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Oral history interview with Michael Cohen, 2001 August 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Cohen on August 11, 2001. The interview took place in Pelham, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Gerry Williams for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

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

Interview

MR. GERRY WILLIAMS: This is Gerry Williams interviewing Michael Cohen at the artist's house in Pelham, Mass., on August 11, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And we're sitting in Michael's living-dining room upstairs on the second floor of his studio, looking out over the porch and the flowers and the forest behind, listening to the birds.

Now Michael, I'll start with a series of questions, and you can answer as long or as short as you want. Let's start with the very first question: where were you born and when?

MR. MICHAEL COHEN: Well, I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, March 7, 1936, in the same hospital that my daughter was born in, Boston Lying In [Boston Lying In Hospital].

MR. WILLIAMS: And tell me a little bit about your parents. What did your father do?

MR. COHEN: Well, my father had several jobs before I was born, but when I was born, he owned three liquor stores, and my mother took care of the house. And I had one brother, an older brother, seven years older than I.

MR. WILLIAMS: And were you a city boy, for the most part?

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. We lived in Brighton, Massachusetts, in an apartment house, in sort of a Jewish ghetto, and maybe a five-minute walk to the T, which I learned to navigate through shopping with my mother every Saturday morning. And I went to school in Brighton, and then went to Brighton High School.

MR. WILLIAMS: And did you start in clay work in high school?

MR. COHEN: No, I think earlier than that I was sort of discovered by an arts and crafts teacher who had graduated from Mass Art [Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, Massachusetts]. And I was going to a day camp in Brookline [Mssachusetts], and she took me on as sort of an assistant, and then she became my mentor. And, as a part of her life, she made marionettes. And she taught me how to make marionettes and how to paint scenery -- the first time I'd ever touched oil paint, and we painted scenery. And it was a big production. And she made me part of a team, the troupe, and there were five people. And we would travel around, three shows, maybe, in a year, for about three years, and we would do it with half the Boston Symphony Orchestra. So we'd be doing musical numbers, like the *Nutcracker Suite* and things like that.

So it was all marionettes and then the orchestra in front of us. And that was my introduction to classical music and my love of classical music. To be almost within the orchestra while it was happening was great. So she inspired me to go to Mass Art.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was this person's name?

MR. COHEN: Her name was Helen Denison, and I didn't keep track of her. I don't know where she is now. But she was probably 20 years older than I was. But while I was in high school, I was chosen to be in a scholarship program at the Museum of Fine Arts. Boston has a program of taking two people from each high school and bringing them down to the Museum of Fine Arts basement, where we had intensive art courses. And that was fantastic. It sort of pointed me in the direction of Mass Art.

On the other hand, I was so ignorant of everything. My father had died when I was in high school. I was so ignorant of the way things worked that when I applied to college, I applied to Mass Art. That was it, no back up. I can see that I got in pretty easily, but it was very scary. And then I went to Mass Art for four years. And in my sophomore year, I had the mandatory class of ceramics with Charles Abbott, and that was something like around 1953, something like that. And that's how I got started in clay.

MR. WILLIAMS: And what attracted you to clay?

MR. COHEN: It spoke to me. I realized there was a connection between my design sense and the total -- I don't know the word -- the ability to manipulate it into anything. You can make it look like anything, or like a real ceramic bowl or something. The mechanics was interesting to me, the fact that you're using a machine to make the pots. But all you had were sort of stand-up kick wheels and a few electric kilns, and I spent two years doing just that kind of stuff.

Abbott was a stickler on glazes, and so we had to learn glazes with slide rules. It was horrible. I'm very bad at math. But I think the physical experimentation got me through, you know, getting glazes and understanding what the materials were. So by the time I left Mass Art, I had a pretty good sense of clay, but I realized now that I knew nothing.

MR. WILLIAMS: Before we leave Mass Art, did Mr. Abbott become a mentor?

MR. COHEN: He was a mentor. He wasn't the greatest potter in the world, but as a Zen master, he certainly brought me to a new level. The minor spirituality that I have, I think a lot came from Mr. Abbott. He was a wonderful guy.

MR. WILLIAMS: What was his background?

MR. COHEN: Well, I think he was an architect, or his wife was an architect, or something like that, and I don't know. He got into clay somehow. He went to Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan], and he fell in love with Maija Grotell, who was then healthy. By the time I got to Cranbrook, she had disintegrated.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did he bring to you, through Maija Grotell, certain aspects of ceramics?

MR. COHEN: Not really, no. He had become a production potter, and I love that direction; I love the repetition. So during my last year at Mass Art, Bill Wyman, who was teaching, I think at the museum for his living, also had a little crummy basement studio. And he hired me to throw mugs, ashtrays, and cast porcelain decanters and porcelain mugs. So I would go there every weekend for a dollar an hour. And being next to him, as a master, during that time, he produced some of his greatest art pieces. Along with his production, he made slab pieces with impressed glass and sand, and he became very well known for those. And I was there, and we would talk about why one should write on a pot or what can someone write on a pot; should someone write on a pot? We would talk for hours. And so, you can't buy that kind of --

MR. WILLIAMS: And there was an episode in the meantime between two academic places.

MR. COHEN: Yes. After Mass Art, well, I had been in the top third of my class at Mass Art, which, that's what you needed to avoid the draft, which was then very, very heavy. And I was sort of penniless, and my family was penniless, and I thought I could save some money if I went into the army. But everyone was getting drafted. So I thought if I joined, they guaranteed you a school, which I joined, and I got photography and lab. And after my basic training, I went to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, where the photography school for the army is, and I learned photography by the army way. And I came out second in my class there.

The first in this class spoke perfect German, so of course they sent him to France. I had taken German in school, thank God, and went to Germany. I mean, I was in the army three months and I was in Germany. It was the first time I had ever been out of the country. I was a punk kid, but I went to a company that was all photography. It was 150 guys; 100 of them took pictures or were involved in the lab work. So I spent two and a half years going around Europe in my free time. Weekends, you know, you could go to Munich on a weekend.

I met potters all over Europe. I would go to the Frankfurter Messe, which was a big exhibition, and I met all the people there, and then I would get their addresses. And then I would visit them, and I would take pictures, but not enough. Little did I know I should have been writing this all down for Ceramics Monthly. I would have been published long before John Glick went to all the places I had told him to go to, like Hohr Grenzhausen. He had my list of people and places, and he followed it when he was in Germany.

So you get a certain amount of vacation in the army, and I went one time to Spain and took pictures of peasant pottery and things like that. But the main thing was going to England, because I wanted to become an apprentice with either Harry Davis or Bernard Leach. And I wrote them; I visited each one for several days; and I showed them my portfolio from Mass Art and Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine]. Oh, I went to Haystack after Mass Art, then I went into the army, studied with Toshiko Takaezu and Hal Rieger. Can I make a side thing for Hal Rieger?

The studio was so crowded that Hal said, well, why don't you try raku, and you can do it outside the studio. And so, all we had was A Potter's Book [Bernard Leach. London: Faber & Faber, 1988 (3rd ed.); 1940.]. Using A Potter's Book, we did the best we could do. We dug a pit, we made a sagger, we burned wood; we actually made

pots with the formulas from A Potter's Book, and Hal took pictures of all of this. And so therefore, that summer, he had about 100 pictures, and they became the beginning of the chapters of the first raku book in America. It was published around 1960.

So I go to visit Harry Davis, and he says -- he looks at my pictures -- I'm too one-of-a-kind; I have too many one-of-a-kind things. And then I go to visit Leach, who was just charming and lovely, and I sat with him for hours as he decorated pots, and we talked; he looked at my slides, and he looked at my pictures. I had photographs, because I had access to all this photoprinting equipment. And the result was that he felt I was too American and that I could never do the production type of pottery; I would not be able to stand the repetition. Little did either of us know that I would make thousands of the same object, just as he did. So that was England. So I took those same photographs and applied to Cranbrook for a scholarship.

MR. WILLIAMS: Where is Cranbrook?

MR. COHEN: Cranbrook is in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and it's a very exclusive graduate school. At the time, it took 100 people, and Maija Grotell was the teacher. So I got a full scholarship and I went there. Interestingly enough, my class, there were many wheels. And there were so many wheels in the studio that they had to cover them with boards because there weren't enough tables. So you'd be working onto covered-up wheels. It was stupid. And behind me was John Glick, and in front of me was Ron Burke. It was quite a group. And then Bob Sedestrom, who became the ceramics instructor at New Paltz for 30 years.

MR. WILLIAMS: When was Maija Grotell there?

MR. COHEN: First of all, she was just crippled from arthritis. She couldn't move her hands. She would shuffle around. And after I started going, after a few months, I started making functional pottery. And the worst moment I had at Cranbrook was I had done a lot of trays and had decorated them in different ways, had different shaped trays and different feet on them. And I got them all out of the kiln and put them on a board, and she came along, shuffled along, and she pointed her gnarled finger at the trays, and she said, "We don't do this at Cranbrook." And I was crushed.

Later that day, she called me into her inner sanctum, which only the most favored people would get to go. She, of course, would spend three months on a pot, four months, six months on a pot. The whole thing was covered up in plastic. She would meticulously work on it for months -- one object. I, of course, am banging things out as fast as I can make them, because I want to learn how to do that. And she accused me of sending someone else's pictures for the scholarship to go to Cranbrook. And I burst into tears and I couldn't stop crying.

And in that moment, I was so, not weak, but so needy. I said, what do you want me to do? I'll do it. Just tell me what you want me to do. And I didn't know that in graduate school no one tells you what to do; you're supposed to do it on your own. No one told me anything. I was very naïve about everything. That was a horrible moment. I walked out. She let me out of her private door so I could go to my room and weep. That moment is when I should have left and gone to study with [Peter] Voulkos, who was an incredible influence on me, as he was on everybody. I should have gone to Berkeley and sat at his feet. On the other hand, if I had, I think I would have been dead already from drugs and alcohol. So it's probably a good thing I didn't go.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you stayed in Cranbrook and graduated.

MR. COHEN: No. It's a two-year program; I left after one year. I didn't go back. It was cheaper for me to start my own studio than to go back and pay the money, which wasn't very much, but I didn't have anything. So I started in my mother's basement. Well, that summer, I went to the new Haystack up in Deer Isle, Maine, and Fran [Merritt], the year before, had taken Bill Wyman and myself to the site when there was not a thing on it, and that was a great moment.

The next year, it had been built, and I wrote Fran. I said, I will do anything to be at Haystack the first year. And he said, well, we need a maintenance man. And for half the summer, I became the maintenance man at Haystack. So it's very strange, when you're among all these semi-professionals, and all of the sudden, it's your night to give a slide show, and the maintenance man gets up and shows slides from Europe and his own work -- it was a great moment. It was one of the most wonderful summers. And every time I go to Haystack it's wonderful. So then I started my own studio in '61.

MR. WILLIAMS: Since we're talking about travels abroad, where else did you travel?

MR. COHEN: Well, recently, I've gone on elder hostel things. I have a phobia about travel. It's hard for me, so I have to force myself to travel. But I've been to Florence, and I've been to Sorrento and Naples and gone to museums there, all through elder hostels. And I'm about to go to Sienna in March, culture and culinary arts. I love cooking.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you go by yourself?

MR. COHEN: Yes, I go by myself. I'm going to the Grand Canyon with my sweetheart in a couple of weeks, on an elder hostel program, to the Indian reservation at the Grand Canyon. So that's going to be interesting.

MR. WILLIAMS: And these travels have been not organized, but in terms of the arts. But you've found your way --

MR. COHEN: Oh absolutely, all over Europe, when I was in the army, going to Madrid, and I had been to Paris in the Army, and Madrid, and seeing all the museums.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you travel in the Far East, Japan?

MR. COHEN: Never have been there.

MR. WILLIAMS: Any interest?

MR. COHEN: No, I don't really have interest, because being a poor kid and seeing all these rich kids spending years studying in Machiko or Bizen -- sort of trust-fund hippies would go to Japan and study with masters, you know, and throw their hundred bowls. I was jealous, and I sort of kidded myself into feeling it was like a cliché to do it. So I've never really wanted to go to Japan, and now I think it's more like a production line of American potters going to Japan. So I don't think I really want to go.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that context, do you think of yourself as being part of a traditional line of pottery?

MR. COHEN: Yes, definitely, first of all, from the Bernard Leach line and [Shoji] Hamada. I remember seeing around 1960, there was a show of Hamada and -- oh God, I forget the names of the great Japanese potters at that time -- in Cambridge, and it blew my mind. It was the epitome of what I wanted to do. I even, for years, for almost 20 years, I used a four-petaled flower with dots in the spaces as my trademark, and it came right off of a Hamada pot.

Years after that, I met Hamada at a show he had at Bonniers in New York City, and he was wonderful. It took guts, but I asked him for an autograph, and he did an autograph. That was in 1960s.

MR. WILLIAMS: In Japanese.

MR. COHEN: In Japanese.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you still have it?

MR. COHEN: Yes, I do.

MR. WILLIAMS: Can I buy it from you? [Laughs.]

MR. COHEN: I remember looking at his vases or looking at his pots, and, oh, they were outrageously expensive, $200 for a bowl or $200 for a vase. If I had any money at the time, I would have bought -- I think, he also said, you don't have to buy anything. You have it in your mind. You're looking at it, you have it in your mind, it's in your eyes; you don't have to own it. He was right.

MR. WILLIAMS: Good advice.

MR. COHEN: Yeah, yeah.

MR. WILLIAMS: Now, you had mentioned Voulkos as part of the American tradition. What interest did you have in that direction?

MR. COHEN: He and I, I think, were influenced by the same cover of Craft Horizons. It was a box with a face on it, and the face had a top hat on it. He told me that he thought those were four feet high, and that's when he started doing the gigantic stacked pots, because he wanted to make something as impressive as that. It was only years later that he found out those were four inches high. But because of the angle of the photography, they looked monumental.

MR. WILLIAMS: Whose work was it?

MR. COHEN: Some Finn, I don't remember. But see, he liked -- were very large at that time, and I always looked to that kind of stuff. So when he started coming out with his torn work and his thrown-together work -- between him and Eric Gronberg, who handles clay in another way, sort of similar, which is the nontouching, you know, having saran wrap between him and the clay, and using stamps in his clay, that was very influential for me. But

watching Voulkos grow was such an inspiration. And I tried to work in a way where you would -- it's also a Japanese thing, which is where you'd hit the pot or hit some slabs together, and you'd leave the mark of the paddle, and you'd leave your finger marks. And that was how it influenced me, and both the Japanese pottery and Voulkos, as a combination of things.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk about function and its role in your work.

MR. COHEN: Well, for 35 years or more -- 37 years, I think -- I've been making mostly functional pottery. I would say 90 percent of my work is functional pottery, and 10 percent is nonfunctional, more sculptural. I loved the idea of people using the objects that I made. And it's just an incredibly important part of my life. And so, when I started out making a line of pottery, it was totally functional. It was plates and mugs and bowls and pitchers and all the things, but I tried to put my own spin on all of these objects so that it wouldn't look like everyone else's and using interesting glazes.

And I was trying to do the best I could, but it was very hard to make a living, because there were no stores to sell stuff in. And I guess I have to tell you, the selling experience was, you would make pots, you'd wrap them in newspaper, you'd bring them to Marion Ruth [store in Boston], and you'd kneel down on the floor, you'd unwrap the pots, and your hands are getting filthy, and she's waiting on customers. Then she would pick some pots that she'd write a check for $105, and then you would sit there and wrap up the stuff and take the rest of it home. Then you go to Upper Story and do the same thing, and that's how I lived.

When I got married, and Harriet saw the way I was doing this, she did it one time -- Harriet, my ex-wife, my wife at that time. When she saw how I was doing it, she said, this is stupid, this is degrading; you've got to have samples, and you've got to have order blanks, and you have to have photographs. And we went in that direction. And we went on selling trips with samples, and people wanted to buy the samples. We said, no, no, these are samples, and here's an order blank; we'll write out your order. And she says, oh no, you're not going to send us what we order, because you're going to somehow cheat us. That was from Frans Wildenhain, who said that to us.

But I think we were the first people to have an order blank. I think I am; I don't know. But as a production pottery, they just couldn't order from an order blank from a production potter. They could order from Dansk from order blanks; they could order from anybody from order blanks; but when a handmade work came through their door, they had to buy the actual object that they were looking at. Well, we tried to change that with, I think it was with, America House.

We would never take pots to America House. We had a fabulous photography book with all the wholesale prices, and there was an order blank, and he would write orders. And he was one of the first people -- I forget his name [Robert Hodges] -- who did it.

MR. WILLIAMS: At America House.

MR. COHEN: Yes, at the old America House.

MR. WILLIAMS: So it has been a part of your life.

MR. COHEN: Totally part of my life.

MR. WILLIAMS: May I move on just a little bit to religion and sense of spirituality?

MR. COHEN: Very little.

MR. WILLIAMS: You said in the beginning, you spoke about your Jewish background. Has that been part of your life?

MR. COHEN: Not at all. I might make things for people who are religious. I made a lot of menorahs that were exquisite, extruded, square things that I would make into menorahs, and then I would make mezuzhas. I made mezuzhas for about ten years. It was so funny; we'd make them production style. We'd have three "shiksa" in a row, which is non-Jewish people, and we'd be making menorahs. And we just laughed as we did it, and we would make about 100 menorahs in a morning -- not menorahs, mezuzhas. And we sold lots and lots of mezuzhas, and they were lovely, really lovely. But I did it as a commercial thing, not as a religious thing. Very nonreligious, in fact, an atheist.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

MR. COHEN: No, I really don't consider myself spiritual. I'm more like an engineer, more practical.

MR. WILLIAMS: Engineers don't have spirits?

MR. COHEN: No, they're thinking of the practical part of life, the actual part of life, the part you can touch and feel and make.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is there a spirit to your work?

MR. COHEN: Well, when you come downstairs and see some of the sculpture that I've done, well, that was the only spiritual thing I've ever done, I think. My father died when he was 59; my brother died when hewas 59. I was becoming 59, and I made a whole set of tomb figures and guardian figures, and sort of like things on canopic jars, Egyptian tomb figures, and that was my most spiritual. I was kind of almost expecting to die when I was 59, and to get through that year, I think I made those sculptures to get the death feeling out of me. That was the most spiritual thing I've ever done.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that respect, what, in a tangential manner, has race, sex, or ethnicity entered into your work?

MR. COHEN: No, it does not have anything to do with my work. The sex part, I think I've always done erotic work. I've done some humorous erotic work and humorous erotic games, but they're for my friends and never to be sold. They have been exhibited, which has always been fun.

MR. WILLIAMS: So the male-female, gender aspect of sculpture, for instance, hasn't particularly interested you.

MR. COHEN: Not at all.

MR. WILLIAMS: Your masculinity is not overtly --

MR. COHEN: No, I've been trained very well by Harriet. When the first Ms. magazine came out, it was the beginning of my education. And it was a rough year or so, my trying to become liberated, and I hope I've succeeded. I think I have succeeded, because when I have women workers, afterwards they've told me that I was, like, the first guy who ever treated them like a human being, or not as a sex object but as an equal. And that's from my training with Harriet. [Laughs.]

MR. WILLIAMS: But your work itself --

MR. COHEN: No, I don't think so, no. No, only when I was sort of putting in erotic parts to a piece, but only for the pleasure of doing that, not so much that I'm trying to make a statement. It's only that I would make openings that are feminine. And there is a funny thing. In my decoration, for years I was doing brushwork, until Harriet said, look, leave that to the Japanese; you know, get into the sponge-printing thing. And I would do a penis and testicles in brushwork that was so abstract that only I knew that it was that. And thousands of those are out.

MR. WILLIAMS: No vaginas.

MR. COHEN: No, only in sculptural pieces. On the three-dimensional pieces, I would have vaginas.

MR. WILLIAMS: Has the African-American culture had a heavy influence on you?

MR. COHEN: No, not African-American, but African, absolutely inspiring in the primitiveness in the way they handled the wood and made the masks. I think a mecca for me is the Metropolitan collection of African -- that whole collection at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City]. I've been there 10 or 15 times.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. COHEN: -- Northeast group of craftspeople. I forget even what it was called. And they, many, many years ago, probably 30 years ago, started up at Mt. Snow, and they had their first craft show, but it wasn't a retail crafts show, it was a wholesale crafts show.

MR. WILLIAMS: ACC [American Craft Council].

MR. COHEN: No, that was long before. It was us. It was the Northeast region of the ACC, but ACC had nothing to do with it, until it got to Rhinebeck. So we went to see the first show, and we were so impressed that we applied the next year, and that was the beginning of just a dignified way of bringing your work to many, many shop owners. So the shop owners, the number of shops were growing; the fair produced people in front of your booth. I mean, where else can you be rejected by 99 percent of the people, and you're just looking for one percent?

And we would take orders for maybe $6,000 worth of stuff or $10,000 worth of stuff. That's when we were grossing something like $30,000; two people working, grossing $35,000. But it was a wonderful way of doing it. It was hard, but it was wonderful. And then, it moved to Mt. Snow and we did that, and then Mt. Snow moved to Bennington. And Bennington was fabulous. Those were the hippie days, and it was all incredibly warm. It was wonderful.

MR. WILLIAMS: What year was this?

MR. COHEN: I have no idea. I can't remember. Then it moved to Rhinebeck, and it was in Rhinebeck, New York, for 10 years. But during the beginning, Carol Sedestrom used to work for like $1,000 a year, because they needed someone to organize the thing. And I remember encouraging her, Harriet and I encouraging her to ask for $10,000 a year, because the job she was doing was worth it, which she did. But that's when the ACC moved in. And to make a long story short, it took it over.

You know, it was still Northeast -- we had it locked to the Northeast, but the ACC said, let's get 50 people from California. And we all protested, because we don't want -- you know, it's going to take our market. But, of course, the ACC did whatever it wanted, brought the 50 people from California, and maybe by the next year, it was national.

MR. WILLIAMS: Pardon me, what is the ACC?

MR. COHEN: The American Craft Council. Then it became more and more bureaucratic, and the craftspeople -- because the whole thing was run by craftspeople. I forget the name of the guy who used to come three days early to actually make chalk lines in the grass. And everybody did it; everybody worked. It was wonderful. But when the ACC took it over, the craftsmen got further and further removed from how the place was going to be run, and then it became a megabusiness and started the wholesale shows in Baltimore; then there were the copycat shows of Richard Rothbard across the street.

And then, when Baltimore became overflowing with too many craftspeople -- you know, it would have 800 craftspeople at that time, and there so many good people who weren't getting in -- Wendy Rosen came in and scooped up another 800 people. It was like a license to print money. But Wendy made money, where the ACC never made money because they had so many committees and so many people who had to get paid, where Wendy ran as a dictatorship and got things done.

I did a couple of Wendy's shows when I got rejected from the Baltimore shows, and the same buyers would come. And that was wonderful. All the buyers came, you got orders, you made a living. That was the major change. Three and a half years ago, I had been working on tiles for a little bit, and I decided to go with only tiles. So I went to a Baltimore wholesale show with only 24 tiles, and in a white booth lined up along the wall, and I got originally about $10,000 or $12,000 worth of orders. And almost every one of those people re-ordered, and that's the most important thing, the re-order.

I mean, my son convinced me to get a fax machine. Sometimes, in a day, it starts smoking if I get three orders on a fax machine. I mean, when I was making pottery, I would have to call people and beg them to buy my stuff. It was lovely stuff, but -- and then they'd give you an order, and it would take two months to make it. In the tile business, we make so many ahead of time that we ship in a week, and they love that. They can order in the last minute and get it in a week.

MR. WILLIAMS: So your tile business now has taken over everything.

MR. COHEN: Taken over everything. And the only pots I make are for retail shows, which is then making a pot for $30, making a bowl for $30. It's worth it, as opposed to not making any money at $15, as we all know.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you've learned how to write an invoice.

MR. COHEN: Oh, with my computer I've made a fabulous order blank, and all my little forms are made by working on my computer, which I'm trying to learn as much as I can about.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are you on the web?

MR. COHEN: No, I don't have a website. In a way, I really don't need a website, because I don't want retail people to find me. It's mainly I want wholesale people to find me, and I give my e-mail address and I give my fax machine number and my telephone number, and they reach me; they get me. So that's been a modern miracle for me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you have a dealer?

MR. COHEN: No, I do all my own. I'm my own dealer.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why do you object to the concept?

MR. COHEN: Well, you have to give them five or ten percent of your price, and you don't have the control of the shops that you're selling in. I mean, I hate to visit some of the shops that I sell in now, because they may be junk shops. And most of the shops I haven't seen. The ones that I do make an effort to see are places like

Appalachian Spring, and all the Abacus stores in Maine are gorgeous. And so, I sell in very beautiful places, but I think I'm also selling in not-so-beautiful places, you know, sort of jumbled.

MR. WILLIAMS: [Inaudible.]

MR. COHEN: Not that much, because I never see them, and they're faithful to me, and a lot of stores give me standing monthly orders. They know that it's a guaranteed sale. And if the first order or the second order they order 24, I send them a beautiful little wooden rack with my name on it and what the thing is. And so, not only does it display the tiles, but as it gets empty, they realize they should order. And it has my name on it, and I give it to them free. And so that's worked out very well.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you're very pleased with how you're selling now.

MR. COHEN: Yes. I mean, the creative part comes from the making of the molds, the stamps that I use. And for three years, I've made about 100, but only keep about 36 in production. And I drop things that aren't selling, and I create new things that people might find more saleable. So each stamp might take three or four hours to carve, and that's like meticulous carving in clay.

MR. WILLIAMS: I want to ask you how much you make a year, whether it's adequate enough to survive on.

MR. COHEN: Well, I'll tell you something, it's three times more than I used to make -- double to three times more than I used to make making pots. But also, I'll tell you that my expenses for help is $50,000 a year. I write $1,000 in paychecks every week.

MR. WILLIAMS: That says a lot, and leads us into the next question about apprenticeship. Tell me how that started.

MR. COHEN: Well, I felt that I was an apprentice, working for Bill Wyman for a dollar an hour. And then, when we got together at Herring Run Pottery in East Weymouth, Massachusetts, he left his cellar and I left my cellar, and we got together. We started having apprentices who would come and beg us to work for nothing, and we would train them to be our helpers. And that persisted not so much in New Hampshire, when we moved to New Hampshire around '65. We moved to New Hampshire, and we bought ten acres, and a house, and about ten out buildings for $16,000.

MR. WILLIAMS: We is....?

MR. COHEN: Harriet -- my wife and I. And that's where we had our children, Amanda, who is now 33, and my son, Josh, who is now 31.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you began to employ.

MR. COHEN: Yes, except when we moved here to Pelham. Then again, there were so many people who were interested in becoming potters in this area, maybe 20 years ago or 30 years ago, '73 or whenever that is, that again, they banged down my door trying to become a free apprentice. I mean, my kiln took three months to build, and it was done with the help of a free guy, who was still potting. And a lot of my apprentices did go on to become potters.

And I would have an apprentice every year, for at least maybe ten years, for free. I mean, I would give them space in the studio to work and a little bit of firing. But as times got more expensive, people were not coming to be an apprentice for free any more, so I started paying people. And in a way, it's almost better, because they're not around the studio all the time, and they're not trying to learn from you every second of the day, and you kiss them goodbye and they're out of your studio, and you have privacy.

Having apprentices around, you'd be watching television at 10 o'clock, and you'd hear banging in the studio as they're throwing out slabs or something. So the paying of the people who worked just hourly wages, worked out well.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are they employees rather than apprentices?

MR. COHEN: Yes, they are employees. Well, we call them outside-contracted work.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you provide health services for them?

MR. COHEN: No, I do not. And they pay for their own taxes. We sit down with a sheet that tells their responsibilities. I give them two weeks paid vacation a year, some snow days paid, some sick days paid. So out of 12 months, they work 11 months, but they get paid for 12 months. And I try to pay them more than they can make anywhere else.

MR. WILLIAMS: What is the hourly wage now?

MR. COHEN: Let's see, the cheapest person coming in will get $11 an hour, and my most expensive will get around $18 an hour. And they're worth every penny. We were working four days a week, and my son came up -- it was 24 hours, I think, all together. And my son came up with the idea of, why are we working from 9 to 3? Why don't we work from 8:30 to 3:30? I said I would give them the same amount of money for 21 hours as opposed to 24 hours, and we'll only work three days a week. And they promised that they would work hard, you know, faster and more efficiently, and they did. And now, we're down to three days a week, and we make all this money working three days a week. I mean, people can't believe it. I can't believe it.

MR. WILLIAMS: But you support the concept of apprenticeship.

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. There is nothing like it. You get the inside look. I mean, a lot of people who were apprentices got out of pottery because they saw what the life was. It's not an easy life. I mean, when we first came here, we were working about seven days a week, which was a normal thing up in New Hampshire. And then we had our children, and I would work in the morning, and Harriet would work in the afternoon in childcare things and cooking.

MR. WILLIAMS: But the apprenticeships nowadays are few and far between in relation to how they were then.

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. I don't know anybody who has an apprentice right now, except, I don't know, maybe Todd Piker.

MR. WILLIAMS: What does that say about our field?

MR. COHEN: That you can make more money being a lawyer. That's what people are looking for. They're looking for security, and they're looking for comfort, and they're looking for a lot of money. That's what it says to me. And since I got into it so long ago, I got in for very artistic reasons, and these kids are not going in for artistic reasons. We'll get into this in the colleges a little more, because they're not teaching functional pottery in the colleges. They're teaching one-of-a-kind art.

If you open up American Craft, you have 99 percent one-of-a-kind pieces, all exquisite, all beautiful, all art, and sort of a token casserole. Maybe the casserole has like a racing horse on the top of it.

MR. WILLIAMS: How many apprentices do you think you had?

MR. COHEN: Oh, 10 or 15, because some wouldn't stay a whole year.

MR. WILLIAMS: What are the names of the current people who assist you?

MR. COHEN: Zoe Wright is my right-hand woman, and my son, Josh, is sort of the chief of operations -- we call him. And the changing person will be the next person coming in, and right now we're using John Ozereko, who is the son of a ceramics teacher at UMass [University of Massachusetts]. And he's at Mass Art right now, going into his sophomore year. And he used to work for me packing on Saturdays, but he's now developed into a tile maker and packing. So he'll be leaving in a week.

MR. WILLIAMS: And you clean the toilets.

MR. COHEN: They sweep and vacuum and wash the studio. And I do clean the toilets, to tell you the truth. And I do all the paperwork and most of the dealing with the stores.

MR. WILLIAMS: Would you recommend apprenticeship to other production people coming up?

MR. COHEN: Well, I don't recommend going into pottery at all right now. I think the competition is very, very high, very fierce, fierce competition. It's very, very expensive to be a potter. If I built my kiln today, it would cost me $20,000 to $25,000. It cost me, I think, $3,000 or $4,000 when I built it. I just spent three or four days taking down the kiln shelves in my kiln, chipping and kiln-washing them, and I estimated that the shelves are worth something like $4,700. There's, like, 97 shelves in this kiln.

And that's only the kiln shelves. And bricks that I paid 35 cents apiece for are a dollar apiece, and bricks that I paid a dollar apiece for in '73 are three dollars apiece. So it's very hard to do. If I left my studio for some reason, like I was, you know, too decrepit to work or something, and I wanted a small studio, I would probably buy a nice car kiln from Bailey [Bailey Ceramic Supply], and just have it plunked down in my studio and not have to build anything. Because he makes nice kilns. I mean, my kiln is gigantic. It's 100-cubic-foot catenary arch, car kiln.

MR. WILLIAMS: You may not recommend someone else going into pottery, but are you happy with who you are?

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. I belong to a health club, and this is the Amherst area, so there are lots and lots of professors. And what do the professors talk about when they're changing clothes? They're talking about backbiting and getting screwed on the job, and their raises aren't coming through, and they're not getting any graduate students, and the facilities are rotten. And they complain almost all the time about being a teacher, being a professor. And the whole thing of being self-employed, which I've done my whole life, has been so wonderful.

Money can't buy that. It's just fabulous. And so that's why maybe someone could go into art or ceramics, or some craft. But you have to have tremendous self-reliance; you have to know many, many skills such as carpentry, and all kinds of plasterwork, and all kinds of things like that.

MR. WILLIAMS: But you like who you are and what you're doing.

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. That's persisted. You know, no one ever asked me that question, but it's so wonderful to have spent most of my life just making beautiful objects for people to use. I go to shows, only about three retail shows in a year now, maybe two retail shows in a year. I cannot tell you the amount of people who come to me and look at my work and say, "Oh my God, I own this. You're the person who made this. I use this every day of my life." And they shake my hand and they want to know me. That's a warm, wonderful, fabulous feeling. And I've made thousands of pots and I've made thousands of tiles, and they're all out there all over the world.

MR. WILLIAMS: Isn't that frightening?

MR. COHEN: No, it's exciting. It's exciting that people are using them and loving them. That's it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's change the subject slightly. Tell me about your involvement with some of the schools like Haystack, Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee], and Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina].

MR. COHEN: Penland, yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's start with Penland.

MR. COHEN: Well no, let me start with Haystack, and I'll do it very quickly. I mean, each school is a long story, but I will make it short. Someone told me about Haystack in my last year at Mass Art. I applied; I got the pottery studio assistant, and I spent all summer there. And I met one of the greatest men in the world, especially in crafts, and that was Francis Merritt. The man is amazing; he was amazing, and a very inspiring man. At the same time, I met his assistant, Bill Brown, who later became the savior of Penland and modeled Penland on Haystack, how Haystack ran.

So when I moved to the new school, as I said, I was a maintenance man in '61, when I met my future wife. Several years after that, I taught for a session at Haystack. It was fabulous for me. Also, when Penland got started, Bill Brown called in all his friends, like my buddy, my best friend, Ron Burke, who went down and built the inside -- not only did he build the inside of the original Haystack pottery, but he built the original inside of Penland. They're still using the wheels he built and the tables and things like that.

So Bill called me down, and I taught one of the first years there at Penland. And then several years after we were married and we had two children, so that would be like 1971, I taught again.

MR. WILLIAMS: Where is Penland?

MR. COHEN: Penland is in Penland, North Carolina. And where Haystack is more spiritual, Penland is more practical. Both have had an incredible impact on the craft world. So then I went to Cranbrook. I told you my experiences at Cranbrook, which were not happy at all. And then, I'd given courses around in different places.

MR. WILLIAMS: What were some of those?

MR. COHEN: Artist in residence at Notre Dame for three weeks.

MR. WILLIAMS: In Illinois.

MR. COHEN: No, Indiana. Oh, I did workshops in Ohio State; I did workshops in San Francisco Potters' Guild; I did one at your place, at Phoenix Pottery, when I first got my extruder. I have to insert something about equipment. There are three tools which revolutionized studio pottery. One was the Bailey Slabroller. The second one was the Super Duper Extruder, soon to be bettered by the Bailey Extruder, and the Giffin Grip [Giffin Grip Company, Boulder, Colorado], three wonderful pieces of equipment.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are you a salesperson for each of those?

MR. COHEN: [Laughs.] No, I make no money on this at all.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you taught widely in a number of different places.

MR. COHEN: Yes, but very short sessions. Mainly, we were here making pots for sale.

MR. WILLIAMS: And if you were recommending someone going to one of them now, which one would you recommend?

MR. COHEN: It would absolutely be a toss-up between Haystack and Penland. And I don't know enough about the university departments. I'm out of the loop. It would be Haystack or Penland equally, and I think I would go to both. If I was a glassblower, I would go to Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington]. I don't know if you know this, but that was modeled after Haystack too. He went to Haystack to give a glass course. What was his name? Dale Chihuly. He said, I could do this, and he went out and did it.

MR. WILLIAMS: What would you describe Fran Merritt's contribution, in a few words?

MR. COHEN: He inspired, just by his presence and his words, every person who's ever gone to Penland, every person who's ever gone to Haystack. You felt so inspired there; you felt so good there. He made the atmosphere so that -- the fact that it was open 24 hours a day, that you just ate, drank, and lived crafts, and everyone around you spoke the same language. No on wants to leave. You can't go back into the real world. You pine for the atmosphere at Haystack and the atmosphere at Penland. That's what it is.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk a little about, in that context, the difference between that kind of school and a university. What is your connection with the university or your opinion of the university-trained ceramics person?

MR. COHEN: Well, coming from Mass Art, which is not a university, but it's certainly -- I think more important than what I learned in clay at Mass Art was the two years of mandatory foundation courses. And now, the students yell so much about the fact they have no choice, that they've cut it down to one year. And I think that my two years of foundations at Mass Art have carried me in good stead for my whole life. I use something from Mass Art every single day of my life. That's how important it is to get foundations. I mean, perspective, and color, watercolor painting, and oil painting, and design, everything, and along with clay.

And I really cannot comment on university-trained people. I mean, there are lots of wonderful trained people from -- I mean, I never had a great teacher. I've almost been self-taught, I think. I mean, if I had gone to learn with Voulkos, I would have turned out a totally different person. If I had gone to Minnesota and studied with Warren [MacKenzie], I'd be a totally different person. It's that kind of a thing. And those people turn out good people, but there's so much crap being made. Again, it's because of the nonfunctional aspect.

And it's hard to make great art. And it's really hard to make great art when you're like a junior in college, yet they do, yet they try, and most people fail. It takes a little bit of living and a little bit of experience to --

MR. WILLIAMS: So in that context now, the American university has a very powerful role in the craft movement, does it not?

MR. COHEN: I don't know. I'm out of it. I am totally out of that loop. I don't go to NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts]. I mean, I've been in conferences. I've been part of NCECA a couple of times, but it's like a foreign language. It's like foreign to me when I go there. Most of them are not talking art, they're talking, how can I get more graduate students, how to develop their departments. You know, I don't have a great feeling about it. But I'm probably wrong, and there are wonderful things going on. Even Mass Art has a better ceramics department than when I was there. It's a fabulous ceramic department.

MR. WILLIAMS: So has there been any community outside the university that's been important to your development?

MR. COHEN: Well, 25 years ago, I started, with a friend of mine, the Asparagus Valley Potters Guild, which is more social than it is ceramic. But being a potter is a very lonely thing. You're in your studio alone, and you hardly ever see anybody else. So once a month, we get together for a wonderful potluck supper, and we discuss professional things, shows that we should see, books that we should read, stores that you should avoid. It's a network of about 25 to 35 people.

MR. WILLIAMS: Where is it based?

MR. COHEN: It's all in the Pioneer Valley, in Happy Valley here.

MR. WILLIAMS: Which is western Massachusetts.

MR. COHEN: Western Massachusetts, yes. We even have someone from Troy who comes, because she's so isolated that she just has to come to talk to other potters.

MR. WILLIAMS: So this fulfills a purpose and a service that you can't get elsewhere.

MR. COHEN: Absolutely, and it's on a professional level. And no teachers are allowed in and no amateurs are allowed in. When we talk business, it's real; it's not theoretical.

MR. WILLIAMS: How many members are there?

MR. COHEN: There's about 35, in that range. Maybe 15 or 16 people show up every meeting.

MR. WILLIAMS: How many years?

MR. COHEN: 25 years. We're just about to design the new T-shirt, five sets of asparagus stalks, with 25 years.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why asparagus?

MR. COHEN: Because this valley used to be called Asparagus Valley before the asparagus blight many, many years ago, 40 years ago. But they used to make all the asparagus for New York and Boston. Plus, there's still asparagus here, and it almost grows wild some places where the seeds are flown. You'll see asparagus between roads.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. WILLIAMS: We're starting tape three, side B. I'd like to talk with you about your studio, its space. Tell me first how you came about building the studio here and what it's like inside.

MR. COHEN: Well, we sold our place up in New Hampshire and had some money, and we had saved some money, and we bought a house on ten acres, five minutes from the center of Amherst. And we'd known that we were going to build a nice big studio. I think the original part was 1,800 square feet, with a 100-cubic-foot catenary arch kiln on the inside, which probably was a mistake in the long run, because it blackens the walls, as you'll see -- a throwing room with copious space for both Harriet and myself. We were married here about seven years; we were married in our whole life about 15.

MR. WILLIAMS: You're no longer married.

MR. COHEN: That's right. We divorced about 20 years ago. But it was designed by a friend of ours, who designed our old studio out of a chicken coop, a large chicken coop that had never been used for chickens. And his name was Frank Robinson, and he was more of an interior designer, but he knew how to architect. And like every architect, he postponed the drawing of the plans until fall, so we lost the summer. And when we finally put it out for bids, one clown said, oh, we think we can do this for $40,000. I said, wait a minute, you know that our budget is $20,000.

It was devastating. To make a long story short, we found someone else who would do it cost plus. And I remember him giving me my last bill, and he said, gee, I wish I had bid on this thing for a price; I would have made more money. But the whole thing cost $18,000. So it was like $7 a square foot. Because it's a big shell, no kitchen. There's water and a toilet there, but it's just a lot of open spaces.

And then, I came in and built all the shelves and the racks. I built the kiln. It took about three months to build the kiln, because it's so much more complicated to build a car kiln. And I brought the car from my old kiln up in New Hampshire down and fit it around that car. We put the wheels in and had room for materials and glaze mixing, and then a showroom.

MR. WILLIAMS: Describe your studio space.

MR. COHEN: Well, it's two shed roofs interconnected. There's seven or eight feet above the top of the kiln, incredibly important. All kiln fires start by having rafters or stringers two inches away from the kiln. You know, it's hot, so this room was designed to hold that kiln. So it's something like four or five feet away from every wall. And seven feet from the ceiling, there were windows with a gigantic fan, which sucks out hot air, and windows across the top of the building that we opened in the summer, and even in the winter sometimes.

The chimney I learned how to make from Dudley Giberson, the glassblower and equipment maker. He told me two things. He says, the gas people will say put in a half-inch pipe; put in an inch pipe. He says, it runs 100 feet; he says, you'll never freeze up; you'll never run out of gas. And he was right. I remember having Angela Fina call me and she was down to her last few gallons, and I said, pour hot water over the tank, and it saved her firing, because she had a half-inch pipe.

The chimney is a hard brick chimney with a three-inch airspace and then red brick built all around it going up through the roof. And there are holes at the top of the chimney and the bottom of the chimney on the walls so that cool air comes in from the bottom and cools the interior chimney. And God willing, I will never have a fire. And that was an important thing from Dudley, both of those things.

MR. WILLIAMS: And table space?

MR. COHEN: Mucho table space, because you have --

MR. WILLIAMS: No boards on the wheels, like Maija Grotell's do.

MR. COHEN: [Laughs.] Oh, yes. No, no, no, there's many square footages of table space, because with tiles, you need a tremendous amount of flat area. We get 400 tiles into a kiln, plus 100 spoon rests, which is an auxiliary thing to this, because we had a certain space that would take a four-by-four-inch object. And so, I invented this spoon rest, which goes in the little spaces left by the tiles.

So at $10 apiece wholesale, that's $4,000 in tiles and maybe $800 in spoon rests in every kiln. If I was lucky, I'd get $1,500 worth of pots in a kiln. And we fire about 45 times a year, about 35 high-fire tile kilns, and the rest are bisques. And the packing area, we used to use shredded paper from the police station. We still do in a pinch, but I think I've finally broken down. I have a couple of sources of peanuts that people call me up and I go and get. But I realize that we're shipping so much stuff that we need to buy peanuts, which are incredibly expensive.

And I buy all my boxes fresh and clean, and I used to use old boxes. Now, it's all more efficient to buy boxes and to buy peanuts. And my worker and I can pack $3,000 in about four hours. Not like pottery where you get $150 into a box. That would be the biggest size that UPS [United Parcel Service] will take -- $150 inside. Now, a little box can hold $400. It's crazy. It maybe weighs 50 pounds.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you ship by UPS?

MR. COHEN: Yeah, mostly UPS, except when people, like in Hawaii or the Virgin Islands, we'll send it first-class mail.

MR. WILLIAMS: And do you ship abroad to Japan or Europe?

MR. COHEN: No. I once did make lots and lots of trays, which I think were used as sushi trays, for a store in New York, which did resell them in Japan. And each one had to say, "Made in USA."

MR. WILLIAMS: A sushi bowl made in USA.

MR. COHEN: No, excuse me, trays, long trays.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that respect, how many people can work in your studio at one time?

MR. COHEN: Well, four easily; four people, sometimes five. When I was making baskets, you know, mass-producing berry baskets and bread baskets, I would have four people in the morning from UMass and four people in the afternoon. And in a month, in January, their free time, I would make a year's supply of baskets in that time.

MR. WILLIAMS: Clay baskets.

MR. COHEN: Clay baskets, yes. So it was all run very efficiently, and we had morning shift and afternoon shift. But it was all over by February, and then we had so much bisque that it would last the year.

MR. WILLIAMS: What influences have there been on your work from outside art sources?

MR. COHEN: It's hard to think of anything outside art.

MR. WILLIAMS: Pictures come from where? The objects on the tiles.

MR. COHEN: Those come mainly from nature, a lot of nature things, hummingbirds, and whales, and things like that. They're very ordinary.

MR. WILLIAMS: They're things that you like.

MR. COHEN: Yes.

MR. WILLIAMS: Environmentally correct?

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. There's a whole group of things of endangered species that I'm working on.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you work in semantic material, like some of the other ones.

MR. COHEN: Yeah. Well, the other ones are not so much nature. It's sort of just charming little things, like a cup and saucer with a sunrise over it, or a beautiful pig with a sunrise over it, and maybe a little fence across it. Sometimes, my workers come up with combinations of stamps that mean something when they're together, but don't mean that when they're printed separately. So they have fun, and I let them run wild. And if people start calling up and saying give me that, we start putting it into the line.

MR. WILLIAMS: So do you draw a lot? Do you have a sketchbook you have all the time?

MR. COHEN: No, I don't. I don't draw a lot.

MR. WILLIAMS: When you run to the museum and --

MR. COHEN: I go to museums, mostly archeological-type museums, and things like the Museum of Fine Arts [Boston, Massachusetts]. The Egyptian collection at the Museum of Fine Arts is great, really wonderful, and the Met, of course. And I go to the one in Hartford, the Atheneum [Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut]. They have wonderful shows there. I think mainly when I go to other countries, when you're faced with incredible age, that's when I really get inspired, and not only in the museums, but just walking down the street. I mean, there's nothing like walking down a 500-year-old street. I mean, it makes Boston look like a new little town.

MR. WILLIAMS: What about art movements?

MR. COHEN: Art Deco, tremendous, especially in what I was doing sponge printing on glaze. And it was very simple designs, but used in combination with one another in a three-by-three-inch sponge stamp. Those were very complicated, and those were very Art Deco, very designy. And I think I love just well-designed objects, and I'm always looking at well designed objects and going into places like Crate and Barrel and looking at what people do in manufacturing, in mass producing.

MR. WILLIAMS: In that case, technological advances interest you.

MR. COHEN: Yes, tremendously.

MR. WILLIAMS: Such as?

MR. COHEN: Well, the equipment has influenced me tremendously. I mean, the invention of the studio extruder changed my life, and the slab roller changed my life. And I was able to do things that would take hours and hours and hours to do in minutes by these two pieces of equipment.

Actually, I watch a lot of movies and I watch a lot of television, and mostly for its entertainment value. But when you get to things like [Akira] Kurasawa's movies, the feeling and the mood of those things, and the visuals of those movies are just part of me.

MR. WILLIAMS: So you feel a part of the movements or the culture.

MR. COHEN: Yes, I think I do.

MR. WILLIAMS: You're not alienated by it?

MR. COHEN: No, I love kitsch. I'm a collector of kitsch. I have like 300 snow domes, which are driving me out of house and home. They're not up now because I just had my house painted.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why do you like that?

MR. COHEN: Because it reminds you of a place you've been, and sometimes it reminds you of a place you haven't been. And they're silly and they're worthless. They may cost three to five dollars, but they're inherently with no value whatsoever. But when you put 50 together, that's something, that's a statement, and it's visually very exciting. So I think I got hooked after I had around 10 or 20 of them and I started putting them together in rows. And now, part of my house is devoted to these damn things that are driving me out of shelf space.

MR. WILLIAMS: Will they ever appear in a museum under your name?

MR. COHEN: No, no, no. But there is an underground collection group. There is a group that collects. We have a newsletter.

MR. WILLIAMS: These things?

MR. COHEN: Snow domes, yeah. It's silly, very silly. But then I collect Catholic kitsch too. You know, nuns playing conga drums and comic books with the Pope, Pope cut-out dolls. I have a whole collection of that kind of junk.

MR. WILLIAMS: Is this Pop art?

MR. COHEN: Oh, I loved Pop art, and sometimes I make it myself. I think the one object that I've made, which is incredibly reminiscent -- reminiscent, it's a copy of [René] Magritte's pipe: This is not a pipe. I made a series of six pipes and painted them in the identical colors that the painting was painted in. I didn't glaze them; they were just bisque. So I'm painting on highlights and I'm painting on gold, and then I put it on a base, which is the color of the background of the real painting -- and I've seen the real painting, with the words in French.

And I used it in combination on a poster with a very strange teapot. And so, the top says, "This is not a teapot," and the bottom one is Magritte's part, "This is not a pipe," but in French, which I cannot say. So that kind of surrealism or absurdism, that interests me tremendously.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you been well received on the whole by writers in this field?

MR. COHEN: Well, there's hardly anybody who writes. There's not that many people who write. And no, I have not been. I mean, I've had critical reviews of shows that have been wonderful and very, very complimentary, incredibly complimentary. But the objects themselves, I have almost everyone I've ever made, because they don't sell, especially the ones with the very grim theme to them. I've gone into the Smithsonian craft show with these figures, these tomb figures, and I had about 10 or 15 beautifully displayed on white pedestals, and people would ricochet out of the booth. They couldn't get out fast enough, it was so scary, which was kind of a compliment. But when you're trying to sell them, it's very dispiriting when you don't even make the money that it cost to do it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you remember who wrote the good reviews of your shows? [MR. COHEN: No, No.] Is there anyone who comes to mind as a writer in the field?

MR. COHEN: Harriet Goodwin was a great critic, but I don't think she ever reviewed me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Harriet Goodwin.

MR. COHEN: Yes, my ex-wife. She was a great writer. But when she reviewed a show, she would tell the truth. It wasn't sort of a physical description of the object and just art babble; it was real, because she knew it from the inside. And she was condemned; I mean, people hated her. She would have hate mail. I remember Vivika [Heino] got panned once by Harriet, and she never forgave her, because Vivika was used to being loved, and everything was fabulous, and "Who was this pipsqueak to criticize me," kind of a thing.

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you ever write?

MR. COHEN: Never. I never, never write.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why?

MR. COHEN: I'm not a writer. I've never been a writer.

MR. WILLIAMS: But you're a speaker.

MR. COHEN: I am a speaker, but I'm not a writer. And my ex-wife is a writer, and my daughter is a writer, my daughter Amanda. She can really write. She's written her whole life, for all kinds of things, you know, creative writing, and then critical writing, and interviews, when she was interviewing comics from around the country. She's a great writer, but none of it came from me. She gets her art from me, but not her --

MR. WILLIAMS: What are some of the specialized periodicals in the field that you read?

MR. COHEN: Ceramics Monthly is very important to me. I read about half the articles. Studio Potter, I look at the pictures. Because I don't write; I don't read. And Studio Potter is very esoteric to me. American Craft is a house organ for the American Craft Council, and it promotes themselves. And if I see societal pictures in black and white at Joe Blow and Mrs. Somebody at some damn opening, I want to throw up.

So I look at the art. I mean, the ads are almost better than the articles sometimes. You find out what's happening the art world; you don't find out what's happening in the craft world.

MR. WILLIAMS: What magazines do you subscribe to?

MR. COHEN: I think the only thing I'm getting now is Time, which is sort of a twisted view of the news. But I think I get most of my news from the Daily Show [Comedy Central TV show with John Stewart] at eleven o'clock, which is a comedy, which is a non-news show, but it is so wonderful. And that's all the news you need to know, because everything else has gone to hell, and it's so depressing to listen to it that I don't. But I get the basic stuff in Time.

And a periodical that I can read is *Americans United for Separation of Church and State*. It's a watchdog group that monitors the religious right's infiltrating into politics. You know, it follows all the people who are trying to get the Ten Commandments put up in every school and have crosses put up, and things like that, as if it's the only religion -- or having prayers at football games, and things like that. So they watch and they sue. It's wonderful.

So I give money to them, and I give money to the Abortion Rights League, and I give money to a lot of the arts things, all the arts. The UMass Fine Arts Center I give money to, and I give pots to -- things that really touch me. But I don't read that much. I get most of my stuff visually.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's discuss clay as a means of expression for you. What do you think of expression, in terms of, how you might express yourself?

MR. COHEN: Hard question, because most of the time I don't consciously think about that. I think most of my work comes from the manipulation of the clay and the fact that I've worked for so long in clay. I mean, I'm not the most fabulously technical wizard in the whole world. I mean, I've never made a six-foot pot or a six-foot piece of sculpture, nothing like that. I have done commissions of large fountains, but, you know, they're failures; they're not great.

So I'm more of a two-foot guy. I mean, if I'm going to really express myself, it has to be within like a foot, two feet in any direction. And as I said, my most spiritual things were these figures, these tomb figures that I made, and it was one of the happiest times of my life. It was about five years ago, I think. And I think there was nobody in the studio working for a few months, and I took that time to make this sculpture. And it was a combination of sort of fear of death and manipulation of clay at the same time.

And it was a fabulous time for me. And I would cover them in sort of envelopes of newspaper so they wouldn't dry quickly. And I swear, I would come down at night, and I would lift these things up, and I'd say, I made this. That's how fabulous I felt they were. And then, other people came in, and they said, my God, these are fabulous. So I was getting wonderful feedback. And then, when they went out into the world, they were rejected, really rejected terribly.

MR. WILLIAMS: This was the 59 syndrome?

MR. COHEN: Yes, that's right. What was the first question, the actual question that you asked?

MR. WILLIAMS: Means of expression. What other expressive --

MR. COHEN: Well, when you're making functional pots, it's very hard to say things making functional pots. So the ultimate thing is to make the most beautiful functional object.

MR. WILLIAMS: Beauty is the function?

MR. COHEN: And function is beauty.

MR. WILLIAMS: And what makes a pot beautiful?

MR. COHEN: For me, it's all the plastic things, shape and form and size, and means of use and means of handling, touch to the lip, touch in your hands, holding it with two hands, what it feels like that, using it to cook with. And I love cooking. I cook an awful lot, so serving on my plates, my beautiful dishes. I mean, how many people make their own dishes? I mean, only a potter does that. And people beg me to make this stuff for them, but it's so hard to do dinnerware. Just to make my own set -- I made a set for myself; I made a set for Harriet; I made a set for each of my children; and that's it. So functionality, you can't get incredibly spiritual with just making functional objects.

MR. WILLIAMS: How about the limitations of clay?

MR. COHEN: God, you read a few issues of American Craft or Ceramics Monthly, there are no limitations of clay. You can make clay into anything. You can make it look like wood or plastic; you can paint on it. There is no limitation. Controlling yourself from doing too much on something is a goal, because you can do anything in clay. But just because you can do it doesn't mean you should do it. And a lot of people, I think, when they're doing bad objects, break that line. They make clay into something else.

Well, there's this whole thing of mechanical-looking objects that you see in American Craft. Someone's cast some gears and cast some pipes, and then you make molds, and you cast the mold, and you put them together, and what have you got? You've got a ceramic machine that doesn't work. And then there's the people like, oh, the woman who started doing leather bags and leather shoes, Marilyn Levine.

I remember I was at Berkeley walking around with Voulkos, and she was at Berkeley, I think, at that time, and there was a whole gigantic case of this stuff, and you would swear that it was leather. And he looked at me, and he looked at the things, and he said, "So what." The fact that you can make something look like leather doesn't mean it's art or any good. It isn't art, but it's always presented as art, the fact that you can make it look like leather.

At least Richard Shaw and his fool-the-eye objects, you know they're ceramic. Even though they're real objects, there's a quality to them that says clay, where the leatherwork looks like leather. You want to squish it.

MR. WILLIAMS: So clay has limitations within the perception of the person.

MR. COHEN: The perception of the person. You have to stop before you go too far. But there is no "too far," in a way. You can do anything you want.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you done a lot of commissioned work?

MR. COHEN: Not a lot, no, no, no, I haven't.

MR. WILLIAMS: Could you describe a few?

MR. COHEN: Well, my best commissioned work was the State of Massachusetts was giving money to craftspeople, and I was chosen to be one of those people that would make objects for the Fuller Art Museum in Brockton [Massachusetts]. And I made three gigantic bowls; I made six gigantic bowls, and I chose the three. And they were extruded coils with slab pieces, with a thrown foot, and they were two feet in diameter or so, and they were glazed. It was very warm and lovely. And they are in the permanent collection of that museum. That was one of the nicest commissions I ever had.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are they still there?

MR. COHEN: Yeah, they're in the permanent collection.

MR. WILLIAMS: What other commissions have you done?

MR. COHEN: Oh, I remember making a fountain for a theater. It was terrible. A wall fountain, and the water would come pouring down, and it splashed all over the place. That was terrible. It was a total failure, but it was glued in. And then, I've done fountains for fountain planters and walls for a house in Brookline [Massachusetts]. That was beautiful. That was really a lovely commission. But I really don't like commissions.

In fact, now, when people call me for special tiles, I've decided to not even do a different-size tile. You've got to take a five-and-three-quarter-inch tile. That's it. I don't make any. I don't make them small --

MR. WILLIAMS: [Inaudible.]

MR. COHEN: Exactly. If you use more grouting, it's too small. Because every time I do a commission -- not every time, but most times when I do a commission, you've got to make it twice. Sometimes you have to make it three times to get the one that they want. Then you end up with the other two that, like, have nothing to do with your life. So I try not to do commissions. And the tiles have been taking care of me very well, so I don't have to.

MR. WILLIAMS: So does this mean you're not going to be remembered by posterity?

MR. COHEN: Oh, I'm going to be remembered tremendously by posterity. For one thing, I'm in many permanent collections. But that's another story. I'll be remembered with my tiles. What comes out of this studio is, like, 11,000 to 12,000 tiles every year. Every one of them has my name and the year they were made. These are going to be the most cherished, sought after collectors items 100 years from now, just the way everybody else's things from 100 years ago are collected.

You know, the worst pieces of commercial crap are going for hundreds and hundreds of dollars. Well, people are going to search for every design I ever made, and it's going to have the dates on them; it's going to have my name on it. Plus, all the trademarks that I've ever put on my pots are in a trademark book, sort of a really definitive trademark book of contemporary people. So all that stuff will be -- I'm on eBay. A vase that sold for $15 sold for $60 on eBay, from probably 20 years ago. So yes, we will all be remembered. This stuff doesn't go away. Cloth goes away and paintings will rot.

MR. WILLIAMS: After the nuclear war --

MR. COHEN: It will still be there.

MR. WILLIAMS: Now, an interesting subject to talk about is the difference between early and late work. Can you describe what might have happened in between? Are they the same, elements of it the same?

MR. COHEN: Absolutely, elements are the same. Even in my most favorite one-of-a-kind pieces, they still have the quality that I still use now. Certain techniques and feelings that I put into my original pieces, which is absolutely --

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MR. COHEN: -- of poking out and tearing, and the making a knife mark and not cleaning it up. That was an important part for me.

MR. WILLIAMS: Let's talk about exhibitions. Tell me about some of the single and group exhibitions.

MR. COHEN: Well, I became very famous very early, which is probably the wrong way to do it. I entered the Syracuse International at the Everson Museum and won the Everson Memorial prize. I shared it with Dan Rhodes and Bertil Vallien. I'd been at Herring Run Pottery for one year. And also, Bill Wyman won a prize that same year. We went to Syracuse and accepted prizes. That was amazing.

But then, the important show was the "Objects: USA." That's the day I met Voulkos. I almost genuflected. And he took a mirror of mine and said, we'll trade. Ten years later, I went to Berkeley and got a second one of his plates. It was the day his gallery had called up from New York and he had sold one for $4,000. I had just read a story that Voulkos offered someone with an unsigned second plate $10,000. He offered this guy to buy it back. And if he's buying it back, then it's worth $15,000. Well, that was neither here nor there.

And then, I was in American Studio Pottery at the Victoria and Albert [Victoria and Albert Museum, London], and then shows at the Smithsonian, "Collector: Object: Environment" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts [New York City], and I'm in the permanent collection of that museum. "For the Tabletop" [Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York City] was very important to me, and in September, I'm about to be in a functional show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts again. And then, right after that, one of the pipes is in someone's collection, and he's showing his collection at the museum. So I'm going to be in that too, and those will be in books too.

So those are the most important exhibitions. But collections, years ago I was selling at a store in New York City in Greenwich Village, and the man who was in charge of the design collection at the Museum of Modern Art asked for my name, called me up, asked me to bring in some work, and he bought five pieces for the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art. That was such a wonderful feeling. I was proud.

MR. WILLIAMS: What did you send them?

MR. COHEN: We actually brought ten pots, and they bought five. The three of them were mushroom-top vases. It was like a cylinder with a flatop and then decoration on the top, and then a couple of bowls that had pinched -- you know, you flare the rim slightly, and then you come back after you pinch the rim, so that the bowl becomes straight again, yet it has these fabulous pinch marks, three pinch marks on the rim, in a beautiful iron-yellow glaze. But I don't think they've ever been shown. I think they're just collected.

And then, I'm in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts. That was donated by Goren Holmquist from Bonniers. And I was in the Museum of Syracuse and the Walker Art Center [St. Paul, Minnesota], the Fuller Art Museum [Brockton, Massachusetts] -- well, the Johnson Wax Collection, which I think was dispersed. I think that was "Objects: USA."

MR. WILLIAMS: Do you know where your pieces are?

MR. COHEN: No, I don't know where --

MR. WILLIAMS: What did you have?

MR. COHEN: I had a very large mirror. That was at a time when I was making all kinds of mirrors, both commercially and sort of in an artistic way. And gee, it must have been two or three feet long -- not the mirror part. The mirror was only about a foot in diameter, but it had thrown sections and slab, and then applied clay. So it's in Objects: USA, the book. Those are the major places that I --

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you do anything abroad?

MR. COHEN: No, not in permanent collections.

MR. WILLIAMS: Okay, let's change the subject a little bit, and tell me about your teaching philosophy, if that's possible.

MR. COHEN: It's almost impossible. Well, you once gave me a chance to teach at Phoenix, and I've taught at Penland and Haystack. Well, most of my times, it would be with either beginning students -- not completely beginning students, but first-level students. And my thing is to stress repetition, stress throwing, stress quick throwing. No one should be throwing after three minutes on one object, you know, on a two-pound bowl or a three-pound bowl. You have to throw it in three minutes, three pulls.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did you time them?

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. And I remember timing them myself at Mass Art in my own little studio, making sure that I didn't waste time, but not for a money reason, but just so that the pots are still alive when you take them off the wheel. And there's nothing worse than watching a beginning student with an off-centered pot work on something for 20 minutes. It's got to be ripped off, centered, and then rip off, center, and rip off, center, and rip off. But that's the way I do it. And cylinder, cylinder, cylinder, cut them all in half; let's discuss the cylinder. So that's the way I teach.

MR. WILLIAMS: And how do you teach someone who has some experience?

MR. COHEN: Then it's just a more advanced version of that. So after you master the cylinder, which takes a year -- I mean, you can make a cylinder in a couple of weeks, but it takes a year to actually know what you're doing and be able to reproduce it, and have control so you don't have to worry about the damn technique, so you can then put a little of your art into it. Most people don't get to that section. They're so busy making a vase that they're happy to get a vase, even though it's thrown in a stupid way or it weighs 14 pounds.

So with a more advanced student, after the cylinder, I would then go into making a sphere from the cylinder, and then after that, to make a simple low bowl in sort of a perfect hemisphere. You know, make them do a perfect hemisphere. It's not take what you get, but how do you make something come out, like a hemisphere, every single time. And after the hemisphere, how far can you bring the clay out before it falls over? How thin can you make things? And so, I would force people to do that.

And so, you're not getting pots to take home with you. That's not the point of the whole thing. The point is to learn the techniques so well that you can express yourself when you get home. So when you're at Haystack, it's not time to make art; it's time to learn how to throw, or learn how to put slabs together. How many things have you ever seen come out of a kiln with cracked attachments? How do you put on a handle that stays on -- that when it breaks, part of the mug comes with it, not that it breaks off cleanly and you don't see any score marks? So that's what I teach.

MR. WILLIAMS: Did at any time any designated philosophy teachings, such as Mingei [Japanese folk craft movement] or Bauhaus, attach itself to you?

MR. COHEN: I think when I was smitten with the Bernard Leach thing in school; but I think as I got older, the whole Mingei thing of the unknown potter, and not signing them, and blah, blah, blah -- this is by rich people. That was invented by rich people, not by potters trying to make a living -- the people who didn't have to make a living. Oh, I went to Japan; I stayed for three years. Well, how do you go to Japan and stay for three years unless you have money? And that still happens with sort of trust-fund hippies.

So I sort of put that aside, I think. My philosophy is much more in a practical sense and an artistic sense of my own art. And I think my major thing is to make things that you can look at it and say, oh, that's Michael Cohen, without having to turn it over. So much stuff now, like all the Minnesota stuff, it's almost impossible to tell who made what. I mean, all the people who are firing -- kilns and making fake Byzan stuff, well, you know, it looks like it's a thousand years old, but they did it a thousand years ago. So I'm wondering about it.

MR. WILLIAMS: Can you teach pottery by the book, or does it have to be --

MR. COHEN: I've known people who've learned by the book. I think Brother Thomas learned from the book. He's practiced enough that he taught himself. And I think I taught myself, because I didn't learn that much from -- I learned the basic things of throwing from Charles Abbott, and that was it. And then, I would watch John Glick throw, and I'd watch Ron Burke throw, and other potters throw, and went to workshops to look at things; I've been to your workshops. And you pick up techniques, and you watch movies, and you watch the Hamada movie, that old, old movie of him decorating and having the glaze pour off the wax resistant, and it holds on one of the circles. And all of the sudden, after way too long, the tension breaks and the glaze drops off, and you go, oh, great moment. [Laughs.]

That's how I learned. And I think you really shouldn't learn from books. I mean, when I teach beginners and I see them floundering at centering, I put my hands on their hands, and I want to show them how hard I am actually pressing, because they're not pressing hard enough; they're not using their bodies; they don't have their elbows into their sides. And I crush the clay to center it, and then they realize that we're not playing here. You know, it's not an easy thing to center clay.

MR. WILLIAMS: Where do your ideas come from?

MR. COHEN: My ideas of objects come from, I must say, every art book and every pottery book I've ever looked at, and every show I've ever looked at, and every Japanese object. And you know, it doesn't have to be clay; it could be a knife, or a sword, or a handle of something.

MR. WILLIAMS: Your perceptions are alive.

MR. COHEN: Absolutely. I mean, when I went through the archaeological museum in Naples and saw the mosaics and the Greek and Roman bronze things, and the clay objects and painting, I just come alive. It's just so thrilling to me. I mean, to see that these things are 2,000 or 3,000 years old and they still go zoom, right through the ages, and still hit me. I mean all the Peruvian work, all the animals and figurines. And then, I mean, all of the Egyptian work.

Plus, everything that's contemporary I look at. I can reject it, but still, I'm taking it in. I have vacuum-cleaner eyes. Then when I do my own work, hopefully, it will all be filtered through my own soul and come out of me.

MR. WILLIAMS: So where is that space inside you that is private, that you assimilate all of this material, in the middle of the night, or when you're on the bathroom?

MR. COHEN: [Laughter.] You know, it's not a forced thing that I consciously do. It's something that, when I sit down with clay, that it just comes in a very natural way. And it's come my whole life, from the time I was a little boy. And I combine that with my ability to make interesting tools to help me do my work. And so, I have these very personalized things that I have made, which then translate into making my objects, which can only be made with my little tools. So that's all I can say.

MR. WILLIAMS: What are some of the tools?

MR. COHEN: Well, beveling tools, tools for cutting off extruding things. I remember I mentioned something about it, and then I get a call from -- oh, I forget the name of the company -- but it's just a device, a harp, which you cut off the extrusion when it comes out of the extruder. Most people, you know, you're holding one hand and you're cutting with a knife, and it's all raggedy. Well, my whole use of the extruder was for making mugs and vases, and things like that. It had to have a perfectly flat cutoff, and so I made the cutoff tool, which was a harp with a wire that is on a hinge, and you draw it across the extrusion, and it comes out perfectly flat. Then you go on to the mug. And you can't do that without having a flat surface, a flat cutoff, things like that.

MR. WILLIAMS: So sometimes, the tool comes first, and then the object that it makes comes after that.

MR. COHEN: Yes. Well, in the use of other tools, I see what I need, and I run into the next room. I have all my little, I mean, very primitive woodworking tools, really primitive, and I knock something up that I think, well, I'll make a good one when I have time. And I never make a good one because the bad one works so well.

MR. WILLIAMS: You use it for years.

MR. COHEN: Use it for years. You know, one of the hardest things of making tiles is marking up a big piece of clay, a big slab, you know, and you have T-squares, and you have rulers, and on and on. No, no, I saw that was ridiculous. So I make a big frame and string elasticized string in exactly the grid mark that I want, and then you lay the whole grid thing on the soft clay, you do the rolling pin, you lift it up, and there are the marks for the exact tiles, which are then cut with a special piece of wood, a flat piece of wood that, on the very end of it, has a thin piece of metal going down, which sinks into the clay.

How many times have we taken a ruler, you draw the knife across the slab down the ruler, and then as you get to the end, the ruler slips and you get the wrong angle? Well, my little piece of metal sinks down into the selvage of the clay, so that when you're holding up at the top and you draw down, the wooden thing can't move. So it makes all those efficient little tricks in production pottery make a lot of sense.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have you ever manufactured it and sold it?

MR. COHEN: No. I tried to sell the designs of the harp, but it went nowhere -- because I'm not interested in that part of it all, really. All the people who work for me go off with things like that, but no, I've never tried to commercialize that part of it. But I'm so glad that other people have spent the time engineering good tools like

the Giffin Grip, and the slab roller, and the extruder. It's changed my life.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why has the Giffin Grip changed your life?

MR. COHEN: Well, my whole life, I used clay tabs or a foam bath to tool the bottom of objects, and they'd get thrown off and you'd have to re-center, and that takes time; where the Giffin Grip, you hold the outside of the wheel, the flat wheel, and you turn your wheel slightly, and arms come in and grip the bowl, the round object, tight enough that you can trim. It just did away with clay tabs. I spent my whole life with clay tabs until the Giffin Grip. And I was one of the first people to buy one. I think it was like $75 at the time. I bought it at NCECA when I was in Boston, which was many years ago.

And he knew what he had, but he didn't really sell it that much. He didn't bring any soft pots; he brought some hard pots, and they slide, and people weren't impressed at all. I was impressed, though, and man, I bought one of them immediately. It's been great.

MR. WILLIAMS: Change the subject slightly. Has some political or social commentary come into your work? Can you describe things that you've done in that context?

MR. COHEN: No, I've never put any kind of social message into my work at all, ever. That comes from volunteering in political things or donating money to causes that I love. So I don't put that into my art.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why don't you describe, in your material, what you're thinking about socially?

MR. COHEN: What do you mean?

MR. WILLIAMS: If you're interested in preventing abortions and whatever.

MR. COHEN: No, no, having abortions. [Laughs.] Preventing pregnancy. Okay, there are two things that I feel strongly about, and that is a woman's right to choose. So I do everything in my power, such as picketing and anti-picketing pickets at abortion clinics. I've done that a few times in Boston, and I picketed in Northhampton [Massachusetts], holding up signs and have people throw beer cans at you as they drive by, from their pickups. And then, I give money to that, and I give pottery, like large objects, you know, like $300 objects. And I give those so they can auction those off; that's the one part.

And then, the second part is theater and dance. And there's just a tremendous opportunity here to help, so I give, it must be $500 worth of pottery to the fine arts center, which is in the University of Massachusetts [Amherst], and I give to them for auctions, and then I give them money, and plus, I subscribe to their things. And so, it's been such a cultural heaven. And I've taken my son to all these things. I mean, when I was a kid, when I was at Mass Art, I used to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But my son has gone to see every fantastic dance group, and we both love dance, and my sweetheart loves dance, and we go to every dance group that comes, and we go to Jacob's Pillow, and we give money to Jacob's Pillow. We give money to all the arts and the theater, Asian dance; all that stuff is very important to me and I support it.

MR. WILLIAMS: But your work is separate.

MR. COHEN: Work is separate, yeah. I give my work to them, but it has no political content.

MR. WILLIAMS: I know we've talked a little bit about other craft organizations, such as the ACC and NCECA, and so forth. Have you had any experience with any of them?

MR. COHEN: A lot of experience with the ACC and some experience with the Rosen Group, and I think I've talked about that a little bit. But the other group would be CERF, which I've always given money and pots to that. And then, I give my little bowls to Studio Potter every year, and our group does. We have a good group for that, because we know UPS and we know packing, and we're a group that gets together, so we give you a big box of stuff every year.

MR. WILLIAMS: Next year, have UPS give you a free service for that.

MR. COHEN: Oh really, because it's a service?

MR. WILLIAMS: Why not?

MR. COHEN: We'll see. So I think being able to distance myself from the American Craft Council has been pretty good for me. I mean, I look at their magazine; I don't read anything in their magazine, but I look at it because it's contemporary, it's modern, it's new, it's art. But to not have to pay $1,200 for a booth that when I started might have cost $200, and now they're charging late fees, If you come from Wendy's show and you're an hour late, it's $100, or you're two hours late, it's $200. They charge you for trying to make a living.

And what kind of a craft organization that says they're for the craftspeople does something like that? The whole thing is to do it in the most friendly way possible, and they're doing it like you're an enemy. So that's my feeling about ACC. I love their museum, but where is the American Crafts Shop, where's America House? What's the first thing to go? The thing that makes money for craftspeople who make it for a living. And who's it for? It's for teachers who make their six pots a year.

MR. WILLIAMS: Have we discussed the museums that you want to?

MR. COHEN: Yes. I think I've said enough on that.

MR. WILLIAMS: Are there any curators who you'd especially like to mention?

MR. COHEN: I would. I mean, I've known Paul Smith since he was the assistant to Campbell at the Little Museum. And I must say, he's put on some fabulous shows, and he's put on some weird shows, but he's there. He's really there and he's a voice, and he's faithful to people he's known in the past, yet he is totally open to new things. And so, me being part of the past, I feel very warm that he thinks of me when a show comes up that is functional. He knows that I've been doing functional pots for my whole life. So he's the one.

And then, I think the only other person I've dealt with is Leslie Ferrin of the Ferrin Gallery in Northampton, who I've known for 20 years. And she has her shop, which is mostly functional stuff that I sell in, sell my tile, and I sold my pottery for many, many years there. And now, she has sort of a virtual gallery on a website, and she's almost invented the collecting of teapots; you know, one-of-a-kind, weird, wonderful teapots. She's written a book calledTeapots Transformed, and I have a beautiful extruded teapot in it.

And at first, she was going to try to get a gallery in New York, but the rent's ridiculous, and you have to have an incredible location. And all of a sudden, the website started working, and now I think she's just going to keep a website and do it by slides and personal contact. And she's a wonderful person that has fabulous taste, and she's done an incredible service to craftspeople.

MR. WILLIAMS: We have talked about your former wife, Harriet Goodwin, and how you both worked together for many years. Can you tell me a little bit more about the collaboration that you had?

MR. COHEN: Oh, very important.

MR. WILLIAMS: And what she's doing now.

MR. COHEN: Yes. Just a little history is, we met at Haystack in 1961. It took a few years for us to finally get married in 1964, but we were made for each other. She was an Alfred [Alfred University, Alfred, New York] potter, I was sort of self-taught, and we both loved functional work. And we got together, we married. And I remember on the day I asked her to marry me, I said, "Well, separate studios, or do you want to work together?" That's the kind of marriage we had, and it was wonderful for many years, and we worked together and sold together, and she was a tremendous help in boosting sort of the image of ourselves and our feeling about ourselves.

So we would feel good about ourselves, and we could go into the world a little bit better, at a higher level. And that was wonderful, and we moved to New Hampshire around '65 and had our children there, Amanda and Josh. And that's when pottery, for us, got harder and harder to sell, and it was rough times. And she went through some very low periods, but it was a very positive thing to move to Amherst. And we were in New Hampshire seven years; we moved here around 1973.

MR. WILLIAMS: Why did you move here?

MR. COHEN: We moved for the schools. The kids were getting to be school age, and it was, like, primitive in the town we were in, New Ipswich. Primitive. So we could get the radio station from there. We were so high, 70 miles away, we could get WFCR, and it would read off the art calendar. And Harriet came home one day from shopping, and she said, "I know where we're going: we're going to Amherst." And we did.

So things disintegrated after a few years here, and we decided to divorce, which we did. But she stayed here in Amherst, and I built a house on top of a studio, and she took the kids, but I was with the kids. You know, we were just, like, ten minutes apart from each other; it wasn't that I left. And she worked for two years while we were divorced, because she had to have a transitional period. So we worked together as Michael and Harriet Cohen.

MR. WILLIAMS: Then she went to Smith [Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts] didn't she?

MR. COHEN: She had gone to Smith, yeah. And that's why she didn't want to come back to this area. There's a whole anti-Semitic thing that happened, though; her life at Smith was rough -- but it was the most incredibly valuable education, you know, general education.

MR. WILLIAMS: And she lives here in Amherst.

MR. COHEN: She lives here in Amherst. She lived in a couple of houses, and the house she lives in now, she converted a two-car garage into the most beautiful pottery studio; in that scale, you can imagine. Really lovely. And she worked in pottery for a few years, and she has outside income from an apartment house, so she didn't have to really sell; so she didn't have to bend to the commercial world. And she didn't bend to the commercial world, nor did the commercial world come after her. So she got very discouraged and changed her studio into a graphics studio, which she does for her pleasure. And now, she's going to be in a gallery up in Brattleboro [Vermont]. And we are still wonderful friends. We do things for each other all the time.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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