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Oral history interview with Michael Simon, 2005 September 27-28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Simon on September 27 and 28, 2005. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in Colbert, Georgia, and was conducted by Mark Shapiro for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Michael Simon and Mark Shapiro 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

MARK SHAPIRO: This is Mark Shapiro interviewing Michael Simon at the artist's home and studio on September 27, 2005, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

So Michael, where were you born, and when was that?

MICHAEL SIMON: I was born in Minnesota, born and raised in Minnesota. I was born in 1947 out on the plains, western Minnesota, a little town called Springfield.

MR. SHAPIRO: And where is Springfield, exactly?

MR. SIMON: Springfield is really across the state, near South Dakota. I don't think that I went to Minneapolis until I was a senior in high school. Or maybe-no, in high school. It was a farming community where I lived. No big metropolitan areas. There weren't any metropolitan [laughs]-it worked out. My father was a farmer, and I grew up on a farm. So I spent a lot of solitary time as a child, out on the plains.

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you expected to help on the farm?

MR. SIMON: Well, as a child, I wasn't really expected to help. I did little things, like feeding the chickens. But I was really was not old enough to drive a tractor or operate any equipment. I fed the animals. We kept pigs and cows and chickens, and I helped a little bit with the milking. But actually, we'd moved from the farm by the time I was old enough to do real work.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was there art in school-was there any sense of art as a thing you might do?

MR. SIMON: I can't remember that there was any art in school until much later. As a high school student, I took art the last two years. We actually had a great art teacher, named Angel Lillo, who came from Spain. I was lucky enough to have him the first year he was in Minnesota. He'd just come over from Spain. He's a sculptor. A real artist. And he came to teach us in Faribault, Minnesota. It was such a good break for us. You know, children who didn't really know anything about art, to have a passionate sculptor come teach us what art was. It was a singular situation. Very lucky.

MR. SHAPIRO: You worked with all kinds of three-dimensional materials with him?

MR. SIMON: Well, [we worked with] what was available in the high school, which included plaster and clay. And we did make sculpture. And even though he didn't know how to work on a potter's wheel-in fact, they had a treadle wheel; I cannot explain why the treadle wheel was there, but they had a treadle wheel.

And he liked me. We got along very well, and he told me one day that if I wanted to work on the potter's wheel, that he would help me, and he gave me some books that would tell me what to do. He said he didn't know how to do it himself. But he let me work on it. And I did that. I did it-I'm surprised now that I did it. But I did it. I just kind of taught myself how to throw, from reading.

MR. SHAPIRO: You were able figure it out?

MR. SIMON: I learned how to center, apparently, because I actually made some pots. My mother still has one of them. [Laughs.] I mean, it's very thick. But it's centered. I'm always amazed when I see it, because I made it with so little knowledge.

MR. SHAPIRO: What books did he give you, do you know?

MR. SIMON: I do not remember. There wasn't much available. But they probably were some basic beginning throwing books. But I can't remember what they were.

MR. SHAPIRO: Glenn Nelson [*Ceramics: A Potter's Handbook*. New York: Rinehart & Wilson, 1966]?

MR. SIMON: Glenn Nelson doesn't talk about how to throw, does he? I tell you, I can't remember. But that's one thing that happened.

And the other thing that was important, I thought, was that he took us to the museums, which was the first time that I had ever been, first time I thought I wanted to go, because my family-well, there was just no connection to, I don't know what you'd want to call it, a sophisticated art world, or a-especially to a contemporary, cultured art world; there was really no connection.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did they have objects in the house that they considered aesthetic?

MR. SIMON: Yes.

MR. SHAPIRO: That you also would call-

MR. SIMON: I would just call them decorative. [Laughs.] It was just very, you know, modest. Let me see. What would have been important? There were some pretty nice pieces of furniture that I think had been passed down within the families. But no paintings. Photographs, mostly, and mostly photographs of family members, were what decorated the house. Some small religious symbols, Catholic. That was the extent of the art.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did he encourage you to go further? Or did you go to the university to study art?

MR. SIMON: So why would I go to the university to study art? Who knows at the time? I was really interested in it, though. I liked making things. There was just the mystery of getting feeling out of an object. Somehow, I had been moved by it. And it made it interesting. So I paid attention to art. When I went to school at the University of Minnesota [Minneapolis], the whole art scene in Minneapolis was available, including the Walker Art Center-and the Art Institute had a great collection of all kinds of things.

MR. SHAPIRO: You entered as general liberal arts?

MR. SIMON: I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had some little thoughts of doing architecture. I had actually been taking some architectural drafting when I was in high school. It was a kind of dream, I guess. Not a very specific dream. But then, as time went by, the first year I wasn't very good student. Actually, I wouldn't say I was a great student anyway, all through undergraduate school, but I started to take art classes about the second year that I was there, and then it may have been late in the second year before I took a ceramics class again. Again, I just say as a continuation of high school. And it was very good to go into the ceramics studio. There were a lot of good students who spent a lot of time there-the studio was open 24 hours a day. It was casual, but there was a lot of enthusiasm, and it was immediately attractive to me.

Within a short time, it just felt kind of serious. I felt like I could make things look kind of like I wanted them to look. I could affect the way they looked, and I seemed to have more of an understanding for it than I had for painting or drawing or printmaking, which was the way I had mainly been working.

[Audio break.]

MR. SHAPIRO: This is September 28, 2005. I am Mark Shapiro, here with Michael Simon in rural Athens [Georgia]-is that what we said it was?-in his studio.

So, Michael, you were talking about what it was like to be at the university at that time.

MR. SIMON: Yes, the University of Minnesota. When I think back about the way things developed in my life, it was so important. I can't say enough about how my life changed in those years I was in school there.

The situation in the ceramics studio at the University of Minnesota was very open. I think that it was coincidental. I just think this all kind of happened-just coincidentally happened at one time. There were a lot of students who were, somehow or another, really engaged by ceramics and pottery-making. And it was an exciting place to be. The studio was open all the time and-well, let me tell a little bit about the teachers that were there.

The main teacher-and the person who set up the ceramics program there at the University of Minnesota-was Warren MacKenzie. And he had been teaching at that time. I came-I think I took the first classes in about 1967 or '68. So he had been teaching there for 17 or 18 years at the time. And he really didn't have to spend a lot of time with the students anymore. I mean, he had spoken enough; he was always anxious to get out to his own studio to work.

That was something that was always remarkable about him. And he became my-he was a father figure and my

mentor, and continues to be. I still hear him in my brain, and I still think about him whenever I have to make decisions. He is one of my-he is my touchstone; he is the place where-he just is the figure that I think through. He was very important to me. I didn't know at the time, really, I wasn't conscious at the time of Warren's value. We weren't really physically close when I was there at school, but the contact was crucial.

And Warren opened the door; he led all of us there, I think-believe that pottery could be really an expressive form, a place to work where you could have the reward of being able to put forth your feeling. And so it let us take it really seriously. I mean, that was really the beauty of Warren's teaching, I think, was that, if for nothing else, then the feeling of his dedication and how much he saw in the pots. He had ultimate confidence that the pots could carry his total self, and that was what we saw.

So that was a great thing to have contact with. It was an unbelievable thing for a Minnesota farm boy to have this kind of contact. It was revealing, and it opened up a huge world that I don't know how I would ever have come in contact with without having been there.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was it completely a different feeling than at any other studio in that department?

MR. SIMON: Well, yeah, for me it was. I suppose some of that was just the response to being able to do the work in the clay. Somehow the clay was right and making the shapes was right. It went deeper than something that I wanted to-that I should say that I merely wanted to do, because I just felt involved with it. It moved me. Yeah, that was why it was different.

Well, Warren was different because he was so driven. He was a good teacher, and he took responsibility to expose us to the process of making things. But he also was deeply involved in his own work, and he really-he didn't hang around school. He had his class time, he would do his work, and he would go home and work in a studio. He was dying to work in the studio.

Now, most of the people at school, that taught school, hung out at school. They did a little work, but they didn't seem to have the same motivation.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was his own studio life accessible to you as a student?

MR. SIMON: Not immediately, but I think I said that he had been teaching for 18 years. Later I remember him saying that he had never had a class, he had never had anybody before go out and try to make pottery, in 18 years of teaching. And for some reason in the group-the few years that I was there-I think there were eight or nine people who went out and have continued to make pottery their whole life.

MR. SHAPIRO: And that is Wayne-

MR. SIMON: Well, Wayne [Branum], Mark [Pharis], Randy [Johnston], Sandy [Lindstrom, now Simon, Michael Simon's former wife], me. There is a woman named Laurie Westby Schmidt; I don't know what has happened to her, but I'm pretty sure she still makes pottery. There were a couple of other people-and a woman named Laurie Samuelson.

There was a man named George Beers, who was probably the best potter of all-he was definitely the best pottery student of all of us. He was a really talented shape-maker. And he got a Ph.D. in art education and then ended up not making pottery. Well, I'm not sure that he doesn't make some pottery. He hasn't made much-as much.

And part of what was so good about being there also, I think, was having all of these students-oh, there is a man named Gib Krohn, who was there who still makes things. It was a very active studio.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was there a division between undergraduate and graduate students there?

MR. SIMON: Not much. But the graduate students were-well, let's see; well, Karl Borgeson was there, actually. There wasn't much of a division. There became one later. In the middle of being there, the university got control of another industrial building, and they moved glassblowing and graduate ceramics into that building. And so the graduate students were no longer in the studio.

It was a pretty compressed situation. They have moved it into an industrial building-one big, open room that had all of the working-I remember the clay mixing was in the same room. They would be mixing clay in the middle of the day, with the classes going on. There was just a-you know, it was very odd, and Warren had set up a big wet box, a big walk-in wet box for everybody to keep their working-state ware in, a big heavy door with steam in the room-my God, it was ridiculous-then a big doorway into the kiln area, and the kiln is on, and they have a salt kiln right inside the studio. I mean, you know, this was the late '60s. There just were not very many rules.

There also wasn't-I think there wasn't a demand. I think that right around that time the amount of enrollment

they had in ceramics and sculpture-both were adjoining in the same building-jumped up tremendously in the late '60s and '70s. So they ended up moving-

MR. SHAPIRO: After you left.

MR. SIMON: After I left.

MR. SHAPIRO: And there is also the background of the war.

MR. SIMON: Oh, it was such an exciting time. I was in Minneapolis. You know, it was very active there, the counterculture-the war gave the whole counterculture a lot of strength. I mean, everything became questionable, and there was somebody to answer every question. Every side of the story was being told, and it was just a-well, it was better than chaos; it was like you were getting a chance to see all different sides of things.

You couldn't help but look. You know, if you were alive, you were just looking around and you could-everything was being exposed. It was really exciting. I just felt as though the culture was going to change radically. And I was so excited about making stuff with clay, making pottery, and I thought, good grief, everyone is going to start to do it [laughs]. I was just sure that if I didn't get started, it was going to be, like-it was going to be too late. [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: I remember you saying at one point that you refer to that time as the time you thought that a pot could change the world.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, that is really true.

MR. SHAPIRO: Do you think Warren thought that?

MR. SIMON: Well, he thought that pots were important. He knew that pots could change people. He knew that pots had changed him. It's the power of art-of the arts; you could just say of the arts in general. I mean, good music, good books. Anything that can bring you to that kind of poignancy, that kind of deep meaning, is valuable, and you have to do it.

We have to have it. It is crucial. Since I have been sick now, I think it's made pottery seem much more important. I like my pots a lot more since I have been sick. I mean, I like pots in general. I should not only say I like my pots, but I am feeling a lot of power from pots that I didn't really have access to.

I mean, it hasn't been that long since I have not worked, but when I was working, there was kind of a restraint that was built in, because of the physical effort of making pottery, and the demands were always somewhat-it wasn't really compromising, but they would make me feel a little bit halted in my enthusiasm. Or I would say, I have to get this done, or I would like to make this look better. You were kind of working on them, so I couldn't sit back and look at them very much.

But I have had that chance now to see how-and I feel like I see them more clearly. And they are really important. I want to say that I think-all potters-it is a crucial thing; it's crucial. Their pots are important, and they move people. And so we have to go on. [Laughs.]

Let's go back to school again. There were some other things-the people that were there: Mark Pharis, Wayne Branum-it was just-it was too good. They were my peers, but they seemed brilliant. I thought they were making beautiful things right from the start. And it was so moving and kind of felt compelling to feel the development. And then while I was there, I married Sandra, Sandra Lindstrom.

And there was a loose plan formed. Jerry Chappelle was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. And he was finishing graduate school. Jerry had a family. He was a little bit older than I was, and he came-there was a job opening at the University of Georgia in Athens, 1970, 1969, maybe, the fall. And Jerry came down to Athens, was interviewed-in one weekend, Jerry came to Athens, was interviewed, was given the job. He bought a farm outside of Athens, and when he came back to Minneapolis the next Monday and came to school, he invited us to come down and make pottery at his farm. [Laughs.] It was just like that.

And so everyone was leaving school. It was-it must have been the spring of 1970, because I remember the Vietnam War was being highly protested at the University of Minnesota, and they actually ended up just calling off classes. They gave everyone, if they were passing at the time, a passing grade; they gave them credit for the course they were taking and closed the school. It was only mid-quarter, something like that.

So we had ordered our wheels from England. We had ordered Leach treadle wheels, which were the only wheels that were in the studio at the University of Minnesota, because Warren MacKenzie had set up the studio there. So ordered them from this place that-the only place in the world that made them that we knew of. They were beautiful wheels and they were very inexpensive. I remember that they cost $147 at the time, 1969, somewhere

in there. Anyway, seven of us ordered them. Seven of us were finishing school and were going to go out and make pottery.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was there a sense of a losing that community, or everybody was ready for that?

MR. SIMON: No, not really. And so Jerry Chappelle had invited everyone. He didn't make any bounds-I mean, it wasn't personal, particularly. He just wanted to carry some of the energy with him. And so we kind of made a loose plan that we would go, but we didn't see him during the-they moved to Athens early in the summer. We were still in Minneapolis, and our wheels didn't end up coming until, I think, October or November. And a couple-and about five other people were kind of loosely involved in the plan to come to Jerry's and set up a pottery.

Various situations happened, and Sandra and I ended up being the only ones that actually went. And we actually moved into one of Jerry's outbuildings, with some help from friends that we met here, and with some encouragement-there was a man named Jerry Horning also, who taught here at the University of Georgia.

MR. SHAPIRO: I have met him.

MR. SIMON: And Jerry Horning, it turned out, had been-coincidentally had been a student of Warren's from back in Minneapolis, and Jerry was very supportive of our pottery-making and our connection with Warren. And so he helped us do things-I think we snuck into the school and fired on a couple of weekends-and helped us kind of get started. He let us use his kiln once or twice, and eventually we got a kiln built out at Jerry's farm. I mean, all of this happened, and we were only there for a couple of years. So I can't really tell you how-I can't remember the developments, but I remember, we kind of scrambled material. We had just very little money. But we were very romantic about it and we were dedicated.

MR. SHAPIRO: How were you selling your products there, in the beginning?

MR. SIMON: I remember. The first thing we had was-Kathy Chappelle had met the Episcopal minister at the college. And we had a sale on the front lawn of the Episcopal Center about two months after we were in Georgia; I mean, it was amazing. I can't remember the sequence of how we got the pots together. But I think we sold about three or four pots. [Laughs.] Oh, gosh, it was a long shot. I will tell you, it was really a long shot.

But somehow after about a year of that, we had a stoneware kiln and shelves operating out of Jerry Chappelle's farm. And I had gotten a CO [conscientious objector status] from the draft board during the-it was actually during the college thing. It was when the lottery came out, I think. My number was low and I had-I just applied to my draft board for a CO and I was given the classification, but you had to do two years-you were supposed to be doing two years of alternative service. Well, I was given a job in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Shortly after we moved to Georgia, I got a letter from the draft board.

And I went into Athens and I got a job at the hospital, working at the hospital, and had that job approved by the draft board so we could stay in Athens. And so Sandra actually started-pretty much started working by herself except for when I-at night I would work and then weekends. I don't know when I had time to work.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you were working 40 hours.

MR. SIMON: I worked 40 hours at the hospital for about a year and a half. And-

MR. SHAPIRO: What was that experience like?

MR. SIMON: Oh, it was depressing. I was very excited to get started working and I just-my first meeting up with the southern culture-you know, that was good, although it was an education that I wasn't looking to get, but I did get it, and that was very good. Actually, it happened inadvertently, but that was very good. It was important; it was crucial because working at a hospital, I was just put right in the middle of the culture. It was different than it would have been coming to Georgia as a hippie potter, which was essentially what my role was outside of working at the hospital. We were pretty unusual to move into an outbuilding on a farm out on the countryside-you know, the neighbors and some parts of the town-I mean, it was a college town, it was a more liberal place, and a lot of Georgia wasn't at the time.

MR. SHAPIRO: Ron [Myers] wasn't at the university.

MR. SIMON: Not yet, no-not yet at the university here, at Georgia [University of Georgia, Athens]. At the time it was Jerry Chappelle and Jerry Horning, and then also the longtime teacher, Earl McCutcheon, who had been here since the early '40s. He was a great man and was really interested by slump glass. He was a kind of innovator in slump glass. He had graduated from Ohio State [University, Columbus] way back in the late '30s.

So there was a little bit of community. And after a couple of years at Chappelle's-Jerry and Kathy's farm-Sandra and I rented a farm nearby, and there was a farm pottery studio-old barn for a studio and old farmhouse, and we

rented it for $30 a month. I mean, it was rudimentary, but we built a kiln. And we built a kiln at the time-a hard-brick-just because we could scrounge these materials, a hard-brick kiln, and we would fire it with diesel fuel, because the year that we set up-1973-there was the first energy crisis, and the propane companies weren't putting out any tanks, any new tanks. They were afraid they weren't going to be able to supply their customers.

So we got a fuel-oil tank-a 300-gallon-set up on a platform. And we found some fuel-oil burners that had been in a brick factory south of here. And we tried to fire with diesel fuel. I mean, we did fire with diesel fuel; we fired for about-well, gosh, we fired for, like, seven years, I think-the rest of the time that we were together-with diesel fuel and a hard-brick kiln. Man, these burners would just get-they just had so much power. I have never since made a firebox that looked like that. [Laughs.] They were just really powerful.

We made pottery there. So Sandra and I made pottery there till about 1979 or '80-'79, I would say.

MR. SHAPIRO: And she was working in porcelain and you in stoneware?

MR. SIMON: It developed that way. First we were both working in stoneware, and then she started gradually working in some porcelain and working only in porcelain, probably for the last five years-by about 1975, I guess, she was working primarily in porcelain.

MR. SHAPIRO: And were your pots undecorated glazed pots at that time?

MR. SIMON: Well, not strictly, but they were definitely glazeware with celadon, temoku, ash glaze-a lot of ash glaze, with a white slip behind it, with-

MR. SHAPIRO: Hakeme?

MR. SIMON: Hakeme, textured brush. And you use the white slip to contrast the stoneware clay, and did that with all glaze, celadon glaze and ash glaze. And then I don't think we even had shino. Shino didn't really become-we just started looking at shino.

[Audio break.]

MR. SHAPIRO: So we were talking about the early days and Sandy.

MR. SIMON: Oh, yeah, the glazes in the studio. Yeah, we were firing in stoneware reduction, and so we were actually sharing the glazes. Sandra was putting celadon and ash glaze, and we had a couple of clears. As time went on, we ended up with buckets and buckets of different glazes-I think 22 buckets once-at one point we counted the glazes that we were trying to keep active. It was absurd. But sometimes they would look really good, but there was a lot of-Byron Temple's white glaze we used a lot.

And some of the pots were painted. The first problem is that we didn't have any repertoire. Well, at first, we just didn't know very much. Good grief, we were trying to make pottery-I was lucky when I sat down to throw if I could make a shape. I wasn't really conscious of having the pot in mind that I was going to make. So I would just, kind of, be throwing and see what would come out. Essentially, that was the beginning of my pottery work.

And as things developed, I became a little bit more specific about what I wanted from the pots, and I started to see the surface of the pot I was making. I started to see the shapes and have some idea of the scale, that you are going to end up with a particular ball of clay-all of those kind of basic things that you learn-I mean, that's the first thing that a potter has to learn. How long did it take? I don't know.

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you becoming more-you know, I always thought there was a big contrast between the way Warren approached things, where he just kind of-the pots just flow forward-and the way you make things, which is so trying to get it a certain way and get it right.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, I think that-

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that starting to happen then?

MR. SIMON: I think in the first few years, there wasn't much consciousness-Warren was a pretty mysterious figure. I didn't know why he had the power that he had. I began to understand it, but it just took a little while. But then when I did-Warren's aesthetic was based on the, kind of, mingei value of making things straightforward, that the economy of touch was important, and you demonstrated your trust in the material with this economy of touch.

Warren would say, you know, "overworked." That was the biggest thing I remember, really, from undergrad school. I remember "overworked." He really wanted to encourage you to let the clay stand for itself, let it look the way that it looked, not try to cover it up or to make it pretty, to really try to use its character-to find its

character and use it. And, you know, these things were just too abstract-I didn't know what it was; I didn't know what it meant. So it took some time to understand, I think, what Warren was doing.

And it did take time. I didn't know. When I moved to Georgia and started making pottery, I did not understand the [Bernard] Leach-[Shoji] Hamada tradition. I didn't really know what Warren was after or what he was suggesting, what it had to do with the work that I was doing. I came to understand it. It took looking around at a lot of different things and seeing a lot of pottery. We looked at a lot of pottery those first few years, all of the books we could get our hands on, every time I could see a pot show-anytime I could look at anybody's pots, we would look at them.

MR. SHAPIRO: You looked at a lot of pots with Warren, as an undergraduate.

MR. SIMON: Warren had a lot of pots. Warren had a collection of pots he would bring. As an undergraduate student, he has pots of Hamada's in the showcase, right in the studio there at the University of Minnesota. I mean, I didn't know what they were. I didn't know who Hamada was, and I didn't know anything about these pots.

These pots were not easy to understand. They were not obvious, beautiful tent shape, or-they were great. I mean, I know the pots now. Warren still has them in his house and I see them and they are beautiful pots, but I didn't have access to them. I didn't know-I didn't understand the language. I wasn't sophisticated enough to understand them.

So as things developed-so the skill developed-just the technique of throwing developed, and then the repertoire spread out to where I had shapes to make. I started having a variety of shapes. At first, I remember the most frustrating thing was going to the studio-having a studio setup and having clay, and having the clay wedged, and then going to the wheel and not really being very sure of what I was going to make. That was the idea.

I remember those moments, and I was really uncomfortable. I thought this was silly. And then started to make myself prepare to go into work. I would start drawing just simple sketches of shapes I was going to make, so that when I got in the studio, I had enough-

[Audio break.]

MR. SIMON: Where did I get to?

MR. SHAPIRO: We are talking about-

MR. SIMON: -shapes, trying to develop shapes in the early days.

MR. SHAPIRO: You often used the word "menu." I have heard you use the word to talk about the group of pots that you were making at any given time.

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did that idea start to form at that time?

MR. SIMON: Well, I think we did start-Sandra and I worked on the kilnloads together, and that kiln was bigger than my kiln here. I can't remember. Maybe it was 50 cubic feet-it was not a huge kiln, but it was enough probably for three weeks or so-maybe two weeks, both of us working hard. And so I suppose this was somewhat market-driven, but we would try to make all varieties. I say we were pretending to be real potters, and part of that was that we wanted to make plates and cups and bowls, the things that we thought of as traditional functional pottery formats: teapots, jars, pitchers.

So we would try to make a variety of those things and put them in every kiln. And I suppose some of that was kind of market-driven; I am not really sure. I mean, we were learning about all of these shapes, and there was no other way to do it but just in trying to make them.

There was a point where I started to understand what Warren was doing. And consequently that opened up somewhat of an understanding about Leach and Hamada and what they had handed over, and then also how it related back to the real old potters whose work they were looking at, when they made some of the decisions that they made back in about 1920. The real-

MR. SHAPIRO: The old Asian?

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: Or medieval.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, the Korean folk potters that-I mean, it was Asian-Chinese, Korean-but they were also looking, I think, at Middle Ages Japan. They were looking at real indigenous work. I think that was what they found moving and valuable.

And I came to understand the economy of working and gave it more credit in my work, but I just wasn't a very-I don't know what to say. I didn't have enough technique, I don't think. I think when I look back, I didn't have enough technique. It didn't look good. If I tried to throw a bowl in the manner of Warren's-the way that he would just open up a bowl, and they would seem to kind of unfold, and he would be at the proportion he wanted.

And he wouldn't touch the clay much, because everything was set up. He had the wall-the clay wall would come out, and it would be the wall that he needed. And at this early stage of my working, I would not be there. The clay wall would be too thin at the low down; and it wouldn't support the shape or it wouldn't-the proportion would be too high for as wide as it was. Or I didn't have the patience to-a lot of this would ordinarily be overcome-this is kind of like apprenticeship work, where you would learn just to do this.

You know, I had never really worked like that; I had never made multiples of the same pot and learned how to make the proportion of the pot and make the clay wall and how integrated they were. It is just something that you have to learn, and I think that I didn't have it. I didn't have access to it at the time.

Sandra was developing a clay wall, and she had made many more pots because of having worked more in the first couple of years that we were here. But she started making bowls and plates that had beautiful shape and had a really nice clay wall, nice proportions, and I was just slower. I just didn't have access to it yet.

It was crucial that I like the pots that I was making, it seemed to me. And so I just had to step back and make them, even though they didn't fit into the way that I thought I should work, which was with a potter's economy.

MR. SHAPIRO: Like Warren?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, more like Warren and what I imagine was the way Korean folk potters had worked: straightforward, you throw the wall, and the pot is-the pot is a traditional pot form that you are making. Your experience and your confidence and your directness make the surface and the shape dynamic, and you have the pot right there. It's kind of built in, joined together. It's beautiful.

So I just said-I said, well, I have to like the pots; it was crucial. I was getting pots out of the kiln that were trying to be something that I didn't have access to yet, and I just determined that I needed to like the pots, and I was going to make them look the way I wanted them to look before they went in the kiln.

MR. SHAPIRO: Before they went in the kiln.

MR. SIMON: Well, you know, the firing was another thing. [Laughs.] I wasn't going to fire things that I didn't believe in. I just had to have a bottom line, someplace that I could work toward. I had to make that a real thing for myself. This is difficult to explain. Do you understand?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes. Did that mean that you winnowed out certain shapes that weren't working or that you-

MR. SIMON: Well, it just meant that I spent more time on the pots. The thing that I thought was dogma-not that I thought it was dogma-the thing that had become kind of dogma with me was to be direct, and to be direct with the clay was not giving me the pots that I wanted to get. So I just started to-you know, I just changed.

I just said, I have to make them the way that I can make them; I have to make them look the way I want them to look, so I have to make them the way that it will get there. It was pretty simple. It was pretty simple-it was a hard decision to make, because I was really deciding for myself how I was going to work. In a way it was a breakthrough. Now that I think about it, it was a breakthrough. [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: Did your pots become more complicated or just-

MR. SIMON: Well, yeah, I suppose they did-they became more complicated. I just let myself then kind of take control of all of the parts of the pot. I gave into time. I said, well, you know, I will work eight hours instead of working four, or I will do this-but I want to like the pots that end up with. I want to like the shapes, I want to like the surface, and I want to make them look the way I want them to look, and that got to be my bottom line. I can't be guessing on the basis of someone else's aesthetic and skill what I can do.

MR. SHAPIRO: When you said before that you were making this range of pots that was probably market-driven, did you mean people coming to buy your pots? What was that market?

MR. SIMON: What was that market, yeah. I just mean market-driven in that we imagined that somebody might want a teapot; somebody may want a pitcher. They are coming to me for a pot. I want to be ready with my pot

shapes; I don't want to say I don't have any plates; I didn't put any plates in my kiln. The other thing-I realize now when I said that, that other things were important, too.

We were trying to develop all of these shapes, and I remember thinking, you know, that I needed-I would try to keep all of these things going: make sure that I had some pitchers, and make sure I would work on jars, and make sure I would work on some wide-low shapes, and make sure I would-and try to make some tall cylinders that were pretty simple, and just try to expand the repertoire.

I was conscious of wanting to work for years. You know, at the time, I remember, being at 23 or 24, 25, that I thought, gosh, you know, if I keep doing this until I'm 40, I'm going to be able to do it. [Laughs.] And I thought 40 was tremendously-really old, but I thought that would be a lifetime of pottery-working, and there would be development. The development was constantly going on. Every kilnload would come out, and you would learn something, or have a good day's throwing. There was always development. We started from such a basic level, and we had that first bit of time.

And Sandra and I developed a really good working relationship. It was hard. We had to develop ways of criticizing each other, or we felt like we did, and we got through it; we got to the point where we could talk to each other about the work. And every day-did so every day practically.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. SHAPIRO: I remember you at one point mentioning that she did this trigger handle that you thought was just fabulous.

MR. SIMON: [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: Making handles also must have been part of this whole discovering how to make these-it seems like the handles that you and she were making were much more inflected than what was coming out of Minnesota at that time.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, maybe so. I don't know. We worked on handles a lot, I remember. It was exciting. In the studio it was really good. It was 10 years from the start-the work changed a lot, really developed, I think. It probably took six or seven years to feel like I was making pots that were, kind of, made. I remember always having the question, well, is this a good pot?

And I was always trying to find the answer-someone who could write about it or someone who could tell me, what is this pot-what is it that makes it good? I was attracted to things, but I couldn't explain to myself why I was attracted to them. And I was always looking for clues. But there was some time in there-some time after six or seven years-that I started feeling like I could make those decisions. I could say for myself what I needed to do, or what I liked about a pot, or something like that. I started to develop a pottery value system that I could work from, and that was important.

MR. SHAPIRO: And that was not the result of seeing any particular object or this book that comes later, this book that opened up these Persian jars for you?

MR. SIMON: No, no, no. No, it was what was happening in the studio and inside myself, personally. Well, all of the time, the enthusiasm didn't wane. I would find things out, and it would just lead to a better understanding. It would make it more fun to see pots and look at new pots. The development just continued to happen, even though there were many things that were difficult, and the business was always difficult. There would be bright spots, but we really lived on very little money.

MR. SHAPIRO: And no workshop teaching at that time.

MR. SIMON: Well, the first thing that happened, actually-we did our first workshop in 1975, and I-when I think about it now, I can't imagine what we had, because I didn't even throw very well in 1975. But apparently-I mean, who knows what was going on for real? My perception isn't always very clear. Cynthia Bringle was very nice to us. She was really encouraging every time we would see her.

It turned out that in 1975 at Penland [School of Crafts, Penland, NC], Bill Sax was scheduled to teach the last session in the summer, and he had been given a new job. A new program was opened in Boston College. And so he was forced to cancel his teaching at Penland, and so they called us because of Cynthia [Bringle]. Or maybe Cynthia, even, was the one that called us on the phone and asked us if we would teach. And, you know, it's flabbergasting to be asked to teach at Penland, because Penland was a mecca at the time. Well, it was very good. It was flattering and exciting as can be. We loved the idea of it.

So we got to teach, and we got to teach right after Warren. Warren was teaching the session before us. So we

went up a few days early, I remember, to see him. And he had had a great session, where people were just like-[laughs]-it was really moving and people were baring their souls. [Laughs.] It was really good. And we were sitting alone with Warren in his cabin, and I told him that I was pretty nervous; I had no idea what was going to happen Monday and that was a matter of class. He said, well, it's just an exchange of ideas. [Laughs.] You know, that was really helpful.

So we taught our first class there at Penland, and it was a great deal of fun. It was totally, I think, unsuccessful, but, man, we just had so much fun, and it was so exciting. And it was really difficult to come home, I remember, for the two us to be home.

MR. SHAPIRO: What was exciting about it?

MR. SIMON: Well, we were able to tell people what we thought from kind of an authority position-[laughs]-which we had never had before. And it turned out we knew quite a bit. Actually, we had learned quite a lot in those five years that we didn't know, because we didn't have so many people to talk to. The people that we lived around weren't as deeply into the kind of pots that we wanted to make as we were. There wasn't that much understanding. So it was nice to go up there and talk. And it was-we met [other potters] also.

Well, of course, Cynthia was there. Jon Ellenbogen and Becky [Rebecca] Plummer were there. They were assistants in the class, actually, I think. Jon Ellenbogen was cooking for the school at the time. They were terrific people. And Craig Bryson was there. He was the monitor for the class. I don't know; it was really an exciting culture. We had all of the different kilns to fire and, I don't know, 16 hours of pottery-making-[laughs]-with a huge group of people. It was a riot. It was really good.

So, and then-but that didn't happen very often. But we did go to art fairs; in order to sell our work, Sandra and I went to art fairs. We went to a lot of good and bad-

MR. SHAPIRO: Local, or did you go-

MR. SIMON: Local, and we started to do a little wider range. We went to Florida and we went to the Midwest, and we went to Atlanta, when there was one there.

MR. SHAPIRO: Ann Arbor?

MR. SIMON: We never did do Ann Arbor. Sandra started to develop some great work in porcelain, I thought, in about 1977, '78, '79; got far along, making a lot of work, and we were getting it out of the kilns. Sometimes amazing things would happen. Like, she would just put a little copper slip on a small fish on a big base, and it would turn bright red-would make a base that just seemed incredibly powerful and valuable. She was making great porcelain work.

This was at a time when we were working with-I remember she had been working on grolleg [English china clay] for a few years from Warren's grolleg body. Warren's porcelain had always been a grolleg body. And someone from Georgia Kaolin had come in contact-oh, it was through Tom Turner, who was at the time working over at Clemson. And he was working with a Georgia kaolin body-a porcelain body made out of Georgia kaolin.

So we got in touch with Georgia Kaolin, and they started to work with Sandra. And we developed a porcelain body that was pretty nice-looking-translucent but fairly workable. Actually, we sold it for a while. I remember we bought a Walker pug mill and mixed clay to help our cash flow problems, and it helped us for a couple of years, although we had to mix the clay, so it was just more labor, but Georgia Kaolin was giving us the material. So we did actually make a little bit of money-bought a Walker pug mill.

MR. SHAPIRO: The same one you still-

MR. SIMON: We still have it, yeah. It still works.

But then things were-Sandra and I were having trouble with our personal relationship, and so we ended up splitting up. This was the late '70s. And I found myself for the first time-maybe 1980, I can't remember; it was right around in there-found myself for the first time alone in the studio and not particularly liking my pots and not particularly liking my business. And it wasn't a great time. I thought that I needed to make a change.

I expressed my dis-ease [sic] with Ron, my friend Ron Myers, who is now teaching at the University of Georgia, and Andy Nasisse also. Ron had come to the University of Georgia in 1973, and gradually we had become good friends, and Andy had come in 1976, I believe. So they were now teaching at the University of Georgia, and it was really a completely different department than it had been before-much more with the times; I thought it was a real solid department.

So they had four foundation fellowships there, and Andy and Ron both recommended-they said, well, why don't

you just come into graduate school-make some big change? And so I did. I had the idea that I would do it, and it would give me an option of teaching if I wanted to. And I applied for these four fellowships and I was given one, so it made it quite easy to go to school. And so that is what I did.

And it was encouraging to go in there, in a way. I realized that I really knew quite a bit. I had learned quite a lot in the 10 years that I had been working.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you stayed on the farm that you were renting?

MR. SIMON: Stayed at the same farm. It was really simple to go to graduate school-stayed at the same farm, drove into school-it's 15 miles. And I was a better-actually, I was quite a good student. I took a lot of art history, and it was very interesting to me, and the graduate seminars were exciting, and I was-it was really nice to talk to people. I felt kind of renewed, and it was exciting to make pottery in an academic situation and get away from doing business with the work. I liked that a lot.

I just felt kind of empowered, I guess. I could see that I knew how to do things and had a real value system that I could use, and it felt quite good. And I taught a class in there-started to develop some work. I remember one summer I went back to Minnesota to visit my family, and I made a point of going back and visiting some of the people that I had gone to school-Mark Pharis especially-Wayne Branum, Randy Johnston-had all set up in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

MR. SHAPIRO: You never mentioned Jeff Oestreich in those.

MR. SIMON: I didn't have much [interaction with] Jeff, although I did go there that summer also. Jeff was later.

MR. SHAPIRO: He was in a different time?

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: And Linda Christianson?

MR. SIMON: Linda also. I didn't know them before I left Minnesota, and I didn't meet them when they were young either, because when I would go up there, I had my whole family to visit, and then I would always see Warren, and there wasn't a great deal of time. I didn't have a great deal of time, and I wouldn't see everyone.

I always was jealous of the pottery culture in Minnesota. It was hard for Sandra and I to move to Georgia, because we would always assume that those people would see each other, and they would be talking about their pots, and it would be like it had been when we were in school. It turns out that, in fact, they didn't really see each other very much, and it really wasn't the case. The whole pottery culture there did certainly develop, though, into a really strong culture, I mean, so potters and a lot of pottery support.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was [Robert] Briscoe-

MR. SIMON: Briscoe wasn't there, and I don't know when Briscoe came. What a great bunch of work that is. Will Swanson is there. I don't know who he is, and then Matthew Metz-when Linda [Sikora] moved in there, you know.

Warren continues to work and Warren continues to work, and my goodness gracious, what a body of work that is now. Just flabbergasting. And he continues to be really good. He laments being down to six hours a day or something like that. I don't know; I was there last summer and he had made-I think he had three boards of teapots. I think I counted 19 teapots that he was working on all at one time. He had thrown them, and then he put them together, two different sessions. And I've made teapots all my life; I made teapots two at a time, and it was a big deal to make two. He had 19. He is 80-something, you know, and he had 19 and was regretting the slowness of his output.

MR. SHAPIRO: Michael, when I was up at Warren's, he mentioned a time when you and Ron and maybe a few other people were up there. Was that about that time, or was that after graduate school?

MR. SIMON: In 1986. I remember it. Yeah, it was well after. Well, okay, so I'll just step back and go in the sequence. The thing that happened there that summer-my trip up to Minnesota was-being really moved by Mark Pharis's pots. He was working on a little farm, a farm that he owned, at Houston; they call it Houston, I think, in Minnesota.

MR. SHAPIRO: Where Matt [Metz] and Linda [Sikora]-

MR. SIMON: Yeah, exactly, that same farm. And he had set up a kiln that was a wood-burning, oil-fired, salt kiln and was making-using a really sandy body and using an odd Missouri fire-like a Wellsville, I think. And it had kind of like an orangey, sandy clay body, you know, really beautiful, and he had just a big bunch of the best-looking

pottery that I had ever seen there. And it was really straightforward-probably different from the pots he's making now.

MR. SHAPIRO: So he wasn't squaring things off or-

MR. SIMON: No, and they were thrown, all thrown. He had actually made quite a few press molds and press-molded parts-places where you could press small parts of pots like spouts and-oh, I'm not sure about lids. He was starting to think in a sheet-metal mode that led him into the work he's doing today, I think.

I never have understood it. It just developed. I have never talked to him or heard him speak of the development of his processes. I've always admired Mark, though, even from undergraduate school. He was really inventive, and just right from the beginning. And he was brave and played with pots. I was much more reverent. And he played with them. He played with ideas, and he was facile in his mind. I say brilliant, but he had a nice sense of humor, and I still think he is one of my favorite potters. I always have to see his work. I really feel close to it.

But it was the surface on his pots that I saw in 1980-the summer, let's call it-which made me think I just had to have a salt kiln. And I came back to Georgia and then built a salt kiln pretty much immediately, as I remember it. There was also a salt kiln at school, and I fired it in graduate school, and I did have a couple of firings that were remarkably good. And that probably also would have encouraged me.

But the thing about it was the salt kiln was getting away from-I had ended up with about 22 buckets of different glazes, and it was just becoming nearly impossible to do a glaze day at my studio. I had so much glaze preparation to do that I would never get around to glazing. And there were too many decisions to make, and they would never look good together in the same kilnload. I'd fire the kiln with the idea of one thing, and it would contradict all the other ones, or some of the other ones. And so it just wasn't quite working out. And I wanted to simplify things.

I was in the studio for first time alone. And doing the bisque kilns, there were just too many steps involved, and there were too many steps that weren't the part that make your pots better. I wasn't getting any more experience in throwing and making shapes and developing pot ideas. I was spending too much time maintaining the process. And I could kind of see if I did salt and did greenware, green firing, and just simplified-work with one or two slips and let the salt-the beauty of the salt, of course, is that it made a constantly varying surface, and I would just try to find a clay body that looked good. I was attracted to the kind of orangey light browns, and so that is what I tried to do.

That was the next step, and then I finished graduate school, and I had my salt kiln built at home, and I just went back in there with some new vigor and enthusiasm.

MR. SHAPIRO: Michael, before you go forward, Ron described your graduate thesis show as the smokers that were all hand-built; they were totally not thrown.

MR. SIMON: That's right; they were. They were all hand-done.

MR. SHAPIRO: That must have been quite a departure for you.

MR. SIMON: How did I even make them? Oh, I made them on a slab. I made them a slab. Well, this was a very eccentric process.

MR. SHAPIRO: And very architectural, you said.

MR. SIMON: I was trying to make-although we haven't spoken much about function, but function was involved in all of this pottery thinking. And part of the idea was to bring function into the work in grad school, but change the scale. I thought, if I'm going to be a teacher and teach at a school, I need to have some experience in earthenware and other firing processes, because I'd always only fired stoneware reduction, even in undergraduate school. The only clay that we used-no, that's not true. But everybody was using stoneware clay. We all used stoneware clay in undergraduate school. And I continued to do so all through the '70s. I just thought consciously I was going to make some changes, try to change things and get experience when I was at school so I would know-just so I would have a little bit wider repertoire. And so I made up an earthenware body.

There were some precedents for stoves that I ran across in literature. I can't remember where-stove and smokers. And it turned out they were mostly smokers; smoking for food is what I mean. And actually, I was smoking a lot of food at home at the time in various kinds of contraptions. Smoking venison-I knew deer hunters from living out in the countryside-and smoking fish. And then smoking all kinds of things, and it became-I could smoke things. I knew how to do it.

And then, so I started making these big pot shapes, basically, that were smokers. They had some kind of little

device about them for burning coal, and then they had a rack at the top and a lid for putting in food, where you would put the food in.

MR. SHAPIRO: What scale were these?

MR. SIMON: Well, let me see, the tallest one was, maybe, my shoulder height and 18 inches, maybe, in diameter. And so very round ones, and then there were some that were marked, actually slab-built things. And they were made out of a real soft-in order to do the fire, I reasoned that I just needed to make a real porous body. And I didn't want to do some kind of a nonshrinking-I didn't want to get into the technology. It was real low-tech. I just made it with a lot of vermiculite. I put a lot of vermiculite in the body and made slabs. I actually had a great big mold. I remember having a stacking unit that was somewhat on the order of Randy Johnston's stacking boxes, but I made a plaster press mold so that I could make three or four sections high, however I wanted to.

And the function was how much heat you had in the firebox. You want to smoke the food and not bake it, so you had to have a size of a firebox that would let you put enough fuel in it to smoke the food but not get so much heat that you were baking it or roasting it.

So they really did work, and I developed surfaces-terra sig [terra sigilatta, type of slip made of extremely fine clay particles] a lot, as I did work on some other earthenware bodies, a white one and a red one, to make some earthenware pottery shapes-develop some earthenware glazes. I was a pretty good student really; I worked as a student, and it was a good time in every way for me there.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was there a lot of back forth with Ron and Andy?

MR. SIMON: Ron and Andy-had a good talk with them, although I can't say that my relationship with them changed, because I had already had a good relationship with the both of them. They were both always encouraging. I don't think they felt like they could act as my teacher.

MR. SHAPIRO: Ron said that, with you, he felt he just had to get out of the way.

MR. SIMON: [Laughs] Well, yeah. But Ron was always helpful. He'll never admit that he is, but he helps everyone. He is a big teacher. He has a huge group of people that he has taught. He taught there for, since-well, he had students before that, but he taught there since '73, to '93, I think, so a lot of students, and a lot of students trying to, carrying on his work, too. He has a big influence.

But anyway, they were very good to me. They supported everything I did and helped me do the hoops that I had to do to do it. It was really no problem.

I remember I did apply for a job right after that. There was a job that came up at the University of Florida, and I thought, well, this is kind of what you said you would do, you know, and I applied for it only half-heartedly. Well, I did have good letters. I made a pretty good application, really, but I didn't get the job.

But then I worked in the studio; for some reason it felt different-the salt kiln was really encouraging. From the first firing it was exciting again to unload the kiln. I got to the point where the kiln of those reductions glazeware was-taking down the door of the kiln was becoming one of the most dreadful things. I thought, this was not the right situation. There were so many things that were giving me a clue.

Now, I felt foolish; I was making pottery-what I had dreamed I wanted to do-and I had everything set up, and I wasn't really feeling very good about it when I was doing the glazeware because, you know, one glaze would look right and then other glazes wouldn't look right. And I just felt like I had an amazing amount of self-criticism; I just hardly liked any of my pots. It was frustrating.

And somehow the salt glaze-the surface was so interesting to me. It's so integrated with the pots. It wasn't any kind of questioning. I felt more like I was kind of a conduit and that the clay was-the clay had all of this character, and if I could just kind of leave it alone and let the kiln work on it; it was-

[Audio break.]

I have a pottery career. [Laughs.] Really, that was what-I remember thinking that it took about 12 years to become a potter, because in the '80s I felt a lot more like a potter, with my salt kiln behind me, and I started to like my pots more; they started to develop; I don't know. And a lot of it is just, I think, a matter of time and experience doing the work. And I was pretty stable. I had a studio. Even though the business was not easy, it became a little bit more consistent, to where I was actually-had the necessity to go into the studio and work consistently. I think that helped the pots.

And I was getting-the salt kiln was making surfaces that I really liked. I didn't feel like they were mine, and they

didn't feel like they were a mistake; they were-I liked them. I could just appreciate them without-they seemed like they were part of the big world. It changed my attitude about the pots somehow. I don't know what it was.

And then I started to get more encouragement. It's hard to tell what happened first, in the order that it happened, but then I had done a few workshops, then people started to ask me to come work a lot, and then stuff got published.

I remember Andy Nasisse wrote an article that was published in *Ceramics Monthly* in 1983 [reprinted in *Art Papers* as "Imperfection as Beauty: One Small Bowl." March-April, 1983, p. 10], and they asked me to write a little article about myself. The magazine wanted something to accompany the article about the cup. Andy's article wasn't really about me, but he used a cup of mine as, well, I don't know, not exactly as a metaphor, but he used the cup to explain a lot of feelings about art, and it was quite a good article, actually, I thought.

I remember it was a painful article I wrote, and I had somebody help me edit it, and they published it. And they published a nice portfolio of my pots from that time-1983-I remember five or six photos. It was quite extensive. And I was-it was a surprise. I didn't know when it was coming out, and somebody drove up in the yard and they said, did you see this? So that was pretty exciting.

There was kind of a consistent development all the way through that-working with one kiln. No; I had the second salt kiln also during the '80s. The first one only lasted a couple of years actually. Ate itself up, but the second one was a kiln that was a, kind of, pretty dynamic kiln-a real tall catenary, tall and deep and slim, which I fired with diesel fuel-and it made a real dramatic hot side and cool side, and also I could really oxidize.

I realized later, after I had tried to oxidize with gas, I could really oxidize my diesel fuel, surprisingly enough, in this kiln, and I made some real light-bodied salted ware, and that was attractive to me at the time. This kiln I worked with for about six years, I think, before I left that particular studio. And I tore it down. It still had some life in it, but it was a great kiln. It would hold about three weeks of work.

I would fire green, and that was-what else happened in the '80s? Well, I don't know; it's just continuing development of the pot shapes. I started to make a Persian jar. I had been making a square jar ever since about 1975 or so. Warren had made a square jar, and I had gotten one of them from one of his daughters. Tam had a beautiful celadon jar that was squared, and it was squared by cutting with a knife. It was square by squeezing and then cutting with a knife. And I mean, it was basically-it was a thrown pot, I should say, a thrown pot that was thrown thickly, squeezed into a square cross section, and then cut with a knife so that it had corners.

And I liked those pots. When I started to paint on pots, I found that it was really difficult to paint on the round pot. I always tried to make faces; even with round pots I would make faces-you know, one side, and then I would paint one side, and then I would paint the opposing side. I never could deal with painting around the pot, except for just in the most rudimentary ways, like making stripes or something like that.

So I really wanted, when I became more involved in painting on the surfaces, to stop that circle from happening. And you do it, and pottery throughout time is done in a lot of different ways, by putting handles on the side, so you break off and make two faces between the handles or some such thing. But one of my tactics was to start to square and rectanglize pot shapes so that I could have that-basically made a flat plane that would hold a pattern of some kind or another and could stop at the edge of that plane. The pattern could stop at the edge of the plane.

And that became-I was kind of motivated to develop a square jar shape. I was really interested in making lids that fit, and somehow making the lid-throwing the jar and squaring it and then throwing a lid and squaring it and making it fit together was fun-just a fun trick to do. And there was some kind of dynamic to the way that it looked that I appreciated, and then it gave me those panels that I could pattern, and it made it easier to pattern the pots for me.

And then another thing that happened, I can't really say it was a goal, but the pots became-they started to suggest architecture much more strongly than the thrown round pots had. So I guess I started to use all of those things. I remember developing a triangular vase early in the '80s, and I was trying to square everything. I tried to square bowls and tried to square cups. And sometimes I would just squeeze them into a soft square, and sometimes I would paddle them into really hard corners. I learned how to paddle things.

And I became more aware of how much water was in the clay wall, how the different degrees of leather hard, how the clay would bend when it was a certain wetness and not bend anymore when it wasn't as wet, and how it would react to a paddle. And that gave me a wider repertoire of shape and helped create, I think, more from the outside. I got more and more encouragement. So that continued to develop.

In about 1992, I met Susan Roberts, and we were married, and we bought an old farmhouse near Athens, about 30 miles from where I had lived previously, and built a new kiln.

[Audio break.]

MR. SHAPIRO: You built a new kiln.

MR. SIMON: Built a new kiln-just got reestablished. Well, Susan and I, getting together, we both had houses, but neither of us had a house that would accommodate both of us. So we found an old house, a beautiful old house, a house that it was obvious at the time it was going to take more attention that we really intended to give a house, but at the same time we were charmed by its architecture, by the scale of the rooms, and the proportion of the rooms, and the way it sat on the landscape. The house is a long, skinny, tall house from 1888. It was in not very good condition.

But it sat on the landscape high-it was built on kind of a ridge so that it looks out across a lot of big pastureland-the views are large and long, and we were just generally charmed by the possibilities. There was a beautiful studio building, two-story brick building for me to work in, and so we bought it and moved here-1995-built the kiln the first summer. It was a small salt kiln-or virtually the same kiln I had been working with-three weeks of work, I thought at the time. Actually, that three weeks was-as I started to paint more and more pots, I started to wax resist sometime in the '90s.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that the Forbes wax that you-

MR. SIMON: I don't remember what the Forbes wax is.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that a particular wax that you found that worked particularly well?

MR. SIMON: It's a particular wax, but I only know it is really the wax from Highwater Clay [Highwater Clays, Asheville, NC], and I don't know the name of it.

MR. SHAPIRO: Forbes, they call it.

MR. SIMON: It's Forbes? That may be true. Anyway, I started to use a wax resist in my painting. It was obvious from the beginning I was attracted to pots that were painted on, that had painting on them. I would like to look at Hamada's pots, where he had just made two or three movements with a brush and made a pattern of-you know, the bamboo pattern and the grass pattern. And I just loved it; I wanted to do that. I wanted to do it, really badly. I just thought it really took me to the pot. I thought it had a lot of power.

Even as far back as 1976, I remember a Sunday-one day a man drove up-he owned a sushi restaurant in Atlanta-the Nakato Restaurant-it's a really nice sushi restaurant, one of the first ones in Atlanta. He was in a Ford station wagon with his mother, a middle-aged Japanese man. He ran up to our pottery barn, and he was holding this plate that he had found at a shop in Atlanta; it was a plate that I had painted with a grass pattern, kind of copying Hamada's grass pattern.

And he said, you make? [Laughs.] He was very excited. And it was a dreary day and we're in the studio and not much was going on, and it was really exciting to have this man come. And he wanted us to make pottery for the restaurant. So he said, come over and have dinner at the restaurant, and we can see what we can arrange. But anyway, I remember painting that grass pattern. We made about 50 plates, or something like that-worked out a deal. And it was fun to paint them.

I developed a small repertoire. I had a fish. I could do a fish a couple of different ways and painted them with-just painted them with iron slip under-on bisqueware? I can't remember how at first. It must have been on bisqueware, maybe on greenware. I can't remember exactly. I'm sure I did it both ways, tried it both ways, and I probably did over a glaze sometimes. But just tried to make the brush, tried to learn how to make the brush, make a shape, and then-or try to make a brush make a tense outline-one or the other-

MR. SHAPIRO: With the wax-

MR. SIMON: Grass patterns and fish and different kinds of tree patterns-things that I could make without much drawing skill. And I did it all the way through the late '70s. I remember always trying some. It took longer and I ruined pots. Because it was so direct, I just ruined pots, and couldn't waste that many pots. So I wouldn't do very many, and I would just say, you get what you get.

But basically, you get better at how thick the pigment should be and how your brush worked and what you could expect. And could I make this-you know, you just make a direct circle-try to make a direct circle or try to make a direct-maybe a spiral, and when they were good, they could be really good; and when they weren't, they would ruin the pot. [Laughs.] So I would always try to learn, and you could kind of get to where you could set yourself up so you wouldn't lose anything-make a smaller mark or make it a pattern of marks, so that if you had made one bad mark, it could attach itself to all the other bad marks and you have a pattern. It would work out; the pot

would still be whole-

[Audio break, tape change.]

-it wouldn't be all the attention drawn to a bad line.

So I became aware of that possibility, and I became better at using the brush. And I developed a few more things that I could paint and a few more ways that I could put them on a pot, different pigments, and then gradually got to-I don't know, it was seeing somebody's work with wax or a historical pot with wax resist pattern. It may well have been Hamada again. But I started to use the wax, at first really directly, just making a mark with wax and glazing or putting slip around it, but then I started to use the wax to paint things. And then I started to find out that I could sketch on the pot with a pencil and fill in the negative areas with wax and then put a strong pigment in the positive area and end up with a nice outline that would be where the brush, because it ran into the little ledge of wax, would actually leave a thicker pigment right at the edge.

And it was built into the process. It was terrific how it worked, and it would have the effect of a woodblock print at its best, and it would even leave a little residue of pigment around so it would look like ink.

So I thought that had a huge benefit for me, in terms of patterning, because it was safe. I hate to say this, but it didn't hurt the pots. I didn't have to give up the pot in order to put the pattern on anymore. I mean, it did take that element away that could sometimes be really exciting. Because the risk is high, when you get it out it would feel very good. But the trade-off was that I got a more consistent-I could get images that I wanted. I could make the image like the way I want it to be on the pot and then paint that image and have it there pretty much. There was some small amount of spontaneous things that would happen because of the technique, but not as many as that first-you know, make a strong-hope you were Franz Kline.

Yeah, so that was the development of the technique of putting a pigment on. And I always claim that the form and the proportion were the crucial elements to me, and I still do. I still will claim that. But there was also an undeniable-that the audience would look at-would see the surface. The culture didn't seem to want to look at the shape or proportion. I mean, try to talk to someone about the proportion of a bowl. It's very difficult to engage someone with the proportion of a bowl. It's just very difficult. And then I wanted to engage-I wanted engagement. I really did.

So patterning, particularly, gave me access to an audience in a way that I didn't feel like I could develop with shape. So that was part of the motivation to develop that kind of pattern surface. And I didn't really want to be speaking about the things that were in the pattern. I didn't really want to think about the fish. I didn't want to think about the fish's heart beating, or I didn't want you to think about it either, or I didn't really want you to think about the bird, although the bird got dicey because the bird, of course, carried a little bit more sentiment than the fish did, at least for me. It was dangerous territory, but it was still the kind of image that I needed, in that it was recognized by everyone in the whole world who would see that image, and, you know, they knew what it was and they knew the range of feeling that a bird could give-well, anything from a raven, a crow, to a buzzard to the most beautiful songbird, painted bunting or something like that.

They were all in that bird, and I really wanted that. That's the way I wanted the bird to be and that's the way I wanted the fish to be, is just to be not something that you would be personally involved with, but at the same time a recognizable image that I could bring to the pot and a function that mattered.

One of the first things I used to use was just fruit, the fruit pattern, those circles with the outline and a little-some kind of a leaf, branches; it was always from Chinese, I think-or Chinese and Japanese and Korean-not so much Korean, because there really wasn't so much.

MR. SHAPIRO: It seems like the branches pattern at times would become very abstract, to where-

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: More so than the fish or the-

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: It would just be almost pattern-

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: -instead of image.

MR. SIMON: Well, at the same time I'm carrying along other things, too, that I still feel like I'm going to resolve, and I don't know yet-I can't tell you what will happen, but the other things that I worked with were intersections-

circles of some kind or another, squares of some kind or another, mazes, kind of like that. I called it "Orbit." It started out as circular, and I called it "Orbit," and then when it was rectangular, I called it "Maze," but it-I don't know. And they were all basically attempts to try to fit on the shape.

MR. SHAPIRO: It's like a shift.

MR. SIMON: Yeah. And hook on your eye-to take your eye to the pot, and there is not meaning. If you took the pattern off the pots and put them on paper, they have no meaning, I don't think. I think that-I mean, there may be little bits of tension that happen.

MR. SHAPIRO: No symbolic?

MR. SIMON: No symbolic. That's right. That was not it. I wanted the pot, and I didn't want them to take the weight-the pot was the message. That was the content, and I didn't really want the image to be the content. It can't take over. I didn't want it to take over. I kept it from taking over, I think; people might argue that I didn't, but in my mind I did, and in my mind I was trying to keep it from taking over.

MR. SHAPIRO: We talked about old-timey country pottery, country crockery, like these undecorated pots that you make, typically pitchers or simple pots. Was there a very different reaction publicly to those pots and to the pots that were patterned or-

MR. SIMON: Yeah, sure, there is less response. There was less response. I suppose that was taught to me pretty early. People are brought to the graphicness of it. I don't know why. I always thought it was a shortcoming, frankly, because I thought that shape was the beauty of pottery-making. I mean the essence of pottery-making was the shape and proportion, which I'll just call a clay wall, which is both those things to me. I mean, the clay wall means everything. The clay wall is what you build from, so it's the essence of the thing. To do all the stuff that you have to do to make the clay all the way you want it almost precludes the patterning being important, from the potter's point of view, I think.

But, in fact, when the pot is out there in the world, the graphics of the patterning are the-I mean, I could say it's the easiest thing to see. But it seems to be what people see. It seems to me what people are trained to see, somehow. It's almost as if they feel like they should see the pattern before they see the shape of the pot. And I think potters have to get this reorganized, because it seems crucial that we, as potters, can have that clay wall-can have people understand how important that clay wall is to the pot.

And I think that pots-we are yielding to people. If you take away all the patterning, people are still going to be moved by the pot. But they might not know why. I do think that the pot shape really carries importance. But if people are given a choice or-it's just what happens. I talk about people like they're different than me, but I don't know how to describe the audience, and maybe it's something that really does happen.

If you put out five pots, and some of them are painted and some of them aren't, the ones that are painted get more attention. They get early attention. It may be that people who are around pots and are more sophisticated in their experience with pots will be able to see the unpatterned pots more easily and quickly, but there is some pull that the pattern has. There is some demand that the pattern makes. There is some power there.

MR. SHAPIRO: As you say, when looking at Hamada's grass pattern, it took you to the pot.

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: You.

MR. SIMON: That's right; me, as that person, that's right. And it was true. I would do that if I had a chance to watch one of Hamada's kilns be unloaded. You know, I would have wanted to see all that patterning pulling my eyeball. They're hard; that's really true.

So there was power there, and I wanted to have some of it. I wanted some of it and I wanted access to it. Yeah, and I won't quit doing it, I guess.

MR. SHAPIRO: When did the raised detailing start-the lines and the crosses?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, it really comes from that-that rib was the same to me in my mind, and I was just trying to make it-I said, I've always liked this, and I used it. I think I made this-well, it's a bowl of Warren's. Warren uses this. And this-

MR. SHAPIRO: Hamada, too.

MR. SIMON: Hamada, maybe, but then it's a whole world of pottery-making, because it's the barrel, you know,

with these other things that keep it from wearing out all over the fat part of the side.

There was a Jugtown pot that was made like this. Williamsburg Pottery in [Williamsburg] Virginia is making a cup with a rim. And it was like that, so I thought, I really like this, the way it salts and the little steps back in, and I thought I was just going to do it-well, I was just going to try to do it. And Ron is doing this, too. I don't know if he's still doing it, the salt glaze-the low-fire salt pots that he was doing-and all of his images, he started to do them in appliqué. I don't know if he had that-

MR. SHAPIRO: Did he push them out?

MR. SIMON: Well, push them out; he would just add a piece of clay, and he'd cut parts of it out-parts of the outline out-and he'd draw on that, and sometimes he'd just cut out a piece of clay that was the shape of a fish, basically, and stick it on the pot. And I kind of liked the way it looked. This is just developmental. I thought it would go somewhere. And then, oh, I saw a couple of other places, too-Jane Shellenberger and Randy Johnston both-they're both doing-

MR. SHAPIRO: Jan [McKeachie-Johnston]?

MR. SIMON: Maybe. They're both doing something that had that look at it. The look ends up, when it's right, ends up being kind of artifactlike. It felt old, and I was always attracted to things that would make them feel like they got lost in time. That was always attractive to me, to have them be anonymous in time. Well, some of it was logical, because I tried to figure out why I liked these old pots so much when I would go to museums.

I remember going to the Freer [Freer and Sackler Galleries, Washington, DC] the first time and being able to look at those old pots. There was a guy named Martin Ampt. I went there, and I had no idea what they had. When I was in graduate school here, we made a field trip to Washington. I can't remember all the reasons, but one of them was to go the Freer.

We made an appointment, and 14 of us, I think, or 12-too many people-went into this little room, and a man named Martin Ampt gave us-okay, he would just say, well, what do you want to see? So we said, well, Korean folk pottery. And he said, Kenzan? We shook our heads, yeah. [Laughs.] I mean, he just kept bringing out these pots, and it was just so powerful, and they had such a good bunch of work there. And he said, these are your pots. You can look at them. He meant, as American citizens, they were our pots. [Laughs.]

And so, I mean, we were handling these pots, you know. We handled-oh, what were those-Yangshao-Yangshao pots from ninth century B.C. China. They've got two of them there, whole. And pots that you think-I've always thought-were incredibly thick, primitive pots were anything but. They were really incredible clay wall; these pots have been made, I mean, if these were made in 900 B.C., you thought, geez, they've been making them for 3,000 years before that, you know. How long did it go on? They were so good.

One of the grounds for judgment, I guess, early on, was kind of how it would go through time. Oh, Warren's pots always pointed to that, too.

MR. SHAPIRO: Stand the test of time. That's a Leach phrase, isn't it?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, maybe so. Maybe so. When I would describe Warren's pots, it was one of the ways that I would describe them. They would go through time. They were not of a time. They were bigger than contemporary. And they continue to be. And so that became a positive acknowledgement that I always wanted to see in work. It was the way that I started to judge work for myself. Of course, it's hard to tell. Your ideas about timelessness change.

MR. SHAPIRO: I don't know if we finished talking about the Persian jar.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, how did we get to there?

MR. SHAPIRO: -because you'd said-

MR. SIMON: Oh, the square. I started talking about the square.

MR. SHAPIRO: About you'd gotten that pot from Warren and-

MR. SIMON: Right, and then the square, and I was talking about how he developed that square and other non-round for the sake of patterning. And then it just happened-it was one day, actually, when I was teaching at Penland. I taught at Penland quite often during the '80s. And one time I was there, I was teaching a concentration session and I had a particularly troublesome young man, student, who would go to Marion.

At Penland you can't buy beer, so you have to drive to Marion to buy beer. And there was a library in Marion.

Maybe it was Buncombe County-the county library. And Joe went to the library and, amazingly enough, brought back a book called *Ancient Persian Ceramics* and it was kind of a coffee table, beautiful book. It was a book really that was published in Japan-it was an archeological book. It was about a dig that had happened in what is now Kurdistan.

And the work was-the excavation of ninth-century-B.C. work, Persian jars, and it was not just jars; there were cups and other kinds of vessels, but a lot of lidded shapes, and a lot of them square or rectangular, taken out of round, and with a lid-beautiful pots that looked timeless. They kind of flipped it around; they looked contemporary; they were so old that, in order to describe their timelessness, you said that that they were contemporary. That was funny. But they did; they looked contemporary and they were really beautiful.

And they made use of all of this technique that I had developed all for myself. I could see immediately that I had that jar; I had made that jar. I felt so close to these people in this book; it was really a moving experience.

And it led to make-I started to make a little jar then. In a way, it lightened up the jar-making, or it let me use it as a-I don't know how to describe it-changed my idea of that little-jar format anyway. And I started to make it, and I started to make a lot, really quite a few of them. I had success with them and they moved people. People just were drawn to them, and [they] became a serious format that I never really have stopped making up until now.

And it continues to be an interesting pot to me, even though I have made a lot of them and they have gotten pretty contrived-I mean, I would admit, mannered. I mean, I'm very conscious of them when I'm working that I'm working on a jar. I'm working on it. They are nowhere near folk pottery at this point. But they were a good format; it was a good format.

Well, it's nice when things happen like that, where you just felt like you could work on it forever and it would always sing a little different song. It had a wide range of communication that could be really sad or heavy. It could at the same time flip and be light-hearted. It could carry everything. All you had to do was make it. It was a pot that was not very demanding in terms of technique. It was somewhat tedious; it had steps and drying and stuff that-so you had to be patient with it, but it presented itself readily if you would just give it time.

MR. SHAPIRO: What about the cutting out of feet on thrown things with the bottoms-had you seen that technique somewhere?

MR. SIMON: Well, Warren did it in a real straightforward manner. He would just take, maybe, just a foot ring like this and cut it. Well, let's see. [Leaves table.] This jar has got some of the criteria. It would just basically be, you would make the shape of the pot, and then you would cut a foot, and then cut legs from the foot. That is really all it started out to be.

And then I realized at some point that I could reveal-for one thing, I could make the shape of the inside rounded, or however I wanted the shape to be, and then cut the outside to reflect it, and then it would reveal the inside shape here, so you would get kind of a reflection of the inside volume on the outside of the pot, and you get a lot more dramatic leg. So it was something I used. And I used it and carried it on in a lot of different formats.

MR. SHAPIRO: And the big, sort of, apple-shaped.

MR. SIMON: That round jar, yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: With the tiny lid.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, we don't have one here, do we? That's an inside. Oh, kind of that horse-it ended up being that horse jar-

MR. SHAPIRO: Right.

MR. SIMON: With the leg, and the legs became-right.

MR. SHAPIRO: That seems like kind of a breakthrough.

MR. SIMON: Now that horse thing was a breakthrough, but it didn't really lead-I can't say that it led anywhere except that it let me make that jar, which I made over and over again.

[Audio break.]

But that was a dramatic moment because-I remember so distinctly-because I had a jar sitting here; it was a finished jar, but it wasn't patterned; it was a subtle pattern that it had-I had made that shape round and then, you know, cut in there-cut this shape. I looked at revealing the structure here, and then it was kind of-it was

somewhat decorative, and I liked that belly hanging down in there, because it made it feel like a sack or it made it feel like a vessel; it made you aware, looking at the outside, that this was-that there was volume there, and it was what the pot was about.

Well, but that jar was sitting here, and then I was just closing the door and turning the lights off one night when I left the studio, and I looked back, and a shadow or something was making a-it wasn't the horse I could see, but it was just the legs around here and the belly of the animal. They were just standing there. I mean, somehow, you know, it was in my brain, and I don't know what happened. But the next day I painted the horse, and it just went on there like a tattoo. It went right on that pot. It was unbelievable.

I would never have painted a horse. You know, it was too hard. I couldn't really paint a horse, and I think that let me paint-let me start fooling around with this dog on the Persian jar, too.

MR. SHAPIRO: That also was such an incredible integration of pattern and image.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, exactly; a strong pot shape and a strong pattern. It wasn't something that was moderated or compromised. It let them both be big. That was really fun.

MR. SHAPIRO: So all of this time when you were giving these workshops, that must have been the time when your sale with Ron was going, because we haven't really talked about that.

MR. SIMON: Well, let me say few words about that. [Laughs.] The sale came really also from Warren's suggestions. Now, when Sandra and I were undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota, Warren was having sales at his house, at his studio, and he would advertise them. And by that time, he had developed a clientele, and his pots were so ridiculously cheap, inexpensive, that you had to go out there at, like, 5:30 in the morning, and then there would just be cars parked all along the road. You know, when we first went out there as undergraduate students, you just couldn't imagine what was going on, that these pots had drawn these people here. It was really great.

But anyway, that was part of a potter's life, was to sell pots at their studio. And so we did it soon. Sandra and I had sales at our-if we didn't have sales at Chappelle's, which we may have, we certainly had sales at our first studio that we set up. And they were pretty good, and then they got better, and then they got a little bit better. And it was a nice way to sell pots, and it gave you contact with people that was sometimes really encouraging.

So then later on, in the '70s, we became better friends with Ron, and then we just started to have sales together. We had asked Ron to come out and do a sale. This is how I remember it anyway; I think this is what happened. And then after Sandra left, I remember that we did a couple of sales-George McCauley-there were a couple of other people involved. George McCauley was at a couple of them, I think, and there was a good friend named Sue Wilde, who made pottery here for quite some time. We did it together for a few times.

But then from about the early '80s, I would say, Ron and I did two sales a year: first at my studio, and then once he retired from the university, we started to do it at his studio. He moved to a place where it was just conducive to having a sale, and it was close to town.

But the sale became-well, and then other things were happening. For both of us, we were getting more encouragement from the outside gallery world and just the clay world in general. People started to want our pots. It was a great thing. So the sales became absurd. We started to have to make rules about when people could come and what time we were going to open the door and that kind of thing.

And then finally it just became kind of hopeless, where people were-it would be not even a minute before everything was just held in hand. There was not time to look at a pot. If you could get to a pot, you had to take it, because there weren't any more. So it was kind of-we just wore it out.

We couldn't do anything but impose rules, and we couldn't make any more pots, and we didn't really want-it would become a little bit of a quandary, because we were having to save a couple of kilnloads of pots for the sale, and it was hard to save them. It was just hard to put that much work together and continue to take care of the other obligations that we really wanted, to have good shows in other places. So we just had to say that we wouldn't do it any more.

It seemed silly to do that for so long and to kind of develop things and then have it be-it was really just perfect for about five or six years, where we needed it and people were still being turned on and the pots were-we were able to put the best of our pots out there, as well as everything else, but really the best pots were included. So it was very good.

And then it kind of went to seed. The people became haughty, and we became a little haughty, maybe, I don't know. But it wasn't too much fun. I mean, people were just grabbing pots that they couldn't even afford to look

at. It was no longer the idea of finding a pot that might really help you with your life-contemplative or poignant. There wasn't any room for that, and so it was kind of contradictory to what we wanted and so we had to quit.

I mean, it wasn't bad to quit. I think it really helped us both, and we didn't have any trouble with our pots. We both had a lot of encouragement in the last 10 years.

MR. SHAPIRO: You had a kind of special relationship with the Signature [Atlanta, GA].

MR. SIMON: Well, the Signature Shop-the Signature Shop-I'm proud of it just because it was the oldest craft store in the southeast, and it was developed in about the mid-'60s by a couple of smart women in Atlanta, and then the woman who owns it now actually worked there as a high school student, as a kind of an intern.

And so she came back and bought it, as a mature woman, and still works there, still runs it. Directly after Ron and I stopped having our studio sale, we started to have exhibitions there, once a year, I think, we did-or maybe once every other year-and they were quite successful and fun, and a lot of the same-a lot of the customers that we had developed would come to the exhibition, to the opening, so we would still get to see people.

I still see people, I mean, up until the time I became ill. I actually encouraged people, old friends and customers, to come out-or people who I met who just seemed susceptible to a pottery feeling, seemed to understand what I wanted to do, or something like that. I would always try to get them to come out. Even though I say that I have had a lot of encouragement, I never really had enough. [Laughs.] So it's nice to have people who you feel like are moved by the pots. I always love showing pots.

Even though it's easy for a potter to complain about support, there has been a lot of good support through time. I made pottery here for 30 years. A lot of pots went out and I met a lot of people-made pottery talk with a lot of people. It was very good.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was there a point at which workshop teaching wasn't giving you as much as it had?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, that is true. That really became true. I think my feeling changed about doing workshops when Susan and I were married, and we moved to this house, and I just liked being here so much and I liked being home. And I just didn't want to go out as much as I had been. It wasn't as if I did that many workshops. I mean, I did some-I did, I don't know, maybe eight, or maybe there was a couple of years when I did more than that, but that was about the most I did in a year.

I did the summer, which would be two weeks, or sometimes even three weeks, in different places-well, it adds up to a lot of time to be gone. Actually, it's interesting because I think with Susan and our marriage and that we were both in a kind of a mature state of our development; I had more of a structure in my life, and going away wasn't that-there were things about the workshops, too, that had worn out, but it was mainly the leaving. I just didn't want to leave here anymore to do that.

I had given my spiel; I had been able to do it many times, tell people what I felt about the work and try to explain how my work developed, and I just didn't feel like I was able to put anything new or get anything out. And all too often I would go to a place and people would know what I was going to do, and it just seemed kind of silly to go out to do that. I wasn't that rich with information. I have seen people that can be over and over compelling; I just didn't feel like it was my-I felt like it was more valuable to be home and in the studio, and also not thinking about myself. Something tells me that a really mature phase of making things is going to be not thinking about making them.

MR. SHAPIRO: And there was this thing you did, going to Italy with the UGA [University of Georgia, Athens] program.

MR. SIMON: Well, the UGA has a great arts program in Cortona [Italy], a small Tuscan mountain hill town that has a wall around it. But it was Etruscan, and I think it was built in 1000 B.C. This wall-I mean, it's a serious rock wall, and so it had a finite amount of space inside the wall, and someone told me that the last building built in Cortona was built in 1310-the last building. So when you go there, it's like-you can't believe what it looks like. It looks like a theme park, but it's the real thing. There is not a seam in it. It's just an incredibly beautiful place.

And they have now bought a building. At the time they were just leasing these buildings, but they have now bought two buildings there in the town of Cortona. It was great. And you can go travel around and you can see all of the old majolica. And they had a kiln there, so you could actually do work. It was beautiful to be traveling like that, to just get up and go out on the street and then go to your little studio. I had a small number of students.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did you work with the local earthenware there?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, we went and bought-I said, well, where is the clay, when I got there, and they said, well, you have to go get it. So they put me in a van-[laughs]-and I drove to a place where they made tile. They made tile for the Middle East, actually. It was their big business; they made tile, and they had a mountain of clay that wasn't really very good-it wasn't throwing clay, but it was quite good modeling clay, earthenware, and that is what we worked with. Firm, now that I think about it, too firm.

Beautiful stone building, though-a stone building that was built in about 1300. The upper parts of which was an old folks home, "la casa de reposa." And they had a nice little muffle kiln, gas-fired muffle kiln. We fired our pottery there-really something to experience. And then it was the only time I have traveled in Europe, so we got to go to Rome and we got to go to Florence and Venice and Milan. Then on the way back went to Cannes and Paris, and Amsterdam. It was a lot of-it was a great trip.

[Audio break, tape change.]

-and then I have been lucky enough to do a couple of other-I went to one workshop at Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. A woman came-were you there? Was that the-Mariana-

MR. SHAPIRO: You went to Chile, right?

MR. SIMON: Mariana Domique [sp].

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh, no, to Venezuela, or was it to Chile?

MR. SIMON: No, it was Chile. Yeah, a woman that came from Chile, who worked in a community studio in Santiago, invited-or they as a group invited me-to lead a workshop there in Chile, in Santiago, the following year. That was the year that Susan and I were married. It was 1994. And, you know, it was a lot of fun, and I remember I did a public lecture at the American Embassy, and I was like the prince of pottery. [Laughs.] It was terrific, a lot of fun.

They were very nice and really sophisticated. They just sent me a book. They printed a book from their little school, the people that worked there-some nice photos, a beautiful book. The woman that runs the school is Ruth Krauskopf, and she is a beautiful, marvelous woman. They took me to the countryside and a little town called Quinchamali, where people were making earthenware with a little fire under little dung piles.

I saw a woman fire her week's worth of pottery in about 45 minutes with about five buffalo chips. It was unbelievable economy-and the pots were pretty hard, surprisingly hard. I swear there was not enough fire there. I don't know how it dried a dishtowel, much less fired a pot.

Anyway, they took me to the vineyards, and, oh boy, it was just a marvelous trip. Unbelievable-Chile is very beautiful. And they have a big-they actually have a big pottery store there in Chile.

What were some of the other questions that you were thinking about, that we talked about before we started this morning?

MR. SHAPIRO: We were talking about things that you've read that have been moving to you. You were talking about Warren's writing, and Michael Cardew.

MR. SIMON: Right. Oh, gosh, yeah. Let me see if I have that. Well, the Cardew stuff, the Michael Cardew writing that's so good is in this book [Michael Cardew. *Pioneer Pottery*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971].

This is kind of an example of the difference between Ron's work and mine.

Well, the Cardew stuff is-here's my marks from when I was writing the text. I made little marks in here. You know, this is how far I got on one platter, I think. [Laughs.] I can't really believe I got that far. But there are the little marks.

MR. SHAPIRO: What did it feel like to write that text on your pots?

MR. SIMON: Do you remember this, that article?

MR. SHAPIRO: I've got it here, too.

MR. SIMON: The text that I wrote?

MR. SHAPIRO: I'm talking about the text you wrote when you took Cardew's writing and put it on your pots.

MR. SIMON: Oh. I was just-I mean, it felt like a pain in the ass, to tell you the truth. I'm sorry to say that, but I

was trying to figure out how-think about the surface of the pot. I tell you, there was not much of a mysticism or metaphysical connection between putting Cardew's text on a plate. I kind of liked that, but I was struggling to get the text on the pot and have it look the way I wanted it to look on the pot. I was trying to get this to where it would open up a whole realm of surface work for myself, easily done but, I hate to say, but poignant. And, you know, I say easily done; you never get that. But I don't really mean easily done like it's cheap; I just mean something that I could do, and do over and think about it going into the future. So I just envisioned in my mind how I could keep doing this.

It's like they have this thing I've heard referred to in some of the-it's called writing. It's holy writing, or some kind of writing, that it's like you're a medium for the supernatural, and the writing comes through your hand. You know, you just hold the writing instrument and it's going through your hand. And I saw some examples of this. There's a man down at Sandersville [sp].

MR. SHAPIRO: Is this like a-

MR. SIMON: Automatic writing, it's called.

MR. SHAPIRO: Outsider?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, it's kind of like that. And it's kind of like also speaking in tongues or that kind of thing. Yeah, it's outsider, right. This guy is one of the outsiders. And he does a lot-it's called automatic writing. And he just picks up a pencil, and he's got a piece of paper, you know, and he does automatic writing. And it's beautiful. I don't know how to explain to you.

MR. SHAPIRO: And it's a narrative text?

MR. SIMON: It's a narrative text, but no one can read it. It's not words.

MR. SHAPIRO: Oh. Okay.

MR. SIMON: But it looks like script, but it's not. And it's in rows. [Laughs.] Well, it's nice. And somehow I just thought that that's just what I need, because it's the shape, because it lets me put a surface on, but it's a shape. It's the same thing that, in a way, that's what I got down to. That kind of came from the same desire, what I call a woven pattern.

And really, to take you back to the shape, I was just making all those little lines. It didn't have anything to do, really. I mean, you could pick that apart and you'd say, well, shit, you know, that's just like bad weaving; there's nothing good about it. But somehow I thought, and in the best cases, it did do it. It took you in there to the clay.

But the writing was-the reason it was a pain in the ass was I could never get a tool, really, that would let me go around curves, let me make a nice mark.

MR. SHAPIRO: You get those little birds.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, and you'd make a little bird and it means too much, and you make a nice curve and it disappears in there. I don't know, I wasn't getting it, and I finally just gave up. Well, I shouldn't say it like it was a surprise. There are a lot of things like that, where you just don't quite-you can't work it out in your medium, in my little stuff of stoneware salt glaze, with the tools that I had. I wasn't going to get the look, or didn't quite have it yet, you know.

MR. SHAPIRO: To be continued?

MR. SIMON: Maybe next year I'll get led back to it by a backdoor method or something, or else someone else will do it and I'll figure out if it's the way that I could do it. A lot of times that happens. I steal things. I've stole a lot of things. I've used a lot of things. For the first five years, anything I could glean from anything, I just tried it. I didn't care too much.

MR. SHAPIRO: And the writing that you did yourself, you said it was always very difficult, very painful?

MR. SIMON: I thought it was hard always to-my words weren't enough to say what a pot, you know, to describe what a pot does or something. I had a hard time writing about pottery. You're always asked, as potters-and I guess artists in general-always asked to make comments, it seemed to me, like every time you're in a show or every time-there's a lot of situations like that. Every time something is published, they would like a statement, a statement of intent or a statement about your work. And it's sort of painful. It's always painful. And it's obvious that it's painful not only for me, but it's painful for just damn near everybody, you know. The statements hardly ever add up to the work being done. It can't, really. I mean, it shouldn't. It's always a little bit behind.

This was a little thing Glen [R.] Brown wrote, and I thought that-Glen Brown's an art historian, and I felt like I liked having an art historian write about my pots [Glen R. Brown. "Michael Simon: Between the Universal and the Personal." *Ceramics Monthly*. v. 51 no. 9 (November 2003), pp. 36-40].

MR. SHAPIRO: When you were asked to do that lecture at the university, and you decided to talk about the evolution of your pitcher over a long period of time, how did that opportunity come to you, and how did you decide on that approach?

MR. SIMON: Well, my friend Andy Nasisse teaches at the University of Georgia and has taught there his whole-he's retired, just last year. And he just asked me if I would do it. He had been setting up situations where he would have people come-he was using workshop money, he said. They would have people come to the studio. They were given a certain amount of money each year to have visitors come in and work. I told him I didn't really want to work at school right then, and he said, well, how about if we just do a lecture at the museum? I think that's the way it came about.

They have a nice program at the university where they have-they have six or eight every year of artists come, and they're paid to do one lecture in a pretty nice hall. And it's been a good program. Helpful, I think. And they're generally well attended.

Well, so it was frightening for me to think about doing a lecture, and it's not something that I ordinarily do. When I was doing workshops, it was easy for me to talk about the work, especially while I was doing it. And it's somewhat more difficult to do a lecture in a big hall with people, where you're not really talking to people, but you're just talking in a big room and trying to describe-really having to use the words, because my words aren't very specific, or they aren't specific enough sometimes.

Anyway, it was just a situation that made me somewhat nervous. So I wanted to get ready. I really prepared for that lecture. And one of the things I wanted to demonstrate was the evolution of the work. In fact, I think that was the title of the lecture ["Discussion of Work through Slides and Pots." Georgia Museum of Art. 1999]. And I wanted people to be able to see what a potter did. I wanted to use a simple shape, you know, where I thought it would be obvious, the changes in both consideration and technique and everything like that. I happened to have some slides-pictures from way early and, you know, all the way through my work time. And I just used them, went through it step by step, and used that to explain what my concerns were at the time and how they developed through the time that I was working. It worked-

[Audio break.]

MR. SHAPIRO: This is disc three, Michael Simon interview.

So you found Warren's writing-it must have been after-

MR. SIMON: After being a student, yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: A student-that you discovered his writing to be particularly-

MR. SIMON: Well, I just think Warren's writing is clear; Warren really believes in the culture. That's one thing about Warren, you know, he is very positive. He really believes in civilization. I mean-[laughs]-that's nice about him! He likes to participate. He's really engaging. He tries to understand everything. I think a lot of people have gotten the idea that he's kind of narrow-minded. And that's not the case. He is big. I mean, he sees a big life. And knowing that, I suppose, gives him more value; because you could say, you know, how many times is he going to make that bowl? Because it looks like he's making the same bowl. But that's really not-the reservoir there is-he's working from a big-standpoint of a big scope.

MR. SHAPIRO: You certainly see it in the range of the work of his students.

MR. SIMON: Gee whiz, yeah. I was given this. This is great.

MR. SHAPIRO: That's *Studio Potter*?

MR. SIMON: Oh, it's an interview.

MR. SHAPIRO: An interview. *Studio Potter* from 1990.

MR. SIMON: Well, I could never finish telling you how important Warren has been to me in all the time I've been working. And I went through a time where I kind of had to shuck off his voice in my mind. I had to find my own way of doing things. I had to find my own reflection, kind of, in the work. I had to find out where my bottom line was, what work was going to be acceptable to me-or, I don't know how-I don't really want to say acceptable, but what was going to be my profundity, what was going to be my gravity. I had to have a basis, and it had to be

mine. It had to be a place where I could operate. And it was necessarily different from his, as it is for any student with any teacher, I think.

But it was a long process of understanding, and understanding the possibilities, and understanding the things that he represented. I didn't come to him as an apprentice; I came to him as a university/college student and left there as the same thing. I mean, we had a final critique. That was the end of that talk.

MR. SHAPIRO: So that time that you went up and made pots in his studio, that was probably after his wife had died.

MR. SIMON: Oh, that was much later. That was mid-'80s. Well, in terms of Warren, when we first moved down here, to Georgia, we would go back to Minnesota because both of our families were there. We would go back every year-maybe even more than that, if there was something going on.

So we would see Warren most of the time, I think; we'd most of the time go out there. And then it became crucial to go out there. The relationship developed, you know, after we were gone from school.

Sandra wrote him, you know, began to write him. And Warren is a fantastic correspondent. He will write you back immediately. I swear he will just-if you write him a letter, he will answer, I think, the next day. It's amazing responsibility. He's very good.

I remember him writing-he wrote some great stuff. He said it's the simpleness [*sic*] now that he really had to have and that he knew that-he knew there was a risk of just being boring, but he said that he had to have the clarity, that there wasn't anything else that was-you know, that he could find. So he has always been a guide.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did you read Leach a lot at some point? Was *The Potter's Book* [Bernard Leach, 1940] important to you?

MR. SIMON: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Read all those books, yes. Not in school, though, not undergraduate school. I don't know why. Where was all the reading? The only thing I remember doing in undergraduate was looking at *American Craft*, and that doesn't make much sense to me. I don't remember reading much.

When Sandra and I finally started reading, it was about four years later. And that was when we got *The Potter's Book* and then consequently read all the Leach books and then read-when did Cardew's books come out? *Pioneer Pottery* came out-it was in the late '70s-

MR. SHAPIRO: Seventy-six or something like that-somewhere in there.

MR. SIMON: Yeah. We got it right away, I remember.

MR. SHAPIRO: There's that section on geology that always blew my mind.

MR. SIMON: [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: He got so far into that.

MR. SIMON: Well, he does-there are some things in this book-this whole section called "Product," I think, is all about it. And there's one page in here that I don't know if I'll be able to get through if I read it. It's just so good.

MR. SHAPIRO: Do you want to read it?

MR. SIMON: Well, no, frankly, it's too much. There's just too much. It's so good, though. It's about six or eight pages.

You know, he speaks like this: "The Western potter who finds himself committed to work of this kind will still encounter difficulties and obstacles." [Laughs.] Like he is not a Western potter, you know. He's-you know-oh, God, it's so funny.

Let's sum this up. And he really does sum it up. And it was flabbergasting to read this, for me, the first time, because I thought, like, "Jesus Christ, this is what our life is, isn't it," because it was perfect.

MR. SHAPIRO: There's that part where he talks about potters who want to make small pots and big pots and, you know-

MR. SIMON: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: -that it's fair to want to make tableware and gallery ware and-

MR. SIMON: Right, right, right.

MR. SHAPIRO: I found that very encouraging.

MR. SIMON: Yeah. And he does say that, but at the same time I think he's using it to make a point. He said that it's important that the potter is the one that makes the decision about what is made; you could make it, you have to make what you want to make, and we have to be the ones leading the way; that you can't expect-that if you're making pots for the public, it's just not going to work out, because they don't know what you know. And I thought that was really good.

Well, it's great, powerful stuff. It's nice to see good writing. We need good writing.

I have to think that our pottery culture-I remember the last few years I was doing workshops, I would say that I thought that now that the American pottery culture was the best pottery culture in the world now. And I guess I still think it's true. I mean, this is probably 10 years after that thought, but-

MR. SHAPIRO: What are the elements that bring that together?

MR. SIMON: Well, it's pretty wide-ranging. I mean, there's some real good pottery being made. There's some just really good pots being made, I think. And it seems to me it's better than the pottery that was being made in the '50s, that it covers that ground that-maybe that's not quite right. Maybe it's not quite fair. But I was going to say that it covers that ground, but it also covers a lot more ground. It's expanded, definitely expanded, since I started.

MR. SHAPIRO: So it seems like the younger potters come in at a higher level skill and sophistication.

MR. SIMON: They come in at a higher, wider-and with a wider base. I mean, good grief, they're really-I think they're really, really smart.

And there's also-I think that even though there's not nearly enough, I think that the support systems are better. It seems to me to be a little bit wider.

Now I can't really tell, because compared with those first 10 years of working, the last 10 years have been so much easier, because I've had people coming to me for my work-I mean, all but about 10 percent of my pots are sold when I make them. And I can say, "Well, this one came out better than that one," but it doesn't really matter very much where they come out, you know. There was someone that wanted to look at them, and that was a lot different than it was the first 10 years, when, you know, it was difficult. It was difficult to get people to look at them.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you've always kept one pot out of every kiln, which is unusual.

MR. SIMON: [Laughs] Well, I didn't always, but I started doing it sometime in the mid-'80s. And that was because I got to a point where I didn't even have an example of a whole decade of work, not a single example out of the whole 1970s, you know. And I thought, "Well, that's kind of funny." I mean, not a good example-[laughs]-not one I wanted to look at. [Laughs.]

And then I thought, "Well, what will happen then," you know, just drawing it out. It became clear that the biggest thing that you had was the development. Somewhere along the lines, I remember when I started to think this, too, sometime about early '90s, I thought, you know what the story is here, is you're not going to a point where you're going to say, "Well, look at all these pots that are just marvelous." But what you're going to be able to do is say, "Look where you were and what you went through and where you got to," or something like that. It's not linear, but there is development. There was development, and I knew it all the way. I could tell that-especially if you had two years, and you look back two years ago, you could always-you knew that you just accumulated. You had things that you'd understand and you didn't have.

MR. SHAPIRO: Like a snowball.

MR. SIMON: It was better. It seems pompous to say it was better, but it was better. It was somehow more encouraging, or it was wider; it meant more.

MR. SHAPIRO: So your typical work schedule, you would have a certain amount of pottery you'd want to make in a given day? I had heard that; is that true?

MR. SIMON: Yeah. Well, it was just a story. I've heard this story from many people, and everybody has a different number, and they think about it, and they're in terms of time. But what I just trying to do was-how was the scheduling?

Well, the first thing, one of the most difficult things, I guess, from way back in the beginning was the discipline of getting in the studio. And as a young person, there are always things that you could do, that would even seem like you were kind of getting ready to work, but they might not have been. There were things that were easier than work or that would-or that you could do without-I don't know what. But at some point or another, it became clear that I needed the discipline to get in the studio and really make things and to do it for-in terms of a year or in terms of a long time.

MR. SHAPIRO: Did you feel like your background, growing up on a farm, prepared you in some way for the routine of it?

MR. SIMON: Part of it was that thing I was talking about, about how I said, if I keep doing this, by the time I'm 40, it'll work out. You get breakthroughs-sometimes you'd have slack periods. Like the first winters-it would be after the holiday sales were over. We'd have a little bit of dough. It would be easy not to work most of January. It was cold in the studio. There's a million other good things to do. I mean, you didn't have to go in there. So things like that.

As time went by, you just figured out that not only were you not getting in the studio, you just weren't getting anywhere. You weren't finding out. All the information was there, and you weren't going in there to get it. You had to do that. It was just like opening a book. You had to open the book, or having the book wasn't going to do any good.

So it was just a matter of establishing a discipline of getting in a studio, and so that was where it started out. So, like, I'd say to myself, "Well, you've made a dozen. Let's do a dozen." And how are you going to get this kilnload made? And how are you going to-and you couldn't just say, maybe it doesn't work, and so are we going throw any away? Or how would you do your-let's make a dozen good ones. [Laughs.] Sometimes you wouldn't get a dozen good ones.

MR. SHAPIRO: So would you throw a lot of pots away?

MR. SIMON: Well, I've seen a lot more greenware than in the early days. Yeah. I didn't throw very many pots away those last few years. [Laughs.] I didn't, frankly. But I wasn't taking the same risk, either, that I did then. A lot of was just, I would think I was going to make an 18-inch-tall pitcher, three inches in diameter, or something like that. I didn't know the limits. I would just put myself in places I couldn't possibly succeed.

Well, so anyway, I think part of it was just to make sure that I would keep getting work done. And that fit right into mingei, too, fit in the right into the potter's economy and having it be not so conscious, so that the days you went in there-you didn't just go in there when you felt like going in there. You went in there when you felt good and when you felt bad. It was your life. You just went in there.

And it became obvious. I don't know if it was just short-term, or maybe it took one or two years, and you could say, "Well, there's development going on here, and you don't want to miss it. So if you don't want to miss it, you go in there." And if you don't go in there, it doesn't develop. It doesn't develop in your brain. It doesn't. I mean, you've got to think about it, and it doesn't hurt anything to think about it, but it doesn't make it work. You have the physical sense, and the clay tells you the truth. It processes the truth, kind of. You have to be able to take it through all the steps, or your thinking-all your thinking in the world won't really help.

So why would you decide on 12 a day? It was a number. I just wanted to get somewhere where I could-and I could have said, "Well, I'm going to put in a big day's work, and that'll be it." Well, that was okay. That would have been fine. I wasn't going to argue with it, but somehow that way I would know when I was done. And then-that was nice.

And, you know, if things were going really well, I wouldn't necessarily stop. I didn't have to stop. It helped me get a couple more kilnloads out; that was good.

MR. SHAPIRO: Once I heard you refer to a pot as a kind of an argument.

MR. SIMON: Oh, gosh.

MR. SHAPIRO: Does that ring a bell?

MR. SIMON: I don't remember saying that.

MR. SHAPIRO: Are you saying a pot argues for certain solutions?

MR. SIMON: Oh.

MR. SHAPIRO: And in a way, a pot is kind of like an argument for the way-for a point of view, for an answer of-

like it has a structure of an argument almost. I mean, you didn't say that, but-

MR. SIMON: Gosh.

MR. SHAPIRO: -you said, you know, there are parts of this pot I would argue with.

MR. SIMON: Oh.

MR. SHAPIRO: Or that-like, I have no argument with.

MR. SIMON: Oh, yeah, I see what you're saying. Well, that's kind of a manner of speaking, I guess. Well, there are pots that succeed some places and, you know, other places you wish they'd tell you what they meant, or wish they would-or, you know, they weren't telling the same story.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah. And this other story that I was thinking of is at Haystack; Bunzie Sherman once asked you, she said, "Michael Simon, were you ever a production potter?'" And you said, "Bunzie, what the hell do you think I'm trying to do?" And she said, "You are an artist-A-R-T-I-S-T." Which, to me, kind of begged the whole question of how you think about yourself.

MR. SIMON: Yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: I mean, she said-

MR. SIMON: Did I say-what'd I say then? Did I say anything?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes. I think you said, "What the hell do you think I'm trying to do?"

MR. SIMON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. SHAPIRO: Which to me meant there is no-in your mind, there is no-

MR. SIMON: Difference.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yes. But I-

MR. SIMON: Well, in her mind, there was a difference.

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah.

MR. SIMON: But I think there was no difference. Sure, you can say there's an intent-if you don't believe that pots are going to carry yourself, then I mean, why would you invest yourself in them if you don't even think they're going to? And if you think they do, then how can you not give all the attention that it takes?

I had a lot of good teachers at the University of Minnesota. One of them was Robert [J.] Poor, who was an art historian. He taught Eastern art-taught Chinese particularly-art history, which I took a lot of because he was such a great teacher. But people would ask him before his tests, what should we do? How much do you want us to write? He smiled, and he would turn his back and he'd say, "Water seeks its own level." [Laughs.]

He was a great teacher. I had some great teachers at the University of Minnesota. It's flabbergasting how lucky I was to go in there. And it was so peculiar to go there. I think Mark Pharis-he's so serious to our American clay world. Seems to me he is. And then-and Randy, you know, made so many good pots, and Wayne Branum-I suppose he's my favorite potter. I just love his pots.

MR. SIMON: And he became an architect.

MR. SHAPIRO: He's an architect.

MR. SIMON: Right. He's an architect, but he was always a good potter. He and Mark were sidekicks in undergraduate school. And they were always together, and they fired salt kilns together. And Wayne made great pots then. He's just always made really nice pots. And now I think they're just better than ever. But it's actually not the pots-he made all those little house pots that I think are not his best pots. But his other stuff does refer to architecture often. But, boy, he has nice pots. I always liked his surfaces, too. Well, I like him, that's probably-it's hard to tell. Endearment is dangerous in terms of evaluation.

But anyway, they were all there. We were all there like kids. It was pretty amazing. I just can't get over it. I was so fortunate. I know where my brother is. The rest of my family-I know where they are, you know, and my life has ended up so different from that-

MR. SHAPIRO: Were you the only person to go to university in your family?

MR. SIMON: I was the only person since my grandfather, who went to college.

MR. SHAPIRO: And was that-

MR. SIMON: In my mom's immediate family, I mean. My mom had eight sisters. So some of them-the families are a little bit different, depending on who they married, but there wasn't much value given to education. We have the term "redneck" now, but they weren't-I don't really think of them as redneck, or-you know, it wasn't the same. We were quite poor-I mean, farmers. But there wasn't much value given to education. It surprises me, you know?

MR. SHAPIRO: So were you encouraged by your family? Who encouraged you to go to college?

MR. SIMON: No, no one really did. No one did. I pretty much made a decision on my own. I wasn't even encouraged because of-

MR. SHAPIRO: Did Angel Lillo encourage you?

MR. SIMON: No. Not really, not really. We didn't have a-I mean, I was a high school kid. We didn't have a personal relationship, you know? Not really. Well, maybe he did. I mean, he might have. You know, he might have said something like, "You should study. You should go study." But I don't-I can't remember that. But because of moving, I kind of got lost in the counseling shuffle in high school, too, and I-you know, I was never really put on a college preparatory program or anything.

MR. SHAPIRO: Was it obvious that it was an option-for you personally, was it obvious that it was an option for you?

MR. SIMON: It was something that I can say that I hardly ever thought of when I was in high school.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. SHAPIRO: But you must have had whatever required grades-

MR. SIMON: Well, I had math and science. I had good math and science. In fact, I thought I was quite a good mathematics student. And I thought-that was really part of why I thought I could do architecture. I thought about going to the Institute of Technology [at the University of Minnesota]. But the first math I took in college was the end of that thought [laughs]. I might have-who knows, if I say that I could have, might have gotten it, but I was not a good enough student. There were a lot of distractions right then.

MR. SHAPIRO: What about politically? Were your feelings about the war-was that different from your family?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, I remember I was listening to Bob Dylan and Jefferson Airplane in 1966, in the summer, so I know that I was aware of the stuff going on by then. By the time I was in Minneapolis-there was a year between when I finished high school because I went to a junior-I didn't go to a school for a quarter, because I didn't know what to do; I didn't have a plan. High school ended and there I was. No one had taught me, get ready. [Laughs.] I hadn't gotten ready.

Yeah, I hadn't gotten ready, so I didn't go to school for a quarter, and then I went to-

MR. SHAPIRO: Hang on for a second, Michael.

MR. SIMON: So I was thinking about how my day was kind of driven and how I decided what to make every day and those kinds of issues. And this-kind of a continuation of how I decided to make 12 of something-so I was getting in the studio to make those 12, and what indeed were those 12 going to be? So, of course, you can't make 12 pieces of art in one day; you can't do that, but I would make-I would just decide on formats, and I would say, well, I'm going to make a half-dozen cups, and then I would make-maybe I would make Persian jars.

I would make Persian jars, and I would make two of them. I would usually do two, and then I would maybe make another jar, some kind with a lid or some other kind of shape and maybe a simpler one. The Persian jars take a lot of time. And I would try to arrange things so that I was throwing them one day and then be able to finish most of them the next day, so that then I could go back and throw the next day and then go back and finish on the next day. That would be kind of what I wanted to do.

So in order to do that, I would make some simple things and some things that were more complex. If I would make-so I would have those three jars, then I would maybe make some vase forms, some vertical forms, and probably vases, maybe two vase shapes-different kinds. And then I would make another simple pot, like a

pitcher. A pitcher was a good one-step pot. And my pitchers, as my own rules, never had-were not footed; they simply had a handle attachment. So if I made a good spout when I threw it, the pitcher was essentially done at that point-just a matter of finishing the bottom and attaching a handle.

The teapots were a little bit more time-consuming, because you're throwing a pot-throwing the lid, throwing the spout, and sometimes throwing the handle. And then in the next day they were going to take a lot more time to put together. And then I would make some bowls and some plates, which are simpler and could-and were oftentimes made and had the foot cut, and that would be it.

So I would just do combinations like that that would allow me to throw them one day and then finish them. I mean, finishing is cutting feet, adding handles, getting them into their final shape and thickness, and stuff like that.

MR. SHAPIRO: Would you decorate the ones from the day before, or that same day?

MR. SIMON: My latest phase is that I painted all of the surfaces at the end of the making. In other words, after about-however many days it took me to make the kilnload of pots, after they were all done and glazed, I would start painting them all. And the reason for that was that I found, when I first started the salt glaze, that it would be more immediate, that I would glaze and then decorate and then get all of the stuff. So I would essentially be throwing the pot, finishing it, putting the glaze on, and decorating it all in a sequence of just one or two days-no, two or three days.

But in reality, what happened was that having to remix the pigments every time I went back to use them wasn't very practical, and they would often end up getting thicker and thinner, and I found myself using the pigments of the wrong thickness, whereas when I got the whole kiln of pots in a dry state and then went to paint them, I could get the pigment into the proper thickness and keep it there for a week.

MR. SHAPIRO: So they would be slipped at that point, if they were going to be slipped?

MR. SIMON: They would already be glazed-glazed and slipped-yeah. My rules were to slip first, then glaze, then paint. So the slip and glaze had to happen leather hard. Some people say that they can green glaze bone dry, but I have always found that my clays wouldn't tolerate bone-dry glazing; they had to be glazed leather hard before the watercolor left the rim at the top. That was my guide-and really the softer the better. My glazes-well, let's see-yeah, that would be how I did it.

And then I wanted to make all of the things that I considered to be the potter's traditional format for food preparation and service, which were cups, bowls, plates, teapots, pitchers, covered jars. And I tried to make a variety of them so that they were not the same jar, and a variety of sizes with them. And that was the way I would work. I found that I was sharper on the pots-my perception of it was.

It was contrary to what I understood about Leachian thought. Leach often talked about making the same shape-you know, a grouping of them-however many that would be, 10 to 20. And some of them would be better and some of them would be worse, but that would be the way it was, and you would become accustomed to making them, and I don't know-I can't remember anymore what the positive attributes of that were going to be. I guess speed was one. Was it?

MR. SHAPIRO: Yeah. And I think there was this idea that you would see one or two, and that that would help you move forward to the next group you would make, and see one or two that might be better, and then you would take that as the-

MR. SIMON: I see, I see. Yes, yes. But, I mean, if you're going to-well, I guess I was hoping, was I would have one model, and then I would use that and I would change that, you know. I could sit with six cups that I could feed on. That seemed pretty nice, because I could change them a little bit. That was kind of within reach, but I didn't want it to become tedious.

I realize now that in workshops I would often speak about keeping your morale up, and it was kind of true. Especially when I was working by myself, I thought, you know, you're your own stimulus really. I mean, one of our jobs as potters, as artists all together, really as human beings, I guess, is to keep yourself stimulated. It is not always going to just come to you. You're not going to necessarily wake up feeling terrific every day or something like that, or sometimes you might have setbacks, but you have to keep yourself stimulated; it's really crucial. So that was an interesting thing to find out. How did I start that story?

MR. SHAPIRO: You were talking about how many pots you would make in a given day or decorated or-

MR. SIMON: Yeah. So that was it, just keep yourself excited in there. You have got this new thing, or how is this going to turn out? Or if it became too-if it was too placid or too staid, you didn't have that motivation. I didn't

feel that motivation, and I wanted it. I always wanted to feel like there was evolution in the shapes, even in the simple-like, even in a dinner plate, which just doesn't seem to have much adjustment for any of the-that you would say, well, I have got to change the shape of my dinner plates.

I had a lot of dogma about my dinner plates. I was trying to make-for about 15-how many years-20 years probably-I tried to make a dinner plate, a rimless dinner plate-a simple curve, no rim. In fact, I mean a rim that would kind of disappear. And within that, within that format, it could change every-I always had a plan of attack to change my dinner plates, and they never went outside of that format.

Now, isn't that just flabbergasting to think of now? Now when I am not making pottery every day, when I think of that kind of a situation, it's almost hard to relate to, but that was where I was-that was really where I was. That was really serious-it was very serious where my dinner plates were.

And it was just like we were talking about those cup handles; I could go for long stretches and not be able to get the handle, after all of the time.

That was another reason for the lecture about the pitchers, too, over the long period of time, was that it wasn't-the development is not linear, because you can't just think your way into it; you can't say, I'm going to make a better pot today, because you have got to make the better pot; that is what makes it art-[laughs]-or that is what makes it bigger. That is what gives you the possibility, because it can go-you might not get as far as you want to go, but it might go way past where you thought you were going to get. Both of those things could happen.

MR. SHAPIRO: So you have always had this preference for very small studio spaces?

MR. SIMON: [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: Was that conscious, or how did that-

MR. SIMON: I don't know. I haven't figured that out. It is true, though. I guess I have ended up-I minimized this one, didn't I? Now when I came back in here, I thought, well, now, if I unloaded that ware cart, I would open this thing up; I really want to now. I feel differently.

MR. SHAPIRO: Ron commented that when you came to work at his studio, you-

MR. SIMON: I moved back in the little corner.

MR. SHAPIRO: He gave you a big space, and you ended up using about six square feet.

MR. SIMON: [Laughs] I moved back in that little corner, and I did not leave. [Laughs.] Well, I did the same thing in my first cow barn. I made a little room-after Sandra left anyway-I made a little room and closed it up and put a heater in there. The practical part of it was that it was supposed to be easier to heat and cool, but I don't know why I did it. And then the next studio that I built, I actually built the room-a whole new building, and I built the room that I worked in, 10 by 16, or something like that. But the space that I work in, it can be small, and I knew at the time that I wasn't going to work with anybody.

Now since I have been ill and I have not worked and I think of all that time that I spent in the studio by myself, I often think that, wish, I had been with someone. And I often think I would really be in a group with people-not really someone in particular, but just activity going on. I don't know why that is. It's hard; I can't explain that. I am quite sure there are benefits to both, though.

And like the mingei-Susan and I have turned to a macrobiotic diet because of our trying to make sure that cancer doesn't come back, and we-and for one thing, the diet is demanding in terms of cooking preparation and needing fresh food for every meal, so it is quite time-consuming, and you almost need a community to get things, to be able to not cook three meals a day. I could easily spend now four hours a day cooking our meals, and that doesn't leave very much time-[laughs]-for developing other things.

So it would be nice to have a community. And somehow that has made me think in terms of making pottery alone, and it's become-even before we became macrobiotic, I thought how difficult it was to make a kilnload of pottery. Since I have not been working, pottery has become much harder work than it was when I was a potter. I can't imagine anymore how people make a kiln of pottery, when you consider how all of that shape and all of the considerations and everything that has to line up and make sense and have-not just thought about, but actually accomplished-glazes mixed and, oh, everything right. It's flabbergasting the amount of work to do.

But I know at the same time I felt so lucky often to come out-to just be able to walk outside of the house and go in the studio. And the best part, really, was to just get into almost a daydream in the middle of working, having the work done-having the work in concept, ready for you, so you weren't planning but were just free to feel the clay and see how the shapes would grow and really essentially daydream in the work. It was a terrific

experience. And I suppose that is hard to do, actually, with a community of people. Maybe it's not, but-

MR. SHAPIRO: Would you listen to music?

MR. SIMON: Always had NPR [National Public Radio] on, so I was listening to the radio, which was usually classical music. It's been a long time since I have controlled my music, since I had my own tapes or something in the studio. I just gave up. [Laughs.] I just gave up. But I guess now I have-like, if I had maybe a CD player with a random play so I didn't have to think about it, that might be workable.

But I always did have some sound on, yeah. But I wasn't hearing it; I oftentimes wasn't hearing it. It was a daydream. It was free out here; it was a nice place to come. I liked it. And it was better when I was like that. My pots-you know how it is? Hamada tells a story about how he would, if he had to make some important pots, he would invite the neighbors over so he wouldn't have to think about what he was doing when he was throwing; there is a lot of truth in that.

If you can get into that state-it's hard to make it. If you try to make it, you can also just make distractions that are not the same, but if you are just in there working and you are using some kind of deep judgment about what it needs to look like, you know, you're basically making your clay-well, you can almost get to a place that is like a folk potter-as close as we get anyway, as close we are able to.

I haven't addressed the issues, the tough issue, of course, of making things and-the unresolved issue of making pottery-really making real pottery and really wanting-there is just something about me that knows that the ultimate pleasure is in having the pots in the kitchen and using them, having them do things, drinking from a cup, for instance.

I mean, right from the very beginning of being a pottery student until now-just right now this morning, just very enjoyable to have a cup that is meaningful and you are just drinking your beverage from it. It's a very rounded out experience. It's a terrific part of making pottery.

And in a lot of ways, it's not so direct anymore. I mean, the function of a pot, I guess it's just a balance of things. It's not only that I have to make a teapot, I mean, make a teapot to make the tea; the teapot is made, is really-it's got to be a moving teapot. Somehow it's going to carry my feeling.

So then automatically you are trying to get two things out of the teapot now. One is that it should make tea, and the other one is that it should carry your feeling. Oftentimes those things are just perfectly coordinatable [*sic*], but sometimes it gets to be contradictory.

MR. SHAPIRO: Because of the nature of the way the object is used?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, either the way it's used or the way that it's made, one. I mean, sometimes it's too hard to use. Sometimes it might end up being too hard to use. Or the other thing is that it might be too precious to use or too precious to use in any given situation. So you have to be-so then it becomes-well, I don't want to address that part. I don't know how to address it. I was going to say-

MR. SHAPIRO: Ceremonial.

MR. SIMON: It could become more ceremonial, although I don't really have anything-I don't have any ceremonies of my pots, really, that aren't just regular daytime everyday use. Well, that is not all together true. I do have pots that are put away that I don't use for everyday use.

MR. SHAPIRO: Are those pots that you made or that other people have made?

MR. SIMON: Some of both. But a lot of them are mine; a lot of them are pots that I thought were good.

MR. SHAPIRO: When did they come out?

MR. SIMON: Well, we ate off the plates last night. It comes out whenever Susan and I decide to go get them. [They laugh.]

MR. SHAPIRO: There you go.

MR. SIMON: There is not any-there is not any real reason. And we do have a humbler state of ware-[they laugh]-in the kitchen.

MR. SHAPIRO: The chipped ware?

MR. SIMON: Yeah, it might be chipped, but it is the stuff that could be chipped and it wouldn't kill us somehow or

another. We have things that are more important. I remember Warren telling a story about Leach having-Leach had this Ming dynasty set of four little serving plates, and Warren said-did you hear the story? Well, he and Alex went there to stay with Leach after Leach had-I'm going to say divorced the second time, but I'm not positive that is correct; but he was alone-anyway, newly alone. And they came to stay.

And so they helped cook. He invited them to stay in the house-they just went over there and they were staying with Leach in his house. And then he had all of these pots from-he had pots from Japan and China, and he had these little four dessert plates, like, Warren called them. And he said that he and Alex loved them and they would get them out every day. And finally Leach said, well, these plates are Ming dynasty-there was something about them-they were just extremely rare and valuable plates. Warren said they never picked them up again.

But some things are more-you just feel like they are more important than other things. It's hard to tell if there was anything real in those decisions. There is a lot of endearment, things that you love because you love the people or because of the time that you went with them, or that you just had for so long-you have been around them so long-cups that have lasted-cups that have bounced off the floor miraculously; they step up a notch in value.

MR. SHAPIRO: So, Michael, when you were working in exhibiting and teaching, was there anything that you had hoped would happen that didn't happen in terms of your career, in terms of what you-the place where pottery could go?

MR. SIMON: Well, there were a lot of issues with the pots that I thought I would get to that I didn't ever get to resolve. I mean, they were small. Some of them are small things, like finding that solution. But some of that had bigger implications, like the difference between the animal or maybe the tree of fruit-the difference between those pots in the intersection and also just the unpatterned surface. I feel like there was some kind of issue there.

I want to be somewhere in between there, not have to make-I don't know. I was going to say the declaration of the pattern, but something that was not the pattern, that didn't let us both off the hook as easily, as somehow the pot and the pattern got closer together, some deeper kind of harmony in them-but also that wasn't more complicated, that was simple. I don't know what that would be.

I felt pretty positive about the development of the pots, but I thought that maybe it could go on-[laughs]. I mean, it's hopeful. We know it's not linear but-

MR. SHAPIRO: In terms of where the pots were seen also.

MR. SIMON: Well, you would like to have a-I would like to be in the Met, frankly. [Laughs.] I wish some potter was in the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] or some place. I wish some potter was seen and it could be talked about. It seems to me that we don't have that yet, that we are-I mean, there are some pretty good shows, but we don't really have big venues.

I remember that Toshiko had a big show at the American Craft Museum at some point, but what else happens? I can't think of anything big where one person-well, Voulkos has had some pretty big honors, but that is so far from-I don't mean to say that Peter's was far out, but I just mean it's so far from the center of things-you know, there just aren't very many Voulkoses.

I don't really think that Peter had that much more to say than everybody else, but there just hasn't been enough attention paid to our pot issues-[laughs]-and to what pots can give, I think. It's too bad, because we're kind of ready-[laughs]-I think we're kind of ready. I think we have got people who are ready to make their opus. I mean, we're working on it anyway. You know, that the culture won't pick it up and say, let's look at this-it's a pity; it's a pity. You have got your long development, and you're not going to see that you have it. It's a pity.

But that is kind of for potters in general. I can't really say. I didn't expect a lot in the beginning. I mean, as things go by and you get credit for one thing and it's so nice-you always kind of hope, I guess-I always kind of hope that something will happen. Just yesterday I got invited to be in a great show next year at the NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts], and I am going to be in it; I'm going to just do it with some pots that I have somehow, because there is a lot of potters that I like a lot, including a lot of people I went to school with.

I don't know. I'm happy to be here now. And so many things did happen. It was a rich-there were so many rich things. I certainly don't have any regret. I would like to-you know, I am working on some things. I have got a rim. I have got a rim I have got to work on some more. It's just too good. [Laughs.] I have to use a little bit; I hate not to.

I would like to transfer things. I would like to transfer things out of salt glaze into glazeware a little bit; I'm

thinking a lot more about glazeware. I don't know if I can do it or not, but I would like to try. I often want to make a Tang dynasty horse. [Laughs.] But see, we have dreams; the dreams aren't stopping. [Laughs.]

MR. SHAPIRO: That is good. That might be a good place to leave it.

MR. SIMON: Yeah, yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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