHANER: I guess I'm anti-technology. What was that word you were looking up, Ann, in the crossword puzzle the other day?

ANN SHANER: I don't remember what you're referring to.

MR. SHANER: Cedric tiled his floor with Mexican tile. And he sent us a picture and in one of the tiles is a dog print. And he thought-he was so proud that he bought those tiles, and there was one of them a dog had walked on. So, by gosh, he was putting that on his floor. That was important to him.

MR. WILLIAMS: And will you just tell me what your son does for a living?

MR. SHANER: What's his title, Ann?

ANNE SHANER: He's in marketing technology.

MR. SHANER: For Hewlett-Packard.

MR. WILLIAMS: So, would that be an example of the need for the human or visual touch in our lives in a world-

MR. SHANER: I think so, and clay is such a universal thing; it's abundant. Something that was very important to me-and I think it was Rhodes pointed out in his book when he gave an analysis of the substances in the Earth and then the analysis of clay, and it was just about the same. And I began to realize how universal this material is that we call clay.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think the Bush administration would be more effective if it had a class in clay at the White House for its staff?

MR. SHANER: The way Joan Mondale supposedly-

MR. WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MR. SHANER: It's hard for me to say too many kind things about the Bush administration other than I'm hoping I can outlive it, but I don't know. I have something like 1,235 more days to go.

MR. WILLIAMS: Oh, you'll outlive it, I'm sure.

MR. SHANER: I was glad to see when one of your fellow Vermonters said he was first annoyed when Reagan said that the government has no business in the arts, and that must have been over 20 years ago. And I should mention that the National Endowment-because I think it is important; I think particularly with shows-a lot of things I never would have seen if it hadn't been for things that they've funded that happened to come through Seattle or, you know-and it was nice for everybody to get a grant. Not everybody got a grant, but they support and continue to support so many fine projects.

MR. WILLIAMS: You yourself initiated the endowment grant at the Archie Bray Foundation.

MR. SHANER: The Archie Bray was the first organization to get a craft grant, and this was a big controversy. While I was applying for the grant, one of my board members was writing to the endowment saying, don't fund this. And they were smart enough to realize what was taking place and funded it anyway.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk about commissioned work. Have you had many commissioned pieces in your career? Or if not, tell me about pieces that are in certain collections.

MR. SHANER: I don't think I've had that. I can't remember a major commission that I've ever had. I think the pot that stands out in my mind as being one of my most successful pieces is the one that's in the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. And it's one of those things where I had hiked down in the Escalante Canyon; I came back and made this piece, fired the kiln and packed the piece hot, shipped it off and never saw it again. And maybe if I saw it again, I mean other than a picture, I would change my mind. But that was a major successful

endeavor, I thought, because I felt I captured my feelings in that particular piece. But I have work now showing in five continents.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are they in collections abroad as well?

MR. SHANER: Not too many collections abroad other than Canada, but I've had tours through the various crafts shows. There was one that went to Poland and Moscow about 20 years ago that was the first American crafts that were shown there. And I had pots shown in South America and Australia and Japan.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you feel you've been successful, on the whole, to get your pieces in important collections and have it shown?

MR. SHANER: Yes, I think so. I mean, I don't know. I've never been the type of person that pushed and pushed myself for my work. I have always felt that good work should find its own depth. And it's always reassuring to have one of your pieces in a collection.

[END SIDE A, TAPE TWO. BEGIN SIDE B.]

MR. WILLIAMS: Side four of the tapes with David Shaner, June 18, 2001, in Bigfork, Montana.

David, I want to ask you the similarities and differences between your early work and your late work. Can you describe that?

MR. SHANER: Well, I like to feel that there's a thread about all my work; that one person made it. I'm not of the opinion that one's work has to change with every whim and every shift of the art movement. I was always interested in simplicity. My early work was basically thrown, and my later work was basically hand-built. But simplicity of form carry through, I think, in both of them. And, like I said, I like it to be very obvious that one person made that whole body of work. Although I never felt I developed a style or anything, I just felt that by working you become so comfortable with what you're doing that it becomes kind of a practiced grace and permeates whatever you do.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you have a special place within you where these things came from?

MR. SHANER: I don't know that I do.

MR. WILLIAMS: Where do they come from?

MR. SHANER: Well, I think they come from hikes in the canyons and seeing simplistic forms. Although I can't make pots [Mr. Shaner stopped working in clay in 1997 due to his illness], I still think about pots, I still dream about pots, I'm still making pots in my dreams. And I like to feel they just have grown and developed in my whole body, and that I was just a vehicle to bring them about.

MR. WILLIAMS: When you see one of your early pots, do you recognize something in that that you then had in your later pots as well-some quality, some essence?

MR. SHANER: Sometimes I'll see an early pot. I remember going to a workshop and this person said, "Oh, I happen to have a pot. Do you want me to bring it in?" And I kept saying-you know, I just kept putting it off, putting it off. So finally the last day they brought the pot in, and it was a beauty.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why did you like it?

MR. SHANER: There just was something about-that I captured, whatever, the whole essence of it. So that pot is somewhere in Philadelphia.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you had it early on as well as later on. It was there. You were born with it, were you?

MR. SHANER: I don't whether I was born with it, but I knew I had special talents with clay and I always knew I wanted to be an artist. And I was able to spend a whole lifetime developing what I wanted to do, and that was a joy as well as a sacrifice. Some people hate their job. I enjoyed my job.

MR. WILLIAMS: Can you describe the first exhibition you had? What was in it, where was it?

MR. SHANER: You mean one-man show?

MR. WILLIAMS: One-man show.

MR. SHANER: Well, I was involved in many group shows. The first one-man show that I can remember was

maybe one in Bozeman [Montana State University] in the library about 1964 or '65.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you ask for it or did they invite you?

MR. SHANER: They invited me.

MR. WILLIAMS: What did you have in it?

MR. SHANER: Just a variety of what were the things I was-I never made things for shows. I just always exhibited whatever I was making. I always tried to make sure that I was doing exciting things to me, as I worked, and so that's what I wanted to show.

MR. WILLIAMS: And did you do that all the way through your professional career, making things that you liked to do rather than for the exhibition?

MR. SHANER: Right. I made very few sketches of pots because I found I couldn't make the things I sketched and I couldn't necessarily sketch the things I made. So much took place as I was working.

MR. WILLIAMS: Not in your mind but in your hands.

MR. SHANER: Right.

MR. WILLIAMS: And did one pot, then, lead to the next one?

MR. SHANER: Right.

MR. WILLIAMS: You tried something-

MR. SHANER: And the advantage that the potter has over the painter is the painter does not have to deal with that curse, the kiln. But yet, that kiln can be a wonderful friend, and all sorts of things take place in that kiln that you couldn't possibly conceive. But if you're careful and can watch what's doing it, you can make it part of your working vocabulary. And I think looking at the pots is very important.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that respect, you've done a lot of workshops and demonstrations. How has that helped you develop your professional skills in life?

MR. SHANER: Well, it made me think about what I was doing and why I was doing it, because those were the questions they wanted to ask me. It made me crystallize my thinking, I guess. I not only had to demonstrate, but I had to verbalize. It helped my confidence to have people appreciate what I was doing, and command an audience and command respect. And I've had people that have taken my workshop three or four times, so they must get something out of it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you have a philosophy of teaching?

MR. SHANER: I suppose it was doing rather than talking.

MR. WILLIAMS: But then you had to decide what to do in order to show them what they were looking at. How did you decide that?

MR. SHANER: Well, I tried to-Even the things that I would do again and again, I would try to make myself feel that it was the first time I was doing it, even though it might be something that I did a hundred times before, to try to maintain a certain freshness about what I was doing. I mean, it must be like someone playing Bach on a piano. It's been written down for centuries, but yet somebody can come along and play Bach in a different way, and sense a certain richness about. And I think that's the idea of pottery; the forms are so universal and yet they're timeless. The throwing could be almost like a dance in that respect.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you get interested at all in political or social commentary in your work?

MR. SHANER: Mm-hmm.

MR. WILLIAMS: Tell me how.

MR. SHANER: Well, I did a lot of natural things with brushwork. And I made one series, *The Last of the Wilderness*, I remember, where I had-most everything was black and just showing one little section of the natural world.

In essence, I was trying to create beautiful things. I didn't think beauty had to be something that was looked down upon. And the world was beautiful, and I just thought: produce beautiful art to make a statement to show

how beautiful things can be. I wasn't trying to necessarily destroy anything the way some artists do, you have to destroy something in order to make something.

MR. WILLIAMS: By social commentary I mean George Bush, or I mean a black hanging in Georgia. Do those kinds of things enter your work at all, even if-

MR. SHANER: I don't think they've entered my work, as such, but they might have prevented me from working. I mean, I could hear something that would so upset me that I wouldn't be able to work. But I don't think it went out and made me produce a specific protest piece.

MR. WILLIAMS: What do you think of social protest in ceramic art? Is it valid?

MR. SHANER: I guess everything is valid, depending on who's doing it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is it passé in terms of high art?

MR. SHANER: I think it's something that's probably made for the spur of the moment. And in some cases it's very short-lived, and maybe that's the way it should be.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you like Robert Arneson's work?

MR. SHANER: Mm-hmm, very much so. That's why clay is so wonderful. There's so many ways of-directions to go. And I'm accepting of any way of working, provided you're good at it, you're enthused about it, and it reflects what you're all about. Now, if you put swastika on everything-I'd question it.

MR. WILLIAMS: What involvement do you have with national craft organizations like NCECA [National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts], American Craft Council, and so forth?

MR. SHANER: Well, I've always-I'm a member of NCECA and I'm a member of the American Craft Council. I always thought paying my dues to the American Craft Council was like paying union dues. I didn't necessarily agree with what they were doing, but I thought someone had to speak for us.

I couldn't afford to go to the NCECA's every year, you know; for me to quit work and, you know, it usually cost \$1,000. And it was usually in March, and March was always our leanest month as far as sales were concerned. I enjoyed my times when I went to all the NCECA conferences, but I'm not a-you know, I was not an NCECA junkie that had to go every year to get my fix, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that relationship, have you had any meaningful contacts with curators in museums that have been useful to your professional career?

MR. SHANER: I guess not. I've had a better relationship, I think, with curators than I have with so-called arts bureaucrats that run art centers, and people of that sort. With the real professional curators I've had no difficulty with and have enjoyed any association I've had with them.

MR. WILLIAMS: What museums in particular have you worked with?

MR. SHANER: Well, I can't say I've worked with them, but I've always enjoyed the Seattle Art Museum.

MR. WILLIAMS: Who is there as curator?

MR. SHANER: Well the person-what was-Mike's wife was the curator. I think she was David Levensgood's wife?

ANN SHANER: I can't help you.

MR. WILLIAMS: Any in Montana here?

MR. SHANER: Not really because most of the museums are kind of fairly recent. A good friend of mine is Peter Held at the Holter Museum [Holter Museum of Art, Helena, MT]. I have a good rapport with him.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think they play a role in the public's perception of American ceramics?

MR. SHANER: Yes, I think so, if they're doing their job. Peter goes out and searches out, you know, evocative shows and presents them, and it's not just showing the same thing again and again.

MR. WILLIAMS: What impact, if anything, has technology had on your work? We've discussed this, but can you identify any aspect of it?

MR. SHANER: I guess technology has not had a great effect on my work.

MR. WILLIAMS: By that do you mean computer technology?

MR. SHANER: I depend on my wife to do all my cyber-

MR. WILLIAMS: So one can get along without visual ceramics, perhaps?

MR. SHANER: One could get along without visual?

MR. WILLIAMS: Can one get along without virtual ceramics?

MR. SHANER: No.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you think we'll eventually just make pots on the Internet and exchange them around the world?

MR. SHANER: I find that hard to fathom. But they rave about this music on the Internet. When I hear anything-music on the Internet, if it would be on the radio, I'd turn it off, you know, as far as quality and everything else.

I'm grinning here because I'm thinking some of my remarks they used to say about Mike Mansfield, they always had to compile a list that was twice as long as everybody else because so many of the questions were a yes and a no. [Laughs.] And if he didn't have anything to say he didn't say it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Who was Mike Mansfield?

MR. SHANER: Mike Mansfield was a majority leader from-longer than any other senator-from Montana.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you know him personally?

MR. SHANER: I knew an aide of his personally. I felt as if I knew him personally. I mean, you could write him letters. He's still living.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did he play a role in the Bray Foundation at all?

MR. SHANER: Mm-hmm.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was that?

MR. SHANER: Well, we wrote to him to try to help us in any way that he possibly could. He was aware of the Bray. They had a show at the Smithsonian of Bray work. And he was the one that, after everything fell through, decided that we should ask the Endowment [National Endowment for the Arts] for money because he thought that they owed us something. And perhaps they felt that it would be good if they could fund something that Mansfield was interested in funding because he was the most powerful man in the U.S. Senate for 30 years, I think. He's sort of like the Bob Turner of the politicians, I guess.

MR. WILLIAMS: What do your senators now think about the arts?

MR. SHANER: Well, I'd put Conrad Burns in there with George Bush. Max Baucus's wife-not wife, his mother [Jean]-was in my pottery class in Helena. And at one point, he bought some mugs for his office. I wanted to give them to him but he said no, he couldn't do that; he'd have to pay for them.

MR. WILLIAMS: That was your brush with immortality.

Do you know Joan Mondale at all?

MR. SHANER: Met her in the elevator at NCECA in Philadelphia. Asked her if she'd consider asking her husband to run again. I don't know who was running that year, but-

MR. WILLIAMS: What did she say?

MR. SHANER: Oh, no, no. Then she looked to see what my name was.

MR. WILLIAMS: David, tell me a little about your immediate family members, and who they are and what they do.

MR. SHANER: Well, I've been fortunate to be married to a wonderful woman for 44 years. We have four children, two girls and two boys. My sons are both involved in technology-computer companies-Celestica and HP. And my two daughters, one is a physical therapist and the other is a speech pathologist. And although they're not involved in the arts, they have a wonderful appreciation of the arts. And the arts are very important in their lives, both music-wise and visually.

MR. WILLIAMS: Tell me what your wife, Ann, does.

MR. SHANER: My wife is a teacher. However, she did not go back to teaching after we were married until our youngest daughter, Coille, was in kindergarten, so that she was a stay-home mother for the years when the kids really needed her-you know, preschool. And of course my work was always at home so I was always close by as well, which is one of the rewards of being self-employed and being able to work at home.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did she help you with some of the big projects that you were involved in?

MR. SHANER: My wife always-Ann always did the book work for me, the paperwork. I answered the mail but she did the typing and now does the computer work. And later on she'd help me in the shop with some of the clay work when I was physically not able to do it. And she enjoyed doing it too, so she would help.

MR. WILLIAMS: You have a beautiful and spectacular garden outside your house. Tell me a little about your interest in flowers.

MR. SHANER: Well, growing things was always important to me, and I still plant things. As a boy I-as a child I had a garden, and everywhere I went I planted gardens. One of the things we were anxious to finally find a piece of ground where we would build a garden and live there for a while rather than leave our gardens behind.

And the garden, again, was a family endeavor. At one time it was a source of most of our food, but now it augments, you know, with fresh greens and fresh, organically grown food for the summer. To me it's a spiritual thing. And it also, I think, has affected my work, too, because, you know, you can't be mad if you're working in a garden. And I think you have to feel good about the things growing and about your work. And I think a lot of my decoration has to do with plant vegetation and the environment, and I always thought this was kind of nice.

MR. WILLIAMS: Has the color of the garden affected your aesthetics in clay at all?

MR. SHANER: I don't know if the color has, no, or not obvious-

MR. WILLIAMS: Shaner's Red did not come from calla lily, perhaps?

MR. SHANER: No, although I would find myself using certain colors at various times of the year, like every fall it seemed I would start to use a little of my yellow glaze when the leaves were turning yellow. This is not meaning that I used white glaze all winter long or three-quarters of my glazes would be white. But I like to feel I was affected by everything around me.

MR. WILLIAMS: And you live in the middle of a fantastic environment, which is near what park?

MR. SHANER: It's near Glacier Park [Montana], and we chose to live here because of the natural beauty, and we liked the people here. When we came to Montana, we were made to feel welcome and we were-it was our home, I guess. And we were just accepted as, you're the local potter, you know, the same as you had the local horseshoer, or what have you.

MR. WILLIAMS: Now, I'd like to talk with you a little bit about the dramatic affliction that you've become involved in. Tell me a little bit about how it began, what you have and how it affected your professional life.

MR. SHANER: Well, in 1995, I was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease. And it came on very slowly, that I wasn't really aware of what was taking place, but I noticed that I was losing strength in my arms. And I naturally thought, well, it's just overworking and aging and so forth. And Lou Gehrig's Disease is something that is not easily diagnosed. And I was using a glaze for, oh, close to 20 years that had a 30 percent manganese. And so I assumed that maybe I was getting a concentration of heavy metal in my system, but the medical profession, unless it has concrete evidence, they didn't seem to pay too much attention to it. And so finally, when I insisted on having my body chelated, I found that I had five times the amount of manganese in my system. And whether or not that brought on the disease, or whether it triggered that, or whether I'm prone to-one of these people who is prone to have this disease. But it came on very slowly and gradually.

I've now had it for about seven years, and I stopped working in-I think my last show was 1997. And my last pots were all hand-built because I could not throw. And I always came up with ways of adapting. My hand-built pieces were different than my earlier hand-built pieces. I was using ropes and things of that sort within the clay to make my designs, and more use of forms to support the clay. And that's where Ann really helped me because she was able to help me lift forms into the kiln and actually fabricate the forms. But I was able to work until 1997, and I like to feel that some of the last work was among my best pieces.

MR. WILLIAMS: What were some of the pieces you did at the end?

MR. SHANER: Well, the last pieces were very much in tune with the environment, and very much the landscape.

And I like to feel they were sensuous. I knew they were coming about for a long time, and it seems like the last few years were very intense. I didn't get them all made.

MR. WILLIAMS: What are some of the names of them?

MR. SHANER: Well, I call them *Cirques* because a cirque is where a mountain range forms into a lake, so many of them resemble mountains and valleys. Some of them are called-well, one I called *Shaner's Canyon*, one I called, *A River Runs Through It*, one I called, *Cenote*, one I called, *Two Medicine*. But their names were just titles that I put on the works themselves.

I never had any particular mountain range in mind; I just had all the mountains in mind when I made them. And I was able to feel that the clay was speaking to me as I worked, and this was very important.

MR. WILLIAMS: And were the gods of the mountains with you in those last pots, do you think?

MR. SHANER: I would hope that was true, yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Even though now you no longer work in the studio-and the studio is closed, I assume.

MR. SHANER: I've given away all my equipment.

MR. WILLIAMS: Yet your life continues in relation to friends, contacts around the country, and you seem to continue in a very rich relationship with many people and many institutions. Tell me a little about that.

MR. SHANER: Well, these are my friends, and I gave my whole life to pursuing this.

MR. WILLIAMS: You've had strong relationships with Alfred University, your alma mater.

MR. SHANER: Yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: And some of your pots are there now?

MR. SHANER: A few. I chose to-I'm in the process of giving a lot of pots, a lot of other people's pots to Alfred now. I feel as if they were the ones who really helped me and I would like to share those pieces with other students. I never collected anything for any monetary value, but just because I wanted to look at it and see it and enjoy it and use it. And the pots were not-some of them, not major pieces, but they were pots that appealed to potters and I would like potters to see them and learn from them as well.

MR. WILLIAMS: And at this very moment you have an exhibition at the Archie Bray Foundation?

MR. SHANER: It's a small exhibition of just a sampling of my work. And it's held in conjunction with the 50-year anniversary-

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...September 8, 2006