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**Oral history interview with Kurt Weiser, 2006
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kurt Weiser on May 22, 2006. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Tempe, Arizona, and was conducted by Peter Held 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.

Kurt Weiser and Peter Held 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

PETER HELD: This is Peter Held interviewing Kurt Weiser at the artist's studio in Tempe, Arizona, on May 22, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

Kurt, why don't we just start off, and tell me when and where you were born?

KURT WEISER: Well, I was born in 1950 in Lansing, Michigan.

MR. HELD: Do you want to talk a little bit about your childhood, family background, maybe a little bit about your parents first?

MR. WEISER: Well, my dad was from the Upper Peninsula, Michigan, Iron Mountain, because we lived in southern Michigan, in Lansing. And we used to go up north a lot. I loved it up there. To me, that was more home up there than down in Lansing. It was just more -

MR. HELD: More rural an environment?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, completely, old mining town. East Lansing was actually a college town, where I grew up. So Michigan State University was there, which was pretty, you know, great. I liked that, too. But when I got a little older, it was nice to be next to that university, because they had a place over there called the Kresge Art Center [Michigan State University] - [telephone rings] - which was part of - yeah, we should turn that thing off.

MR. HELD: What did you see at the Kresge Art Center?

MR. WEISER: Oh, it was, you know, just like here. It was the grad students shows, M.F.A. shows - I assume that's what it was. But, you know, paintings, ceramics. It didn't take me long to get, sort of, familiar with what was going on over there, even though I just did it from a distance.

MR. HELD: And you were still in elementary school at this time, or high school?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, elementary school. Yeah, there was a natural history museum close by that we would go to, and that's where I first started to see old pots, and see all of this old pottery. For some reason or another, it was fascinating to me; I still don't know why exactly, but there was something about it was just really interesting.

MR. HELD: Was there anything with your parents' upbringing that cultivated the arts, or were they

interested in the arts?

MR. WEISER: No.

MR. HELD: Were they supportive of the arts?

MR. WEISER: Well, no, but they didn't seem to be aware of the arts at all - my mother a little more so than my dad. It just wasn't something you were into. I remember now, when I look back on it - it is pretty interesting - there wasn't a record in the house; there were very few books in the house. And I remember that - actually, there were no books in the house; there were magazines. But, you know, my dad - there was a house my dad was building, so we were living in this unfinished house, and it was - no wonder there wasn't a lot of that stuff around; it was just a big, a big, sort of, half-finished house out in the country we were living in, which quickly turned into the suburbs, but -

MR. HELD: How many brothers or sisters did you have?

MR. WEISER: Three sisters and one brother.

MR. HELD: Uh huh. [Affirmative.] Any of them have an interest in the arts at all?

MR. WEISER: Well, they did, yeah. My one sister was a ballet student or dancer, and then a teacher. And my other sister went to the School for Dramatic Arts in New York. Now she does plays and things in Sonoma, California. And she does these, you know, voice-over things, basically some commercial on TV that is on, like, on Saturday at two in the morning showing some weird hair product. Did you hear that? My God, that is Jamie's voice - [laughs] - that is strange.

MR. HELD: I know you're with -

MR. WEISER: Actually, when we got older, my mother really encouraged it. She did. When we got a little older, she really encouraged it. But there was nothing in the house to read, so she brought this *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which I thought was great. It was something to read, so I'd end up reading that all the time. I remember I talked them into getting a record player. So we could - I wanted to listen to Elvis and all that kind of stuff. And then the radio, we got a radio. I used to listen to - I remember the first time I heard Bob Dylan on the radio. Wow, this is good. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: I know you went to the Interlochen School of the Arts [Interlochen, MI]. Why don't you tell me how that came to be?

MR. WEISER: Well, that was interesting. I was a student in East Lansing, East Lansing Public High School. And I just wasn't a very good student. I wasn't interested in what was going on. It was boring, you know. I was kind of rebellious, irritated with everybody and school wasn't interesting. It was sort of like this sport kid, jock kid - the ones with money - had the fancy cars and the cool clothes, and the rest of us were just sort like peons, you know. I didn't care much for that. Plus, you know, there was no real interest in anything that interested me; it was just nasty, boring.

So I wasn't a very good student and I didn't really take school seriously at all, to say the least. I was in the ninth grade and I just wouldn't go to school; I just quit, not thinking about the future or anything, of course. The only thing I knew is I didn't want to go back to the school with all of those jerks.

So, I had jobs. I got a job picking cherries and all that kind of stuff. I realized that wasn't going to pan out. And my mother said, well, why don't we go up and look at this school up north; it's an art school.

And since you like - you know, I like to paint. Salvador Dali was my hero. I really liked to paint. So, you know, okay, okay; let's go have a look. But I thought, well, you know, they were just trying to trick me into going to a military school or something.

Well, I went, and to tell you the truth, I wasn't very impressed. It just looked oppressive to me, but, again, it never was a choice, so I went. And I didn't care much for it at first, but it turned out to be, really, a great thing for me. It was a really interesting place: music, dance, drama, the arts, and all that stuff.

It was like an arts academy and it was a pretty new thing at that point. It had been a national music camp, and it was really known for its music. That is what it was known for. There was a giant art department and all these other things. So, anyway, it was - all of a sudden, school was really interesting. The teachers were very interesting people, the stuff they talked about - it was just all of a sudden incredibly interesting. So it was really a smart thing for me - my parents - to send me there.

MR. HELD: Is that where you first got interested in ceramics, or did that come earlier?

MR. WEISER: Well, it came a lot earlier. I lived out in the country and there were dirt roads and they used to grade the roads every so often. The road grader would come through, and he would pull up all of this perfect blue clay; I mean, it was just perfect clay; it was like ball clay, but perfect condition. And me and these other kids would take it and make stuff out of it just because it was there to play with, mostly pipes, you know, so we could smoke, stuff like that. But we'd make, you know, our own sort of fake Indian pottery out of it. So, yeah, I kind of got - I was already interested in making things out of clay.

But I remember, when I was in grade school, they took us on a field trip to the University of Michigan's Natural History Museum, and they had an exhibit of ceramics there, from where - I don't remember. But I just remember looking at these pots and being totally fascinated with these containers, you know. There was something about them that was just a really interesting thing to me. So I remember getting back off the bus and walking home, and you know - digging up more of that clay, and try to make copies of these pots I'd seen. It is so odd when you think about it, you know. Some kid looks at some pots and wants to go make pots. It's just bizarre, so -

MR. HELD: Did you ever try to fire them?

MR. WEISER: Yes, I did.

MR. HELD: Uh, huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WEISER: Sure.

MR. HELD: How did you fire them?

MR. WEISER: Well, first I just built a fire and dropped them in. It didn't work so well - blew up. So I went to the library and got some books, a few books about it, and studied, figured out a little bit about it.

And I remember one time in the house, putting it, you know, reading that it had to heat up gradually. So we had a big fireplace, so there was fire in the fireplace - and I'm slowly pushing this pot closer to the fire, and I got it too close, too fast, and it blew up and shot shards all over the house. [Laughs.] My father was little irritated - "What the hell?"

Yeah, we finally figured it out. We figured out how to do it. I think we do it - I got a book - and I think, you know, it was that old Hal Riegger book - out of the library.

MR. HELD: Raku book?

MR. WEISER: *Primitive Pottery* [New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972], I think it was called. [Actually not the book he was thinking of.] And I thought that was a gold mine. All the information was there, you know. Plus, as a kid, adolescent kid, what could be more exciting than playing with fire, you know?

So we'd build these little domes out of red brick. They were like little baby wood kilns, and they actually worked; they worked. You know, we'd make pipes, of course, smoke pipes, make these little Indian pots and paint them with - some of the clay was white and some of it was darker. It had iron in it so we'd use that. It just sort of evolved, you know. We had our own little primitive experiment going on. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: Let's get back to Interlochen. Who was your ceramics teacher there?

MR. WEISER: Her name was Jean Parsons, and she had been a student of Maija Grotell at Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI]. And I didn't - well, that first one, I didn't take ceramics; I was more interested in painting, so I just took painting, but Jean was the head of the art department, so it was a requirement that you took ceramics. So I took ceramics. And I didn't know how to use potter's wheel, although I had fooled with it a bit, because a neighbor's mother had one in the garage and I used to play with it. I was pretty interested in it. Plus, also, there was a guy named J.T. Abernathy, who was a potter in Ann Arbor. He sometimes would come over to East Lansing to sell his pots. And I'd go over and see what that was all about. So he had this famous blue glaze, which we thought was some mysterious thing.

Anyway, Interlochen.

MR. HELD: What year did you graduate?

MR. WEISER: Sixty-nine. Oh yeah, you had to take ceramics there, so I took it. She was - you know, I was sort of the ceramic pet. I had to take care of mixing glazes, make the clay with canoe paddles in the garbage cans, put the water in the garbage can, put the clay in, and let it sit overnight and come in early in the morning and stir it with the canoe paddles, and then ladle it all out into these vats with these heat lamps. She was pretty strict. If I didn't get it just right and do it just right, she would really let me have it.

MR. HELD: So you learned quite a few technical skills, the technology of ceramics?

MR. WEISER: Yeah -

MR. HELD: Did you learn a lot?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I did glazing, firing that old Alpine kiln. She would give me instructions - mostly tips. She was an interesting woman. She was really into the Scandinavian ceramics. Kyllikki - do you remember hearing about Kyllikki Salmenhaara?

MR. HELD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WEISER: And that whole Scandinavian design was big. I remember I had found a book that had

Voukos pots in it. And I remember showing her these pots and saying, you know, I want to make pots like these. And there was a picture of a teapot very much like that one you have in the collection, in a book, in that old Rose Slivka book or something, and it had iron spots in the glaze from reduction. And I said, you know, I want to make pots like this guy, and I want these spots.

And she said, well, no spots. She said, that's reduction firing. We don't do that; that's frivolous. That's frivolous. So, I remember thinking, well, ceramics is not? Everything here is frivolous if that's the point of view you want to take.

So, I thought, well, I want this. So I figured out what was going on, and I scraped the interior of the garbage cans that I would mix the clay in, as they were always rusty [the rust contained a high percentage of iron]. So I scraped the rust off the insides of the garbage can, busted it up in little pieces, and mixed it in with my white clay. And she was pretty irritated with me for that, because it worked. It looked just like it. I was just happy as hell. She thought I had reduced the kiln, which I didn't.

MR. HELD: She must have been Bauhaus-inspired, since Grotell was in that school.

MR. WEISER: Totally, totally. Yep, that was her problem. That was her thing, and she wasn't about to entertain anything new, I didn't feel. Like the Voukos stuff, you know, I showed it to her, and she was - she showed a disdain for it.

MR. HELD: Were you exposed to Asian ceramics at that time, or was that part of it?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, we were. I remember one of our assignments was to make a haniwa figure, which I thought was pretty cool. So I still - yeah, I still remember making those. It was really interesting.

Yeah, she would show slides of a lot of Japanese, but as I said, mostly Scandinavian stuff, but we did see some Japanese stuff. And when you go to the library and look at the ceramics, you run into a lot of the Asian ceramics. It wasn't really until I got to Kansas City Art Institute that Ken Ferguson taught me about Asian ceramics.

MR. HELD: Did you go to the Kansas City Art Institute right out of high school?

MR. WEISER: Well, I didn't. You know, I got out of high school - I hadn't made any plans about what to do after school, after I graduated. I don't know why. So when I got back down to Lansing, I thought, well, you know, I better - I should go to college, you know. So I checked around and there was a school in Detroit; it was called the School of Arts and Crafts. So I signed up for that and I went there for a semester. It was okay, but I didn't like it because the ceramics department was very small, and they had just had electric kilns, which, you know, wasn't at all what I interested in. And I had to take the bus from Plymouth, where my parents lived, all the way into Detroit everyday. It was a - it was hell. So I thought, well, I better wake up here and do something, or I am going to -

MR. HELD: Waste your time again?

MR. WEISER: [Laughs] I'm going to have to do this everyday. So I remember there was a woman, a girl, ahead of me, in the class ahead of me at Interlochen who I thought was really a good potter. She was really into ceramics and could control the clay really well. And I remember asking her where she was going to go to college, and she said that she was going to go Kansas.

So I thought, well, Kansas must be good, so I looked it up, and Kansas City Art Institute was pretty

much right there, the first thing on the page. So, not knowing much about it except that, I applied to the Kansas City Art Institute.

I didn't know Ken Ferguson was there. I didn't know anything. I just - that was just something I thought would be a good place to go. So, sort of misunderstanding on my part - this girl said - she ended up going to the University of UMKC, University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Anyway, so I applied to Kansas City Art Institute and I was accepted, and I went and I just took a plane. I remember the cost to fly from Detroit to Kansas City was \$25 a plane ticket, \$25. And the tuition to Kansas City was \$600 a semester.

MR. HELD: So why don't you tell me a little bit about your program there.

MR. WEISER: Well, when I first got to Kansas City, I had to take what they call Foundations, which here they call it - they call it - I can't remember what they called it - anyways, it was foundations - a lot of design projects, things like that, just to sort of get you ready for what would - what you would decide to be your major. But I already knew what I wanted to do when I got there; I wanted to do ceramics, and I felt kind of strange and frustrated with spending the semester doing these, what I consider to be, foolish exercises. Of course, they weren't; I didn't have any patience.

And I had too much time on my hands, so I ended up doing my stuff, and everybody - my roommate's - I would do his things.

MR. HELD: Projects.

MR. WEISER: Projects, and they'd all be out smoking dope or something, right? I just - I stayed in. I was more interested in doing projects, to have something to do.

So, anyways, but I would sneak over to ceramics and look around and kind of sniff around to see what's going over there. And I knew this one guy who was a student, who was in ceramics, and he said, well, come over and you can just make some stuff. So I went over there at night, and I remember that I made whole bunch of teapots and set them out on the table where we dry things. I came back in two days and they were gone. So I asked somebody, what happened to the teapots that I made? And it turns out somebody broke them. He won't mention who - he didn't know who it was - somebody had stood there and smashed them. But Ken Ferguson had seen them and he wanted to know who made them. So this guy said, well, Ferguson wants to talk to you. And Ken Ferguson is this big, huge guy I would see coming into the cafeteria. Everybody was sort of afraid of him.

So, I went up to him said, you know, so-and-so said you wanted to talk with me. I kind of thought I was in trouble. And I thought, well, I better - you know, I said hiding from him was probably not a good idea, so I better just go out there and face the music. He said, you're the guy who made those teapots? Then he started asking me questions, you know, where I came from and was I going to be a ceramics major. Yeah, I said. You know, foundations is driving me crazy. Can I come just throw pots? I said, you know, I won't keep them. He said yeah, you can, and so I did. And I would go over there and make things like that, and I actually got a few things fired.

So anyway, next semester I was in ceramics and everything was fine. I had a great time - I think with him and Victor Babu - amazing experience. That is the one thing about Ken; you know, he was just absolutely, completely into it, into ceramics. He just loved it; he was so into it that it just rubbed off on everybody else. You know, you never questioned it, questioned what you were doing for a

moment, whether ceramics was a silly thing to be doing. It just seemed like the most important and interesting thing on earth.

MR. HELD: How would you describe his teaching style?

MR. WEISER: Well, he wasn't a preacher, or much of a lecturer. His teaching style was sort of like, you know, follow me, come look at this, you know. He was just like another - almost like another student, in a way. He was definitely in charge, no question about that. For instance, he'd come in and he'd fire his work at school pretty much. He would come into class. We would see him climb out of his truck, and he would come in, holler at somebody: come here, come here; follow me. So you would follow him into the kiln room, and he would start un-stacking the kiln and handing you bricks, and he would be talking about what he hoped he was going to find in that kiln.

MR. HELD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WEISER: It was just - it was informative, but incredibly entertaining too. I mean, this guy was truly a character. So when we were first students there, you know, we would all be looking at each other and sort of grinning, like, whoa, you know - [laughs] - look at this guy. But he had us. You know, we would just follow him, like puppies around him. He'd take us next door to this music conservatory that had food and vending machines, buy you something to eat, something to drink, and just go off on this tirade about one thing or another.

MR. HELD: He also took you to the Nelson-Atkins Museum [Kansas City, MO]?

MR. WEISER: Oh, yeah.

MR. HELD: Field trips?

MR. WEISER: Well, yeah, well, one time he did. But he just expected you to go over there. He just assumed that you would be there, and we did, you know. If there was a show or something over there, or certain pot he would refer to - and if you didn't know exactly what he was talking about, he just looked at you like you were a total idiot and maybe berate you a little bit. Like, how can you be here and not know what that is? It's over in the museum. What do you do all day long? Go now and go look at it. So, yeah, everything was over there at the time.

MR. HELD: Who were some of the other undergraduate students with you?

MR. WEISER: John Gill - John Gill, Rick Hensley, Donna Polseno, Stanley Welsh, Dick [Richard] Notkin - oh, geez, a lot of people. Silve Granatelli. I am sure I am leaving someone out, but there was a lot of people; it really kept going, you know. And then, you know, sort of either end - oh, Allan Winkler was in there too. Yeah, it was quite a -

MR. HELD: A good crew.

MR. WEISER: Quite a crew, you know. Yeah, we used to be so competitive too, geez. Ken Ferguson would play us a little bit, you know; he'd come over to me like he has got something sort of confidential to tell me. He says, ah, man, you should see what Hensley is doing over there. Unbelievable. The greatest, the best stuff I have ever seen in my whole life. And you would think, what the hell, you know; what is that? So you would wait awhile and then you would kind of wander over there and see what it was, look at it, and think, well, maybe - I don't know - one thing or another. But you'd think, geez -

MR. HELD: Ken thinks it's good.

MR. WEISER: I better get to work here.

Yeah, and you know, and 10 minutes later he would do the same thing with Rick Hensley. So then he wandered over to see what I was working on. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: [Laughs] Good motivational tool.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I know. He just had us crazy most of the time. But he participated. It was not like he was the teacher; it was like he was the coach, kind of. He would come in and he was just the leader of the band, you know. He would come in, he would show slides - okay, you have got to see this. And we'd see things that, because of his enthusiasm, it was sort of infectious. There were things that I can remember where I would see it at first and think, well, I don't like this, and this is ugly.

Like, I remember wood-fired stuff. He had this thing where he would take an old salt kiln - he would take earthenware clay, put it in a salt kiln, and fire it until 04 and throw salt into it, and it would give it this really rustic, kind of beat up - where it looks like wood-fired stuff in a way. And I first saw that - I thought that was just awful. It was messy and awful. But I kept looking at it - I mean, he was so into it that I thought, well, there has got to be something there, you know. So I kept looking at it and looking at it, and I finally started to see it, you know. It took awhile to see it, but then I really saw it.

It was just like the experience I had when I was in high school, in painting. I wanted to be Salvador Dali, you know. And the teacher I had wanted me to be Robert Rauschenberg, because that was what he was into. So, as a consequence, you know, we all had to learn how to become a little abstract expressionist painter. And at I first thought that was pretty stupid, too. I just couldn't relate to it, but the more I did it, the more I tried to emulate that work, and the more pictures I saw and the more I learned about it, the more interesting it became, until I, too, was pretty obsessed with it. It's almost like a language you sort of have to learn, you know, to sort of understand it, to get it, you know. Once you get it, it's very interesting.

MR. HELD: It makes sense.

MR. WEISER: That's something that I always wondered about in teaching, you know. It's a funny experience. I wanted to be Salvador Dali, and this guy wanted to - Peter Ramsey was his name. He is good painter and a really interesting - very good teacher, but he wanted me to be Robert Rauschenberg. I shouldn't have been doing either one, actually. But that's the way it worked out, but it was just interesting. Later on, I'm thinking to myself, gee, it's amazing how - we thought art students - we thought we were just sort of so arty and everything, but it turned out we were just as conformist as anybody else, you know.

MR. HELD: Would you feel - if you had to sum up what you got from Ken being your main teacher - what was the major message or skills that you learned from Ken?

MR. WEISER: Well, skills, you learned a lot of skills, because we - he would say, you know, if you were going to do ceramics - his philosophy was sort of preparing us to go out in the world. And if you had a pickup truck, a chainsaw, and a hammer, you could survive. You know, he taught us how to make glazes, how to build kilns, how to do everything ourselves, you know. And it was the times, that kind of -

MR. HELD: Self-sufficiency.

MR. WEISER: - self-sufficient, you know, back to the earth; I am going to do it all myself, kind of thing.

So, yeah, I just, as far as survival, all that stuff, he really emphasized that. Calling somebody to build a kiln for you was just out of the question. It was - it would be an embarrassment; you'd never survive. It was the weirdest thing, you know - not that that is important, but what's most important is just the belief in yourself, in your work. I mean, he really did that. He was so into what he was doing that the rest of us just felt like, well, you know, of course, this is perfect, no question about it, a self-belief in yourself, whether it was delusional or not.

MR. HELD: This built your confidence?

MR. WEISER: Confidence, yes. Just go do it.

MR. HELD: And what about - what was George Timock's role teaching with Ken?

MR. WEISER: Well, he came after I left.

MR. HELD: Did he?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, so I really didn't have any contact as a student. Jacquelyn Rice was there when I was there for a while. And I got to know her pretty well. And then later on, when I was a grad student, she was teaching.

MR. HELD: After you finished undergraduate school, you went out to Oregon for a few years.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I did. Yeah, I went out to - I was just - I was in Ken's office one day and I had applied to Alfred [University, Alfred, NY], to grad school, I mean, and was accepted, but I was not feeling so good about it because I remembered the teachers I had in high school - Interlochen. She didn't graduate from Alfred, but she would go there for the summers, and then Ken was from Alfred, and every sort of, every sort of successful person in ceramics I ever knew or heard about was from Alfred. So, I don't know, I guess I was just sort of rebellious and I thought, I want don't want to go there; everybody else went there. I want to be like these California people that do something weird and different, you know. Plus, I want to go see something different. I want to go out west and see what that's all about.

So, I was standing in Ken's office, and he gets a phone call, and Tom Coleman on the phone. This just shows you how different things were - Tom Coleman on the phone and he is talking to Ferguson and Ferguson says to me, do you want a job? And I said, doing what? Do you want a job teaching ceramics out in Oregon? I said, well, what, you know, what is it about? He just hands me the phone and it's Tom Coleman. Tom Coleman says the same thing. Do you want to come out here and teach ceramics? Ken kind of nods his head like, yeah, I have to do that. So I said, okay. So he said, okay, you're hired. So that was pretty much it.

MR. HELD: And now was that was at the Portland Museum?

MR. WEISER: Portland school, Portland Museum Art School. But that is just the way things were done. You know, he would call up Ken and say, who do you have to come out and teach ceramics? And I was in his office and it -

MR. HELD: It happened.

MR. WEISER: It happened. So then, I did. I went out. I didn't know how to drive, so I learned. I went back to Michigan and bought a pickup truck - I almost bought a fire truck. Thank God I didn't do that. Goes to show how tuned I was into reality, you know.

So I bought this truck, learned how to drive it. I built a potter's wheel that summer in Kansas City and threw that in the back of the truck and drove to Oregon. And got there and met Tom Coleman, and just got set up and kept going.

MR. HELD: How many years did you spend there?

MR. WEISER: I was there for two years. I taught one year at the museum art school. And I didn't like it too much. It was right there in the city and it just - it was in the basement, and I just felt awkward. It just didn't seem like what I thought a ceramics studio should be. And there was a school out in Marylhurst [Marylhurst, OR]. A guy had been teaching there named Pat [Patrick] Horsley. He set it up there really nice. But he didn't want to teach there; he wanted to teach in town with Coleman. So we just traded. It was amazing. We just traded jobs.

So I was teaching at Marylhurst. I taught there for a year. And at the same time, I was at a place called Hillside Center in Portland. It was a studio situation that I worked in with a guy named Mick Lamont. I ran into Mick Lamont somewhere, in a bar I think, down by a part of town in Portland there where there is place called Potter's Workshop, and Horsley and [Don] Sprague, and Coleman and those guys used to work in there. And there was a bar down there, so the potters kind of hung out in this bar.

So I was in the bar. And I met this guy Mick Lamont who was from Menominee, Wisconsin, which is right across the border from Kingsford, Michigan, which is up there, Upper Peninsula, close to Iron Mountain, and I felt like I was on the moon when I got out there, because it is such a different culture.

So this guy seemed like a neighbor. So he said, well, there is a place, Hillside Center up here; you can rent a studio up there and a little apartment to live in if you're interested. So I went up there with him, and it was like this ritzy, ritzy part of town, up in the hills. It was an old convent, and the art school owned it and used it for a while but then they moved downtown. So this convent sat up there and they rented it out to artists. So it was a perfect situation. You know, you're up on hill; you look over at Portland; it's beautiful. So I did that; I rented a studio out there.

MR. HELD: What was your work like, at that point? What kind of pots were you making?

MR. WEISER: Oh, I was making just stoneware pots, kind of - oh, not much. I think I was playing [Shoji] Hamada or something, trying to get that back together. [Laughs.]

I - you know, it was such a whole new experience out there that mostly I was just trying to get my bearings. I would - you know, I had to build a kiln; we built a kiln up there just out of scrap, stuff lying around, and just getting all that stuff going, mixing clay, getting ready. So what I did mostly there, for those two years, was Mick would make a lot of pottery and then he'd go to art fairs. That was like the heyday of the art fair, you know, when there weren't seven million production potters making stuff. And we would make pots and go to these art fairs and make a lot of money, you know.

So that's what I did, too. I started throwing pots and it was like being a farmer - get all of these pots together and then we would pack them up in the truck and we would drive to the Ann Arbor Street Fair [MI], which is 1,800 miles away or something, and make a lot of money.

MR. HELD: What was a lot of money back then?

MR. WEISER: Well, like, \$6,000. That was serious money, you know. And then, you know, hang around a little bit. We were just like gypsies, you know, driving our pickup truck full of pots, and drive back out to Portland, and, you know, I have to start teaching again, and start making pots.

I remember there was a gallery there. Oh, on Corbett. What was that? Arts and Crafts [Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery].

MR. HELD: Oh, the Contemporary Crafts Gallery.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, but it was a gallery -

MR. HELD: Yes.

MR. WEISER: And you would submit work every - once a week or something, and they would jury it, and either it got in or it didn't. And I could not get anything in there; couldn't get anything in there. And I finally asked somebody, what is the deal here, and they said, well, one thing is the bottoms of your pots are a mess. They're all scratchy, and, you know, anybody who comes here and buys these things, they put them on this expensive furniture. So if the bottoms are rough and nasty, they're not going to want them. The first time it occurred to me, you know, this whole commerce thing, like well, that people actually buy these things -

MR. HELD: And they have to work.

MR. WEISER: They actually have to work and they have to be as genteel as - they don't scratch the tables. Amazing how naïve I was.

Anyway, but even though I got the bottoms cleaned up, they still wouldn't take any of them, cause they weren't that good. I was trying to fit in, you know. I'm trying to make better Coleman pots than Coleman made and better Sprague than Sprague made, and it wasn't working. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: This is all high-fire stoneware?

MR. WEISER: High-fire stoneware reduction, yep.

MR. HELD: So after two years, you decided to go back to graduate school?

MR. WEISER: After two years of that, I was - you know, Portland was a real pottery town, a real pottery town. And I liked it, but in some odd way, even though I was really into making pottery, I didn't feel like I fit. I didn't feel comfortable there. Something was missing and I think it was - well, part of what was missing was Kansas City Art Institute and that sort of lively atmosphere.

MR. HELD: Interaction with the students?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah. And Portland was just, it was a real strong pottery community, but it was strictly pottery, nothing else.

MR. HELD: No art.

MR. WEISER: No art. No, I remember a conversation with somebody, and I asked him something about Joseph Cornell, just assuming that they were art students and they would know who that was. They didn't have the vaguest idea who that was. And I remember thinking, this is a little - this

is just a little too tight for me. So, not only that, but another reason I went to grad school was that the studio we had up there - finally, people with money realized what was going on up there. They just, the community decided to buy that convent and turn it into tennis courts. So we were out of luck there; we were getting kicked out. So I thought, well, I'll go to Ann Arbor and sell pots. I should call Jacquie Rice and see if she can get me into the grad school there, cause this - by now it's May or something. And so -

MR. HELD: Jacquie was still in the Kansas City Art Institute?

MR. WEISER: No, Jackie had gone to the University of Michigan. So I'm going back to Ann Arbor and I'm thinking, she's at the University of Michigan; maybe I can still get into school there. So I called her and said, you know, I'm coming to Michigan. Is it still possible to get in there as a grad student? She said, yeah, yeah, send me your slides. So I did and then she called me back and said, yeah, you're a student. Yeah, so things are so easy.

Well, it wasn't that easy; I remember that I had to prove I was a resident, some of that silliness, but all in all it was pretty simple. So there I was; I was set up. I went back, sold a bunch of pots at the street fair, had money in my pocket, found a house to rent in Ann Arbor and we moved in, and there I was a grad student. Christy, Christy, too. Yeah, I got married in Portland, before that.

MR. HELD: So who was teaching, besides Jacquie at Ann Arbor?

MR. WEISER: Jacquie Rice, John Stephenson, who was sort of like the don of ceramics in Ann Arbor, you know, and, oh, geez - it's just that her name slips my mind [Georgette Zirbes]. She had been there a long, long time, too. I think she's still there, just now retiring. I just can't - I can't -

MR. HELD: We'll go, and come back to it.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I guess. It's embarrassing. I can't remember her name. Anyways, but mostly I interacted with John and Jacquie. And again, you know, this was the '70s and the whole, sort of, education, or art education, I didn't notice at the time, was very different then, you know. I mean, there wasn't a whole lot of interaction. You were just there, and you did what you did if you did it. And if you didn't do it, well -

MR. HELD: They'd let you know about it.

MR. WEISER: They'd let you know about it. And there are few people who were there and didn't do much, and one day they disappeared, you know.

MR. HELD: They're mostly practicing artists being role models for the students.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah. And I remember, getting their attention was not easy. If one of them stopped and talked to you for 10 minutes, that was a big deal. That was a big deal.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

MR. HELD: This is Peter Held interviewing Kurt Weiser, disc two.

But do you feel like you got the most benefit out of going to graduate school? Obviously, you were taking some art history and other classes.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah, we took a lot of art history. I got into one class, I remember, because I

procrastinated too long to sign up. All that was left was a class in Islamic art, and I didn't know anything about it, but - so I took it and it turned out to be a pretty difficult class. It was all Ph.D. students, and they spoke two or three languages and this was serious business. And the teacher - I remember it was interesting to me because it was a lot of ceramics, of course, all that tile work and everything else. But it - this was serious business.

The teacher sort of got a kick out of me because I was a ceramics student and just sort of lost in this intensely, sort of, academic whirlwind they had going. But she was okay. I could talk to her. You know, the biggest defense if you're a ceramics student and you're in a class that's driving you crazy and you don't think you can handle this, you invite your instructor over to ceramics and try to get them addicted to ceramics. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: Try to convert them.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, this worked. I invited her over; she loved it. She just loved it. So instead of writing a long dissertation or something for this, I got off the hook by making examples of these tiles and doing some sort of technical paper so they understood the technical part better, which they had no idea of, you know, so, it was okay - [inaudible, cross talk] - fair trade, yeah.

MR. HELD: You graduated from the University of Michigan in 1976. What was your next career step?

MR. WEISER: Seventy-six. Well, like all grad students, I remember agonizing over what I was going to do, you know, trying to decide, first of all, who I was going to be, you know, and how I was going to do it. And I had a couple of options. There was the sort of - the desired path - we all sort of had to be immediately hired by some big university and you go off and you become exactly who you weren't two weeks ago. You become the teacher instead of the student. I applied to a number of places. I remember - and it was working out okay for me. I remember I applied to University of Kansas or Kansas State University, which was in Manhattan, Kansas.

MR. HELD: Kansas State University?

MR. WEISER: Kansas State University. And I went in for - they called me for an interview. So I remember I went there and it was close to Kansas City, Missouri, so I felt like I was sort of back in familiar territory. And I went for the interview, and I remember that it was one of those deals they have quite often in universities where they've hired somebody as a temporary teacher and they teach that semester, but then they have a search that semester too. So the poor person is there teaching as sort of a temporary position and they sort of - so anyway, this person was in there teaching. And the students just loved him, just loved him. So they saw me as this sort of invader for, you know - clown that's going to come there and ruin that whole setup. So it was a little, a little uneasy. It was kind of uneasy. So I wasn't very comfortable there. And the studios were in the - underneath the stadium, underneath the bleachers in this place. It just didn't seem right to me.

So I remember I left; I left and I went over to Kansas City to see Ferguson and visit the school and see what was going on there, because I hadn't been too long gone, you know. So I went over there, and I remember Akio Takamori was there; he just got there, and he's making this little village. And I was sort of - I just had this Japan fascination for a long time. And he didn't speak very good English yet, but I'm talking to him and he invites me to lunch. Will you come to my house for lunch? Well, sure. So he wanted to play some records for me. So, well, I mean, we sort of hit it off right away.

So we go to his house and he cooks that ramen stuff and he's playing Hank Williams records and he

wants to know what I think of Hank Williams. To me, Hank Williams was just this hillbilly guy, you know, that I didn't know too much about. I knew about the Beatles and the Rolling Stones but Hank Williams, no. So I, you know, I listened to him and thought this is sort of interesting, you know. How does he, sort of, land here from Japan, all of a sudden he's into Hank Williams?

Anyways, I went back and talked to Ken Ferguson about this job and he didn't think it was a very good idea. Why don't you just go make pots? That's what you do. So, but - he said, the Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, MT] is looking for somebody to run the Bray, because the guy that's there now is leaving. And I heard all about the Bray Foundation from Ken, because he had run the place, and David Shaner. Ken was always showing us Shaner pots and stuff, and Shaner was my absolute hero. I wanted to be David Shaner at this point, you know, just back when I was a student. His pots were - seemed so good to me, so good. Anyways, so he said, if you're interested, write a letter to David Shaner because he's handling this.

So I remember thinking, God, Montana. I wasn't sure where it was. It was like this legend kind of thing. So I went back home and said to Christy, there's this - there's a job at Archie Bray, you know; I'd be like - I would have to run the place. And I remember thinking, well, I don't know if I could do it, but I'll apply anyway. So I applied for that. And after that came up, all those other jobs that were available, I sort of lost interest in them. And I really wanted to do this because it was more of a do-it-yourself kind of thing, you know. So anyway, I applied for the job and flew out to Missoula and met with Rudy Autio and David Shaner. And, you know, it looked like I was 14.

MR. HELD: How old were you?

MR. WEISER: I was 26, 26. And I thought, there's no way these guys - I mean, Shaner, I'm talking to him - Autio - they seem like bigger than life, you know. So I went home and I'm sort of agonizing over this thing; oh, that would be so cool. And plus I was really impressed with Montana. I'd never seen mountains like that before. Well, I did drive into Oregon but, anyway. And then, I remember, Shaner called up and said, do you want the job? I said, yeah. He said, okay. See you in October. So we packed up and moved to Montana.

MR. HELD: So David Cornell was still resident director?

MR. WEISER: Cornell -

MR. HELD: Finishing up his directorship and -

MR. WEISER: Oh, yeah. At that point he wasn't doing too much work. He was just kind of getting ready to go, you know. I'll tell you, he had a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff. Like, in the studio and everything - canoe - all kinds of other stuff. And he had the glassblowing thing going. Yeah.

MR. HELD: Who were some of the residents when you were first director?

MR. WEISER: Well, when I first got there, it kind of emptied out, you know. I remember Wally Bivins was there working. That's it. I think it was just Wally and maybe Dick Swanson a little bit, just kind of leaving. But the place was dark and empty and dusty.

MR. HELD: Cold.

MR. WEISER: And cold. When we first got there, I remember, we first pulled into Helena, and we first go through East Helena, and I'm thinking, this doesn't look so good. But then she said, Christy said, no, this is East Helena. There's a real Helena over here. So we kept going a little bit. And we got into

Helena, and it was so different then than it is now, you know, obviously. But we stopped at some little diner downtown right next to O'Toole's - it may still be there - went in there and got something to eat, and then we're going to drive up to Archie Bray. And I passed the turnoff and started going up the McDonald Pass because I wanted it to be up there. I didn't want it to be down in the swamp.

MR. HELD: The flats.

MR. WEISER: Yeah. So we got up there after a while. And I'm driving one truck and Christy's driving a Volkswagen, and she kind of flags me over when we're up on top of the pass like, no, it's back that way. So we go all the way back down, finally find it, pull into the Bray. It was about 4:30 and the sun's already starting to go down, you know, and it was just an absolute mess. All those 50-gallon drums full of glass, broken glass, and just old cars - that big old truck, that old car with a saw on the back of it; wood is everywhere from the wood kiln. It was just a mess. I couldn't believe it. You know, I'm not that fussy, but I'm thinking Archie Bray Foundation, right. This is sort of like a ceramic mecca

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MR. HELD: Shrine.

MR. WEISER: Disneyland, yeah. And I pull into this - what looks like a junkyard. And I was really upset. I just thought, what is this?

MR. HELD: What did I get myself into?

MR. WEISER: Ceramic mecca here. This isn't much, you know. So I said I just - I'm not - this is just ridiculous. So Lauren Kearns happened to be living in Helena and I had known her from since I was living in East Lansing. So we went over to see her and spent the night there. And the next day I drove up to Bigfork to see - talk to David Shaner, to find out, you know, what's going on here. So I drove up there, talked to him and, you know, calmed down a little bit and went back down to Helena. And the chicken coop where we were supposed to live was a mess because people had been working in there all the time. And I just sort of said, okay, let's just - it's like you land on the moon and there's no going home; you just deal with it. So I did, just started, you know -

MR. HELD: Thinking things over.

MR. WEISER: Cleaning things up and talking to Dave and finding out - Dave Cornell - finding out this clay business he had going and what, you know, there was \$300 in the bank. And the only thing that saved it was that \$300 in the bank. And he had this deal going: a bunch of schools wanted to buy electric kilns that year, and that's a way to make quick money in the clay business. And I think it brought in, like, \$3,000, and that's what -

MR. HELD: Bankrolled everything else.

MR. WEISER: Pretty much bankrolled everything, to begin with, yeah. Because, you know, I had to buy clay, restore the clay business, and I'm trying to run this clay business, which I know absolutely nothing about, and he started teaching me. So I think he might have worked with me that first six months.

MR. HELD: And then you recruited Chip [Clawson] to run the business?

MR. WEISER: Well, yeah. That was after - I ran the clay business for about a year, until I - at least things had settled down a little bit. And Chip had been a studio technician at the University of Michigan when I was there. So there was a house for him to live in, the one Cornell had lived in that

was empty, and the few residents that were there were - lived in that house in the meantime. So, anyway, I thought, I don't want to run a clay business. That's not what I came out here to do. But it's a good thing, because it makes money and just sort of stabilizes this place a little bit.

And it was totally do-it-yourself. There was no endowment; there was nobody looking over your shoulder saying, you need money and need help. It was like, okay, you're paddling the boat now, and this is what we got you out here to do.

MR. HELD: Better get you down river.

MR. WEISER: Get going, because there's nobody waiting to help you. They're just waiting to see if you screw up.

So anyways, David Cornell had the clay business and thought - I knew Chip and I knew he would be really good at it. And I knew he liked the great outdoors, you know. So I had to convince him. I thought, how am I going to convince Chip to move out here and do this? I could offer him a house to live in and \$300 a month, not a hell of a lot of incentive, you know, but, anyway. So I thought, well, what I'll do is I'll buy him a plane ticket to Missoula, so when I pick him up, I can drive him over the pass back into Helena. And if that doesn't impress him nothing will, right.

So that's what I did. And it was a perfect day, you know, some raining over here, snowing over here, sunny over here. It was perfect. So, he said, yeah, he'd do it. He'd do it. So he quit - went back to Michigan, and quit and moved to Montana, which saved me, you know. We all know what a good job he did building that place up, yeah.

MR. HELD: So part of your salary at the Bray was whatever pots you sold, the Bray got half of it? Was that the original setup?

MR. WEISER: About half of it. That was the original deal. But it didn't quite work out that way in the beginning, and at times, quite often, everything went to run the place because it, you know, if they cut out the gas, that's the end of the party, you know. I used to be scared to death of that gas bill. You know, \$1,800. Whoa. So, we had to make a lot, a lot of money.

MR. HELD: You know, at the time you were at the Bray, you were doing some raku pots, stoneware pots - just trying to make pots to keep the foundation going.

MR. WEISER: Well, I was trying to do - to please everybody. Trying to please myself, trying to please the Bray and make money there, trying to experiment a little bit at the same time. I did, yeah, I did - I made pots. I tried to be sort of Dave Shaner, partially; making casseroles and teapots, keeping the gallery up in front stocked with stuff I thought people would buy.

And I, you know, I loved it. I loved it. Just that whole business of orchestrating all that - make the pots, get it, you know, the lids fit, the glazes fit, they look nice, fire the kiln right - all that whole thing, it appealed to me. The process and the material just, sort of, the process and the material are so interesting that that can consume you just itself. And it sort of did.

And at the same time, I'm trying to be everybody else, I'm doing this raku stuff, and I've got a show in Hawaii and I'm trying to do a good job with that, and I'm trying to be a director and that -

MR. HELD: Were you thinking of going into business?

MR. WEISER: - like eight people at one time, you know, and it's driving me crazy.

MR. HELD: How did you recruit new residents? When you first got there, you know, there wasn't a large residency program. It wasn't very active, so you had to recruit from people who knew -

MR. WEISER: I had to kind of get it going again - from different people I knew. I called John Stephenson and Jacquie Rice, and Ken Ferguson was always there with about 15 people he thought should be up there. So in the beginning, pretty much Ken Ferguson fed the -

MR. HELD: The pipeline.

MR. WEISER: The resident program, yeah. Yeah. But, you know, he always sent good people. They were always good, from Kansas City, artists - they were always self-sufficient and knew -

MR. HELD: Motivated.

MR. WEISER: Motivated, and knew how to use equipment.

MR. HELD: I know that John and Andrea Gill came out at that time. Akio Takamori, Larry Bush -

MR. WEISER: Yeah.

MR. HELD: A lot of Kansas City alumni.

MR. WEISER: I remembered Akio from Kansas City, and I'd been back there a few other times and talked to him. And I remember he graduated from Kansas City and went back to Japan. And I got a letter from him; he wanted to come back to the States and work, and he needed a place to work. So I said, well, this is perfect; perfect, come do this. So he came pretty early on. He came and worked for a while, maybe six months or a year or something, and then he went somewhere - I don't know - back to Japan. And then he was teaching in Bozeman [Montana State University] for a while, and then he finished teaching in Bozeman. He came back up to Helena right after that. And we just kind of - you know, I needed somebody around that was interesting to me and -

MR. HELD: Stimulating.

MR. WEISER: Stimulating, you know, really fun to, talk to and he was it. He was really an interesting guy.

MR. HELD: Who were some of the other residents that you enjoyed being around?

MR. WEISER: Oh, Bobby Silverman was an amazing guy. There were a lot of them. There's so many of them. The guy in Missoula now -

MR. HELD: David Regan.

MR. WEISER: David Regan, yeah, he was a really interesting guy.

MR. HELD: And at that time in the early part of the Bray, when you were director, the Bray didn't own the brickyard. You want to talk a little bit about how the Foundation acquired it?

MR. WEISER: Yeah. The first -

MR. HELD: - purchased the brickyard property?

MR. WEISER: Well, how it didn't have it at first. The first Archie Bray, you know, was alive and he

owned a brickyard. And this pottery he built because he was interested in pottery. And he had Voulkos, and Autio too, working, and he was just, sort of, fortunate to have those guys.

This Archie was an interesting guy, I guess. I never met him. He died before I ever had anything to do with the place, but the place started on my - pretty much on my birthday; 1950, they started the place. I always thought that was funny. But Archie Bray, you know, he had pottery going, so he heard Hamada and Soyetsu Yanagi were in the States, so he invites them to Helena, Montana. I mean that's pretty big thinking for some guy running -

MR. HELD: For a brickmaker.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah, you know, for somebody who's a businessman making brick. So, anyways, so he invites them and he gets Voulkos and Autio up - fortunate - to come up and work and run the place, and that just got it going - got it going.

Anyways, later on Archie died, and his son [Archie, Jr.] came home with - his son was an airline pilot - came home to deal with the family business and decided to borrow a lot of money and build this huge tunnel kiln and modernize the business. But it didn't quite work out; it was a disaster, a financial disaster. So all of that went down the tubes and the place was auctioned off by the Small Business Administration. At the time, David Shaner was there, the resident potter or director. And he could have just bailed, you know. He could have just said, well, to hell with this. This isn't working. I'm moving up to Bigfork and this is over.

MR. HELD: Be done with it.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, be done with it. But he didn't, you know. He stayed there and he convinced the Small Business Administration to auction it off into two pieces, the pottery and the brickyard, so they could raise enough money to buy the pottery. And there were - a lot of legislators' wives took classes out there, so he had an in there with -

MR. HELD: Politics.

MR. WEISER: The politics to help with this, you know. And he was smart enough to know that and to do it. Plus, they loved him, you know; they loved him. So, he - I think they bought the pottery for \$7,500. I'm not sure, but I think it was something like that.

MR. HELD: Sixteen thousand.

MR. WEISER: Was it? Okay, \$16,000, amazing. And then the brickyard was auctioned off to Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Company in Canada. So when I got there, the brickyard was off limits; that was all fenced up and there was a watchman. He knew if I turned a brick over, over there. He was just right on everything. When I first got there, the old guy was - the watchmen -

MR. HELD: Earl Elliott.

MR. WEISER: Earl Elliott, yeah. And then he died about the time I was there, and then his son [Jim] took over. We had a pretty good relationship, me and his son, but he, you know, he never let me get away with anything. Anyways, Gordon Sissons [owner of Medicine Hat Brick and Tile] would come up on occasion, and I'd see this fancy car pulling in and this guy get out and wander around.

MR. HELD: Is this the Medicine Hat owner?

MR. WEISER: Owner. And he was curious about the pottery, so he came in and I kind of had a hunch who it was. So I talked to him and showed him around, and he seemed like a pretty jolly guy, an interesting guy. And he was interested in what we were doing.

So, you know, he'd come down every so often, and I got to know him a little better and he - one time I was going up to Banff to teach, and he had a summer place up there and invited me over there for dinner. Anyway, to make a long story short, I said, what about this brickyard? Why don't you sell it to us? He said, well, you hippies don't have any money. You know, he thought we were just plain goofy - a lot of people did, actually. They're just a bunch of crazy hippies out there making dishes. If they knew we were doing pottery - some of them didn't know what we were doing. Anyways, he didn't take me seriously.

So, you know, a few years went by and it was - everything was really, really depressed and [the city of] Butte was so depressed and the copper mine was closing, and I think he was holding on to the brickyard thinking that maybe he'd start it up again if -

MR. HELD: If the building business got better.

MR. WEISER: - the economics were right. But I guess he had the tunnel kiln still. That was worth a fortune. But when Butte went down the tubes, that was it. I could tell that if he's ever going to sell it, he's going to do it now. So I called him again and said, what do you think? Will you auction it off? And he said, yeah, I'll sell it to you for a half a million dollars. I said, well, that's a lot of money. I said, how about if I hire an appraiser to go out and appraise it, and we'll start from there? He said, okay. So I went downtown, found somebody - I didn't know anybody who did that - I guess I asked somebody - Bill Porter [Archie Bray Foundation board president] or somebody asked him.

So I hired an appraiser and he appraised it and I got the appraisal and it was \$50,000, 26 acres and all this equipment. I couldn't believe it. I remember showing it to Chip - look at this; this is unbelievable. I called David Shaner and said, so what do we do now? And David said, well, send it to Sissons and say, we'll pay you \$50,000. So I did and he called - Sissons called me back up and says what are you - is this guy your brother-in-law or something? I said, no, oh, no. I don't know him. But you hire anybody you want, you know, if you want to continue with this. You hire your own guy and get an appraisal, and then we'll start from there. So he said, okay.

So he did and I didn't hear from him, didn't hear from him, and so I finally called him. I said, did you have it appraised? And he, yes. I said, well what did they say? He said, well, I'm not - wasn't going to tell me. I said, well, all I can assume, then, is that it was at least the same or less. So, why don't we start there? He says, well, look. He says, I'll come down and we'll have a meeting.

So he came down, and Dave Shaner was at the meeting, Bill Porter was at the meeting, and Chip Clawson and myself, and we sat there and set a round table up at Chip's house. So I had the appraisal and I put mine down. He didn't show his. That was like a little poker game, you know. And I said, well, we've discussed it, and, you know, we've got an appraisal here for \$50,000. We assume that that's pretty much what it's worth and we're willing to pay you \$50,000 for it, which none of us had. We figured we'd deal with that afterwards. So he said, well, I'll take a hundred for it; I want \$100,000 for it. And Dave Shaner says, well, why don't we just split the difference? He says, okay. So, bang. Right there, I mean, in a matter of seconds, an agreement was made.

MR. HELD: Seventy-five thousand dollars?

MR. WEISER: Seventy-five thousand. So we said, it's a deal. So then he went home, and we said,

well, you know, we'll get this started. So he took off and I'm sitting at the table with the rest of them and said, well, now all we need is \$75,000. So I, you know, it was a lot of money then, but it wasn't in the - \$75,000.

MR. HELD: Wasn't out of reach.

MR. WEISER: It wasn't out of reach. So I said, well, let's borrow the money, borrow the money and pay it off. Take a mortgage out and do it. Can we do it? So I went down to the bank first and talked to the banker and, you know, he wasn't buying it. I showed him, we have got a clay business; we're making such a - certain amount of money. He was concerned that I was, you know, I was there running the place then but I could leave any day, like there wasn't some contract binding me to the place and Chip either. So he was - he wanted somebody a little more respectable.

MR. HELD: More stability.

MR. WEISER: More stability, yeah. So I said, you know, no, I promise I'm not going anywhere till the money's paid off. He said, okay, that's not the way we do it. So I called up Bill Porter and told him what the situation is, and Bill just went and talked to the guy and fixed it. So we had a mortgage for \$75,000, which we paid. And, you know, it's the clay business revenue that paid it.

But then we got - the first attempt at raising money - which I knew nothing about and was not very interested in, just wasn't my thing, but had to do it - and Kay Turman was taking pottery classes, and her husband [George Turman] was the Lieutenant Governor at the time. So, and she said, I will help you. I will help you do this. So you know, I didn't fight the coal tax money grants and all that kind of stuff.

And I remember going to the capitol building - I had to go in and talk - give a slide presentation to the legislators. And I'm down in the capital and I got, you know, my carousel and my sport coat on and a tie and everything, and she comes up to me - she sort of set this up - she comes up and she opened up her purse and pulls out a brush and fixes - fixing my hair. I was afraid she was going to spit on a handkerchief and clean my face, you know. But she was so helpful. She really was very helpful. And just took it on as a project, you know. So she and Bill Porter and, pretty much those two -

MR. HELD: Wasn't there also an auction with pots that the former residents donated?

MR. WEISER: We did that.

MR. HELD: Was that part of it?

MR. WEISER: We did that. That made maybe \$3,000. Not much money.

MR. HELD: How long did it take to pay off the loan?

MR. WEISER: Not as long we thought. It took us maybe three years. Three years to pay it off, yeah. We had a little party. Yeah, it was easy, actually, because we got quite a few donations, and we were steadily paying off the mortgage, and anytime there was any extra money we just put it right into that. So it worked out pretty well. And then we owned the brickyard. It was like this enormous resource: bricks for an eternity. Firebricks, you know, pipe, anything you needed.

MR. HELD: Space.

MR. WEISER: Space. So we slowly started to migrate out. Remember when you helped me lay those cinder blocks - helped me, showed me, did it - those columns for that building?

MR. HELD: The kiln shed?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, the kiln shed. So we just did it bit by bit, and I sort of told myself that - before we bought the brickyard, I had been there for, I don't know, six years or something, and I thought, well, it's time to move on; I should get going. But then we bought the brickyard and I sort of felt, I'm paying this off and seeing this through. So, stuck it out and then after that was paid off, enjoyed it a little while, you know, used it, played around with it, and then left.

MR. HELD: Well, the purchasing of the brickyard really opened up the first possibility to do large-scale architectural sites-specific ceramics.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, and there's an interesting story behind that, too. I had all of a sudden discovered that just because we're a nonprofit organization, doesn't mean we don't pay tax. If you own property, that's not directly used for -

MR. HELD: Your mission of the organization.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, you pay tax on it. So all of a sudden we had this huge brickyard - we're not making brick - and we had a tax bill. So I thought, uh-oh, you know, who likes to pay taxes? So I went down and talked to them and said, okay, now just what constitutes use as far as this goes? And he said, well, the buildings, you know, the taxes are very low as far as the building go because most of them are ruins, with the exception of the one big one. Okay, well, if we use the big one, we're - all of a sudden the nonprofit status kicks in and we don't pay taxes on it, yes.

So first thing we did was move the clay business into the big building. So that saved us there. And then we could use the old clay business for the studios. And the site-specific sculpture was - we had all this land with nothing on it that we're paying taxes on it. And if you put a piece of art here, you've got such and such a perimeter around it, was nonprofit again. So -

MR. HELD: That was your motivation in siting the pieces?

MR. WEISER: Right. You want to build some big stuff around it? And that's why they were where they were. We measured it out to see just how much -

MR. HELD: Space you could use?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, you know. And it worked.

MR. HELD: Well, the other thing that you did during your directorship was, I think you were the first director to invite a lot of international or foreign artists to start work there. I remember people from Japan and Thailand came.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, well, I had the opportunity, you know. It interested me. At that time that the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] - well, they probably still do - project grants, you know. I know David Shaner had gotten a few of them for the Bray, and I was really naïve, but I wanted to learn because I wanted to be like that too, you know. So Akio was sort of the beginning of it. He came, and he just was really an asset because he was sort - a bit exotic and -

MR. HELD: Different culture.

MR. WEISER: Different culture completely. And a lot of people would come out and take classes and things to sort of - it was just a real added dimension that made the place seem bigger and more interesting. So, you know, Eric Mhyre, he gave us the money one time for artists. And I said to Akio, who do you know in Japan, good artists? And Kazu and Tomoko Nakamoto came out on that. And the Asian Cultural Council - somehow I got wind of that and got money to get Suwanee [Natewong] to come out, who I admit, it's a - lot of it is total coincidence.

I'm driving around Edmonton; I was doing a workshop and I see a sign that says Thai trade fair. So, you know, maybe they have pottery. So I go in there and Suwanee and her family is in there selling pots. So I just gave her an Archie Bray brochure and said if you ever come to the States, come see us, and forgot completely about it. And two weeks later she's at the airport in Helena. The guy calls up from the airport, stating somebody was here for Archie Bray. I had no idea who it was. I go up there and it's her, you know; she had just come to visit.

So she showed what she did and made these big murals, and Rudy, who happened to be there, saw it and really like it. So the next summer when we had money for residents - I forget where that money came from now, but we had money for something, and there was a competition and she got it; sort of an informal version of the Taunt Fellowship - somebody else, just every summer, somebody would do something.

Anyway, so, yeah, you know, we had people from Europe and Asia. And I loved it. They just made the place more interesting. They really brought something different to the place, you know.

MR. HELD: Well, I know your personal travels have influenced your work a lot, and I know you went to Japan in 1984. Why don't you talk a little bit about that experience?

MR. WEISER: Well, like most potters at the time, I was fascinated with Japan. Akio for one thing, you know, made me think more about it. But even so, just all the Japanese pottery influenced all of us so much that I wanted to see it. So I got - I applied for a grant from the Montana Arts Council, got it, went to Japan. At the time they were having that big show in Mino. It was this -

MR. HELD: International competition. [Mino International Ceramic Competition.]

MR. WEISER: - ceramic show now, yeah. So I went to see that. And I went to see Kazu, who had come to the Bray earlier in the summer. I just kind of looked around a little bit, just to get some idea of what was there, you know, which was really a good experience.

MR. HELD: Was that the first time you've traveled abroad, other than Canada?

MR. WEISER: Yup, yeah. Yeah, I remember sitting in the airport in L.A. and thinking woo-hoo-hoo - this is like, you know, blasting off to Mars or something, you know. This is strange. A country where they don't speak English on the other side of the planet, you know. I mean, geez.

MR. HELD: Big adventure.

MR. WEISER: Big adventure, yeah. And then later on, things just build upon themselves. Suwanee was there, Louie [Louis] Katz and Gail Busch were there. And Louie got really involved in Thai culture somehow, got a Fulbright to go to Thailand to study the pottery of Thailand and make a video. And I had just moved down to Arizona then, and he had just gone to Thailand to do this. I put this studio up, sat in here, and couldn't think of what - couldn't do anything. So I said, I'm going to Thailand to see what Louie's doing and see what that's all about. So I flew over there just to see what was going on.

And that was kind of the beginning of all this drawing and painting on the pots, you know. I came down here with the intention of continuing what I did in Montana, which - but all the times that I did, I always felt a little uneasy about it because I knew I was trying to make art on purpose, you know. I knew - I knew it and I didn't feel good about that. It was about the material, it was about form, it was about all those formal aspects, you know. It's like composing music - maybe that's a bad thing to say if you're a musician, but putting elements together to make - to go somewhere - I wasn't sure where I wanted to go. So it was a consequence that was hard to do, but still I was sort of uneasy about this formally making art.

So, I went to Thailand thinking, well, I'll go there and look at the pottery they make there and see if I can come up with some other - a different approach, you know. And I look at all the pottery, and the pottery was really interesting and everything but - and amazed at the skill level of, like, children almost, you know. Everybody was so good at making things. And I got back here - but the thing that interested me - I did the most there was draw. I just sketched things, because I was utterly fascinated with the place. The foliage and the people and the odd things I'd see; I just filled up sketchbooks with stuff. And I drew all these pots with images on them, just doodling, you know.

So I got back here and thought, well, I don't want to make the stuff I used to make because I'm bored with it. I don't want to be that person anymore. And I don't want that struggle either. I want to just do what I want to do. So -

MR. HELD: Well, you had a new teaching position, so you had a salary that cushioned your income base.

MR. WEISER: There you go. Yeah, yeah. But thanks for pointing the obvious out. Yeah, I was in a couple more - I was in a position where I could, sort of, experiment.

MR. HELD: Because the Archie Bray days were survival.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, right.

MR. HELD: I mean, you had to make pots to keep the foundation alive.

MR. WEISER: That's right. All of a sudden I didn't have to worry about who's going to plow the road, whether the lines were - electric lines were down between the pottery and the clay business or got - a roof is leaking. I'm thinking, here I am. All I have to do is teach ceramics.

MR. HELD: This was in 1988.

MR. WEISER: Nineteen eight - well '89.

MR. HELD: Eighty-nine.

MR. WEISER: I came here [to Arizona State University] in December '88. So, and then I put the studio up, not thinking - well, when I put the studio up, you know, I didn't have a lot of money. I bought this house, which we thought insanely expensive at the time and could just barely make it, you know, financially. But I knew it would get better; it had to get better. And - but I needed - I wanted a studio, because Ferguson just used to drill it into our heads, you've got to have a place of your own. Until you had a place of your own, you're nobody, right. And I believed that; I still do.

So I got here and I thought, well, I have this big piece of property; I'm going to build a studio out there, and I kind of designed it around the Bray brickyard building, and - except I didn't have any

money because I'd blown it all getting into this house. But I - so I was trying to find a way to borrow the money. I figured it was going to cost about 25 grand to do it if I did it myself. So I was trying to find a way to borrow the money, and they did not, you know, the bank didn't want to lend me money because I already was stretched out. I had come home one day and I open up the mail and I got a \$20,000 check from NEA -

MR. HELD: For a fellowship award?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah. I couldn't believe it. It was just like money from heaven, you know. I'd applied for the thing for years and years and years and never got it. I was so frustrated at the whole thing, you know. And I just - but I apply every year just out of habit. I'm thinking it's like buying a lottery ticket, you know. But I never needed it when I was at the Bray. I didn't need it because I already had the equipment and stuff. I just wanted the recognition, you know. But I get here and when I really do need it, I get it. So all of the sudden I got - so I put the studio up. It was just amazing.

MR. HELD: Perfect timing.

MR. WEISER: Fortunate situation, yeah.

MR. HELD: So why don't you talk a little bit about the work you made right after Thailand. And I know you started making sgraffito black and white.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I came back from Thailand and right when I got back, I got - I had a relationship with Garth Clark Gallery [Los Angeles, CA] since the early '80s, since he started it, you know. I think I had the second or third show he ever had there.

MR. HELD: In Los Angeles?

MR. WEISER: Yeah. And that's a whole other story. But anyways, you know, I kind of felt that I had been doing this work and he had been sort of representing me, but he never made any money; not from me. You know, he'd sell a piece here and there, but I guess he liked the work I did, so he stuck with me even though I was a drag. And I was feeling guilty about it a little bit, like, I don't want to send you any more work because it's just going to clog your place up. I like you and all but, you know, I'm embarrassed.

MR. HELD: Not financially beneficial.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I just feel silly. I feel silly. So he called up and said he had seen a piece of my work in a magazine, and he said, send me some of your new work, you know, you haven't sent me any in a long time. He said, we're going to have a teapot show. Were you interested in participating in that? I said, sure. So I sit down and think, okay, I'm going to make a teapot, and I did all these drawings and stuff and I couldn't come up with anything. It was like I was absolutely nobody and I couldn't decide who to be. I didn't know which direction to go, you know.

So, I remember thinking, okay, if I'm going to make a teapot, if I'm going to bother to make a teapot, it's going to have to mean something to me. I'm just not going to try some arty teapot, because I'm sick of that, you know, I'm sick of it. So what do I do? So I thought about it and thought about it and thought, well, you know, I like to - I love to draw, I want to draw, so I just started drawing on pots a little bit, just playing. And then I thought, okay, what would a teapot be to me?

I thought, when you're a kid, you sit down for breakfast and you got those boxes in front of you -

cereal boxes - with all this information on it, right. You're a little dazed, you're eating your cereal, and I remember how absorbing those boxes were; you just read every little thing, you look at everything. So I thought, that's what a teapot ought to be, you know. That to me - that makes sense. So why don't you just make up some of these teapots, paint black slip on them, scratch it away, and make it a place. Make it so absorbing and so interesting -

MR. HELD: Full of information.

MR. WEISER: Just totally full of information, digital information, so that when you're drinking tea, this object absorbs you, right. So I thought, well, that's not a bad idea. So I made the teapots. I stuck a little pin in the eraser of a pencil and scratched it away and I started - it was like a scratchboard, make these two-dimensional images. And I was sort of amazed that being in Arizona and that at night the moon is out shining on these weird cactuses and everything, so I did all these drawings of all that.

And I was - I felt a little self-conscious about it because nobody was drawing on pots. It was sort of the "don't" thing to do, because it was still that residual - we all wanted to be Voulkos or Hamada or something like that, still. So I did it anyways. I thought, who cares? Nobody cares anyway, do what you want. So I did it, sort of, timidly sent them off, and I thought he'd call me up and say, what the hell is this, you know. But it worked out, you know, and he actually sold them and he was interested in it. So I got some positive feedback because of it. And it started to dawn on me, you know, well -

MR. HELD: This will work.

MR. WEISER: How come it took me so long to figure out that the only thing you can do is what you want to do, you know? But it was all that Bray and responsibility and trying to be - trying to emulate your heroes and all that other kind of stuff that kind of - it took me a long time.

MR. HELD: - be the caretaker for a lot of other people, too?

MR. WEISER: Oh, yeah. I mean, it just took me a long time to, sort of, mature, I guess, because I just didn't have time or didn't - or wasn't that important. I don't know what it was. But, now all of a sudden I sort of felt like, I got it, I got it. This is when I realized, this is the - these are the things that really, really do interest me.

MR. HELD: Yeah, it resonates.

MR. WEISER: Yeah. This is something that - and for subject matter, I had my whole history; I had my own past. All the things - it wasn't about ceramics; it was about life that was interesting - doves and leaves and atmosphere and people and relationships and all that stuff - I could put on the pot that I loved making. But I got two things; it was an object, like a TV set from across the room, you know; it was a sculpture. But you get up close and it's a place, you know; you're somewhere. And it had two sides so all that, you know, good and bad and evil and two different consequences. So I could get involved with all the stuff that was sort of - had a lot in my head - to do, so.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

MR. HELD: Continuing the Kurt Weiser interview, track two.

So you got positive feed back from your black-and-white teapots. Were those thrown teapots, or you had started casting in porcelain?

MR. WEISER: Well, they were cast, yeah. The work I was doing in Montana, a lot of that was cast, too. And I just painted with black slip, scratched up, and single fire.

MR. HELD: So you did that for several years?

MR. WEISER: Oh, no, I think I did it for - I don't remember, but it was not too long, but a year, maybe. And because of that, I started to look at different things. You know, when we were students and long after you go into a museum, the ceramic section, and look at the Asian stuff, and maybe if you're feeling really open, you know, you look at the Greek stuff, but the European stuff, I mean, we just would run in the other direction. We didn't have the vaguest interest in it, I guess, because it was something - personally, it was something I was sort of familiar with because, you know, grandma always had that kind of stuff in the house, and it just had all of those connotations that were just sort of -

MR. HELD: High class, court porcelains.

MR. WEISER: Well, not even that. I mean, I wasn't even thinking that much about it. It was just sort of sanguine, boring stuff, knick-knacky stuff. It didn't have any soul to it. So I didn't pay attention to it. But, of course, I was wrong. [Laughs.] Anyway, when I started using that visual inventory on the pot, I started to look a little more to things that had imagery on them, which I had never done before. So, you know - Sevres Meissen, the whole European tradition. I actually became interested in it.

So I go to the library and I check out the books, and the china painting - you know, I kind of want - I had always thought anytime I try to do any imagery, using underglazes, it really works well. The china painting, you know, had these connotations of little old lady painting groups.

MR. HELD: Mold shops.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah. So it's just amazing how all of these things have such an influence on your thinking and the directions you take. It's so stupid, you know. It's just color; it's just color, and to see it in terms of, you know, all of these connotations, it's just idiotic. I was ashamed of myself - [laughs] - sometimes.

So, anyway, I finally saw a china painted pot. I thought, well, what is that stuff, you know? They sure did some amazing stuff with it in Europe. Maybe I should try that. So I did; I did, because I wanted to sort of move from black and white to color and all, so I did, but I didn't want to learn how to do it; I just wanted to do it, because I was in a hurry. So I just got some china paint and mixed it up with stuff my son used to mix oil paint with, started painting pots and took out all of those old drawings I had.

MR. HELD: From Thailand.

MR. WEISER: From Thailand, and just made those things, painted those things. And the first ones were - I look back on them. I should have been embarrassed - incredibly crude painting. But to me it was really exciting, so exciting because it was brand new; it was previously forbidden territory.

MR. HELD: No other ceramic artists at the time were really exploring it in new ways?

MR. WEISER: Nobody was messing with it, so I didn't feel like I was in some sort of horse race. Ed Lebow said something in an article he wrote about that that was perfect, just like this train that nobody else was on. So I had to - all to myself, you know. I could actually say, well, let's go here. So

yeah.

MR. HELD: So it just started off recollecting your imagery, impressions from Thailand, and then from there went on to other art historical periods?

MR. WEISER: Well, then I started thinking of what is - this is wide open. I can use any subject I want. So it was a combination of lot of things - a lot of stuff from my childhood, you know, growing up out in the country and being fascinated with nature - swans and rivers and turtles and frogs and pheasants, and all of that stuff was really interesting to me. Natural history was really interesting to me. And all of a sudden I had an opportunity to bring that into my work. When I was working with clay, it was just the material I was interested in. It was really confining, you know. How do you pick up a guitar and play something entirely new? You have to make a different instrument almost.

So I had a lot of stuff I could bring in all of a sudden - all of that natural history stuff I was fascinated with. I thought of those weird, sort of, relationships between people, and male and female and nature, and how much of it is nature and how much of it is in the environment, and all of that, sort of, oddly - not heavy, but psychological stuff, you know, personal stuff - the way you see the world.

So I just - the nature of being in the world, what caught my eye, what fascinated me. It turns out most of that stuff that interested me is incredibly universal, you know. We are all thinking about these issues.

MR. HELD: Similar concepts.

MR. WEISER: Similar thoughts, yeah. So that worked out okay. You know, and in art history stuff. A lot of the stuff I swiped from historical stuff, because I need a model. I need somebody posing in a certain way, and I could find it in these books. And what amazed me was I would see a certain pose and steal it, and then I would look at the book, a different book somewhere else, and I would see somebody maybe a hundred years before who had done the same thing. So I realized they have been ripping each other off for years, for generations, you know. The certain kinds of poses you see over and over again in certain paintings - so all of that stuff, a combination of all of that.

Books, I started collecting books on natural history and bugs and butterflies.

MR. HELD: Mostly from the 18th, 19th century?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Animal behavior - just all of those great old books from the '30s, plus all of the explorers, you know, all of that stuff - the unknown, kind of, exploration. It really interests me. I guess, that is really it - exploration, whether it's nature - take a leaf apart or cutting a tree down and seeing - the interesting thing is in order to investigate all of this stuff you have to kill it, it turns out, which is a bizarre thing. But, yeah, exploration, that is how I ended up fooling around with the globe business, too - inquisitive, sort of poking around.

MR. HELD: But twisting it in your own way. I mean, your imagery is surreal, and you mentioned earlier you wanted to be Salvador Dali.

MR. WEISER: Yeah. You know, it is amazing what Salvador Dali - a lot of students I see, young students, are really interested in Salvador Dali, so let's talk a little bit about that. It's amazing, when you're really young, things have to be incredibly weird to be weird - they have to be really twisted up to be weird. The older you get, the stranger normal becomes. You know, like if you stare at a chair for more than 10 minutes, it gets really strange.

MR. HELD: Well, too, with the advent of the computer and globalization, we are exposed to a lot more, so we have more access to different types of information, different cultures, and it seems like that is infused in your work as well. I know people writing about your work have mentioned the Hudson River school, German Expressionists. What other schools or art historical periods have do you feel have been most influential?

MR. WEISER: Well, most of the painting that - I mean, as far as to be useful to me, there are paintings that I really like, like Milton Avery. I love that stuff, but actually I don't think like that; I just appreciate it. But the stuff that I use that is sort of a resource for me - Hudson River School, yeah, I mean, they painted landscapes and all of that sort of defused kind of romantic landscape of - what they call the Orientalists - that, sort of, exotic, far-away, imagined kind of stuff and - yeah, and I can't think of his name, but - Maxfield Parrish - the hokiest - unbelievably sort of sappy, romantic, kind of stuff, but at the same time, it's really good. I read about him. He was working with Kodak and all of these people. The way he uses color, they look like color-chromed photographs. They are bizarre.

MR. HELD: Same with [Henri] Rousseau, *Peaceable Kingdom* [Edward Hicks, 1846]?

MR. WEISER: Henri was - I just always loved him, you know that. Yeah, a lot of people think I'm - those paintings I do are so purposeful primitive. They are not; it is the best I can do. [Laughs.] I'm getting better, you know. But, yeah, I just love his stuff. It is just so - he is a great painter. That one painting with the guy on the horse [*War or Discord on Horseback*, 1894] - you know, the war painting - oh, man, and *The Sleeping Gypsy* [1897] - there is just something so intense about those paintings; yeah, they're great.

MR. HELD: Why don't we talk a little bit about the forms you utilize. You have done a lot of teapots and, sort of, Asian-inspired vase forms - co-joined vases - all have historical reference to them. How do you see the forms that you use for the imagery and -

MR. WEISER: Well, I first started to do this - in the drawings I made at first, I would make the drawing, and then according to where the drawing went, I would take the teapot around it just to enclose the drawing. So the teapot was this sort of nebulous thing that was just created by what the image needed. And I started experimenting. First, what else can I do? So I have made some, sort of, hard-edged things, things with edges and stuff. It didn't work at all because the form dictated too much what I could or couldn't do. So I thought, well, these things sort of should be like smoke. They shouldn't have any defined edges; they should just meander.

So what I did was I took all of these forms I really loved, which were those snuff bottle forms. I had books on those things. And it was like if you take a snuff bottle and put it up in front of a fun house mirror and just let it wobble a little, those are the forms I wanted. It had a formal aspect to them, so they were grounded, right? The form didn't take over, but at the same they were wobbly enough to sort of absorb whatever I wanted to put on it. So if there was no front and back, or they wanted to just split it into the next thing - and they were classical forms sort of seen through a dwarfed mirror.

MR. HELD: Oh, okay. And I know at first you mentioned you used a lot of your sketches from Thailand for your work, but I know just observing your work over in the last several decades, you work in a stream-of-consciousness manner. You know, you have a blank canvas, blank porcelain teapot, and you just start at point A and work your way around a form. Do you want to talk a little bit about your process of filling the form?

MR. WEISER: Well, yeah, it's not planned out much, except the very first three or four that were just

copies of drawings I did then. But after that, I would make a series of forms, variations on different forms, whether they are teapots or jars or whatever, with nothing planned, just make them so that they didn't need planning; they were open to whatever I wanted to do, and then I just sit down in front of it and sort of wait for something to come along, look through books, magazines, take pictures, look around until something catches my eye.

And then if that doesn't work, I just start in the corner and paint a leaf off in some obscure corner, and then add something to that, add something that, and it starts to - but then all of the sudden you sort of - like, trying to get to a place - so I keep adding something, and if the leaf is good and then maybe a stick will grow out of that and point at something, and then I'll think what is it pointing at. So it's that kind of process; just sort of a subconscious bubbling - you know, something will rise to the top. And, you know, the amazing thing about it is after I get to where I have got something going, I'm thinking, well, where is this going? I don't know where - but I'm into it, and almost every time when I finish, it sort of tells me - it make sense. If I just can leave it alone, if I don't - it's like these little cups, you know - if I sit down and think, I'm going to do this, it never works. If I can shut my head of and -

MR. HELD: Spontaneous.

MR. WEISER: And then go right to my hand, something good comes out of that. It is frustrating sometimes.

MR. HELD: And you mentioned china paint is a little forgiving, because if you don't like the way it starts out, you can wipe it off and -

MR. WEISER: Rub it off and go back again. Plus, very un-ceramic - is that what you see is what you get. You never get that in ceramics except for china paint. You paint your color. It's the color - it pretty much stays the same, which I like because the whole thing, the whole joy of doing the work, is being there, is creating this place that you go while you're doing it. If it was all of the wrong colors and everything, it would be a - it would be a technical exercise.

MR. HELD: Well, we have talked about your work habits a little bit. I know you like to work late into the evening. Is that more conducive for your imagination to roam?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, sure, sure. There is nothing like two o'clock in the morning and it is dead silent and you hear a dog far away barking or something or maybe a bird or something. And you know, hopefully, at least you can imagine, the rest of the world is gone, and it's yours at last. Yeah, this last night, it was a cool night. The weather was starting to change a little bit. The doors were open - no music playing, nothing - just starting to be dusk. And you're thinking through your head - sort of wandering your way over here - way over there, and the dog barks somewhere, and sort of jump back into the radar. That is great.

MR. HELD: No distractions -

MR. WEISER: During the day there is too much stimulus. There is too much stuff flying at you all of the time.

MR. HELD: So where do you see yourself as an artist? Do you see your work being particularly American, or part of an international contemporary trend?

MR. WEISER: This - yeah, wow. It is a total mixture of, sort of, Asian, American, European, you know. That is like - this is the one privilege of being American. We can just deal with absolutely any source

that we want to. But, you know, if you have any interest in ceramics, eventually you looked at a lot of it. And I guess everything I do - any art form, it is an assimilation of a lot of stuff. That is what makes it new. I mean, there is nothing new. So new is a different combination of the old. So people, myself, absorb all of this stuff, and then it comes out in a particular way.

MR. HELD: Formed all of your own personal experiences.

MR. WEISER: That is why they call it self-expression.

MR. HELD: Do you think that the issues of gender, race, or ethnicity play a part in your work? I know a lot of your subject matter - you know, the human forms aren't quite American faces - are more Asian or Southeast Asian.

MR. WEISER: Well, a few were but not too much. If you look at a lot of it, you can't even tell whether they are male or female, you know. Some of them are half-Asian, half-Caucasian. Some of them look like - I have always been fascinated with those paintings - faces like [Hans] Memling, you know, Northern European stuff. To get those faces, a lot of times what I would do - back before Photoshop - is I would take Christy's *Glamour* magazines and pull out the big faces for the ads, and then take a razor blade and cut them up into sections and then stretch them out so - and elongate the whole face, or cut them - start it at one point on the chin and then fan it out so that would spread the face out this way. So I do all of these little studies to change the shapes of these faces and the relationships of the features, and then I got into Photoshop.

So a lot of times I'll take just a face, someone's picture and -

MR. HELD: Distort it.

MR. WEISER: Stretch it, distort it, pull it around.

MR. HELD: Do you feel like religion or a sense of spirituality plays a role in your work?

MR. WEISER: No, no. Only in one respect. The spirituality is something that is hard to define. But religion, a lot of - through my childhood, I remember holy cards - there are things you include in your prayers. They are sort of like the equivalent of Catholic baseball cards, you know - all of the different saints, and all of that stuff. And as much as I - as uneasy as I was with all of that - I remember being fascinated with certain aspects of it - the statues, for one, I thought were amazing. The beautiful church where we went to with an unbelievable wooden pair of statues. I don't know where it came from. I remember looking at it and really being fascinated with how they do it - I want to do that, you know.

And the holy cards, these dramatic little tiny realities, you know - martyrs, a lot of them were sadomasochistic almost. You know, I mean, martyrs being tortured or, you know, look up into the heavens, and the lights pouring out - you know, really dramatic Joan of Arc.

MR. HELD: Other worldly?

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anyways, I remember being fascinated with just that atmosphere they created - it's that atmosphere. That is sort of - what I like to do when I'm painting - that sort of strangely dramatic kind of - [laughs.]

MR. HELD: So your parents were Catholics? Were they devout or did they go to church every Sunday?

MR. WEISER: Every Sunday. Yeah, they were very devout when I was a kid. You know, Sundays - I remember my sisters with the shoes and the gloves and - just the '50s.

MR. HELD: You started your career in the '70s. How do you feel like the market for American craft has changed throughout your career? You mentioned earlier when you were in Oregon and marketed through craft fairs, which you don't do any more. What are your thoughts on the shift in the market place?

MR. WEISER: It has been unbelievable. Unbelievable. When I was a student at Kansas City Art Institute, I remember Ken Ferguson saying, we're having a pottery sale this weekend; be prepared. And I said, well, no thanks. I don't ever want to do that. And he said, I'm not asking you; you're doing it with the rest of them. I was so self-conscious about my work not selling, of course, but I remember I did - needless to say, I did - and I made \$200. I remember calling home - wow; I couldn't believe this. And naïve as it may sound, it was the first time I made that connection between making something and then selling it.

MR. HELD: Taking it out there.

MR. WEISER: And selling it - connecting to reality.

So then I went through the art fairs and all of this other stuff, and then Archie Bray, where, you know, sort of the pioneer thing where you made pots; people came and bought them.

MR. HELD: Did you ever get feedback from people?

MR. WEISER: It's a really interesting, odd feedback - make the pots and put a little mark in the side of something to make it look good. Somebody asked me, what does this do? Oh, it's just decorative. Why? So that, you know, that is almost survival, kind of thing. And then, you know, in my experience, Garth Clark came along and he had this gallery in Los Angeles, and before that, there was Alice Westphal [Exhibit A Gallery], I remember.

MR. HELD: Chicago.

MR. WEISER: Chicago, and that was when I was a grad student, and that was some sort of far-away thing that kind of - Jacquie Rice showed me. This issue of ceramics in an art situation.

MR. HELD: Is that something you aspired to?

MR. WEISER: Well, I liked it - something about it. It smelled good to me, you know. It just seemed like a good thing, because I loved ceramics and I thought it deserved respect rather than the pots on the coffee table, you know. Yeah, I thought that is where it belonged, kind of - that it seemed like a stretch to me. Anyways, I thought it was a good thing and they don't charge you for anything. When you're in Montana, you're pretty far removed from all of that stuff.

MR. HELD: Well, you mentioned you sold at the White Bird Gallery in Cannon Beach, Oregon, and entered competitions.

MR. WEISER: Oh, I did all of that, sure. I did all of that. And when I was at the Bray, I would send stuff to Hand and the Spirit [Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ].

MR. HELD: Different market.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, it didn't occur to me, and all of a sudden Garth Clark came along, and he was in Montana and asked if I wanted to have a show, and I said sure. So I made the work and I sent it down there, and he called me up and said, you know, I can't sell this stuff; it's too cheap. You made it too cheap. And I thought, how about you decide? So I said, why don't you do that? I don't know. I don't know how this works - what you are doing.

So he set the prices and I remember thinking, whoa, that is expensive. And I went down there for the opening and he sold some things. And it's the first time I personally was involved in that sort of thing. And he said something to me about - he saw that things were going to change. He said, you could make pots. You can stick with this sort of art fair craft shop thing, but it's never going to progress beyond that. You're going to get stuck in a whirlpool.

And he was talking sort of career, economics, public perception on this kind of stuff, which I wasn't necessarily thinking about, not until he mentioned it. And then he said, or you can really pursue what interests you personally and take your chances. You may end up with nothing, or you may end up in a position where you can do it all of the time and really make something of it.

That made sense to me. That made sense. And I thought, well, you know, you're right. So I started to - and it wasn't really a conscious decision because I was sort of headed there anyway, but it just reinforced that and it sort of made me feel good that somebody was thinking about this, too. So anyway, it's sort of, kind of what happened. I left the Bray, and so at the end of the Bray I sort of drifted out of trying to make pots for everybody.

MR. HELD: Well, the pressure of the survival back then, too, changed after you left.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah, but even so, things got cushier at the Bray. You know, the money wasn't such a serious issue all of the time. I could experiment more. Like this stuff up here [points to older work in his studio], this black-and-white stuff, I did all of that at the Bray.

MR. HELD: And that's the kind of work you were showing at Garth's.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, yeah. See, I still have most of it.

MR. HELD: You know, you have been teaching at Arizona State University for a number of years now. What do you see as the place of the universities and the American craft movement, especially for artists working in media-specific, clay, glass, fiber? Maybe we'll get - you know, what is your philosophy, or what do you want to impart when you teach students? And I'm sure that has changed over the years, as well.

MR. WEISER: You know, it changes a lot. It changes a lot. Well, where do we start on this first one?

MR. HELD: Where do you see the role of the universities as far as teaching, people working in craft-based media?

MR. WEISER: Well, since I became involved in art, the university has been the place. When I was a young guy in Michigan, in high school, I can remember seeing Hamada at the Ann Arbor street fair, the pots, and he had been brought there by John Stephenson. And Patti Warashina taught ceramics at the University of Michigan, and I used to sneak over there and walk in the ceramics studio just to see what was going on. To me, it was like a really fascinating place and I was - eventually they would grab me and take me out. Just watching people make all of these pots and these kilns and all of this stuff, I was just delirious. It was so cool, you know. The university is where all of that happened.

The whole apprentice thing, it's just not an American thing, I don't think. It's more European and Japanese or something. Here, you went to school, you went to art school to do it.

MR. HELD: How do you perceive your work being received over time, and who in your opinion have been some of the most significant writers in the field of American craft?

MR. WEISER: Well, that is a big question - significant writers as far as I'm concerned or just craft in general? You know, I usually look at the pictures. I don't really read much. [Laughs.] Well, I have got, say, Ed Lebow. The way he writes really, really appeals to me because he writes not only about the subject, but he writes about the atmosphere around it. He sort of creates an atmosphere and a point of view in a way that is entertaining and allows you to form your own opinions in a way. I mean, he makes an interesting story out of it. I mean, crafts can be pretty boring for people that aren't interested in how did they make that basket, when you're talking about things other than technical stuff. It can be pretty dry. He always amazes me in how, sort of, cleverly he weaves that all together and makes an interesting thing out of it.

MR. HELD: Storyline?

MR. WEISER: Storyline, yeah.

MR. HELD: What role have specialized periodicals such as *American Craft*, *American Ceramics*, *Ceramics Monthly* - how often do you look at those magazines and what do you feel like their role is?

MR. WEISER: Well, I don't get it as often as I used to, but I still look at them and I think it's really important. The more of that the better. It's kind of a mirror. I mean, you can sort of see what is going on everywhere and what people's perception of what is going on - what delights me is to see it just sort of expand into other - and now, you know, the *Form and Perception* from Australia, you know - that is really a classy magazine. There is Spanish ceramic magazines. I never knew any of this stuff, that there were magazines in all of these other countries about ceramics, you know, but they are all over the place now.

MR. HELD: What about mainstream art peer articles, like *ARTnews* or *Art in America*. Do you look at what is going on?

MR. WEISER: I get them. I subscribe to those things. And I look, but it's like I'm looking, peeking over a wall at some crazy thing, you know. Part of that whole art-versus-craft thing, I don't know if enough people consider it - there is also a benefit of not being directly scrambled up into a lot of that art scene, which I don't think is terribly healthy anyway. You know, who needs that exotic craziness? *Artforum*, wow. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: Well, I think a lot of people might see it as a way to elevate the craft - A, how people perceive the work, and, B, the marketplace - because in the '70s the marketplace was low end, and one way it has elevated itself, also in price, is to align itself with the arts. And, in the '70s, there was the big debate about art and craft, and I remember one time you told me the difference between art and craft is between your ears. So it's just how people perceive it.

MR. WEISER: Did I say that? Well, that is not so bad. I was ready to be embarrassed.

MR. HELD: No, I thought that was good. I use it often.

MR. WEISER: Well, it is, it is; it's just in your perception. Making things has always interested me.

Making stuff interests me, making stuff with your hands. This stuff where, you know, somebody picks up a concept and has somebody else put it together and - well, okay, I might think that it's a thing, but I like making it; I like the act of making it. It's a pleasure to me and it's interesting.

So that is how I do it and anybody can do it anyway they want. But just ideas and no skills is boring; it is kind of boring.

MR. HELD: Isn't that one of the problems in the art schools now, where it is more interdisciplinary, that the students don't have the concentrated time to learn a technical skill? They might have the ideas or concepts, but they are too impatient to sit down - and any of the craft medium.

MR. WEISER: Well, there are so spoiled now. Our role as educators are going to be - they come in and say, I want to make a 12-foot ceramic Popsicle. Tell me how. I have got two weeks. What are you going to do? Well, have a seat. This is going to take awhile. So then we end up making it for them because they get the great ideas and we have got the skill. It is going right back to where it used to be a long, long time ago. People forget this.

There was the artist, the guy with the white coat that walked in where all of the craftsmen were. He pinned up the drawing on the board that him and his other white-coat guys have been working out for six weeks with pencils and protractors, and then they say to craftsmen, you make this. So he makes it and then they come in and take it away, and they make a mold of it and it's their work, you know. So it's just silly. And it seems to be we are headed right back there again. And I knew the guys with something new - I think that is silly.

MR. HELD: You have been in a lot of exhibitions, both in the U.S. and internationally. Are there any that stand out in your mind as being important or pivotal in your career?

MR. WEISER: Exhibitions. Oh, God. There are so many going on. I remember that Everson [Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY] used to be such a good -

MR. HELD: The National. [Ceramic National Exhibition.]

MR. WEISER: Yeah, that was a big deal. We all had a lot of respect for that. I did anyway. I think everybody else did. They put out a nice catalogue and got sort of an overview of what was going on. Wichita used to do that. They don't do that anymore. Scripps [College, Claremont, CA] does it. They have sort of taken the place for that.

MR. HELD: How about the one show that challenged you? There was "Architectural Ceramics, Eight Viewpoints" - ["Architectural Ceramics: Eight Concepts," St. Louis, MO, 1985].

MR. WEISER: Oh, that was a total disaster.

MR. HELD: Why is that?

MR. WEISER: It was just an embarrassing disaster. Well, that thing in St. Louis. It was in St. Louis. [American Craft Museum II.] Yeah, I just don't like - what I did was a joke. Made all of those things - they are still out in the backyard. They are stepping-stones back to the studio. What I was trying to do was put the same sort of surface on a flat tile piece that I was doing on my pots.

[Audio break.]

MR. HELD: So we were talking about the architectural exhibition that was less than satisfactory.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I felt like I just was - it was a huge experiment for me that just didn't work out. And I remember some of the reviews weren't exactly flattering. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: There wasn't any direction in it.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, I kind of felt like I had stuck my neck out a bit too far and got whacked. I mean, it didn't destroy me or anything, but I remember feeling, ouch.

MR. HELD: Any other exhibitions that stand out as being important in your career?

MR. WEISER: Oh, you know, I'm never - I don't remember - Ohio at least - was it Wooster, Ohio, or something? We used to have one.

MR. HELD: Functional Ceramics.

MR. WEISER: Yeah, and I won an award when I was a grad student that, you know, got me some attention. "The Hand and the Spirit," that is how I got involved with the gallery.

MR. HELD: Through that exhibition.

MR. WEISER: That exhibition. Well, I would tell the grad students, get your work out there because that is where - people won't see it otherwise. Get it out there and let people see it.

MR. HELD: Do you see any similarities and differences between your early work and recent work, any continuity with -

MR. WEISER: Boy, that is the question, isn't it? People look at it and say, how many different people is this? And to some extent they are right. One of the things that - I don't know if it was a handicap or not, but I had such an appetite for ceramics, every aspect of it, you know, that I wanted to do everything. I wanted to do everything, wood fire, salt, anything. I wanted to know all there was to know about every part of ceramics. I was totally fascinated with the process of ceramics, you know, the science of it, the kilns, the forms, everything - equal sort of - I just wanted it all, you know.

And I tried to do it all. I experimented with everything that I could. A lot of it I hide. There is stuff I hide because it's just embarrassing; it's so impressionable. I just wanted everything. I want to do that. I want to do that. So I did a huge variety of stuff. As a consequence, I know how to do a lot of stuff. A lot of good it does. I mean, occasionally I'll run into something where, oh, yeah, I remember that.

MR. HELD: One of the things I have always been impressed about - you know, whenever you have decided to switch, whether it was from raku to porcelain, and it seemed like it only would take you six months to figure out new clay bodies, new glazes. So it is important that you have those skills and knowledge to move onto a new body of work and make it succeed without a lot of experimentation.

MR. WEISER: And that was part of the attraction, too. It was to sort of, set up shop and know how to - okay, I want this color. I want it; I'll get it. It was like building something. And you get it all put together and you sort of explore all of the possibilities. Well, maybe that is not it, so -

MR. HELD: Back to the drawing board.

MR. WEISER: Roll back down the hill and find another one.

MR. HELD: Besides teaching at the university, you have done a lot of workshops, both in the U.S. and abroad. What are your thoughts about - what do you get out of presenting workshops or traveling?

MR. WEISER: Well, traveling. Anybody that does a lot of workshops, they will tell you that it is traveling; it's a big attraction. To get to go places to see - new things, what is going on there, what does it look like, and just meet new people. You get around. To me, anyway, that is the most important part of it - to see a different place, meet some new people. And it is always nice to be with a group of people that, number one, think you know what you are doing, and, two, are really interested in something you're interested in. I mean, that is a perfect situation.

MR. HELD: Besides the Archie Bray, you have taught at a variety of craft schools around the country. Are there any in particular that you had really positive experiences with?

MR. WEISER: Well, all of them, all of them. I can't think of any place that was dreadful. I mean, they are all great. I have got favorites just for the physical environments. You know, Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], I think, is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been, the way that place is built and the architecture of it, looking down at the ocean - wow, I was so impressed with that. What a cool place.

MR. HELD: Is an inspiration for artists.

MR. WEISER: Well, it's just like a fantasy come true, you know. All of those little walkways, you know, built up - it's on that steep hill. There is a walk through the woods, you know, where there is, like, ferns growing and you come out to the ocean and there is a - it's just an amazing place.

MR. HELD: It's a little different than the Arizona desert - [inaudible, cross talk].

MR. WEISER: It is just an incredibly interesting - a big spot. Yeah, there is something about the place that amazed me. It was just beautiful. But so is Smithville, Tennessee, the Appalachian Center for Crafts - beautiful, too, in a different way. You know, just a - an unbelievably dense - it's like cauliflower, and the water - amazingly beautiful place - and a good setup, a really good setup. Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC], to all of those people who have gravitated and served in their community of potters who live around there. Yeah, it's amazing.

MR. HELD: I know recently you went over to the Royal Copenhagen Factory [Denmark] to do some work there. Do you want to talk a little bit about short-term residency?

MR. WEISER: Well, I went to that place that none of us could pronounce. It wasn't the Copenhagen Factory but it was the -

MR. HELD: The European Work Center?

MR. WEISER: No, Gulegarg or Gulgard [Guldagergard International Ceramic Research Center] or something - Mark Cecula was just there. I just got a catalogue. He was there and got work from the Royal Copenhagen - stuff in the hotel, you know, and stuff like that. Yeah, it's Skaelskor, Skaelskor, Denmark. Yeah, that was amazing. Again, a beautiful place like out of a dream. You know, this little town where people are bicycling - they are out on their bicycles with bread sticking out of their baskets. Just an incredibly genteel - a little pastry shop. You know the cobblestone streets - really cool.

MR. HELD: Do you feel like your work has any political or social commentary?

MR. WEISER: Political, no; absolutely no - I just want to get away from that. I mean, I'm not that political anyway. It's just all so tedious and hopeless. Social commentary, it depends on how you define that. Yeah, maybe a little bit - mostly relationship between male and female.

MR. HELD: Human and nature.

MR. WEISER: Women and nature and men and nature and how all of that sort of ties in with nature itself, you know. Yeah, the whole business - yeah, I'm fascinated with this sort of - civilized on the surface and underneath, it's just a swap, you know. [Laughs.]

MR. HELD: The underbelly.

MR. WEISER: Yeah.

MR. HELD: Have you had any personal involvement with the national craft organizations like the American Craft Council, NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts]?

MR. WEISER: Well, sure, NCECA, you know, for years and years, in one thing or another. I mean, it's an amazing organization. That thing has grown from the first - obviously, I'm not sure who started it. It's a huge thing. American Crafts Council - you know, I will always remember the *American Craft* magazine.

MR. HELD: *Craft Horizons*.

MR. WEISER: *Craft Horizons*, yeah. I remember seeing that as a student in high school, being sort of fascinated with that. But no, I haven't been that involved with the American Craft Council. It's all just, sort of, labels.

MR. HELD: You recently received the Fellow award from the ACC.

MR. WEISER: Fellow, yeah, yeah. That always seemed like such a big thing. That's a good thing - all of those organizations are a good thing.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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