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Oral history interview with Ralph Bacerra, 2004 April 7-19

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

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Transcript

Interview

Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project For Craft and Decorative Arts in America

Interview with Ralph Bacerra
Conducted by Frank Lloyd
At the Interviewer's home in Eagle Rock, California
April 12 and 19, 2004

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ralph Bacerra on April 12 and 19, 2004. The interview took place in Eagle Rock, California, and was conducted by Frank Lloyd 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.

Ralph Bacerra and Frank Lloyd 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.

MR. LLOYD: This is Frank Lloyd interviewing Ralph Bacerra at the Frank Lloyd residence in Eagle Rock, California, on April 12, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number one.

To begin with, Ralph, could you tell me when and where you were born?

RALPH BACERRA: Garden Grove, California, 1938. California – did I say California?

MR. LLOYD: Yeah, you did.

MR. BACERRA: All right.

MR. LLOYD: And can you describe your childhood and family background, if you would like?

MR. BACERRA: Family background? My mother from Montana, father from the Philippines. How my father got to the Philippines I'll never know. [Laughs.] What was he doing in Montana in 1938 all the way from the Philippines? But anyway, he was there, met my mother, they were married. Had five children, moved to California probably early '30s – late '30s, I guess. I was born in California so –

MR. LLOYD: And this is in Garden Grove?

MR. BACERRA: This was in Garden Grove, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And your father ran a farm there, is that true or –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, we were farmers.

MR. LLOYD: So that's where you got an early interest in growing plants and –

MR. BACERRA: Maybe.

MR. LLOYD: Maybe. Maybe. In previous conversations we talked about your early education and your career choice, and you told me that in high school you had a very influential art teacher and also a ceramics teacher.

MR. BACERRA: There were two teachers in high school. I was an art major in high school. The main teacher was Art Nelson, who had graduated from, I believe, Long Beach State [California State University, Long Beach], and then I had a ceramics teacher named Priscilla Baker. Ceramics was sort of an elective course that you took once a week, and I was always sort of interested in that class, and she was very influential too. She encouraged me to do different things. But never really gave it any kind of major thought this is where I wanted to be. I just enjoyed it.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah, and I think you told me that there was a ceramic bowl in Mr. Art Nelson's classroom –

MR. BACERRA: In our art classroom there was a footed compote that was done by Dr. Ward Youry, who was then teaching at Long Beach State College, and I just – I still have visions of the bowl. I can remember it was

stoneware with a matte glaze, and it had carvings or scraffito on it, and I still remember it.

MR. LLOYD: And was – was there any contact then in your high school years with the art school that you eventually attended, Chouinard [Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, California]?

MR. BACERRA: No, after high school I went to a junior college called Orange Coast Junior College in Costa Mesa, California. Close to home. And there I was a commercial art major, but I did take some ceramics courses with Bill Payne, who had graduated from Claremont and he was – his main focus was just throwing and glazing and didn't know too much about glazes. But everybody was experimenting and doing different things. But I really didn't say this is – this is the field I wanted to go into. I just took some courses there.

MR. LLOYD: So it wasn't until you got to Chouinard, and then – did you say that you took an elective course –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, I scouted around Los Angeles for different art schools. I went to Otis [Otis College of Art and Design], I went to Art Center, and then I went to Chouinard Art Institute, which were the three main art schools in Los Angeles at that time, and decided that Chouinard was the right atmosphere for me. Art Center was a little too sterile. Otis was brand new. They had just opened their new building. My god, it's not even an art school anymore, but at that time it was – it seemed a little sterile, and Chouinard was entrenched, and there was all kinds of activity. People were painting outside in the patios, and I enjoyed that atmosphere. So I decided to – on Chouinard.

MR. LLOYD: And did you enter with anything specifically in mind, that you were going to be a painter –

MR. BACERRA: At that time it was called commercial art. I wanted to go into graphic design and illustration, that kind of thing.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: And the first semester – well, you take a whole range of courses: drawing, painting, design, color and design, composition. Chouinard stressed drawing as their main focal point and in all of the disciplines. And you could take one elective. I think I took the elective the second semester at – in ceramics with Vivika Heino. And once she started to talk, demonstrate, and the environment in the classroom, and I started to get more serious of working with the wheel and the clay and the glazes. I said this is for me. This is where I want to be, and I dropped everything and switched my major to ceramics.

MR. LLOYD: And you've never turned back.

MR. BACERRA: I never – and I never went back.

MR. LLOYD: So was Vivika the only ceramics instructor there?

MR. BACERRA: Well, Otto, her husband was around all the time, but Vivika was the only ceramics instructor. It was a very small department, probably eight or nine people.

MR. LLOYD: And we talked about this before too, that that was your first inspirational ceramics experience in the art school, but there were other art schools active at the same time that had ceramics programs, for instance, Susan Peterson –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, well – well, there was Susan Peterson at University of Southern California, and then there was Peter Voulkos at the Otis Art Institute. Otis was about three blocks away, across the park in downtown Los Angeles. So we would go – our class would go visit Pete at his class, and Pete would bring his class to our studio, and everybody saw what everybody was doing.

MR. LLOYD: So, and you saw what the students were doing, you saw what the faculty members were doing –

MR. BACERRA: Well, Pete mainly worked in the studio at Otis.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: That was his main teaching sort of focus looking back –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – that he worked right along with the students, and whatever he was doing, they would sort of mimic, or they would –

MR. LLOYD: Would you say that Vivika's influences were different or teaching methods were different?

MR. BACERRA: Well, her background and her teaching methods were probably quite different because she was very structured.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: She was the second person to get a master's degree from Alfred [New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, New York], which is the ceramics college in Alfred, New York, and her background was in teaching.

MR. LLOYD: And then she was also emphasizing glaze technology and –

MR. BACERRA: Clay technology, glaze technology, all kinds of skills in making objects.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: From – it didn't mean necessarily throwing on the wheel. We did plaster molds, slip casting, some slab work, but her main focus was on technique and information.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: Glazes, how they fit clays; different temperatures, from low temperature to high temperature.

MR. LLOYD: Right. Now, were – was she interacting with Susan Peterson about that kind of information?

MR. BACERRA: Well, they – at that time in the late '50s the American Ceramics Society, which was a division of the – the design division of the American Ceramics Society, was a division of the American Ceramics Society that was nationwide. And everybody belonged, everybody that did ceramics or talked ceramics. And once a month there were meetings, and Susan was maybe president one year and Vivika the next or Bernie Kester from UCLA or Laura Andreson and Peter Voulkos. So they all got together, and there was a nice communal atmosphere.

And that's how I met all these people, is through these meetings and visiting their campuses and their studios.

MR. LLOYD: And was F. Carlton Ball active in that organization?

MR. BACERRA: Susan started the – well, Susan was at SC because Glen Lukens left, and Lukens was an old time ceramics person in Los Angeles, and then she, I believe, brought Carlton Ball in, who was her – I believe her instructor at Mills College [Oakland, California].

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: So both – then that department started to grow, and then Carlton Ball and Susan Peterson ran the department.

MR. LLOYD: Right. Then, during that period of time that you were at Chouinard, was that when Shoji Hamada made his second trip to the United States?

MR. BACERRA: It was – it was after I had graduated. I maybe had just graduated. It was the summer after I graduated that Hamada was giving a month workshop – month or – I think it was a month, it seemed about that long – at USC. And so I took the course, which was sort of an exciting course because he – here was this funny Japanese man – I didn't know too much about him, Shoji Hamada.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: He was the sort of instigator of the mingei, the folk art tradition of Japanese ceramics, and he was friends with Bernard Leach from England. And there was another Japanese potter, I can't remember his name –

MR. LLOYD: Was that Yanagi?

MR. BACERRA: Yanagi, right. Well, anyway, Hamada was at SC, and so I took the course or the workshop, and it was a great experience. There were about 20 people and he – you watched him come in and work. He came in with his kimonos, and he sat cross-legged on this table and used a stick to turn his wheel, but it all worked for him, and he worked very quietly. He said he didn't speak English, but I think he did because he had his son there interpreting for him – but his son washed all of his clay.

And so he made his pots, and then he – he'd trim them, and then he'd put spouts on them, and he did the whole process. And they were all bisque. And then we saw him glaze and do his paintings. And afterwards we went – I think there was several kiln loads, and he would talk about each one with his son interpreting. And I was only,

what, twenty at the time, 19, 20, and, you know, at that time – what is he talking about? [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: I mean, the essence of the pot and the – how the pot lives, and I didn't really quite understand at that time, but I do now. And at the end of the session he gave everybody a nice tea bowl, which I thought was very nice.

MR. LLOYD: And was Susan responsible for bringing him to that?

MR. BACERRA: I believe so because she was very friendly with him, and later on she wrote a nice book on Hamada, probably 20, 30 years later.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: And she had stayed with him in Mashiko.

MR. LLOYD: Mashiko.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. Can you remember any of the other people who were there besides you, Susan –

MR. BACERRA: In the class?

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: Ed Traynor. Do you remember Ed Traynor?

MR. LLOYD: I don't know him.

MR. BACERRA: He was a professor at Pasadena City College, and then he later went on to teach at UCLA before Adrian, and then he left when Adrian came in. I can't really remember who else was in the class.

MR. LLOYD: Would Laura Andreson have been there, do you think or –

MR. BACERRA: I think everybody stopped by to visit with Hamada.

MR. LLOYD: I see, yeah.

MR. BACERRA: That was in the area. So – because he was – he was a big thing. Stoneware at that time was – or high-temperature firing was becoming very popular in all of the universities. And all the schools were building stoneware kilns or buying – [Paul] Soldner built his own at Claremont, and then Susan would have West Coast Kiln build them for her at SC, and it was – stoneware was a big thing, so everybody wanted to see what he was doing.

MR. LLOYD: And then following on from your experience at Chouinard and these early experiences in this workshop and other contacts with people, you did have two years of military service, right?

MR. BACERRA: Two years in the Army. That was at – they had – they still had the draft at that time, so I knew I was going to be drafted, and so right after that Hamada workshop I think I went off to Fort Ord, California.

MR. LLOYD: Right, but when you returned, you were able to pick up a teaching job. You taught with someone, John Fassbinder?

MR. BACERRA: After I left the Army, or was released, I – Vivika was still teaching at Chouinard, and she offered me a summer job teaching ceramics in the summer session, which I accepted, of course. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Sure.

MR. BACERRA: And then she got an offer to go – to teach at the Rhode Island School of Design, and she left that following semester. And I and John Fassbinder were running the ceramics department at Chouinard. And I think he was there for a year or maybe two, and then he left, and then I became head of the ceramics department.

MR. LLOYD: And during that time is when you established your own studio, around that time?

MR. BACERRA: And – and then I had started a studio in Eagle Rock, where we are now, and that would have been in 1962, '63. So –

MR. LLOYD: So you've been in the same studio for –

MR. BACERRA: – so in the same studio for over 40 years.

MR. LLOYD: Forty years.

MR. BACERRA: [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: That's amazing.

MR. BACERRA: It's small but it works.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. Do you think – from your experience, you were in an art school in a ceramics department. Do you think there's any difference between a university-trained artist and one who has learned his or her craft outside academia?

MR. BACERRA: Not having been in academia – I don't consider the art schools – but maybe they are today – academia because the main stress was on your creativity and not on your math or your sciences or your English skills or writing skills, which are all important but they didn't stress them. You had liberal studies, which were maybe one or two hours in the morning, and the rest of the time you spent in studio. So that still happened at Otis until the very end, and then it started to get into more theory and concepts.

MR. LLOYD: Right, and in your early education there at Chouinard were you motivated to engage in any other type of craft media like weaving, glassmaking, woodworking, et cetera?

MR. BACERRA: We didn't have any at Chouinard, but there was a time when Sam Maloof came through, who was a friend of Vivika, and he was looking for an apprentice, and I thought, well, maybe I should try the working with wood. And I briefly gave it a thought about apprenticing with Sam Maloof, but I never did. I just said no, I'm going to stay with clay. Who knows what – maybe I would have been a good woodworker too.

MR. LLOYD: [Laughs.] But that was probably your most rewarding educational experience there at Chouinard, with Vivika Heino?

MR. BACERRA: Yes, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: Definitely. All right.

MR. BACERRA: Even though it was brief. It was like three years, but Vivika and I were – Vivika and I and Otto were very close. She sort of took me under her wing and –

MR. LLOYD: So, in line with that would you say that you apprenticed with Vivika Heino?

MR. BACERRA: It wasn't really an apprenticeship. It was more of a –

MR. LLOYD: Could you describe that relationship in some way? It was teacher-mentor –

MR. BACERRA: Teacher-mentor mainly, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: You also did travel with Vivika, is that correct?

MR. BACERRA: One summer, I believe it was about – I was – I wasn't even – my god, I hadn't been in the Army. It was right after I had – maybe the year before. She and Otto had a house in New Hampshire, where she was from or Otto was from, and she had a studio there, and every summer they would go back. And since Otto had the studio – a working studio in Los Angeles, he couldn't go that summer, so she invited me to drive with her across country. I think we took 14 days to get from Los Angeles to New Hampshire, but it was a very, very educational experience. We stopped at all of the museums, the ceramics people that she knew across the country, up and down, different states. It was not a direct shot to New Hampshire.

Quite exciting experience. It was the first time I had been out of – out of California, I think, and seeing the Grand Canyon – I'm sort of visualizing the trip now – the Grand Canyon and then on to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and we would just spend one day, and we spent four because it was such an exciting place, completely different than it is today. I mean, all the art galleries and the big hotels and all of the hype. At that time it was just the Indians in the square. And visiting Maria Martinez out in her pueblo and then on to Colorado, and she knew somebody at Boulder and – do you want to go through the rest of the trip? Or –

MR. LLOYD: Well, let's pause for a moment here.

Okay, so in line with that relationship that you had with Vivika Heino and your travels across the United States, did you ever have any involvement with the Penland School of Crafts [Penland, North Carolina], the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts [Deer Isle, Maine], the Arrowroot School of –

MR. BACERRA: Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee].

MR. LLOYD: Arrowmont, correct.

MR. BACERRA: Penland – Penland I visited. In 1964, ’65, I drove across country and had heard about Penland, so I stopped in. Couldn’t find the place, finally I got to Asheville, North Carolina, and they said, “Penland, Penland, it’s up in the mountains.” So they directed us up to this windy road that went up to Penland in the mountains. It was a very small sort of craft area. They did ceramics, they did some wood, and I think they were doing some weaving and dyeing of wool and that kind of thing. But it wasn’t – it wasn’t such a big place, and it’s a very active thriving craft school now.

Haystack, that came later. That was, I think, in the ’60s, ‘70s. I never – I’ve never been there. Arrowmont in Gatlinburg, North Carolina – or Tennessee, not North Carolina, I did a month workshop –

MR. LLOYD: When was that?

MR. BACERRA: – at Arrowmont. My god, I don’t remember. Anyway, it was during the summer and it was hot and humid – [laughs] – but I had a nice time. The students were very responsive, and Ray Pierotti was director of Arrowmont at that time. He used to be the assistant to – who was director of the American Crafts Museum out of New York?

MR. LLOYD: Monroe? Michael Monroe?

MR. BACERRA: No, before – anyway, he was his assistant, and then he became director of Arrowmont, and Sandra Blain was his assistant, I believe, at that time. And then he left, and she became in charge of the Arrowmont School. But it was a nice time. I enjoyed the students. We had a good time.

MR. LLOYD: And when you do a workshop like that, do you have a set kind of thing that you do, a demonstration or anything?

MR. BACERRA: Well, most – most of the – I haven’t done that many workshops, but that particular one I wanted the students to work, and they were there to do something. So I set the agenda that they do what they do, and then at a certain period of time we have a criticism; we talk about what they’re doing. And they were very responsive to that because they normally said the person that does the workshop does all the talking, does all the working. And they enjoyed the conversation and the criticism of their work and not just the person doing the workshop.

MR. LLOYD: Right. But in the workshop format you don’t have enough time to really devote to clay technology –

MR. BACERRA: Well, I – I told them that maybe they wouldn’t be able to fire something, and they were very upset about that, so we – it was like a two or three-week workshop, but we finally got one kiln going for them. But it was just the experience of talking to the students, getting their ideas and my ideas going and working one on one, which is the way I teach – or taught; I don’t teach right now.

MR. LLOYD: You retired from teaching after your – your tenure at Otis. Is that correct?

MR. BACERRA: I retired from Otis in 1996, I believe, so it’s been like seven years.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And when did you start at Otis?

MR. BACERRA: In ’82. So I was there for about 15 years, and before that there was a 10-year period where I worked in the studio in Eagle Rock doing my own work and then also doing glazes for commercial tile companies.

MR. LLOYD: And you also worked on –

MR. BACERRA: And also for an industrial stove company, Induction Heating, where they have an induction stove that you cook with no flame or no electrical element. It’s all done through magnetics. And I worked out a whole series of clays and glazes for the tile, stove tile. But before that I was at Chouinard for 12, 13 years so –

MR. LLOYD: So that’s ’64 through –

MR. BACERRA: Seventy-two.

MR. LLOYD: Seventy-two.

MR. BACERRA: And then I didn't teach for – until '82. So 10 years of – then at that time I did a lot of traveling as well through Asia, Europe.

MR. LLOYD: And let's talk a little bit more about your travels. You're very influenced by Asian ceramics, Japanese and Chinese. Did you travel to Japan and China?

MR. BACERRA: Japan and Taiwan, not a lot in China. But Japan was a big influence, mainly the work that came out of the Arita factories, which is called Imari because Imari was the port from which it was all shipped from. So they – they coined the name *Imari* as this type of ware, but it was actually done in Arita, Japan. And then the Chinese, always sort of a mystery as to how they did their – their multicolored pieces because the foundation was white, and then there was a cobalt design applied, then a glaze over, and then there were multicolors of enamels that went on and then the silver and the gold. It had always been such a mystery to me that I just decided, well, let's see how they did it.

So I did some – I knew how to do the blue and white, and then I had to purchase some – some China paints of the over-glaze enamel, and I worked for several months just copying the Imari and trying to get their color and their – you know, that nice sort of rusty red and the greens and the blues – I mean, the browns and the yellows and – finally I said, well, this is not so hard. So the mystery sort of disappeared, and from there I just took it and went my way with it because I think you can probably see some of my over-glaze work maybe some influence of the Chinese and the Japanese, but it's done in – in my – my style.

MR. LLOYD: Vivika and Otto have – or had a very early makara, a covered vessel that was blue and white.

MR. BACERRA: I remember.

MR. LLOYD: Well, it was very Chinese –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: – but it was almost indistinguishable from Chinese –

MR. BACERRA: Really? Okay.

MR. LLOYD: It was – it was a wonderful piece, and I remember Vivika taking it out and asking me, "Do you know who did this?"

MR. BACERRA: [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: And I said, "Well, it looks like it's Chinese," and she said – turned it over and, you know, and it's Ralph Bacerra.

MR. BACERRA: Okay. Well, that was during the time I was – I was really into the research and exploration of how the Chinese actually did what they did and the Japanese and the Koreans and the Thai because they all have a different – different feel and a different look.

MR. LLOYD: In line with that you've continued to research this, and we have a show at the gallery which included, I think, the widest range of celadons I've ever seen. There were – the *Cloud Vessels* that you did, and they ranged from almost a pure white to a very gray-green, dark gray-green –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, well the celadon – the celadon glaze is an ancient Chinese glaze that was developed when they began to high fire their clays, and it was – it was strictly from the ash residue that they used to fire the kiln that they mixed with water, put on the – on the clay, and it gave them this transparent glaze. And as the kiln smoked, because of the wood fire, reduction happened in the kiln, so this ash glaze was transparent, would bleach through into the clay and pull out the iron and cause the color to become sort of green, and that's why it's called celadon.

Celadon is a French term. It was – he was – Mr. Celadon was a French actor who wore this coat of this particular shade of green, and, I guess, the French associated that color with the Chinese glazes, and so celadon stuck to the ceramic high-temperature glaze. But celadon, it could be white, and it goes all the way to black to gray – or gray to black, brown.

MR. LLOYD: And in your exhibition you varied also the amount of crackling.

MR. BACERRA: Well, that has to do with the – with the components of the glaze. If there's high soda, then you begin to – the glaze begins to crackle because it doesn't have the proper fit with the clay. So that's just through

experimentation and knowing what your materials do, and that's because of glaze technology that Vivika sort of shoved down everybody's throat. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Well, quite a valuable experience.

MR. BACERRA: Because she was very, very big on people knowing what materials do and what the glaze – components of the glaze do in the glaze at all the different temperatures.

MR. LLOYD: Did your travels to other countries have a similar impact on your work or –

MR. BACERRA: Probably the museum in Taipei, the National Palace Museum, which is the imperial collection out of Peking that Chiang Kai-shek took from Peking and hid it in the hills in Taipei, and they have it there. So – and their exhibition space is hundreds of celadons, all the different variations, best of the best, I think. Also, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco –

MR. LLOYD: Yes, we've talked before about that, and there's a wall that is particularly interesting to you.

MR. BACERRA: Well, before – I haven't been to the new one. They moved.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah, that's true.

MR. BACERRA: This is at the – adjacent to the de Young Museum in San Francisco, and as you walk into the Asian Museum, there's a wall that's called a treasure wall. And it's done in the Chinese fashion with the squares that are offset, and they have sort of the history of Chinese ceramics; quite fascinating and quite beautiful, always exciting to see.

MR. LLOYD: And you've returned to see that many times.

MR. BACERRA: Many, many times. It's been there a long time, so every time I go to San Francisco, I always have to make a trip to see it because it's always changing. Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And what about travel to Europe or to the Middle East or anywhere like that?

MR. BACERRA: Well, Europe – every time I've been to Europe, there hasn't been too much ceramics, especially in France. England, yes, but France and Switzerland and Austria, you don't see that much. Germany you still see the salt glaze, but I've never really tried to look up any contemporary ceramics artists.

Japan, yes –

MR. LLOYD: Yes.

MR. BACERRA: – because that was mainly my interest, and also at Chouinard I had a lot of Japanese students from Japan studying with me in the ceramics department.

MR. LLOYD: Can you tell me who those were?

MR. BACERRA: Mineo Mizuno, Jun Kaneko, Goro Suzuki, Sawako Shitani, Eiko Shitani – they're from Kobe and that's where they had that big earthquake, and the Shitanis lost their father and, I believe, their mother in that earthquake. But he was a very famous sculptor in Kobe, and he sent his daughters to the United States to study English and ceramics. One is still here, and one is still in Kobe doing very well as an artist so –

MR. LLOYD: And Mineo Mizuno continues to live and work in Los Angeles.

MR. BACERRA: Mineo's in Los Angeles, and he still has a big studio and is working very well.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: Jun is big time in Omaha.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And Goro went back to Japan.

MR. BACERRA: Goro went back to Japan, and he's one of the best Oribe makers in Japan now.

MR. LLOYD: Can you also tell me a little bit more about then how you think of yourself as a part of an international tradition, or do you think of yourself as one that is particularly American?

MR. BACERRA: I'm particularly American. [Laughs.] I don't –

MR. LLOYD: And that's because –

MR. BACERRA: Because I am. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: But you also have some influences from painting. I know I've seen that Kandinsky poster in your studio, and some people write about your work in terms of 20th-century abstraction, geometric abstraction. Are those influences in your work?

MR. BACERRA: Well, the Kandinsky – I've always been – in California we call it the Blue Four because of the collection of Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Klee and –

MR. LLOYD: Feininger.

MR. BACERRA: Feininger. And that was part of the Pasadena Art Museum's main collection.

MR. LLOYD: I think you're referring to the Galka Scheyer collection [Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California]?

MR. BACERRA: Right, right.

MR. LLOYD: Is that right?

MR. BACERRA: That was always on display at the Pasadena Art Museum, where I used to visit quite often, and that's a big influence in my painting and in my design. Also, M. C. Escher from Holland for his interlocking shapes that form shapes within shapes that all sort of interlock like a puzzle. Persian paintings as well, Persian manuscripts. Japanese prints – you can pick up patterns and different kinds of ways that they have a blank space and then a pattern and gold. And these are all sort of influences that I don't really think about, but once I've done them and I see the piece, I say, well, you know, there's certain Japanese or a Persian influence here, Escher here, Kandinsky there maybe.

But all those things are sort of intuitive, I think. You do research, you read books, you see the shows, and they're sort of in the back of your head, and as you begin to work, it all begins to come out.

MR. LLOYD: In –

MR. BACERRA: Nothing is really thought about before so –

MR. LLOYD: In your work nothing is thought out before? You don't do preparatory sketches or drawings?

MR. BACERRA: No, I don't do drawings. It's – it's all in my head. If I do a drawing, it's so flat that I can't really see what's going on on the other side. Actually, I can visualize and then get out the clay and starting working.

MR. LLOYD: And you actually – you visualize the components of the piece as well, because your work is often in three pieces, a base, a vessel, and a lid. So that is intuitive as well?

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, yeah. After 40-some years of working it should be, right?

MR. LLOYD: And you work almost every day. When you're working, you work on a pretty full day's schedule, don't you? You – you've often worked –

MR. BACERRA: I'm mainly a night person.

MR. LLOYD: – at night.

MR. BACERRA: I start my day around 10:00, 10:30 and maybe finish it by 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. So –

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: – but in the meantime I have lunch and I have dinner and that kind of thing, but I'm not an early person, morning person.

MR. LLOYD: I understand from your students, though, that you do stress the importance of continuous activity in the studio as students, and you practice this, as well, as an artist.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think that most of the creativity comes from the actual doing of the object or doing – using your hands, using the clay, using the materials. And you can't sit there and think about it, which is what was happening at the end of Otis, that they would have these think-tank theory classes, and everything had to be conceptual, and you'd think about it so much that you don't really do it. And they really thought that if you

needed to make something with your hands, you needed to actually have something physically made, you hire somebody to do that for you, and that wasn't my philosophy. My philosophy is you get in the studio and you get out the materials, and by using and working and actually putting the forms and the clay together, then it – the process begins –

MR. LLOYD: Right, and –

MR. BACERRA: – along with your thinking process –

MR. LLOYD: Where you discover –

MR. BACERRA: – and your visual process. So the actual using your hands and the material, the visual process of seeing how it all goes together and then you think about it as you're doing all of this, and that's when it all begins to happen.

MR. LLOYD: So in your teaching process you would emphasize that, and also the clay technology and glaze technology –

MR. BACERRA: Well, along with that you need to know what the materials do. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Right. And you also –

MR. BACERRA: Because there's nothing more devastating than to have a beautiful object that is in the green stage or in the bisque stage and then not knowing what to do with it when it becomes time to glaze it or to finish it. So you need to, as you're working through this initial stage of working with clay, always think about what it's going to look like at the end, because the final firing is the major part of the whole process. If you don't have the right glaze, the right – the right color, the right texture, the right surface, it can destroy the piece.

So you think about – it's exciting when you're working to see the clay and the forms and the volumes and the shapes that are happening, but you always have to think further. You have to think at the end because that's the end product, and if that isn't thought through, you could destroy the piece. So as you're working, it also gives you a time to think about how you want to finish the piece instead of – some people get the whole table full of work, and then they have this bucket of glaze and that bucket of glaze, and they just – they just glaze without any – with any thought.

[Audio break, tape change.]

But you need to really think about how you want this piece finished as you're making it. That's what I always stress to the students. Glazing was the most important part of the whole process. So you need to know about glazes and clay, and experience all the different temperatures, surfaces, whether it's shiny, whether it's dull, whether it's matte, whether it's textured, and all the different variations of color that happen.

MR. LLOYD: So this philosophy of teaching and working, would you say that that's an integral part of the American craft movement?

MR. BACERRA: It was.

MR. LLOYD: It was.

MR. BACERRA: I don't know what's happening today. I've been out of the teaching business for like seven, eight years and don't know what's going on in the universities today. What I do see when I – when I see announcements and maybe of the smaller shows around some of the colleges, it's all very conceptual and more sculptural. They've gone away from the pot is a pot, the teapot is a teapot, or vessel a vessel. Everybody wants to do sculpture today, which is fine.

MR. LLOYD: But a thorough knowledge of the material they don't have.

MR. BACERRA: But I find that some of the work doesn't really have the understanding of what the glaze is and what the glaze can do and what the clay can do –

MR. LLOYD: Exactly.

MR. BACERRA: – because they don't know. Nobody that I know of gives them the understanding of glazes. Alfred, I think, still does, but the Southern California ceramics department is very conceptual. Irvine's [University of California, Irvine] campus is very conceptual. These things are not stressed anymore. It's all in the head.

MR. LLOYD: And it's more sculptural and more conceptual and doesn't relate then to the pot is a pot, nor does it

relate to the function of objects.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Right. Which was often a –

MR. BACERRA: That's not important anymore.

MR. LLOYD: But it was often a very important component.

MR. BACERRA: But when I was going to school – when I was a student, the function of the piece was – was ultimate.

MR. LLOYD: And that would also carry over –

MR. BACERRA: Frank Lloyd Wright's form follows function, that kind of thing.

MR. LLOYD: Right. It would also carry over into other media, like you were referring to your – the concurrent interest in woodworking in Southern California and Sam Maloof's practice, and obviously he was interested in similar aspects of wood. The ways that you can join it, the strength of the wood –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – and then it – he was always making a useful, functional object, right?

MR. BACERRA: Well, that's important.

MR. LLOYD: Yes.

MR. BACERRA: I still maintain that that – that attitude, it's ingrained. I don't know, I can't – that's what I do. [Laughs.] It's hard to say, well, I'm going to make an object that is just going to be for visual pleasure. There's something sort of – well, maybe it should have a cover or lid or should have a handle or that kind of thing for some basic function aside from visual.

MR. LLOYD: Well, do you derive an aesthetic pleasure from the use of everyday objects in your home environment?

MR. BACERRA: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And this carries over into your own work as well?

MR. BACERRA: Mm-hmm.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: I have a large collection of Imari. I have a large collection of Chinese ceramics that I use everyday.

MR. LLOYD: And another thing that I'd like to explore briefly here is about the role of any other influences on your work. Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art?

MR. BACERRA: No.

MR. LLOYD: Not at all?

MR. BACERRA: Not at all.

MR. LLOYD: Also related to these – the craft movement itself, how have you exhibited and sold your work? Are their individual exhibitions that you'd like to talk about, or should we talk about some of the major exhibitions that have come about during your period of time of practicing, such as the exhibit put together by Lee Nordness called "Objects USA"? I think that was in the middle '70s.

MR. BACERRA: Was it in the '70s? Yeah, it was.

MR. LLOYD: We have a date down here. Let's check.

MR. BACERRA: I think it was early – late '60s.

MR. LLOYD: Late ‘60s, you are correct.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: It says here 1969, “Objects USA” at the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., and I believe the curator was indeed Lee Nordness.

MR. BACERRA: Right. That was a show that traveled around the – around the country, and he visited all of the – it wasn’t only ceramics. It was other – other works as well, I believe.

MR. LLOYD: Yes, it was all craft media. So I think Sam Maloof was in that show as well.

MR. BACERRA: Right, right.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. We have a book – I don’t have it here with me but we have it at the gallery and – did you know Lee Nordness?

MR. BACERRA: Oh, yeah. He came and visited – I think he visited every artist that he had in that exhibition. He traveled around the country, visits the artist’s studios, and we became very good friends.

MR. LLOYD: There were other large-scale exhibitions of craft media at the time but more specifically related to ceramics. In 1972 you participated in something called “International Ceramics ’72” at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

MR. BACERRA: Was that ’72 or ’82?

MR. LLOYD: Well, it says here it’s ’72.

MR. BACERRA: I think that was – that may be a misprint. I think that was ’82.

MR. LLOYD: Oh, should be ’82?

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: How about these: do you remember the California design shows at Pasadena Art Museum in Pasadena, California?

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, that was a every-two-year exhibition started by Eudora Moore who put together "California Design." It was design whether it was industrial or sort of studio design, and every two years the Pasadena Art Museum would put on a large exhibition of just strictly California design. I think I was in every one of them.

MR. LLOYD: And Eudora Moore created every one of those?

MR. BACERRA: Yes. Eudora Moore was the – the main curator. Bernard Kester, I think, did most of the installations for her, and he’s the main installer at the L.A. County Museum today. But Bernie was – started out as a potter with Laura Andreson at UCLA.

MR. LLOYD: And he was a member of the –

MR. BACERRA: American Ceramic Society as well, right.

MR. LLOYD: Design chapter. Right. And then you also began to exhibit your work in commercial galleries during that period of time of the 1970s, including Theo Portnoy Gallery in New York, New York.

MR. BACERRA: Well, it probably all started first with the American Hand out at Washington, D.C., which was a small – it wasn’t really a gallery per se but they – they sold functional ceramic ware. It was started by Ken Deavers and Ed Nash, and they had a nice shop or gallery in Georgetown, Washington. And I used to have shows with them every – once or maybe twice a year – not twice, every two years along with Adrian Saxe, Peter Shire, and Elsa Rady and the whole – my whole list of students at that time – ex-students. And he – he was there for 20, 25 years. I think he’s since left Washington. But that was where most of it was sold in the beginning – most of my work.

And then Theo Portnoy opened a gallery in New York City on 57th Street just down the street from Garth Clark today. And I had a show – my first show with her was in 1976, and then I did a series of large-scale animals.

MR. LLOYD: Was that the ’76 show?

MR. BACERRA: That was in ’76, yes. So those were not functional as far as, you know, you could take a lid off,

but it was – well, I thought New York, I'll do something big. That's what I did for that first show in New York. Then the next show were more vessel types.

MR. LLOYD: And the shows at the American Hand Gallery in Washington, D.C., were functional vessels?

MR. BACERRA: They were all – it was all functional work, right.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And how many times did you show there at the American Hand?

MR. BACERRA: I can't remember. Many years.

MR. LLOYD: Many years.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, 10, 15 years.

MR. LLOYD: In line with that, could you describe your relationship with these dealers and others as your career continued? That would be Ken Deavers, Ed Nash, Theo Portnoy, Garth Clark –

MR. BACERRA: Well, Ken's retired. Ed Nash passed away. Theo disappeared. She closed her gallery and then disappeared. I couldn't find her, don't know what happened to her. Garth Clark opened his gallery in '82, I believe, in Los Angeles, and I was one of the first artists in his gallery in Los Angeles. And then he opened – I can't remember when he opened in New York but probably five or six years later. Was it – or maybe 10 years later.

MR. LLOYD: Now, see you have – you have one show listed here in 1986 in New York at the Garth Clark Gallery.

MR. BACERRA: So about – about six years later. He moved – opened the second Garth Clark Gallery in New York City.

MR. LLOYD: And then you've alternated exhibits in Garth Clark Gallery, Los Angeles and New York over several years –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – following that.

MR. BACERRA: So it was – it was either New York, Los Angeles – I still have very good – I'm still with Garth Clark and also Frank Lloyd Gallery out of Los Angeles, who took over when Garth closed his gallery in Los Angeles, and Frank opened the Frank Lloyd Gallery in Santa Monica.

MR. LLOYD: And you've also continued to exhibit in major survey exhibitions –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – throughout the world –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – during that period of time from the late '60s on through the present time. Do any of those stand out in your mind in particular? Say let's – let's talk for a moment about the exhibition that Jo Lauria curated called "Color and Fire."

MR. BACERRA: "Color and Fire" at the L.A. County Museum. Well, that was an exhibition of work that was owned by the County Museum, or, you know – that show had – the work had to be purchased or be owned by the County Museum, or dedicated to the museum at some point. It was a very large show, all ceramics. That was – what year was that, Frank?

MR. LLOYD: I think it was the year 2000.

MR. BACERRA: Two thousand.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: So that must have been four years already.

MR. LLOYD: And –

MR. BACERRA: I think I had two or three pieces in the exhibition.

MR. LLOYD: You've also had work included in a more recent exhibition at the Newark Museum called "Great Pots," put together by Ulysses Dietz, and that is a beautiful publication.

MR. BACERRA: Yes. And I think that's also work that the museum owned? Right.

MR. LLOYD: Yes, that's correct. You've also exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Art, in 1996. I believe that institution and the Renwick Gallery own a teapot –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: – that's used frequently in their publications. It's on the – a coffee cup that I have –

MR. BACERRA: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: – it's on a traveling mug. I think it might be on T-shirts.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, well, I've been involved with the Renwick Gallery in Washington since they've started. I don't remember when they really –

MR. LLOYD: Really?

MR. BACERRA: – really opened. They opened in the late '70s – early '70s maybe. What was his name? That ran the – ran the gallery [Lloyd Herman]. He's now in Oregon. Anyway –

MR. LLOYD: And in those exhibitions it also still continues to be a group of people that you are affiliated with and have known over a long period of time: Susan Peterson, other practitioners in the ceramics arena. Do you sense that there's any kind of a community in the American craft movement? And I'm thinking of a time, for instance, when I went to a – an NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] conference with you, and one of the demonstrators was Toshiko Takaezu, and she immediately recognized you and took special care to come over and greet you.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Do you feel that there's a sense of community among the early practitioners of ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: Today, yes. But I don't know about the younger people that are doing what they do today, but it – the older people – Toshiko and Bob Turner from Alfred, Bill Daley in Philadelphia – when we all get together, there's a nice sort of communal feeling.

MR. LLOYD: And you still maintain your relationship with Susan Peterson, for instance?

MR. BACERRA: Well, I don't – well, Susan and I talk on the phone maybe, or we can talk about her book, or whenever we see each other, we always have to have a drink together or some sort of social thing.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: And I visit Otto in Ojai every so often, maybe once or twice a year. Vivika passed away several years ago so – but I don't know too much about what the younger people do. I sound like an old man, Frank. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Well, no, I think what it – what I'm getting at is that in the earlier days of the American craft movement there was a sense of community –

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think everybody sort of responded to what everybody else was doing and it was the American – it was NCECA that brought everybody together, I think, at that time. At that time, the National Council for the Education of Ceramic Arts was a division of the American Ceramic Society, and they had yearly meetings, and I think I was at the third or second – the third meeting in Pittsburgh of NCECA. It was in conjunction with the national meeting of the American Ceramic Society, and there was Ted Randall and Bob Turner and Susan Peterson, Vivika Heino, the – Lyle and Dorothy Perkins from Rhode Island School of Design. I'm trying to think of – of all the people that time.

So everybody once a year got together, and it was a social event. Talking with one another, having dinner with one another, having meetings, discussing what to do about ceramics art education.

MR. LLOYD: Right, and you were all involved in that –

MR. BACERRA: Everybody was mainly involved with – well, the Alfred people and the Rhode Island people –

MR. LLOYD: Toshiko was teaching at Princeton?

MR. BACERRA: Well, Toshiko wasn't at the very beginning part of NCECA, but I think – I don't know whether she was teaching at Princeton at that time or not [taught at Princeton 1967-1992]. I think she was in Los Angeles. Or maybe she was in Ohio somewhere.

MR. LLOYD: But Turner was definitely at Alfred?

MR. BACERRA: At Alfred, right. Turner and – Ed Turner and –

MR. LLOYD: And Daley at the Philadelphia College of Art?

MR. BACERRA: – what's his name? My memory's getting bad. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Well, that's a lot to remember.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Now, but there's another sense of sharing and community that we've talked about before that I'd like to hear a little bit about again, and that is Vivika and Otto Heino's sharing of information – the clay bodies, the glaze technology; they would give away these recipes.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I don't know if they would give them away, but it was – it was called – there were no secrets. I mean, her passion was giving information, and it didn't matter how complicated or how simple it, was or what the glaze was, whether you always got the glaze. And you did with it what you wanted to do with it; you didn't copy what they – or she and Otto did with it. So it was – it was a full sharing of information; nothing was kept secret and that's my philosophy today.

MR. LLOYD: Some of those glaze – the information about glaze technology came with her from Alfred, but then passed on to other generations. So there's a continuity and community –

MR. BACERRA: Right, and I always taught a glaze technology class as well where I was teaching, so the students knew what was happening within the glaze.

MR. LLOYD: And those formulas for clay bodies became an integral part of the clay companies that were started in Los Angeles. Is that correct?

MR. BACERRA: Well, when I first started in clay, everybody made their own clay. Before you could even – [laughs] – make your first clay piece, you had to make the clay. That was part of the – of the assignment, and in school the lab assistant made all the clay for all the classes. And then there were so many schools opening that Ernie Sherill decided that it was time to open a ceramics company, and he opened his ceramics company in Westwood, California, next to UCLA called Westwood Ceramics. And then every school would send their recipes in, and he would make up their formula for the different – different schools. And most of the recipes were shared between schools so I don't think nobody copyrighted a formula or they said if you want to sell it fine.

MR. LLOYD: But Westwood clay was distributed all over the place, wasn't it?

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, and then Ernie Sherill sold it to a company called Laguna Clay. Well, Ernie moved it out to the City of Industry, and then Laguna Clay bought it. There was another ceramics company in Los Angeles or Pasadena called Ward – S. Paul Ward, and Laguna bought that. So it's a big growing concern now. They make lots of different clays, different glazes.

MR. LLOYD: S. Paul Ward was located right down there on Mission Street in South Pasadena.

MR. BACERRA: Mission Street in South Pasadena, right. It was so convenient to my studio.

MR. LLOYD: They also sponsored a little league team.

[Audio break.]

Well, the question is, how has the market for American craft changed during your lifetime?

MR. BACERRA: Pricing, I think, is the main – the main difference or the main change. In the beginning you used – you sold your work because people were going to use it, and they weren't going to sit on a shelf whether it was a plate or a cup or a bowl or a covered jar or a casserole, whatever you were making. And so you wanted it priced so people could use it, and they could break it and they weren't going to be concerned. They'd come and buy another one. And that was mainly the market in the '50s and the '60s.

And it wasn't until probably the late '80s – or the early '80s, maybe late '70s - when the prices began to increase, and then Garth Clark came along and opened the gallery in Los Angeles and began to raise prices. Then other galleries around the country – but I think the pricing is the main change. People were still making their pots or their objects, but the prices were getting higher and higher, as everything does. I mean, look at what a hamburger costs today – [laughs] – not at McDonald's but a good hamburger is like $10 today. Right?

MR. LLOYD: [Laughs.] You're right. Now, what – speaking –

MR. BACERRA: And I know some – some restaurants are charging $25 for a good hamburger.

MR. LLOYD: Right. So speaking of the increase in prices and the ascendancy of the Garth Clark Gallery, when did you first meet Garth?

MR. BACERRA: Garth came through in the '70s. He was a graduate student at the Royal College of London, and he was visiting the ceramic artists because I think his thesis was on ceramics or European ceramics. But he was visiting different ceramic artists throughout the United States, and he came through and visited the studio and me, and that's when I first met him. But he also gave slide lectures at some of the different universities, and I remember going to one at Long Beach State College, and it was on European ceramics which was a real eye opener because I'd never seen a lot of European ceramics. And he had really done a lot of research and I was really fascinated what was going on in Holland and Czechoslovakia and England, as well as France and some of the Baltic countries.

MR. LLOYD: So this –

MR. BACERRA: Russia – which you never really – really saw – it wasn't published. You saw a glimpse of it in some of the collections in the museums, but it was never an in-depth study on European ceramics, and it was a very nice slide lecture, very informative.

MR. LLOYD: So this would have been previous to his organization with Margie Hughto of the "Century of American Ceramics."

MR. BACERRA: This was a prelude – I think it was a prelude to his working with Hughto on the exhibition. I believe that was at the Syracuse –

MR. LLOYD: Everson Museum of Art -

MR. BACERRA: Everson, right.

MR. LLOYD: – in Syracuse, New York. And the full title is "A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978."

MR. BACERRA: Now, what year was that?

MR. LLOYD: And it says that it traveled starting in 1979.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, '79, right.

MR. LLOYD: So do you think that made a big difference in the visibility and marketing of craft or ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: Probably for Garth, but maybe not for me –

MR. LLOYD: Your work then –

MR. BACERRA: – because – well, my work was already out and I was selling. There was no –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah. But I think it was maybe an eye-opener for Garth Clark because he could see what was happening.

MR. LLOYD: And that exhibit –

MR. BACERRA: It was his research on the different areas of the country and different artists of the country, and I think –

MR. LLOYD: And also it got a lot of –

MR. BACERRA: – it sort of inspired him to open the gallery.

MR. LLOYD: And it got a lot of national publicity.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And it did inspire him to open the gallery. I think the first exhibit that they had was called “A Very Private View: Works by Beatrice Wood.” Well, anyway –

MR. BACERRA: That was the first exhibition in Los Angeles?

MR. LLOYD: I think it was.

MR. BACERRA: It was? I can’t remember.

MR. LLOYD: Can you remember the first exhibit at the Garth Clark Gallery in Los Angeles that included your work?

MR. BACERRA: I believe that was in ’82. It was just – when the object – it was – I think it was a series of rectangular plates or rectangular shapes.

MR. LLOYD: Another person who was active in the Los Angeles world of ceramics and who is an art historian is Elaine Levin. And she’s the author of *A History of American Ceramics from Pitkins to Beanpots to Contemporary Forms* [New York, Harry N. Abrams: 1988]. And have you known Elaine for a long time?

MR. BACERRA: I’ve known Elaine – she wrote an article for *American Ceramics* – no, *Ceramics Monthly*, I believe, or *Craft Horizons* it was called. That’s when I first met her. She wrote an article about me and the studio, and I think it was about 1973, ’74. So I’ve known Elaine for a long time. I see her every so often at meetings or at lectures or at gallery openings. And she also taught ceramic history for me at the Otis College.

MR. LLOYD: And do you think that her publications and Susan Peterson’s publications and Garth Clark’s many publications have helped in the advancement of American ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: Oh, it all – it all helps, right. Yeah.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: The more – the more literature, the more that is written about the crafts, I think, the more important it becomes because there isn’t enough written about it. There isn’t enough critical information that’s being said. If you look at the amount of books and literature and print that is printed about painting –

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: – and sculpture as opposed to the craft; there needs to be more people writing, which is, I think – is why Jo Lauria – we mentioned Jo Lauria before – I mean, she has turned into a very good writer and curator. And she was a former student. She got her master’s degree at Otis in the ceramics department with me.

MR. LLOYD: Jo Lauria came to you as a student not of art history but of practicing ceramics.

MR. BACERRA: Ceramics, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: So –

MR. BACERRA: And she did her master’s in the ceramics department, right. And then she set up a little studio, and then she got an apprenticeship at the County Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] in the decorative arts department as an assistant curator, and then she became curator. And then she was there for many years, and then retired and is now a freelance curator and writer. So maybe she’ll do some good books on – and she has done several on different people.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. So you’ve had students that have become practitioners –

MR. BACERRA: [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: – you’ve had students that have become teachers; you’ve had students that have become art historians and curators and critics.

MR. BACERRA: Right, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And all of them – they’re quite a few who remain active.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think the art school background teaches you to solve problems, and this is what life's all about is this solving problems. I mean, you pick up a lump of clay and then you have a problem: what do you do with it? And you have to solve that problem so – and each stage of the working process of working with clay there's another problem you're confronted with. It's always, well, what – what do I do with it now? What's going to happen to it now? So you're always thinking, and I think your mind is constantly active, and I think as long as you can solve problems – it doesn't matter where you go – that you're going to be successful. It's the person that can't solve the problem – [laughs] –

MR. LLOYD: Right. Let's also continue in that vein and talk a little bit about how you solve those problems when you're in your working environment. You're talking about your work ethic and your ability to work with glaze technologies and everything. Is there anything specific that you refer to in your working environment or use repeatedly in your working environment to aid you in the process?

MR. BACERRA: Probably just the things around me. I enjoy plants, plants' shapes; flowers, flowers' shapes; color, just the things that are – that are around the environment.

MR. LLOYD: In your –

MR. BACERRA: Nothing really is going to dominate, but some of the cast teapot shapes, or I went out to the woodpile and picked up pieces of wood and said this would make a nice base, this would make a nice spout, this would make a good handle and went back into the studio and cast them out of plaster and then used slip to make the actual shape.

MR. LLOYD: And those are the forms – and I have a catalogue here that we were looking at. There's a teapot from 1990 that contains a –

MR. BACERRA: That was just a piece – pieces of wood that were cut up, and I just dug them out of the woodpile.

MR. LLOYD: And the same is true, actually, of that teapot that's in the Renwick collection.

MR. BACERRA: In the Renwick, yeah. No, that's not the one that was in – the one that's in the Renwick is the one that was chosen for that Smithsonian show that traveled around the United States, which was sort of –

MR. LLOYD: It's red – red and gold, isn't it?

MR. BACERRA: What? What's that?

MR. LLOYD: It's red and gold.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, I don't remember that. No, it's gray and – yeah, it has a red base, I think.

MR. LLOYD: Red base.

MR. BACERRA: But that was a sort of a very, very good show that traveled. I think the Smithsonian put it together. I don't know how many pieces – objects, but it was Lincoln's top hat, and it was the sword that Washington used when he crossed the Potomac or Delaware, whatever it was, and objects that were most often asked for by people that went to the Smithsonian. And I was honored to be – [laughs] –

MR. LLOYD: Right there with Lincoln's hat.

MR. BACERRA: – right there with Lincoln's hat and the first light bulb and the first electrical microphone. It was sort of amazing.

MR. LLOYD: That's great. I'd like to stop for lunch.

MR. BACERRA: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MR. LLOYD: This is Frank Lloyd interviewing Ralph Bacerra at Frank Lloyd's home in Eagle Rock, California, on – let's see – April 19, 2004 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number two.

So, Ralph, continuing on from our previous conversation, one of the interview questions here is – deals with the way that your work, and perhaps other work in the field of American ceramics and American craft, is recorded by writers. The question is how has your work been received over time? And, in your opinion, who are the most significant writers in the field of American craft, and why is their writing meaningful to you? Is criticism written by artists more valuable to you? Can you give me any insight into that?

MR. BACERRA: Well, you want to talk about the writers first?

MR. LLOYD: Sure.

MR. BACERRA: I think a more established sort of historian or critic gives a little more insight than something that is written by the artist because the artist's viewpoint is mainly geared towards their bias and their – the way they work and not so much as far as historical values and research that a professional writer would do. So I think the art critic or the historian has a more overview of what the artist or the work is all about. So –

MR. LLOYD: I think we – we already discussed some of the people that you are – you have known during your career, such as Susan Peterson, Elaine Levin, and others. And we did discuss the participation – you had a – you have participated in several exhibitions, landmark exhibitions such as "Objects U.S.A." and "A Century of American Ceramics."

And one of the things that people often point is that when Garth Clark and Margie Hughto started that exhibition, "A Century of American Ceramics," and it toured around the country, there was a greater amount of interest in the history of the movement and history of ceramics, and that the publication and the touring exhibition created a lot of other opportunities for people to write. Do you remember any of that, and do you think that's a significant turning point in the reception of American ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: Well, after that "Century" book with Garth Clark and Margie Hugo – Hugo?

MR. LLOYD: Hughto, I think her name is.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think then Garth Clark – his book on American ceramics came out [*American Ceramics, 1876 to the Present*; New York, Abbeville Press: 1987]. That was in the – I can't remember, the '80s, '90s? No, '80s, I think, maybe middle '80s. And then Elaine's book on American ceramics, I don't remember the title – Elaine Levin. And those are the only two real scholars that – that have written about American ceramics in depth that I know of. Can you think of anybody else?

MR. LLOYD: I think those are the significant larger volumes that –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – chronicle the history.

MR. BACERRA: And people just write about different artists though, different craftsmen.

MR. LLOYD: Actually, you brought me today a copy of the publication, collective writings of Garth Clark, called *Shards* [New York, Distributed Art Publishers: 2003], and this probably also is related to this question because Garth's writing wasn't just historical. A lot of it was criticism and observations from a different vantage point.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: And I was wondering how you see that as – in what way did that contribute to the development of a critical – a base of critical literature for the field of American ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: Well, right – I don't think there is too much critical – critical writing going on about American ceramics today or the American craft.

MR. LLOYD: Most of it would be expository or kind of the historical documents –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – and also –

MR. BACERRA: Jo Lauria may be – may be trying to do something because she's become very knowledgeable in the American crafts, but I don't know of anybody else. I'm trying to think – and we need more people in the field to do this kind of writing to sort of validate the field.

MR. LLOYD: Well, related to –

MR. BACERRA: I think we've discussed this before. There's so much writing historically and over the centuries about painting, sculpture, and very little about craft.

MR. LLOYD: So –

MR. BACERRA: Now, who's going to follow Garth or Elaine Levin or – I don't know, I don't – I don't see that much

happening.

MR. LLOYD: What role do you think specialized periodicals for ceramics, or other craft media such as clay, glass, fiber, metal, wood, publications such as *American Craft*, which was formerly *Craft Horizons* –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, well every – every craft, every discipline has its own magazine. You have Metal Art, you have Jewelry Art, you have Fiber Art, you have American – *Ceramics Monthly*, *American Ceramics* when they publish, *Craft Horizons* or now what's called –

MR. LLOYD: It's now called *American Craft*.

MR. BACERRA: *American Craft*. And they publish and write. So there's good criticism and good articles on – especially *American Craft* – about the different disciplines that are doing things in the field.

MR. LLOYD: And were these publications of use to you in your development as an artist?

MR. BACERRA: I've – I've subscribed to *American Craft* since the early '50s, so I read all the – I take all the magazines, I read all the magazines, and I sort of keep aware or abreast of what's happening in the field.

MR. LLOYD: And did you make them available to students in your classroom?

MR. BACERRA: While I was teaching, I took all of my magazines after I read them and deposited them in the studio, and they were read constantly and disappeared constantly. [Laughs.] I could never keep them in the studio, but it was a good resource for the students.

MR. LLOYD: Right, right. So that would have been *Craft Horizons* –

MR. BACERRA: So there was *Craft Horizons*, *American Ceramics*, *Ceramics Monthly*. Those were the three – three major ones.

MR. LLOYD: I think I remember when I visited your office there at Otis, when you were teaching at Otis, you had shelves of magazines –

MR. BACERRA: Magazines?

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: And every show that Garth Clark or Frank Lloyd had, I posted – we had a big bulletin board and all of the – the announcements were posted on the board so people could see what was going on across the country.

MR. LLOYD: And let's – there's another question here. It's kind of a wider scope of a question. Could you discuss your views on the importance of clay as a means for expression, and what are the strengths and limitations of the medium? This is a large question.

MR. BACERRA: I know. Say that again.

MR. LLOYD: Could you discuss your views on –

MR. BACERRA: It's the same question that everybody asks you.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. The importance of clay as a means for expression.

MR. BACERRA: Well, it's my chosen medium. I mean, I worked with paint and drawing and prints and stone and wood, and it seems to be the one that I'm most excited about.

MR. LLOYD: And do you have any particular feelings, say, for any of the qualities of the material, such as its plasticity, its –

MR. BACERRA: I mean, that's sort of something that's very basic –

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: – and they want –

MR. LLOYD: No, I think they're just looking – what are the strengths and limitations of the medium of ceramics?

MR. BACERRA: I don't know if there are any limitations –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – except – there was a piece that I saw at the "Scripps Annual" [Scripps College, Claremont, California] this year, and it was very tall, like six or seven feet tall and very thin, and I said, "How did they get that in and out of the kiln?" And then a person in the gallery that was looking at the show said, "It's fiberglass, it's not clay. We don't even know why it's here."

But there are limitations are far as thinness and height and structure and –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – how – how it holds up in the kiln because, as I said before, the kiln is the final product – or makes the final product.

MR. LLOYD: You've been –

MR. BACERRA: And there's such a beauty about all the different clays: porcelain, stoneware, earthenware, smooth, textured, coarse, unrefined, and then the whole variety of different surfaces with glazes.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: From the ancient Chinese to the Japanese to the Koreans to the Europeans to the production factory – like Sevres out of France and Meissen out of Germany and Haviland from France. There's a whole variety of glazes and surfaces that sort of excite me, and you can't get this with any other medium. Paint is paint and glass is shiny and fabric is, you know, it could be shiny or matte, but the transparencies, the translucencies, the opaqueness of the clays, the unctuous quality of some of the matte glazes – [audio break, tape change] – it doesn't happen in any other medium.

MR. LLOYD: Now, you've done some very ambitious projects in the medium, including one fairly recently, and I think that's one of the things I wanted to discuss today is about commissioned works. The question here is what are your most important commissioned works? How did the commissions come about? Could you describe how they differ from other work? Did the circumstances of the commission have an impact on the work? And describe the difficulties or opportunities presented by commissions.

I'm thinking of a couple of them that I know of. One would be the commissioned works, the *Four Vessels* that you did for the Four Seasons dining room in San Francisco. And I guess I could fill in a little bit about – the way that commission came about was that the art consultant for the hotel developer came to the gallery and asked about what artist would be appropriate for that project. I suggested that your work may be very appropriate for it. I showed her examples of your work, and then we presented some samples as well, and she selected rather large – she wanted these very large-scale vessels. Could you describe what you did on that project?

MR. BACERRA: After talking with Frank – was Wayne involved there? I don't remember.

MR. LLOYD: I think it was –

MR. BACERRA: Well, anyway, after talking with the Frank Lloyd Gallery, and then I spoke with – I can't remember her name now.

MR. LLOYD: The art consultant.

MR. BACERRA: The art consultant, and she had mentioned that the owner of the Four Seasons knew my work, so he was very enthusiastic about having me do the project. And she sent me samples of – diagrams of the dining room. These – we're talking about commissions.

MR. LLOYD: Yes, it was. We had a floor plan, didn't we?

MR. BACERRA: We had a floor plan, and then she sent me samples of the fabric and floor materials and wood materials, and she wanted it to be very subtle. And so I did some very, very large, probably four feet high, sort of big-volume vessels with sculptural tops, and I used a very subtle local reduction luster with some overglazing enamel over them. And they were placed probably, what, 20, 40, 20, 30 feet apart?

MR. LLOYD: They were. Yes, a large – it was a large space.

MR. BACERRA: I can't remember. It was a large dining room, and there were four on large pedestals, which were – when, I saw the whole project finished, it looked very, very good.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah, I think we were both very pleased.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, everybody was impressed. Frank and Judy and I think – was Steve there, too? I can't remember.

MR. LLOYD: Steve was there as well. We all had dinner there.

MR. BACERRA: We all had dinner there. Right.

MR. LLOYD: Mm-hmm, about three years ago.

MR. BACERRA: And there was another one at the Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, which was a very large vessel, but it was multicolored and multi – lots of pattern. And that's in one of their dining rooms on a very large pedestal, and that's still impressive as I go and look at it every time I'm in Las Vegas.

MR. LLOYD: And then there's –

MR. BACERRA: The other commission that came out of the Frank Lloyd Gallery was – most of the commissions come through the gallery – was the Joan Borinstein portrait commission, where she wanted two – two vessels on either side of her dining room. And I decided to do her portrait as a vessel, and so we did one for each side of the dining room.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And then the most recent one that you worked on is a – one of the largest projects that you've worked on. It was commissioned by Maguirre Partners for the –

MR. BACERRA: Out of Los Angeles.

MR. LLOYD: – Maguirre Partners Development Company, and they built a building in Pasadena called the Western Assets Plaza.

MR. BACERRA: The Western Assets Plaza, and at the entrance to the building, there's a – they left a wall that was 12 feet by 14 feet that they wanted a ceramic mural. And they contacted the Frank Lloyd Gallery, the gallery that worked with the art consultant for a while. And then the owner decided they didn't want to work with the gallery, so they worked directly with me, but the initial contact came through Frank Lloyd.

And after meeting with them I presented my work and told them my ideas, what I thought it should be, and then all of a sudden they decided that – well, maybe that wasn't – that was too subtle. They wanted something very wild. They wanted something very visual, something that would really stand out and people would stop and look at it, so instead of something very subtle that was on the wall.

So I came up with a 12-by-14 mosaic of geometric shapes – circle, square, triangle – lots of pattern, lots of movement, six different colors from white to black to blue to gold to red to yellow – and I can't hold my train of thought here. So there was matte glazes, shiny glazes, colorful glazes, and the project was about three – over about 3,000 pieces.

MR. LLOYD: This is the significant thing that when one looks at it, you realize that you had to fabricate 3,000 pieces, all different sizes, each one –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, it wasn't like – it wasn't square tiles that you go and buy. I fabricated the whole project. So I rolled out the slabs, cut the individual pieces, dried them, fired them, glazed them, and even helped stick them on the wall. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: So other than – you – this is a great example of the attention to detail and the all-encompassing kind of attention to the craft of making your work, because you did everything, save – you did hire an assistant to do the grouting, the mounting and grouting. But you did –

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, I did hire a tile setter just –

MR. LLOYD: A tile setter.

MR. BACERRA: – because I wasn't that familiar with it. And he was – he was very excited about the project because it was something he had never done before, because he's only worked with square tiles, and you stick them on the wall, and you put the little bitty things in between. And this particular project had no grout, so every piece had to fit together perfectly. And as we put the last piece in the corner, everything was square. [Laughs.] It was amazing.

MR. LLOYD: Well, that sort of addresses the other question here. Describe the difficulties or opportunities presented by these commissions.

MR. BACERRA: Well, there weren't difficulties. I mean, if you know what you're doing –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – and you have your vision, you have your idea, and it – it comes out.

MR. LLOYD: You see, that's what I had told the art consultant. I said, "You should have Ralph do this because he can do anything. Just tell him what you want. He can do anything." [Laughs.]

Did you do any commissions during your earlier period of –

MR. BACERRA: Oh, there was a commission for the – one of the television stations of Los Angeles. I don't know what it's called – KTTV, I believe, Metro Media. And I did a wall for them in their patio dining room upstairs, but that was in the '70s, and I had forgotten all about it. And one day I was watching a movie, and all of a sudden, there's my wall. [Laughs.] I had forgotten all about that project.

MR. LLOYD: And do you think that the commissions that you've done – how does it – does it have any influence on your work, your other work?

MR. BACERRA: Not at all, no.

MR. LLOYD: It's really quite separate activity?

MR. BACERRA: It's sort of – sort of separate, except for the vessels that are – that are – that I'm known for, that's what I do. The mosaics and the murals have never been published or seen or – because the one at Metro Media, it was a private dining room. Now, the one in Pasadena, there's been lots of talk about it, so people are looking at it and wondering what – who did it, what is it all about?

Along with that project, Jun Kaneko has two of his large dangos in the same – in the same building.

MR. LLOYD: Let's see. Another thing that the Archives is interested in is a different kind of a question, if we can backtrack a little bit. But I want to have you describe, what are the similarities and differences between your early work and recent work, or are there any?

MR. BACERRA: Probably the amount of, oh, what would you say, sophistication? Because you're constantly growing, and you're constantly adding to what you already know, so there's a general idea of maturity I would think.

MR. LLOYD: And so it gets more complex than the amount of elements at your disposal that you can bring to an individual piece.

MR. BACERRA: Well, most of it is – I think I've said before – is intuitive. It's something that I've done that I've exhausted the process. Because normally when I work, if it's a new glaze or a new process, a new idea, I sort of work it through until I've exhausted everything I wanted to say about it and move onto something new. But that – what you did before always comes into what you're doing now, so it becomes more sophisticated and intricate and more involved and hopefully better.

MR. LLOYD: Do you see a time when you might be reintegrating some of the earlier work into – revisit an idea? Let's say for instance your interest in plant form. You may have incorporated that in other pieces earlier, but we haven't seen it so much –

MR. BACERRA: Well, who knows what – you know –

MR. LLOYD: You don't know because it's intuitive.

MR. BACERRA: Right. Because I said all of that – all of that comes by working, and if you see a form or you see something happening while you're working with the clay, I can use that; that comes into mind and I can inject that into what I'm doing. So it isn't a specific idea. It is in the beginning, but as it begins to grow and evolve, everything else that happened before comes into play.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And this is – we just did discuss earlier on our previous sessions –

MR. BACERRA: I think so, yes.

MR. LLOYD: – particularly as it related to this question: Is there an element of play in your process or finished work of art, and that's where you discussed the intuitive process of working and the necessity of being in the studio in order to make things happen, which of course also relates to your teaching philosophy, and that's

something that you stressed with your students.

MR. BACERRA: But just working in the studio or just working is the major part of what I'm all about. It was difficult while I was teaching because about six months out of the year, I dedicated my time to the students. And that was about six, seven months, and then the other five months I could work in the studio.

But during those five months it was very intense. I dedicated all of my time, forgot about the students, and that's how I had to work it that way. I couldn't – I couldn't really work in the studio during class – school time. It was difficult because my head was not there; my head was at school, and when I'm at the studio, my head's at the studio. Now that I have all this time and no students, no school, it's probably the best time of my life right now.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. Your daily routine then is pretty much uninterrupted; you can at any time be in the studio. You take only your breaks for lunch or an interview, as we're doing today, and you work late.

MR. BACERRA: But I do – I do travel. You need an intense period of working, and then you need some fallow time to – where you do nothing but – maybe not nothing, but you sort of go to museums and you go to the different shows and you read and you do something to get your mind away from the studio.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And that intense period of time is where you – you generate ideas in the studio. And we've talked also about your influences from some of your travels and looking at other work, but do you have any other inspirations beyond those? And have those inspirations or sources changed over the years, or are those pretty much what you follow?

MR. BACERRA: I think they're pretty much what I'm all about, because I can go to the same museum 10 times, and then when you go back the 11th time, I begin to focus in on maybe one – one object that interests me, and then that sets off a train of thought on how could I interpret that or how can I use that in what I want to do.

MR. LLOYD: Do you have any political or social commentary in your work?

MR. BACERRA: Very little, if any.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And –

MR. BACERRA: Not that I'm against it, but I just – I just have no reason to put it in my work.

MR. LLOYD: Right. I'm going to stop the tape for a moment so we can take a break.

[Audio break.]

MR. LLOYD: So we'd like to address something else here, and that is – this is the last question on their list here, but it relates to the period of time in between your two major stints as a teacher. There was a period in between when you taught at Chouinard and when you taught at Otis where you were on your own and doing technological research. What impact has technology had on your work? Did that experience have any impact on your work, or did the research –

MR. BACERRA: Only to develop new glazes or new – probably new glazes, because it was a period where I worked for several tile companies developing glazes for them, and then the stove – Induction Stove Corporation - developing the clay tile that would accept heat, and you could actually cook on top of the tile. I did the whole series of tiles for them for several years. That's all I did. But it had really no effect on the kinds of form I was doing because we were working with flat surfaces.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And do you think any other kinds of technology has entered in? Are you basically working off of –

MR. BACERRA: I don't even know how to use a computer, Frank. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: Right. So you're still basically working off –

MR. BACERRA: I'm back in the Middle Ages. Even at school, at Otis, they were giving classes for the instructors to use the computer, but I had no interest. And I would always be kidded at the faculty meetings because I didn't have e-mail or I didn't know how to use the fax machine. [Laughs.] Technology is not my thing.

MR. LLOYD: Except for that you have done a tremendous amount of research into glaze technology, and so you – but you continue to use the same methods that you used before – measuring and testing and recording that information about the temperatures you're firing to.

MR. BACERRA: But it isn't at a computer. I'm not a computer person. I doubt if I ever will be, even though there –

there's one at home; there's several at the office. I'm around them all the time, but I don't have the time to sit down, because I know it takes a tremendous amount of time at my age to figure out how the thing works and what to do with it. And somehow every time I touch one, it breaks. Really. There's something that happens. Whenever I go to the office, they say, "Don't touch the computer." [Laughs.] Because that's where I go to do word processing and write reports or letters, and I always have trouble.

MR. LLOYD: You know, we did discuss before some of this, but I think maybe we can consolidate here this discussion of the involvement that you've had with national craft organizations. We talked a little bit about the National Council on Education for Ceramic Arts –

MR. BACERRA: NCECA, right.

MR. LLOYD: – but there are several others, and maybe we could run through a list here and see –

MR. BACERRA: Didn't we go through that?

MR. LLOYD: Well, this one has to do with the American Craft Council. Did we discuss that one?

MR. BACERRA: No, I don't think so.

MR. LLOYD: No, we didn't. So have you been involved with the American Craft Council at any point in your career?

MR. BACERRA: Only by being a subscriber to the magazine. And they did give me a fellowship award several years ago.

MR. LLOYD: And I guess the –

MR. BACERRA: I don't really have that much time to be active in organizations, because I really feel if you're going to belong to an organization, you should be involved and become a part of the – part of the group. And I don't have time to travel, and I'd rather be in the studio.

MR. LLOYD: So you haven't participated in the international one that's called the International Academy of Ceramics.

MR. BACERRA: No. That started with Susan Peterson like 30 or 20 years ago.

MR. LLOYD: Did it?

MR. BACERRA: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. LLOYD: So many things start with Susan.

MR. BACERRA: I know. She's the guru.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah. And the local craft organizations –

MR. BACERRA: The American Ceramic Society?

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: I'm just an honorary member because I've just been with them for so long. I don't go to their meetings or their workshops or – but I know what's going on.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And some of the people that you know are very active in it, such as Ricky Maldonado.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And let's see, another thing that I'd like to discuss is the contemporary scene. We haven't talked too much about your observations of what's going on in exhibitions and in, oh, what you see as far as young artists coming up and how you see the future of contemporary American ceramics.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think as far as the younger artists that are coming up that I can – I don't have much contact anymore with students because it's been like eight years now since I've retired. And so I don't know what they're doing, but the whole sort of ceramics area has turned into more of a sculptural area. Nobody really is doing a good pot or a good teapot that – nobody's doing really functional ware. They all want to be sculptors. That's how I see it.

MR. LLOYD: Well, do you –

MR. BACERRA: Even looking through the magazines, and you'll see what different people do, and except for *American Ceramics* – they still show the vessel and the teapot and the bowl and the cup and the different kinds of ceramic firings, but the majority of the younger people I think want to be sculptors.

MR. LLOYD: Well, let's talk about then the people that came along both as your students and contemporaries, and I'm thinking of people who were at Chouinard, and maybe we could just go through and talk about some of them, your observations. We did discuss your having had a class that you were given to teach in the summer for high school students, and one of the students in that class who went on to study with Vivika Heino is – her name was Elsa Rady.

MR. BACERRA: Elsa Rady, right.

MR. LLOYD: And you've probably followed Elsa's progress throughout her career.

MR. BACERRA: Since she was 16, yeah.

MR. LLOYD: And it's very well known –

MR. BACERRA: And she was very dedicated and interested in the bowl and throwing on the wheel, and that's all she wanted to do, and porcelain. And she has made a career out of it. And from just throwing on the wheel, using the bowl and the bottle shape, she has sort of – things have sort of become more sculptural, where she's combining different bowls and bottles and shapes together and putting them on platforms and making a maquette or a sculpture.

MR. LLOYD: Right. And –

MR. BACERRA: And then Adrian Saxe has gone his way. I think as I've said before, you give them the basics, and everybody begins to move out in their own different way. Adrian is very interested in ideas and the current culture and making social statements with his – with his pieces. The function is no longer there as far as eating or drinking out of it or using it as a vessel. Peter Shire is very sculptural, even though he does a lot of utilitarian pieces in his studio.

MR. LLOYD: And you're familiar of course with Peter's development as an artist and how he, although he was your student at Chouinard and started out in ceramics, at one point during his career, he – his work was noticed by Ettore Sottsass, and he became part of the Memphis Design Group, an international design team. And Peter branched out into designing furniture, doing some sculpture, glass, architecture, all kinds of things.

MR. BACERRA: As I said, everybody has their own way of doing things, like Jo Lauria, I think we mentioned before, who was a curator at the County Museum in the decorative arts field. And she got her master's in ceramics at Otis, but then she went on and became the curator even though she had a degree in ceramics, and now she's writing about the whole field of craft and curating as well.

MR. LLOYD: Another person that came over from Japan – we did talk a little bit about your relationships with three Japanese people who came over – Mineo Mizuno, Jun Kaneko, and Goro Suzuki. But we – but not to discuss at length the development of Mineo Mizuno's work, and I think you've have the opportunity to observe that. So can you tell me anything else about that? I think, again, you give them the tools, and Mineo's work for a long time was based in vessel-oriented and functional ceramics. And he still does that, but he has gone on –

MR. BACERRA: He still does that, but he has gone on into sort of monumental, very big clay sculptures, very simple shapes, and some of them are very elaborate shapes. But he still maintains the vessel orientation. He does a lot of work for the upscale sushi restaurants in Los Angeles. Is this – do we need to talk about the students? Is that –

MR. LLOYD: No, just trying to kind of identify what happens –

MR. BACERRA: What happens to the students?

MR. LLOYD: To the students, but as a result of your teaching philosophy and your teaching methods and how you see the craft movement.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I think it's as we said before. I mean, I give them the basics, and I stress the technique and the skill and the actual doing and working and working and working. And once they get out, they do whatever they want to do, even though they have all of the same information as far as the glazes and the same information as far as the technical aspect of doing something, whether it's throwing or doing slab building or doing slip casting or coiling or whatever it is. They take off and go their own way. And I think that's a sign of a

very good instructor, is that they're not doing what you're doing.

MR. LLOYD: Right. Now in your teaching career at Otis, Otis College of Art and Design as it is now known, another generation of students studied with you, presumably with these same types of – same teaching philosophy. But some of their work is quite different. I'm thinking of Cindy Kolodziejski's work and her incorporation of imagery –

MR. BACERRA: Well, she likes to make very, very basic social statements, and it's a play on – an image on one side of her piece would be an image of a figure, and then on the other side would be the sort of the opposite of that statement. But that's what Cindy is. [Laughs.] You know Cindy.

MR. LLOYD: But basically the familiarity with methods, techniques, materials that she's using - all were in place by the time she had completed her degree in studying with you, right?

MR. BACERRA: Well, she had the basic information, and she expands on it. Right.

MR. LLOYD: Mold making, china painting, all of those things that she does.

MR. BACERRA: Yeah, all of that was done at school, right.

MR. LLOYD: And did you – do you see – a question I always have about teachers – you see hundreds or thousands of students come along in your career. How – at what point do you notice the ones that will have significant careers as artists? Can you tell right away?

MR. BACERRA: Well, in an art school, most of the students that come are all very dedicated. They're not there because they have to be in school. And some have – I've said they all have talent, but then in the very beginning you recognize who's going to go somewhere. It always happens. And there have been several that haven't gone somewhere, but that's because they've either gotten married and have children, and the family becomes the most important thing, or alcohol or drugs get in the way.

MR. LLOYD: Right. Going back to one of the questions that we addressed earlier, it had to do with the early exhibitions that you had and your relationships with dealers. We did discuss your association with Theo Portnoy in New York, and we did discuss the exhibitions with Ed Nash and Ken Deavers at American Hand. Those were during the 1970s and early 1980s.

You also did begin to talk about your initial relationship with Garth Clark here in Los Angeles, but we didn't discuss too much about your exhibitions in New York over the years at the Garth Clark Gallery. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about the composition of those exhibitions, what works you exhibited in New York at the Garth Clark Gallery, and whether that's had a significant impact on the development of your collector base, which I think it has.

MR. BACERRA: Well, I mean, the collector base mainly came from Theo and the American Hand, and then when Garth Clark opened his gallery in New York and Los Angeles, the collectors came to the gallery, liked the work, supported what I was doing, and each show in New York has been very successful. It didn't matter what sort of format I would take, whether it was very functional or whether it was more on the sculptural level, but that's where the collectors see the work. Then they want to meet the artist. They either come to my house or come to the studio when they're in town, and you have a nice relationship with the collector on a more personal level than just, oh, I have a piece of yours when they see me. But they know who I am, what I'm all about, and –

MR. LLOYD: And you've –

MR. BACERRA: And Garth has been very, very good about having the collector meet me, and Frank as well, or you as well.

MR. LLOYD: Now you've had shows at the Garth Clark Gallery in New York according to this resume in 1986, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999, and even last year in 2003.

MR. BACERRA: Two-thousand-and-two, I think – '02, right.

MR. LLOYD: And those have also been chronicled in publications, I believe in *American Ceramics*. I'm thinking of a review here that I'm looking at by Ulysses Dietz. *American Ceramics* published this in their issue 12/4, and Ulysses Dietz is of course the curator at the Newark Museum –

MR. BACERRA: At the Newark Museum, right.

MR. LLOYD: – who produced this wonderful exhibition called "Great Pots," of which you were a part of.

MR. BACERRA: From their collection.

MR. LLOYD: From their collection. And he's written a rather interesting review here. It's kind of an interesting thing to look at the language that he used in this review in the context of this interview, because there's – I'll just read you a little bit, and see if you think that this directly reflects something about your work.

"Bacerra's latest show was a refreshing departure from his sculptural pieces of the last few years, in which complex decoration had reached an almost frenzied state as his vessel forms had become less readable as vessels. Such art-driven trends are typical in contemporary ceramics, as in all the craft media, and always set off alarm bells in this decorative arts curator's mind.

"The Los Angeles-based Bacerra has taken a fortuitous step backward while moving vigorously forward, producing work unlike anything that has gone before. The work is distinctive, technically brilliant, and a visual feast, gorgeous in the best sense of the word. Two forms, one old and one new, make up the elegant presentation in the gallery. Bacerra's *Cloud Vessels* in two basic sizes, though inspired by cloud motifs found in Chinese art, are purely his creation. The subtle forms of the bodies are ideally suited to being cast in porcelain, on which the modulated glazes of crazed celadon sit beautifully. On some, the glaze is a silvery white while on others it is a deep, cloudy olive. On both, Bacerra controls the crackling of the glazes with the assurance of a master.

"But it is the decoration that lures the viewer. Cast appliques of geometric shapes adorn these vessels, forming vestigial handles and whimsical finials. They are richly enameled in saturated colors and highlighted in gold and/or platinum lusters. The interplay of rich decoration with the simple swellings of the celadon bodies evokes Chinese monochrome porcelains. Likewise, the controlled profusion of ornament gives these pieces an eclectic aesthetic that is sympathetic with the look of 19th-century interiors.

"Beautiful but less successful are the show's other vessels, which harken back to more inert forms Bacerra used in the 1970s, whose shapes, compared with the movement of *Cloud Vessels*, seem inert. However, they also seem more modern, and this might make them more appealing to those for whom Bacerra's style is too rich a banquet." And that's by Ulysses Dietz.

These reviews – there's another one here that came from the *New York Times*, actually, and I think it has to do with that same exhibition, but perhaps a different one. And this is a rather interesting use of words, and it says, "Gorgeous large ceramic vessels by a Los Angeles-based craftsman, Mr. Bacerra's tall bulbous jars have traditional Asian profiles that are covered by intricate, richly glazed patterns and checkerboards, triangles, trapezoids, circles, and stripes that dissolve the surface into deliriously congested cubistic spaces. To look at them is to wallow in visual hedonism." This is by Mr. Johnson in the *New York Times*, February 19th, 1999.

Do you find that these kinds of reviews have any impact on you? Do you read these reviews? Do you have any – do they give you any kind of feedback as to the critical audience, or do you think it's just significant for documentation purposes and for perhaps other viewers to see?

MR. BACERRA: I think that the main part of these reviews are for the people that observe or look at the objects. It doesn't really have the impact on me –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – but I'm always curious as to what an individual writer or curator or, well, critic has to say. Whether it's good or bad doesn't really affect what I'm going to do or what I'm doing, but I think it does have an effect on what the viewer, who maybe doesn't have the knowledge or the knowledge of the skill or technique that's involved in making the object, gives them a little more insight or maybe an excitement about – about what they're looking at. But as far as changing my direction, it really hasn't affected it. Because I think as a creative person, as an artist, you have to do what's inside. I don't know any way to put it. It's what's in there, and then when you get to the material –

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: – this is what happened.

MR. LLOYD: Right.

MR. BACERRA: And no critic is going to –

MR. LLOYD: It's not going to change your direction –

MR. BACERRA: – change that direction.

MR. LLOYD: – or your mind about doing anything right.

MR. BACERRA: It's always nice to have somebody write something nice about what you're doing, or it's always nice to have somebody criticize –

MR. LLOYD: Exactly.

MR. BACERRA: – what you're doing so you get the different viewpoint. I mean, one – those two articles that you read, one is a writer who writes for the *New York Times*, and one is a curator of the decorative arts at a major museum, and they each have sort of two different things to say about – even though they're similar, they say it in a different way. I wish we just had more writers in the craft field.

MR. LLOYD: Yes. You mentioned the woman who had became a curator was your student at Otis. Her name was Jo Lauria and she's written about your work. I have a copy here of an article that she wrote for *Ceramics Art and Perception* in 1994, and its title is "Ralph Bacerra, Ceramic Artist: Article by Jo Lauria," and it was published, as I said, in *Ceramics Art and Perception*, Number 15, in 1994. And this is a fairly comprehensive article which incorporates a lot of the things that we have been talking about –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – and makes some rather interesting observations about the series of work that you've done and also about the *Portrait Head* series that we discussed. I won't read it here because it is lengthy, but I think you're familiar with this. Did you consider that to be a pretty accurate assessment of your work?

MR. BACERRA: Yes, yes.

MR. LLOYD: Good. And then here's one that I know you were quite complimentary of the author, and it's an author who is a general writer about not just ceramics of course but about contemporary American art, someone who I think you knew initially through his chairmanship of the Otis College, Peter –

MR. BACERRA: I never met him.

MR. LLOYD: You didn't meet him?

MR. BACERRA: Peter – what's his name?

MR. LLOYD: Peter Clothier.

MR. BACERRA: Clothier, right. He was at Otis, but he was there while – and I wasn't there.

MR. LLOYD: I see.

MR. BACERRA: He predates me.

MR. LLOYD: But this involved an interview process maybe similar to what we did –

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: – and I think you were very pleased with the way – the observations that he made.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: So this was published –

MR. BACERRA: Because he was from a whole – he was from a writer's point, or a more academic approach to writing, as opposed to what an artist would say.

MR. LLOYD: And so this is pretty much a continued observation that you have. What you need is more writers, and perhaps from different vantage points, in order to make a contribution to the literature of the field.

MR. BACERRA: Yes, it makes the field a little more valid. I think the craftsman or the potter or the jeweler that writes about their own field has a certain bias and they – oh, I think we've discussed this before.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: When somebody with a different viewpoint outside of the field, that comes in and takes a fresh look at what people are doing.

MR. LLOYD: And I'll just, for the record, enter that this is an article published in *American Ceramics*, Issue Number 13/1, by Peter Clothier – that is C-L-O-T-H-I-E-R. One of the things that he mentions in here – we may have discussed this before, but I think it relates to your travel, your interest in Chinese ceramics – he mentions the purchase of a Tang horse, deaccessioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

MR. BACERRA: Oh, this was in the early '70s. This is before the Los Angeles County Museum moved.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah.

MR. BACERRA: Well, they'd just moved to their new building – I think it was the late '60s – and they were – at the old museum they were selling things that I guess were deaccessioned from the museum, and I purchased a Tang horse and camel. I don't know why they didn't want them, but I bought them and I still have them. And that set off a whole new – that set off that whole sort of animal series that I did for a show in New York, and that was sort of the inspiration.

MR. LLOYD: That's a brilliant purchase on your part, too. Did you get them for a reasonable price?

MR. BACERRA: Of course. [Laughter.]

MR. LLOYD: What a great collectible thing to have.

MR. BACERRA: Right, right. But that was – I don't know; I was just lucky that day.

MR. LLOYD: Yeah, you were. And what other things do you collect?

MR. BACERRA: Right now not very much because I don't have too much space left, but it was mainly ceramics. And the – as I had mentioned before, the Imari, the Chinese, Korean ceramics, Japanese ceramics. I've even purchased Goro recently – Suzuki, the Oribe maker. And most of the visual, the paintings, are artists that I've known, and we trade. So it's a barter system there as far as collecting paintings.

MR. LLOYD: What paintings do you have that you have traded for?

MR. BACERRA: Nobuko Hideshi, Japanese printmaker, painter – I'm trying to think of other people that I've traded with.

MR. LLOYD: And of course I think we mentioned before that you have been influenced by European painting. I'm thinking of Kandinsky, and we discussed –

MR. BACERRA: No, I didn't trade with Kandinsky.

MR. LLOYD: No, you didn't trade with Kandinsky. [Laughter.] And you didn't trade with M. C. Escher, but this is certainly an influence on your work and something that you admire.

MR. BACERRA: Right.

MR. LLOYD: Well, let's take a break for lunch.

[END]

Last updated... *November 3, 2004*