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Oral history interview with Wayne Higby, 2005 April 12-14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Wayne Higby on April 12, 13, and 14, 2005. The interview took place at the Artist's home in Alfred Station, New York, and was conducted by Mary Drach McInnes 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.

Wayne Higby and Mary Drach McInnes have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARY DRACH MCINNES: This is Mary Drach McInnes interviewing Wayne Higby at the artist's home in Alfred Station, New York, on Tuesday, April 12, 2005, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Thank you, Wayne. I appreciate this opportunity. Are you ready?

WAYNE HIGBY: I'm ready.

MS. MCINNES: Excellent. Let's just start off with some pretty straightforward biographical questions for you. When and where were you born?

MR. HIGBY: I was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, May 12, 1943. Actually, I just found a copy of the birth certificate that said I was born at something like 2:28 p.m. in the afternoon on a Wednesday. Now if you were going to do my chart—[laughs]—that might be important information.

MS. MCINNES: I think you should take that to China with you.

MR. HIGBY: Yes, let them do the charts.

MS. MCINNES: Exactly.

MR. HIGBY: Right.

MS. MCINNES: I know that you spent a lot of time in the country growing up; could you speak a little bit about that, because I think that has influenced your life and also your work.

MR. HIGBY: When, I think [I was] about five years old—five or six years old, my parents bought a house outside of Colorado Springs proper. So this would be on the eastern side, in an area called Austin's Bluff. It was next to a city park called Palmer Park. Palmer Park was named after General Palmer and he was credited with founding Colorado Springs. Austin's Bluff was a whole area that belonged to someone named Austin who was a sheep farmer.

There were big rocks and outcroppings and sort of clifflike areas and sage brush and oak trees and what have you that overlooked Colorado Springs and Pikes Peak, on the opposite side of the city. So my parents bought this place; it was an older house, but there was some acreage with it. And a big picture window on the front room looked across the valley to Pikes Peak. The backyard went up a steep slope, and there was a place at the very back of the yard called Lookout Point. Lookout Point belonged to Palmer Park, so people used to drive up there, to park and do whatever you do when you park - in the daytime, I guess, just going up to see the vista, look over the top of our property and out towards the peak.

I grew up in that environment. I would hike up to that point, and there was a little cave just below that point where, as a kid, I used to sit and look out. Sit and look out was my basic modus operandi. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: You are still doing it.

MR. HIGBY: I'm still doing that, but the other critical factor, I assume, is that I was an only child, so I didn't have brothers or sisters, and I just spent a lot of time by myself, just inventing imaginary games and what have you. My father was interested in horses, and he built a barn on the property next to the house. So I started riding horses, probably by the time I was seven or eight years old.

MS. MCINNES: Your father was an attorney, wasn't he?

MR. HIGBY: My father was a lawyer in Colorado Springs. My parents moved to Colorado Springs after the war [World War II]. They are both from Kansas City, Kansas, and my father was stationed at Camp Carson. I think it's Fort Carson now. That was an army military base just south of Colorado Springs. He was sent there, and he was stationed there at one point before he went overseas. I was born in a hospital in Colorado Springs while he was there in the military.

Then when the war was over, they liked Colorado Springs. They liked the area. He wanted to set up his legal practice; they just picked Colorado Springs to do it.

MS. MCINNES: So all of your education really—your early education up through your undergraduate years - was in Colorado.

MR. HIGBY: Yes. I went to elementary school and to high school in Colorado Springs. Then I went on to the University of Colorado in Boulder. I don't think that was my parent's first choice.

MS. MCINNES: But you wanted to go there?

MR. HIGBY: Well, I have the same story most artists have about elementary and secondary school. I wasn't a very successful student, so I think they wanted—well, my father wanted me to be a lawyer, and they wanted me to go to some school like William & Mary [College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA] or something, but I didn't have a particularly good academic track record. And Boulder—University of Colorado—I think if you were a citizen of the State at the time, you could go to school [there]. Tuition was something like $350 a semester.

MS. MCINNES: Pretty good deal.

MR. HIGBY: So I went to Boulder to school.

MS. MCINNES: One of the things that interested me about your biography at this moment in your life is that after two years of undergraduate study, didn't you take a year or so off for some world travel?

MR. HIGBY: Yes.

MS. MCINNES: Was this in the early '60s?

MR. HIGBY: It was 1963. Let's see, that would be my junior year. I started in Boulder in 1961. And then in '63, I was invited to take this trip with some friends in Colorado Springs. Our family doctor—Robert Smith, was his name. He had two daughters, Holly and Sherri Smith, and I grew up with Sherri. She is an artist today also. She is a fiber artist. I think she now is the chair of the graduate program in art at the University of Michigan [University of Michigan School of Art and Design, Ann Arbor, MI]. I don't remember when we met, but it was probably all the way back in elementary school; it must have been.

They had decided that they were going to take this trip, and Sherri was at school in Stanford [Stanford University, Stanford, CA]. Anyway, we were close family friends, and they decided they were going to take the trip, and they invited me to go with them. So my parents—they were very generous - understood that it might be a big learning experience, so they agreed and helped me.

A couple of years before that - I don't remember when it was - but my father had gone to a legal conference or something in Honolulu [HI], and we took a two- or three-week trip, and I had invited Sherri to go along. So we were just close friends and kind of did things together. I think also that might have been part of the impetus, where she was saying to her parents, "Well, that's fine, but it won't be any fun for me unless Wayne comes along," or something.

MS. MCINNES: So where did you go?

MR. HIGBY: Well, it was a huge trip. Eventually it took—I stayed on longer in Europe, so for me it probably was a six- to seven-month trip.

The Smiths were very interested in Japan, so we first went to Japan and spent quite a long time, maybe a month or so. Then we went on to Southeast Asia—that's when I first went to Angkor Wat [Cambodia]. I have just returned from a trip there, because it has been very, very important to me, somehow in my psyche, so going back was interesting. Then Burma, India, North Africa, the Middle East, Greece and Southern Europe, Italy, Spain, and coming back after spending some time in England.

MS. MCINNES: I have read in a couple of places that this particular trip, especially your time in Crete [Greek Islands], was influential on your choice of profession. Was it your initiation, in some respects, into clay?

MR. HIGBY: Yes. The trip to the Heraklion Museum [Crete] was very, very important to me. I didn't have a focus

to my work. This would have been the beginning of my junior year, and I had done the basic program as a freshman and a sophomore. In Boulder at that time, at the end of your sophomore year I think it was, you had to prepare a portfolio and submit it to the art faculty, and then they juried your portfolio. That's how you got into art school or not. So in order to spend your next two years in the art school, you had to go through this portfolio review process. I had just done the general work, the foundation work. Some of it was sculpture; some of it was painting. I was leaning in the direction of painting. So then I had this opportunity to go on this trip, and I spent most of the trip kind of thinking about it art historically. I must have noticed contemporary life, but I was really focused on the arts and the history and the architecture, and I didn't know a thing. So it was just, whatever it looked like, I was interested.

When I finally got to Crete—although my interest started in those museums in Athens, probably—there's so much ceramics. And then you walk into the Heraklion museum; it's a kind of ethnographic museum, full of Minoan pots, and I thought, "Gosh, have I ever really thought about pottery before? This is serious business. Look at this."

It's interesting because in Japan it didn't hit me. We had gone to a tea ceremony and all that, and that seemed kind of—that was wonderful cultural history, but it didn't really connect. It was the pots, the Minoan pots, that somehow just overwhelmed me. I thought, "What is this about?"

MS. MCINNES: What was it in particular about those pots—the shape or the type of painting on the surface—what got you interested?

MR. HIGBY: To begin with, it probably was the painting or the decoration. There was something about the patterns and the brushwork on those pots that perhaps were a first kind of inclination of curiosity. But it's so connected to the forms. I just remember writing Donna, my wife, was in school back at Boulder, and as I took this trip, we had been close, and we weren't, of course, married yet, but I would write to her once a week from wherever, and I also kept a journal. So there is an entry in my journal—I can't tell you the exact date now, but it's right there in the journal - about the Minoan pots, and, oh, I should ask somebody about pottery—[laughs]—who am I going to ask? And I wrote her a note and told her about what I had seen at this museum. Then sometime later I got a postcard from her in another venue wherever we were, and she said, "Well, I am taking a pottery class," and so I thought, oh, they have pottery in Boulder, so maybe—I don't know, this could be interesting.

The amazing thing about this—well, to me it was amazing - is that that was the seminal moment for me becoming a potter. And what struck me was, I think, the power of the forms and the surfaces, the shapes and the surfaces. How they were this human intellect but this interface with the—the site with the ocean and the island and the patterns of the flora and the fauna and the pots or the people or—I think there was a big rush of this. I didn't unpack it at the time.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: In 2002, I was back at that same museum. So this was 40 years later or whatever it is, and I am 61 [59] years old at the time. I guess I was 60, or is it this year—I don't know what—59, 60, and I was able to take Donna to the museum. I said well, "We will go to Heraklion museum; it won't be anything like it was, but you will see why I became a potter."

We walked into the museum; it's almost exactly the way it was. Nothing has been changed. And I found myself staring into these glass cases, looking at these pieces that I had seen when I was 20 years old. And at one point I caught my reflection in the glass. It was like being there with the Ghost of Christmas Past or something. It was like there was this thing going on in my head about being 20 years old, and now I am 60 years old, and my 20-year-old persona is standing next to me looking through the same glass window at the same pot—this wonderful kind of revelation about how this 20-year-old kid who knew absolutely nothing about anything, actually knew something, because the 60-year-one old said, "Kid, pretty sharp. This is hot stuff." [Laughs.] "So, I just want to congratulate you. You were on to something, because it's right here." That was a wonderful moment, where your life sort of compresses—you remember the essence of when you were first in that framework, and then you see it from the distance of greater knowledge. All the critiques and study and making that I have done since then on ceramics, on pottery, and now I am back at that same spot looking at that piece talking to the 20-year-old kid. Well, what kind of destiny is that?

I had a similar experience when I went back to Angkor this last January, because I had carried that experience of those ruins with me. Certain things are burned into your psyche; they are very close. Even though you don't think about them every day, I think they really become seminal in something about your thinking as your studio work unfolds. That Minoan pottery experience and then the revisit and the confirmation was really quite wonderful.

So, I continued on my trip thinking about those pots, and when I got home to Boulder, I just went to see my

painting teacher, this fellow who had been—well, I took art history class when I was a freshman, and then I did some sophomore drawing or painting class with him. So I called him up, and I said, "I need to"—it's like an advisory thing - "I just need to talk to you about something I have seen; I have just come back from this trip." So I went to talk to George Woodman about pottery, not knowing that—[laughs]—he was—

MS. MCINNES: Another great connection.

MR. HIGBY: Betty Woodman, right?

MS. MCINNES: Yes, exactly.

MR. HIGBY: So, I am sitting talking to George, and I am saying, "George, I saw this—what do you know about pottery?" I said, "I have just had an amazing experience at Heraklion Museum, and I really need to think about this. I would like to learn something more about it."

I don't remember exactly what—I think he just invited me home to dinner. So eventually I did some work with Betty. She was at this recreation department program. She didn't teach at the university, but she taught a class at night through the Boulder recreation department. And I went and took the class, and then later she asked me to be her sort of studio assistant. So I hung out at her place and in her studio, so there is a lot more story that fits in there.

Actually, while I was on this trip—between the summer when I ended the trip and came back to school—somewhere there, Donna, my wife, went to work for the Woodmans, because they had always hired a student as a kind of nanny, live-in person. And of course, she didn't know that the Woodmans were ceramically or artistically involved, and I didn't. But at that same time that I was talking to George about, what do you know about ceramics, Donna was getting a job living with them. [Laughs.] And then they hired her, and she lived with them for at least a year, taking care of things. So this became an interesting connection.

MS. MCINNES: When did you and Donna get married? After you both finished the university?

MR. HIGBY: Yes, we graduated in 1966 and got married that—well, we graduated in the fall because I missed the whole semester. And so we graduated in the fall of '66 and then we went to Paris. Donna's father was connected to NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] at that time. In 1966 we got married in a little village of Marnes-la-Coquette, which is about 20 minutes from Versailles. We were married by the mayor of Marnes-la-Coquette, all in French. Then we spent the rest of that spring and on into the summer in Europe. We spent a month in Florence [Italy], living at the Woodman's house. They had rented a villa, gone on sabbatical, and moved to Florence. Then they went on some trip. We showed up there, and Betty and I did a little work together. Then they went on this trip, and we lived in their house for about a month, or a month and half, in Florence. And then took more travel through Europe and came home, and I started graduate school at the University of Michigan.

MS. MCINNES: Before we get to Michigan, was Betty Woodman really your only ceramic instructor, or was there someone at Colorado, at Boulder, at the university?

MR. HIGBY: Well—

MS. MCINNES: Did you work with a Manuel Neri? Did I read that?

MR. HIGBY: I did take a class with Manuel Neri.

MS. MCINNES: And how was that?

MR. HIGBY: Well, that was a big learning curve about the artist-educator. Manuel Neri, and he brought California—[laughs]. And—

MS. MCINNES: Was he on a sort of a—

MR. HIGBY: Visiting artist—

MS. MCINNES: A visiting artist.

MR. HIGBY: —semester thing. And the first time I ever saw work by Henry Takamoto, [Peter] Voulkos, [John] Mason, what have you, was in a slide presentation that Manuel Neri did for his sculpture class. I thought, hmm, that's pretty interesting. I was beginning this pursuit of the clay thing, but the sculpture class—he decided to do a plaster rendition of the Rocky Mountains, and so it—all the students were sent outside of the sculpture studio to work. We worked in hallway or outdoors, and then he built a two-by-four chicken wire structure of the Rocky Mountains covered in plaster, and chopped on it with an axe. I am not sure what he taught me, except

vicariously. I am thinking, so that's what artist educators do. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: It looked pretty fun.

MR. HIGBY: He was developing that series of plaster figures that were cut and then painted, and so that's what we all made; we all made figures and chopped on them with an axe and painted them with color.

MS. MCINNES: Well, it's interesting that he does that, painting on the sculptural surface.

MR. HIGBY: Yes.

MS. MCINNES: I mean, there is obviously a connection with ceramics, where glaze sits that's glazed on the clay body.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, like that he was—

MS. MCINNES: —versus that kind of a traditional, sort of bronze sculptor or something?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah.

MS. MCINNES: He had a painterly approach.

MR. HIGBY: I was a very young person, and I didn't know what was up with anything. I was just trying to find out what it is that I thought I wanted to do. And I picked up on why there was no ceramics at the university, because ceramics wasn't art. I picked up on that, and that part I didn't understand. It didn't seem to be a problem for Betty and George, and then when Manuel Neri came and showed the slides of Voulkos and what have you, I thought, well, he doesn't have a problem, so—

[Audio break.]

MS. MCINNES: Okay. You were discussing how you had a sense from the institution of the university that ceramics really did not have a place in the art department, but then the people closest to you at that time, the Woodmans and Manuel Neri, who you were learning from obviously didn't have that same issue. So you were getting two different messages. And you obviously decided to pursue ceramics. How did you keep that focus, and how did that lead you to Michigan?

MR. HIGBY: Well, I think the individuals that I met were more important to me than whatever the more esoteric issues were. There is another part to the puzzle, which also occurred on this trip, and it's something that's been very seminal. The experience with the Minoan pots was a major trigger. The trip itself was worth four years of undergraduate education. I mean, I think it set into motion everything I have been focused on ever since. It set into motion all the basic premises of my philosophy and my pursuit of artistic practice, my ideas about communication, the importance of the international community in the arts.

But the other element that's part of the puzzle was a very formative period of about four days. It's amazing how a day or four days or a visit to a museum for two hours could create the trajectory of your life, but that happens.

We had traveled to India, and obviously, if you are on a trip like this, you wouldn't bypass India. So we were in New Delhi. That's where we went first. I think we had been in Burma, and then we were in New Delhi. And India was a real shock to me. It started maybe in Hong Kong; Japan wasn't so much of a shock, although it was a very wonderful, dramatic difference in culture. But I grew up in Colorado Springs, in a middle class environment. Colorado Springs was a very lovely town and a pretty middle-class to upper-middle-class environment: white, Republican. I had never seen poverty, had never seen the kind of suffering or—now I'm going to begin to sound like Shakyamuni Buddha or something, but, I mean, this was my Buddha experience, I guess.

India was just overwhelming. You are driving in from the airport to your hotel, and it's just this sea of people, and outside the hotel there are people living on the street. Well, I am very familiar with this now. I've traveled to a lot of nations, but as a 20-year-old kid, I didn't get that. My friends had scheduled this tour so that we were staying in what were nice hotels, sort of the English hotel in New Delhi, not fancy but very pleasant. I had my room, and I had my clean sheets, and I had my thick airplane ticket. And the people outside were sleeping on the street, and I didn't get that. I didn't understand that at all. I didn't understand how I could have clean sheets and an airline ticket, and these people had to sleep on the street. There was a woman—I'll never forget her - she was right outside the door of the hotel, and she was wearing nothing but tin cans. She had cut tin cans and made this clothing for herself. So she was obviously quite eccentric. You would go out on the street, and the children would follow you and ask for money.

So I didn't really see New Delhi. My friends went out and went to museums and things but I—I don't know what

was going on through me, but I just—I couldn't go out after that first day. So I stayed in this hotel room for about four days while they were doing things, and I said, "I am just going to stay here and read my book." I thought I would just meditate or do something. I mean, I didn't know anything about this language I am using. I just was stunned. I sat in my hotel room, and I went down to have meals in the hotel, and I just kept trying to figure out what was I supposed to do—what was I supposed to do about this? I mean, I could empty my pockets on the street; it wasn't going to really help anybody. I had the ticket. I couldn't, like, erase—well, how I could give away—I don't know. I was so confused, and I never figured it out. Okay, it's time to go, we're going to Banaras [holy city on the Ganges River]; oh, that will help. [Laughs.]

So that way I will see the lepers at the step of the temples at the Ganges, and that will help a whole lot. India was like that, and I just kept worrying about it. The only thing that I began to sort of sense was that, well, okay, it just meant that I had to take ownership over something about my "opportunity," that I was given an opportunity to study, or to travel, or to see the world, or to meet people. What is it I could—I had some ability as an artist, and then the only thing I could think I could do was to take that seriously, to say, okay, you have to do something with that. This means something.

That is the only thing you could do, is take responsibility for yourself and really take ownership over that and to sort of—whenever there was an opportunity, you had to really embrace it and work with it and do what you could do with it. That was the real epiphany, because I was—I was doing okay in school, but it hadn't meant anything yet to me, and so then later on the experience with this ceramic thing—I started just saying to myself, okay, and you have to pursue this with a certain rigor. And then school started to make sense to me.

I still had to do the whole liberal arts curriculum. I still wasn't done with geology and anthropology and what have you, but I think I graduated with a pretty high average. And it was all about the fact that I had made a decision that I had this opportunity to be in school; I had this opportunity to meet these people. I was there at the Heraklion Museum. I saw pots and it—my job was to make something out of this—to take on my opportunity.

Along with that came the idea that I would look into teaching. It seemed to me the next step was to somehow facilitate an opportunity for someone else. So you have to take this, and then you have to offer it somehow. I am not sure I think exactly the same way about it [now], but art seemed to be a kind of self-indulgent thing, necessarily so. So then teaching seemed like an opportunity to take that and offer it somehow.

At the same time I went to talk to George about the ceramics, I began to look into the educational curriculum at the school. There was a woman who taught the pedagogy in Art Ed[ucation], her name was Ann Jones. She had [a] small ceramics studio connected to the Art Ed program. If you were an Art Ed student, you could go and take this ceramics program. This is what Donna had been doing when she had written me the postcard after I had told her about the Minoan pots; but she had been taking this course in Art Ed. I actually did my first raku piece in the Art Ed program there.

I enrolled in the Art Ed program. I don't remember much about it except the ceramics studio, but there was a little—it's a little shop in the basement of the liberal arts building, and there were maybe two or three wheels—kick wheels—and then down the hallway there was a little glaze room, which had been a classroom, and there were cupboards in there.

Ann Jones had the students using all lead glazes. We didn't know anything about lead. In the cupboard there was a little magazine, some ceramic—maybe there was Ceramic Monthly. I don't know how long that publication has been around, but there was an article in there about raku. There was a picture of a fellow in a white lab coat with a little pair of tongs and a tiny little cup doing something. I don't know whether I swiped that thing from—I don't know, I can sort of picture this guy, and I thought, oh, well that would be fun. And she would never—Ann Jones would never let us fire anything. The kiln was locked behind a door, so we never could go in there and do that.

I read this article, and I figured out how I could use the little test kiln that was in the glaze lab, and that if I glazed this whole thing and then opened the window and threw it out—[laughs]—the basement in the middle of the—then if I ran down the hall, ran up the steps, and ran back around to where it was, I can do this little thing with the reduction. [Laughs.] So, I was making little raku pots in the basement of the Liberal Arts building.

MS. MCINNES: That's wonderful.

MR. HIGBY: And then at the same time, I started taking a night class with Betty Woodman at the Boulder recreation department at the old firehouse. Then she asked me to work for her, and she introduced to me a lot of things. She introduced me to Paul Soldner, who had come to town; he did a little workshop—a little raku workshop - at the firehouse. At that point I was seriously considering that I would get a high school teaching job; that's where I was going with this. Betty convinced me to consider going to graduate school and that Paul Soldner might be the place where I would want to go. He was at Claremont [Scripps College, Claremont, CA].

So I'd met him.

She called him up, and then I put some ceramic objects that I had made in her class in the back of my car and drove to Aspen—he was in Aspen. I spent the day with him, and he never looked at my work. But we cast fly reels, and we baled hay, and at the end of the day we drank some dandelion wine or something that he had made. And then I got a letter from him saying, come to Scripps. He offered me a scholarship. And so at that point I was changing the course of things, and I was on my way to graduate school.

The story takes a shift there, because he, in the midst of all this, just before I was about to go there - because I was living in Europe; I had been living at Betty Woodman's place there in Florence, and we were coming back to go to school, and Paul said, well, he was going to take the year off, so he was leaving Scripps. He wasn't going to be there. I don't remember who his replacement was, but he said, you can come and work. He said, "But you might consider Ann Arbor, Michigan. There is a fellow there named Fred Bauer, and that might be interesting to you."

So I don't remember the timing of all that; it's a little confusing to me right now, but, well, the end result was that I went to the University of Michigan [Ann Arbor, MI], and I worked with Fred Bauer and John Stephenson as a graduate student. I don't know, it's—you're making me think about—I can picture the events; I get confused about the timing of all that. We could study a chronology.

MS. MCINNES: Yes, that was good. Just one question that I had is, in addition to the University of Colorado and to Michigan, have you had any involvement in other arts institutions? I know, for example, you've had a relationship as a trustee and a teacher up at Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, MEE]. I believe you went to the Archie Bray [Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MT] in 1970. Any other sort of art institutions that you had contact with over the years?

MR. HIGBY: Well, yes, you mentioned them—the primary ones, I guess.

When I was very young as a kid, I had—I think I was in elementary school. Probably in the eighth grade—seventh, eighth grade or somewhere, I don't remember. But it was before I went to high school. I had a scholarship to go to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. I was just picked out of the class, and I had some time from school, and I could go there.

But even earlier, as a very young kid, my mother had enrolled me in some children's class at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, and that, in retrospect might have been an important piece, because there are these indications. Once you find your mission, you can think back on your life and figure out what little connectors they were.

I had a retrospective, actually, at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

MS. MCINNES: Really.

MR. HIGBY: About four, five years ago, we had big show there, so it was a coming home to the place. I did a three-day workshop at the arts school—the Fine Arts Center children's school, so that was connecting all the dots in a circle.

MS. MCINNES: And after your M.F.A. in, I think it was, '68, you went to the Archie Bray in 1970.

MR. HIGBY: I had—yeah, how did that work? I don't remember exactly. David Shaner invited me to come there to work. There were a number of grants that were given to come work at Archie Bray, and Archie Bray has always been this sort of—it's some kind of rite of passage to work at Archie Bray. I don't know whether that's true today, but I think it's still somewhat true; certainly then it was. And I don't remember now exactly how that came about.

But I worked at Archie Bray for a summer. I was there with Mark Pharis, Victor Babu, and a fellow named Bunny McBride, who I think—maybe he is retired now, but he was teaching in Iowa. The other connections came—well, let's see. My first teaching job was at the University of Nebraska in Omaha.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. HIGBY: That was sort of a last minute thing. I graduated from Michigan, and I had forgotten to look for a job. [Laughs.] I was so busy with my work.

MS. MCINNES: No wonder you are so forgiving with our students.

MR. HIGBY: Is that it?

MS. MCINNES: Yes, I think it is.

MR. HIGBY: I was working, and it was like, ah, ceramics, isn't it great? And at the same time that I am in graduate school, Donna's—we were having our children. We had our two children while we were in graduate school. So I was thinking about a lot of stuff—it is surprising I wasn't—my colleagues in the program were getting jobs, and I was like, oh, right, I have to get a job, too.

So then I went through that application process, and nothing turned up. I had a couple of interviews. I think I was just too scared. But anyway I finally, at the end of August, beginning of September, got a phone call from the University of Nebraska in Omaha, and they were a little desperate. I don't know, I think the connection came through John Stephenson, my teacher. They had called him up, and he said, yeah, I have one left or something. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: So, you went out to Omaha.

MR. HIGBY: So, I went out to Omaha, and I spent three years there.

MS. MCINNES: And then you went to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] in 1971.

MR. HIGBY: Then I went to RISD. The major thing that happened in Omaha was that I had my first one-person show about six months after I got there, and that was at the Joslyn Art Museum [Omaha, NE].

MS. MCINNES: Really?

MR. HIGBY: I had taken this pot of mine down to the—there was a gallery downtown. They had some pieces of clay in the gallery, so I walked in, and I said, "I am in town, and I have just started this little studio, and I would like to show my work; this is what I make." And I think they liked it all right, but then they were asking me what I thought the value was, and I said what it was—my pricing was somewhat arrogant—[laughs]—or whatever, I don't know, but anyway it was not the same as their expectation.

Well, I got trained by painters and sculptors, so then on my way back from town, I am driving back down the road to the school, and there is this huge museum, the Joslyn Art Museum, and I said, that's where I should be having my show. So I just pulled over and pulled in and walked in, and I said, "Who is the curator of contemporary art?" And the fellow's name escapes me right now, but he was there, and he saw me. And I went and got my piece out of the trunk, and I brought it in and showed it to him, and we had this conversation, and I went away. A couple of days later I got a phone call, and he said, can you have you a show—like three months later or something. And I hadn't made anything, but, of course, I said yes.

So, my first show was at the Joslyn Art Museum, and it was great—it was sort of a confirmation. They had this big sign on the lawn, next to the museum, with my name on it. There was a picture of me sort of leaning against it. [Laughs.] So that was—that was my first one-person show.

MS. MCINNES: And then, very quickly after that, you started showing nationally. You were in the "Objects: USA" show [National Collection of Fine Arts (now Smithsonian American Art Museum), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, October 3 - November 16, 1969, and traveling].

MR. HIGBY: I was the youngest person, I think, in the "Objects" show.

MS. MCINNES: So that was '69 and '70, and it toured to great success.

MR. HIGBY: Yes, and I think the piece I made that was in that show was from my graduate exhibition. So I went from Omaha then to RISD, and I don't remember the date now, but you are beginning to hear about all these places.

MS. MCINNES: It was in '71 you went there.

MR. HIGBY: You're starting to hear about the clay thing and about the craft world and what was that about. And "Objects: USA" was the crafts world. I had heard about this place called Haystack, and Haystack was another one of those places that loomed sort of large as one of the rights of passage—Archie Bray, Haystack, Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC]—these places. I remember I have the letter in my file, so I actually wrote [Francis] Fran Merritt a letter asking him if he might want to consider me to teach a workshop—I mean, well, I went into the museum and nothing, so I had delusions of grandeur or just total stupidity—whatever it was, full speed ahead.

So I wrote Fran this letter, and Fran wrote back a very charming letter about, "We'll call you; don't call us," or

something—[laughs]. That wasn't in the text, but that was the tone. So then I think I drove up there once just to see what the place was like, because we were around the East Coast, and we had a week to just go see that place.

Well, it wasn't until '70—sometime in the '70s—after I came there to teach. I started teaching in Alfred [at Alfred University, Alfred, NY] in '73, so it might been '74—somewhere in there—when I was asked to come and teach a workshop at Haystack.

Then the story gets sort of interesting because, eventually, I served on the Haystack board for 18 years, and I was the head of program committee, the head of the trustee committee, the vice president, the president, and chair, before I was finished. So every now and then I go look at my letter from Fran Merritt. Well, I think I even gave this little speech at one of the Haystack meetings when I was elected chair of the board. I just wanted to read you all this little letter, because I have had a connection with Haystack for a long time. So I don't know what that means; it was just sort of poetic.

MS. MCINNES: And certainly the Maine landscape figured in prominently in your work, I think, particularly in the '80s.

MR. HIGBY: Once I started going there, the landscape became a kind of ideal site and meant a lot to me. There were two—two regions of the country: the Southwest where I grew up, and that area around Haystack. Those were the factors, ideal spots. I don't think I have ever made work that was specific, in the sense of a pictorial rendition of a location, but there is something about the sort of psychic energy, or something about my experiences in a certain place, that made it sort of seminal in the work and also probably what it afforded in terms of shape or something about color.

One of the big factors in all of that work was the horizon, and that has another story behind it.

MS. MCINNES: I have two directions I would like to go into in talking about the '70s and '80s, and one is specifically about your work and issues like the landscape and horizon and space and memory, but the other is sort of just trying to chronicle that period.

MR. HIGBY: Yes.

MS. MCINNES: What would you prefer to talk about in the time that we have left for today, whichever—you want to talk about the fun thing? [Laughs.] Talk about the work?

MR. HIGBY: I was thinking just a minute ago about the landscape, and that has more to do with something about my work, because you have just asked me about the Haystack landscape, which triggered in my mind the whole issue of landscape. My early work, the work I did in graduate school, had nothing specific to do with landscape. I was in graduate school and in the first years of my career, very much focused on the history of ceramics, particularly the Islamic ceramics, for some reason, Minoan ceramics. I was very interested in earthenware, probably coming out of the Minoan work.

MS. MCINNES: And did that mark you, or did that make your work distinctive at that time, because when I think of the '70s, I think of a lot of stoneware going on.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, might have.

MS. MCINNES: And also the raku - I mean, Paul Soldner was doing raku, but how many people were doing raku at that time?

MR. HIGBY: Probably a few. The raku came, for me, out of my painting experience. All these things really have a kind of didactic logic, I think. When I was in school in Ann Arbor, there were maybe 10 graduate students—eight, 10 graduate students. They were all in the basement of this building, and I just moved out of town, and I found a little kind of garage space. It was actually at the back half of an old house, and I set up a studio. I built a little raku kiln because that's what I knew I could do, and I just said, well, I'll work here, because that's a madhouse, all the undergrads and the grads. I just needed more solitude, I guess.

The raku things began at that point because you could work with a small kiln, and I had some—a little bit of experience with that. Then I think the color and the rapidity with which you could do it, with which you could fire this thing up in an hour to and get results and see what you were doing and keep looking, that appealed to me in the beginning. I think some of the sensibility of the material which—and the fire, I guess - that, for me, there was something connected a little bit to painting about that process.

MS. MCINNES: Certainly raku has that combination of the raw and the refined. I am thinking of the surfaces—the ash surfaces—and then the kind of painterly areas.

MR. HIGBY: I think from the very beginning, maybe, the earthenware was all a part of that, but with the Minoan pots, there is a rawness that has to do with—they are just made out of dirt, and the firing processes were not very sophisticated. But the decoration was ethereal; the decoration, the painting, and the savvy of how to make this mark here because it's an echo of this volume there.

It was such—to me, it's such a highly sophisticated and intellectual kind of pursuit, and I think that the other side of that coin is just the certain brutality of stuff; the world is made of mud and dirt and gravity and—that you could take this stuff of the world—dirt, I guess, in the sense of the Minoan, and shape it, and then you could intervene in this very savvy sort of way of pointing at it. There is the oscillation, kind of bifurcation, sort of rhythmical dialogue between this raw energy and this kind of intersection of human intellect and sophistication. And intuitively, as I said, I think I was just drawn to something about that, which later becomes a whole premise.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: It's something that's just kind of come forward over time. When I went back to the Heraklion and saw those pieces 40 years later, I knew what it was. When I had first looked at it, I had no idea what it was. I was just totally captivated. And then later I was standing there next to my 20-year-old self, going, you knew what it was. You couldn't say what it was, but you knew in your gut what it was. And now, intellectually, you can explain it, and you can talk about it.

My early work was all of that—this reading of ceramic history and things connected to this trip around the world, and then just before I went to RISD, I got this recognition. There was a show called "Young Americans." It was sponsored by the museum—the Craft Museum in New York [now the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY]—actually by the American Craft Council. I later juried the show. They did a series of these.

MS. MCINNES: Right. In 1973 you had a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MR. HIGBY: This was way before that.

MS. MCINNES: Before that.

MR. HIGBY: Before that there was a show called "Young Americans." I had made a pot in my studio in Omaha just following along the same patterns of work that I had been doing, and when I got it out if the kiln and cleaned it up and looked at it, it appeared to me that it had a landscape on it. It was almost serendipity. Then I made another piece kind of following along that line, and it wound up being selected for this "Young Americans" show. The show opened in Albuquerque at the museum somewhere there. And I went to see it, and I think that was my first recognition of craft exhibitions. The "Objects" show had come along, but I didn't see the show. Then I was contextualized with these other Young Americans in paper and fiber and—

MS. MCINNES: All working in craft.

MR. HIGBY: —ceramics. I had this pot with this landscape thing going on. At that point the landscape became my—Chinese dragon or something—[laughs]—the landscape. I began to say, well, of course. I mean, think about that cave in your backyard.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: Why wouldn't the landscape be—why wouldn't you have digested enough of the ceramic history thing to go off on your own? But landscape and the introduction of landscape onto ceramics is a classic. So there is a fusion for me there between the pursuit of certain classical themes and historical themes in ceramic art and my own life. What was available to me as childhood experience, or what was available to me, just the direct experience.

MS. MCINNES: So your own memories?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, without spending all my time in the museum and looking at books.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: At some point it would come together, where it could be mine in another way. And the landscape was clearly something that was a very deeply felt part of my childhood experience and my experience growing up, and the riding of the horses and spending time outdoors.

So I think it was about in that time frame, where those things came together about the work, of the landscape and moving into a higher level, professionalism, and moving into a sphere that included the Rhode Island School of Design. And Boston, and New York, and the craft world, and Haystack, and things started coming together

around that picture, where I found a center of my own thematic notions in the work, and was also beginning to have some recognition—the “Objects” thing, the “Young Americans” thing.

MS. MCINNES: What was the character of those early craft exhibitions? I mean, looking back, do they seem as sophisticated as they may have seemed to you at that time or as exciting? Because those were the early years in which American craft was being shown on that type of national platform.

MR. HIGBY: Yes, I remember seeing the show in Albuquerque, the “Young Americans” show. I remember it was just—well, of course, it was very exciting to me that I had a piece in the show that had a national perspective, and that there were young artists. I think all of us in the crafts have this sort of passion for materials and the excitement of just colors and textures and shapes and things that could be made out of all of these sort of material-based phenomenon. It was very exciting to me.

Also I think there was something that’s always been appealing to me about ceramics craft—that it was sort of outsider art, and that always sort of appealed to me.

MS. MCINNES: On the margins?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, that somehow we really weren’t mainstream. These were young artists doing this thing, and there is a little bit of impetus for doing this by an earlier—slightly earlier generation. But these people are pursuing something that had a philosophical base that was kind of in the margins. It’s like going back to Betty or to other people that I met that were interested in this. They were on a kind of mission - this is important - but were not totally accepted. There’s a sort of mission to this, philosophically.

If you go back into the literature—and later on I became really caught up in this mission of the artists that came back after World War II and had this philosophical notion about work, and what was good to do, and things connected to the environment. Crafts had a political, kind of philosophical connection that I really responded to. I don’t know, maybe—I grew up in a political family. Both my parents were politicians, and politics was sort of always on the charts in terms of conversation. My mother wound up being the campaign manager for a man who was elected governor of Colorado, and in the process I met [Richard M.] Nixon and [Dwight D.] Eisenhower and [Nelson] Rockefeller and all this. But I grew up in this sort of environment where this idea of a better life or improvement, and people were taking sides then.

I don’t know whether that was really it or not, but there was something maybe connected also to my experience in India. Without putting too sharp an edge on it, there was a sort of moral imperative associated with a certain kind of work and a certain kind of art-making. And I was just exposed to that, and that was very motivating to me. To this day I love the idea of still being in a pursuit of an art form and a kind of idealism that is still sort of dicey; it’s just in the margins. I don’t know whether I will be happy if it were ever mainstream. That would sort of take the wind out of me. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: How has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime?

MR. HIGBY: Well, financially, oh, boy, my mind reels, because all the questions immediately take me to these sort of cosmic places. It is so complicated. I think the Vietnam War is an operative piece of this picture. The Vietnam War was something that was part of my generation. But the Vietnam War was also something that triggered this sort of hippie, back-to-the-earth thing, the flower child—there is a piece of the ‘60s and the Vietnam war and—

MS. MCINNES: Counterculture.

MR. HIGBY: —the counterculture, the peace movement, and craft got a really bad name at one point because everybody could make a string of beads and so—

MS. MCINNES: Macramé. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: Maybe the whole picture would be different today if we were laced with that, but then as the wheel turns, and we come out of that, and the economy gets stronger, then I think there is also this sort of interface between the art of craft and the craft and the idea that people could make stuff and make some money doing it. So there are lot of people who had potteries in their basements or who do wall hangings or who made beads or bend metal, shish-kebab beads for earrings or—there is a whole thing going on that, in one sense, has something to do with what I am about and, in one sense, kind of had a certain moral imperative to it, and it sort of dovetailed into the counterculture or the peace movement.

No one has helped us really unpack that very well. Then we have these trade magazines, who also can’t figure that out . Craft Horizons became American Craft,and American Craft became this marketing venue, where primarily it’s marketing. It’s not really a serious, critical analysis in the field. Sometimes you could find—if you

can find it—something in there, but mostly it's big color ads.

I had at one point—I gave it to the library—I had a whole outline of the show announcement thing, where it's a black-and-white thing on a Xerox machine, and I think the first one I had in that range was a color photograph of the Voulkos plate on something.

I used to lay this out for my students; if you laid that out, then the '70s, was all still black and white. Sometime in the '80s it went to full color, and I became—I'm guilty for this, too, because I started having my work photographed in glowing color. From very particular angles and sort of hyping the visual phenomenology of it. And then, well, that's the double edge sword, because at one point—it helps market the work. You sort of become better known, and the image has a certain cachet that people remember.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: More and more people see the image, and fewer and fewer people see the work. So everyone assumes you are actually making this image, and then people start writing about that image. Basically, they've never gone to see the work, and they assume that the work is about that image, but in fact, [the] image is just an image. That was a real come-up that I learned in this whole process: that the PR is just that, and it's very risky to try to have an intellectual dialogue about the PR, risky in the sense that you don't find much depth there.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: I think some of the critical writing is really ensconced in this whole world of imagery, and the folks that we think of as serious critics in the field don't spend enough time with the work.

But anyway, you are asking me—you can see why my answer is so long. It's a cosmic issue in terms of how all these things sort of interface. I can remember sitting up on the bench outside of the Fosdick Nelson Gallery [Alfred University, Alfred, NY] sometime in the '80s—must have been; I've been at Alfred a long time—and I had just gotten word from my dealer that I had sold the piece for $1,500. Then I was over at the school at some opening, and I was sitting on—I can remember this, thinking, wow, we went from $25 to, or we went from a $100, or we went from a $150, and this is like my dealer calls me so excited, going like, wow. And then I can remember—

MS. MCINNES: That was Helen Drutt?

MR. HIGBY: Yes, I've worked with Helen since 1974. But one night or one late afternoon, maybe—it had to be a dozen years ago now—the phone rang, and I picked it up, and it was Garth Clark. And he says, "I just wanted to let [you know] that a piece of yours just sold for $12,000." [Laughs.] And it was another one of those moments where I went, oh, wow, $12,000. And he was so excited – he was just so excited. And it was like $1,500 sometime in the mid-'80s; by the end of the '80s or early '90s, Garth's calling me—I mean, he is not even my dealer. He was just so excited that he had to tell me. Well, that's cool. That's great.

I don't know what it means. And then there were some people who have achieved this sort of secondary market—there are only a handful in clay—where you are—Garth was calling to talk to me about a piece that was in the secondary market. I mean, when I started, there was barely a first market, so certainly, I watched that evolution, but there is baggage that comes with all of that, too. Years ago, I had a conversation someplace with Bill Perry - I don't remember where it was - and he was telling me how hard it was for Bob Turner because there were no galleries, and there weren't any publications, and I was sympathizing and—but I was—every generation has their own problems.

So, I was saying, "Well, yes, Bill, but it's really just as hard for my generation because there are so many possibilities." To be able to understand how to get started and then where to make the choices and how to maintain your integrity in terms of your work and your pursuit of your ideals in this sort of plethora of possible things is a—so you sold it for $1,500? Who cares? What did you make? So there is a big color poster of it?

And there is a lot more hype, and in that hype there is a lot more to sort out in terms of where the integrity of the art is and where the work is. We are so much more in need of good, critical dialogue, which is very hard to find.

MS. MCINNES: Where do you find that critical dialogue, if not in the traditional craft magazines? Do you find it in Ceramics: Art and Perception, or do you find it in other types of art criticism or philosophical tracts?

MR. HIGBY: Well, I saw that question when you handed me that little bit of an outline and that question is sort of puzzling to me. I don't have anything brilliant to say about that. Maybe I feel a little cautious about saying anything about it.

[END TAPE 1.]

MS. MCINNES: This is Mary Drach McInnes, and this is tape number two for April 12, 2005.

And, Wayne, you were just speaking about things you read or do not read in the field.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, we were talking about reading the critical views, outlooks in the various trade journals, and who I thought the writers were and where I would read, but I was just reflecting on the fact that I don't read much of that material, although I think I probably should.

And speaking about how I do this as a profession, probably a lot of my ideas come out of direct experience.

But it got me thinking about what we are doing here. We start with the biography, and I'm talking about myself and reflecting on my childhood, and then we were fast forwarding into something about the work, and now we are here in 2005. And it's not linear; it all just kind of overlaps. So when I said this thing about not reading, I just was reminded of, as a kid, all the way through, even up until the latter part of undergraduate school, I only read the books that I was assigned, but I didn't read. I was not a reader, and my parents didn't have books particularly.

MS. MCINNES: I find that surprising because I have read your writings, and I have also sat in on your class critiques, and you are very eloquent.

MR. HIGBY: Well, I would hope to be eloquent. I think I read now, but I don't read ceramic criticism. I do ceramic criticism, but I don't read it. [Laughs.] Maybe I should read it.

MS. MCINNES: What sort of ideas funnel into your criticism in the classroom?

MR. HIGBY: Well, I think it goes back to this idea of always trying to have direct experience with something. If I'm trying to work out a problem, it's like when I was a kid: I just have to think about it really hard, or I have to observe life more carefully, or I have to go back to the museum, or I have to think it through one more time. So a lot of things really come back to sort of—I spend a lot of time turning things over in my head—a lot of time turnings things over my head and playing with those things.

I can remember going to see my father, who wound up being district attorney in Colorado Springs, and I can remember seeing him, because he had to do some, like, trial lawyer things. And going to watch the debate, about how the lawyer would convince the jury that the man is guilty—the interrogation, that goes in my head a lot. So when I come home from school, I'd given a critique, and I'd go, was he guilty or wasn't he guilty? [Laughs.] Did he do it in the ballroom with the candlestick, or where is—and I think it's just a propensity to do that a lot.

I began reading, I think, once I actually was here in Alfred, and the teaching became more and more critical, and being hip to what's going on. But then I had to figure out the history of art, at least the history of 20th-century art. [Laughs.] So I wasn't going to start with ceramics; I had to start with who knows what. At one point I got this idea that I would read everything that happened, geopolitical history from 1943 to the present, because I was born in '43. So I started reading geopolitical history. Of course, reading all this stuff about World War II and Germany and Hitler and that was hopeless, because once you start that, you realize you have to read everything up to that point.

MS. MCINNES: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: So my reading got pretty far afield. [Laughs.] Then once in the early '90s when I was invited to China—another piece of my life story—then I just started devouring everything, basically, not on Chinese ceramics or Chinese painting necessarily, but on the political history of China and trying to get a fix on my experiences there. So I have done a lot of reading on that.

The current book I'm reading is a book called In Praise of Blandness [François Jullien. In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics. Translated by Paula M. Varsano. New York: Zone Books, 2004], which is a book on Chinese aesthetics by a French philosopher.

MS. MCINNES: Who is that philosopher?

MR. HIGBY: His last name is Jullien. I don't remember his first name.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, interesting.

MR. HIGBY: But his whole premise was that he was going to immerse himself in Chinese aesthetics so that he could learn about the West, because he was a Frenchman, and he figured the only way he can learn about his

own culture was to really study this other one.

MS. MCINNES: To step outside of it.

MR. HIGBY: So he made his whole career a study of the subtle, deeper nuances of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics coming out of Taoism and Confucianism and Buddhism, and then that would show him something about—and then another book I'm reading is called The Aesthetics of Appearing or The Aesthetics of Appearance [Martin Seel. The Aesthetics of Appearing. Translated by John Farrell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005], and I'm very interested currently in the problem of aesthetics as just phenomenon, which I think we have moved—well, certainly in modernism we moved away from that, and certainly in conceptual art in the '70s, but I think we're still hung up with ideas and not enough with phenomenon.

So I'm really interested in how I could reassess this whole business of the way things look as an intellectual piece.

MS. MCINNES: And just your engagement with an object also.

MR. HIGBY: Yes.

MS. MCINNES: That whole critique of the object.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah. I was recently at NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts], and I was listening to this wonderful lecture by this woman who is, I think, at the Henry Gallery in Washington [University of Washington, Seattle]. She is talking about Howard Kottler's plates. I have a few, and Howard was a close friend of mine. But her lecture was about what's important about the plates was that they're a homosexual code, and then all of these images have references within the homosexual culture, which I don't know a great deal about and most people perhaps—well, obviously some people know all about it, but even at the time I didn't really know about it. I just liked the plates.

And maybe because I liked Howard, but I thought, you are very beautiful. And I loved the way—the care and intensity with which he went about it, and I loved the conceptual notion of taking this sort of blank and then taking a commercial product like a decal and reconfiguring it. I thought they were just beautiful and sophisticated and sometimes funny, but I didn't know the whole code, so the lecture is all about this means this, and this means that. And Howard's contribution to the world of art was to introduce this code into this sort of strata of art-making. And the summation was pretty much that. It was like Howard was an important artist because he had this idea, and he had sort of – he was subversive in entering this code. I'm sure that was part of his plan. I wouldn't be surprised, knowing Howard that that could very well—ha ha, they are eating off my plates, and the plates are really—it's like that line from—what was the musical? Oh, "The Bird Cage," where they come to have dinner and—

MS. MCINNES: Right, "La Cage Aux Folles." And they are eating the soup—[laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: Where they come to have dinner, and they are looking at the plates, and the guy says, "No, it's leapfrog." [Laughs.] You know?

MS. MCINNES: Yes.

MR. HIGBY: There are obviously figures on the plate doing things like that that are a little naughty, so—but I left the lecture thinking, so I have to know the code?

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: I've been looking at all this incredible Buddhist art. I have been studying Buddhism for two years. I don't know a thing about Buddhism, and I know I love this art. Now we are back to standing looking at the Minoan pots.

I don't have a clue about the code. I know the code today; I know the history of the place, and I know what the patterns are and where they came from and why they used them and yadda yadda yadda, at least as far as artists and archeologists and art historians know that material. But I left the lecture with the same question; I don't think that's why I like the plates, and I don't think I have to know the code.

And you are going to have to tell me—if the lecture can go the next step, it will be to say to me, it's important because of the code in connection with how it's done, so that the code is actually empowered through the way it's achieved.

[Audio break, tape change.]

That's why the Buddhist art is incredible, because somehow the moral of imperative in the work—the philosophical notation of the work, the belief system - is empowered by the visual phenomena. You get it when you look at the work, and you don't have to know the code. You know you are in the presence of a profound piece of art. You just know. It's there. And then you want to go find out as much as you can about [it].

So I want to know why it is I know—well, some of us maybe are a little more tuned into things than others, but I think even the rank and file can walk in and see a piece of Buddhist sculpture and be moved by it. So what is it? That—to me, that's the aesthetics, or aesthetic, of appearing. There are certain things that have this energy. And so I'm interested in that because it's so much a part of the phenomenology of the place where I work and materials and what they do. And how to capture and follow them and to empower them through some sort of getting together with it that's sort of seeing how you could follow it.

And some of that notion comes out of Chinese painting, where you put the brush on the paper, and it moves, and you follow it, and you sort of nurtured it into the image.

MS. MCINNES: That's a good place to stop.

MR. HIGBY: Okay.

MS. MCINNES: Thanks.

[Audio break.]

Hello, this is Mary Drach McInnes interviewing Wayne Higby at the artist's home in Alfred Station, New York, on Wednesday, April 13, 2005, for the Archives of American Art.

First, why don't we start off—Wayne, you were remembering a few things that you thought of overnight about, sort of, early moments that seem important to get on this history.

MR. HIGBY: Well, yes, yesterday, Mary, we were talking about the early biography, or autobiography in this case, and things that were pivotal in me becoming an artist or becoming a ceramic artist, and I think I touched on it, but we got on to some other things. And it's problematic, I guess, about an interview of this sort. It's just that you try to make it linear to a degree, but it's not linear. It's all sort of cyclic[al], and everything is overlapping and overlapping in my memory.

But there was one critical element having to do with my parents and the fact that my father was a lawyer and the fact that when I was ready to go off to school, he was very interested, and so was my mother, in the fact that I would become a lawyer, and then it would be Higby & Higby, or Higby & Son or something of that sort. And of course, I had no idea myself about this, but in fact, I had determined for myself that I wasn't going to college. I had been raising horses. Actually, at a certain point early in high school my father bought me a mare, a kind of fancy quarter horse mare, because I had become quite interested in the horses. And then I started working with her and breeding her and sort of working out a kind of genealogy.

Every year I had a little foal, and I was messing around with these ideas, and I had also had been showing at a lot of quarter horse events, equitation and things of that sort. I also had a horse that had won the quarter horse reining competition at the Denver stock show, and I was riding her in the region, collecting trophies, et cetera, et cetera. I was very into this.

So I thought I was just going to go on to be some kind of pseudo-cowboy horse-raiser, trainer, something of that sort. And I kept the horses all the way through school—through undergraduate school and on into graduate school in my early career. I had a horse in Colorado—a mare that I bred with a—as a sort of business arrangement with a friend of mine who had some pretty nice animals. And one year I had worked out the breeding, and we dropped a foal, a little colt, that I sold, but later on became the world's champion quarter horse gelding, about 1975. So I was very into the aesthetics of horses and horse breeding.

But my parents, as far as they were concerned, that was just to keep him out of trouble—keep him off the drugs and out of the cars. So I didn't understand. I thought, well, this is where I was going. But, no, you have to go to the college. So parents are pretty much in charge. So I had to go to college. I went to the University of Colorado because that was available and accessible. And I thought, well, okay, I don't know what you're supposed to do here. So I am a pre-law major. The first semester I was invited to a mock trial at the law building on campus. So I'm trudging off. I have been in school maybe two months or something. And I have been to see my father; I had been to the trials before, and I had watched him. And I sort of liked when he was—I mentioned this yesterday—when he was district attorney—the sort of theater of criminal law. It was interesting to watch him work and the whole mindset of manipulating ideas. So, I wasn't against it necessarily. I didn't know what it was.

So the point of the story simply is that I got there early, and the trial—mock trial - hadn't started, so I went into the law library. I'd never been into a law library, and it never occurred to me. [Laughs.] Well, I think I said yesterday that all the way through high school into college I did not read. So you can now imagine this young man who had been riding horses, was an only child, always in that country, working with animals, looking at the horizon line, what was he thinking about? I don't know. In high school math class, staring up the window, been sent to the principal because he wasn't paying attention. And now in the law library, and this is going to be my career. So you take a book down off the shelf, and you open it up, and it was just stunning to me: the thickness of the book, the words, and the fact that there were no pictures. There were no images—[laughs]—whatsoever, and it occurred to me that, oh, man, I'm going to be in this library for the rest of my life with these books that had no pictures, with all of this wordiness. I think I stood there for a while trying to make patterns out of the paragraphs or looking at the space in the margin—[laughs]—of the book. It's like, well, is that interesting? I don't know what I am doing.

I laugh about that now because it's a funny thing, but it was terrifying. It was absolutely terrifying. I looked down the road thinking, four years of this? I'll never survive this. I can't read. I don't enjoying reading. There are no images. I hadn't done any art in high school. I had done some. My activity in high school artistically had to do with theater and drama, and I was a swimmer. I spent a lot of time in the swimming pool and was on the swim team, so between the swim team and the theater, that's what I did in high school primarily. And I enjoyed the theater a lot and played a number of different parts in high school plays, et cetera.

So I decided, well, university has got to be about books. So what other kind of books do—[laughs]—they have in the university? And there's this huge library on campus, so your mission tomorrow is to go to the library. And of course, what the punch line is going to be: it's simply that I found that the art books were the ones with the most pictures. [Laughs.] And I—

MS. MCINNES: Your fate was sealed.

MR. HIGBY: Yes, I thought, oh, I think I am getting a message. [Laughs.] So I went up and signed up for freshmen foundation. I don't know what it was called at that time. So in the spring I just started taking freshmen curriculum in art, and I called my parents, and I said, "I am going to change my major to fine arts." And my father, bless him, "Son, you can't go to school just to have fun. You be a lawyer. You can acquire all the art you need." So I thought, okay, Dad. Well, it's like this: either I do this, or I am coming home, because I will never survive that curriculum. And that, of course—that was sort of the bargain—don't come home. Stay in school.

MS. MCINNES: Everyone has limits, even parents.

MR. HIGBY: Even parents have limits. So that is another one of those important—I talked about the Heraklion museum, being in a museum for two hours. I talked about four days in India. That experience in the law library, as life is going on, you can look back on—they could be just like two hours, or they could be—I don't think I was in the law library an hour. But this moment - and you are trying to look at "who am I?" - are very, very formative.

And then to somehow give yourself permission to embrace that. I could have fought against it. My parents could have been less understanding, but they weren't, fortunately. And so maybe because I was an only child, and I was somehow—they were caring for me in a particular way like, well, he is the only one we got, so this is what he wants to do. I didn't feel that I wasn't given permission. As I said, they helped me take that trip, so every point along the way. Finally, my father made peace with it. He just said—he said, "Well, whatever you do, be the best." Which is pretty heavy load to carry, too. Okay, I will try.

So that was, I think, an important piece of the biography that I didn't want to miss talking about, because I think about it often—that early stage and how I got finally to the art thing.

The other piece was, I mentioned George and Betty Woodman yesterday, after I had my epiphany in the Heraklion museum, and I came back, and I talked to George, who was the only faculty member I really knew very well. He was my advisor, and it so happened his wife was Betty Woodman. But once I started working with her during that period before I graduated—I was thinking about this yesterday, too, after we finished talking. That I am not—we haven't been very accurate maybe in trying to figure out the exact chronology. I could probably go back and figure out what happened this year, and this happened that year, but it's all within this sort of time frame in the '60s, just before I graduated in '66.

After I started working with Betty, and I started taking this clay class in the art education program, Jim and Nan McKinnell came to teach at Boulder. It could have been in the summertime, but could have been in that fall semester before. It was somewhere in there just before I graduated. Jim McKinnell and Nan were very interesting people, people who had been very important in the early part of the mid-20th-century ceramics. And so a kind of relationship, I think, began to happen also for me in understanding something about the potential of

ceramics that had to do with my experience with Betty and, through her, with Paul Soldner and also my experience with Jim McKinnell and Nan.

Jim McKinnell was a glaze technician. He was my first insight into Alfred. I don't think he studied at Alfred, although he might have. He later taught at Alfred briefly He was a ceramic engineer whose proclivity was towards glaze and glaze materials and glaze formulation and glaze analysis and this thing that was then utilized in ceramic industry. Then he worked as a potter, but his proclivity towards that was from the scientific, engineering side. He was my first exposure to the technology of the handmade thing. His wife, Nan, was, for the lack of a better wording, the artist. She was sort of an innovator. She was making these hand-built—big, huge, hand-built volumes.

So she carried this sort of poetic element into the studio. They were a real team, and they had, early on, gone to the Bray to help Voulkos. They had built a kiln, put it on the back of the trailer, attached [it] to a car, and drove around the country doing things. He was very instrumental in facilitating the loose-brick kiln that everybody started building in their backyards.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, really?

MR. HIGBY: And he invented a lot of—took a lot of the science and turned it into an individual, hands-on way of working.

I remember him inviting me once to watch him stack his kiln. He had calibrated, designed, formulated glazes for each spot in the kiln. So this pot had to go back in that corner and this pot had to go up front in this corner, and just watching him, I learned something else about that piece of ceramics. He used to sit at the wheel down in that art ed place that I mentioned yesterday where they have the Leach treadle wheels. And he'd sit at the wheel in a white shirt and bow tie and roll up his sleeves and throw these shapes.

Later on when I saw pictures of them and all the sort of Alfred—

MS. MCINNES: And [Bernard] Leach.

MR. HIGBY: Leach, and so I thought, oh, right. I never sat at wheel wearing a white shirt and bow tie. But it was very impressive. Once again he took an interest in me, and Betty had taken an interest in me. George had taken an interest. Jim and Nan McKinnell had taken an interest. Soldner took an interest in me.

I just thought of something about that, too. At one point before I graduated from the University of Colorado—and this was Betty's doing—I had worked with McKinnell. I had been working with her. I had an exhibition, which was my first exhibition. I talked yesterday about the Joslyn, which was my first one-man show, but this was the first exhibition I was ever in. It was an invitational exhibition that Betty facilitated, because it was in a gallery in Boulder at the university, and it was Betty Woodman, Maria Martinez, and Wayne Higby.

MS. MCINNES: Yes, I saw that in '66. It's a regional, right?

MR. HIGBY: I had no clue at the time what it meant. But later on and sitting here now I am thinking, what? Really. But I didn't know what it—I thought, well, of course. [Laughs.] How old was I? I'm 21 or -two; why wouldn't I have an exhibit with Betty Woodman or Maria Martinez? I have made 25 pieces—[laughs]—in my lifetime.

So, but I guess the important point about that was just there were these folks who obviously I admired—I was studying—that had the information. They were interesting people, and I was interested in ceramics, and they were taking an interest in me. And I think that's the important role that teachers play, not only—I mean, they delivered information, but I don't think the information was as important as the fact that they gave me a kind of attention, you know, that they were interested, and they were showing me things; they were suggesting things to me. Just the fact that McKinnell would take me out of the class and say, come tomorrow night; I am going to stack the kiln.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: So that was information, but it is also this notion of recognition. And then gradually you build this sense of, well—

MS. MCINNES: Of who you are and your place in that universe.

MR. HIGBY: Well, that I could—they are encouraging me, so I could—maybe this is where I should be.

MS. MCINNES: And in hearing you speak, it's not only so important in your decisions to become a ceramic artist, but it must have deeply affected how you see yourself as a teacher.

MR. HIGBY: Well, certainly. Because they were my mentors. They were—

MS. MCINNES: I mean your relation—the quality or the type of relationship that you have with particular students.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, yeah. Certainly.

MS. MCINNES: The type of generosity that you have—

MR. HIGBY: You know, that's almost subconscious that they were—I understood later on about what teaching might be, because that's a whole other topic, and at some point I'd like to talk about teaching. I never felt like you could teach art, and so teaching for me is something that is more about being a good audience.

In retrospect, I thought, well, there have been a few people in my life that were great audiences, like Betty or George or Jim and Nan McKinnell or Paul, briefly, and certainly later on Fred Bauer, John, who were people that just sort of stood back and watched, but you felt like they were constantly with you. You know, they won't be ignoring you, and they weren't, like, getting up at intermission and leaving. [Laughs.]

I figured out later that, to be a great teacher, you have to be a great audience. Then it began to dawn on me that throughout the history of art the greatest work has always been made when there were great audiences: people who were engaged and knew the territory. Perhaps sometimes I have bemoaned the fact in ceramics today that perhaps the audience is not as dynamic as it might be, in terms of being more aggressive in their education about work and ideas, and that would probably trigger more good criticism. It's not just the objects; it is the demand of the audience.

Anyway, we are kind of off the track, I think—

MS. MCINNES: Well, can we get back on the track in the sense of talking about your teaching, because that is one area that I would like to cover. Is this a good time to talk about your move to Alfred?

MR. HIGBY: I was thinking of one more little indication. After yesterday, I thought about [it], and it had to do with your questions to me about how I've seen the external market, shall we say, or the external sort of development of ceramics and recognition of ceramics since the time I started.

Last night I was thinking about another kind of gateway for me that's relative to that. Just now I was talking about Maria and Betty and the little exhibition. And around that same time, I had made a raku box. It couldn't have been more than four inches, five inches high by three or four inches wide, just a small raku box. I had entered it in an exhibition; Betty encouraged me to do this. It had to do with "[Designer] Craftsmen U.S.A. [1960]." She was sending work, and she said, "You should send something."

So I sent this little box, and they had a regional jury, which was somewhere in the southwest, and then there was a national jury. After you passed the regional jury, you were in the national jury. We could go back and look all this up, but the next thing that happened with the little raku box was it wound up being exhibited at the Craft Museum in New York—the American Craft Museum. There was a picture of it in Craft Horizons magazine, and I sold it for $25.

I was thinking about that yesterday when you were asking me about that trajectory of work from the $25 box to the time where I was sitting at school going, it's $1,500 to the time Garth called me and said it was $12,000, and to just the other day, Helen has a piece from the '80s which is being negotiated now at about $20,000 or $25,000. So you see that from afar. I don't think that that changes anything, but I was just reminiscing about your question and how things have changed.

I think the thing I learned from the little raku box was, number one, this is a piece of cake [laughs]. Okay? I mean, okay, I get it. I'll be a ceramic artist. I don't know, it just—at some point that was almost too easy. It was sort of like you could send this dumb little box and—and in a way I was trying to wrestle with that, because I was again being given a lot of permission to take this on.

And what I realized was that the box wasn't very good. It was just a little different, and sometimes different suffices for good. That was an early lesson. It was sort of like, well, where are you going with this, and where is the art in ceramic art? And where is the art in the art world in general, and does "a little different" cut it?

So, I don't know what that means. That was a kind of an early lesson, because it was ridiculous for me to get that kind of attention at that stage, but I am sure it was because it was just a little different.

MS. MCINNES: And when was this questioning? When was this sort of consciousness that it was because it was little different and—

MR. HIGBY: Just about that time. I had shown in Craft Horizons, and I just thought, wow.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: And I said, how did I get there? It didn't make any sense to me that it would have been because the work was astoundingly deep or something.

MS. MCINNES: But, Wayne, it says something that you ask those questions rather than - I could see someone else saying, well, I can make a lot of these and have that part of the market that has this - I think a lot of artists, then and now, spend a lot of their time trying to figure out the market.

MR. HIGBY: Get a strategy.

MS. MCINNES: They're strategizing. And you were asking art questions.

MR. HIGBY: Well, listen, I could just take that box and set it next to one of those Minoan pots, and it was pretty clear—[laughs]—that whatever it was, I didn't have it yet.

MS. MCINNES: It's nice to know you had a little humility before you showed up at the Joslyn Art Museum. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: Well, I had humility. I also had, sort of, just seat of the pants, take a risk; I mean, they can only say no.

MS. MCINNES: Exactly.

MR. HIGBY: So whatever. So, yeah, a little bit of this and little bit of that.

MS. MCINNES: It's interesting.

MR. HIGBY: Right, anyway, there are probably few other stories along those lines.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, we can keep weaving them in. That's fine.

MR. HIGBY: What were you asking me before?

MS. MCINNES: Well, we talked briefly yesterday about your teaching position; for the last 32 years you have been at Alfred. You came in the fall of '73, and if I remember correctly, Ted Randall, Robert Turner, and Val Cushing were your three colleagues at that time.

I'd love to hear a bit about what brought you to Alfred. What did Alfred mean to you at that time, because you had a very different education. And who was it that lured you to the wonderful hills of Allegany County?

MR. HIGBY: You know, I'm not actually sure what the lure was. I think the lure in some fundamental sense had to do with teaching and my interest in teaching, however one might define that. I've always been confused by that—what teaching is—or at least what I thought it was and what I know it to be today.

But Bob Turner had lot to do with this. I had met Bob Turner at NCECA in California—1970, I think. And I was sitting on the floor at some event. I don't know, was it music or a talk or something? And he came around the room and walked over to me and said hello and introduced himself. And I thought, well, that's interesting. Bob Turner just—I mean, who doesn't know Bob Turner? Who didn't know Bob Turner? Everyone knew Bob Turner. And that was interesting.

I also got, that same evening, a personal invitation from Peter Voulkos to come to a party at his house or his studio or one of those great, sort of, mythologicalized debaucheries. [Laughs.] And I thought, well, that's interesting, you know. So when these things—Donna, my wife, who is just the center of my career—I don't mention her too much, but, oh, my. Anyway, she didn't often come with me to these events. I would rush back to the hotel and say, "Donna, Bob Turner just talked to me." [Laughs.] Or, "Donna, Pete Voulkos just invited me to his party." And she would say, "Oh, that's nice. I'm glad you're there." [Laughs.] You know, she was always so calm and together, like, you are at the right place; everything will be fine—keep following your intuition. That sounds good.

So the Alfred thing—I had, I think, "purposely" not applied to Alfred to graduate school. I had gotten the application form, and there was something on the application form that said I had to write a statement about what I wanted to do in the future and goals or something. And I went something like, you got to be kidding. That's way too much writing. [Laughs.] And of course, I was a child of Neri and Betty and Soldner, and they gave me these little clues about, well, Alfred is a place—I think it was Voulkos who used to say that if you want

to learn the techniques or the technology, then that would be the place to go.

I think Alfred, in my mind, because of those folks, seemed much too conservative and much too rigid a place for me. And as I said, Paul had invited me to come work with him and given me a scholarship and then later recommended for Bauer. So Alfred was just not in the picture.

But back in my brain - and that's why the McKinnell story was important. There was this other little thing that ceramics was also something else and that he loved Alfred, even though I don't think he went to school here. He had a real respect for Alfred, and that had lodged in my brain at the same time. And I knew this history of the school. So I was teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, and I was working with Norm Shulman, who was an Alfred grad, and that was interesting to me because he sort of picked me to come to work with him. I gave up an open opportunity to go to work with Don Reitz and also with Jerry Rothman, who was in Iowa At RISD they offered me a lot less money, but there was something about RISD, the art school and the East Coast, that was kind of beckoning in a way. I thought, well, that would expand my horizons. I am a Westerner. Go to the East Coast; try RISD. You know, learn something.

And then Shulman, he was the one who brought me to Alfred the first time. Somewhere in '71, something like that, he was going on sabbatical, and he wanted to hire someone to come and work with me during that period. And he says, come with me; we are going to go to Alfred. So we drove up to Alfred. That's the first time I saw Alfred. It was probably '71, '72, just before I left RISD. I don't remember where we stayed. I think we might have stayed at Val's. That's when I met Val, at his house that time.

I'm saying, yeah, so show me Alfred. You know? And I'm looking around going, really? What's so hot about this? I don't know. Just being kind of—whatever. Then we left—and Biz Latell was a grad here, and he came to work.

At the same time in that period, Ken Ferguson had come to RISD to do a visiting artist thing. He is another one of these sort of gatekeepers, so to speak. At some point he took an interest in me, and I wasn't a student of his, but at some point, I got on the list of people to call, and Ken would call me up and say, "Higby, what are you doing?" And he came to RISD, and he says, "Go to Alfred. There's a job at Alfred." And I said, "I should go to Alfred?" He says, "Higby, go to Alfred." Dan Rhodes had retired, and that's what the position [was].

I said, I'm happy. I am living here in Providence and—well, I think the connector, later on I began to realize, had to do with David Shaner, because David Shaner had been an Alfred grad, and he invited me to come to the Bray. David was quite interested in my work for whatever reason—the landscape aspect of it. I actually at one point made a piece for him that—it's called Shaner's Canyon or something. But I think he was talking to Ferguson, or they were talking together about this job that had opened up at Alfred. And I'd had a show in '73 at the American—well.

MS. MCINNES: The Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MR. HIGBY: Yes.

MS. MCINNES: And Shaner wrote the catalogue.

MR. HIGBY: Shaner wrote the little introduction of that, which was very poetic and beautiful.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, really.

MR. HIGBY: It was sort of a hit. I got letters from all kinds of people—Mary Frank, different people, about that work, which was sort of astounding to me. It was great to have the show. I was 30 years old, and that was a little bit early in a career to have a one-person show. But anyway, I'd had the show, and David wrote the thing—the intro - and I think they were just talking; so I got a phone call from Ted Randall, and he said, "Why haven't you applied for this job?" And I said, "I don't know, Ted." I said, "I got a good job, and there isn't any real major reason." And he said, "Will you come here and talk to us about it?" And I said, "Sure, I'll come if you pay my way." [Laughs.] "Get me an airline ticket or something."

So I came, and I interviewed for the job. They had just moved into—they hadn't quite moved into Harder Hall yet, but they were about to. And they were great; they were nice. Donna came with me, and we loved the countryside here, the idea, but again it was like, well, the kids are getting—they were in kindergarten, first grade. Myles was in first grade, I think. Sarah wasn't. Well, now it's time to really perhaps consider making a life. Where would that be? In the city? In the country?

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: I grew up in country, so there are some things here that seemed like I could make a life out of, and

Donna enjoyed that, although we were concerned about—it was a pretty laid back little place. Sometimes I wonder, if that was what it was like in '73, what was it like in 1900?

MS. MCINNES: Probably not a lot of difference.

MR. HIGBY: Probably not a whole lot different. [Laughs.] So, there were just some little questions; I thought, no—no.

MS. MCINNES: It still is remote.

MR. HIGBY: So, I end this interview, and the one thing I remember—two things I really remember from it: one was Ted Randall sitting behind this desk, because I think he was the head of the art school or whatever, and he was very elegant—I thought somewhat severe and very formal and had white hair and sort of his empathy—he sort of exuded a kind of intellectual rigor, and he kind of scared me. Do I want to deal with that? And Bob Turner, I remember distinctly standing on the road somewhere out near Bob's on East Valley Road talking about that, and Bob, in his wonderful way, kind of nurturing the possibility that I would come down. And I think he was the one who finally in my mind made it possible. Something about his persona, something about, well, Bob's there. There's something about Bob and his spiritual energy, his poetic energy, his intellectual energy that seemed very possible—made it possible.

Later on, I became very good friends with Ted Randall. I teach the graduate seminar now that he started. Only because when he retired, he asked me to do it.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, that's nice.

MR. HIGBY: And so he became a mentor of a slightly different kind than Bob. So, I went home, and then I got this phone call, and they said, "We forgot to introduce you to the provost." [Laughs.] Big faux pas. "Will you come back and meet the provost?" I came all the way back, met the provost for about 20 minutes, left, and about a week later they offered me the job.

MS. MCINNES: Oh.

MR. HIGBY: Donna and I had a long conversation about this and so—well, at that time, they made a sweet job. They made an offer I couldn't refuse, but I think that ultimately it was the teaching. I thought, okay, this is all the way back to the Calcutta experience. This is, you want to be in the thick of it; you want to be there. And Alfred's—it has this great history. They're in a real transition, and if they are receptive, and if you can work with them, the sky's the limit. Anything in clay could happen at Alfred. You know, anything. It was an incredible kiln room. All you need to do is go and encourage them to open the doors and windows and let it all blow through.

MS. MCINNES: I've heard from other graduate students at that time; I mentioned Graham Marks earlier, and certainly the Gills [John and Andrea] felt that there was a sense that Alfred was changing. And you are now seen as a very central figure in that transition at Alfred, where it went from a very conservative school based in technology or rooted in technology and embracing ideals of function and having more of an arts and crafts aesthetic versus one that was much more caught up with the dialogue with the larger art world and thinking of the vessel in conceptual—

[Audio break, tape change.]

—terms.

In general, can you map that arc of the last 30 years at Alfred? One of the interesting things in the last couple of years is that we've had more "sculptors" as grad students in the ceramics field than people doing functional work, and that says something. And there's more graduate students in the ceramics division who are investigating mixed media or doing ceramics in installation or site-specific work, or mixing digital media with their ceramic practice in some interesting ways.

MR. HIGBY: Well, I'll take a deep breath, because the one thing about my experience with Alfred has been this sort of extraordinary exhilaration, the sort of excitement and the sort of amazing energy, and then at the same time I think sort of an exhilaration—I'm using the E words. Combined with that is a certain kind of exhaustion, because the intensity is high maintenance, trying to sustain yourself as an artist, be an adequate educator, keep things going on. And it's always been a team of people. One person can't do this. You have to really enjoy the idea of collaboration, the idea of a team.

I think my experience may be going all the way back to my experience in high school in theater, where it was always a team. Let's put on a production in the barn. And I thought, well, Alfred's a little like that; so like, who are the members of the team? And how can you work together, and how can you create an atmosphere where

you can respect each other and give each other room to operate and sort of nurture that? Because on one side, the great thing could be you could have this teamwork together with all these different ideas and different approaches to media. Everything is possible if you have enough cross-references, in terms of people who are really into the science and technology of it, people [who] are really into some of the element of the sculptural aspect of it or whatever. One person can't do this.

I think I was a trigger mechanism in some ways. But I think ceramics is changing. I came to Alfred, but that wasn't in some ways a decision that I envisioned: I would go to Alfred and change the work. It was like Ferguson, "Go to Alfred. Ted, don't you want the job?" Turner saying, like, something interesting could happen. And so when I showed up, they were tremendously supportive. They were all - Val, Turner, Randall - I think these were the deities I had read about, heard about. They were on Mt. Olympus, and Mt. Olympus in ceramics was in Alfred. Even though there were naysayers around the country, the mountain was still in Alfred. As is true today, almost, you—Alfred is almost a necessity. It certainly was a necessity for Voulkos, because he could be the counter-culture. He could have the thing to work against. Or if Garth wants to write about the history of Alfred and how it was a little dry or a little academic, that's a kind of key that he has to use just to establish his own career.

So Alfred was then and has always been this sort of—you either have to be for it or against it. You have to have an opinion about it. You can't ignore it. So it's always been Mount Olympus. You might not have agreed with Zeus and what have you, and you could sort of say, well, I'm going to start my own religion. But there was always that rub that you needed. And so early on I thought, well, I get that picture. But what's great about it is that this is a school where the whole raison d'être of art-making is centered in this vortex of ceramic art.

I'm being offered an opportunity to be there, to sit at the table with these folks. Now, are they going to tell me what to do? Because if they do, this isn't going to last very long. Or are they going to say, what shall we do? And am I going to say, well, what do you want to do? And can we be a team? Can I bring a voice of the younger generation or some other kind of experience?

And they were incredible. Some days I think they were—they were just like, "Okay, let the kid do it." It's like—[laughs].

MS. MCINNES: That exhaustion you were talking about.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, exactly. They were saying, "Oh, man, the kid is here." It's sort of like, "He's got a lot of energy. Let him do it." And, well, if that was the thought, I was particularly willing, and they weren't throwing up roadblocks. But I remember the whole shop; everybody was throwing. So the students—you could make 25 pots and sit them on a table, and I was trying to teach a hand-building class, and it would take the students all day to make one piece. Finally I said, "Okay, we're going on the other side of the wall, so the students in my hand-building class don't have to see the rest of you stockpile this ware."

But I think at this point, all of the insights that I've used to reflect on my entire career have come together, because my work here, it's challenged me to reach for concept and understanding in the role history and tradition play in contemporary work and in the future.

Why don't we stop for one second?

MS. MCINNES: Okay.

[Audio break.]

Go ahead.

MR. HIGBY: We're still talking about Alfred.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: So I was talking about just beginning to effect a change. I didn't have any theoretical mission. I think my only premise was that Alfred was a place where anything in ceramics ought to be able to happen. So—

MS. MCINNES: That's a pretty big premise in '73.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, I guess. It just seemed right to me. I mean, there was all this space. There was facility. There were studios. They had a great history. Why wouldn't they entertain ceramic sculpture or architecture, pots, nonfunctional pots. And as I said, I think my idea of the teaching was that—well, one day when I was teaching at RISD after I'd been there for a semester, I decided to teach a class in earthenware. It's something I was interested in. I'd been doing raku, but I didn't know much about earthenware or the broader topic. So I started introducing this to my students.

One day Norm Shulman came in and said, “Can I see you in my office?” And I said, “Oh, of course.” I went to the office. He says, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Well, I decided to teach this class in earthenware; we have all this red clay.” He said, “What do you know about earthenware?” And I said, “Well, not much, but we’ll figure it out.” He said, “How can you teach a class about something you don’t know anything about?” And I said, “Well, I’m beginning to try to figure that out.” I said, “Norm, I’ve been here for a semester. I’ve taught everything I know. So if I’m going to stay, I have to start teaching things I don’t know, and maybe that’s not teaching, but the students and I are going to figure it out.”

I think my sense of teaching had always been that. So when I came to Alfred, it was like, well, the students will tell us - if we give them enough support, and if we get really interested, and if we can bring to them some information, the students will tell us where ceramics is going, what it’s going to do. I’ve always felt that way. You know, it was like, okay, we’re a team. Here’s the space; here’s the kiln room; here are the studios. We invite the students to come. What do you want to do?

I’m talking particularly about the grad program, which was sort of the definition of Alfred. There’s always been an undergrad program, and I think that program has gotten a lot better, but the main focus at Alfred was on their graduate program. And so in talking about it, I think of that and the idea of opening it up to, well, whatever the students—the world is a big place. It’s full of amazing things. I had just traveled around the world looking at all this stuff. I’d seen ceramics in all kinds of shapes and forms. So why wouldn’t we be a place where anything can happen? I don’t even know what it is. So I’m going to be here going, oh, is that what it is? Okay. Well, have you tried this, or have you thought about this, or did you see that? And, oh, well, yeah, maybe we can get some money to build a different kind of kiln. You know, it’s Alfred.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: We ought to be able to squeeze the budget another way.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: In ceramics, it ought to happen here. So I think that’s the only premise. And again, I don’t think that even that premise is bankable without the team, because you have to have someone who can ground that premise. If someone really wants to know about glazes, and they come to talk to me about it, I said, “You really need to talk to Val.” Or they wanted to know something more about the idea of, well, how to make a lid, a spout, you know, “You really need to go to talk to Val.” Or if they were in some place about sculpture or something—Ted Randall studied at Yale [University, New Haven CT]. If you want to know about modernism and the early days of sculpture, you need to talk to Ted. Then if they’d say, well, Voulkos this, and Abstract Expressionist, the sort of mid-century, I’d say, “You should spend a little time with Bob, because Bob is always entertaining; he’s always moving, and he’s always receptive. He has a point of view, but he’s always receptive, and he’s always thinking, and he’s always open to entertaining whatever is in the moment. So maybe you should talk to Bob.” The other day I got Bob Turner’s book out again because of what’s going on currently with Bob and Wayne. It’s a wonderful thing. There’s a new chair in ceramic art named after him.

MS. MCINNES: That you’re receiving.

MR. HIGBY: That I’m receiving.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: But, so I got out his book. There are several quotes of mine that he put in his book or shared in his book, and one of them was having to do with—well, he talks about his approach to teaching, and then he says something about working with Wayne, and Wayne was always certain. And if you know Bob, if that’s the yin to the yang, then “certain” could mean a variety of things, because one could say, well, that’s true, Bob was always very uncertain. So—but it was so great to teach with him. The most satisfying moments in the team were often when Bob and I would be doing the critique.

I was slash and burn at the time. I was certain. I don’t know whether I was insecure in this environment and had to assert myself. There probably is a piece of that. Often the slash-and-burn energy comes from being insecure, I think, today. But it was more that I felt that the students really need—didn’t need—well, maybe they need—they deserved—ceramics deserved a critique. For me, it was just another way of making art. And it deserved an intelligent and aggressive, at times, critique. Maybe in those days I overdid it, because I was just trying to make a point, that you can’t get away with this anymore. You know, it’s not just about, does the rim—does the foot rim not scratch the coffee table? You know, we’re going to have an engagement.

It might come as a surprise, but when I started working here in the program, the faculty would walk into a student’s studio where the student was making functional ware; that was 99 times out of 100 the dialogue. You know, the glazes run. You could do better with this. The bottom of this should be ground off because it’s really

going to scratch the table. And we might spend 10 minutes, 15 minutes max, and I might be exaggerating to make a point. In those days the sculpture and the ceramics faculty worked together. We'd walk across the hall or down the way into a sculptor's studio, and we'd spend 45 minutes or an hour, just jockeying around concepts and ideas and the problems in the work. And I'd say, you're not really giving the kind of permission that these young people deserve who are not doing that sort of mannered Constructivist art. So I was a little bit of slash and burn. Just, sort of, saying, this is serious business.

But I loved the reviews with Bob because this is the team again. I'd do the slash and burn. The student would become very upset. Bob would be standing next to me. And Bob would say, "I don't see any reason to disagree with Wayne." They'd feel better instantly, and we would move on to the next. [Laughs.] I thought, now this is teamwork. I don't feel so bad about doing the slash and burn because I know Bob is going to make it be okay.

MS. MCINNES: Okay.

MR. HIGBY: Fundamentally he agrees with me. But the slash and burn was not his style. He wouldn't do that. And that was not Val's style. I was a little more Ted's style. He was more—he brought an intellectual rigor, but the students, I think, had a hard time just appreciating it because he was older, and it was a little distant in the sense that it was very learned. The students were still—they're mud people, and they were still in a bit of a headset that to be learned was really not where you were supposed to go.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: That was Mr. Tradition and Mr. History and Mr. Intellectual, uptight. But he brought wonderful, wonderful information to them. They'd go to his seminar class; they'd go up to his studio and sit around, and he would talk for two hours about modernism and ideas and the ontological question. And then they'd all go, what was that about? Anyway, those were some of the early days.

But as I said before, the point was just to open the doors and the windows. We were going to create a context of teamwork where the students were going to tell us where contemporary ceramics was going to go. And then we were going to be a tough audience. We were going to be a good audience. We were going to study; we were going to learn; we were going to bring them information; we were going to applaud; we were going to boo. We would refrain from throwing garbage. But our job was to be the best audience they could possibly encounter.

MS. MCINNES: That's great.

MR. HIGBY: And then we would see where ceramics was going to go. And that still is my theory about it, to get a good team together. Alfred today, I think, is—well, for me, and I'm biased, but it's a wonderful place to work. The team is sensational. My colleagues are gifted and wonderful. And I love them.

MS. MCINNES: We should just quickly name them.

MR. HIGBY: Well, today, it's John Gill and Andrea Gill and Anne Currier. And what a complimentary threesome in terms of the different directions of the work and the way they think. And more recently, Walter McConnell, who's an extraordinary sculptor. I mean, we're not talking clay or rubber; we're just talking sculpture, and [an] amazing sculptor. And Linda Sikora, who's a brilliant potter and very key figure because she is genuinely an individual who can entertain all kinds of ideas. She comes to us as a functional potter, but her sense of intellectual rigor and her delight in dealing with ideas is very critical.

Without a potter, without a functional potter with that kind of mindset, we would have more of a problematic situation, because as I said, the fundamental rationale is to entertain all possibilities. She really can do that, as well as bring a kind of rigor to her practice—an intellectual rigor as well as a fine hand to the functional field. She's a wonderful addition.

So with Walter and Linda—I'm becoming the old guy now. I look back at when I started working here with the older guys, and they were—I thought, okay, later on Star Wars [1977] gave us the terminology that they were the Yoda, or they were the Jedi knights.

MS. MCINNES: Yeah.

MR. HIGBY: You know, and I was Luke Skywalker or something. Some kind of wannabe. I thought, let's see, what shall I wear to the opening tonight? If I'm a Jedi knight now, what's the dress code?

MS. MCINNES: You have to dress accordingly. Let's stop there and go on to the next tape.

[END TAPE 2.]

This is tape three of Mary Drach McInnes interviewing Wayne Higby. Wednesday, April 13, 2005.

Wayne, let's shift the conversation to the discussion involving the vessel that started happening in the late '70s and was very strong in the '80s. I think you were one of the first people, or certainly the leader, in talking about the vessel form as a conceptual object and really pairing the vessel with modern art on the same terms. And coaxing or urging or prodding people to start looking at everyday forms in a much more complex way.

MR. HIGBY: All of the work that I have, in a sense, become known for on a sort of intellectual side, the writing side, and certainly aspects of my own work, are things that have come out of teaching here in Alfred. As I said before, surveying the scene and walking into studios of functional potters and then on into studios with sculptors, and then back to my own studio, and debating these ideas in my head, trying to think of, well, what am I experiencing here, and what I am looking at in terms of what people are making?

At first I thought, well, how do I understand it intellectually myself, because my work has evolved in this direction. I knew that I was very enamored, as I said before, with that pot under glass. When I saw the Minoan pots, they weren't being used. They were symbols. I didn't, in many cases, have a clue about how they were used. They were shapes. They were forms. They were patterns. They were statements about culture. They were statements about history. As well as being visually amazing, all of the messages that they carried were kind of intellectual abstractions about how man interfaces with nature, with the world, and how man makes intelligent decisions, how work is a reflection of a human being.

You know, the supreme logic of taking some clay and shaping it in a way to hold water. It's a tool. It's the human interaction. In a kind of philosophical, intellectual way, all of those patterns of thought had a lot do with what I made. And yet there was a very distinct connection to the pots that other people made that were based more concretely in function. And so how do you create the vocabulary for that? I didn't know.

But as I said, I'd walk into the students, and I'd say, it's time for us to be more rigorous in our conversation about the relationship of this pragmatic functional dynamic and this other element that artists are bringing to it in order to couch it, to reveal it, to extend it. Then sometimes it was clear that we were making things that had nothing to do with function except in some sort of esoteric intellectual sense. Has that always happened in ceramics? I had to find out. So the writing that I began to do was based on—this is what writing has always been to me. I need to figure out something. So I'll just sit down and dump my brain on a piece of paper, and it'll be totally confused, and then I'll try and edit it, and I'll see if it makes any sense at all.

MS. MCINNES: I write a lot like that. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: And I think writing has just been—I need to get a grip. I need to find out. I really need to solidify what I think about it. I reserve the right to change my mind, but I've always given myself permission to have an opinion in the moment. Well, okay, this is what I think about this now. Now, I might change my mind tomorrow. I reserve the right to be more informed at a later date, but this is part of my sense about certainty with Bob and —I thought, I could be certain now in any moment. At this moment this is what I think, so let's work with that, and then we can change it.

I think the writing about the vessel was an effort to understand this place that, to me, was between the functional thing and the sculpture thing. It had gone on forever in one shape or another; either in a piece that was put into the tomb that was never used and just carried all of the correct psychological messages. One primary difference was that the contemporary vessel was very American in that it was this assertion of individual persona. It was a vehicle for the "I am" in ceramics, so one could embrace tradition and history and comment on all of that, but at the same time comment in the context of "I am." I'm going to reveal it to you this way. And so Voulkos would tear a hole in it and poke some porcelain through it, and Betty would make it way too big, the pillow pitcher.

MS. MCINNES: Yes. I love it.

MR. HIGBY: Okay? You know, that handle is not going to facilitate anything. And Ron Nagle, well, I know it looks like a cup, but there's no bottom in it—or Turner. I went to a show once with Bob, and I'm looking at this work - and his practice came out of a very serious involvement in functional work, but I remember once looking at one of his pots, and then as you would always do, you go with the pot, and you look down inside it. And it's got a crack running all the way across the bottom. Just opened up in the kiln, and that was fine; he didn't bother to patch it. I'm saying, well, Bob doesn't care. So how do you put words to all of that? They're doing it. And I think, yeah, I'm doing it. You know, I'm putting the landscape image outside and inside, and I'm asking you questions about maybe there is no such thing as outside and inside, and maybe it's all just one great continuum, a non-dual phenomenon. But you'll destroy the whole message if you fill it full of spaghetti. So what am I doing?

In 1970, early in the '70s, somewhere along that line, I was in Bloomington, Indiana, doing a workshop, and I was in the university book store. I found this book called Ceramics, by Philip Rawson [New York: Oxford University Press, 1971]. I must have found it, it might have been '74, or I don't know. It was very soon after it

was published. Of course, I bought this book and I started reading it. I went, yeah, that's it. You know, memory traces.

And what I loved about his book was that there was—it was kind of tough at first. There was a kind of arcane, art historical, philosophical rigor to his language. And I thought, good for him; we can use this for ceramics. You have to read this paragraph twice. And I thought, this is good: slows you down. Pay attention. I said, ceramics could use some of this. Also that it wasn't a text that was particularly biased, I didn't feel. It wasn't Eurocentric; it wasn't a kind of treatise on the tea ceremony; it wasn't about the moral attributes of the folk potter. It was ecumenical. It was sort of, well, we'll just talk about ceramics.

I don't think he ever was particularly—he didn't really want to get into the contemporary dialogue, but he accessed historical work across a broad range, and so much of what he put into words was just—I think we all have had that experience. You'll read a book, and you'll say, that's exactly what I'm thinking. There are the words. There are some words here that make so much sense to me. And so his thoughts and his text became, again, another kind of trigger mechanism. I guess in a sense what it did was he helped me give language to a contemporary practice and to give language to what the vessel was. Then I began to write about this spot in ceramics. In a sense it's always been there, but what's new about that? What's now about that? And how is that an interface with postmodernism or an interface with early stages of modernism or with issues in sculpture or with issues in functional art?

I just began to write about it and talk about it and to use my colleagues as examples: Bill Daley, Betty, Voulkos, Nagle, Bob. It was just that I was also trying to write about my own work, and I was trying to distinguish—to help myself distinguish, well, where were the artistic issues in function; where are the artistic issues in sculpture; and what is this other sort of place that is in some ways uniquely ceramic? There's a rigor there, and I'm packing that as a way to give ceramics another kind of cachet in some sense as an art practice. Because we were all—and still are - aware of this sort of sloppy confusion that people bring [to] this dialogue about ceramics as an artwork. But if you make it out of rubber, it could be. Oh, cut me some slack.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: I mean, it's just so ridiculous. I have opinions about that that come out of the institutions of art and just, sort of, protect your territory. But anyway, that's where that conversation started. You sort of innocently - if you could use the word "innocent" - you're just writing it, and you're just putting it out there. And you're not looking for a fight. But I got into some fights about it [laughs].

MS. MCINNES: There was this exchange with Warren MacKenzie in the mid-'80s?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah. He didn't like—

MS. MCINNES: He didn't like your word "vessel" that you were using.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah. I made this sort of naive attempt to redefine the word "vessel" against history and artist historical practice and everything. I thought, okay, well, why not? I can walk into a museum and ask for a show; I could also change everyone's vocabulary. Well, that was sort of a nonstarter, but I toyed with the fact that the vessel was going to be different than the pot. Just as a way to start the dialogue. And that the vessel was this thing that really was the nonfunctional pot. And then I sort of dipped into the territory, I think, that really annoyed Warren, because at one point I wrote about how Hans Coper was confused. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: What an audacious thing to say.

MR. HIGBY: I had read someplace, or maybe it was Warren who told me, that Lucie [Coper's wife] really used to put flowers in Hans Coper's pieces. And I thought, gasp, what a horrible thought. That she countermanded his whole philosophical projection about the vessel. And that he was bringing this kind of very conscious rigor to shape coming out of modern sculptural practice, and that he wasn't particularly interested in the fact [that] you can put flowers in it. Never thought so. Anybody who spends that much time doing that—well, that's my speculation. I get to speculate if I want. I don't know the truth. Never met Hans Coper; only looked at his work—think it's incredible.

At the same time, he never did anything—he may have, but the work that I have studied does not indicate that he was going to close off that possibility. Where Voulkos would tear the hole and push the porcelain through, or Betty would make it too big, or Ron would take the bottom out of it.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: Or I'd paint the landscape totally on the inside and the outside. Coper never indicated.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: He never took a stand, from my point of view. And that's all I was saying. But I was pushing the envelope by saying this man was confused. He probably wasn't confused. He just wasn't interested. It didn't cross his mind to be that aggressive in his point of view.

MS. MCINNES: Neither did the Natzlers [Gertrud and Otto], for example.

MR. HIGBY: Right. And I think the work is similar. And so I was just trying to add another dimension of rigor and to say, as an artist—I mean, if we were talking about painters of the same era, we'd go to the mat.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: They wouldn't get away with anything.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: We would be speculating about the whole thing.

MS. MCINNES: Absolutely.

MR. HIGBY: All I was doing was saying, if we want ceramics to be taken seriously, we have to get serious about the speculation, so here's a question about Hans Coper. And I think that's where I really annoyed MacKenzie, because he came out of that—these were pretty much gods and goddesses, although I think Leach, in a more strictly functional premise, is more where he is. His classic comment to me, or one of them, which was in a letter to the editor, was, I was into this trivia—this classical trivia where you sit around in the monastery and count the angels on the head of a pin to find out how many angels there are on the end of the pin. And so then that, of course, that was my opening.

MS. MCINNES: Yeah.

MR. HIGBY: So I wrote back saying, hmm, I always wanted to know what an angel was. The outcome of that, which is sort of a funny little piece of history, was that there was the NCECA coming down the pipe that was going to be in Kansas City [MO]. This was obviously—now you'd have to get the date part. I don't know when it was.

MS. MCINNES: Probably the late part of the '80s; '86 or something?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, maybe '86. So Ferguson called me up and he says, "Higby," he says, "Will you sit on the stage and talk to Warren?"

MS. MCINNES: I'd love to have been there.

MR. HIGBY: And I said, "Sure." Then I guess he called Warren and asked him the question, and Warren said, "No way."

MS. MCINNES: Interesting.

MR. HIGBY: So that didn't happen. So what happened was, Ferguson called back and said, "Well, Warren doesn't want to do that." He says, "Will you curate the collection at the Nelson [Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO]? And we'll have a show of your choices and his choices." So I said, "God, that'd be great."

MS. MCINNES: Yes.

MR. HIGBY: "And then you'll write about them, why you chose them." So we did that show, and I think they published it in Ceramics Monthly or someplace. I went to the museum and—I probably shouldn't—well, it's a true story. I spent a week suffering, trying to go through the Nelson to look at every ceramic object they had and decide whether I wanted it to be in my show, where I could pick a dozen pieces or something. And I remember going down to the vaults where all the tea bowls were in these boxes and saying to this young kid, "Well, unpack all of those; I have to see them." [Laughs.]

So I was sort of pushing my limit. And then I got word that Warren had come to the museum for a day or two days and left telling them they didn't have what they should have, and he sent examples from his own collection for the show. But what I admire about that is that his pots are great, and he just had a point of view. I'd celebrate that because that was certainly giving me a lot of room to operate. And I thought, bring in—

MS. MCINNES: Again, even just to work against.

MR. HIGBY: Put him on the team.

MS. MCINNES: Right, right.

MR. HIGBY: You know, because he's challenging me to really think about what I think, and he's challenging me to dig deep and to be as assertive about my belief system—in ceramic art - as he is about his. And who's right? I don't know who's right. That doesn't matter. The point is that the future of ceramics takes its course based on the richness of the dialogue and the quality of the work. And again, the next generation tells you where it's going. So your job is just to debate the issues, make the work.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: Challenge each other. Have a rigorous and rich engagement. And so I really enjoyed that. At one point the editor, maybe it was Bill Hunt at the time, wrote me a letter and—or called me on the phone and said, "Don't you have something else to say? The subscriptions have gone up."

MS. MCINNES: We want another fight.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah. "Can't you think of another fight to pick?" I said, "Oh, I didn't pick a fight. We've just been talking about it." I got letters.

MS. MCINNES: I can imagine.

MR. HIGBY: I got letters. I got letters from potters all over the country.

MS. MCINNES: Well, it's interesting the passion with which people working in ceramics have. I still hear in conversations with various people very sort of short but passionate and negative comments about, quote, "dunking your head in slip," referring to something from 1971—

MR. HIGBY: That was Jim Melchert [in Holland]. What a great idea.

MS. MCINNES: And as someone who's trained in art history as a modernist and also Postmodernism, this type of boundaries that people have, or set of perimeters, always astounds me. I mean, it always takes me aback.

MR. HIGBY: Well, one side is, the boundaries might be a philosophical point of view, or it might be just a fortress that you hide out in.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: You know, and in a way I'm not the least bit against boundaries if the boundaries have to do with an articulate philosophical point of view, and one which entertains—it's sort of like nationhood or ethnicities or religious practice. I can be a Buddhist, and you can be a Christian, and that's cool. And what I enjoy most about that, in some sense, is that we can have a dialogue about these different ideas about God or the universe, and by conversing and entertaining each other, we inform each other in this extraordinary way. So I think having opinions or points of view is kind of great. All I'm saying is like, well, I would certainly have dunked my head in the bucket of slip. It wouldn't take me 10 seconds.

[END TAPE 3.]

And then I would sit there talking about the fact that there is a constructed ceramics called function that has a great deal of validity, and it's another philosophical place. But I want to understand that place. I want to understand where the art and function is. I want to understand where the art in dipping my head in a bucket of slip is. And the great thing about it is we can do both of those things. So it's not a question of saying, well, if you dunk your head in a bucket of slip, that's art, and if you make a functional object, that's not art, and that's where the boundaries become these, just, very knee-jerk protectionist fortresses.

MS. MCINNES: Or it's said with a kind of triviality that they're not giving a sense of importance to.

MR. HIGBY: Well, they're not willing to entertain what the ideas are that might be embedded in that sort of seemingly playful activity. Well, sure it's playful, and that would be part of the reason to do it, and then there's, wait a minute; we could—oh, this takes us a lot of different places. So I think from my point of view, my job as a teacher has been to be willing to entertain all kinds of possibilities and just take them and work with and see if I can learn from that, and that we can learn together about that. The outcome of some of the letters and all of the dialogue about the vessel was I wrote this piece called "The Intellectual and Sensual Pleasures of Utility," where I said, okay, you guys, now I'm going to write the other one, because thinking about the vessels really helped me figure this out. Now I know that I can tell you what I think about this. You know, there is no art in function; there is no art in nature. The art is in how you create a context for it.

So the brilliance of some of the functional artists in their ability to bring this incredibly intelligent and poetic context to use is amazing. I need to access it from that point of view. The vessel's a different thing, and just let it be a different thing. There are all kinds of ways to make art.

So I guess that's all part of my Alfred experience, as well, in trying to just entertain the possibility.

MS. MCINNES: Right. Since we're talking about your writings, you're an artist who's done quite a bit of writing, and the artist as author has been an honored position in the field of ceramics. Have there been any other artists who have written criticism that's been influential on you?

MR. HIGBY: Well, when you ask it that way, of course, I thought about the Rawson book. I thought about The Unknown Craftsman book by [Soetsu] Yanagi [Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972]. Those are the two premier books that deal with craft and ceramics and some of this territory that we've been specific about. For a long time I resisted Yanagi's book because of the way it was kind of used as an apology for ceramics, and particularly functional ceramics. I didn't understand that; I didn't like the apology part of that. But in more recent times—and I use it in my seminar—I think it's a very savvy and beautifully written book. His access to issues of the Buddhist ideas of beauty and some of the deeper philosophical questions are really, really important. It's a way into some ways of thinking that I think have been endemic to ceramics, certainly Western ceramics and the Leach influence and the orientalizing of Western ceramics, that we need to look at.

But in terms of my own writing and in terms of the larger art world, I've enjoyed—well, I guess the first person that comes to mind is Robert Motherwell.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, really?

MR. HIGBY: I've read a lot of things that he wrote. He was an interesting figure, because he was this intellectual voice in a moment in time that was pretty anti-intellectual. The Abstract Expressionist thing was sort of like, just do it.

MS. MCINNES: And macho.

MR. HIGBY: Voulkos always had a little bit of that. Although when you cornered Pete, he could be extremely articulate and knew exactly who he was and what he was doing and where it came from. Sometimes in his earlier statements there was less of that showmanship and a little more just getting down to it. I had a wonderful morning with him in my studio where he talked to me about my work and about ideas.

MS. MCINNES: So was that on his recent trip to Alfred?

MR. HIGBY: No, that was—it might have been his first trip to Alfred. It was sometime in the '80s. But anyway—and I was kind of surprised, because I didn't know him then.

But anyway, Robert Motherwell, he wrote a lot, and he edited some journal—what was the journal—I can't remember the name of it now. And then there's a book that's kind of a collection of his writings that was really a key text at one point for me. I don't know when I read it; sometime in the '80s. I loved what he said—"love" being the operative [word]. He wrote this thing about the early artist, the artist as the formative young person, how art became part of their lives, what the formative experience was, and he wrote about how young people—and I think he used the words, "have a lot of love to give," something along those lines—that artists in general have a lot of love to give, and that as young people they don't know that, and they don't know how that happened, but they find materials—they find paper or crayons or clay or wire or sticks or a musical instrument, or whatever it happens to be, and they give this passion and love to that material, and the material gives it back, because it registers the energy and the love, and that giving back to the artist vis-à-vis the matrix, the material, it's what finally creates this sort of groundswell of commitment.

He just wrote about it so beautifully, and I thought, oh, does he know what he's doing or not? This guy is really smart. I loved the fact that he was a very credible artist whose work I enjoyed—the collage paper things in particular—and he was so articulate, and he was so smart about kind of primary things. He wasn't just making a case for his work; he was trying to unpack primary things like, how do artists come into being in the first place? I have always thought that he was one of the special people in the art world in the sense of being able to make art but also being able to articulate ideas in art, from the inside, because he is an artist, so—

MS. MCINNES: There are two other books I'd like you to comment on that have come up a couple of times in your writings: Henry Varnum Poor's From Mud to Immortality [A Book of Pottery: From Mud to Immortality. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958]. You mentioned at one point that he was your hero. I wanted you to address that. And the second one was George Kubler's The Shape of Time [The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962], which certainly is fascinating in terms of how it forces us to rethink our ideas of progress and to reevaluate history.

MR. HIGBY: Those are two good examples, because one is a kind of ceramics text and a sort of how-to-do-it text almost, and the other one is a much bigger philosophical text about the ideas of art. And I think they're important to me for different reasons. The Kubler text was important to me because it gave me access to some thoughts that were important to me and ceramics relative to tradition and timelessness of certain aspects. I think I also liked it originally because it was compacted; there weren't very many pages, and they got down to the action. [Laughs.] And, again, when you're looking around, you have to look outside the media; you have to look for the bigger connections. You have to find some relationship between music and dance and plays and painting and sculpture and architecture and—reading about architecture has helped a lot to give me ideas about how to do the critique on function.

So I think sometimes ceramics or crafts doesn't look far enough into the bigger realm of ideas.

MS. MCINNES: I've been thinking this year during my sabbatical that architectural writings and current architectural theory is really a key for that—for the conversation now and in the immediate future for ceramics.

MR. HIGBY: And I think there are folks—certainly the artists and certainly, I think—you asked me yesterday about Ceramics: Art and Perception; there's all this writing. I'm not sure these people have read [Immanuel] Kant or [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel or [Arthur] Schopenhauer. A lot of it's there, and it's sort of like when I sit down to access Cubism with my graduate seminar, and it's just—it hasn't dawned on them that their practice has been so informed by this that it's just totally taken for granted; it just is. It's in the artistic fiber of their body.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: To get them to go back and recognize it, so there is some of this kind of—the evolution of philosophical thought in aesthetics or art that's just in the fabric, but no one bothers anymore to go get grounded again—oh, that's where that came from. Well, that's interesting; let's play that by one more time.

So anyway, Kubler's is the kind of book that digs into the bigger realm of ideas, and I found that really helpful in grounding what I was thinking about ceramics. What I loved about Henry Varnum Poor was that I discovered his work before the book and his work as a ceramic artist—he was a painter, and he could draw and paint. He did all this work in ceramics that accessed this interface, which I think ceramics is a lot about. I just identified with him on that basis, having a real interest in painting, and also in earthenware, because he was a real fan of earthenware. He'd talk about the Etruscans, and he'd talk about red mud. When I came into this field, it was a stoneware world, and I came—

MS. MCINNES: A cone-10 world. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: A cone-10 world, and I came from that Minoan place. I wanted to make earthenware, and earthenware was really passé. And yet this man, Henry Varnum Poor, who was really a painter, the artist who made these wonderful things, loved the earthenware. And he writes about it in his book. He was also somewhat of a poet. He gave the technical side a sense of how it was really part and parcel of the poetic side. In his book he's able to weave that together. The illustrations in his books are little paintings, little drawings that he did of his work and other things. So you just look at the illustrations, and they're beautiful little drawings. And he writes this great thing about the Etruscans and about red earth. I think today, and I thought then, that From Mud to Immortality, that has to be the best title anyone ever came up with—[laughs]—for a book on ceramics, and then it was going to be a book on kind of contemporary practice and the sort of private goings-on of a single artist's studio.

And so there was something in his book that countermanded a little bit of the kind of more—I guess in Leach's book there's a little ranting and raving going on, which, again, I support in a sense, but it was a little bit too much "thou shalt do this," and—

MS. MCINNES: The commandments.

MR. HIGBY: Poor's book is like, "It's so beautiful"; "It's just so wonderful"; "Mud to Immortality." And that appealed to my romantic side perhaps a little more.

MS. MCINNES: The last question I have for you today—we'll talk more tomorrow—is that we've spent a lot of time talking about your work in the '70s and the '80s and the issues of function. But thinking about Kubler and others, your recent writings seem to have a different tone and interest. Part of it is the writing about your relationship with history or your delving into different cultural practices. But the other which interests me is suggesting that ceramic work has a set of values that is not seen in mainstream art, or values that are perhaps under-appreciated in our culture.

I remember at one point you talk about how to look at ceramic art, saying that you need to slow down. Is this

“slowing down” something that perhaps we need right now? Or at another point you contrast Jeff Koons’s work with Adrian Saxe, and you point out how they both appropriate images, but you contrast the cynicism of the postmodern gesture of Koons with something very affirmative by Adrian Saxe. Do you see your interests now going towards thinking about what ceramics has to offer rather than trying to suggest ways of thinking about it in terms of ceramics as a modern art object?

MR. HIGBY: No, I don’t—as you talk about it, it sounds interesting. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: Well, your writings are interesting. [Laughs.] I should mention that you’re working on an anthology of your writings, and I was very happily reading a number of essays that you’ve written recently.

MR. HIGBY: Am I acquiescing to something?

MS. MCINNES: No. [Laughs.]

MR. HIGBY: Or am I engaged in something—

MS. MCINNES: It just seems like that your engagement right now has shifted.

MR. HIGBY: I think it’s probably like my work in the studio. When I launched into this whole porcelain thing, everyone—not everyone but many - thought that I had really changed my work and changed my ideas, and it didn’t look anything like what I’d ever done before. It all seemed very much part and parcel of the same thing. It didn’t seem that different to me. The look of it was different, but the ideas, sort of where it’s evolving from, were very much things that I’ve always been working with. So that’s probably true in the writing as well, just seeing it from the slightly different perspective.

o you grow tired of things sometimes? Yeah. I try to be patient, but I guess I’m a little impatient, or I’m a little tired of the sort of constant grasping for some rationale that makes ceramics part of this ongoing art world, quote, unquote. That doesn’t seem to be, to me, what’s interesting about ceramics, one way or the other. There are many kinds of tracks of artistic endeavor in the world, and I don’t think we take enough time to look at some of the richness that exists. I spent two weeks staying with my friend who is a classical violinist. There’s a whole world going on in classical music and the evolution of classical music, and ideas in early 20th-century classical music that just—oh, it’s just fascinating.

And some of the debates are, in a way, similar. There’s this sort of classicism, and then there are people trying to create new music and – I don’t know. Human beings have come up with so many different ways to think and deal with art, with the idea of expressing themselves in writing or—and sometimes the more edge or the deeper the work is, the more esoteric it is from the general rank and file of the entertainment factor. So I don’t know how many people read poetry, but I think there probably is art going on that is just not quite as accessible and doesn’t try to be. It doesn’t try to answer all these questions for the marketplace or the media, and I’m just sort of—I don’t think “tired” is the right word, it’s just that trying to constantly find a way to hook ceramics into something else doesn’t seem to be the most interesting thing about it.

MS. MCINNES: Right now.

MR. HIGBY: And so, what is interesting about it? Because it deals with issues that maybe the institutions of art think disqualifies it. On the other hand, maybe those issues are important issues, and maybe we just have to—well, maybe we can do whatever we want. But if you have a passion for something, then trying to understand it—and I don’t think we need to constantly come up with reasons it should be somewhere else than it is; we need to continue to reinforce our understanding of what it is, and if we become savvy enough and articulate enough and can encourage an audience that wants to be in that place, it’ll take care of itself. Well, just in terms of marketplace, we went from the $25 raku box to $85,000. [Laughs.] So someone’s paying some kind of attention. I know it’s not the 100,000 or the million-dollar painting, but I just don’t think that’s the most important issue.

So what is this curious thing about ceramics? One of the hooks for me more and more becomes what I’ve been sort of harping about, probably all the way along but more so even lately. We did the “Material Matters” show over at school, and it was, again, to look at this issue of how a material, a craft—by that I mean a skill, a particular way of using language, and a particular kind of context, and a particular material phenomenology - matters in terms of what the outcome is as an idea, and that the art world—quote, unquote—or the institution of art, has erred, in my opinion, too much in the realm of idea, the exclusivity of idea, and has actually—

MS. MCINNES: Without the embodiment of the idea.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, but it’s actually just a matter of the obscurity of the obvious. I mean, you’ve got to make it out of something. And as soon as that happens—and I don’t care whether you have an army of technicians

make your piece, the element of craft or skill—it's still a voice in that work, and it articulates the idea. So the problem I find in ceramic criticism also is that there's not enough attention to the way the synergy operates. There's not enough attention to the how with the why. Now, I don't need to have a glaze formula. I could. I don't need to have a how-to book, which facilitates some kind of hobby practice.

Not that those how-to books aren't really helpful and move ceramics along, because there are a lot of people who can really turn that into gold. But ultimately, the critique is about the relationship of those parts and the whole notion that idea can come out of a practice, out of just squishing your hands into a material, that you don't have to have an idea a priori to action. As I said in relating this story of Motherwell, I don't think young people had an idea; they're just going for it. And the feedback begins to go, you know, what?

So we don't entertain enough of that whole picture. We spend so much time trying to create an apology for ceramics as art, I just don't care anymore. I don't know whether I ever cared; I just was trying to figure out, well, where's the art? The fact that those of us who are ceramic artists are passionate about this material and the possibilities of it, from earthenware to porcelain, and we're passionate about processes, from temperature ranges and phenomenologies and—well, for some artists that's a dead end; for other artists, they can do amazing things with that. But you have to sort of look at what's in front of you.

I don't know, we're probably long at this point, but that really opened a thought of my idea about the critique in general and my notion of being a teacher and being there with the students. It goes back to another one of my heroes I haven't talked about. [Laughs.] Philip Rawson, Kubler, Henry Varnum Poor, and Federico Fellini. [Laughs.] Do they come in the same package?

MS. MCINNES: Well, they do in your head.

MR. HIGBY: In my head they do. What was that? I found Rawson in the '70s, and I saw Satyricon [1969]. What more do you want? When I was a freshman I saw La Dolce Vita [1960] 12 times. [Laughs.] I don't understand this film. So one night, I think it was near the time Satyricon was in movie theatres. Fellini was being interviewed by Dick Cavett on his talk show. I tell this story sometimes to my students. They have no idea who Fellini is; they have no idea who Dick Cavett is.

So Dick Cavett says to Federico, he says, "So, Satyricon," he says, "Everybody wants to know what it's about. You've got these naked people standing in this pool of fire eating grapes. What's it mean? What's it about?" And Fellini, he just took a pause, like that, and he said—and I'm getting closer to the television, turning up the sound—he says, "Just go see the movie." I said, wait a minute! [Laughs.] That's no answer. Give me the answer. And of course, thinking that he has to have direct access to the Delphic Oracle, I'm turning the answer over in my head. It's like a Zen koan. It's like, can you clap with one hand? Just go see the movie. What's he telling me? So, I don't know what he's telling me. I make it up.

And it finally dawns on me, from my point of view, what he's saying to me is just, leave your baggage at the ticket booth. Buy your ticket and be vulnerable. Just don't bring anything with you. Just sit down and watch the movie. Don't try to figure it out. Don't project, don't project, don't project. Just be there. Find a way to open yourself up to whatever is being presented, and if you'll do that, you'll get it. It'll come to you. You'll understand it. That's my interpretation of "just go see the movie."

So I'm going back to the classroom; I said, okay, that means that I'm walking in here to your presentation, and I don't think anything. I don't know anything; I don't think anything; I've never done ceramics before in my life. I'm just going to unzip this little opening in the center of my chest and say, okay, and I'm going to try to be—now, you can't really totally do this, so it's a discipline to try and just become neutral. When you're in a situation like I find myself so often—you're doing a critique every 30 minutes, or it's every 10 minutes—[inhales and exhales]—okay, it has nothing to do with the last thing I saw. It has nothing to do with anything I think. It just is here.

And I've always found that if I could be just a little vulnerable in that way, something will come to me. Something will come through. I'll channel something. And then something will begin to spark, and then some dialogue will start. I find that remarkable. Sometimes I'll leave a critique—I'm just so high because we've gone to someplace that I just wasn't thinking about, and the student has provided me and themselves with this opportunity to entertain a poetic or philosophical notion and something about skill and materials and—I mean, that's why I like going over there.

MS. MCINNES: Let's stop today.

MR. HIGBY: Okay.

MS. MCINNES: We'll talk about your studio practice tomorrow because I want to really get into that, especially your practice during the last 10 years. And we'll talk about pilgrimages to mountains.

MR. HIGBY: Well, when you asked me about the writing, something probably has changed also as a result of what is nothing less than profound experiences in another culture. And that probably has gotten me thinking a lot about how we do things.

MS. MCINNES: Thank you.

[Audio break.]

This is Mary Drach McInnes interviewing Wayne Higby on Thursday, April 14, 2005, for the Archives of American Art.

Wayne, what I'd like to focus on for our conversation today is your recent studio practice, meaning the last 10 years. You recently mentioned to me that looking at your current project, entitled Earth Cloud [2005], that you could reflect back on your entire career. So why don't we start there? Why don't you say a few words about Earth Cloud - what that is, and what that means to you.

MR. HIGBY: I have to get my thoughts together. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: It's a very large project.

MR. HIGBY: Earth Cloud is the largest project I've ever done. The title actually came to me almost immediately when I started conceiving of it, and that hasn't happened before. I thought, well, it would be its working title. But it sort of describes the premise, having to do with the creation of what in my mind would be a mitigation between the Earth, gravity, mass, weight, density, a kind of physical sensuality, and something more atmospheric or more ephemeral. The idea of trying to turn clay into a cloud—[laughs]—seemed to me maybe an impossible thing but maybe something that could happen as an effect.

Now, I have no idea—the piece isn't finished, so I have no idea if in the end, so to speak, when it's installed, if the audience will pick up on the idea of the Earth and the cloud. It's not about a pictorial condition or a specific sense of image. It's more about a feeling; it's more about a condition that I'm trying to establish—again, a kind of mitigation, that it probably is neither one nor the other, but the sense of it may begin to encourage the viewer to speculate on that, and the title will give them a little hint. [Laughs.] Not too subtle.

MS. MCINNES: And I should mention that Earth Cloud will be an architectural installation for an entire wall of the Miller Performing Arts Center at Alfred University. So it's a very large-scale project.

MR. HIGBY: Yes, it's large. It's not, in some other sense, that large. In the process of thinking about this piece, I went to see the Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon [Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany]. That's large.

MS. MCINNES: [Laughs.] Everything's relative.

MR. HIGBY: Well, I was saying that I had spent some time at Angkor on this trip when I was 20, and it comes to mind now because just recently I paid a visit to Angkor Wat, and it was, of course, 41 years later, but this particular place had been something that I carried with me for a long time. And it was amazing to see it again. It was a little bit like the experience I related maybe yesterday or the day before about looking at the Minoan pots as a man of 60, thinking about the young man of 20.

Angkor was a similar experience. The architecture, the mass and weight and structure of shape and dimension that was overlaid with this extraordinary patterning, this extraordinary delicate sort of carving that, of course, was mythological narratives, religious narratives. But the astounding part about that for me was something—actually, it's quite simple—that the decoration, for lack of a better word, could in fact lift the stone from gravity and could move it into a more intellectual or ethereal realm, and that the power in this architecture was the oscillation between this incredible mass and sense of gravity and sensuality of material, and then this sense of the lifting of that, of the moving of that into some more spiritual realm, some more speculative realm, and patterns which caught light and cast shadow and reconfigured all of this massive stonework into a kind of moving, spatial, atmospheric, ephemeral condition.

I don't know that I could bring words like that to it when I was in graduate school—but I began making work in which the patterns that I would draw and invent would be embedded into the material of the object. So I would roll out these coils and press them into these molds, lay clay over them, and when the clay was lifted out and shaped into a pot, the decoration, that which would normally be added, was actually embedded into the object.

Recently when I was looking at Earth Cloud, I realized that, oh, this has some of the same quality, the same basic condition, energy, if you will, of things that I made in graduate school in that it's not essentially pictorial. You can't perhaps at first sense any aspect of imagery, and much of my work in the interim has carried a rather clear kind of image premise.

So there's a very strong sense of patterning - repetition and system - in the Earth Cloud piece. At the same time I think there's a very strong notion of the landscape. The title Earth Cloud—I've never titled a piece before or while I was making it, but that seemed to be a way to express something about the idea for this piece. But it's still unfolding. It won't be until it's installed that I will see it. I haven't been able to see it, so to speak, in its entirety in any sense while I'm making it. So it continues to be held in my head, and I continue to speculate and to hope that it's going to turn out the way I envision it.

But it's based a lot on this same idea of taking something that's very gravitational, very physical, something that is of the body and sensuality - that being the porcelain from which it's made - and to then try to engender a feeling of atmosphere, or the ephemeral, the idea of the sky or the clouds, something that's moving and you can't quite get a fix on. So that sort of lifting of the gravitational into this other speculative space is fundamentally what Earth Cloud is about.

And that really is what my work has been about from the beginning. I think the big raku bowls were always about the sense of the object, the sense of the sensualness of the material, and fire and color, and then the sense of illusion, a kind of space that would extend beyond the physical limitations of the object. And that really is a kind of – it's not kind of; it's essentially what the human experience is, that we're somehow this combination of the physical and the intellectual, the physical and the spiritual, that we're housed in this skeletal structure with musculature and size and weight, and as you get older, it gets a little harder to move it around.

MS. MCINNES: [Laughs.] But intellectually it might be a lighter version.

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, at any given point you could have an out-of-body experience. I mean, you could be anywhere you want to be. So there's this wonderful oscillation, which involves a tension between that physical thing and that sort of intellectual space that's available through the imagination. You can be a time traveler; you can be anything in your imagination.

So my work, I think, has evolved in the context of that premise, the bowl as a sort of figurative condition, much like what I felt about the Minoan pot: that it was a sort of symbol of the human being. The introduction of the landscape was a context, a place, a specific kind of place, the Earth, the land, that sense of my connection to my upbringing in the countryside, riding and looking at the horizon. And then the imaginative, the totally imaginative, out-of-body experience that was achievable through illusion, that could take you wandering into all kinds of space beyond the physical.

So Earth Cloud sort of—again, as I said, it's a kind of summation of some of those themes, on a grander scale. It's about 56 feet wide and 30 feet high. We batched—

[Audio break, tape change.]

—40,000 pounds of porcelain. We turned my studio into a little folk art brick factory. We made porcelain bricks, basically, and I cut them with a sharpened paint scraper. So I've been cutting through 40,000 pounds of porcelain.

MS. MCINNES: And is it the first time that you had a regular assistant for this project? Otherwise you've been working alone, haven't you, or have you had assistants?

MR. HIGBY: At one other point I had an assistant, and that had to do with another architectural project. Just the necessity to have someone else as kind of a conspirator to help you with your artistic doubt as much as with your physical limitations technically.

I did a piece called Intangible Notch [1995]. This was for the corporate headquarters of Arrow International [Reading, PA]. The CEO of Arrow International is a man named Marlin Miller, who's become a close friend. Definitely I would say he is the principal reason I'm able to even conceive of doing this kind of work. He's been a wonderful collaborator. He is the individual who gave the Miller Performing Arts Building to Alfred University. And it is in that building, the main stairway and entrance to the C.D. Smith Theater, that Earth Cloud will be installed.

So Earth Cloud is clearly a piece related to a very specific architectural condition. It's a piece that's been inspired by this collaboration with Mr. Miller, who is an extraordinary man. I mean, he has given me so much courage and permission, and challenged me so much to reach places or go places that I think I could imagine going but never thought I would ever go. He just keeps saying, "Well, what do you need? What do you want?" And probably one the key factors - because of all the other things I'm involved in - is he's not worried about deadlines. So when it's done, it's done, and I can keep working on it. Earth Cloud started in 2001 after a conversation I'd had with him. And I did the fall of 2001 doing a lot of drawings and developing the idea.

And then there was a kind of chaos that entered my life. My son Myles was in a serious motorcycle accident in

2002 and my wife battled cancer for a good period of time until she died in early 2004. So in the process, I've been working, when I could, on Earth Cloud, but it's taken longer than I thought it would take. It's very much about this collaboration, and fortunately, I've been in a situation where I could work with really interesting architects. The building is close by the studio, and yet the architects are internationally known architects. The firm is called Kallman, McKinnell & Wood. I've been working principally with Michael Kallman and Bruce Wood—wonderful people. They have been also collaborators, coming to my studio, making gentle suggestions that have inspired me to make it bigger—[laughs]—or take on a little more than I thought I could.

I think in the end it will come down to about 20,000 pounds of material on this wall. My studio assistant says, "Well, just think of it as four four-by-fours, like that big truck you drive." Or, "just hang those trucks on the wall." But I want to see if all that material then can be in a place where it will move, where it will sort of transcend and become this more atmospheric entity. And again, that sense of mitigation, material and atmosphere—material and ephemeral.

So I am hoping for that. The early indications—[laughs]—suggested it might go there.

MS. MCINNES: I think it will. It is really fascinating. And Earth Cloud, as you have mentioned, is made out of porcelain, and you shifted over to porcelain after a very particular moment in the early '90s when you went to China. You made it a kind of a pilgrimage to Gaolin Mountain, is that correct?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, that opens the conversation to the China experience, which has been a kind of awesome piece of my recent existence. Yes, I had thought of working in porcelain before, and my wife, Donna, would from time to time say, "Wayne, why don't you work on porcelain; it's so beautiful?" I never could find any specific rationale for doing so. My work has always been grounded in experience.

If I have an experience of a certain kind, then somehow I have permission to engage in some way, and although intellectually I could say, oh, porcelain; that would be great – or certainly looking at the history of ceramics and thinking about materials and looking at other people's work who worked in porcelain and thinking, gosh, porcelain is really wonderful. But I never felt I had my own distinct experience that would trigger that shift in material.

But in 1991 I was invited to China to the first conference that the Chinese put together dealing with recent ceramic art. This was a conference that dealt with ceramic art, ceramic design, ceramic education, the interface between education, art, and industry. And serendipitously, I just was invited. I don't really know why that invitation came to me. There were six people from the West invited to come to China to participate in this conference—no reason to turn that invitation down. [Laughs.]

Chinese art, Asian art, has always been a factor in my work. I think most American ceramists would say that. But in particular, I have been interested in Chinese landscape painting, and there is a particular vase in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. I call it the "dragon vase"—

MS. MCINNES: I love that vase.

MR. HIGBY: And that piece is very, very operative in my idea of surface and shape—of the sort of fusion of surface and shape. So I had been, I think, inspired, as I say, by Chinese art, but I wasn't thinking much about contemporary China. I knew about the cultural revolution and a little bit about those things, but I wasn't very focused on China.

So I got this invitation, and I thought, oh, okay, I'll go there; it was just simply to come and show my slides; there was no other raison d'etre that I could figure out. So I got there—[laughs]—it was funny. I would come back from the conference every day and call Donna on the phone, and she had gone out and bought a guidebook. I didn't even know where I was. She said, "Well, you're in Beijing, and these are the things you need to see." So she started giving me a list over the phone every night of where I was and what I was supposed to do.

MS. MCINNES: And she is in Alfred Station?

MR. HIGBY: And she is in Alfred Station. I would go, "Oh, the Forbidden City, what's that?" But we were really locked into this conference for five days. So I got up, and one afternoon—I don't remember which day it was at the conference—and I started showing my slides and talking about my work and about Alfred and showing the studio and the horses and the kids, and—[laughs]—you know. I thought I wasn't going to do a heavy-duty intellectual wrap; I was just going to share a cultural exchange kind of situation, and lots of pictures of my work.

And this audience of Chinese captains of industry and artists—

[Audio break.]

MS. MCINNES: You are in China.

MR. HIGBY: I am in China; I am showing these slides—[laughs]—to mostly an audience full of gentleman; I would say a couple hundred gentlemen from industry and art. As I started showing them, they all started talking. And I thought, this has never happened before; at home people are polite, and they are quiet, and I thought the Chinese are extraordinarily rude. I am trying to communicate here. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: It would be like giving a nightclub performance with people eating and talking.

MR. HIGBY: So they are looking at each other; they are talking, and after a few minutes, they started getting up and coming down to the front of this little auditorium and taking flash photographs of what I am projecting on the screen. So I got through this thing, and it was amazing; there was something about my work that they recognized. There was something, and I'm sure it goes back to my own appreciation of Chinese art. And then there was also something new, something different, so there was this sort of communication that all of the sudden began to happen, and a rush of conversation.

The short story about all of that was that at that point then I got all kinds of invitations to come back to China, to do a lecture tour, to visit schools and factories. A photograph of a bowl appeared on the cover, about six months later, on the cover of the only fine arts magazine at the time published in China.

I came back, and I kept getting communications from China—from the Chinese, and one offer was from a sculpture factory and school in Jingdezhen and a school in Wuhan. They asked me just to come back to come to Jingdezhen and talk to the people who—craftsmen who worked at the factory, to talk to the students at the school. This was the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute. And then they would help me see China. So I was to get a guidebook and figure out my itinerary and all of the things I wanted to see. Then I would spend a few days with them, and then they would see that I saw everything I wanted.

So Donna and I went together to China for about eight weeks. We went to Jingdezhen and had an extraordinary time. I didn't know what I know today about Jingdezhen and its history and the invention of porcelain. And all of that—thousands of years of information. Last year, they celebrated their one-thousand-year birthday. A thousand years ago, they were declared the imperial kilns of China. I became the first foreign national to be made an honorary citizen of the city of Jingdzhen. So a lot happened—[laughs]—between that first visit and me becoming a citizen of Jingdzhen.

But it was an extraordinary visit—that first one - and the students were wonderful, and the people were so generous, and engaged, and interested. And then we traveled all over China. We would fly to Xian, and a car and a driver and a guide would show up and take us where we wanted to go. They were just incredibly generous in helping us see China. And I have been going back every year since, working with Chinese artists and working particularly in Jingdzhen with the artists there and doing whatever it is that I could do to help facilitate contemporary Chinese ceramics.

But at one point in one visit, soon after I had gone that first time—it might have been in '93, somewhere in there - I was taken on a journey to Gaolin Mountain. This is a mountain that, at that time, was maybe a half-a-day's drive out of Jingdezhen. They keep improving the roads—[laughs]—you could probably do it in 20 minutes today. But it was a great journey. And they took me to the mines where the porcelain—the kaolin - was discovered and dug and became this empowering material for Chinese porcelain.

So I got my little chunk of gaolin, or as we say kaolin, and it is down in my studio, kind of a little enshrined spot. As soon as I got my chunk of kaolin from Gaolin Mountain, I thought, okay, Wayne, you have permission now to work in porcelain. [Laughs.] You have had an in-life experience.

And so I thought, what would I do, what would I make in porcelain? Well, the first thing you should do is forget everything you know about ceramics; just pretend you know nothing. What would this material do? I just made solid lumps of porcelain, blew them up in the kiln, and glazed them, and just messed around with it. And after a while, it began to gel. I had made a little visit to Lake Powell out in Utah and Colorado during this time, and I started doing a lot of drawings and images of the lake and the cliffs, and those drawings began to appear as kind of raised line or pattern.

Again, interestingly enough, I suppose—not surprisingly, the drawings are in the matrix of the material, not something added.

MS. MCINNES: Yes, it's fascinating; it's really wonderful.

MR. HIGBY: But it comes out of the material. So when you look at these pieces, at first you just see the slab of stuff, and often it's cracked and crazed, and the glaze is dripping and running. Then the more you look at it, the more you see that there is actually an image in there – these raised, very delicate raised lines of water, of cliffs,

or something.

MS. MCINNES: And you get that by pressing the porcelain—

MR. HIGBY: Yes, I would carve the drawing into a block of plaster and then press the porcelain into that so that when you raised it up, the lines would be imbedded into the clay.

MS. MCINNES: I have looked at a couple of the Lake Powell pieces, and what is fascinating is the quality of that drawing. I mean, sometimes it seems observation-based; other times it seems as if you have used, perhaps, Chinese patterns.

MR. HIGBY: Nothing specific there that is a direct reference to anything Chinese, but I think that the quality of the space, the quality of this material in relation to the drawing, has a feeling of Chinese landscape painting—also because it is fundamentally monochromatic, and the drawing is such that there—isn't much mitigation in the way it's drawn between near and far, which is more typical of Chinese painting. It's sort of a device of how the space is moved and engaged that gives you distance and relationship to edge.

That, I think, is just—just comes out; it's not intentional necessarily, but it came out in those pieces. I'm not sure that this is the most successful body of work I have ever done. I think the last series of big raku bowls were perhaps a certain kind of pinnacle of my practice, and I have been—

MS. MCINNES: And what is that time period?

MR. HIGBY: Those were in the '90s—1990. I don't think the artist is the best judge, but I think the porcelain pieces have led me along, and they have been very instrumental in encouraging me in some sense to make Earth Cloud. I think Earth Cloud may be—and hopefully will be - a real centerpiece of my studio practice; that wouldn't and couldn't have happened without those porcelain pieces.

But also they allowed me to sort of move in a direction more related to sculpture, shall we say. They helped me move into an area that became somewhat more abstracted, and led me into the practice of cutting and moving the materials that is essential to Earth Cloud.

MS. MCINNES: And you use a painter's tool?

MR. HIGBY: Just a sharpened paint scraper. You know, it was just the way, and if you have ever worked with porcelain, just cutting into it is such a jazzy moment. I think it wasn't so much throwing it. It was like if you had a block, and it was the right wetness, and you just took a sharp tool and cut into it, that is how irrational artist practice is—that that would be the fundamental reason to do something. I just, "Look! Wow!" [Laughs.] Let's see if we can make something where we can do that over and over and over again.

So I guess that, in a nutshell, says something about [the] ceramic artist's makeup and passion for material craft—a process which is something that is so wonderful that it inspires a whole sort of operatic piece of work. One of the wonderful things I get to do is just to go to my studio and get those blocks of porcelain and cut into them. I have always been interested in—I have probably mentioned it several times in our conversation - but the relationship between process, material, idea, and that—Earth Cloud has been such a teaching and confirmation of these ideas that just cutting into porcelain and looking at what results and then asking the results to sort of teach me something about what needed to happen next, and then taking that cut and reconfiguring it or saying yes to it in a certain way.

So there is a kind of following and a kind of observing, and a kind of nurturing something that is very much not about the imposition of a control but a being in the midst of it and fusing with it. I think my experience in raku relative to that is the firing, where I would spend hours glazing this piece, and then there would be a moment when the piece would be pulled from the fire, and a few minutes when it would be outside the kiln in this reduction material, and there would be fire and smoke, and it was that you had to really get in on it at that point; you couldn't create, necessarily, a rational structure for that; you had to participate in the center of that and into the moment, and sort of respond to what is going on.

So that sense of the fire as a place that required this sort of sense of the dance is very much about the cutting of the porcelain and following the material and becoming this great sort of dance team of material, and glaze and fire, and artists, and—so that is also a really strong philosophical position perhaps: if I have a personal thing to say to my students, it often revolves around that kind of thing—stick with it, be patient, pay attention. I used to say, craft was the art of paying attention, so pay attention and follow; let it take you places. You don't know where you might go, but if you pay attention and allow it to teach you, you'll really learn something—something important will happen. And so that is a kind of element in my teaching that grows directly out of the studio practice.

MS. MCINNES: I love how you describe the making and the coming into being. I would like to go into two different directions. One, I would like to ask you about source material, because landscape is such a prominent feature in your work throughout your life. Certainly you have been influenced by your childhood landscape and your landscape here. I want to talk about, perhaps, sources in painting, either Chinese landscape painting or American Luminism or 19th-century landscape paintings. And then, two, I would like to talk about looking at the work when it is done.

But let us start with the landscape, because you do have this wonderful dialogue over your career with landscape that is rooted in direct experience, but also Chinese landscape painting. And I think you have looked pretty hard at some American landscape painting as well.

MR. HIGBY: I have. I am not a scholar in this area at all. It really is another reflection of that trip to the law library and finding the books with the most pictures. If you ask me a specific date or a specific artist, I probably couldn't tell you. But I know the painting, and there are certain paintings at every—[laughs]—museum in America—that when I go, I go right to that painting. So I have a collection of my own; it's just shared by all of the various museums around the world that I have been to.

I went specifically with my wife to St. Petersburg so we could spend five days getting up every morning and going to the Hermitage [State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia], and during that period of time, I was collecting Casper David Friedrich. There is a room of his paintings in the Hermitage, and some of it I'm not sure about. I have a propensity to be very romantic, and the paintings are very romantic.

But there is this wonderful longing, often, in his painting that I identify with, and I'm not sure what that longing is about; it has something to do with a longing for a connection with the universe that resolves doubt or resolves artistic doubt, or whatever that tension that we have as human beings—things that religion do for us as well, I think. But there are some of his paintings that have an extraordinary silence, and the silence is really powerful for me; I love that silence. And I don't know what that is; it's very confirming to me, maybe because I grew up essentially alone.

So the other painter who is sort of my all-time favorite, and I look at his stuff a lot. Well, it comes out of the Luminous paintings, and Kensett—

MS. MCINNES: John Kensett.

MR. HIGBY: There is a similar quality of light, and space, and silence in his work—oh, I'm trying to think of the other's painter's work. I can't think of his name right now. That is funny, isn't it? I told you—[laughs].

MS. MCINNES: Well, there is a—Fitz Hugh Lane is also one of the Luminists.

MR. HIGBY: He does the ones at the haystacks.

MS. MCINNES: No, you're thinking of Martin Johnson Heade.

MR. HIGBY: I'm thinking of a different painter. Oh, he has such an extraordinary sense of light in his paintings, particularly—

MS. MCINNES: [Frederic] Church? [Thomas] Cole?

MR. HIGBY: Particularly at the end of the day—no, I think the Church paintings and the Cole paints are little too—it's like [Albert] Bierstadt—

MS. MCINNES: Right, dramatic, theatrical.

MR. HIGBY: Just too theatrical. I sort of love Sound and Lights at the Pyramids. I'm thinking of George Inness.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, yes, sure.

MR. HIGBY: I think Inness is perhaps my all-time favorite of the painters of that era. There is a painting—I think it's in the Boston Museum [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA] that I have always identified with—and I don't know the history of this painting, but there is a big valley in it, and there is a ridge in the foreground, and there is a lot of sky, and the light is coming in sort of mid-, late afternoon—beautiful, beautiful light. And there is a figure in the painting, and it looks like he is wearing a graduation outfit. He looks like he is in the robes of a scholar, and he is walking on the ridge into this space.

I have always identified—[laughs]—somehow with this painting and just the sheer beauty of it. Many of his paintings have a quality of color and a quality of time, and I think, again, a kind of quality of longing. I have always enjoyed, in this intense, slightly melancholy way, the light at the end of the day. There is a melancholy

to it that I find very poignant, very beautiful—a certain sadness, but certain poetry in that sense of the light.

It is nice where I live, because right here where my studio is, I have some piece of property, and I can walk around and look at the trees and look at the light on the patterns that are in nature—the repetitions of the patterns in nature as they are touched by light. That is something that has been very important to Earth Cloud—trying to capture something of that kind of feeling.

When I was traveling and showing slides, so often in China after my lectures, people would come up and ask me about Taoist and Buddhist religious theory, and whether I was a practicing Taoist or a Buddhist. And I didn't understand what they were talking about. I mean, I knew enough about Taoism and Buddhism to think, oh, well, that is curious—maybe. So I started at one point delving into that more purposefully, and it seems in some way that my studio practice and things that have come to in my work, just through the work, have a very distinct connection to some of that metaphysical theory. I find that more and more interesting.

MS. MCINNES: There certainly is a contemplative quality to your work.

MR. HIGBY: Right, also I think something that has always been very important to me is this balancing of opposites—this fusion of shape and surface, and with the bowls, this very intense, careful sort of drawing, and sort of creation of space, and then this momentary instant in the fire—something calibrated, something intuitive, something instant.

Also in that work, and perhaps fundamental in all my work, is a fusion that I have always felt between painting and sculpture and what we refer to as craft. I can remember an article written about some of these box pieces I made where the critic asked the question, is Higby a painter, is he a sculptor, or is he a potter? And I always thought, well, do I have to choose? I just want all of this at any given moment. I want somehow to fuse this sense of the history of the decorative—the history of the craft object, painting, George Inness, the Chinese landscape, materials, and sculpture, and architecture. It all has been compelling to me, and naturally, I think, would find it's right into the work.

So sometimes I get—oh, I don't know, it's sometimes just a feeling of cosmic sigh—it's so tedious that we have to continue to make choices, or that the art world feels it's necessary to create boxes to put you in. But at the same time I think the effort to create categories help to dice it up, to think about some things—does it fit here, does it fit here, does it fit here? Oh, well, it doesn't really fit; it sort of takes in all of those parts and reconfigures them. So that is interesting in and of itself.

MS. MCINNES: You bring up this issue of how one defines a work of art. In the early part of your career, you worked with a recognizable vessel form, an open form. And then you did a number of sort of box forms, and then you really moved in a different direction with the Lake Powell memory pieces. You moved into a much more traditional sculptural format, although fairly small scale for sculpture, but still a three-dimensional solid object that one would walk around and look at.

Did you find that there were some interesting shifts in how people critiqued your work when you moved, say, from a vessel form to sculpture? Did you find that people had a difficult time because you were proceeding with what seemed to be an organic process in your studio? For the more recent pieces, the architectural pieces, did the critical reception change? Was there a new audience for that work? And did one audience fall away because you shifted?

MR. HIGBY: Yeah, I think that that did happen. I think there was a sense at one point, when the porcelain pieces were first presented to the public, that I had done something radical. And on the one hand, that was interesting. The notion that an artist in somewhat late, mid-career would totally reinvent himself. There was a certain kind of celebration in the fact that, well, he got out of that rut. [Laughs.] Now he's somewhere else. But at the same time, there was this—on the part of certain people who had been interested the work—kind of disappointment.

And then I noticed there began to be a slight shift, in some newer response to the work. Some people got very excited about the work who hadn't been totally there before. Some people have continued to be very supportive and interested in the work. And then at that point, as you say, when that shift began to happen, a lot of questions got raised. Some people started to distance themselves, and others came to the fore.

I think by and large, and this is a gross generalization, but we all tend to be interested in what we're familiar with. All artists have this experience, who are working on the edge of anything. They present something, and there's this sort of either reaction, no reaction, an embracing, not embracing. So many times I've done that, where I make a shift in the relationship of a shape, or the bowl would change, or I would do the box, or something else would happen. I've usually been fairly successful with the response of the audience, but often people would say to me, "Are you making any more of those?" Or they're always interested in what you've made, but they're not completely sure about what you're making. I figure that's a good sign.

MS. MCINNES: That is a good sign for you. I think you're right, we're all much more comfortable with what we know and what we can define and how we can sort of receive information.

As you've moved into a more purely sculptural arena, have you found a greater acceptance from museum curators? I've noticed that you've had a couple of really terrific catalogues in the last few years. Perhaps that's the accumulation of your studio practice over decades, but perhaps it's because of the shift out of a traditional pottery form and into a type of format that's "fine art."

MR. HIGBY: That's interesting. I don't know. I think that's possibly true. We see a lot more ceramic sculpture being made today, just in general, than we did when I first started working in ceramics. I think sometimes the critic—the audience can come to sculpture in a way they can't come to something that is so blatantly a pot, because there's already sort of this embedded kind of question about the pot. And, yes, I think that that's in part the case. There've been a number of museums who acquired the porcelain pieces, and I wonder if that isn't also because there's a certain reputation behind the work, that the work previous to those pieces was accepted. At least within the craft genre and within the decorative art genre. So I think if the porcelains had fallen flat on their face—[laughs]—no one would pay any attention, or they would just rather go and bemoan it behind your back.

MS. MCINNES: You're talking about a change in format, but you're also talking about the change of clay body, and porcelain has traditionally been valued higher. And even the celadon, even perhaps the monochromatic surface is more familiar.

MR. HIGBY: I don't know. There's still people looking for the bowls. I don't make them now, but I continue to get calls and questions about those pieces and there's quite a secondary market for those pieces. I don't know. The other thing I think it would be important to say about the porcelain pieces is that they're very, very much connected to the idea of the tile. And they're very much connected to something that grew out of Intangible Notch, where I'd made this architectural piece with these tile elements.

And I think, very much like my practice all along, I have continued to visit certain paradigms of ceramic art, the bowl being one of them, the box, the covered container. And now, I think in those pieces, it's the tile. It has some reference point continually to the classics of ceramics, and that's—that's a conceptual piece. Of course, they're sculpture, but I think content, in addition to that dimensionality, has to do with references that they make that are embedded in ceramic art. And critics who are savvy begin to sort of understand that, well, it's not just simply that I made a move into some kind of open-ended dimensional place, but it's really a step that also is very reflective of the practice.

With the porcelains, of course, I'm also making reference to the history of the material. A further study of those pieces, I would assume, certainly for me, would take you into the whole pantheon of the history of porcelain and things that have been made in porcelain and the reference to celadon, which is very much a part of the purpose, conceptually, for me in those pieces. I mean, I didn't choose—

[Audio break, tape change.]

—celadon. I didn't invent a celadon glaze not knowing that it was going to reference history.

MS. MCINNES: Right.

MR. HIGBY: So as much as they're about just the kind of sculptural conditions in ceramics, they're also carrying a lot of other connections for me and, hopefully, for the viewer, who again, has the willingness to go deeper into the work and find that—ceramic art also has a history and a connection as much as painting and contemporary sculpture. Artists are continuing to appropriate the lineage and the history of their medium. And to me, I want to make ceramic art. [Laughs.] As much as it comes directly out of the material experience, it also comes out of these things that I see and the things that I've loved and been inspired by that are in fact the history of ceramics. The Minoan pot is a pot that has the landscape on it, and I haven't gone very far a field from that. [Laughs.] It's a pot with a landscape on it.

It was, from the very beginning, the idea of what the symbology of that was, the iconography of that, the sort of message that is sent about the human experience and how ceramic artists were tied to this very fundamental kind of relationship of tool and life and hope and dream of human beings. And that's something that's embedded in the work. That's something that's very important to me. When I stand back and look at what I made, are those things there? Are those threads, those connections, still built into the work? And now being able to go into the realm of architecture is such a great place, because it expands the practice, but it still is within the realm of those fundamental interests, inside and outside.

Working on Earth Cloud, trying to come up with a premise, thinking about the building and how it's brick. It's a brick grid on the outside. How do you bring the brick grid and fold it into the inside? How do you create

something that fuses itself with a space, with a shape? The introduction of the design for Earth Cloud is very much about how it's going to be the dragon vase, how it's going to be this pattern, fusing itself in some kind of synergy with structure and the space and the articulation of the volume that exists within that architectural framework. So it's a much more operatic piece, but it's very much clearly tied to the whole history of my studio work.

MS. MCINNES: That's great. Your work is so affirmative in how you speak about it. Very good. That's quite different from a lot of Postmodern cynicism or the irony that one sees in a lot of recent work. So you approach history very differently than other contemporary artists.

MR. HIGBY: Recent things in my life have deepened my sense of a certain kind of knowing in the realm of not knowing. [Laughs.] Maybe that's called spiritual domain, but I have a lot of faith in human beings, even though we do a lot of crazy things. And I have a lot of faith in young artists, in the folks that I have the privilege to work with. I have worked with so many gifted young people, and they are doing such great things, it's putting good into the world in a way that goes all the way back to my little epiphany in Calcutta and New Delhi and Banaras.

It's extraordinary how I've had the opportunity to work at Alfred, to work in a medium that I love, to have this relationship with young artists, who have gone on into the world and done so much good teaching, making extraordinary work that they're sharing with each other, that they're sharing with people. If you do that, if you find yourself in that realm of experience, you can't help but believe that human beings are okay, that we're going to be able to continue and to resolve our issues and to make peace with our demons.

So that's a positive thing I know; it comes out of my experience. Maybe I'm Pollyannish; maybe I'm ignoring something. I know what's going on, but I choose to bring those thoughts into my mind and to take them into school with me and take them into the studio with me. You can't be an intelligent person without a certain dab of cynicism. Cynicism is related to the doubt. Cynicism is related to, like, "Oh, really, so prove it." But I think cynicism can also be overwhelming. And that sense of the naysayer and just this cynicism as a modus operandi, to me, isn't fundamentally that interesting. It's clever; it's often witty; I get it.

This, I see that you know this about this and that, and yeah, and it's pretty, perhaps - I think it's too easy to be cynical. And I choose a tougher challenge—[laughs]—to say, okay, even at the dawn of the 21st century, after all we've lived through, after all I've lived through, we can still just take cynicism and put it in its place and say, that's really great; let's do more of that.

Maybe part of it is also that I'm at home with this material and with this genre of work that's kind of jabbing at mainstream society. It's sort of jabbing at the entertainment factor; it's jabbing at the cynicism; it's jabbing at the sort of culture of material and moment. Maybe I'm reading that from its history, too, and how the works of art are alive today, that sense of the romance of art and its history and how it appears to us today. We've separated out all of the negatives that surround the great Sung Dynasty. What would I have thought if I had to live sleeping in the dirt without any food, being chained to my wheel? I don't know.

But the work itself is such a powerful affirmation that comes through all that. Or when you go to Angkor. Angkor Wat has become a site. It's a destination. When I was there 41 years ago, there were 10 people wandering around the jungle looking at this stuff. And today there are busloads of tourists there. The economy of Cambodia is, like, totally Angkor, but what's it about? It's about how these temples are an affirmation of the human spirit, and thousands of people want to just go and look at it.

What's left? After everything, what's left is the art. And the art it so affirming. You can see that need that people have just to go there and imagine it and see it and take home a picture of themselves standing in front of it. That they're saying, isn't mankind amazing? And look at the art that affirms the spirit. So that part of it makes you feel very positive about working with other artists and creating whatever it is we create. But we get to look at it together, and maybe someone will get to look at in the future.

MS. MCINNES: That sounds great. Would you like to end here?

MR. HIGBY: That's fine with me. You know—[laughs]—I think the interview is something that is sort of indicative, I'm sure, of every artist that gets interviewed. And for me, once I get on a roll, it's hard to stop. [Laughs.]

MS. MCINNES: Well, I could sit here all day and talk about issues surrounding ceramics.

MR. HIGBY: I'm just excited about what we do. I'm very pleased that I've been able to have the life that I've had and to do this work and to be with the young artists and the amazing colleagues that I've come in contact with through my professional life. So I tend to just enjoy talking about it.

MS. MCINNES: Well, thank you. I do want to mention that at this very moment, there have been a number of

honors that have come up in your life. We've talked about personal chaos in your life, but in the last year, there's also been some wonderful, positive things that I know of, at least professionally. You mentioned the honorary citizenship of Jingdezhen, which was a great honor. Last month, in March of 2005, you received the lifetime achievement award, I believe from NCECA, the National Council of Education for Ceramic Arts.

MR. HIGBY: The honor of the Council—what a great moment.

MS. MCINNES: [Laughs.] And John Gill sang to you.

MR. HIGBY: Yes. That will go down in the history of NCECA, I think. No one will remember who got the award, but they definitely will remember John singing to somebody.

MS. MCINNES: And tomorrow afternoon you're receiving the first endowed chair of ceramic art, the Robert Turner Chair at Alfred University. That's a wonderful accomplishment. Congratulations.

MR. HIGBY: It's amazing to me, that one in particular, in the way it brings some kind of circle—I think it's a double helix, me spiraling along with my colleagues, and all of us working on something that we believe deeply in. When I came to Alfred I thought, history has been made here. That was the reason to go there, to sort of nurture that history or to honor that history or to add a little something to that history. It's only occurred to me lately, and certainly at this point with this new recognition of ceramic art at Alfred, that we're actually in a moment of making history.

This is a historical moment, where we've come to a place where we can really honor Bob Turner, where Marlin Miller again is facilitating through his generosity this recognition of the legacy in ceramic art at Alfred. And that however it is that I happen to be in this moment, to be the first recipient of that, I don't in any way think it has so much to do with me. It has to do with what we've done together here. It has a lot to do with the celebration of Bob—he's a very special artist and been very special to the history, recent history of Alfred. So it's an honor for me, just to have my spiral spiraling together with these people. And I'm glad that I accepted the offer to come to Alfred. There have been moments of doubt and struggle, but certainly it's been a really formative experience in so many ways and to have access to these great young people who come here.

Of course, the other thing that just continues—on Sunday, I'm in Washington, D.C., where the Renwick Alliance, connected to the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, is honoring me with the Master of the Media Award.

MS. MCINNES: Really? Congratulations!

MR. HIGBY: So, I'm taking another little bow, and all of this is certainly making me think. But what it's also related to is that ceramics - in terms of the contemporary American aspect of ceramic - is that it's moving on. We have lost Voulkos; we lost Viola Frey; recently lost [Kenneth] Ferguson. I just learned that we lost Marilyn Levine.

MS. MCINNES: Oh, yes, last week.

MR. HIGBY: People pass, and that is okay. I know that there have been struggles involved in each of these passings that are hard to understand. But what it does for the field of ceramic art is it catches us up and says something about, well—it says something about who we are; it asks us questions about who are we. It also challenges us to move on, to embrace the legacy of these people, but also to recognize that ceramics lives, or as Ferguson would say, "Your best pots are still in the mixer." And those of us who are still here and who have made contributions are now being recognized. We're keeping the flame alive, and the recognition is a kind of recognition that ceramics is still alive, and there are people who have made contributions, and we're now beginning to recognize their contribution.

I think that is healthy; it's healthy for the field to move forward, to enter a new era of maturity, and to have a legacy of some of these seminal makers who change contemporary history, and then to recognize how that has matured and moved into the present, and to look more carefully at the younger generation's art to see and to understand that there is work there that is equal to the masters. So honor the masters, but pay attention to what is going on, because there are some wonderful things happening.

MS. MCINNES: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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