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**Oral history interview with Kent F. Ipsen, 2009
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kent Ipsen on 2009 July 4. The interview took place in Ipsen's studio in Richmond, VA, and was conducted by Josephine Shea for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Rolanda Iris Scott and Neil Duman were also present during the interview. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay, I think we're ready to begin here.

I'm sitting in the studio of Kent Ipsen. And this is Josephine Shea interviewing Kent Forrest Ipsen, I believe it is, at the artist's studio in Richmond, Virginia on the 4th of July, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc number one.

The way that we usually begin is at the beginning, which is when and where were you born?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: Would you like to know what year?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I think I might know, or at least I've read 1933. Is that correct?

ROLANDA SCOTT: She knows.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, unfortunately that's correct.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, do you want to give us a clue as to what day you were born on?

KENT IPSEN: January 4th.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Ah, right after the New Year.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, were you the oldest child? I know we're sitting here in the studio with your sister. Are you the oldest?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Not sister. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No?

ROLANDA SCOTT: No.

KENT IPSEN: Do I have what?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Do you have sisters?

KENT IPSEN: I have two sisters.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Are you the oldest child?

KENT IPSEN: No, I'm the middle.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: The middle. Okay. And tell me about your parents. How did they meet?

KENT IPSEN: My mother lived in Racine, Wisconsin.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay, that's just north of Chicago.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. And my father was selling something door to door. I don't know if it was vacuum cleaners or whatever. That's about all I know about how they met.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay. And what did they do in Milwaukee? Did your mother work?

KENT IPSEN: No, she was a homemaker.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: My dad worked for International Harvester. He was a foreman, I believe.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay, working in the plant making—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: He built tractors in that particular plant.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So that was right before the war. Did things change? You probably don't remember.

KENT IPSEN: Well, actually I remember quite a bit. He had been in the First World War, so he wasn't eligible for the draft, I believe. My mother worked in a defense plant.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And my father of course worked at International Harvester, and they were building tanks and guns and—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what kind of neighborhood did you live in?

KENT IPSEN: It was a working-class subdivision—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: —about 10 miles out of Milwaukee.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did you live there the whole time that you went to elementary school?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, I went through elementary school and high school.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: There as well? And when you went to school, did you have any particular art classes?

KENT IPSEN: Not in elementary school.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: We had a program called Let's Draw. [Hums.] I still remember the melody. Yeah, Let's Draw. And then high school they had two art teachers, and I think I gravitated toward the female art teacher. The other guy, you know, had this disgusting habit of smoking all the time.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, my goodness. I can't imagine. [Laughs.]

KENT IPSEN: So I took classes with Ruth Lassen—L-A-S-S-A-N—E-N. And I stopped and visited her just—guessing where she might be. And she's since married and I think she's retired from teaching.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And was that class a particular favorite of yours? Were you drawn to art from the beginning, or that was just one of the classes that you took and it wasn't of particular interest to you?

KENT IPSEN: As far as Ruth Lassen was concerned?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And as far as art classes.

KENT IPSEN: I kind of just chose whatever I wanted to do. And she would have me go to the front of the room and stand next to her desk. "I want everyone in their seat right now. Myron [ph], sit down! Now, I want you to look at this book. You can use this book anytime you want, but I don't want you to let Myron see it." So that was my introduction to doing figures.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Oh, my goodness.

KENT IPSEN: And that was pretty risky in those days. Even today—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say—

KENT IPSEN: —I think, you know—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Yes, in high school.

KENT IPSEN: —that would be sticking your neck out.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did she show you that book because she felt you had a particular ability to draw?

KENT IPSEN: I probably took art because I enjoyed it, and other kids took it because it was easy, or they thought.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Was there also, by any chance, like, a shop class that you took—

KENT IPSEN: No.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —practical building things or—

KENT IPSEN: No, no. They certainly had, you know, welding and all those things—auto body work and so forth—but I never got into that there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: I picked that up on my own.

I was down in Florida at an art event of some sort; I had my son with me. And he was perhaps 13 at the time. And we found her address. She was married to a man named Shriver [ph]. We found her and, oh, she was so pleased—[inaudible]. "And, Ms. Shriver, this is my son, Stephen [ph]." "Oh, you wonderful boy." And he's a big kid, you know. "Oh."

JOSEPHINE SHEA: She was probably very happy to see that one of her students had done so well in the art world.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then did you go on to college, from high school?

KENT IPSEN: Directly, yeah, with no thought of that when I was in high school. But I think that the art teacher, Ruth Shriver, had a hand in that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Really had an impact on you.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, she talked about it. There was a local teachers college—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: —in Milwaukee, and I had a pretty formidable art program compared to all the elementary and secondary education that went on. And her program was pretty substantial—two teachers, two faculty.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did you choose that as your major right off the bat for college?

KENT IPSEN: I guess I did. I didn't have any notion of that when I was in grade school, but I did discover art when I got into high school.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And were you mostly drawing or painting or—what kind of artwork were you doing?

KENT IPSEN: We had a potter's wheel in a little room in the back, and Ruth Lassen, she didn't know how to make pots.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: But you still had the potter's wheel.

KENT IPSEN: Well, we could go in there and kick it and make it go around. I don't remember ever making any pottery there, in high school.

ROLANDA SCOTT: But you knew what it was. That's a good thing.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how did you find the teachers at the college level? Were they inspirational, or did they—did you take ceramics classes in college?

KENT IPSEN: Yes. They had a curriculum that at least for two years you had to follow, and that was drawing and more drawing, painting—you know, just kind of the standard curriculum.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And Mr. Graves [ph] was my high school teacher for one semester. Mr. Graves, he lowered himself to smoking.

ROLANDA SCOTT: I think he probably had more influence on you than you think. [Laughs.]

KENT IPSEN: And he had always two monitors when he was out of the room. And these were always males that were big. So the class was always in order.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Aha.

KENT IPSEN: He could slip off for the afternoon, I think. Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, my understanding is you kind of became involved with ceramics first. How did that transpire from painting and drawing?

KENT IPSEN: My interest in ceramics started after I graduated from high school. Let me think. I believe I was teaching in a small town near Milwaukee, and they had a potter's wheel there. And a friend of mine would come to use the potter's wheel, and I attempted. So eventually I bought myself an electric potter's wheel.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: From a catalogue or—what inspired you to do that?

KENT IPSEN: Hmm?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: The potter's wheel, the electric potter's wheel you bought, did you buy it from a catalogue or—

KENT IPSEN: Well, I think just a local supplier.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And my wife threw pots on it and I threw pots on it, and everybody that came over didn't come to see me; they came over to fool with my—[inaudible].

ROLANDA SCOTT: Mud people.

KENT IPSEN: And then I—

[Cross talk.]

KENT IPSEN: —went on to graduate school and majored in ceramics.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what graduate school did you go to?

KENT IPSEN: It was the University of Wisconsin.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: The one at Madison?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And I thought it was most enjoyable, and then I started graduate school and was introduced to glass-working. Harvey Littleton was the professor that started that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what made you decide—did you continue teaching when you went to graduate school, or did you just decide to go to Madison and go there full time?

KENT IPSEN: I think I was—I had a part-time teaching job—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: —when I was at Madison.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So that's where you bumped into Harvey Littleton as a teacher.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. I've always kind of kept in touch with him, but not, you know, like every year. And old Harvey had a personality to hold his own, and you could either go with it or leave the room.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Didn't they require, like, two years of ceramics before you could go into glass?

KENT IPSEN: Before you could go into glass?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, didn't they require that you be a ceramics major before—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think Harvey—Harvey was a potter of some note, according to Harvey.
[Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: At least something, according to Harvey, for everything.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. And he got interested in glass-working.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right. Did you ever go down with him to Toledo to those glass workshops at the Toledo Museum of Art?

KENT IPSEN: No, not at that point.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: But he was teaching ceramics and glass-working, and somehow I got into one of his glass courses. And it was very primitive, nothing fancy about it, but I put in a lot of effort, and I think that he appreciated that.

So, when I finally graduated, I managed to get into graduate school. That's where I did my graduate work, at the University of Wisconsin. And I majored in sculpture, ceramics, including glass.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did you exhibit your work at all at the student level?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, they had—sometimes they would have student art fairs. Madison was the capital of those, Wisconsin, and the art fair would be strung out all the way around the capitol building. And people came from all over to see the stuff. So that was my first opportunity to, you know, show what I was doing.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how was your work received?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, pretty well. I stayed with that process of merchandising for a long, long time after that. I traveled all over the Midwest going to art fairs and, oh, my goodness.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, you used to have a great big wooden sign that said "Ipsen Glassworks."

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I wonder what happened to that.

ROLANDA SCOTT: I don't know. It used to be up there somewhere. It was a big wooden sign.

NEIL DUMAN: Carried over from the—[inaudible]—painting days.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

KENT IPSEN: Do you know it is now?

NEIL DUMAN: Must be—I don't know. I haven't seen it in a long time.

ROLANDA SCOTT: I haven't seen it. I don't see it right now.

NEIL DUMAN: It was probably six feet, seven feet long.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, it was about six feet long and three feet tall, because I remember loading it into your van when we would box up stuff.

KENT IPSEN: And a great piece of wood.

NEIL DUMAN: Oh, a nice piece of wood.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

KENT IPSEN: Kind of rotting.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Old, rotted piece of wood with "Ipsen Glassworks" on it.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, you mentioned that your wife also experimented throwing pots?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, she started throwing pots.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: But she didn't follow you into the world of glass.

KENT IPSEN: No.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No.

KENT IPSEN: She blew some glass but not with the intensity of the pottery. And she still throws

pots and has, you know, all that equipment and so forth.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, you mentioned Harvey Littleton. Were there other people that—at that same era that were starting out to develop glass that were particularly important to you as you were learning and adventuring in this realm?

KENT IPSEN: Well, there certainly were, you know, two or three people that contributed a lot. One was Dale Chihuly.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was wondering if we were going to hear his name.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Dominick Labino. Wouldn't that—Labino?

NEIL DUMAN: Dominick Labino.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Dominick Labino. He was—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes, Dominick Labino, of course.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, he was the chemist.

KENT IPSEN: He was a retired vice president of something or other, some big corporation, and he met Harvey and saw what Harvey was doing. So Labino went back to his home in Ohio and really put together a glass facility.

And he knew how to make glass from sand, and how to anneal it so it wouldn't crack. And he was just head and shoulders above everyone else, outside of maybe the Corning Glass Company, which knew a great deal.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And were you able to study with him? Did you go to—

KENT IPSEN: No, not really.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No.

KENT IPSEN: He would give a workshop, and that mostly consisted of drinking beer.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: It lasted about a week. At that point some of the people in the class were already capable of blowing a bubble, putting it on a punty iron, blowing it up and putting it in the annealer. And they really didn't need what Nick had to offer, which would have been a chemical look at glass production.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, he was—so his talent and his knowledge was in the technical aspects.

KENT IPSEN: Right. Exactly.

And, oh, we had a fellow named Marvin Lipofsky. And Marvin took any opportunity he could find to irritate people, and he took on Dominick Labino one time. And he point blank said, "Well, what do

you know about making art?" And Labino said, "Well, what do you know about making glass?" And of course Marvin didn't know anything about making glass.

And Nick was making nice pieces. They weren't outrageously creative, but they were strong, powerful pieces of work, and ultimately the best glass that you could imagine.

So he had a group of students—I think about eight of us spent a week at his studio, and he demonstrated and answered questions and so forth. And I think that's when Marvin asked him, you know, "What do you know about making art," and Nick Labino says, "What do you know, about making glass?"

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So did you—I assume that you got a master's of fine arts for your graduate degree.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, my graduate degree is a master of fine arts.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then did you continue kind of studying on and off with Harvey Littleton or just—

KENT IPSEN: No. I rarely saw Harvey.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: He may have come in the studio. I worked nights in the studio and he may have dropped in once or twice, but he never really ever had anything to say.

Once a semester he had a critique, and he would have a couple of other faculty attend that. And you would put your things out and he would take you apart, and the other faculty would come to your defense, you know.

He kept you on edge all the time. And he had a couple of students that, you know, should have been kept on edge.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right. The crit process, as they call it.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you feel that you learned from those experiences, that kind of feedback, positive or negative?

KENT IPSEN: Well, that was the only place to learn anything, really.

Well, we did go as a group to Toledo. At one point they had a workshop there. There were just so many people there that you really didn't have a one-on-one relationship. You could stand and watch somebody else go one-on-one, you know. But it was worth the trip. I got a lot out of it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then what was the next step in your career?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I guess teaching.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You just went directly into teaching.

KENT IPSEN: Yes. Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I had one more question about University of Wisconsin at Madison. What were the facilities like? Was Harvey Littleton able to get—I know kilns and glass and furnaces and—

KENT IPSEN: I don't know if they did after I left, but our facility, it was pretty primitive. It was kind of a sheet metal building shaped like that, whatever you call that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: A Quonset hut.

KENT IPSEN: A Quonset hut, yeah, that was it. And Jake O'Brien's [ph] Bar was 40 steps that way and then back up that street.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Conveniently located.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes. It was hydration for dehydration. It was bad business.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So did you feel that—I guess it was primitive but it was good enough for your working process and for supplies. Did you have to pay for those, or how did that work?

KENT IPSEN: The supplies? They were provided—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: —with just the regular tuition. And if the art department had an art department fee, I paid it. I don't really recall that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how did you afford that? Were you able to pay for it by the part-time teaching that you were doing, or—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, in part.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, it was a state school as well.

KENT IPSEN: I had GI Bill support.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: That was about it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did we—

KENT IPSEN: We lived in student housing. That was a big help.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So, you finished your degree and then went right into teaching. And where did you start teaching?

KENT IPSEN: Mankato State College in Mankato, Minnesota.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you stayed in the Midwest.

KENT IPSEN: Up to that point, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Didn't you teach little kids at one point? Didn't you teach little kids at one point, or elementary school or high school?

[Cross talk.]

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think I did do something—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, because I remember you talking about little kids—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —because I teach little kids.

KENT IPSEN: I'm sure it was—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, you taught—

KENT IPSEN: It was probably two years that I taught in the elementary schools.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Something Prairie.

KENT IPSEN: At that was just straight art.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Prairie du Chien? Prairie du Chien?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, one of the schools was Prairie du Chien.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what was teaching like at this state college?

KENT IPSEN: At the university?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: At the state college where you started your teaching—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Mankato.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, oh, oh, oh. It was an art education department, and it was, you know, pretty strongly art education.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you were training future teachers to go out into elementary and high schools and—

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —possibly the college level—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —to teach art classes. And did you teach the whole range of art—drawing, painting, sculpture—or did you focus just on glass and ceramics or—

KENT IPSEN: I'm trying to recall, because I used to teach 1st grade through 8th grade.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And that may have been that first and second year that I was enrolled in the glass

program at Madison. But I'll never forget the little kids. They were just terrific, you know. And the mothers—oh, my goodness.

ROLANDA SCOTT: They still are.

KENT IPSEN: "Take this home with you." And she showed up the next day and said, "You gave Charles some paper to take home." And I said, "Well, you know, he just produces so much artwork here and I wanted to see that he had some paper to work at home." "Well, my husband and I don't appreciate it and I'd like you to stop. He's going to be an engineer, understand?"

And I peeled myself off the blackboard, hat in hand. And I'll bet that kid is an engineer and probably the most unhappy individual.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say—[laughter].

KENT IPSEN: But he's doing what Mom and Dad wanted him to do.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, a little bit earlier you mentioned Dale Chihuly. Tell me about your interactions with him.

KENT IPSEN: Pretty limited.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you ever go out to Pilchuck?

KENT IPSEN: Go out to what?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: To Pilchuck in Seattle?

KENT IPSEN: Only to visit. I didn't do any teaching there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay. Did you run into him when he was still at Rhode Island School of Design?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, I think when I met him, Harvey had invited him to the University of Wisconsin. Meeting him was rather brief. He was head and shoulders above everyone else in the field at that point, and perfectly willing, you know, to share if you could swallow your pride and say, "How do you"—you know, ask for help, he was certainly there to help you. Nice guy. Nice guy.

Didn't something happen to him?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, he was in the car accident—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: In an accident.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —and he lost vision in one of his eyes.

KENT IPSEN: He lost—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So now he—although, I guess, at the beginning he was so technically proficient, now I don't think he actually does work.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He doesn't blow much of his own stuff anymore. He does some but not a whole lot.

KENT IPSEN: I've completely lost track of him, but—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, also, you know, Dale was somewhat involved with an Italian gentleman named Lino Tagliapietra. Did you paths cross at all?

KENT IPSEN: No. I know the name, and he may have been a visiting artist after I was graduated and out of town. I know it's a tough name.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.] Well, it always sounds a little bit like food to me, like an Italian type of pasta.

KENT IPSEN: We had another one in ceramics—Liel [ph] or something. I don't know. And he was—
[Cross talk.]

KENT IPSEN: He was a nut. Oh, he was a barrel of fun.

ROLANDA SCOTT: There were a lot of clay people you talked about—Bendel and Reitz and—

NEIL DUMAN: He's a big, burly guy.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes.

ROLANDA SCOTT: That whole crew. Voulkos—Peter Voulkos. All the biggies.

KENT IPSEN: Don Reitz was a—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So, were you doing these at the same time that you were evolving toward working in glass, or was ceramics first?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, I was doing ceramics simultaneously.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Simultaneously.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. I didn't see much of Harvey as far as ceramics was concerned, but Don Reitz is really the important figure there. And I don't know if Don Reitz ever went over to look at the glass students.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: He just stayed focused on ceramics.

KENT IPSEN: Right, he was just really immersed in it. It showed in his work. [Inaudible].

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So how did you interact with Peter Voulkos? I understand you have a photograph of—do you have a photograph over there?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, there's a photograph in one of the stacks of Peter Voulkos.

KENT IPSEN: I went to a couple of his workshops.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And you did some workshops with him, didn't you, in Arizona—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Montana?

ROLANDA SCOTT: —a number of years ago? I remember you coming back from one of the workshops that you did with wax faces of Bendel and Voulkos and a bunch of them. I think it was when the—

NEIL DUMAN: Was it in Flagstaff maybe?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, it was Flagstaff. Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: It was Voulkos—Flagstaff.

KENT IPSEN: Now, Rudy Autio, of course.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, Rudy.

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: And Don Leedy [ph] and all those guys.

KENT IPSEN: Those really ought to get ironed.

NEIL DUMAN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: [Inaudible.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Oh, my goodness, there's Voulkos and—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how did you continue to train and work in your art? Was it mostly by going to workshops or—tell me how that process kind of evolved for you.

KENT IPSEN: Well, when I was involved in ceramics I had a ceramic shop in the basement of a house I was renting. And I had a first-class electric potter's wheel and all kinds of clay. So whatever I got into, I got into. I didn't do any of those things, like, part time, just part time—[inaudible]—but pretty full time glass or full time ceramics.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You were doing them both, you say, at the same time.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And were you supporting this by going around—and you mentioned that you sold your work at different art fairs. And did you sell both ceramics and glass or just ceramics?

KENT IPSEN: I think—no, I think at one point I was showing both, and probably showing pots that I had made two years earlier. You know, I was really more interested in the glass at that time.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then—it sounds like you've pretty much taught throughout your career. When and how did you make the move from Mankato State College to Virginia, where I think you had a very long career?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think something like 20 years.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Twenty years. Weren't you at the Chicago Art Institute?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, you were at Chicago Art Institute for a—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think I was there after—

ROLANDA SCOTT: —before you came to VCU.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, that's right. I believe I was there seven years.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how did that transpire? How did you—were recruited to go and teach there?

KENT IPSEN: I think I sent some glass objects and a letter to the art department at the art institute. It was a tremendous museum and they had a pretty fair art school. Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, where did you have the studio in your garage? Where was it that you had your studio in—

KENT IPSEN: When? When I was in Chicago?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah—well, wherever—you had a studio in your garage before.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

KENT IPSEN: That's where it was.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Because I love the story about the guy helping you clean in the studio, and you'd gone back to get a piece of glass to give him. Do you remember that? I love—that's my favorite story.

You'd been cleaning in your studio, and he had a truck or a whole bunch of stuff, and you said, "Wait a minute," because you were going to give him something to pay for helping you clean. And you went in and got a big bottle and took the price off of it and handed it to him, and he said, "This too?" And you said, "Yeah." And he threw it on in the truck. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Not an earlier appreciation of your work.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, that I'll never forget. I'm glad you reminded me.

ROLANDA SCOTT: That's one of my favorite stories, because I can just see it, you know, "This too, huh?" "Yep." "Yeah."

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, those were his exact words, "This too?"

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Somewhere along the line you made the transition between selling your work at art fairs and selling in galleries and exhibiting. Can you tell me a little bit about how that came

about?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I guess sometimes gallery owners would go to the art fairs and look for new artists or different artists, or whatever. And I guess the art fair circuit is just pretty darn hard, and it could be expensive if you weren't doing well. So several gallery owners saw my work, and that's where I got into the galleries.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And was one of those—tell me who were some of the first galleries that you started working with. Was one of them Habitat? Did you work at all with—

KENT IPSEN: Yes, yes, I certainly did. Yeah, Habitat.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And on the East Coast, in New York or—did you have representation? And I was wondering if you showed at all through Maurine Littleton's gallery.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, I may have done that. It was very, very limited.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Sally Hansen.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, Sally Hansen in Washington, D.C.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Sally Hansen Gallery in D.C.

NEIL DUMAN: Did you ever show at—you showed at Heller a couple of times.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, because I went up to New York for one of those with Doug Heller, when you showed at the Heller—

NEIL DUMAN: Back when he was down on Madison Avenue—[inaudible].

NEIL DUMAN: They're talking about the Heller Gallery in New York.

KENT IPSEN: It was a small gallery on 5th Avenue, I believe.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Something like that, because that was—they had one or two of your bubbles, and then they started the cast pieces. That was when the first cast pieces—

NEIL DUMAN: When it was still on Madison Avenue, a little small gallery where—I think it was this wide.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Do you remember some of those early shows? How was your work shown? And did you have an input into how it was displayed?

KENT IPSEN: Well, as far as galleries were concerned, no. I established a retail price and the gallery would take usually 40 percent, sometimes 50 percent—never more than 50 percent.

Some of the galleries would have, you know, Saturday afternoon or Saturday evening, an opening, cocktails, and everyone got all dressed up, and others just took it as Monday morning and they're going to show different stuff, and that was it. So it was kind of fun for a while.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And would you say that you really kind of supported yourself through the gallery

sales, or was it really more through teaching?

KENT IPSEN: I think that the gallery subsidized my income. I don't recall—well, you know, the family was getting bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger, and the size of the dollars weren't increasing.

The quantity was important, so I guess I tried to do both but I didn't concentrate on galleries. Probably not glass. I should have put more effort into those kinds of pieces than the kinds of pieces that sell at art galleries and so forth.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you have any particular galleries that you really enjoyed showing at, or—

KENT IPSEN: Well, I suppose my favorite was New York. What's the name of that gallery?

NEIL DUMAN: Heller.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Heller?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, the Heller Gallery.

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Florida was—

NEIL DUMAN: But Habitat eventually opened.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, but that wasn't it. I don't remember the name of the one in Florida.

And you were also shipping pieces. I remember the snowstorm when we shipped the piece to Italy. What was that? It was one of the standing women castings. We had crated it up and sent you out the door in the snowstorm to go to Richmond International to ship a piece of glass. And it went to somewhere in Italy. I'm not sure if it was the Vatican or not.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I'm sure it was Italy. And I also sent something that went to—I don't remember—the coast of Spain. And I never heard anything from them.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you—besides the work that you sent to galleries, did you do commissions for people?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I guess I did.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Oh, lots of them. You did the commissions for the Governors Awards—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —a number of years, and then a lot of things for VCU and—

NEIL DUMAN: The tablets. The biggest one was the one with the tablets.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, the hands, the tablets, the big one.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: That was a commission piece.

NEIL DUMAN: And then there's the portrait for the heart surgeon, who specialized in the—
[inaudible]—valve.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, the one that did your mother's surgery.

NEIL DUMAN: You did a face and the top torso with his glasses.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Who was that?

NEIL DUMAN: Doctor—his wife was a pianist.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, Sonia Vlahcevic's husband.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, and you did a portrait of Sonia and then you did her husband, because I remember you lampworking the eyeglasses for—to go on it. You did some of—oh, you did one of Sally. You did a portrait of her.

What about down at Hampton, what's his face, Bobo [ph]—Bowen [ph]—Bobo Vines [ph].

NEIL DUMAN: But that's recent.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. I haven't seen them. She passed away.

ROLANDA SCOTT: She passed away. She had cancer a number of years ago now.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: The last one he designed was recent, Arnold Schwarzenegger as the governor, the one with the fist for a proposition—he had his fist coming down on Proposition whatever, that got defeated.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Proposition 13 or something like that.

NEIL DUMAN: A big fist.

KENT IPSEN: A big fist.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: Yeah, that was, what, three or four years ago?

KENT IPSEN: When was that?

NEIL DUMAN: And one went to Arnold. He did four or five of them.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And then the spinnakers; those were a regular commission.

[Cross talk.]

KENT IPSEN: I'm glad somebody remembers what's going on.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, it sounds like you've done quite a bit of commissions.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Oh, lots.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And has that been kind of consistent throughout your career or just more recent?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I don't think it was throughout; I think maybe halfway through what I was doing—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: Those things happened.

ROLANDA SCOTT: A lot of the commissions were cast pieces. Once you started doing cast pieces, you started doing more commissions, because I know we didn't pack up that many shows for fairs.

NEIL DUMAN: We did that huge shell, yeah—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten about that.

NEIL DUMAN: —the scalloped shell for the Lutheran church—

ROLANDA SCOTT: The great big scalloped shell?

NEIL DUMAN: —for the baptismal.

ROLANDA SCOTT: The baptismal font? The Vatican's got the baptismal font.

NEIL DUMAN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, remember the poured baptismal font—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —with the silver in it.

NEIL DUMAN: But that one was the poured one. The cast one went to the Lutheran church.

KENT IPSEN: I've been looking under the bed all over for that thing. [Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, I know. What happened to it?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: One of the questions is kind of a big question, but it relates to what we've been talking about, which is the market. How would you say the market for American craft has changed in your lifetime?

KENT IPSEN: I didn't get the whole question.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: How would you say the market for American craft has changed during your lifetime, during your career?

KENT IPSEN: Oh. Well, it's just been a growing, growing, growing thing. I can't speak for today. I don't have that much to do with it. But it just kind of zoomed into a whole direction all by itself.

I think a lot of, you know, serious artists wouldn't—particularly in the crafts wouldn't lower themselves to that activity, but eventually that changed.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Have you been involved at all, and did you go down—I know you've taught a lot at the university and college level. Did you go down and teach, for example, at Haystack or Arrumont or—you said you really hadn't been to Pilchuck.

KENT IPSEN: No, I don't recall doing that.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You don't—you didn't do workshops for a week or two in the summer?

ROLANDA SCOTT: You did Flagstaff.

NEIL DUMAN: Flagstaff is—

ROLANDA SCOTT: You did a number of summers in Flagstaff.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, that's true.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Because you would go down and build a furnace and set up a whole shop and demonstrate and—

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, and started—didn't you start the program at Flagstaff, the glass program? And it started from a summer workshop.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. Somebody should take notes. [Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: All I know is that I spent most of my time learning how to build furnaces with Kent. That's what I did for a number of years was tear down and rebuild and sit inside ovens. And he'd be on the outside and I'd be on the inside.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: The inside. [Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: And he would—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, I remember that.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And he's sitting on top of that.

NEIL DUMAN: It wouldn't be so bad until he closed the lid—

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: All I can think of is, I'm sure glad that it's propped really well, because I could just see, you know, whatever, 800, 900 pounds just coming straight down on my head.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, I've heard a little bit in our discussions that you really—you started off blowing and you got very technically proficient and made really beautiful large things. And then it seemed that you shifted more into casting. Can you tell me how that process worked or transpired?

KENT IPSEN: I did a piece for the Vatican.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: And I'm trying to recall—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did the Pope write and inquire—[laughs]—on his official stationary?

KENT IPSEN: He's the one that told them to find me, yeah. And that was kind of a departure point as far as, you know, blowing glass and casting glass. That particular piece was glass.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And would you be using the kilns at the schools that you were teaching at, because I know people have talked about, for casting, the importance of having a kiln that can keep temperatures for long amounts of times so that the process of annealing is successful—

KENT IPSEN: That's absolutely true.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —which is important, as I understand it. So, would you use the kilns at the schools, or did you use other commercial kilns, or how did that work?

KENT IPSEN: I think most of the places that I did that didn't have a glass facility, so I, you know, provided the temperature controllers and all that kind of thing.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So, you were mechanically engineeringly adept as well.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, we built everything.

NEIL DUMAN: He researched and built them, and then made them available to the students once he had them built. But he always built all of his—[inaudible].

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, certain—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So "kiln builder" is on your résumé as well.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes, yes.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And knows how to wire—I mean, we have an electrician here.

NEIL DUMAN: Wire, weld—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Wire, weld—or find somebody to do it. [Laughs.]

NEIL DUMAN: He got good at that.

ROLANDA SCOTT: My first working with Kent was I'd been working in clay, and he had taught—you taught a class on glass techniques, which you explored the core forming and a couple of other things. And that's when you started casting. And you were offering a casting class and I wanted to take it but didn't have the money.

So I went over and said, "I'll do the same thing for you that I've been doing in clay. I'll mix glass or clean the floors or sweep or build or whatever you want." So that's how I got involved. And he would have me making duoies and—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Oh, I spent hours, and spent hours inside building.

All of the ovens were built. Those aren't purchased. You couldn't buy anything that size. And kilns didn't have controllers, and I can remember the first couple of ovens that we had, had like 14 switches, and spending all night turning switches with—

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: You can smoke inside if you want.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, we'll let you smoke in here.

NEIL DUMAN: You don't have to go outside.

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: But that was—one of the fun things was learning—he had so much information, because you couldn't buy a furnace. You couldn't buy a furnace. And—

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: And that was where so much teaching that you don't get nowadays in a lot of classes—

NEIL DUMAN: Well, now they don't teach you how to build anything. The students get out and—

ROLANDA SCOTT: And they don't—

NEIL DUMAN: They don't buy it. They literally can't afford it.

KENT IPSEN: Where is he going?

ROLANDA SCOTT: He's going I think looking for a more comfortable chair.

KENT IPSEN: Well, he can have this one.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: No, no, I think for you.

KENT IPSEN: He can have this one. He can sit on my lap. I don't care.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Now, besides—tell me a little bit more about your working process. Would you, for example, draw sketches of what you were hoping to create, or would you just kind of see where the process of the piece led you?

KENT IPSEN: I didn't sketch much of the blown objects. Again, I designed those as I went along. There were a couple of pieces that, oh, I did with tablets for a synagogue, and that required a pair of hands holding the tablets up there—hands holding to give it a balance. And that I drew out pretty carefully and actually transferred the drawing to clay and made the model out of clay.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So when you started casting, it sounds like the drawing—planning process became more important.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, I think so.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did nature—did you draw inspiration at all from nature, because I know your

piece that's at the Smithsonian, you have a large vase there. And I'm sure many people have said this before, that it looks almost like a landscape in the glass. And I wondered if there's any connection or focus at all that you've had on nature, or if that just happens to be my reaction to your work.

KENT IPSEN: Well, I don't know if I saw that in them or not, but I certainly made an effort to reproduce that kind of surface. That was simply done with silver chloride crystals.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: But you were very—how did you start doing that process, because that's one of the things that you really—I think your work is known for.

KENT IPSEN: I don't know where I got started with—

NEIL DUMAN: You had that one dentist that gave—Otis [ph]? Remember, Ralph Otis gave you those miles of silver filling stuff to play with. I don't know if you were using silver to fill that or not.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, he did.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, looking at—I just looked this morning. I went on the Internet and was looking at some of the pieces that are in the—there's four, I think, four bottles. And those look like the ones where you gathered shards, lots of shards. You do a wide casing and then you gather shards over it and then clear over that.

And some of it you heated and dragged an ice pick through it, so you've got a horizontal pattern going around the glass, and then you went over it with silver chloride on the outside. That's the ones that I saw this morning when I was looking.

I don't remember you dropping—some of it you would have the white—the white pot furnace going, and you would drop shards of glass in the white—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —and then gather it up. And that gave a real pretty—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what led you on that path, on that journey, just kind of random experimentation? Did you have kind of a vision of what you were hoping to achieve, and using these techniques to get you there, or—it's kind of the chicken and the egg question.

KENT IPSEN: Well, I learned pretty fast that if you use silver chloride, you got one kind of result with hot glass, and silver nitrate you got a completely different kind of reaction. One was very volatile and the other was pretty calm. And I guess I preferred the silver chloride. I used that a lot on our pieces.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Because you appreciated the effect that you were able to achieve—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —using that?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think I was pretty much pleasing myself and I wasn't really looking at the marketplace.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And can you tell me about your usual—back when you were blowing a lot, your

usual kind of work process, I'm assuming that you've taught maybe two days a week or three days a week? And would you be spending a lot of time in the studio when you weren't teaching?

KENT IPSEN: I think when I left VCU I was teaching two days a week, and it may have included a class each evening as well as during the day.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Are you a morning person? Do you get up in the morning and go into your studio and dive in? [Laughs.] I'm hearing a lot of laughter.

KENT IPSEN: How did you know that?

[Cross talk, laughter.]

NEIL DUMAN: He did, as far as what part of the morning you're talking about. If you're talking about 1:00 in the morning, he was definitely a morning person.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So I'm getting the impression of more of maybe a night owl or an afternoon/evening person.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I like the evening—[inaudible]—you know, a night owl, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: You did a lot of blowing on the weekends at night. A lot of times we'd get in at 10:00 and—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And just start—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Work.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —work.

ROLANDA SCOTT: You know, when you have four ovens and you do four big pieces—we had four ovens, didn't we? Yeah, we had four.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And you would do four big—four big pieces—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —and call it a night. And we did.

The funniest thing, though, was when—at one point he was quitting—had quit smoking, or was trying to quit smoking—

NEIL DUMAN: He did for a month.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He did. And I don't know how many pieces didn't make it because so much of the timing was based on—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Based on—

ROLANDA SCOTT: —on smoking.

NEIL DUMAN: Kent would maybe gather—I'll go and do a seven-inch gather. But he would use a block so big that he couldn't handle that—

ROLANDA SCOTT: I had to—you had to pick it up out of the water and hold it for him.

NEIL DUMAN: He would gather this massive blast—

ROLANDA SCOTT: And say, "Here, hold this."

NEIL DUMAN: —2,000 degrees—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: —and he's doing this; he goes over and gets a cigarette.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And he's holding it, just tilting it.

NEIL DUMAN: Puts it down, picks up his coffee, drinks the coffee. Meanwhile this massive—and he's just da, da, da, takes another puff. Then he blows one a little bit and—in most studios you go in and there's like massive ants running all over the place, but you go and watch Kent he's like—he sits and stretches, rolls it a little bit, drinks a little more coffee—the coffee and the cigarette.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And the cigarette—the loss of the cigarette just threw the timing off.

NEIL DUMAN: Yeah, meanwhile—yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So a very Zen experience, it sounds like.

ROLANDA SCOTT: It was magic to watch; I'll put it that way. And the first time I ever watched it I said, "Oh, what a beautiful color." And he looked at me and said, "Hot glass is always that color." [Laughs.] Did I feel stupid.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you ever go up to Corning and demonstrate at all, the Corning Museum of Glass up there in Corning, New York?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I've been there, and I think I'm in their collection.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I'm sure you are.

KENT IPSEN: Corning eventually came around and started getting involved with the movement. I believe they sent off one of their people to a meeting. I think we had a major meeting with Corning —

NEIL DUMAN: The first—the glass conference—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, the first glass conference.

NEIL DUMAN: —in the mid to late '70s—'75, '76 at a big glass conference.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That was another question I have. Have any organizations been especially important to you and to your career?

KENT IPSEN: There were some. I would do—well, the one that was closest to home would be VCU. I would do six or eight identical pieces for outstanding faculty or outstanding researchers or outstanding teachers, or whatever it happened to be.

ROLANDA SCOTT: You brought a number of people to VCU to demo.

NEIL DUMAN: Like Fritz [Driesbach] a few times.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, Fritz was here and—

NEIL DUMAN: Billy Bernstein. And who else did you bring over? You brought Harvey up a couple of times.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Who was the guy that does the great big corns—pipes? I can't think of his name.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Richard Morris?

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: I can't think of his name. I have a piece of his. I learned a long time ago from Kent, first of all you never put NFS on a piece. If you're going to make it, you're going to sell it. And then also I learned to trade art with people.

And I asked this particular gentleman if he would trade a piece of glass. And he looked at me and said, "If I traded glass with everybody who asked, I wouldn't have any glass." So he looked at some of my stuff and he says, "My mother always said it was good to ask if you want to trade."

But he brought—Kent brought a lot of important people to VCU to expose students to.

NEIL DUMAN: And usually people who worked in glass differently than he did, which was good. Like Fritz would come in and do his motorcycles, whatever. Billy Bernstein—you actually still have the piece where he did the eagle on the top of some—[inaudible].

Harvey just came in and talked. I don't think Harvey actually blew any. No, he did—I guess that was Fritz too. Paul Bicaney [ph].

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, Paul Bicaney [ph]. Is it—the guy who did the flat—

NEIL DUMAN: Dave [Hucht hausen]—[inaudible]—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: —at VCU.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, who else from VCU? What's his face? He does all the cut glass fused—not fused but—what's his name?

NEIL DUMAN: Oh, John.

ROLANDA SCOTT: John Kuhn.

NEIL DUMAN: Well, John Kuhn took classes.

ROLANDA SCOTT: John Kuhn took classes.

NEIL DUMAN: Kent introduced John Kuhn to glass.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, have you—tell me about the teaching and your students. You taught at VCU, you say, for 20 years? And you must have enjoyed it to stay there that long.

KENT IPSEN: It was a short walk to work. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So it's geographically desirable?

KENT IPSEN: No, I liked the department.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He built the glass shop.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. And we weren't bothered by the fire department and the administration or—I know they knew something was going on with the gas meter when we got running.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: When the bills arrived? [Laughs.]

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What would be your process for teaching students about glass? Would you show them first? Would you assign them reading? Would you tell them to go out and look at other people's work? How did you transmit your knowledge and ideas to them?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I think probably demonstrate once or twice.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Monday morning demos.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Monday morning demos.

KENT IPSEN: And then I had a nice collection of slides of other people's work, other people's facilities and that kind of thing. You know, some idea that wasn't just here but really all over the world.

There were some wonderful movies out that I managed to show. And one, I don't know whatever happened to it.

NEIL DUMAN: It was black and white. It was done with the jazz music.

ROLANDA SCOTT: It was the factory in—was it Czechoslovakia or whatever?

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

ROLANDA SCOTT: It had all of the wonderful jazz music to it.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: No, it was not black and white; it was color. It was wonderful. And it was wonderful, because I can remember the seeing the guys with the cheeks that would go foom, foom.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah. Oh, they were great.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And the music just—and the guys were only—which reminded me so much of Kent at the bench. It was beautiful to watch because there was just this wonderful rhythm and this number with a pipe on the rails that just can't be matched.

NEIL DUMAN: Basically he was like, "Make a bubble; make a bowl. You can make a bowl? Okay, you're an artist; go make something up. And if you need help after you've tried, let me know." He would never just come out and say, "This is how you do it." You had to put the effort forth. And you put the effort forth and he had all the time in the world for you. If you came in and waited for him to show you, forget it.

ROLANDA SCOTT: You had to work. You had to work. If you didn't work—that was—I think that was the biggest draw for me to go over to glass was because there was not a faculty member at VCU that worked, exhibited and showed like Kent did. No one worked in their studios. Nor did anybody make it available for you to watch them work. And Kent was always—you could watch him work.

KENT IPSEN: Well, it was a performing process. It really is.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you let people learn a lot by watching you.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, I presume they did. If nothing else, it was fun to watch.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then tell me about collectors, because—are there particular collectors that have followed your work that you've developed a relationship at all with them or—

KENT IPSEN: A few. A few. There are collectors, I suppose, that buy things from the gallery that are after the piece, not—

[Cross talk.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That you would not even know about?

KENT IPSEN: No. They may buy the name but they don't know the person.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you go to conferences at all, like the Glass Art Society conferences?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, sure. Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And how did you find that experience?

KENT IPSEN: I can't say sobering.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: [Laughs.] The opposite of sobering? It sounds like you had a very good time. We can—

KENT IPSEN: Well, they would bring in people—they had a clay conference, NCECA.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: NCECA.

ROLANDA SCOTT: NCECA.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. And they would bring in some pretty formidable artists.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did you continue throughout your career to continue to follow and work with what was happening in clay, or—

KENT IPSEN: Well, if I wasn't in glass I'd be in ceramics. And I don't think there were too—I don't know that they had the volume of glass artists demonstrating as there were ceramic people.

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: No. No. And it's only been in the last five or six years that a lot of the glass people get together and demonstrate. Before they would—you might see them work a little bit but not a whole lot. And they certainly didn't give out information readily.

KENT IPSEN: And you need a glass facility if you're going to conduct a workshop.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right.

KENT IPSEN: I've built a, you know, temporary—use them for two days and then throw them away furnaces, but it's just—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That's a lot of work, I would think.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what about reading? Did you follow any particular periodicals at all—American Craft, American Ceramics, Glass Art?

KENT IPSEN: I'm not a subscriber. I certainly read them when they're available. The art department has a subscription to all of those.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Were you interested in reading what other artists had to say about art, or did you pretty much feel that you learned by working things out yourself on your own?

KENT IPSEN: I think the articles were purely, you know, "Joe Smith" was making—a photographic essay of this or that guy, girl. And I don't know where the value is in that. I think people are just finding their way. They open up Craft Horizons, and whether it be clay or glass or whatever, and replicate what they find on those pages. And I don't know if that's bad or not.

When I studied with Littleton, I started in ceramics, and he had a reputation as a potter. And there was a certain way to center the clay, a certain way to open it, and a certain way to throw it, period. So I tried to avoid throwing when he was around because I just didn't do it that way.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Because he had such a very set idea of how things should be done.

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: But it sounds like when you were teaching, you were a little more open and a little more open-minded.

KENT IPSEN: Well, I just demonstrated so they got the idea what it was all about. Like most things, it just takes practice, and doing it over and over and over and over and, wow.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: What would you say are some of the most powerful influences in your career?

KENT IPSEN: In terms of facilities or individuals or—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I think it's a very open question. You can—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think I can—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —pick anything out that you'd like to.

NEIL DUMAN: Sailing.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, I did notice when we came into your studio, you have a photograph of a beautiful sailboat.

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did that work its way into your art at all?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I've never come up with a shape as good as that sailboat shape, that's for sure.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: But you keep working at it.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: How would you say your work has been received over your career?

KENT IPSEN: Well, it's been, I would say, moderate. There are certain individuals in glass that, whether you like it or not, you have to have a so-and-so for your collection, you know, to get that one shelf completed. And then you get on to the next shelf, I suppose.

There are a number of artists that, you know, are highly acclaimed that I'm not really crazy about—not as people but—but I think there are more people in art that I admire than I don't admire. It's pretty personal. You know, if you open a book, on page 37 there's Dale Chihuly. "Wow, I've got to get one of those," you know, to round out the alphabet.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So hopefully they got at least as far as "l." [Laughs.]

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Do politics play a role in your work at all, or is there any type of social commentary?

KENT IPSEN: Well, here at VCU, I taught ceramics and glassworking, and the disparity in the races—we have a large African-American population—not a majority population but a large one—and occasionally I would get a black student to take a course in ceramics. Occasionally you would see a few of them working at sculpture.

I think the reason we demonstrate is to capture someone's imagination or show them the potential of a particular material, and that anyone can do it. I don't think we're very successful at getting the black community involved. Not that we're devoid of them, but just—I think you find it in fashion.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, Therman is the only one.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, I think people would generally say Therman Statom is the only kind of well-known across the—

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And it's a very interesting and big-picture question.

NEIL DUMAN: He did a couple of cast pieces, you know—[inaudible]—there was definitely an African-American feel, or African feel to the work.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He did—Therman did an installation at the Anderson Gallery, because I got a bunch of glass when they tore it down.

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: But we certainly didn't have any students—very, very few glass students. The fashion major; she did. The teacher; she did.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I think they'll be the largest to draw on right there.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah. But I've never met anyone.

KENT IPSEN: And you would think sculpture would be a wonderful medium to work with.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Do you—these are more the big-picture questions. Do you have any thoughts on where American craft—and for you I guess it would be most especially glass or ceramics—rank in the international realm?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, not 100 percent—probably 97 [percent] on a scale—very, very high. Very, very high. And I think that is in part due to the way that shows are set up.

The galleries here, they try to put together a show and send it to Italy or—I've spent a bit of time in Europe and Italy, and I rather suspect that particularly Italy would have heads and shoulders above us in terms of glassworking, with their glass factories somewhere.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Right, technique.

KENT IPSEN: But I think the fire has been lit on this side of the ocean, and this is where things are happening, I believe.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You mentioned controllers and the advantages of not having to throw switches all night. Woops. Are there other technological aspects that have impacted your career?

KENT IPSEN: Technological processes with this?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Or did you get involved at all with the Internet or any—

KENT IPSEN: Absolutely not.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Absolutely not. [Laughs.] We won't find you on Facebook.

KENT IPSEN: I just can't imagine.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, we did—

KENT IPSEN: I can get Channel 4, 12—that's about it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You're keeping it simple.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, man.

NEIL DUMAN: [Inaudible.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, we did have one of the very first Digitry computers.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what is that?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Digitry now, I think—I don't know if they now have them, but they were the first ones to give a controller for time and temperature.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay. Okay.

ROLANDA SCOTT: There's a number of companies now that make them, but Digitry was the first one, and I think we had one of the very first ones that they made.

NEIL DUMAN: That's what made the casting—what gave us the chance to do the big castings.

ROLANDA SCOTT: That's what really made the castings more possible.

NEIL DUMAN: [Inaudible]—walls that we put together—it was a homemade one, so we could hold it and ramp it at the right temperatures and the right times.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what about glass supplies? Where would you typically get those from?

KENT IPSEN: There are chemical houses—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Okay.

KENT IPSEN: —standard ceramic supply. Another popular ingredient is soda ash, and that's available from a company up in Maryland that pretty much sells just that. Supplies aren't hard to come by.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you buy glass at all from, like, Bullseye out in Seattle, or just you bought more locally it sounds like.

KENT IPSEN: Well, you don't buy glass; you make it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I mean the things—okay.

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: Basically we made a batch from scratch.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You'd start off right from—

NEIL DUMAN: Pulverized silica sand, soda ash, pot ash—

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: You mixed it.

NEIL DUMAN: One hundred pounds silica, 30 pounds soda, five pounds potassium carbonate—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Two pounds—

NEIL DUMAN: —five pounds lime, two pounds Flourspar—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: —four pounds barium.

KENT IPSEN: Don't forget that, because I have. [Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: And the wall that it was written on is no longer there, because I can remember —

NEIL DUMAN: That's right. You tore the wall down.

ROLANDA SCOTT: [Laughs.] Yeah, it was written by the fan on the wall where we would mix it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you would always use the same mixture, to begin with?

KENT IPSEN: If it works the first time, I would use it again and again and again.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, let's run through that recipe again.

NEIL DUMAN: One hundred pounds pulverized silica sand, two—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: One—we have to go more slowly. One-hundred pounds—

NEIL DUMAN: One-hundred pounds of silica sand that's either pulverized to 200 or 325 mesh. Everything is in a flour consistency. I think the state had the top 10 hazardous materials and seven of them were in the shop.

Thirty pounds soda ash.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Thirty or three?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Thirty.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Thirty pounds of soda ash.

NEIL DUMAN: Soda lime.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Soda—

NEIL DUMAN: Five pounds limestone, so soda lime glass. Three pounds—is it three pounds barium?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, three pounds barium.

NEIL DUMAN: Two pounds Flourspar.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Two pounds Flourspar.

NEIL DUMAN: Two pounds zinc oxide.

ROLANDA SCOTT: One pound arsenic. [Laughs.]

NEIL DUMAN: Oh, and a couple cups of arsenic, a couple—nitrate soda.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Some—what was the pellet stuff? Soda nitrate.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Nitrate of soda, which—

ROLANDA SCOTT: With a little bit of oil and some cobalt and manganese.

NEIL DUMAN: And then 1.2 grams of selenium and .2 grams cobalt.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That's quite a recipe.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And you put it in this cement mixer—

KENT IPSEN: Wish I'd written it down.

NEIL DUMAN: I know. And it was just a cement mixer. You threw some—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Which I have. I have the cement mixer.

NEIL DUMAN: You threw some cullet in and turned it on. [Makes cement mixer noise.] Just sort of that racket. And if you were lucky enough, you had the privilege of being the one to mix it. Then it was just scooped in—

ROLANDA SCOTT: And shovel it in.

NEIL DUMAN: —shovel it in, a few scoops and let it melt down, put in a few more and let it melt down, and it would be glass.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Crank it out.

KENT IPSEN: I think I left my cement mixer at your school.

ROLANDA SCOTT: No, I have it. You gave it to me, because I have it.

KENT IPSEN: You have it.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yep.

KENT IPSEN: Good.

ROLANDA SCOTT: I have the cement mixer.

KENT IPSEN: You never know.

ROLANDA SCOTT: One year we had very—or one batch we had really blue glass, or green. And the bolt in the cement mixer that kept the lid in place had come off and we had shoveled it into the furnace. And we couldn't figure out why it was green. And it was from the—it was the—

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: I think it was just stagnant on the bottom.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —because when I went to mix the next time and to hook the cord in the bottom and pull it up to keep it tight, it was gone.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So that's—

ROLANDA SCOTT: And that's what made the glass green.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —the mystery of the green glass.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Then we used—for the castings we found cullet. There were a couple cullet dealers—

NEIL DUMAN: And that was latex.

ROLANDA SCOTT: —dealing with lead crystal. And we've used Orrefors and—what was the company up in New Jersey? And there was another company in New York that we got lead crystal from. And that was—and that was before Internet. I spent a lot of time looking in card catalogues at the library, finding places. That's what's in the barrels.

NEIL DUMAN: That's what's in the black barrels is cullet, lead crystal. We used 24 [percent], 28 [percent], 32 percent.

ROLANDA SCOTT: We did make some lead crystal, and that was—but having that much PBO around is scary because it's so toxic. I'm surprised they didn't just declare the president's house a toxic waste—

NEIL DUMAN: Kent went to lead crystal because soda lime glass would—[inaudible]—too badly during the cooling.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And it would be—it wouldn't be clear.

NEIL DUMAN: So he went to lead.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you travel at all, internationally, in the United States, out East? Did you travel at all?

KENT IPSEN: Well, a bit, yeah. I was in the Army and I was in Japan for two years. Pretty much all over Europe. I never got to Russia.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you go to the Orrefors in Sweden?

KENT IPSEN: Yes. Yes, I did get there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I'm guessing you went to the island of Murano?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes. That was fun.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did you return to Japan after being in the service? Did you ever go back to

Japan?

KENT IPSEN: No, I never did. I have a daughter who is with a company that is kind of worldwide, and she's been to Japan and she's been to China. She's just been, like, everywhere. And she enjoys it. I wouldn't get all excited about it. You know, I wouldn't fight going, but I wouldn't get—and if I did, I'd just do it, you know? Wouldn't you?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: In terms of your teaching philosophy, was there—it sounds to me like your philosophy was to let your students learn or get inspired by watching you work. Were there people who either inspired you the same way, or their writing inspired you? Did you have any people of note that had the same kind of impact on you that we haven't, by chance, talked about?

KENT IPSEN: Well, yes. My faculty I think about occasionally. And, depending on the area, if it was ceramics, oftentimes the professor would start with a ball of clay and throw something.

He, unfortunately, would—you know, he'd get that far and he covered it all in plastic. And then we'd come back on Wednesday and uncover it and throw a little bit further, and then maybe do some trim. And the following Monday he put a handle on it. You really got the idea, but it sure looked like a boring process.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, a very slow process.

KENT IPSEN: And then other faculty just bang, bang, bang, think whether they pull now or not doesn't matter.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And move so fast maybe you couldn't almost watch or keep up with them. It sounds like there's two extremes.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. I think demonstrating is important.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Would you talk while you demonstrated, or would you just let people watch what you're doing? Would you explain as you—

KENT IPSEN: Well, if it was something critical like, "Oops, I got too much water on my clay that time."

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And it sounds like you pretty much worked with assistants.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: On the bigger stuff.

ROLANDA SCOTT: The bigger stuff.

NEIL DUMAN: On your smaller pieces, he never would.

ROLANDA SCOTT: No, Kent is not—like, if you look at a lot of places now, they've got a team that are—and each person does one thing, but Kent did it all. I mean, that's—

NEIL DUMAN: He threaded himself.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He did all the threading.

NEIL DUMAN: He had—

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: He never had heat shields. "Shield my arms. It's hot." He never had any of that. No, he was doing—his normal-size piece, you'd just sit and watch. When he went beyond that, what he'd basically need is somebody to take the block out of the bucket of water. And then he had assistants.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah. And that was the assistants. There was not anybody—

NEIL DUMAN: Or to open up the lids. They could—

[Cross talk.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: —that kind of stuff.

NEIL DUMAN: But as far as actually working, you just got to sit and watch.

ROLANDA SCOTT: It's hard. If you go into a shop right now, most any shop, one person doesn't do everything. Everybody has got pretty much—and there's all these people with protective sleeves and all this stuff. And, "Oh, I don't do this; you need to do this," or, "Sit and puff on this." And Kent just did it. I mean, he did everything.

And I know I've gone in a shop and looked where to hang my pipe and there's no pipe-hangers because you handed it to somebody else to hold. And it's like, why would I want them to hold it, you know?

NEIL DUMAN: Well, Kent's philosophy, he would say—

ROLANDA SCOTT: "If you can't do it by yourself"—

ROLANDA SCOTT: —if you learn with being dependent on somebody, and let's say you go into the studio and get some work done and that somebody's not there that day, what are you going to do? So if you learn independently and you just happen to have somebody there one day, that's fine. So we had to learn ourselves.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Although it was really hard when he did hand you something, if you didn't— [laughter]. I mean, I can remember him going to light up a cigarette and saying, "Hold this." And he'd have a great big bubble on the pipe, on the rail, you know, and I'm used to things like this and here it was just like this. And you'd sit there and go—[makes straining sound]—trying to hold it and turn it. And he'd take it and just do this and look at you like—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Make it look effortless.

NEIL DUMAN: And he had this little—I'm not sure what humor you would call it.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Sick.

NEIL DUMAN: —almost slapstick. And you have, like, a big piece, and you don't want to mess it up. You've been watching him work on this and—and he'll have it on the punty and he'll go, "Here, why don't you punty it up?" And you'll punty it up and he goes, "Are you ready for me to knock it off?" And, "What?" Bam. [Laughs.] When he knows you're not ready for it, that's when he would knock it

off.

KENT IPSEN: [Laughs.] That's—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Or, I can remember—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: It sounds like that's part of the learning process with you.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He'd blow a piece, or I'd be working at a different bench at a different furnace, and Kent would blow a piece and set it on the floor behind me and wait for it to blow up. And I didn't know it was there, and all of a sudden you'd hear this bang, you know, and—[laughter]. And he's sitting there going, he, he, he, he, he.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: It definitely sounds like a sense of humor is at work.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, I was working one day, and I don't have any depth perception, which—that's Chihuly's big thing. He doesn't have any depth perception because he doesn't have an eye. And I had gotten in the habit of when I would work I wore a flannel shirt, and I would lean over for the shirt to fall over my hand to gather.

So Kent was watching me, and I'd leaned over and the shirt is hanging down over my—so he comes up and he pulls the shirt up over his head like this and goes, "Can I help you?" [Laughs.] And I looked at him and I said, "That wasn't funny."

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well—

ROLANDA SCOTT: And he thought it was.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, it sounds like he thought it was.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He didn't realize that I couldn't see out of one eye and I didn't have—I couldn't, you know. I had to get almost in the furnace to gather.

[Cross talk.]

NEIL DUMAN: —your hands a few times.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Plus I'm short.

NEIL DUMAN: Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, I threw his glove by accident in the furnace and picked it up and got the crap burned out of my hand.

NEIL DUMAN: She didn't realize it was as in as it was.

ROLANDA SCOTT: But you didn't touch his tools. You know, you just did not touch his tools. And I picked up one of his gloves and threw something back in the furnace and it went in the furnace, and I picked it up. And he was blowing that day and I didn't have the nerve to tell him I'd burnt myself. And he looked at my hand and he says, "Get out of here and go put ice on it."

But blowing slots—blowing times were precious. You didn't waste a minute, if you could. And he was excellent. I mean, he—but the best this is he made it available for me.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, that sounds like a nice place to pause as we think about your students and your career, so let's take a little break.

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JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, we're back, after a brief break, once again.

This is Josephine Shea interviewing Kent Ipsen at his home and studio in Richmond, Virginia on the 4th of July, 2009, and this is disc number two.

Well, we just got back from a brief break, and we were able to look basically around in your studio. And one of the first things that we looked at was examples of your sketches. And you made a comment about sketching—

KENT IPSEN: [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —and how frequently it should be done. Because I said you hadn't really mentioned sketching.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, I didn't know you said sketches.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I think you made the analogy of comparing doing sketches as something that an artist should do every day, like brushing their teeth, without even thinking about it.

KENT IPSEN: Well, I guess that's probable.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And is that something you did? Would you do that first thing in the morning? I mean, excuse me, or first thing in the afternoon? [Laughs.]

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, right. I do so little of it. It's something that, like brushing your teeth, you should do it every day, don't you think?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, if you're getting ready for a piece of art that you're going to make, you need to look at it in more ways than just one.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And is it—most of the paper was rather oversize. Did you tend to work in that kind of a format, or did you have a particular sketch type of paper that you liked to use?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, most of that that you used was newsprint. It was real quick sketches, drawings—multiple drawings, different views of the same thing.

KENT IPSEN: I guess I like the bigger sheets.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Give you a little more room to work on?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, it's like driving it down the interstate, you know? Hold it at 60 or you're going 80. If I have a smaller sheet of paper I'm sure I'm going to run out of paper.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what type of crayon or pen or pencil did you use?

KENT IPSEN: Charcoal.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Charcoal.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. Natural wood charcoal.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: That you would sharpen with a knife?

KENT IPSEN: You can if you want.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You can?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I'm afraid we sharpened it on concrete or on a piece of sandpaper, whatever. And I rarely have to have a point on it.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, behind you is one of the kilns that you built, another example. Would you say this is about a medium-sized kiln or a big kiln for you, or how does that rate in your kiln builds?

KENT IPSEN: Well, I think this would be a big kiln, not the biggest-biggest, but it's a big kiln.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: One of the bigger ones.

KENT IPSEN: And the bigger the kiln, the more energy it takes to fire it all. So, if you want to do big pieces, well, then that's the price.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: We also looked at some of the wax—I don't know if you would call them midcasts [ph] or the master models that you made for some of your special commissions are still here in the studio.

KENT IPSEN: I don't know which waxes you're talking about.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: There's one above the sink of a young person that you said was a commission that you were working on for a local charity, was it?

KENT IPSEN: I don't remember what it was for, but it was done in clay and then a plaster mold was made of it. Then the clay was thrown away. [Inaudible]—the hot wax in it. And then after that cooled a little bit you'd pour off the excess wax, and pour a little more and out comes the wax.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And would you work the wax some more, or that would be the finished—

KENT IPSEN: Well, that would be the finished, or you could go back into it if you chose to. If the mold is perfect, the wax will come out perfect.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Then we also saw some very large cast glass hands. Now, what kind of glass did you use for that?

KENT IPSEN: That's a lead crystal, which means it's, like, 40 percent lead and the other ingredients, like sand and so forth, make up the balance of it. They were done as a commission to hold pages of the Bible, so it's a free-standing thing—this particular page of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, I guess. And that hand is holding it this way and that way.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I understand there was a process you used before you came about with that design. First you tried a more literal approach that actually showed the figures, and then I guess it was back to the drawing board.

KENT IPSEN: I don't know what you're referring to.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I heard that when you first showed your proposal with Moses and the two figures holding up his hands, the people said that they preferred to have no figures showing.

KENT IPSEN: I don't recall that.

ROLANDA SCOTT: That was the—

NEIL DUMAN: The commission down—for the synagogue down in Hampton.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: And the committee had to present the piece. And you presented the Moses study and they said, "At the synagogue we can't have any actual literal figures where the scene is. That's not acceptable." So you had to come up with a different idea. That's when you ended up doing the Ten Commandments with God's hands and—

KENT IPSEN: The fingers were a problem?

NEIL DUMAN: Not the fingers, just having an actual figure that you can recognize.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Because you can't have—you can't have images of people in a synagogue was the problem.

KENT IPSEN: The hands were okay?

NEIL DUMAN: The hands were okay.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, the hands were fine.

KENT IPSEN: All right.

ROLANDA SCOTT: They weren't a specific person.

NEIL DUMAN: Especially when the big ones are God's hands. God's hands are always good. You had God's hands bringing—

ROLANDA SCOTT: Handing it down.

NEIL DUMAN: —handing them down, and you had the smaller set of hands accepting it. And then they liked it. You said they had I don't know how many people on the committee, and how much fun you had meeting the committee members.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So commissions can be an interesting process.

We were also looking at some wonderfully shot black-and-white photographs of—you said it was your studio in Illinois.

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Was it Brookfield?

KENT IPSEN: Yes, that was Illinois, and the name of the town was—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I thought you said it started with a B—Brook—

KENT IPSEN: Well, there is a Brookfield. Come on, don't you know where I lived in Illinois?

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, I can't remember the name. You said it earlier and now I can't remember.

NEIL DUMAN: The United States.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And I'll read to you from the back of the photograph. It says, "I'm running one 80-pound furnace—pot furnace—and I'm kneeling in the barrel with two inches of O-felt [ph]"—or is it Q-felt? "To the right is an 18-inch-by-18-inch-by 24-inch brick oven that cools quite efficiently without controls. The shop is 24 feet-by-24 feet, with a rather low ceiling, but it works."

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And you can see yourself there.

KENT IPSEN: It was nice. It was a concrete building, and concrete roof with tarpaper over that. You really built up a lot of the heat without burning the place down.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And what was the process? How did you come to Virginia? Did they recruit you? Did you apply for a job at Virginia?

KENT IPSEN: I'm sure I applied. It's been so long I don't remember.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, that was—that was some years ago, because—

KENT IPSEN: Yes, it really was.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —you said you taught here for 20 years.

KENT IPSEN: I think that's right.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, that's about right.

NEIL DUMAN: Now, did you come to teach and then became chairman, or you came as chairman and then set up the program?

ROLANDA SCOTT: No, he came to teach.

NEIL DUMAN: You set the program up for us.

ROLANDA SCOTT: He set the program—I can remember that when you came you were teaching clay, and then you started the glass program. And it was a number of years later that he became department chairman.

KENT IPSEN: So I was hired as a potter.

ROLANDA SCOTT: As a clay instructor. That's right, because I remember looking into the program. I couldn't get in it because I was an art ed major.

KENT IPSEN: Well, it's too bad. Boy, that's terrible. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Those art ed majors.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Well, art ed majors were just kind of looked down on.

KENT IPSEN: Art educators didn't know anything about art in those days.

ROLANDA SCOTT: And it's still that way. You know, if—you must not be able to do art if you're going to be an art ed major. And it's always been that attitude.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Well, I wonder where art historians rate in that mix? We'll save that for another day.

So, you didn't say much about—if you become chair of the department, usually there's politics and bureaucracies that come along with universities. How did you deal with that?

KENT IPSEN: Let me think. [Laughs.]

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And committee meetings. I've heard there's a lot of committees.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yes, which I didn't care for.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did you stay head of the department until you retired?

KENT IPSEN: No.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You stepped down before?

KENT IPSEN: Yes. Yeah.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Although not too long ago I looked up on the Internet and he was still listed as head of the glass department.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you live on in the virtual world.

KENT IPSEN: I think there were problems with finances. I was trying to start a new program in glassworking, which required, oh, a pretty substantial amount of money for the furnaces and all of this.

I had a couple of faculty that I wouldn't approve for tenure, which made me very unpopular with two of the faculty who—you know, we had 10 faculty that didn't support it and it went through.

NEIL DUMAN: It was not your funnest time.

ROLANDA SCOTT: No, it's certainly not anything anybody really wants, I don't think, unless they like dealing with that kind of stuff. I wouldn't.

KENT IPSEN: It's a lousy job. If there's no money in the university budget, that's the department chairman's problem. I wasn't earning enough to pay for the department's expenses, so—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: it sounds like you would prefer to be out sailing.

KENT IPSEN: Absolutely. Oh, my goodness, yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And where did you sail?

KENT IPSEN: Just in the bay, no real long distance—down to Norfolk and back up—across the bay. I don't remember where I went across the bay, but I know I went across the bay. And that was a lot of fun.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: I was going to say, would you do that every weekend or—

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —that the weather was—

KENT IPSEN: Oh, sure, sure. It's too big an investment to just buy and let it sit. You'd be better off selling it, I guess.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And did your children sail with you?

KENT IPSEN: Did who?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Did your children sail with you?

KENT IPSEN: Oh, sure. It's a little difficult now that I have two in California. But I don't know if they come back to go sailing or not, but when they come back the boat's available.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then maybe you could tell me a little bit about the space that we're in. How long have you had this studio?

KENT IPSEN: About 20 years.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So you got it quite early on.

KENT IPSEN: Yes.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And tell me the process. How did you find it?

KENT IPSEN: I believe Artie [ph], one of the guys that was down here, knew a realtor, and Artie was looking for a place and this guy came up with this property. And Artie was acquainted—we were acquainted but—he was a bartender about the time I met him. And Myron [ph] was into sculpture then.

I just heard it was for sale. So the three of us came over with a realtor and bought it. And it's worked out pretty nice. I get along well with the other partners, as far as I know.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: They were talking about how you ended up on the first floor.

KENT IPSEN: First floor?

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Of a three-story building.

KENT IPSEN: I guess because I run these very hot ovens, they thought it would be better if I did that on a concrete floor than a wooden floor. That was one reason. Artie's a photographer and he

had a lot more light throughout his building—wonderful sunsets and—[inaudible]—as well.

And Myron, I just don't know. I guess he just didn't want anybody making noise on top of him, but Artie's—[inaudible]. Artie's had some pretty good parties up there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And that's very interesting that you've been in this studio space for 20 years.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: You must have a lot of memories here.

KENT IPSEN: Oh, yeah.

NEIL DUMAN: There used to be a Jaguar right there.

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, it is a little strange not seeing the Jag.

NEIL DUMAN: What year was the Jag? Do you remember what year the Jaguar was?

KENT IPSEN: Say what?

NEIL DUMAN: Do you remember what year your Jaguar was?

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, it was a '60—

ROLANDA SCOTT: It was an E-Type—E-Type Jag. The hood on it went for 20 feet at least. I mean, it was huge.

KENT IPSEN: Maybe 1959? The Coupe, Jaguar Coupe.

NEIL DUMAN: And you used to drop in—

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And you could just drive it right in your garage door here.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah, I kept it in here with the intention of restoring it. And my son from California was here and he put it on a trailer and took it to California.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So now it's his project.

KENT IPSEN: Yeah. I hope he has more luck than I.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then, as we looked around the studio, there are gifts from different artists who you've traded with and worked with, and then also some examples of your ceramic pieces are still in the studio. They're above the sink. We got to take them down and look at them and look at your signature, so we know you did them.

KENT IPSEN: I can't get away with anything around here. [Laughs.]

ROLANDA SCOTT: Here are the big clay pieces, including the one that didn't look so nice to touch. It was signed by all your children.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: So, a lot of wonderful memories in this studio. I'm sure you have a lot of wonderful memories with your students and the assistants and the people who you've taught.

And then, there's wonderful memories, in a sense, with the glass pieces that are in public collections, like the Smithsonian. And your piece, the last time I was out at the Renwick, was on view. So it's a wonderful legacy that you have.

KENT IPSEN: Yes, it's nice. It's very—[inaudible].

ROLANDA SCOTT: Yeah, when I looked on the Internet this morning, the piece at Wheaton is one of the small hands with the flowers in it at the Creative Glass at the American Museum of Glass, as a casting there.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: And then we also very much appreciate you taking the time to sit and talk about your memories, your experiences—

KENT IPSEN: I'm enjoying sitting down too.

JOSEPHINE SHEA: —and your work. [Laughs.] Well, we all have. Thank you so much.

KENT IPSEN: You're so welcome. If you think of—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]