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Oral history interview with Roxanne Swentzell, 2011 November 8-9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Roxanne Swentzell on November 8 and 9, 2011. The interview took place in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, and was conducted by Mija Riedel 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.

Roxanne Swentzell has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Roxanne Swentzell at the artist's home and studio in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, on November 8, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc number one. Good morning.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Good morning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's start with some early biographical material, move through that, and then we can move into the work in specific. You were born in Taos in 1963?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: '62.

MIJA RIEDEL: '62, good, all right. And what was the date?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: December 9, 1962.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Taos, New Mexico.

MIJA RIEDEL: All righty, and was that the Taos Pueblo as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My parents were living up at Taos Pueblo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. And your mother is Rina?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Rina Swentzell. And she was born of the Naranjo family.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and your father is Ralph Swentzell?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and let's see. Well, and your grandmother was Rose Naranjo, yes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you pronounce it Naranjo? [*J* pronounced like *h.*]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Naranjo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And so clearly you come from this extraordinary extended family of ceramic artists.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And then your father was of German descent, though.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, he was of German descent, a philosopher, and a teacher at St. John's College.

MIJA RIEDEL: So as a young child, did you grow up on Santa Clara, or did you grow up in Taos?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Actually, first years were in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because they were going to school there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then my father got a job at St. John's College in Santa Fe. So we moved to Santa Fe.

MIJA RIEDEL: And he was teaching philosophy?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He was teaching — they teach the whole gamut, from math to science to music to reading the great books. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So the whole thing. So he was — he taught there, and we lived in Santa Fe and I grew up there. But we were still part of the pueblo very much because our family was all here.

MIJA RIEDEL: So did you go back and forth a lot as a child?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and your mother worked as a potter at the time, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My mother was a potter. Early on, she wanted to make dishes for —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — the family, so she was interested in throwing on the wheel, which was an odd thing for a Pueblo woman to do. But she wanted to learn that whole aspect, and she did. And she made all our dishes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, did she learn that when your parents were studying at school together? Was that where she was exposed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, she was exposed to that I think at Highlands University [NM]. And then she brought it home and she set up a shop in the garage, and that's where I first got clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. So as a child, you grew up watching your mom throw on the wheel.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was she doing any sculpting, or was it primarily wheel work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Wheel work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. Now, *her* mother had been a potter but not a wheel — she didn't work on the wheel.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: She made vessels, though. Correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. How was that received? Was there — was there any — because it was quite a —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think my mother had to sort of fight the — you know, the stereotypes that were placed on traditional women. And she had to, you know, break some

molds [laughs]. She dug most of her clay. So on one level she was very much still a traditional potter in that she dug her own clay. She dug her own glazes out of the hills around here. So it wasn't — she didn't have, you know, a chemistry degree or anything like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: She still — she made stoneware in an old kind of way. And then she worked on a kick wheel. So it was — and still to this day, I remember when the new highway was coming through, they were digging the side of this hill away that we used to go dig clay for her to make glazes with. And it was traumatic for us because they were taking away our clay source —

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine. And there was nothing to be done about that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — the highway was going to go through there. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So was that the clay source as well as the glaze source?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a glaze source that was very precious to her and —

MIJA RIEDEL: Specific colors or the actual components of the glaze?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How awful. So was she — what did she do? Did she have to completely redefine or reformulate her glazes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think that was just *that* clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I mean, I guess you could take it to a chemist, and they could figure out what elements created that particular thing. But to just have it out of a spot in the landscape is different than creating it in a lab.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. And that's, I think, especially interesting for the Archives of American Art because I think most of the artists that I've spoken with certainly that are ceramic artists, nobody goes to dig their own clay.

Nobody goes to dig their own glazes. Maybe they try that occasionally as an experiment, but nobody produces work from materials that they've mined themselves. Is that the way that she worked pretty much exclusively?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Pretty much. We would, you know, be driving for a picnic or something and she'd see some clay on the side of the road and wanted to test it. So we'd have to — one of us — she'd say, "Give me a sock." [They laugh.] Have to take off — someone donated a sock, and she'd fill it up with some of that dirt on the side of the road.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then she'd go home and test it, meaning she'd fire it at different temperatures and see what it did. So yeah, she was — she worked like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So as a child, that must have been a pretty extraordinary way to grow up because not only was she making pots but there was a little bit of a science lab going on at the same time while there was just continuous —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It opened it to — like, you can experiment with things. It's not a stuck way to do things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and it's not, "Oh, there are three types of clay and that's what you have to work with."

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's actually sort of hard to comprehend what that would be like. And who would

you — in terms of clay, would she have a place that she would return to time and time again that would be a large source, or would she constantly have to be looking for new material?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, you find a clay source usually, and if you find that it works well to what you're wanting, it becomes very precious. That's why that highway going through that spot, that was a very good clay. It was a very good glaze. And we filled up a — you know, a trashcan full of it before they came and destroyed the whole thing, hoping that that would serve a lifetime. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But eventually she gave up pottery because she had arthritis, and the clay was making it worse.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet. I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I think it's important that she did it that — in that manner, for me, because she — it taught me about what clay *is* in the landscape and where to find it in a very raw way. It's not high-tech.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right — how to go dig it

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's reachable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, it's very reachable, and it's not limited.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was there also — then did you learn how to experiment with the clay body, so if it needed some temper or if it needed different clays, you could combine two to get a more workable clay body?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. And that was really your experience growing up as a child.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's amazing knowledge to have, I think, growing up.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, you think about going to college to learn glaze calculation, to learn about different clay bodies and how to formulate them.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And here you are as a child going out and digging them and putting it in your socks.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And you began working with clay very early on yourself.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Very young, about three.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I had a hard time speaking because I had a speech impediment that made it really hard for people to understand me. So I would use clay to make little figurines right away that would speak for me.

So I remember, you know, being a little girl, and I'd get some of my mother's clay, and I'd be frustrated because I couldn't get them to understand what I was saying. And I'd quickly make a figure that was representing me. But it would show what I was feeling or what I was seeing or whatever it was. And then I'd give it to her. And that was how I began.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's so interesting. I mean, you're sketching immediately in clay. It's

personal narrative from the time you can practically make your hand and eye coordinate together, I imagine.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And so much of that seems to be a through line through the work, a sense of personal narrative and emotional communication.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes, it's still doing what it began to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know from your mother's side of the family that clearly clay and ceramics and art was something that was respected and supported in your family, or I imagine it was. Certainly there were generations of potters on your mother's side.

What about your father's family? Was art something that was respected there? Was there an exposure to a different way of thinking about art from his side of the family?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think — well, my mother's side of the family, well, there was not really a sense of artists. You just made things because you're a human being, and humans like to make things. [Laughs.] And so, you know, that we knew how to use clay was not a big deal. It was ordinary in our life for thousands of years.

So it's a — you know, everyone played with clay. And whether it was clay or doing your farming or building your houses out of adobe and plastering every year with mud, it was — you knew your dirt. [They laugh.] If you needed a dish, you make some — a dish out of it. If you need a house, you make a house of it.

From my father's cultural background, there was artists, those great people. There was a hierarchy of who's important. And so that was — that's a very different way of looking at the world. And, you know, without judging it, I think there's good things to both.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so, you know, he introduced me to — I think both my parents saw that I had — I had some talent, I guess you would call it, or that I had interest in the arts [laughs]. So my father would definitely encourage me in that because every once in a while he would show me an art book. And I loved that.

I loved seeing books of Michelangelo. I loved seeing Rodins and all those, you know, European artists that were amazing to me. I couldn't believe what they were doing. It was stunning. And it excited me to no end. And at the same time, there's a push to it, like, "Well, what can *you* do," instead of just letting you be whatever. So there's pluses and minuses to both. [Laughs.] But I know they both influenced me very much.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Would they take you to museums as a child to see different sorts of work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I don't remember doing that. I remember my father sitting down with me with an art book of paintings and talking to me about the colors they used, and there was — it was exciting to me too to look at art in that — in that way. It was a first.

I think by the time I got into art school, I knew a lot because of my father, because he would talk about perspective and color components and composition and all those sort of things. So I was getting educated by him in that way, a little bit through him. I forget your question. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, just — all right, whether, yeah, your father was introducing you to — well, I think we were talking about museums and whether you'd visited any of those. But then you're talking about — it sounds like your experience was more personal with your father through books.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was more personal, yes, through books. And we lived, you know, in Santa Fe. There wasn't — we didn't have big museums to go to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And your father was American-based by then. He was German descent but he wasn't German.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He grew up in New Jersey.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. [They laugh.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He's a New Jersey baby —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. [They laugh.] Did you take any art classes as a child? Thinking elementary school, junior high, before you get to high school because I know in high school it became more important, but —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: When I was young, I took a printmaking class by a printmaker, Frank Flynn — [inaudible] —

MIJA RIEDEL: You were quite young. This was '71, right?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It sounds right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were 10 or 12?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because I liked to draw. I liked to, you know, anything —

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you liked to draw as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, I would draw.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I would — but I think the sculpting was exciting to me in a way that the drawing felt limited because it was flat. [Laughs.] And clay was just wonderful stuff to use. It could do anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: The printmaking with — it was printmaking?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a printmaking.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were — this was elementary school?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was at a class that was offered at elementary school or something your parents —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a private class, a private class. And I also did a small study with my uncle. My uncle, Michael Naranjo, is a sculptor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he — to me, as a child, he was my hero. I couldn't believe what he could do. Of course, he was sculpting, which I loved to do. But he was doing it blind. And that was intriguing to me. So I would sit there with him and close my eyes, or sometimes the light bulbs weren't in the room. So he would, you know, be sculpting and I'd get to be in the dark with him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was fascinating to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: How old were you when you first — when you remember this first?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was elementary school still.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and did he — he sculpted figures, Roxanne? Did he sculpt other things as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He would sculpt sometimes animals, mostly figures, and sometimes he'd do people's busts. He would do their faces. And they were just like them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.] They were perfect. My memory was that they were exactly like the person. And he'd sit there and he'd feel the person's face, and then feel his sculpture and then feel their face. And they'd sit there and let him touch their face for days. And he'd make their face.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's an extraordinary story.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Isn't that beautiful? And I knew he could see that way because I saw what he could then represent with the clay afterwards. And he would — you know, he'd say, "Come here and let me see you," and you'd have to walk over to him and he'd touch your face. And he'd tell you, "Oh, you're getting older," or whatever — [they laugh] — or tease you about something. But I knew he could see through his fingers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. That must have — that's a profound story at any age. But I imagine as a child, that would have been extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when you say he was your hero, what specific about him was inspiring to you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That he was doing — he was doing sculpture and I was doing sculpture already by then, and he was so good at it and he couldn't see. And he was such an incredible human being.

And you know, his personality was part of it because he was — he *is* absolutely optimistic, given what he's been through, and still, you know, able to put beauty into the world and use what he has to — maybe I identified in that I couldn't speak and he couldn't see.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And yet he could do amazing things. So I could too maybe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And when you say you did a sort of apprenticeship with him, I assume you were still in elementary school or junior high? And what did that entail? Did you show up a certain number of days a week? Was it formal or informal?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was kind of informal. He, like, was going to show me how to do one of his armature pieces out of that sort of waxy clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So we built a wire armature thing and then started building the clay on top of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that was all it was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I would imagine that school was pretty frustrating, and that you didn't like it terribly much. It wasn't a happy place. So this must have been a wonderful place, a wonderful opportunity, in a sense, of what the world could hold.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So I know that you said you had a hard time speaking. But reading was no problem. You could read and write without a problem. Is that true?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, although I wasn't very good at school. So I wasn't very good at

those things. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And already you were much more interested in the clay and in sculpting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: From the beginning.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: From the beginning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. And it sounds as if your parents were really supportive of that as well.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I would say they were.

MIJA RIEDEL: One thing I wanted to mention: I read somewhere that you — as a family, you built a catenary arch kiln. Is that true?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: How old were you? What an experience!

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: How old were we? We were young again, probably elementary school. My mother was wanting a gas kiln. So she studied up on it, her and my dad, and figured out —read — how to build a catenary arch.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, sure.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So we all went out there and we built it. [Laughs.] And she used it for years and years.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know that was — I know building kilns became really popular when Voulkos was teaching at Otis [College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, CA], and then Paul Soldner did a lot of books on building kilns. But I just think as a child that must have been a pretty impressive experience: to go out with your parents and build a kiln and then watch your mother fire in it for years. Or did you just think —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, I guess this was one more thing that, you know, if you want something, you can figure out how to do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But it goes along with the clay. It's like, do you need to go to the clay store? No, you can go dig it in the hills.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: How do you fire? I mean, I grew up where people fired out in their driveway. So building a kiln is very fancy. [They laugh.] It's a very fancy pit, firing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But it's still a kiln. You just have to get the clay hot enough.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But we grew up — my parents very much installed in us kids that you can do what needs to be done. So that's why I could build a house at 22 years old. There was a sense of confidence in doing things yourself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have siblings?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I have a brother and two sisters.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And are — do either of them work in the arts? Any of them work in the arts?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My older sister builds straw bale houses, which I think is an artistic — the way she does it is a very artistic event. And she works with different muds and clay floors. Her stuff is spectacular. So she does. That's my son. [He knocks softly.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Shall we pause this for a moment?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

Hey, Porter.

[Audio Break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and what's her name?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Athena Swentzell.

MIJA RIEDEL: Athena?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, actually — yeah, Athena.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My father [laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Athena Steen is her name now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they run — they have an institute called the Canelo Project.

MIJA RIEDEL: Canelo?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Canelo.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what is that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's all about —

MIJA RIEDEL: Straw bale homes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Based on that, but they branch out from there. It's pretty cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'll have to look that up.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, it's worth looking at. My little sister dabbles in art here and there, but mostly she's a massage therapist. And my brother's a biologist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. All that time digging clay out in the fields gave him a love of the earth. [They laugh.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, I think he was more the hunter. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh I see, okay. [They laugh.] In high school, it seems like art became an increasing part of your life. And you mentioned — I read somewhere about a high school art teacher, Phil Karshis, who was very influential. Was that during your freshman year in high school?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And where was the high school? What was it?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was the Santa Fe High School.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it sort of actually began in junior high with a woman named Sharon Woods.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she was my junior high art teacher.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was that in Santa Fe as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And —

MIJA RIEDEL: And what happened in her class? What did — yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was just these particular individuals along my path that were — took the time to go, "Hey, you're something special. I'm going — I'm going to try to help you out here." And she was one of those people who went, "Wait a minute, this is a special child, and you need to nurture what's here."

And so she took care of me for those two years of junior high. And when I was graduating junior high and going into high school, she was scared for me, and she went — took me, drove me to the high school, and handed — personally handed me to Phil Karshis and says, "You take care of this girl. She's special and don't let go of her." And he did. And he's still in my life to this day. And I'll start crying — [laughs] — a very special person.

MIJA RIEDEL: When people speak about — and who have been fortunate enough to have teachers like that who went out of their way to mentor them, it is really powerful.

And it's interesting to note that you in turn then have gone out of your way, I know, from your teaching experience and a number of the different things you work on to mentor young people yourself. So it seems a gift that you have carried forward.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, and he's a special person. And he did that for a lot of people.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard a number — I've talked to a number of artists who have said that, if it were not for an art teacher in high school or in — even in junior high that really took them aside because they weren't — things — they weren't fitting in or they had problems in school, maybe something wasn't working out with their home life.

But they had a gift and — but somebody took time to notice and then to help nurture that. And William Morris, the glass artist, is one who's mentioned that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh, really?

MIJA RIEDEL: He's the one who comes immediately to mind. But I know there are a few others and — but the way he spoke about it, it was — it was a seminal moment in life. It changed things.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. That's for me, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Phil Karshis was a light that was very helpful for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were there — were there specific skills that he helped you learn? Where there — was it a new way to see the world through art? Was it a belief in seeing the world in a different way? Can you elaborate a little bit on what he was able to do?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He cared. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think, you know, I had — I had a lot of skill by then. By the time I was in his class, I was beyond where the class was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he gave me a special space in the classroom that was for my use. Because I was advancing in areas he — that the class wasn't yet at. And so he — you know, he supplied that space and he created — he even, like, made a new class that I was the only student of —

MIJA RIEDEL: My gosh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — so that I could keep advancing at the level I was going at. And he just watched over me. It was a sense of someone really letting you know you matter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he did that. I saw him not only do that to me. He did that with a number of artists, other students that were mostly troubled students or struggling with home stuff or in the D-home or whatever. And he changed their lives by just caring and set them up in schools that fit them and promoted — you know, helped them, steered them in good directions.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was — it's Santa Fe public high school?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so were you painting? Were you sculpting?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a ceramic class at the time. Later, he did some jewelry. He changed, later after I left, into computer graphics. So he was just an art guy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, versatile.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he's still in my life today because he helps me — he works actually for the Pueblo Pojoaque, which is near my gallery. [Laughs.] So I see him still around. And if I ever need help, he'll come help me with computer stuff or graphic design stuff that we need. And yeah, he's still there.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a great — that's decades.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that's extraordinary continuity.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was the first two years of high school, your freshman and sophomore year, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: All four years.

MIJA RIEDEL: All four years?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Then did you — you studied also, though, at the Institute of the American Indian Art in Santa Fe, yes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right, in the second year — the third year of high school, Phil Karshis decided that I needed to be more advanced, because I had done — I had gone through the whole program.

He felt like he couldn't be teaching me anymore. So he got me into the Institute of American Indian Art. So I was still in high school, but he got me into the other school, the art school, at the same time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were still too young for that school?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They let me in. They interviewed me and they saw my work, and they let me in at that early age.

MIJA RIEDEL: So was that something that happened on the weekends, or how did that work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, it was, like, half a day I would be at one school, and then the half of the day I'd go do my math and science and stuff at the high school, so I could graduate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And then the other half of the day you were completely ensconced in art classes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: How extraordinary!

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that a — did that open the world for you again?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Going to the institute, Indian Art Institute, was amazing because it was all about art. And it was the first time that I was immersed in cultural art, if I could say that, of Indian tribes from all over the country —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — I didn't know existed, you know. We were a little small world over here, and we thought pueblos were all there was [laughs]. And suddenly there were so many tribes that I couldn't name.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they were all coming to this school and painting and making art, and it was cool. So we — you know, there was a big exchange that happened at that point, and made some friends that were lifelong at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I'd like to spend a little time examining how that experience affected your thinking about art and your own work. Were you committed to figurative sculpture at this time?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You know, I would paint. I would draw. I would make jewelry. I would — I was doing everything. But ceramic figurines were still my language.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was still — I was still having trouble talking through this time. So I still found it easier to sculpt a figure of what I needed to say than speak it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. I didn't realize that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it was still my language. So when I got to the institute, it was a little bit strange because they were going, "Well, you can make art and sell it." I had never thought to sell art. It was the way I spoke. So it was a new concept to think of it as art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did your Uncle Michael not sell his work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He did but I didn't — I was a little kid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You don't think about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see. And were you exposed specifically to other traditional Indian tribes and Indian art, or were you exposed to also, you know, other kinds of work that was happening in the country at the time? Was the emphasis still specifically Indian work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Very Indian-oriented —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — more than — I mean, before I was less. It was just, life was life. I went to high school, it was just I was surviving, and at home you just made little clay sculptures. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And my mother made pots, and that was the whole world. And so the concept of art or culture was not conscious.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly. So this was a much more conscious focus on that way of — that type of art and that way of thinking, that way of being in the world.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes. And I became aware that there was art associated with culture for the first time at that point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it troubled me. It wasn't, like, "Oh cool." It was, like, "Huh?"

[Telephone rings.]

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you say that this was the first time you became aware of art associated with culture and "it troubled me." Would you elaborate?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was the first time I became aware that people were then being boxed in categories.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see. I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I don't — I hadn't experienced that before.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because growing up with a father from New Jersey of German ancestry and a mother from Santa Clara Pueblo and native, there was just a big mix of the world?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it wasn't — like, we weren't trying to be Indians or we weren't trying to be white people or we weren't trying to be anything. We were just surviving. We were just living our lives.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And suddenly at art school you were supposed to make Indian art so that you could sell it to white people.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that was a big, like, "what," you know? And that was — at that time, IAIA, the Indian art school, they were pushing that a lot, trying to encourage the students to make art that sold. And what art sold? Stereotypical Indian art —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — or Indians on horseback.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was not at all the sort of work that you were making or had ever made.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, no. I never did that. It was, like, I wanted to tell my mom, "I'm not happy in school," or it didn't have anything to do with — I'm —

MIJA RIEDEL: So did you then have difficulty at that school because you weren't interested in making that kind of work or was there room —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was taken aside by one of the teachers at one point and — because I had just finished a painting of a striped blue-and-white figure that looked like a space alien. [Laughs.] And they were troubled by that because they didn't understand what I was doing because it wasn't an Indian on horseback.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So he took me aside and explained to me that I wasn't doing the correct kind of artwork. [They laugh.] And then I asked him, "what kind of artwork was I supposed to be doing," and he explained to me that, "Art that will sell is the stuff that the outside world wants Indians to make," and explained that. And I remember looking at him saying, "If I'm — if I'm a native person, then whatever I make is native-made."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So don't put me in that box. So yeah, there was — there was some problems there, but mostly not. I ignored it and I continued doing what I needed to do, and there was a wonderful ceramic teacher there. I don't know how much he taught, but he certainly gave the ceramic students a lot of space and a lot of just opportunities to try everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so he was — he was great.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he wasn't so concerned that you only make coiled vessels and that you only make figures —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, he didn't care.

MIJA RIEDEL: — or animal figures, yeah?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were able to stretch there.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. He just wanted to know if it would fit in the kiln. [They laugh.] You know, it was that sort of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there the clay was clearly coming from —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was commercial clay —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — but buckets and buckets of it, more clay than I'd ever seen.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we could use as much as we wanted, and it was, like, "Wow." So we had fun making clay things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And is that one reason why — because your work began to get larger at this point too, did it not?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and maybe there was so much clay you could — you felt free to expand.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, probably. [They laugh.] Yeah, bigger kilns. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And so this — I'm trying to — this was 1978 to 1980, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting to me because when I look at your work, look at the progression of your work over the past 20, 30 years, I look at two of the pieces that were made around this time. I'm thinking of *The Four Stages of Alcoholism* in 1979 and in *The Pueblo Clown* from 1980. And it seems that a lot of the emphasis on personal narrative, on psychological narrative, on social and cultural and emotional commentary is already apparent in those two pieces.

And did it feel — does it feel that way to you, that you have — from the very beginning you had a clear sense of the sorts of things that you were interested in exploring through art and they are things that you've continued to develop, or does it feel like it's changed drastically in some way?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I don't think so because I'm — you know, I'm the same person, hopefully evolving along and so there's issues I'm dealing with always —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — still. And I'm — and there are certain themes that have caught my interest that continue through it.

MIJA RIEDEL: What would you — how would you describe those themes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I would say understanding myself as a female is one. I would — another is cultural issues because of my parents and the world I live in and relationship stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Those would probably be my three top. Let me put wood in that fire.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm getting cold.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's worth noting since you just popped up that we're conducting your interview in a house that you built when you were 20 or 21 years old.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's adobe?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's adobe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Brick?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's a passive solar adobe house.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's exquisite.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you built it when you were 20 years old.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, I needed a home. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Just a couple more thoughts about the Institute of American Indian Arts — what would you describe as the strengths and the weaknesses of that program for you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The strengths was the connection with other artists and people in my similar standing, and the weaknesses was that the school seemed unclear what it was trying to do. It wasn't — it wasn't — interesting, a year after I left, it collapsed and it had to be rebuilt in a different location. It literally, like, dissolved for a year.

MIJA RIEDEL: It literally physically collapsed? The structure collapsed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, another school actually came in one day and moved their stuff out and moved their other stuff — their stuff in and took over. It was, like, an invasion.

[Laughs.] And we came to school the next day, and our school didn't exist.

There were other people in our classrooms. There was — they had pushed us out. That's how weak the school had gotten, that somebody else could come in that way and just take it over. Isn't that bizarre? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't even — yes, I can't begin to fathom something like that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I think they were faltering already.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And were there other students there that you found inspiring? There were other students that you could help build ideas with?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think what I got — inspired. I was more caught by their life experiences.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was very much interested in other people who were being so-called artists that were going through similar stuff that I was, from, you know, tribes that I never heard of. And it was just — I loved their stories. I was interested in them. And yes, they made beautiful things, and it was cool to see what everyone was making. But I think I was always more interested in who they were.

MIJA RIEDEL: And in their stories?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, in their story.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that makes sense. Was it Ralph Pardington? Was he the ceramic teacher?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, okay. Now, is this — you had an exhibition at the end of your high school, yes, at the institute?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And I read someplace that people came and wanted to buy your work.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And would you tell that story?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.] Yeah. Well, they gave me a one-woman show, which was my first show. And I collected all — what I made. And —

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, the school had found another place to exist?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, they were — they were still kind of — both-here-and-out-the-door kind of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But they still had their little museum building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was not very — two-room space that they used to show their shows in, a gallery space. So they set that up for me and made a little sign with my name on it. I remember being so excited to have my name up on the wall. [Laughs.]

And it was — a lot of people came, and some people from Niagara Falls came. And they were setting up a show there for their grand opening of the Niagara Falls new something or the other and wanted to ship my whole show out there. And so they wanted to buy the whole thing. And I didn't price anything because it had never occurred to me to sell anything. And they asked me how much I wanted for it.

MIJA RIEDEL: For the whole show?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, they wanted the whole show. And I says, "I don't know. Go talk to my mom." [Laughs.] So they went to talk to my mom, and my mom stood there and scolded them. [Laughs.] And I think they were shocked. Because they had never encountered somebody who didn't want to sell their work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she, you know, told them that — to leave me alone, that that was not — to not put money — to not put the value of it that way because it was "not where she's at and leave her alone. Go away." And they were — they left. [Laughs.]

Then I was confused because it was the first — it did break a bubble that I had been in which is, like, I was just doing what I was doing. And suddenly it was, like, you know, "people would buy this" was what broke that bubble. It's, like — and so that thought came into my head for the first time at that point.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were 17, 18?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was 17.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, which seems such an extraordinary experience, doesn't it?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: When I think back —

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was, like, so innocently going along.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so when I think about art students today or the undergraduate, so many are clearly preparing so carefully for an art career.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: — and how to support themselves and to have —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It wasn't a career. It was — it was part of my body. It was my language.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that there is something extremely profound there and formative that somehow is — informs your work, still, I think. Does it feel that way to you, too?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think so, too. The older I get, the more I'm appreciative of that whole experience, even though it was painful. It's amazing I found a way to speak that way and can still use it today.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Because the work does feel different than so much other ceramic work and so much other sculptural work. There is a quality to it, and it's hard to put my finger on it.

But when I've been reading about your work and looking at it and thinking about it in preparation of the interview, I think that there are certain pieces or moments or experiences that somehow feel as if they've had ripple effects throughout your work and career, and somehow that struck me as an experience that felt as if it informed the work — and also a changing moment in the work and in your career, where all of a sudden the realization arrives that one could make a living and could support oneself.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Somebody might want to buy these things.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah, which was okay too, once I realized it won't — it won't hurt me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My mother made it seem like some scary thing had happened. And

you know, after I mulled it over a few years —

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Then it was, like, "Well, it would be nice to buy food." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I'll still — I mean, if they want to buy what I spoke, then okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. But that was not the reason for making the work, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, and that's what I had to get real clear.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's a very subtle point, but I think it's a really powerful point and it's a very distinctive point.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I think it was very disturbing to me to then go to the Portland Museum Art School later, and the whole point was to be artists that go have a career and make — and actually I don't think I fit in because I didn't make art for that reason. And I didn't feel like I was an artist then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you go there directly afterwards at 18?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how did you decide to — on Portland Museum? It was Portland Museum Art School, correct, in Oregon?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Portland Museum Art School. Someone told me that they focused more on the human figure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, ah, I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so that was why I chose there because that's what I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I thought, "Well, I don't mind learning more about the human figure."

MIJA RIEDEL: That was 1980?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: 1980.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So you went there — is it a one-year program? Was it a one-year program?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a four-year program.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, four-year program I think. I went there for one year.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were the strengths and weaknesses of that program?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Strengths and weaknesses — I thought — you know, right next door to them was the university, Portland University. And I remember waking over to the university and seeing their art show that they were having and being amazed at what they were producing versus what the art school was producing. And I was trying to figure that out the rest of the year, what was making the art students be less creative than the university art students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I came up with the conclusion that it's because they narrowed it down to just art. And when you're making art for art's sake, it dies. It has to be fed by life or by other classes that are — the university people had a much broader view of things going on than the art school students, who were just concerned with color arrangements or

something.

I don't know. [Laughs.] That was, I would say, the weakness of an art school. I would probably guess that's something that they would struggle with, all art schools. The strength of it was there were some good teachers

MIJA RIEDEL: Anybody in particular that you recall?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm trying to remember names. I'm not going to remember the names. But there was the ceramic teacher at the time that I thought was thinking deeper —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — and I appreciated him for that. And there was a life drawing teacher that was just — she was wild and great. I liked her. And that experience, it was the first time I had gone away from New Mexico in my little world here out into the big world of a big city. So just the going away was very important for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wonder if you could say — I'm thinking about another one of the questions on this list — three different things about the relationship of university training and art school training and the strengths of artists or the differences between artists that have learned to make art in a university setting versus artists that have learned to make art not in a university setting. And clearly you chose not to stay in the art school.

But you didn't choose to go to the university, either. You chose to come home. Was there a reason — was there a reason you were not interested in going to a university? Was there a reason you preferred to come home?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, I wasn't interested in getting a degree. I wasn't interested in higher education in the way universities perceived higher education. I think that school was always difficult for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so the way they proceeded to teach students was very difficult for me. And I found that life experiences were way better than going and sitting in a classroom or reading about it in a book.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I found that if I just lived my life, I'd learn a lot. And I remember walking to school in Portland one morning or sat many mornings and I'd have to go across a couple of blocks, and there were a lot of homeless people.

And I'd never seen homeless people before. I was so intrigued with the homeless people. And then I'd, you know, go into the school, close the doors, and then we'd talk about color composition or things that had nothing to do with what I saw on the street.

It was, like, I wanted to know what was going on that those people were living in a cardboard box. I wanted to know — [inaudible] — there was real life happening. It was driving me nuts to sit in a classroom and talk abstract things that had nothing to do with what was going on in my personal life or those people's lives or anybody else's personal lives.

It was detached to a place that drove me nuts because I had worked so hard to do my sculptures from a place that had everything to do with my personal life and to detach them and make them into an object of art that had, you know — I don't know — put it on the mantle. Or I don't — I couldn't — why.

It took all the meaning of my life away. So why do that? And universities just seemed — they seemed better than them. They didn't just do art. They had broader things to discuss, but still it's not life. Those guys are still on the streets sitting there under their cardboard boxes, and I wanted to know why. So I came home and I lived my life and studied my life and those around me. And that's my education.

And there was a question in a paper I read that I was so caught by. Because you asked what was the best education —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, the most rewarding educational experience, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. And I thought about that and I realized when I homeschooled my children, that was my best education I ever got. And it was because we lived our life and watched it and talked about it. And instead of, you know, a science class where you get pictures in a book about, say, insides of an animal or ourselves, we'd, you know, raise chickens and go butcher a chicken. And the kids would have to dissect it before we ate it and figure out what all the parts are. And they, you know, raised that bird and they would cry over that chicken and they would bury its leftover parts. And it was a much fuller education so that it wasn't — it wasn't detached. It was —

MIJA RIEDEL: It was real connected.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was a real thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: It also feels like it's — it comes completely full circle. It's not — there's no detach between abstract and actual practice. You're going through the whole realm of understanding the chicken as a system, as a biological system.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, you watched it, its whole cycle, what it ate, what it didn't eat, you know, how it's different than the other chicken, and you know, they have personalities. It's not just a Chicken McNugget.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's a real thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it's valuable to know that. It's not detached.

MIJA RIEDEL: That strikes me as just so extraordinarily rare in this day and age and culture —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: — the U.S. general culture to have that experience, where everything is so connected.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's my problem with education, universities, schools.

MIJA RIEDEL: That actually makes me think of something that I was going to ask you later, but it just seems to suit so well here. I was reading about the *Shared Visions* exhibition.

And Margaret Archuleta had written about the Native American fine arts movement and she was saying that prior to 1900 native peoples didn't view art as an activity separate from daily life. And that to me speaks so much to — what you've just described here is art as an integral part of daily life rather than a separate part of daily life. And I realize that she's talking about prior to 1900, but you live on Santa Clara Pueblo, which certainly has a history going back way past that, way before that.

And your art comes from that deep tradition. And while there certainly are all sorts of contemporary modern international influences in your work, that sense of tradition and connection seems to me to be a really defining aspect of your work and the way you work, the way you choose — you've chosen to work and to live. Does that — does that seem true to you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, I like how you say that, yeah. I think so. I think that's where maybe my cultural heritage here influenced me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's very extraordinary, I think, to think about. Because in so many Western cultures, fine art is a separate thing from life, and I think that's one of the defining characteristics of it. I mean, that function becomes part of something else. It's a craft —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: — and so to think about that as a much more integrated whole system where art is part rather than distinct.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes, very much.

MIJA RIEDEL: I find that extraordinarily compelling.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you arrived back here when you were 19 or 20?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Eighteen.

MIJA RIEDEL: Eighteen.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.] I think fast.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did you set up a studio? Did you decide that you were going to make sculpture and try and support yourself doing that? How did — how did your work progress once you left art school to you becoming an artist — a private, independent artist working?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, I continued to make my sculptures.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I never tried selling one yet. I just made them because I had to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They were how I spoke. I came home and I had my son. I had a baby. [Laughs.] So I might as well learn that one. [They laugh.] I had Porter and I was a mom and I continued making more sculptures, but on the side, because I had learned how to make pots from my mother at the same time.

I could finally step over the line of trying to sell those and I would sell pots, bowls and cups and, you know, stoneware stuff because I learned from my mother. And we lived very poorly but we would live off of these cups and bowls.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? And would you — did you have a gallery? Did you sell them locally? Did you sell them yourself? How did that — how did that work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I sold them to individuals here and there and at Christmas fairs. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's how you were supporting yourself.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think it is worth noting that you came — when you came back here, you lived in a tent. Is that correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I actually — when I first came back, I got pregnant and I lived up in the mountains of Mora, north of here, in my uncle's house —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — in an uncle's house that was empty at the time and he needed someone to be up there. And the house had no running water, bathroom or anything. And me and my daughter's father lived up there for a couple of years and put in a well. It wasn't a well. It was a pipe to the spring. [Laughs.] Anyway, that's — I remember, you know, we weren't paying rent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: We were very — we never went anywhere. We never bought anything except bare necessities. And I would just throw pots and make sculptures on the side. And at some point, there was a gallery up in Dixon, New Mexico, that I was talking — I had walked into and told them that I had dishes, like pots, and I made sculptures and I wanted to put something out of mine.

And so I was excited and I took one of my clay pieces to them — I think a couple of clay pieces to them, and it was the first time I put — you know, tried to go into a gallery with my figures.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And a friend of mine went to the gallery to go look at it, and she reported back to me that they had put my piece in the closet because they were ashamed of it. [Laughs.] And so I went and took them out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So that was the start. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And rather than say that wasn't something suitable to the gallery, they just decided to put it in the closet and leave it there?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, I think they got kind of scared of it. It was too strong for them.

MIJA RIEDEL: What piece was it? Do you remember?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think there were a couple of pieces. I hope I can tell you. I think one was a standing male figure, which was very rare. He was just standing there. [Laughs.] But I think it was just a little bit too much.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think of some of those early pieces in the early '80s that felt very — it feels like the early '80s were a very self-referential period. I'm thinking of *Insanity* and *Everyday Housewife*, *The Kiss*. But there's a wonderful sense of humor that comes. *Insanity* just made me laugh out loud the first time I saw it, the mother holding a screaming child.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then *Everyday Housewife*, just complete exhaustion and some degree of despair probably.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the emotional quality of those pieces is also very evolved and profound.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. No, I was just — it's like a journal of my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's, like, "Oh yeah, that's where I was then."

MIJA RIEDEL: The very first clown, piece, though, happened early, right? 1980, I think, that *Pueblo Clown*.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There was earlier ones.

MIJA RIEDEL: Even earlier?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And the clowns were one of those sort of constant themes that stuck with me because as a child they were intriguing.

And I was — I found early on that they were an incredible way to speak through. And so again, it's a tool. They were a tool to speak. And there are some things — like, say, that figure that they hid in the closet, he was just standing there being a kind of drooping man.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry, a what kind of man?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: A droopy

MIJA RIEDEL: A droopy man.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: He wasn't this handsome — he was, like, really — really kind of, like, not a happy man there. But if it was a public clown speaking about the brokenness of a man, people would be, like, "Oh cool." They would look at it. But if you show a broken man right there, sometimes people have a hard time looking at it because it's too strong. It's harder to look at. But through the clowns, people can go, "Oh, that's cool," or they'll look.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's what role they play in the pueblos, too. They'll point out things that you can't usually look at directly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So they have been my friend definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've talked — I've read about you describing in different contexts bridging gaps, and it sounds like the way you're describing the clowns, and humor was a great way to bridge a gap between what you wanted to say and then finding a way so that an audience could hear it or see it. And I know that's — another aspect that you've mentioned as being a very important aspect of your work is that there is a rapport with the audience. It does matter to you that they —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. Well, there's always communication. So if I can't communicate, I've missed the point or I can't — it's frustrating again. It's also strangely — it's a conversation with myself.

So when, you know, I'm struggling through something of my own, sometimes these images — these figures of mine will come out — and a lot of times they are clowns or whatever — and they'll be making fun of me about what I'm going through. They're pointing — they're showing it to myself and going, like, "Oh gosh." [They laugh.] You know, you have to laugh at yourself sometimes, and it helps you get through whatever you're getting through. And so I know that that's — you know, it's a communication for myself. So it's a communication to others. It's an amazing tool for communication.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I was thinking about that exact same thing: that humor has really been a tool that you've used repeatedly over the years to great effect.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems that the work also became increasingly — the social and cultural commentary evolved. It went from being very much of a personal focus to then evolving out to looking at cultural differences and cultural similarities often with a sense of humor.

I'm thinking in particular of *Painted Lady* from 1992, and then there was another — oh, *Pinup*, it was a much later, but that is that sense of humor. But the cultural and social commentary, also gender commentary really begins to evolve. Was there a — is there a particular piece that comes to mind in your mind where you decided to really address that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think *Pinup* was a good, strong piece for me because I think of that period of time in my 20s when, you know, I'm a young adult woman. I've had two children by then. I've gone through several divorces by then and I'm trying to figure out how I fit into this world.

And I was really aware — you know, like when I had reached the Indian school, I was aware of cultural things for the first time real strongly. Suddenly, I was aware now of sexual boxes, so to speak, the cultural sexism that was going on in America and how I was being affected by it. And I was in a relationship at the time with a man who was very caught up with image — female images. And I was not aware of it until then.

I was just me — [laughs] — surviving and living my life. And suddenly I was supposed to look and act and be a certain way. And I needed to know what that was. And the more I studied it, the more horrifying it became. And what was being placed on the female gender was horrifying to me. And so there was a lot of sculptures I did during that time that had this

issue with it that was just showing the pain of these stereotyped images that were being put on out there.

MIJA RIEDEL: What else comes to mind?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There's a figure I did where she has long red fingernails, and the fingernails — one hand is attacking — the hand with the red fingernails is attacking herself, and she's holding it back. She's going — you know, it's like this, and she's terrified.

And it was — I was trying to show how these — you know, these stereotypes and stuff were damaging and painful to us and how it hurt. It hurt. It was a painful experience for women to go through, for young girls to be hit by it, too. And then, you know — and then it broadened. As I went through that, I was able to look at the stereotypes men were having to go through.

But of course I had to do mine first. It was my own personal struggle of being a female and fitting in with the ideals of that, and then I was watching — you know, trying to figure out why that was there and then having to then obviously look at why men were behaving that way, too, and a painful time — a painful time. Yeah, a lot of different figures that came out of that. There's another one that was holding a Barbie doll.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was that one called? Do you remember?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: *Perplexed*, I think. *Perplexed*. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were the early '90s you're thinking?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: In my 20s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh those were earlier than that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Late 20s for that one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But all through the 20s there was some of this, that issue that came up into the early 30s, my 30s.

MIJA RIEDEL: So the late '80s or early '80s through early '90s.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah. So it would kind of come out here or there wherever it would arise again as an issue. But she was in her little bathing suit and she's holding this Barbie doll with a bathing suit and she's just looking at it because it just does not fit. [Laughs.] And it's, like, what do you do. Is this — how do you — I so much wanted all the little girls around me to be protected from this horrible thing that I saw in the world.

And I didn't want them to feel like they were bad. Because that's — the message that it was constantly giving all these girls was, "You're not good enough, you're not the right shape, the right" — you know, it goes on and on. And it was very, very painful.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were teaching at this time. You started teaching, yeah?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I did some classes here and there. I didn't officially teach anywhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking of Santa Fe Indian School and San Juan Pueblo Elementary. There's sort of — Santa Clara Pueblo.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, just doing classes.

MIJA RIEDEL: '79 to '82, and were they art classes?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They were art classes mostly to play with clay, teaching people how to use clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that coincided with this same general time and you're seeing all of these young girls?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well yes, I mean, being a teenager, being a young adult is just very hard. [Laughs.] I just think we can be more gentle to our young

people somehow than what's being put out there. I feel for that whole time, and it was very hard for me because I was — I ended up being divorced because of this issue. And so it was personal to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the clay figures had always — the clay, the art had always given you a way to speak about personal experience but also reflect on larger cultural and social experience?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think of certainly the pieces were those — I think of *Pinup* or I think — well, I think of *Painted Lady*, too, the multiple interpretations of a piece like that.

Painted Lady, you immediately think of the Western concept of a painted lady or one can but this is a beautiful naked figure, all painted with body ornament as if from a tribal culture or, you know, primarily. And it seems that that is something that evolved in your work starting in the late '80s or early '90s, like there is an increasing crossover or fusion of personal and cultural and social commentary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But it goes along with — you know, when you're a little child, you just make your simple experience. And as you grow older, you become more aware of a broader world and what's going on in the whole picture more and more. So yes, during that time it was very caught up with those things and wanting to consciously put into the world, because I was seeing all these magazine ads and all these — you know, everything that movies and stuff that push this hateful energy onto us all.

I wanted to reverse that in my small little attempt to go, "I'm going to put images out there," because by then I was, you know, getting well-known and people were wanting my stuff, and I was getting many books and stuff. And I thought, "Well, I want to put a different image out there, an image that will make people feel like they are good the way they are and not — you don't have to fit this — these very limited images that are being put out there but that they can be beautiful from the inside out."

And so there was a movement in my work to want to really push a different kind of beauty. And that came about through that, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think a lot about beauty in terms of your work? Is it a theme that is addressed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I don't know how conscious that is, except for what I just said, where it's like if I made a woman sitting there, she's not a stereotypical, you know, poster girl.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: She's going to be more of a woman woman. But I want her — when I'm making the piece, I want her to know I love her very, very much; and in that, she's going to exude that kind of love.

And so when people see her, then they don't go, "Oh, that's a fat woman," you know. They'd have to be a very limited person to only see that. But if they have any feeling left in them, they're going to sense there's someone beautiful sitting there. And then it worked. It's like, yes, there is somebody beautiful there. Maybe she's not a magazine pinup.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Another thing that I think about in relation to your work is a sense of community in the pieces. And many of the pieces are actually combined of multiple figures. Sometimes, I'm thinking of *Sisters*, where they're sitting next to each other; or I'm thinking of multiple pieces where they're a transformation, where there are foreign figures. I'm thinking of the pieces where there are people sort of all piled on top of each other looking in all sorts of different directions. I can't think of the title right now.

But it seems that there is a through line running through the work of a communal sense of people and family and the individual not being alone. "Relationship," I think, is how you described it earlier, and maybe that's just what I'm hitting on now.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah, relationship.

MIJA RIEDEL: But there does seem a strong sense of relationships — strong relationships that run through the work.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, that's the other thing that comes through. And of course, that's me — when I have a baby, and you know, you're in relationship with somebody, you're trying to — and they're with other people in your life. It's not just you. You know, you're unhappy or you're hungry or you're tired or suddenly now you're dealing with other beings. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so the pieces suddenly have to deal with other people in the world. And that seems to be when I think back at the stages I went through on that and where I am now because I'm actually very much into that theme these days and you know, it's not just, "Oh, I have to deal with this other person."

There's relationship — ones with partners, like husbands, but then there's — when you have a child and your child has a child and you're suddenly aware that this continuation of life happens. It's the most bizarre thing. [They laugh.]

It's just, like, "Oh my God, I'm just one piece of this sort of stepping stone of where this life force is heading." And I'm — you know, I'm just this one stepping piece. And there's — a number of years ago, my daughter, who is a very talented artist —

MIJA RIEDEL: Rose, right?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Rose.

MIJA RIEDEL: Simpson?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Rose Simpson, and she's — I had the sensation more than ever. Because you know, you have these children and you're, like, raising them and nurturing them and homeschooling them and, you know, getting them on their feet. And then one day they turn around and they step on your head and get further, that kind of thing.

And you're aware that, "Whoa, I was just a stepping stone." [Laughs.] And she's going to take everything I put there and I learned from my journey, everything that I could teach her about what I figured out. And she's going to just use it go — and go places I will never go to because I'm still doing my little journey.

But so there was a set of pieces that was coming out of that time of dealing with me and my daughter and the feeling of her — I hate to use the word "use." But it felt like she used me but in a — it's, like, good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's supposed to be that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I had never experienced that before in my life —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — that my child would use me to go the next step. And it was a new experience. And I was having to work through how you deal with that. And then the first — the thought, too, that at some point you get left behind and you sit there and then you die — [laughs.] — or you start to play with your mortality and that life goes on beyond you. And so that's been a theme that I've been playing with a lot: with the struggle of it but then also the positive, amazing thing to it, that you appreciate those that have come behind you more and you acknowledge that you are just a piece of what's coming out ahead of you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you know that Spanish word "aprovechar?"

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's to take advantage of or to use. But it doesn't have a negative connotation. And I've always been struck by that word because —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: How is it?

MIJA RIEDEL: "Aprovechar," like to — A-P-P-R-O-V-E-C-H-A-R [sic], "aprovechar." We can talk about it later, but I was always struck by that word. Because it's exactly what you're describing: to use but without the negative context.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's just almost to take advantage of but not in a negative way.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And what are some of these new pieces that you're describing that are having this new perspective? Can you think of the titles of any of them?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, me and Rose did a piece together for the Heard Museum a couple of years ago for the mother/daughter show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I thought that was very significant in my life, and probably for hers, too, is my guess.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we could feel the tension. It was like she — there was tension and — [inaudible] — "Let's sculpt it, Rose. Let's speak our language."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I was telling her, "I taught you this language. Let's use it together to deal with our issues." She said, "Okay." So we made ourselves dealing with each other. Basically we decided, "Okay, we have to narrow it down to a scene," and we decided we would make ourselves sitting next to each other, and whatever comes out from that will come out.

And we then thought, "We'll add painting to it and we'll make our thought bubble ahead of our — above-our-heads sort of thing," went like, "Okay, let's get two big round canvases and make our thought bubble" — [laughs] — really hard stuff to face and deal with. So I made my figure that would be sitting on a bench next to her and all the feelings of what it feels like to have a daughter that's going to step on you, you know. And you have to let her and the fear and all of the emotions around that.

Let me get this. [Audio break.]

Why it was important was through making it, I think I learned something about what I needed to do with her. And I think she saw things that she didn't know she would see but by doing it, we learned. We grew. And she saw her blaming — her blaming me in this in herself.

And I saw my fear, I think, but also for myself — like, my bubbles became — I chose to put a number of bubbles that got smaller. And in the bubbles I didn't put words. I painted — the big bubble was her, and then the next smaller bubble was me. And then the next smaller one was my mother, and then the next one was my grandma, and the next one was my great-grandma and to show that we were all these women that are generational and she is — she is the new big bubble —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — and that she didn't get there all alone, that we are all in this together and that there's a continuation that I wanted her to see and in a way for me to see: that this is — this is a journey that we're all on, and one day she will be the small bubble.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's all.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you trace your great-great-grandmother — does that go all the way back to Sarafina?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My grandma's mother died when she was a child. So it jumps to her grandma.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And yes, it goes all the way back to — we call her Gia Hun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Gia Hun?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Gia Hun.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's the name of that piece that you did with Rose? Do you recall?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I don't think we titled it. I don't know if we titled it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I'll have to look for that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's a fairly recent piece. That was done for 2008? Yeah, that sounds right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Boy, you're good at research. [They laugh.] "Wow, that sounds right!"

MIJA RIEDEL: I try, I try to get the dates mostly right. [They laugh.] I would like to talk about emergence of clowns because that was such a significant — it's been such a significance piece. It's been — it's traveled so widely. It's been so documented. And it is such a delightful, powerful piece, and it pulls together so many of the strengths of your work. I know that we've talked about the clowns. Certainly there's a direction to the four directions, to humor.

Is there anything that hasn't been said about that piece that you would like to say about how it came to be, about why it was significant and why you struck it — think it struck such a chord?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think it's an early piece and for me it was one of those pieces that after you make it, you go, "Oh my gosh, I didn't know what I was making." And so it taught me something. And what it showed me was that I was really learning how to grow consciously. Because I saw them as evolving because they were in different stages of arriving —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — and also the — like, when I think of that, it was how I was using the ground itself —

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — or as part of the piece where they were very much part of — that they weren't whole pieces. They were, you know, in the earth. So that I was using the environment as part of the piece was very significant to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when those are displayed, are they displayed on the ground? Is there a pedestal that goes with them?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They put them on pedestal mostly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and one large pedestal? Does it matter to you how high that pedestal is?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I mean, my preference would be if they were just out in the hills in the dirt.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But they are usually on a pedestal that people can view them all on one piece and one pedestal. And it still works. The concept still comes through.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it's Okay. They made it to the White House. [Laughs.] I laughed when that happened because I felt all those little clowns, they climbed out of — came up and they looked so amazed and I was thinking, "That's because they're looking around the White House going, 'Where in the hell are we?'" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's fascinating to hear you describe that you were figuring something out as you were making that piece and you weren't quite sure what you were making until it was done because the clowns have that feeling, as if they're emerging into a place that they're exploring for the first time. So it's really interesting to hear you describe that that's your experience of making the piece.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah, "Look where we are."

MIJA RIEDEL: They were in New Zealand as well at one point.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, they went to New Zealand.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And where — they're in the Heard Museum now, the permanent collection?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah, they own them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Before we continue on with the clay, I wanted to just begin or touch briefly on your work with Flowering Tree. Is it Flowering Tree?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute, because that was something that you started, right, in 1989?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I co-started it with Joel Glanzberg.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And I would like to just address that because that's happening before we get to emergence of Clowns and it is something that you continue with today, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So just that's been a parallel — not career, but certainly a parallel interest for —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Hobby.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, 15 years.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's an interest that — and it was part of even, again, it kind of merged my life with what I find in the Western world is people want to say, "Oh, you're just a scientist or just an artist or just whatever you are." But life doesn't happen that way. So it was — Flowering Tree was a beautiful concept of merging it all together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I still think of it that way. It's a permaculture institute and permaculture — I was introduced to by Joel Glanzberg. And it fit into so many of the things that made sense to me about just putting all the pieces together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Connected.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, connected, all connected.

MIJA RIEDEL: Everything connected.

[Audio break.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Which is perfect. So we started an institute thinking that we would really teach these concepts to people because we thought it was a really great, great thing. And it was part of even homeschooling the kids.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we made — our base was here at this house. And for seven years we lived without electricity. We —

MIJA RIEDEL: In this house?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We grew our food and lived our life here. [Laughs.] Mostly on the land and, you know — and was figuring it out as we went along because we didn't have a lot of knowledge. So we were learning — learning as we went along. And we learned a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: We learned a lot. And so Flowering Tree — you know, Joel left the organization and went on a different route and I continued the institute. But I sort of changed flavor into more of a cultural preservation because as I'm — as my interest in Santa Clara and the heritage here became more involved, I wanted to — I realized that a lot of the traditional life ways were being forgotten.

And we had been living a lot of them for many years. And people were wanting to know how you do some things. And I knew how from having done it. And so I wanted to preserve some of these things. And so it became more cultural preservation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so we do — it's not like a big organization. It's little kinds of — it's mostly just a few individuals doing different little projects every year. But I continue to save seeds — one of the things is I grow gardens every year and save native seeds. But I also —

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is such an incredibly powerful topic right now.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, now it is. Twenty years ago, nobody cared —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — that I was saving seed and you couldn't get nobody to listen to you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And now, everyone wants everyone wants different kind of seeds.

MIJA RIEDEL: Very much out of the zeitgeist, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's like, "Good, go grow them, go save them, good." But there's other — you know, seed saving is one aspect but there's — again, it's like you can't just be an artist.

Seed saving has to do with learning how — what to do with the plants, what grows well, what's the soil, how you keep them safe, how you prepare them, how you eat them, what they do for you what they don't do for you, what the stories about them were, what the songs were. You know, it's so more richer than "Let's save seeds."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it's — you know, it's been like a blooming flowering tree, like a blooming tree that has — that keeps having these new branches coming and, you know, it starts with saving a few seeds and then you need a building and then you need pots to put the seeds in and then you need a different kind of soil and a different field.

And then you need different irrigation methods. And then you need to know what water is

doing. And it just gets bigger and bigger and bigger. So when I try to talk about it, it's so hard because it's, like, it's life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: What part do you want to know about? But it's much bigger than any part.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And this year, we are growing pueblo cotton, which is a very rare, going extinct plant. And the men were traditionally the weavers. And very few men know how to weave anymore. So we are having — for the last year, we've had a men's weaving group, a traditional men's weaving group where they're learning how to spin cotton we grew and make looms and do stuff that they can use, make the weaving.

And at the same time, because it's an all men's weaving thing, because there was — culturally there was importances between what females did and what males did. And those weren't — one wasn't above the other. There was just specialnesses and so to honor those specialnesses I like — I like doing these classes. And the women have been making seed pots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So we got to go camping and go digging in the dirt, looking, roaming around picking rocks and digging dirt, clay and mixing it right out there under a tree, our fancy clay and making pots and firing them in the fire pit while we're cooking dinner. And it's just been really nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It feels like a wonderful exercise in connection, just that complete that we've been talking about repeatedly.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I mean, I love doing those kinds of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. How did the Tower Gallery come about? How does that fit into this whole cycle of life?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, you know, once I got to be a professional artist, then you're dealing with galleries and it can be frustrating because you don't always agree with how they do things. And you know, in my little girl head, I thought, "Wouldn't it be neat if I had my own space and I can set it up the way I would want to show my pieces." So that's always been in the back of my head. And about —

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you show with galleries at any point?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who did — who did you work with?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I still do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Who do you show with?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: With Hahn Ross in Santa Fe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Blue — well, let's not put them. Let's put Four Winds Gallery in Pittsburgh. Spacing out on the names, there's a gallery in Phoenix, Berlin Gallery. There's been several galleries in Phoenix. Heard Museum Shop.

MIJA RIEDEL: And are Four Winds and Hahn Ross, are those fairly long-term galleries?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The Four Winds have been a long time. I've been working with them

since I was 23.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my gosh, that is a long time.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So a pretty, pretty long time. And because we've had a good relationship, I continue to work with them. The Berlin Gallery, that's what it's called. And then Hahn Ross had a show nearby with him and he started a gallery on Canyon Road many years ago and he's just a nice guy. [Laughs.]

So I continue to put stuff in his gallery. But then about eight years ago one of the other students with Phil Karshis when we were in high school together happened to be the governor now of Pojoaque Pueblo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So he was a student with me and with Phil. And he became the governor of his pueblo and I was teasing him because he was the guy — [laugh] — big, big time guy and I always think of him as little George. But he had built — he was building the adobe Poeh [Cultural] Center and you drove by it when you came up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The Poeh Center and he was interested in cultural preservation too and he was learning because Pojoaque really lost a lot of its traditions. And George [Rivera], singlehandedly it seemed like, was trying to bring back his village. So he was building this sort of cultural center over there and had built his tower — adobe tower.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I saw it as I drove up.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Beautiful.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it remained empty but to him it was symbolic. And you'd have to ask him specifically. But my understanding was that he felt like that tower was the center point and that other — if it was built, other things will come. And he left it empty. It was the outside structure was built but it was empty and then he built it and he got funding to build the rest of the buildings around it which he then did.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there was no reason per se for it to be built. There was nothing it was supposed to house. He just wanted to build a tower.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he was right. Then the funds came to do the museum and the cultural center part. And it remained empty for 10 years. And pigeons were flying in and out and I was over there one day. And I was teasing him that he's not using the tower, let me use it. And he took me serious. [Laughs.]

And he just looked at me and he says, "Okay, you and your family, you finish it and you can move in." And I went, "Okay." So we went in and we put in the floors and the plastering and finished it all out. And I had a gallery. [Laughs.] And it's a wonderful, wonderful space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You're going to see it tomorrow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. And how — when was that? When did you actually open?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think seven years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, it wasn't that long, maybe, I'd have to — somewhere about seven, six, seven years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: And does it have actual rotating exhibitions?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's where the doll show's going to happen in about a couple of weeks.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we host — it mostly has had my work in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But there is three floors that we work. The fourth floor we didn't ever finish because it was too hard to get to. But there's three floors. So we can use different floors for different things. And we've had different artists that show upstairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And so the rotating exhibitions every few months, something new comes in?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: More like every six months. We're kind of slow. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you the director of that gallery? Is there a director?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I call myself the art slave. [They laugh]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's probably more accurate.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, you know, I'll go in there and I get to — I get to do the best part. I go in there. I don't have to manage stuff. I have a wonderful — the woman that called earlier, Cindy, she manages the place and my husband. The two of them deal with everything. I can go in there and I look around and go, "I don't like that there," and I move the stands around and move the lighting, change a sign or do something and then leave.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're the artistic director.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or I can come in and bring a new piece and decide where to put it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Put it there and go, "Make a sign for that piece." [They laugh.] And that's what I get to do. And I get to decide maybe who can have a show there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is the goal for this space to be a part of that preserving of cultural traditions then?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, it's part of — like, I first was connected to that place because of Flowering Tree because they had a little garden.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I said, "Hey, I'll start you a seed bank for Pojoaque Pueblo."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so they said, "Well, use that little garden to grow out the seeds." So I started collecting seeds for them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And George gave me a tiny little room about this size to store the seeds in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that little seed room is still connected to the tower and that's where I was, like, "Hey that tower — that big tower is empty." And that's how I got connected because I saved seed for them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: A little seed bank.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have specific vision for that gallery and what should be shown there or is it more of a communal exchange with George and Cindy and your husband?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's definitely a business, a business place. But we laugh because a lot of people just come back because it feels nice in there. [Laughs.] And to me, that's the best part of it, is people come to look at the architecture a lot. They don't want to look at art. They want to come see the building.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And some people will come back and back and back to watch the film. We have a little film downstairs and they love the film. And that was just — we didn't know what to do with downstairs and we had this beautiful plastered wall we'd show slides or whatever on and we started showing this film this guy did of me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh the film of you working or talking about your work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And people love it. And they'll come back and they'll bring their friends. So it's kind of a movie theater, kind of a — some people sit there for hours and say, "It feels like a church." So they'll come — just come and sit there. [Laughs.]

And we laugh at that. It's not really a big money-making place but it just feels really nice. And it does. And I feel lucky to have it for as long as we get to have it. It's like a dream come true for me. And hopefully it's a place that I can show my work that will — people can leave feeling good.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting that you said that some people feel that this tower is like a church. And it makes me think of another one of these questions that I want to address which is religion and spirituality. And sure you remember that from that list. Do you think about that in terms of your work? Do you think of your work as having any kind of a religious or spiritual quality to it?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: In as far as I — yes, I do, in as far as whatever that thing is called spirituality or where you're moved to a higher place within yourself, whether it's a belief in whatever, but you're — like, you can tell when you're moved to a spiritual place. I think many times my pieces have done that for me, in the process of making them and what they reflect back to me.

And I've heard people comment many times that they do that for them. They'll cry in front of them or they don't know what happened. They don't know why they got moved. And all I can say is that I think when something is vibrating at a frequency that is higher spiritual place, it affects you.

That's why I think walking in a church is like, "Whoa." It's vibrating and it doesn't matter what religion you are. You can tell when you walk into a holy space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And for, you know, a cultural person, we speak a lot about that. Like,

the whole point is to get so that wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you're doing it from that place or a good heart.

But so it's — you're not a little person. You're a big person. You're aware much more. And so if I can make these — make my pieces from that place, they exude that. And so, in a way, they are spiritual things. And they're helping me in that place too because I forget. And sometimes I look at them and it's, like, "Wow, okay, thank you, I remember."

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think about political commentary or social commentary or cultural commentary in the same sort of way in your work? Maybe not so much political but cultural.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, cultural and political are statements I'm seeing in the world that — like, through women images.

MIJA RIEDEL: Gender, absolutely, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or, you know, a number of years ago with all the politics and stuff that's going on — a lot of times I'll make a piece that just says a comment about it. But it doesn't feel like it's at that higher level. It's, like, going, "Hey guys, did you notice there's an elephant in the middle of the room," — that sort of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's different than — that's not really a spiritual moment. That's just, like, "Hello, wake up, did you notice the king has no clothes on."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And those — that's a different place. That's more — it feels like humans dealing with human issues. And the other place is more a step up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I think of — that makes me think of the piece — like *Bridging Gaps*, that piece where the figure is just sitting but it's half white and it's half red and it feels — it feels like cultural commentary.

It feels like it could be a personal commentary. It feels like it could be political commentary. It feels like it has all of those things. It's powerful but it doesn't — it feels different than, say, the *Clowns Emerging* which have more of a — they have almost more of a spiritual component in some ways.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah. I agree.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does it feel that way to you too?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.] I was asked recently about a —

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, you were asked recently, you were saying.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.] Where my art was going — where it was going. And it's a strange thing to be asked, given where I'm coming from because it's, like, I don't know because I haven't lived it yet. I'm still living my life. I don't know where I'm — I don't know where it's going to go yet. But I noticed that I seem to be tending to go to a place more and more where it's subtler. Whatever is happening in my pieces, it seems like it's on a more and more subtle level. And it's exciting to me because — I don't know how to explain it. It definitely — it goes out of the word arena.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And a lot of people don't see it that way. And I'm caught by that too. It's, like, very silently present and subtle. And whatever that is, I love it. I love it so much.

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of a piece that's probably earlier than what you're thinking of, the piece called *Fine Tuning.*

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Just those wonderful knobs on the top of the head and the circular lines on the face and the torso. But it feels to me like I can see she's slowly — yeah. Which pieces are you thinking of that would be reflective of that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, I did a number of pieces that interacted with the viewer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Which I was caught by because I never — you know, usually they are interacting by way of communicating a message. But these took it a step further and one in particular is — there's a figure sitting there and it's about to put something in your hand. And the whole point is you put your hand under it.

And when you do that, the weirdest sensation happens because it's going like this and its eyes are closed and it's making a wish. And the title of it is *Whatever You Wish*. And you look at it and it's, like, "Huh?" And it's, like, "Go ahead, put your hand under the thing." And there is this feeling that you're honestly being given something.

And it's kind of saying, "What do you want?" And it'll — it's a bizarre sensation. It's, like, my pieces are doing magic that I, you know, couldn't have thought. But they were doing a different thing. And I want it. [Laughs.] It's just, like, "Oh my God, we're making magic happen."

And I think that led — that whole event led to being more aware of their existence as having real presence to them even more. And there's a piece that — I don't know if I included it in the slides but it's at the gallery. She's a standing figure and she's called *Out of the Mud* because I wanted — it's kind of, like, this is clay. This is mud. This is dirt. We all are — we all are familiar with, we see every day the dirt around us.

And yet she's standing there and there's nothing — she's not doing anything but standing there. And her eyes are closed. But she fills a whole room. What happens when mud becomes somebody? You literally transform something into essence that has life. It's doing something that I don't know how it got there. I don't know how that happens. But it's happening. And it's subtle. It's, like, if you looked at it, it's, like, "Okay, what did she do?" But you know something powerful is happening.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I can't — you can't speak in those terms. There's something else happening besides, "Oh, well you just make the face a little rounder or you tilt it a little." And it's, like, "You guys, you could study that forever and it won't — you can't — there's no math calculation to figure this out. This is a different place. This is — I don't know what to call it."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I don't know. And so but it's coming through and I'm highlighting it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So do you recognize it in the process as you're working that it's happening in order to highlight it or you recognize it in finished pieces and highlighting them then?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, it's happening in the process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I don't know where it happens.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because I'm just doing — I'm, like — I'm the tool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And something else is happening through me, the tool, that I don't — I don't know what it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: I do understand what you're saying, yeah, and I have heard other artists and performance people often will mention that too. I think that it's almost an altered space.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And the piece carries it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that's an interesting point, the piece carries it.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I did a — this past year I did a big project with the Denver Art Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And what was so fun about it — and it was a public piece, so people watched it happen the whole way from the bottom to the finish. It was being watched.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were actually onsite building the figure?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes and people watched me and it was a nine-month making of this piece, a very large woman with four babies in her lap. She's — [inaudible] — a theme of generational life going on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I was nervous because I'm on — you know, I'm on show and I have to make something and I want it to be this thing we're talking about but I don't know how to make it happen. So — [they laugh] — you cross your fingers and hope.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But it's, like, I wanted that mother to have a presence to her that is bigger than just a mom. It's, like, she has to have mother essence because she is representing the mother of all life. It was, like, "Oh my God, how dare I step there and yet I'm going to. I'm going to try to go, 'Okay, you hold it, woman.'"

And she was so strong, so strong. And then when her babies — then I was doing her babies and I watched them emerge. And, you know, I feel like I was there and I was scraping and tying and mixing mud and putting like this. And I watched these little babies emerge and their personalities come through.

And everybody was amazed who came out of that straw and mud because — I couldn't have ever have thought it up. I could have never, ever said, "This child is going to have issues and this child is going to be big brother attitude and this one's going to be just totally naïve."

And yet they did it on their own. They made this — made themselves come alive and sit there in their mama's lap. And they're so full of themselves that you walk in the room and their presence is just overpowering.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it different to work on them being observed rather than working alone in your studio?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's different in that I'm getting reflection back from people constantly. So, like, a lot of times I'm in my own little bubble and I may see something and go, "Whoa," whereas I'm on show and there's, you know, a hundred people coming through a day.

And they're commenting or they're asking questions. And so I'm getting their reflection back

from them. I'm getting an immediate communication going on where I could see where it was working.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and had you ever had an experience like that before?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well. I've worked in front of people before but not at — not quite at that extent. I did a piece with Santa Fe — the city of Santa Fe, the wall piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that was a public thing that people could come watch.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. That was *Family*, right?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: *Family*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I built that upstairs in the tower. And so people could come and watch me on the floor working on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, is *Family* — is that — is that clay?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And just to go back to Denver briefly, how — what — how — what was that working process like? Did you go for a week once a month? How was that structured over a nine-month period that you — this piece was being built.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was about once a — once a month — maybe once every other month we would take. And I'd stay there for about four days. I'd work really hard for two, three days. By then I could hardly walk. It would hurt. My back would go out and then I'd come home and then three weeks later I'd go back out and do it again.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the piece was fired up there as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No. We agreed on a wonderful concept and this is — it put my worlds together too because they wanted a piece of artwork to fit in this room that was pretty large. So it was a large figure. But they didn't want it out of bronze and I refused to do a fired piece after the Santa Fe one. It was very hard to do such a large fired piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I says, "I can't do a large fired piece. It was — it's too hard." And they didn't want it fabricated. So it was just, like, "You guys." And then I says, "Why don't you just build it out of adobe," because I build adobe houses.

So I went, "Why don't we just make a mud sculpture and just leave it unfired where we don't have to fire it and we don't have to bronze it. We don't have to — we just build an adobe sculpture." And they were interested.

And the only thing is we had to then figure out how to make it light enough because it was on the third floor and an adobe sculpture would be very heavy. So we came up with straw bale. So we built a straw bale sculpture and plastered it with mud just like an adobe building and leave it unfired mud.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's what it is. It's a big 12 — no, I think she's 14-feet high, sitting woman. Her feet are huge. And her babies are huge. And she's just mud.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic. So sometimes unfired clay just has such an extraordinary quality to it. So not only is it adobe but it — I can imagine what sort of quality that material might have.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it's all different because each of the babies got to be a different mud. So they're all different colors. So it represents different — different peoples of the world. And the fun part is that I was trying to find — because it was built in Denver. So I asked them, I says, "We need some Denver dirt because this is a Denver piece."

And one of the people coming in was a ceramist and said — I asked him, "Do you know where to get local clay, not from the store, from the ground?" And he says, "Well, they're digging up the train station down the road and I think that's good clay." I says, "Can you bring me a bucket of it?" And he did. He brought a bucket and sure enough, the second baby was Denver dirt.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so people come in and they want to know what — why it's different colors. I says, "They're all just dirt from different places," and I says, "This one is a Denver baby dirt."

MIJA RIEDEL: And where are the other three from?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: One's at Abiquiu, up north. It's a red clay. One is from here, Santa Clara. The mom actually has the dirt from here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: One has a yellow dirt and one's a porcelain. One's — the littlest one, it's a white mud.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I just got some porcelain clay, mixed it with sand and plastered it.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is so — it's so interesting. I was thinking about another ceramic artist I interviewed a couple years ago, John Roloff, who does completely different work but so much of it has to do with geology and with specific places and landscape.

And to hear you talk about your work, there is embedded in the very material of your work a sense of place and landscape and geologic history. And he's talked about something similar. But it is — it is really interesting to think about that aspect of your work.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It means something different to people and they go, "That's the color of Denver?" I go, "Yeah, that's your dirt from here, down the street."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it's like, "Wow." And it's a figure in a major museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's dirt.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it's just dirt.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I say, "If you spill your drink on it, it'll turn back to mud." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, which is interesting too because I think of that sense of transformation, that sense of that is a theme that sort of runs through your work too, of transformation, the way you're describing the working process of mud becoming something else.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Out of the mud.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. There's a piece too called *Transformation* of those four women sitting together putting on their costume.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh yeah, ceremonial outfit.

MIJA RIEDEL: We haven't talked about that. Would you talk about that piece?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's another, yeah, transformation scene. You know, because I'm part of the ceremonies in the pueblos, so, and I've been dancing most of my life. And there is just this amazing event that happens when you go into a ceremony or, you know, you come as a normal everyday person and you start this ceremonial process.

And it's a transformation because by the time you do your — the actual dance, you've been transformed and you feel it. And somehow I wanted some kind of piece that showed that without crossing cultural lines you're not supposed to cross.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But just the act of putting on this outfit, you become something else. You go from an ordinary person to a spiritual being that is actually capable of praying for things that have power and that's — that was fun. And the beauty of it, there was a sense of when you see the whole group transformed, it's powerful. It's an amazing event.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting because in that particular piece too it's not a single figure. It's four figures that are very much interacting, about relationship again.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Almost witnessing as well the transformation of each other, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I didn't catch that, but yeah. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You've done some work in bronze as well. Have you done much?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I've done a lot in bronze.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that was started probably about 15 years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did it start with that little nude? Was that the first one, in '98?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There are a number of little nudes that — because I was scared of bronze. I kept getting approached by dealers and people to do bronzes because then you could mass produce. [Laughs.] You know, that whole thing and I'd push them away, "Go away, go away, leave me alone."

And then — and then I'd start watching other artists and what they were doing with bronze and it actually was kind of a cool medium. You know, I was interested in what one of my pieces would look like in bronze. So I agreed to do one piece and see what it was like. And I made this little woman and we bronzed her.

MIJA RIEDEL: That very small figure, yeah?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was — eventually she was a larger piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Twelve inches? Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But we bronzed her and I loved the way it came out. I thought she was so lovely and then what they could do with the finishing on the piece was so beautiful. And some of the pieces I thought looked way better in bronze than in clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And people weren't as scared to touch them if they're bronze and I really like that. People are discouraged but I want people to touch them. And bronze made them feel like they could touch them that are like that and I liked the thought of them being durable for outside.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so then I could do larger pieces that could be outside. And that's cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. But the Santa Fe piece *Family*, that is not — that is not bronze?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's clay, fired clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. So but the Smithsonian piece, that's bronze, yeah?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's bronze.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And is that *Life in all Directions*? Is that that piece?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And it has — it has another — is it *E-wah-Nee-nee*?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: *E-wah-Nee-nee*.

MIJA RIEDEL: *E-wah-Nee-nee* and is that —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's a tribal word for life —

MIJA RIEDEL: In all directions.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Life to go on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. And was that the first large bronze installation on the wall?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The Smithsonian piece, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was — yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was 2005, I think, yeah. And then there was — oh, and then the *Admiration*. That was the same year, right? It's the large figure studying the bowls. Isn't that bronze?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. Was that the same year? I think that was later but around then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And so it seems that the bronze — with the exception of ceramic masks, it seems like the bronze were the first pieces that really went into relief. All the ceramic were really three-dimensional, fully sculptural pieces except for the masks. Is that — is that true?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, it was only because when the Smithsonian approached me, they showed me a wall and they said they wanted something for a wall.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I was a little like, "I'm a sculptor. That means a relief more."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they were like, "Yeah, do something on this wall."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so that's why it became a relief and that it was bronze was that

they needed it to be bronze. They needed it to be durable that way. And it was exciting for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Totally exciting. I was just thrilled to get to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's the largest piece, isn't it?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's large in its length.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, in multiple components.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But by far the hardest one or the — I won't say the biggest one was that Santa Fe piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Just because it was incredibly physically hard to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that. We were talking about commissions and it seems we are indirectly addressing commissions and the strengths and the weaknesses. And it seems — from what I'm hearing from you, it sounds like one of the wonderful things that has come from commissions is an opportunity to stretch and to do things you otherwise might not have done.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: And let's talk about the Santa Fe piece, how that came about and why it was so difficult, why you'll never do it again. [They laugh.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The Santa Fe piece, they have a certain amount they give to the city for arts. And I applied. I applied whereas the other two I didn't apply. And I was up for — you know, they go through your — you have to present something that you'd give to them. And I applied just because it was Santa Fe.

It's the city I grew up in and they never had one of my pieces. I'm one of the well-known artists of this town and they don't represent me at all. And I thought, "They need to." You know, they should acknowledge the artists that are from here. And I thought, "Well, okay, I'll put myself forward and say, 'Hey, let me do a public piece for Santa Fe.'"

And I went through their little hoops and things and they picked me. And so then they had that wall space. It was a wall space again. And so they wanted to know what I'd make on it. And I told them a bronze piece on the wall. [Laughs.]

And they hummed and hawed and they went, "We don't want a bronze. We want — you're a ceramic person. You make ceramic stuff." And I'm like, "Oh my God, that's a big wall."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I was trying to figure out how do make something out of ceramics. You'd have to make a huge tile thing to cover this wall and that's a lot of work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But they wanted clay. They wanted clay. So I said, "Okay, I will. I'll make that." I didn't know if I could is really why.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Is it curved that piece?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, it's flat.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what are the dimensions on that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's 14-feet-by-14-feet. So it's —

MIJA RIEDEL: It's big.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's big. So I was trying to figure out technically how to make this thing. And you know, once I got the concept down, then I had to figure out technically how to build this.

MIJA RIEDEL: So is it — it's what, close to — it's dozens of faces, all beside each other.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think there's 25 pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so you made it in sections and assembled it.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, because they had to each be fired.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And the problem is because it's a puzzle, you know how clay shrinks and moves and —

MIJA RIEDEL: Warps, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Warps and cracks and everything. To get this puzzle to fit back together again —

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my gosh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And because — you know, if it was in bronze or in fabricated something else, you could do it all at once so it's set in its position. But with clay, you have these tight little pieces that are not — they're all shaped different and they're shrinking differently and you have to fit them all together.

And if you don't, you realize when you start setting them in place and you glue and drill them to that wall, you can't move them if they're slightly off because you start putting it and that last piece won't fit in or is too tight or too gapped — very difficult. And not just, you know, getting it on the wall was difficult but building it —

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — was really hard because I had to fire this clay. And if it was fabricated, then I could just sculpt it and keep it leather hard and then they could come in and mold it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's what I did with the Smithsonian piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I don't have to worry about firing it. But because I had to fire these pieces, I had to hollow each one of these, make them so that they could fire. And they're big reliefs. So some of them — you know, some of those feet are over a foot high relief.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And those have to be hollow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's an enormous amount of clay, first of all.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is, and heavy.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Heavy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And if one of those pieces exploded, to try to get it to fit again inside the whole piece with the shrinkage stuff that happens with clay and everything, technically just an incredibly hard, hard job.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you work — did you work on that a section at a time then? You must have.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I started from the middle because I had to build it kind of in the middle of the room. So I started with the mom and the baby, just like how — it unfolded like a flower. And I just — because then I couldn't crawl back in there later because it's unreachable. So I hard to start and not get back in there until I slowly pulled pieces out from the outside, firing them to get back to the middle and then put them all back together and hope they fit.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you started in the middle and just worked your way out until you had 14-by-14 feet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then — and then cut it into pieces and fired it.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, they were all cut already. So I would make the mom — like I made the mom and baby and then I'd make the piece next to her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they would already be cut.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then I'd make the piece next to that and then the next piece to that one.

MIJA RIEDEL: But then they're all drying at different times too.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right, right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So oh my gosh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So and you're having to go through an enormous amount of clay. And then, before you can get the next piece to dry, you have to get back in to hollow the other one out. So it has to get hard enough to flip it over and it would take, you know, several people to lift one up because it was too heavy to flip over.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you weren't just working — you weren't working it all from the back. You were just carving it all from the front.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right, and then flipping them over.

MIJA RIEDEL: To carve out.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Carve it out, because I tried at first. I practiced on some other techniques to maybe make them, like pinch pot it, coil. But it wouldn't work, or slab stuff and that wouldn't work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wouldn't work either.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So the best thing I could figure out was make them solid and then hollow them out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my gosh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I went through so many tools. They'd break, break.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because it was just hard work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it took — it took over a year.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Crawling on that floor and I would go once a week to the chiropractor.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because my back was really bad. And slowly I pieced it together. It was hard. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. So in terms of commissions, those are the three main ones — Santa Fe, Smithsonian and Denver.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you — is there — would you consider another one? Is it something that you've —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I really like these big commissions. But I'm getting — you know, after doing the Smithsonian and the Santa Fe one, the Denver piece was so cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was such a cool project. I can't tell you how wonderful it was. And it was successful. So you know —

MIJA RIEDEL: Not back breaking.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And first one I actually made money on. [Laughs.] And that's helpful because I didn't kill myself doing it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And bronze, is it something you want to continue to explore as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm not opposed to bronze anymore. I think it's an amazing process all in its own. But I love having made one just in mud where you don't fire it.

MIJA RIEDEL: That adobe quality.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, it's —

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that — well, it must be stable. I mean, 14 feet, but —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was incredibly — I was climbing all over it. I could climb on it. It was like — it's a building really. It's a straw bale sculpture building thing. So it was plenty strong.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you know of anything else like that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, there's — you know, Nora Naranjo-Morse, my aunt, she was playing with forms, sculptural forms. She does just shapes more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Using just mud stuff and letting them be outside and letting them dissolve with the elements.

MIJA RIEDEL: Melt away.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she did that piece up at the Smithsonian too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Which is on that same line sort of.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I also think just having grown up doing adobe buildings, you're very aware of how to form mud and you watch it erode and you watch what you can do. And then my sister and what they're doing with different clays.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's just stunning. It's beautiful stuff. So it's all — it's there. But I never got to make a sculpture in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it's like, "Oh my," things I do, I get to put them all together.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting we're having this conversation sitting in your house which is adobe that you built.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So yeah, clearly it's something that you have some degree of expertise in and you have for a couple of decades. But that's a completely new use for the material.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's see. We haven't really talked at all about influences on your career and your work. We certainly mentioned your Uncle Mike. But who would you cite as having been of significant influence, who or what on your working career.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Michael Naranjo, definitely, as a child. The books my father showed me, Michelangelo, Rodin were definitely influences.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, for just the exquisite articulation of the human body?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Beautiful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You know, I was caught by Van Gogh. I was caught by —

MIJA RIEDEL: The emotional quality of it, the movement?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The emotional quality of and a lot — his — anything I could find out about him, his life and that, again, was the interest. What's her name, Camille Claudel, that — she struck me very much in her story and her —

MIJA RIEDEL: What in particular?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Just she was a woman that was working with Rodin.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she was not acknowledged because she's a woman. So you're dealing with sexual gender stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she was good. She was very good and not acknowledged in the way and she went crazy. It seemed like she — and her emotional, psychological struggles intrigued me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Like, how did she deal with it and, you know, she didn't deal with it very well. [They laugh.] But that sort of stuff intrigued me. Even I'm thinking of Janis Joplin, you know, what were you thinking, why are you — why did you go that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or even, like — even, you know, the Marilyn Monroe story and thinking, "I'd love to talk to her," like, was it too much, did it hurt too bad, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Those are influences I would say. I think now — right now, one of my big influences is my daughter. She's — I'd say she's a genius.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: What in particular about the work or about her strikes you that way?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think she's daring me in a way. I haven't had a lot of people compete or, like, going, "Well, you can do that, look what I can do," because I've always been, like, able to do — handle my medium well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I've been in a row where it's encouraging, like, "Here, you can do that, keep going, keep trying," and suddenly I have my daughter who's going, "Well, how about this mama," and I'm, like, "Whoa." She's took.

You know, she grew up doing this with me and she's — and she can do it with more ease than I can, you know, because I had to learn it. I had to bushwhack the trail. And she could step on my back and so she has — she has things that I didn't have to work with. And so she's —

MIJA RIEDEL: What in particular do you think of when you say that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Some of it's technical skill. Like, I had to learn. Nobody taught me how to make my sculptures.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I had to learn how to figure this out myself. And technically, and she had it all laid out. And then so she has this way of slapping it together with such — it's so quick. It's, like, she didn't have to learn it with all these errors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Trial and error, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, it was — the wheel was already invented for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So she has that. And then she's incredibly intelligent and multitalented. So she can use many more talents to work with on whatever she's doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: By that you mean both skills — technical skills — and it sounds like also experiences in different disciplines from different cultural or social or experiential — is that what you're referring to?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: A little bit that. I was thinking more that she can speak about her stuff, write about it, sing about it, draw it, like she's an incredible drawer. She can — she has more tools available to do whatever she's doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And she's young. And she's cocky. [Laughs.] And that's okay because I know she's young and you go through that time. And I just think when she's — as she's growing, wow, she's miles ahead of where I was when I was her age.

MIJA RIEDEL: In technical skill?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Not just technical because she'll push things in a way that I didn't dare. And so she's — she's saying, "Come on, Mama. Where else can you go?" That's the message she gives me with her stuff. She's like, "Don't you get tired of making that?" [Laughs.] And I say, "No." [Laughs.] But it makes me have to sit and go, "Well, I'm not but maybe there is something else there. Maybe I can push a little bit further." She's — maybe each generation has that. They just kind of have a new push.

MIJA RIEDEL: So her frame of reference is larger?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, for me, it's like when they put my first pieces in the closet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was because they were very, very emotional and people were scared of emotional art. And Rose is at a time when people aren't so scared of that anymore. It's like the trail has been broken and people aren't so shocked. So she can just blast through that right away. It's, like, she's not scared to show how this feels or whatever. It's easier. So then where does she go from there?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And just that is a push. Just that is something that makes me go, "Okay, I'm not dead yet." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Far from it!

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Where do I go?

MIJA RIEDEL: You're only 47, right? Forty-eight?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Forty-eight, yeah. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Barely midcareer, I think.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I'd say another person who inspires — it's kind of funny to say that my children because my daughter being an artist, incredible talent that she is. I'd have to say the other influence that I have is my son and him because he's not an artist but he's a thinker that has incredible heart and I've never met such a wise young person.

And he was always wise. He was born an old man. And he's been — in my family, my little family, he's been the piece that is always in that higher level where, you know, you get caught up with your little issues and stuff. And he's always the person that insists us to step up a few notches.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And don't get caught up in the petty. And where he got that or how he got that, I don't know how he was born with so much of that. But he is big that way.

And even — even in the village here, he's already — he's 29 and he's already showing signs of real leadership. Like, he's where people turn to to ask advice, to ask for songs, to ask for cultural understanding. And it's — he's got it, so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That sort of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I think this is a related question. We've been talking

about influences. How did the ideas for your work evolve? How is that part of your working process? Where do the ideas come from? Do they come from the work itself? Do they come from —some clearly come from personal experiences. Some are social commentary. But how does a work evolve from an idea?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The actual little process?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, both of them. I want to talk about working process and how the actual making of a piece but I also just want to talk about the evolution of the ideas. How do you — how does — how do they come to be?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think because they started as a language because they were a need for communication.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So say — the piece I'm working on right now, for example, I'm going through relationship issues. [Laughs.] And at this time, and it's very particular. And so, I'm struggling along and, you know, whatever it is. I may be outside shoveling or plastering or whatever I'm doing. And I'm trying to understand this, what is this thing. And I may not know what to do with this relationship.

So maybe that's it. "I just don't understand it." And then what appears is this very funny scene in my head. And it's to me. It's really for me but I, you know, then I produce it out and I believe other people can relate because we're all human.

And it's a clown that comes to me and the clowns are striped black-and-white. And here's me and this other person — [laughs] — and it makes me laugh because it's me sitting in one hand and this other person is sitting in the other hand.

And we're so self-righteously arrogant and not wanting to listen to each other and angry at each other. And the clown is holding us. And this clown is looking at us, like, "Oh my God."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I will paint me black and I will paint the other person white which is like the stripes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And the clown is obviously sitting there showing us that you can have both black and white stripes on you. But we aren't listening obviously. It's a message for me and the clown is looking over at me going, "Roxanne." And I'm making it just kind of humbly going — you know, I had to look at it for days while it's rubbing it in my face. But it's my own lesson and it's everybody's lesson.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And yet, you know, so that is how they happen because something's going on and I'm trying to state what it is and work through it.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting. I think you wrote somewhere that you talked about using emotions or choosing emotions as the language that you would use in your work.

And it occurs to me as we've been talking over the past couple of hours that that's something that surfaces again and again and again, is it comes from some kind of personal emotion. But then there's that universal component to emotions that makes it human language.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah. That's a language we all speak.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

Does this piece have a title yet?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think I'll call it *Counseling* or *The Mediator*. [They laugh.] *The Mediator*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is this in the studio right now?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, but I'm too embarrassed to show it because I'm still going through the shame. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds like the working process can be a pretty emotional process.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Hard lessons, sometimes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's shift to the technical aspect of the working process.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: The figures, are they all — they're all hand built and coiled, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I had to fire them as a kid. So I had to figure out how to make them hollow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And because people made pots out of coiled pinch pots. So I made them out of coiled pinch pots. So they're just coiled.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And are they fired once?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And so they're — if there's any color, is that slip when it's still leather-hard or something?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, I used to — you know, I used to make them out of stoneware and glaze them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But that was more processes than need be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I'm not trying to display beautiful glazes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm trying to communicate a message.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So the straighter line to that, the better. So they are one-time fired.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they're earthenware now, they're lower fired?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They're earthenware. They're lower fired so I don't have so much shrinkage and warping that goes on in the clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then a lot of times I like to use oxides too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: To tint them or I'll use paints.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you do paint them afterwards?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And is that — has that been true from early on that you would frequently paint on them afterwards, after firing?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: When I got away from glazing, then I was trying to figure out what other finish would look good. And then I just started painting and it became a good way to —

MIJA RIEDEL: When was that roughly that you made that shift? Do you remember?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Probably my early 20s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So a piece like one of those very early — like *The Pueblo Clown* in 1980, that would be glazed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: But how about *Painted Lady* in '92? Was that painted or was that glazed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was both oxide and paint.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, okay. And then there are some that for a while — *Insanity* that seemed completely monochromatic. Was there any color on that at all?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm trying to think. What's *Insanity*? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That one of the mother holding the screaming child.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh that's glazed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh that is glazed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, that's a glazed piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you glaze at all anymore or no?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, it's just —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, slips and paint.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I mean, once in a while, like if you — if I want to highlight something and it'd be cool to have it glazed, I don't know, hair barrette, then why not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or I realize you can get some glazes that make really nice eyeballs look really like they're wet. That's a nice look to make an eye look actually moist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Most of the pieces have been single pieces. But then it seems — I'm thinking of the *Crybaby* series. There was a series. Was that the first series or have you done — did the bronze — working in bronze inspire you to do ceramic series or how did the series idea start?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Series. Maybe — I mean, you could say the clowns are a series but they're still going. I think it's more of a theme.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And the *Crybaby* series was that I couldn't quite get the crybaby issue out in one figure. So it's, like, crying has many different looks to it. And so I needed — I was just going to keep making them until I felt like I got it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Got it all out, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was having a little temper tantrum. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I think of the work as being exclusively figurative. But then, I saw *The*

Corn Mothers Are Crying which was a figure on a vessel which is a more recent piece. Have there been vessels in your work that I just have not noticed? I think of the work being pretty much exclusive figurative.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I've done a number of pots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And sculpture mixes from way back when I was still making pots, thrown pots. Sometimes I'd add a figure on it because it was, like, "Hey, that handle could be a person instead of a handle," things like that.

And then immersion too, I did a pot with my grandma that was about the — about the clowns because I had asked her, "Where do the clowns come from," that she knew and she talked about them coming out of the Earth. And the pot always felt like that's the Earth.

So she made this beautiful pot. And I made figures around it, clowns because the clowns had come out of the pot. So the Earth, the Earth was the pot. And we fired it outside and we put a lot of smoke in the inside because she was saying it was smoky. So we made it smoky inside. So that was a cool piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: The clowns, they're called kosharis? Is that right?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, it depends on what tribe or who's speaking of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. And I've seen it written as kossa?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There are kossas or koshares or other names are given to them too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I'll tell you an interesting little nugget about that later. What do you see as the similarities and the differences between your early work and the more recent work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The similarities?

MIJA RIEDEL: The similarities and the differences?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Okay, similarities and differences. Similarities is that they're still — they're still my diary, so to speak. They're still a language for me. Differences is just that I've grown as a person and however I've grown, they've grown too and just like we were talking about earlier.

MIJA RIEDEL: The subtlety was one thing you mentioned.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, there's something subtle happening. The use of them is slightly different. I'm not just a little — like, I think so much back on for so long it was just, "I want you to know that I'm hungry, so here's a piece going, 'I'm hungry,'" or you know, it's very directly — like a child.

And the evolution of growing up and growing up a native woman in today has lots of issues to it and then becoming a mom, becoming a wife, becoming a grandma and all the different stages one goes through in one's life and each stage has something to say. And I'm just saying them as I hit them. [Laughs.]

As I stumble into them. And I think the most amazing thing is somebody's life, anybody's, if you get to talking with somebody's life, it's like, "No way."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I would agree.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Has technology had any impact on your work at all?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Technology? Well, now I use a kiln.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I'm grateful for the kilns.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a gas kiln?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I have three electric kilns.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, that makes sense, especially with the earthenware, yeah. Has your working process changed over time or is it fairly consistent?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's pretty consistent. [Laughs.] I grew up, you know, making whatever I made in a studio with my mother there and then being in classrooms and having babies running around, so trying to keep them out of your clay while they're crying or trying to grab a leg.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then because they were always there, my children, and because they were also homeschooled, they were always there. So one of my favorite times of working was when they were young and they'd have to read to me for school. [They laugh.]

And you know, they could pick the book so I never knew what I was going to listen to. But I'd sit there and work and they'd sit there and read to me their novel that they were reading and a wonderful, just a wonderful, wonderful time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so my studio has always been kind of in the corner of life happening.

MIJA RIEDEL: Got you.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then when I was in a relationship with Diego Romero and he had three kids of his own and they all moved in too. So there was for a while a house full of kids. And we — he brought the television and the television was new for us. [Laughs.] And it was very disruptive. So there were a lot of sculptures made around the television era, dealing with television.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. When was that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was in the — my 30s, so —

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so the '90s.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The '90s, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't remember anything with a television energy. Can you think of any?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, there's a pretty famous one is *The Remote Control Woman* and she's been in several books.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've never seen that. Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: She's on loan. She stays at the Tower now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, good.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: She's an old — well, I think of her as fairly older. But she was right when the television came. And I was distracted because there was a show on, three sculptures collapsed and fell apart because I couldn't concentrate on what I was doing. It was very distracting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And so I made this figure about it. I'd look around the room and all the kids and Diego were all TV zoned-out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I wanted to capture what the television was doing to us. So I made *The Remote Woman*. She has the remote and, you know, all the kids would fight over the remote control.

And it was just a scene that would go on around this television and her glazed over look. [Laughs.] It took a while to get used to a TV. I have the TV just for movies.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I've — and I love movies. I think they're brilliant things. And I use them now. Like, I would hear someone reading to me and I realize that I'll put a movie in.

I'll go and start working and the move will end and I will have never looked up at the screen because I'm just listening and I've seen it maybe 10 times before. So I know all the scenes. So I am watching it in my mind as I'm working on my piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I work like that a lot now because everybody left. I'm alone in my house now. And all these people that once were here are gone. So the movies are kind of nice because they're someone telling me a story while I'm working on whatever I'm working on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I'm just thinking about the extremes that you've described in the past, from living in a place where there's no electricity and the water came from a tube from the stream for seven years to that television. It's like going from —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Culture shock. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and it's just such an extreme range of — it's almost like living through different eras of the world. Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. Would you like some salad?

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you like to take a little break?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: If that's okay with you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

[Audio break.]

Okay, we're back after a lovely lunch and let's talk about travels that have impacted your work, trips you've taken or places you've been.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Two places that — actually three, can I speak of three places that I went to that kind of stick out in my mind. One was back in when the *Shared Visions* was sent to New Zealand and a group of us that were part of that show went out together. The whole show got to go out at different times of the year. But I got to go out with Margaret —

MIJA RIEDEL: Archuleta?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Bagshaw.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And Harry Fonseca and Pablita Velarde and me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we got to go out to New Zealand to see the show and then to be hosted for two weeks by the Maori people of New Zealand. And it was one of the most

amazing experiences because of — it was, in a way, a cultural exchange. But never had I seen such powerful proud people.

And it really affected me in being a woman. And I was actually during in that period of time when I was dealing with a lot of female issues and image female issues. And the New Zealand women — the Maori women that I was around for those two weeks were so beyond that that it was very, very helpful.

It was like I went and got medicine. I got a dose of good energy to get through this time. They were incredible hosts. From village to village, they'd —

[Audio break.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — take us and they'd put on their whole performance of welcoming us and feeding us and honoring us. And then they turned and expected us to stand and do the same. [Laughs.] And we were not prepared for that. We were just, like, little artists going to go see our show. And they expected more than that.

They wanted us to sing and they wanted us to tell them about our people. [Laughs.] And we couldn't get out of it. [They laugh.] Not after they were so gracious and then they'd, "Your turn," and they didn't understand that we didn't do that back home. We'd kind of go and hide and ignore everybody.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it made us step up to the plate and it was the first time I had been put up to speak for my people in general, which I felt very inadequate — not capable of doing because I'm just one little person going through my own little ordeal.

But it was helpful because then you have to — you're forced to have to go, "Okay, what do I know about where I'm from."

Instead of just being in it, I have to step out of it and really look at it from a perspective of an outsider looking at it going, "What is this, where am I from, what do we do where I'm from, how is it different than somewhere else, what are some of the things I can share with these people who are so generous with their views."

And so it was — it was an amazing journey. And I think I grew tons that two weeks before I came home.

MIJA RIEDEL: What year was that? You said it was around *Shared Visions*.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, with *Shared Visions*.

MIJA RIEDEL: So fairly recently. No, that was the '90s.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was right at the — when I was about 30 years old, 30, 31 years old.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so '92, maybe '94-ish. I think that's right. So you were 30, your 30s.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where did — did you travel — where in New Zealand?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: We went into Wellington. The show was in Wellington and then we — I won't know the names. We went up to — up and around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Both islands?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Just the one island and we went to village to village.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. And did any specific pieces come out of that or specific change in thought?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, they were caught with me because at one place near Wellington they were — they knew that I was a sculptor. And that was unknown for women to be sculptors among them. So I was kind of out of place to them. They weren't sure. But they wanted to show me their sculptures and only the men carve out of — you know, they carve their canoes and amazing sculptures in wood. And so they were showing me these things. But they were men and there was a strangeness there.

But they really wanted to question me about how that's possible for a woman to sculpt. And then also, then they gave me — they brought me some clay. And they weren't used to working with clay. So they wanted me to make something in front of them. So I sat down with — they brought me the clay and I had to perform because they were doing the same for me. So this was sharing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I formed a sculpture and next thing I know is all these men — these other men — brought clay and sat it next to me and started forming alongside me, you know, as they were watching me they were working on sculptures.

And some of them I heard continued to make sculptures out of clay after I had did that little demonstration of making a sculpture. But they were very caught with what I made important in the piece because culturally for them they make their heads really, really big.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they say that the brain was very important and so you make the head really big to make them have lots of brain. [Laughs.] And they wondered why my hands and feet were so darn large. [Laughs.]

And why I didn't explicitly show the genitals of what it was and just that we talked about what we were, you know, exaggerating forward or what we were showing and what that meant and what they were doing. That was interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did any women come and want to start sculpting?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was only the men.

MIJA RIEDEL: Only the men, interesting, interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But the women were willing to share weaving with me and I was — and I got to have a weaving course with some of the women. And that was terrific because I love — you know, anything like that was tremendous. And they were weaving with feathers. And you know, they'd put feathers in cloaks that they weave out of a flax plant.

And I was thrilled because my people used to make turkey blankets, turkey feather blankets. And I had never found out how they did that because nobody knew how anymore. And here were these Maori women weaving out of feathers. So I just — I ran home, of course, and I started making a little weaving out of turkey feathers because of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, how fantastic. Yes, that's fantastic.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: A piece of the puzzle.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how interesting that gender reversal that here you come from where the women are the potters and the clay artists and the men are the weavers to go someplace where it's completely opposite.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Makes sense, New Zealand, they're having winter when we're having summer. [Laughs.] They're all switched around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So that was two weeks.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was two weeks of an amazing event. And I made some friends.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that it makes any difference in your work do you think?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I came back more confident.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Like it was okay to stand up and be a strong woman, that it wasn't a thing to be ashamed of and, you know, I was always a capable young girl but I was mostly shamed for it. And here these women were not ashamed at all for being that way. They were very proud. And I thought, "That's not a bad thing." So they gave me a lot of, like I said, good medicine to use.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Good people. And another trip that got to me was going to Paris with Diego Romero. We were part of a show there. What was the year — 2000, something in there. We were part of a show that was called? — it was at the Cartier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The Cartier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you have a piece in their permanent collection, don't you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No. I don't think I have.

MIJA RIEDEL: No?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But it was a good show. It was an amazing show and they — we got to experience the French meeting the Pueblos. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be something interesting. What was the name of that show and what was the theme?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm trying to remember the title of the show. But I know it was Le Cartier. There was a big poster. They used my piece for their big poster. I was all over the city. It was kind of cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: How wonderful.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But once again, a cultural thing that was just surprising, that I had never been out of the country, like to — first time in Europe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And no one spoke — well, they spoke better English than we did French, so. But the cultural difference was really striking. And I loved roaming. We roamed around the city. Me and Diego walked and walked and walked for days just staring and going into buildings and seeing art and going to the Louvre. Oh, it was spectacular.

And then one of the — I don't know who he was but one of the big guys of the Louvre wanted to have a meeting with us. And there was three of us Pueblo people — Diego, me and Virgil Ortiz — and to talk about — he was excited because he decided — they had decided at the Louvre that they might expand the Louvre to include Native American art in it.

And he was so excited to tell us that this was a possibility and that how honored we should be to have this. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: How honored they were or you were?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: How we should be incredibly honored that they were considering us to be part of the Louvre.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they didn't understand that Pueblo people are as egotistical as French people are, if not more, because to — you know, French, the world revolves around them, is what I got, which was like, "Wow, they are everything according to them."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Unless you're a Pueblo person. [Laughs.] And the Pueblo people, of

course, it's, like, "No, the world revolves around our little pueblos made out of mud and we are not lucky to go to the Louvre. You'd be lucky to come visit us." [Laughs.]

So there was this clash of egos that happened at that point that I found just hilarious because he didn't understand why he was having a conversation with Diego Romero at the time who wasn't impressed with any of what he — and was insulting them about soccer versus football and it was just this hilarious non-playing the same game.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But for, getting to go there and see — Paris was grand! Buildings and places that were done with care. Oh my God. It was to me an amazing event to walk into those cathedrals or the — what's that big one right there — just the old building and the artwork in them.

I was inspired beyond belief. It reminded me of being a little girl and looking at those photographs in the books for the first time of Michelangelo and going, "Can a human being make that? Is that really possible?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And that's what Paris made me feel like: "Look at what humans can do and make these beautiful places and this beautiful artwork with their own hands, with lifetimes of work into it all." It's inspiring.

MIJA RIEDEL: Especially some of those old cathedrals that were made over decades, if not centuries.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh my gosh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes. So Paris was wonderful — my little time there was tremendously awesome.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did it inspire any particular work or series?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think it compounded — just like with the Maori women and the people that said, "You are okay to be — to be big. You can be strong and be okay about it. It's not a bad thing." I think in a way going to Paris does that too, "It's okay to be great. It's all right to shine bright."

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And you know, in the Pueblo world, you don't shine. But that's not true. It's just more you don't be egotistical about it. You just — you walk well in the world. But that could be grand. And that's what I had to understand, like, you could do this grandly. You can do it well and it's not a bad thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then the next trip, the third trip I think of is I was invited to go down with the Poeh Cultural Center to Brazil to work with the Guarani Indians down in the rain forest there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because they had lost their ceramics because of survival issues. And they still were being hunted by the government and running.

So you can't really make pots and sculptures and much art when you're on the run. So they lost their ceramics. And they wanted to bring someone in that was a native person that they could relate to maybe and help them get started again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I don't know why I was picked but I was picked to go down and

what was hard is, like, you go down there and I'm in a rain forest. I'm from a desert. And I'm supposed to find clay. I'm supposed to show them how to find clay in their land and work with it in their space and fire it in their environment when it's completely different than what I'm aware of. But there I was. [Laughs.]

We drove way out in nowhere, we were under a little grass hut. And out of the jungle comes a whole village of grandparents and chiefs and babies. They came in out of the jungle and some told me they came in from 14 miles away on barefoot through the jungle and they plopped themselves down and said, "Okay." [Laughs.]

So we found some clay on the side of the road and had mixed it up enough so that they could start making little things. And it was obvious they had never worked with clay. And so they didn't even know the first way to hold — to handle it. So it was a lot of basic holding it methods. Plus, we couldn't speak each other's language.

So it was done all in this sort of sign language of grunts and hand motions. [Laughs.] I had some emissary people that came with me that were organizing with their organizers and they were all from their little cultural centers that take care of their Indians down there and ours over here.

And one point the Guarani Indians decided they needed a meeting and they didn't want these white people part of their meeting because they're tired of what was going on. So they sent them down the hill and I was — I got up to go down the hill, too, but they said, "No, no, no. You have to come with us." [Laughs.]

It was all in hand motions. "I'm not from here." But they scooted me up the hill and set me down in the middle. They all sat around me. All the official people were down the hill. They couldn't hear. They weren't part of it.

They began one by one telling me their stories, all in Guarani. I couldn't understand a single word — but I knew that they were telling me their story, one by one. And they knew I didn't speak their language but they had to tell me their stories anyway.

And one by one, they told their stories and they cried and they cried. And it went all around the circle until they finished. All I could say was, "I'm sorry." Then they told the other people to come back up. Then we could make pots. [Laughs.]

I was just worried because it was raining all the time. We know here you do not fire in the rain. But it wouldn't stop raining there. I thought, "How are we going to fire these pots and I only have a few more days here and I have to fly away."

I told them, "We need dry wood and we need a dry area to fire in." So the guys got up and they ran into the jungle to go get firewood. "Dry wood, if you can find any dry wood." And they came back with trees on their back. [Laughs.]

And at that point, I thought, "Oh my God, this is a total disaster. It's never going to work. Their pots will blow up and they'll just roll their eyes and run back in the jungle and never touch clay again." But they brought their trees and I'd say, "Smaller wood, smaller pieces," and they chopped the trees into smaller pieces of wet wood. [Laughs.]

So we started a fire in an area. I'm thinking, "Oh, we'll dry an area out by making a fire." And meantime, they're making their pots and breaking them half of the time because they're rough. They don't know how to handle unfired clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was trying to teach them gentleness, you know, how to move the piece around.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And finally it was time. We had to fire them. And so we put those pots in and fired them up. And I heard these explosions. And I went down the hill and I cried and I cried.

I heard the popping stop and I came back up and they're all happy. They were a very happy people. They don't mind anything. They're just jolly watching the things pop. And we finally

let the fire die down and we dug them out. And they all made it except for one! It was only one piece that was popping the whole time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my gosh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I was so delighted. The funniest thing is they started grabbing the pots out of the fire and they're too hot. So they would drop them and they'd break. And they didn't understand that pottery breaks.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They were used to wood I guess. So a very, very different world. But that was incredible.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And was there — did they have a pottery tradition? They had pots? They had a record of this?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: We took them to see their traditional pots in a museum and they used to make huge vessels. Their pots were beautiful, big pots with intricate design patters on the outside.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And they would actually use them for urns and you'd look inside them and there'd still be a figure curled up in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And we were trying to tell them, "These were your pots, you made pots."

MIJA RIEDEL: And did they have intricate — incredibly intricate line drawings on them?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, but they almost looked like patterns of mazes all over them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, right. I think I've seen those pots but I just associate with them being from a jungle in Brazil. I didn't know the tribe that made them, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, those were them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And now, they couldn't even hold a pot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. And there were no other tribes in that area that were familiar with that landscape and how to make — that's amazing.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Completely lost.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was like going back in time to what the tribes of this continent would have been going through 200 years ago.

I would say it felt like you were stepping back in time. At one point the chief was mad at one of the officials and was threatening to eat him. Only 15 years ago they were still allowed to eat people. They would say, "We would eat you if we still could." "Oh my God," I'd think. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And sorry, when was this trip?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Eight years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so relatively quickly after Paris?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: A couple years, three years after.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And anything in particular that came back and found its way into your work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Again, I want to say a cultural awareness that there are — there's — they definitely felt like they could talk to me, which was amazing to me. And strangely, I remember it as if I heard them talking my language. So in a way, we were talking the same language.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I think it told me that humans are humans and we can speak to each other across these lines. And their pain — I heard their pain. And I felt lucky. I felt lucky that I had what I have. And I loved the way they interacted with each other.

The connections were amazing. When they had a class they brought the whole village. It wasn't school-aged people. It was old people to babies.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The way they dealt with their children was really nice to see next to what you see in this country. Babies were part of them way more than people treat them here. I love that, the connections you see between people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah. We can stop there for today, if you like, and finish up tomorrow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I'll just — I didn't — I was in a hurry to get us going when I started this disc. So I'll just — this is Mija Riedel with Roxanne Swentzell at the artist's home and studios at the Santa Clara Pueblo on November 8th, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This was disc number two.

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Roxanne Swentzell at the Tower Gallery in Pojoaque, New Mexico, on November 9th, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc number three. Good morning.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Good morning.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a pleasure to be in this gallery, this Tower Gallery. This is the space you were talking about yesterday, the building that you finished on the interior to turn into a gallery space.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's wonderful to be sitting here. I was saying that the walls are so thick it makes for extraordinary acoustics, so still. A couple of main topics that we didn't cover yesterday I want to be sure we cover today. First is working process and just if you would describe your working process and how it may have changed or evolved over time.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So the technical aspect of it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and if you'd also describe your studio, how the work evolves in there, if there are things you must have or if the space and facilities can be pretty flexible, just a sense of the working process.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I have very — I have a bucket of tools. But I use very few of them. And my main tool is a little knife that's about three inches long that I get at the local grocery store.

And it lasts for about 10 years and until the scraping has shaped it into not a good shape anymore and then I have to get another one because it wears down the metal. But it's just a little paring knife. And that seems to be my main tool. And of course clay and some spray bottles for water.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the clay you get commercially here in Santa Fe?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I've used different clays throughout my career. Right now, I'm using a red commercial earthenware that I buy in Santa Fe. And I like it. It's a very smooth clay. And I used to use clay that had more grog because that's what sculptors are supposed — someone told me that's what sculptors are supposed to use.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I like this smooth clay because I can play with the finish.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's easier to finish.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you don't have any problem with cracking with a clay that's that fine?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They told me I would but I don't find any more cracking than other clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just fire it very slowly I would imagine.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, and build it right. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and it's all coiled, correct?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's all hand-coiled and pinched.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it's like I sometimes tell people it's just a fancy pinched pot. I figured that method out on my own as a child because I had to fire what I was making. And when they got too big to be solid, I had to figure out a method to hollow them and I had never seen anyone, you know, scrape them hollow so — but I had seen people make pots out of coils.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I learned how to coil them and so there I start with usually a figure is sitting I'll start with their bottoms and make literally like a pot that goes up to their neck. And then, when that gets sort of stable enough, harder so that it will hold itself —

MIJA RIEDEL: Like a leather-hard?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, not quite that hard because I have to add the arms and legs and head. So then I'll cut holes where their legs are and hands are or the arms are and coil out the legs and arms from there and then the same with the head.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then do you use supports as that's drying because I would imagine that cantilevering out of the arms and the — arms in particular —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Rarely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: When I teach classes I'm always saying the trick to using clay is timing. And it's just a matter of how you have to work with the clay drying. And if you work with it as it dries, you can do amazing things with it because it's very strong if it's at the right hardness.

So if I have an arm going out, you coil out so far and then if it starts to droop you stop and you go wash clothes or go check on the garden or whatever. And then you come back and you add another coil or two.

And then you go sweep your floor and do other things. And then you come back and you add two more coils. And you keep doing that until you reach the end of the hand. And it will hold itself because you're patient

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fascinating. I've heard many artists — Jerry Rothman, the ceramic artist from California mixed fibers into the clay and came up with an incredible clay that was so respected.

It was an incredible material because you could cantilever out those incredible angles. But it was not clay and I remember everyone was in awe that you could get those sort of extreme appendages that would hold. But here you are doing it with a clay that has no grog.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No grog. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And just with time is the main tool?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. And so what else?

MIJA RIEDEL: And on, for example, the piece like *Crucifix* where there's two arms hold — I mean, that's extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, and all the figures on the arms.

MIJA RIEDEL: The arms, yes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I was very proud of that piece because I was — I kept expecting to have them fall off with that weight.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or if not in the firing too.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Right, and so when I was building it, it was nerve-wracking because sometimes you cover it with plastic and then it sweats sometimes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then you'll come back and something will have fallen because the sweating remoistened it and then it's weak again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You have to keep playing with the moisture in the clay. And that piece was particularly challenging because of the arms and the weight on the arms. And I put it in the kiln and was afraid of even it breaking in the kiln.

So I did put some kiln shelves underneath the arms just to make sure. And I was trying to guess how much it would shrink. You know, you give a little bit of space for the shrinkage. And so I gave it some room and crossed my fingers and I just figured, "Well, it's probably going to crack or it's going to break or whatever, but I'll deal with that."

And fired it and when I opened the kiln the next day, the arms had settled down — had shrunk. The whole piece had shrunk down to the kiln shelves and it was actually swinging by the arms in the kiln on the kiln shelves. So it shrunk more than I had estimated.

But the arms were now holding the whole body up on this little pivoting swing and hadn't fallen over. And so I was just, like, "Wow, those were well-built arms because they didn't crack at all and, you know, they had now the force the other direction and they made it," so.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That is cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is a technical triumph.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was, like, "Wow."

MIJA RIEDEL: And so — and you built it with the figures on the arms. I wondered if they were added later but they were actually —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, I coiled the arm out like I told you, all the way to the hand. And then I went back and I coiled each little figure on the arms. So they were on there permanently on the arm.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary. That was extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, that was good. And their walls are usually, you know, thicker if it's a little bigger piece and thinner if it's a smaller piece and I just pinch them. And then I use a metal rib to scrape it or my knife. And that's it.

MIJA RIEDEL: We were looking at some pieces upstairs that had broken either in the firing or someplace along the process. Do you ever repair anything if it cracks in the kiln?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Those pieces were beyond repair. So they went into the yard — in my graveyard. But I found that, you know, if you get a crack or a simple break, I can fix them. And I don't mind that. To me, it doesn't make the piece less because my message is still being relayed. And so, like, if there's a crack — a little crack — I can fill it with what I found in the — in my 20s was a stuff called Bondo —

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard of that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — which is used for car dent repairs. And it's really nice stuff because you can sand it. So you put it in and it dries. It hardens within minutes. And so then you can file and sand it. You basically sculpt it so that there's no — what they do with cars when they get dented.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then because I'm painting a lot of it, then I can just paint it and there's — it's gone.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And it really works well.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's durable. It works well with the clay. So it's a wonderful tool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you been painting on the work from the very start or is that something that came along later?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That started in — I started painting them in my early 20s just because the glazes were — I'd lose so many pieces because either the glazes didn't work or I couldn't — like, if a glazed piece cracked, you can't repair it in the same way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So it was a much more complicated and I didn't need to be going that direction. I wasn't interested in being a technical ceramist. I mean, I can build a piece but I didn't need to glorify my glazes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, that wasn't the point.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And the paint, what do you use?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I mostly use acrylic paints.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because they're easy to use.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they're thinned down with something?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'll use — no.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I just however, whatever works.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's funny because they don't have the feeling of acrylic paint when you look at the actual surfaces somehow. Some of them may.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, it's cool because you can play with the textures just like a patina and I'd become sort of like a patina-ish with paints for the pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. We should talk about surfaces a bit too because they're really important to you, texture and surface I think. And that's something that you must have been aware of from the start but something that I know has been really important as you've worked on the bronze is to find patinas that really resonated with you.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. I think the surface — I like sculptural forms because they're three-dimensional and you can touch them, unlike a painting and kind of just a visual thing, that sculpture you can interact with physically more. And so touching the piece is important and the way they feel is important to me.

So then, the textures become important. And you know, I've played with rough textures and soft textures, and you know, different kinds. I personally like for my pieces soft, a smooth kind of surface because they feel nice.

And it probably goes back to being a little kid working with my Uncle Mike in the dark and being very aware of what things feel like if you close your eyes. And they feel nice when they're — when you just feel the forms.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm going to pause this for one second. I think we should close that. I've taken us off the conversation of the studio. But how long have you had the particular studio you're working in now?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I used to work in my kitchen for most of my young adult life. And then —

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, on the table. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right where we had — where we were working yesterday?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh it was a different kitchen and a different table, but yes. And then, you know, clay makes a lot of mess. You're always trying to move your stuff out of the way so you can cook dinner.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And when was it, in my early 30s I built me a studio. And so I had an official studio for the first time that was separate from the house just by 20 feet. So I could walk out to the studio which was really kind of neat. And when my kids were small, it was okay to have it in the kitchen because we were all trying to survive — you know, I was trying to raise babies at the same time I was making the sculptures.

But when I didn't have little babies around all the time, it was nice to go to work. [Laughs.] Because I never had a job, job like that. I supported myself off of my work from early on. So I didn't ever get to go somewhere else to work. So it was exciting to walk 20 feet from the house because I'm going to work. [They laugh.]

And so I built this little studio space and I don't need a lot of space to work usually because

most of my pieces tend to be about two feet high, a foot wide or something. So I usually have a swivel and that way I can swivel them around so I can — I'll sometimes spend, you know, five, six hours in that spot working on the piece in a corner of the room.

And in the other part of the room, because I like movies, I have lots of chairs because people then want to find me. And they come hang out there and they'll watch a movie and sit there and hang out and it becomes kind of like the den. My studio is more like a den. [They laugh.] And so people come and watch their movies and the grandkids now will come over and watch their movies.

Or last night, my granddaughter, who's 8-years-old and is a wonderful reader, I told her to come read me a book. So she sat there and she started a novel while I worked. She sat there and read to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Very nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you don't need complete silence and emptiness and focus while you're working. You can focus and have other things going on around you.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No. My work has so much to do with my life that to block out my life seems contradictory to it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Got you.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And sometimes, you know, I'll — I spent — you know, people don't always want to come in there and hang out with me. So it gets lonely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Got you.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I'm very pleased if someone wants to come sit there and talk or watch a movie or read a book or work on something they're working on.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's cool.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you work on one piece at a time?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I usually work on several pieces at a time and I tend to, because of the clay drying method —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — it's like sometimes it's frustrating because you can only go a few inches and then you can't. You have to go do something else, which I'm usually busy so I can find things to do. But sometimes it's helpful to turn and work on something else that needs two more inches. And then I'll go wash clothes or something, come back and sort of switch off.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then the finishing part is actually the longest, longest time. Building the piece doesn't take that long. But then the finishing, the detail stuff and the fine-tuning, so to speak, can take, like, five days of intense time. And it's exhausting. I'm exhausted.

MIJA RIEDEL: What does that entail when you say the fine-tuning?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, once you get the main form and you have the piece basically there, it's sort of sketched out in this sort of rough pinch pot thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Then you're coming back and fixing forms and smoothing out rough areas and it's very time consuming. And that's the hardest part of it for me. It's exhausting.

And it's always the question of when is it done. [Laughs.] Is that good enough or am I just really tired? [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you know? How do you know? Is it somewhere between the two?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There is — well, sometimes I think I'm just tired. But there is a point when you go, "That's good enough. That'll do." [They laugh.] And I walk out, go have lunch.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Then it's fired and then it's painted.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, and it usually dries in a week, let it sit out for a week or two. And I fire in an electric kiln because I can take it up very slowly. And that's the key to my pieces a lot too, a firing, is that I really take it up slowly.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it might fire over a course of days.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No. I usually maybe put it in in the morning and I let it be on low for most of the day and then the evening I turn it to medium. And then right before I go to bed I turn it on high and go to bed. And in the morning, it will be done.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is there a particular cone or temperature you're going to?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: 04.

MIJA RIEDEL: 04, okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: With this clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then, you paint it. Then they're all painted with acrylics.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or, you know, I'll pour oxides on them.

MIJA RIEDEL: After they're painted — after they're fired?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: After they're fired. I used to put it on before but I found out that it works way better after.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then you don't — you do not fire them again?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: You don't have to fire it again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. I didn't know that.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: As the clay is porous at that low temperature so it just soaks in that iron oxide. You know, it's watery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And you can get wonderful coloring from it.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's like a stain. You're staining the piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. But I bet it's very alive, the porosity of the clay just absorbing that color and not firing might — yeah, give a lovely finish.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, and because it's fired to a certain amount, you can actually wash it if it's — like, I'll use sponges a lot to color them completely, wiping them and putting it on again and wiping it off and doing different things.

MIJA RIEDEL: And are most of the pieces fired as single pieces? We talked, for example, about *Family* yesterday and that was clearly fired in many pieces. But are most of them — most of the figures fired as single pieces?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes. My kiln is about the right size for one piece at a time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Do you listen to music at all when you work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I do. I'm not a — I'm not a very — what is the — cosmopolitan kind of a person. So I'm not very savvy on what's coming out. So my daughter tends to come in and say, "Okay, I got some new music for you," and that's where I hear new music.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Or the news. I don't ever watch TV or read the newspaper. So my son comes in or my husband will come in and tell me what's happening out in the world. And that's how I hear about the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: And can you work to any kind of music, any kind of movies?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, I don't like too much violent, violent stuff. And I don't do well with rap.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there anything you particularly like?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, I was just thinking. I said I don't like violent movies but I go, "I really like Westerns." [They laugh.] That doesn't really make sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe a different kind of violence.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, a different kind of violence. I like — yeah, I like Westerns. I like all the new animated kids movies — *Shrek*, *Toy Story*, *Tangled*, all those ones. They're just amazing to me. They're just — I love them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Those voices are so animated, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I don't know, you know, the way they get the characters to do what they do. It's just wonderful. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And no particular music at all? Country-Western or classical or contemporary?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'll listen to Country-Western. I'll listen to pop. I'll listen to rock and roll. I'll listen to classical. I'll listen to foreign stuff. I like our native music. But I don't listen to rap.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. [They laugh.] I wanted to talk a little bit about exhibitions. We touched on it yesterday. We touched on some galleries. But a couple of follow-up question to that. I was thinking about this morning your story yesterday about the gallery in Dixon that had taken some of those first figures and put them in the closet.

And I thought that we would be remiss if we didn't mention the opposite, some of the opposite experiences you'd had. And I'd read that in 1986 when you were 22 you had your work maybe for the first time at the Santa Fe Indian Market and won multiple awards. Is that — did I read that correctly? Is that accurate?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you describe that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, Santa Fe Indian Market actually has been a big part of my life. So that's a good one. It's a market for native arts and it's very — it's a big show and hundreds of vendors come.

And you get a booth but the amount of people that come in from out of state, from all over the world to come see this event is spectacular. It's a big event. So it's a really good way to show your work even though you're in a booth.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And in my early 20s, my aunt had a booth. And it's hard to get in. You have to —

MIJA RIEDEL: Was this Nora? Nora Naranjo-Morse?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: This was Tessie, Tessie Naranjo.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: My Aunt Tessie was — had a booth and she said that I could share her booth with her.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's a juried booth?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's a juried so I had to get past through the juried thing. And because I was sharing a booth, you get in easier. So I got in and I did really well.

And actually then the following year they have — you can submit your work for awards in different categories of, you know, sculpture, painting, jewelry, pottery, all that. And I could — so I put some pieces in for jurying. And I won awards. I won awards and I continued to do that for the next 25 years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember what the awards were?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I won't be able to list them because I went for the next 25 years. I was going to Indian Market. And I went again a couple of years ago. But for a long time I would go every year. That was my main big show of the year.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's where you sold your work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That was where I made my money for the year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: On that two-day weekend.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It was an incredible show. And so I would get there at about 7 [o'clock] in the morning, maybe 6:30 in the morning and it's still kind of dark and you set up your booth. And by the time I was in my late 20s, I had a following enough so that by the time I got there, people were camped in my booth.

They'd sleep the night because they figured out a way to — because I would sell out within half-an-hour of when I'd say, "Okay, the booth's open." Then you — then you start selling. And so they would — they would fight. They were starting to fight over pieces. So they on their own figured out rules of my booth. [They laugh.]

And they would have a list — the first one there would start the list and then they would put their name at the top of the list and then people that would come after would put their name. And so the first ones that slept at the booth were at the top of the list. And then the ones that showed up at 3 [o'clock] in the morning I guess were further down on the list. [Laughs.]

And I thought they were crazy. Anyway, then I would finish setting up my booth because I put a lot of time in these pieces and I didn't want them to just disappear. So I kind of made rules that you have to leave it in the booth until noon and then you can come get your piece so that people can see them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Because you want them to see them. So I'd take my time setting them all up with their little nametags and their little statements because I like to write statements with my pieces. And then we'd pick up the list and we'd start the first person. And they got the first choice.

MIJA RIEDEL: One piece?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, first we didn't — they didn't have that rule. And then, years into that, they made another rule that you can only have one piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: But at the beginning maybe you could have two.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, at first they didn't realize that might be a problem yet. So it was slowly working its kinks out.

MIJA RIEDEL: But that's extraordinary that your audience worked that out among themselves.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You didn't have to set up any rules.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: All I did was be handed the list and read a name. [They laugh.] And it was — it was troubling because here, you know, I had been making these figures and had a — never thought to sell them and then now I was having to deal with these — the public that was demanding that I sell it to them and not that other guy or just these things I was not prepared for.

And you know, they'd be handing me checks in my hand, kind of forcefully, and then by the end of that first day by noon, everything was gone. I'd pack up my stands and go home. And I — it took me years to deal with it because I would go home and I'd go into a deep depression. It was like it was too fast and it was — and yeah, I had a pile of checks there but it didn't make sense. It's like all those hours of putting myself into these pieces turn into these papers with numbers on them.

It was — it seemed dirty. It seemed wrong. I had to work through it for a while. And I would — you know, I remember coming home and just sobbing, just I couldn't deal with that scene. But I also needed to pay my bills and make a living.

So I had to work through that and I made many sculptures about this because it felt almost like prostitution, like they were pieces of me that I was throwing out in the world for money. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Were those pieces — do you recall any in particular? I think of that piece called *Making Babies for Indian Market*. Is that an example of this sort of work where you're working through it or can you think of others?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, I had, like, I remember one in particular, a clown, who was ripping off its stripes and putting price tags on his stripes, that kind.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was that called? Do you remember?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: *For Sale*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Another piece is a woman who has little figures that she made and she's putting them out there to sell in front of her. And the little figures are all crying because she's selling them.

Another piece where she's sitting there and she took a slice out of her leg, like a piece of pie cut and she has it on a pie thing and she's handing it out, like, "Have a piece of me." Yeah, those were ones that were about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you ever have collectors come to your studio ahead of time to try and buy the work in a calmer format?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes and I would have to turn off my phone and not let people know where I lived because it would — they would try to get to me before the market.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you didn't want to do that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, it seemed unfair to the ones that slept in the booth. [They laugh.] It's hard to make everyone happy because then they fight and there would be fights. And it would — it was not nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. But they finally found a way to work it out among themselves. Did you

request that or did they just —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, they figured it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They did it all on their own.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine some of them who were major collectors would not necessarily want to be sleeping out in a booth.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: No, but you'd be surprised. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, and — yeah. Some of the collectors that I know — I know one couple who probably own about 18 pieces, maybe more. But you know, it was quite —

MIJA RIEDEL: They would come and sleep in your booth? One would come and sleep?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, oh yeah. They'd have their little lawn chairs. And then they got so they'd start to know each other and then they'd have like these — they'd bring their chairs and have, like, dinner parties there the night before. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is a great story.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then it — you know, when I got the gallery, it was like this new stage in my life. I didn't have to go out to Indian Market in the booth. And even though it was an incredible market by way of making money and exposure and all that and I'm grateful for it dearly, it's a hard, hard one to do.

And to switch from that to the gallery, which was so calm and quiet and — it was different. And I was glad. I was glad to have it changed to something where people could come and sit with the pieces and it's not a mob that's grabbing at you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And when you — when you made that transition from Indian Market to gallery, did you come here to the Tower Gallery? No, because this is more recent. You went to someplace in Santa Fe or where did you begin?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Well, I started early on showing in galleries.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I would take my work — like, Four Winds Gallery in Pittsburgh —

MIJA RIEDEL: Pittsburgh.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — was one of the earliest galleries of mine.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Pennsylvania?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: In Pennsylvania. He had found me at Indian Market.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he came to my booth and he says, "Will you show in my gallery in Pittsburgh?" And I was a young girl and said, "Okay." So I didn't know how to do that and he set it all up and told me how to ship them and do percentages and blah, blah, blah.

And he would host shows for me every few years and I'd fly out to Pittsburgh. So we were — I started to do the gallery scene at that point with a number of different galleries.

MIJA RIEDEL: So Four Winds that we talked about and then Hahn-Ross?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Four Winds was a major one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, throughout your career has that been true?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. They've got — when I got my own gallery, a lot of them sort of went in the foreground.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Do you still show with Four Winds now?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I do, I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so that's decades long then it sounds like.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: They're friends of mine now.

MIJA RIEDEL: And how would you describe your relationship with dealers, galleries, gallery dealers over time? Has it been mainly positive? Has it been mixed?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mixed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Mixed. Some are truly art lovers and aren't just trying to make a buck. They're — they love the work. And others want to make a buck and so it's all business or it's very — yeah, it's a business. And you know, Four Winds Gallery, I enjoyed them just because John Krena, who is the owner, he loves art and yet he's also a businessman.

But I think overall he just loves the whole Indian art world. And he just wanted to see as much of it as he can. So it runs through him and back out. He loves to — what is it — circulate it. [Laughs.] He'll buy back his pieces he sold and resell them because he can.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And he just — he's just a good person. And then I've had others that have been hard to deal with and argue with you and act like they're doing you such a big favor and stuff like that, which is hard or you go to their gallery and the whole feeling of the place is not good.

And that matters to me a lot, the space. And that's why having this Tower Gallery was so wonderful because we created a space that felt good for my pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting. When I think — because the materials are so similar too. It feels almost as if the materials are formed out of — the pieces are formed out of the same material as the building itself.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes. Well, it is. It's all dirt and clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, there's a real synchronicity and a relationship between the materials in the work and the materials in the gallery. There's a similar feeling, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, and I plastered those walls that the pieces are sitting next to.

MIJA RIEDEL: It feels like your home in many ways. It feels like the walls we were sitting next to yesterday. Yes, there's a similar feeling.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has the market for ceramics, for Native American ceramics, for your ceramics changed over the 30 years, 20 years that you've been exhibiting?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: For me, it started really slow just because people didn't know where to put me.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I realized people need to categorize things. And I've always fought that because I don't like being categorized. But you know, I've been put in many different categories of women in the arts, native artists, contemporary this and that, traditional blah,

blah, blah or it's just like —

MIJA RIEDEL: Figurative, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Figurative, you know, craftsperson.

MIJA RIEDEL: Realistic, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Indigenous something or the other. But I don't — I question even being an artist because it wasn't — that's not where it came from, like we've talked about. It was a language I learned and I'm grateful people want to buy it so I can make a living out of my language. And that's pretty cool.

When they first started buying, it was for — I remember I sold my first piece to my brother-in-law. He offered to pay me $200 for this two-figure sculpture which he still has. And I thought that was so much money I couldn't believe it because I was selling, you know, my bowls and cups for $5. So $200 was a lot of money. So I was very pleased.

And then I remember another milestone when I think at Indian Market when I dared to price something at I think a thousand dollars. And you know, it slowly went up.

I'm not one of those people that raise their prices fast. It was, like, a very — I had to feel comfortable or else I would not sleep. And so does it feel like that number would work? Yeah, that number would — no, even $5 wouldn't work and I wouldn't sleep.

So it was a constantly feeling event, the whole price thing and the market and watching people and seeing. It's a relationship. Again, it's like would you — they say, "Well, I'll give you," like my brother-in-law, "I'll give you $200 for this piece." "Really?" "Yeah, I think it's worth $200." "Really?"

And then you work with that. It's, like, "Well, let me think about it." And you're playing this game with both yourself and the people that are offering the money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And at some point you get comfortable where it settles. And sooner or later you're at $500. You go, "This is worth $500 to me." Very strange for me to go into that world because money and the pieces don't — they're not about money. [Laughs.] Unless I specifically make it a topic on money.

But Indian Market was really valuable in making a living off of them and slowly, slowly the prices would rise. Through the years, the last five years with the whole economy having a hard time, artists feel — or at least the ones I know and myself — definitely people aren't willing to put out money for art as willingly or they buy little things, the little pieces would sell.

The larger pieces won't. This year, it's better than the last three years. But I feel lucky. I'm still making a living off my art. And I've been doing that since I was 17 years old. So I'm lucky.

MIJA RIEDEL: And your work's been part of some very significant large traveling exhibitions too, which has probably helped to broaden the audience even further.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you had international exhibitions as well?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I've been at the Paris — the Cartier show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, Cartier.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: A show in Britain, a show in New Zealand, a show in — a little show in Brazil that was part of that other thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: In a gallery in Australia.

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were primarily group shows?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and were they traveling exhibitions that had originated in the U.S., like —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And then around, you know, the United States.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: New York, Florida, Pittsburgh, Colorado, California, Oregon, Arizona, I think that's it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. This is a question that I think is going to be interesting for you. It's part of the list that the Laitman Project has been working with. So I think it's important that we ask it. But it's going to be interesting in your context I think.

Do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or one that's particularly American or one that's something else altogether. Yeah, I mean, do you think — what sort of tradition do you think of yourself as part of, or don't you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I like to think I'm both because I think that I speak a language that all humans speak which is sort of a language of emotions. So that's international. I'm worldly that way because I — you know, my pieces get seen in different places or by people coming to see them from all over the world and they get it. They relate because we're all human. So on that, I'm global that way.

But I also am a very local person. I've lived in my house for the last 27 years and I probably will die there. And that's my village. That's my people and my family. And so I'm very connected to Santa Clara. And that makes me — what did you call it — very —

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it was international or American.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh, American but localized American.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: American Indian, specifically Santa Clara Pueblo, which matters to me because I think if you don't know — if you don't have a specific — it's like having a heart versus just having a body. It's like I have a body. That's the part that can relate to the rest of the world. But then my heart is the center of me which is — which belongs at Santa Clara.

It's where I'm from. It's where my people are from. And because I'm a seed saver, and seeds have this. So you can't just plant any plant anywhere. They're very specific to a climate or a soil or temperature. And I believe humans are too. They just forget that we genetically have been adapted to a particular place and climate.

And you know, now people travel everywhere and we've made buildings and cars and clothes that make us so we can live anywhere. But really we're genetically made to fit somewhere. And we probably would be the most comfortable in our right place that way. So given that my genetic makeup has lived here for thousands of years, it's probably the most comfortable place for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of something that you wrote about people being out of touch with their environment and hoping that your work might some way help them access a sense of that. Can you say any more about that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I do think that with this modern age of moving around and stuff that we forget that we do belong. There is a belonging somewhere. And you know, we may fight against it because we judge it. But part of my language of feeling is a language that makes you have to go what feels right and what doesn't feel right.

Our feeling body tells us when something's too hot, when it's too cold, when it's too loud,

when it's too soft. That's how we know how to move through the world. And if we numb our feeling body out so much that we can't even tell, then we end up hurting things around us because we don't — we don't feel what our relationship to it is.

We can step on things. We can cut down forests. We can kill things. We can hurt each other. We can destroy our environment because we're not feeling anymore because if we felt, we couldn't do it. It would hurt too much. So to me, when I make a piece that has a lot of emotion in it, for someone to understand it, they have to connect to their emotions.

It's, like, it's the way you know that language. So you go, "Oh, I know that in me." So it nourishes the feeling body in us. And so it — I think I'm encouraging that. And I think the more we nourish that part of us, the more we're in tune with ourselves and with everything around us because we were feeling it. That's my philosophy. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's very helpful. Thanks for that. What sort of changes have you seen in ceramics in your lifetime? You said at the beginning, for example, I'm thinking of that at Indian Market, they didn't know where to put your work. It didn't fit in a category. I'm wondering over the past three — two, three decades — have you seen particular changes.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: In my little circle, my little world of ceramics, you have to realize I grew up in a traditional pottery-making world. And so, you know, to even work with commercial clays was not okay and then to use a kiln was not okay. [Laughs.]

And my mother stepping into — she first — she made that trail first for me. So she broke out of that mold by going, "Well, let's try other things."

And so, within my lifetime, you know, it went from, you know, people that only dug clay and fired outside in a pit to now many native artists using all kinds of clay, using kilns without a second thought, trying different materials out, mixing media, going to art schools.

That's changed. I'm part of that because I sculpted. I didn't make pots, you know. For a living, I was sculpting. That's new.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you find it's more accepted now?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, definitely. I mean, anyone who starts something, they have to break ground and breaking ground isn't easy.

But I would say my mother and my Aunt Jody, Jody Folwell, definitely groundbreakers. Nora Naranjo-Morse, another groundbreaker. That generation that dared. I think they were breaking the ground first. So by the time I was figuring out my clay pinch pots, there was a kiln.

MIJA RIEDEL: We've talked about your work in terms of sort of definitely native work and we talked about you going out to Portland to the Museum Art School and your father being from New Jersey and of German descent. We talked about your work in the context of native work.

I wonder if you — have you thought about your work in the context of — we talked about figurative certainly and we mentioned Michelangelo yesterday and I know you've talked about a couple others.

But do you think about it at all in terms of contemporary figurative ceramics work? I mentioned Stephen De Staebler but I think of somebody like Adrian Arleo who does very figure-based work that has a lot to do with nature. We talked about Viola Frey in passing yesterday. But have you thought about it in that context at all?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I very much think I would do well in that context. And I've — I don't know a lot of people in that arena. But I'm very open to, you know — we've been looking for a place to host us in Europe. I'd love to go to Africa. I had a show in New York that had nothing to do with native art stuff and did well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: What was it called? Sorry, I don't know the name.

MIJA RIEDEL: Beverly Mayeri is another one who comes to mind and Franklin Parrish Gallery.

Do you know that gallery?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Boy, that sounds familiar.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, if you can't think of it right now, we can add it when the transcript comes back.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Okay, it might be in the —

MIJA RIEDEL: In your résumé?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Résumé, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can take a look. But that would be interesting to think about, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's something you're interested in. There just hasn't — perhaps the opportunity hasn't presented itself. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, busy. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's, like, I would be glad — I would be happy to whatever, show in non-native. I mean, Hahn-Ross is not native art. Four Winds doesn't just show native art. You know, the Denver Art Museum —

MIJA RIEDEL: Museum, right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I'm open to whatever. So I think I'm fine with not being boxed in that category.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I would think.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And I've been part of the women in the arts. That's not native arts. And they gave me an award.

MIJA RIEDEL: When was that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: About four years ago, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was it for?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Excellence.

MIJA RIEDEL: In the field?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Have you had — I don't believe you have — but have you had any interaction with any of the craft schools — Penland School of Craft or Haystack, Arrowmont, what's the one in Colorado — Arrowmont, I think — nothing like that?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I give talks here and there — Arizona State. I'm going this weekend to Texas to give a talk. I'm invited to different universities to give talks — New Mexico.

MIJA RIEDEL: Workshops? That sort of thing?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yes, workshops. I've done — Santa Fe Clay actually has a really good program and they have great shows and bring in all kinds of ceramists from around the

country. I did a whole week workshop with them and talk.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you try and cover in a workshop like that? What's important to you to communicate, to teach?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The one I did with Santa Fe Clay was about 20 adults who probably knew my work and so we were going to make a figure. They all made a figure. So I started them with coiling the pot in my method. I was going to show them my method. But the whole point to them is, like, some of them already knew how to work with clay.

And they were the worst students. They're the hardest ones because they're stuck in a way of doing things. Because they go, "Well, I know how to do this already." I have to say, "No, we're going to start with zero."

"Pretend you're three years old because that's how I started." It's, like, "If you want to learn from me, you start at three years old." "Remember how the clay felt when you were a child and you're holding that wet stuff and it's moving in your hand."

And I make them close their eyes and I make them roll it around. And it's, like, "Okay, now, how do you feel? Did you have a bad day? Did you wake up grouchy? Did you wake up excited? Did you wake up — you know, think about how you feel. Now, we're gonna sculpt and we're going to just make these coils and just feel the clay and just pinch them together."

And they're, you know, "Oh, where's the slip and there's the scoring and where's," — it's, like, "No, the clay will hold itself together. Watch. You just pinch it, pinch it, pinch it." And so they're learning something that they've been told you can't do. So it's good. It's breaking them down.

And then I'm constantly reminding them to think about how they're feeling. And it was really a good class because by the — I think it was two-weeks long actually. We slowly built up the figures and the whole point was they had to — kept practicing how they felt.

And they started to understand that what they were feeling was going to come out in this piece. And if they had a preconceived idea, then they're going to fight the whole way through. But if they just stay with themselves and how that clay feels when you're three-years-old, it's going to come out. And the pieces did come out.

They all produced a piece and they stood there and the last day we went around and looked at each other's pieces. And I think everyone cried when it got to their piece because by then they were incredibly emotional, amazing pieces that looked like who made them.

If you mixed everybody up, you could pick them out and put them near their sculpture just because you could tell whose they belonged to because they had put themselves into it that much. It was very emotional. It was, like, going through major therapy or something. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds like it, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: But I loved it. They did so good. So that's the kind of workshops I like doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. That's incredibly insightful. And two weeks is a long time to be working on that piece.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's intense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's intense time.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm glad we asked that question. Is there — is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist? We've talked about a lot of different communities. But when you think about your development, we've talked about certainly your Uncle Mike and your family, being from Santa Clara.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There's an Indian art community and even — you know, I've wanted to push away from being labeled as an Indian artist because I don't want — I don't like the

labels.

But you know, I've gone to the Heard show for years and years too in Indian Market. And there's artists that attend these that I've known now for 30 years.

[Audio Break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So we were asking about — you were talking about an Indian community.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Oh yes, native art community. I would say that that is — if I have a group, that would be the people that I have watched over the years, other artists. And the ones that I connect to mostly are the more contemporary native artists. A few of those —

[Audio break.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — which would be Diego Romero, Tony Abeyta, Bob Haozous, Shonto Begay, Mateo Romero, Rose Simpson, Denise Wallace. Those are big names that have — that sort of — and they're my friends. And we watch each other's work. And yeah, we're traveling a similar road.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, well, I think we've done an admirable job of covering these questions. I have just a few summary questions and then I'll let you prepare for Texas.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Some final thoughts in summary: How would you describe the strengths and the weaknesses of clay as a — as an expressive medium? And what in particular about it is important to you? What does it do that nothing else can?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think clay is such a great medium because it's so flexible and it's also — I think it absorbs essence. I think it soaks in whatever's around it. It's clay. It does. It soaks in — that you can add and subtract, push, pull, pretty cool stuff —

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — pretty cool stuff. And not only that. I'm so inept in it that I sculpt out of it, I garden out of it, I build houses in it. It's my life. It's the best material there is.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. It's true. When I start to think about it, you built with it, you live within those walls. Yeah, it's — yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah. It's good stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about bronze?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Bronze — bronze has been good. But it's a different — you know, it's a different medium. At first, I thought, "That's metal. That's cold."

But my sculptures, because I think they're soft already and they have this smoothness, the bronzes don't end up being cold even though they're metal. And that was surprising. So I'm okay with the bronze. But I work — I work in clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when would — certainly you might choose bronze for larger figures but you've done smaller figures in bronze as well. What would be the — what would be the inspiration there? Is it strictly to do multiples?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, like, say I make a little figure that's 3 inches high or something that's just nice to hold, and I made it out of clay and we here at the Tower Gallery have a discussion that this would be a good piece to bronze —

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: — so then we decide — because if you go a bronze way, you put up a lot of money. And so you have — it's like a gamble. Clay is cheap. You know, I can go dig it in my backyard. So it could cost nothing if you do it completely on the ground.

So to do a bronze seems to me like, "Whoa, it's going to cost how much money to turn this

into a metal?" So you have to put out money. So you have to have money to make a bronze. And if you have a large bronze, it's very expensive.

So you may not — if you don't sell it, you lose that money or you keep the bronze piece or you melt it down. I don't know. So you have to make a decision whether this piece can be sold, you know, three times or 30 times or 50 times over so that you make money off of this. So it's more like a business aspect of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And if they decide as a group here that this piece is good, that people will like this 30 times over, then they go, "Okay," and they put the money up to mold it and then the mold has to get a wax. And then that has to get a mold and then it gets poured.

And then it gets fixed up and then it gets patina. It's a huge process. And I have all these guys through the state that do this process for me. And they've been working with me for years now. And then they produce this piece and we set it out and cross our fingers.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when you say they, is there a board of directors or something here at the gallery or is it — that makes that decision? How does that work?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: It's more our manager, Cindy, and my husband and me. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So the three of you, if you all agree on a piece, then it's generally a good one to bronze.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Yeah, because it's hard to make that decision on your own because it's scary because you may lose on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: And you still have to pay all those guys, so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. How has your work been received over time?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think I'm received very well at this point. At first, like I was saying, it was strange and new for people and I was breaking ground for my own self. And people — it took a long time for people to be comfortable with what I was doing.

Now, you know, I'm known enough and I've had enough of my stuff out there that people — it's the weirdest thing to walk somewhere and people go, "That's Roxanne Swentzell." And I don't know who they are but they know who I am. It's very strange.

And they know my work and they'll come up and say, "I like your work," and I'll go to different states and people will recognize. I was up in Canada in an airport and someone came up and said, "Are you Roxanne Swentzell?" And it's startling. So that's kind of weird.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: So I think I'm received.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That's neat, huh? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: That meant my language was heard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That's true. Do you see your career in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct? We've talked about threads of continuity that run through it, but —

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I have to. I break my life up into husbands. [They laugh.] My husband now teases me. He says, "So which husband time was that?" [They laugh.] I hate to say that but it's true. [They laugh.] When you were giving, you know, the dates and stuff, I'm, like,

"Wow, dates." I was, like, "No, that was Joel period. Well, that was Diego time then. That was Pat time." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes sense because the pieces are so emotional and often personal narratives. I guess in a lot of ways that resonates.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: There you go.

MIJA RIEDEL: There you go. How do you see yourself and your work fitting into the big picture of contemporary art?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: How do I see it? I think my pieces will stand time. So in that sense, I do think that I — that long after I'm gone, I will be remembered not just in New Mexico but in a broader sense, that these pieces, some of these images I think will be remembered as major pieces of art in this country, maybe the world. I think they can do that. I've never said that before but I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about the work in particular matters to you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: The ones that matter?

MIJA RIEDEL: What about the work in general or in specific but what about it matters to you? What about it is important to you?

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: I think when a piece of artwork — we were talking about vibration yesterday — has a vibration that's high enough that it touches a larger array of people, it's remembered. It's just — you know, *Mona Lisa* is vibrating very high. Why? It does this to you.

It gives — people see it and they're caught. Whatever that magic is is what makes it — makes it stay. It belongs to the world, bigger. It's not — and maybe that's a difference I would say between crafts and art.

It's like a real piece of art is at a higher vibration. It's reaching bigger places in us. It's not just a pretty picture to put in your bathroom corner. It's something that stops people in their tracks and makes them think bigger things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

ROXANNE SWENTZELL: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]