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Oral history interview with Beverly Mayeri, 2007 September 15-October 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Beverly Mayeri on September 15 and October 3, 2007. The interview took place at the Artist's studio in Sausalito, California, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Beverly Mayeri and Mija Riedel 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

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Beverly Mayeri at the artist's studio in Sausalito, California, on Saturday, September 15, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

Good morning.

BEVERLY MAYERI: Hi.

MS. RIEDEL: So we've agreed to start at the beginning—where you were born?

MS. MAYERI: I was born in New York City, November 2, 1944. My parents at some point moved to New Jersey—North Arlington, New Jersey—and then Ramsey. My brother was born three years after me, my brother Arthur. And then much later—15 years later—a second brother, Michael, came along.

So I was really raised in New Jersey, and my parents were both artists. My mother was a watercolor painter. She would go out and do landscapes, for the most part. She still does, and lives in Connecticut today. Her influence was very big. She does watercolors that are very vivid, lively, colorful, and [Charles] Burchfield-like, if you know him as a watercolorist.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she make a living from that, Beverly? Did she sustain herself?

MS. MAYERI: She didn't really make a living from it, but she sold a lot of paintings. My father made the living, because in those days women were home as housewives, but she really did take her art seriously. My brother Arthur and I learned how to do watercolor and drawing very early on. Arthur became a children's book illustrator and writer.

My other brother is also very creative, but not in the visual arts. He is a writer and a CEO of a start-up.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you and Arthur go out in the field with your mom?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. My mother's name is Cora Howard. And Arthur and I—as teenagers, through our 20s, our college years, and later—we would often go out together and do watercolor and pen and ink, scenes in New York, or he'd come to California and we'd do scenes here. My father was a real renaissance man. He was very creative, very invested in being original.

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name?

MS. MAYERI: His name was Bernard Howard; he was a mechanical engineer and has about 35 patents to his name. He was very much the inventor. He was also a composer on the piano—and he would invent dishes as a chef. In fact, he used to say that if you followed a recipe, you were cheating.

He really impressed my brothers and I when he came home at night and would go to his drafting table and do either pen and ink, watercolor paintings, or oils. He would invent the whole scene. For instance, I have one that is called *Howard's Place*. It's a restaurant with two people eating spaghetti, and they're very sloppy. Another person is asleep over his drink, and the cook is in the kitchen, and things are messy. It has these quirky characters that he thought up. His always had a lot of humor to it. We were so amazed at his ability to invent these scenes.

Through the years he would do a circus scene or musicians. Sometimes he went out and did boats, because he loved to sail and we did a lot of sailing when we were growing up.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you live on the water?

MS. MAYERI: No, we didn't. He kept his boats on City Island, New York. From New Jersey, he would take the whole family out to his boat. He went through about 20 boats, because he never could quite afford them, and so after a couple of seasons he'd have to sell one until he got enough money to get another one.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this on the Long Island Sound?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. We went to the Long Island Sound for the family outing. He would redo the inside of the boat, because he liked to work with wood. And then we'd go out sailing, and he enjoyed it. We weren't as tickled by it, I think, as he was. For instance, we had to work on the boats, and that was not much fun. But that was one thing we did as a family.

About his working with wood, I remember a couple of pieces that he did in wood that were functional. One was a cabinet and one was a coffee table. He carved faces into the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MS. MAYERI: I remember being so impressed with these pieces that I think I must have had them in the back of my mind for some of my work. There were faces that fitted into the wood in a beautiful and very lively, dramatic way.

MS. RIEDEL: Was he self-taught?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I would say his paintings were a kind of Americana. Who was that artist? [Thomas] Hart Benton? A little bit of him, but mainly his own way of working, where he didn't use any references. He loved to rely on his own mind. Later in life he felt that he wished he had been solely an artist, and he felt he would have been successful. I think it might be true. Instead of being an engineer, if he had gone into art, I think he would have done very well.

MS. RIEDEL: Did he regret not having done that?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. He had some regrets over that. But he did pretty well as an inventive mechanical engineer, too. Both my parents were very big influences in my life.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds as if you really learned how to be resourceful from them. They were very much independent, creative thinkers.

MS. MAYERI: I think so. What came through was that it was very important to be creative for yourself. My father once said, "Making money from your creative work is worth more than from business."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What a wonderful thing to say.

MS. MAYERI: He had more admiration for someone who could earn money that way than for someone who was a clerk or a secretary. That had a big impact on me.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. He had 35 patents to his name, too. He was extraordinarily creative himself.

MS. MAYERI: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: What were the patents regarding? Were they all related to a particular discipline, or –

MS. MAYERI: He invented a Teletype printer—a ship-to-shore device that was a mechanical type of typewriter. It was very fast, and at one point the Navy was buying them up. That was just before electronics took over, so it was a short-lived success.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: He invented sewing machine parts, and after that he invented a kind of gyroscope for boats that involved fiber optics. It never quite worked well enough to be successful. It kind of broke his health at that point. That was before he was 60. But he continued to do art.

MS. RIEDEL: So this might be where some of your penchant for setting up experiments in high school came from?

MS. MAYERI: That's what the claim was, that I had a background in science. Also, I've married a scientist. My husband is a neurobiologist, and there's so much creativity in thinking up experiments. Probably the same parts of the brain are used to be an artist as to be a scientist. I don't see a huge difference, except that one is supported by institutions and not the other. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: True. So this was in high school—in chemistry or in biology? I don't remember being encouraged to do experiments in science in elementary school.

MS. MAYERI: Certainly not much in grammar school. In high school when I took a biology class, we were asked to think up experiments and to devise the controls for the experiment in order to prove its truthfulness. I worked up an experiment using Listerine to see whether it truly would cleanse the mouth of bacteria, and I was quite surprised to find that a lot of bacteria still grew in it. It was a lot of fun to think up experiments and actually conduct them.

We had a wonderful biology teacher. I remember at one point he drank—what was it?—hydrochloric acid to show us that there was acid in the stomach and that it wouldn't really hurt him. Now, that was pretty radical. I don't think he encouraged us to drink this acid, but it was very dramatic to have a teacher drink it. That was Mr. Ellerbee.

MS. RIEDEL: Ellerbee? And this was in the public school system in New Jersey?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. This was in Ramsey, New Jersey. It was a good school. I remember Miss Priesche for Latin. I was very taken by Latin; it taught me grammar and vocabulary. French and math and English. Yes. I was the art editor of the yearbook, and I often was the designer for school dances and proms. So my artistic side was somehow noted in that school.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you take art classes in school?

MS. MAYERI: You know, I don't even remember taking art in high school, but I must have.

MS. RIEDEL: But you did take—you talked about taking the bus into the Art Students League in New York to study drawing.

MS. MAYERI: As a junior in high school. I would take the bus from New Jersey. I really worked hard at figure drawing, learned a lot of anatomy at a very early age.

I kept up that interest, but then in the summer as a senior in high school and as a freshman in college, I went to Sandy Hook, New Jersey, to be an intern in marine biology. That was a very exciting place for me. There were other young interns there, and we studied the biology of the sea. I remember my role model was Eugenie Clark, a woman scientist working with, I think, dolphins. I thought of myself as becoming a marine biologist or animal behaviorist.

I was introduced to scuba diving and snorkeling there, and I found the sea life teeming under the surface. I was so taken by the beauty of these swimming animals, like the squid and little fish. It was wonderful to swim with the fishes.

MS. RIEDEL: It is extraordinary when you first have that experience. It is such an alternative world—

MS. MAYERI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —that it's not like anything else. I remember those early experiences, too.

MS. MAYERI: It's true. And I was a swimmer. So the water has always meant a lot to me—sailing, swimming, and then snorkeling.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it always just a beautiful experience under water, or were there times that were frightening and scary and dark, too?

MS. MAYERI: At first it's a little frightening to go under the surface, and you have to clear your ears from the water pressure. And, of course, the bigger the fish, a little more frightening it can get. But you have such freedom under the water to go every which way in that medium. It's so different from being grounded. I used to do a lot of lap swimming, and you get into an alternate state of mind. And sailing is a rush of energy that's very exciting and quiet. There's no motor going, so it's also very peaceful.

I have very fond memories of the water, and water shows up in a lot of my pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And swimming.

MS. MAYERI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: *Treading Water* [1989]. So many pieces. The water lines, water marks.

Do you sail still at all, Beverly, out here now?

MS. MAYERI: No. My father was a difficult captain. [Riedel laughs.] If you made a mistake, you heard about it. And mistakes were made. So it could be a tense experience with him at times.

Some people are thrown out into the sea to learn to swim. Well, I was thrown out in a little boat. My father set me up on this little boat that he had built himself—because he also built boats. That was another part of his inventiveness. In fact, there was an article in the *New York Times* about his boatbuilding. One of them was a little boat called the *Blue Slipper*, and he sent me out in it alone.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you?

MS. MAYERI: I must have been, maybe, 12. I had to learn how not to bump into the other boats with the wind going strong, and how to turn about. It was a sailboat. It was a very swift-moving boat, and I was frightened. I did it well and he was proud of me. He said, "Oh, look at her go in and out of all the boats." He thought it was just the greatest thing, but I never did it again. I was capable of doing it, but I just felt I might run into a boat; I might keel over. I wasn't sure what would happen. I was not ready for that experience.

I'm fine with joining in as a crew for other people, and I'll take the helm and that's fun. But we don't have a boat, so I don't sail very much these days.

MS. RIEDEL: Anything else significant about time in New Jersey and childhood, or should we move on to Berkeley and California?

MS. MAYERI: I wanted to say that the high school was small, and I knew all the kids from growing up in grammar school. I thought the thing to do was to go to a really big school after that, where I wouldn't know anybody and everything would be new. So I made this radical decision to leave the East Coast and go to Berkeley—UC Berkeley—for college.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired you to go so far and to California?

MS. MAYERI: I had a boyfriend at that time who said that was the best school in the country.

MS. RIEDEL: Berkeley.

MS. MAYERI: I got in, and I left by train at 17 for a place that was like another country to me, compared to the East Coast.

MS. RIEDEL: And your parents were fine with you heading off and doing that? This was, what—

MS. MAYERI: Apparently.

MS. RIEDEL: —the late ’50s—right around 1960?

MS. MAYERI: This was in '62, heading towards '63. The fall of '62.

MS. RIEDEL: What a time to arrive in Berkeley.

MS. MAYERI: That's true. I was politically naïve—completely politically naïve. Naïve about all sorts of things. It was a major change for me, and I had to retreat into myself to take it all in and start to feel comfortable. It took me a long time to loosen up and feel relaxed in this very new environment. It was far too big a school for me. It had 30,000 students. That was way too big for me, coming from a little town in New Jersey.

MS. RIEDEL: How many in your high school?

MS. MAYERI: My high school must have had no more than 600 students.

MS. RIEDEL: Huge [difference].

MS. MAYERI: Yes. Personally, I think it was too much. I would have been better off in a small liberal arts college rather than one that was a major university. In fact, one summer I took some classes at a smaller college for summer school, and I realized that felt so much better, because it was more personal.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever think about not returning to Berkeley? Were you horrified?

MS. MAYERI: It was hard to contemplate applying elsewhere and trying to maneuver that way. So I didn't do that. I had a junior year abroad in France, and that was a difficult year, too, for me because I didn't know French very well and the French were not easy on people who didn't speak their language well. They were very

impatient with me. But I had some good experiences there. I ended up with a very nice family, who took me in and gave me a room.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you exposed to a lot of art there? Because you were a zoology major at this time.

MS. MAYERI: I was a zoology major and tried to learn French there. I wasn't exposed to that much art at that time. Later on, I took trips that had an impact—later on, after I was really immersed in being an artist.

At Berkeley, although I did major in zoology, I always took art classes at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: Drawing mostly?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I would take figure drawing or art history, and I loved those classes. In zoology, the part about it that I loved the most was doing experiments. Setting those up, that was a lot of fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember any in particular?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I remember one involving a newt called Taricha torosa—it's called the California newt—and it's poisonous. It has a red bottom and a dark top. The question was, how would fish learn how to avoid eating the little newt tadpoles, for instance?

I found out it was one-time learning. I would put in the little newly hatched newts into the fish tank, and I'd see, would the fish go for it, or would it instinctively know not to go for something that has red on it? And it turns out that it would go for the newts and then spit it out and never go for them again.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MAYERI: So it was one-trial learning. I remember going to the marine lab that was run by Stanford [University]. I took some summer courses there, where I liked to go along the tidal zone and lift up rocks and see crabs. I thought of experiments, such as, how do they get by without oxygen during low tide while they have no water and they're under this rock? Questions like that, which I just found interesting.

I met Earl in an animal behavior class with Peter Marler, who teaches about birdsong. I loved learning about birdsong, whether it's creative or instinctive, when they come out with their own songs. And, sure enough, it's a combination. I met Earl there in about '66, and we were married in '68.

MS. RIEDEL: And you'd both finished school by then?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. He was in graduate school and I was a senior when I met him.

MS. RIEDEL: It should be said that you had come to Berkeley with extraordinary study habits, which you've said is something that you've used throughout your life. You learned that in high school in New Jersey, and that you really knew how to apply yourself, regardless of where you found yourself.

MS. MAYERI: Well, actually, one interesting thing was I was never a good writer. My mother was a good writer. She loved Jane Austen and well-constructed sentences. She still does—she has a very good, specific vocabulary. She would look at my writing and she never liked anything. She scrawled all over it and I was very upset. Although I was a good student, I did have trouble writing. And my mother certainly didn't help me there.

But when I came to Berkeley, I remember one class, which was probably an English class—one of the assignments was to go and look at a painting and discuss it. I walked over to Kroeber Hall and chose a painting, and that's when I learned how to write.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MAYERI: I remember getting a good grade on that paper. I was able to look at the painting, and from the standpoint of form and content, I was able to think about it and analyze it. I was good at that. And I think that ability to analyze art is aligned with being able to critique your own work. So, anyway, I learned how to write and I learned how to, maybe, critique work in one fell swoop.

But I think I learned better study habits when I arrived at college, because the only way you get by is thinking for yourself. You had to write papers that were based on your research and how you lay out your ideas. Maybe that ability to learn how to think did end up being applied to art. I don't know. Certainly when you write, you have to have constant insights on what your next sentence is going to be. That's always a creative effort if you're writing something new, and it's very similar to doing art.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Very often you don't know what it is until it's happening.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's amazing the way the brain thinks up ideas. I do want to talk about that process when we get to talking about the pieces themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: If it's easier—if it's in your mind right now—you could—or, if you prefer, we could just move along chronologically?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I think that would be easier for me to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So shall we discuss your introduction to clay?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I just happened to stumble on the ASUC [Associated Students of the University of California] studio, which was run by the student association. It was right near the Student Union. I went down some steps and there was this studio where people were working in clay and learning photography. I walked in and started to fool around with clay. It was a free studio for students, and I immediately fell in love with it. I started to do these faces and figures, and it was so immediate, so fluid and so non-cerebral, that it gave me a great sense of freedom and delight to do something that was fun and kind of meaningless. [Riedel laughs.] And so I spent a lot of time there.

MS. RIEDEL: That was your senior year?

MS. MAYERI: I think it was my senior year, yes, in '67. There were some young interns, like Marni Turkel and Diana Bohn; Marilyn Stiles was a student working there. They taught me how to construct pieces so they wouldn't blow up, and how to make glazes and use glazes. They did the firing. They taught me how to throw—that was my first introduction to throwing on the wheel.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they students at the time, or teachers?

MS. MAYERI: I think some of them were students and some were teachers. But they ran the place. They were very diligent. They were very supportive. It was easygoing. They wanted to help me and were excited when things came out that were interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: You made figurative work early on?

MS. MAYERI: I did some plates that had dancing figures on it, so I was working with drawing and with glazes, and it was a lot of fun using color and form. I'm trying to remember the early work. I remember doing some vessels with carved faces. I just spent extracurricular time there, so I wasn't hugely productive. It was really my introduction to clay. But it began to turn my thoughts around: This is a lot of fun. How can I work this into my life?

After I graduated, we married and I had my daughter. We were married in '68, and in '69 I had my daughter. We soon went to New York, where my husband was a post-doc in a neurobiology lab at NYU. For me it became very difficult to continue in anything. There was no support for women then for babysitting or nursery school care. It was all very expensive. We didn't have much money, and I had a hard time adjusting to New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Even though you spent a lot of time there when you were younger, taking drawing classes and –

MS. MAYERI: Yes. But I wasn't free. I was a mother of a small baby. So that's very different.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MAYERI: Fortunately, I did make a friend who was in the same boat as me, and we took turns babysitting while the other one went off to an art class. I went to the YWCA in downtown New York and took some classes and used their studio when I could. They even gave me a small grant to do that, which was very supportive.

But I also taught science in a couple of schools at this time, too, because I was very ambitious to do something with my life in addition to motherhood. I was quite torn about which direction to take, but it was easier doing the art, and it was so fascinating. So I made the choice to continue in that direction rather than the science.

MS. RIEDEL: And by "easier," you mean schedule-wise.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I know that some of the wives of the scientists, who had science backgrounds themselves, had their children and put off further studies for maybe six or seven years and then went back to get a Ph.D. But by that time I was immersed in art, and it was fine.

My husband was very supportive about my going into art. He felt that as long as I could contribute what I could to the household, he would carry most of that burden. So we went back to California in '71, and everything became easier then.

MS. RIEDEL: Why was that?

MS. MAYERI: First of all, Earl was a professor, and the babysitting was much cheaper.

MS. RIEDEL: You moved back here to Sausalito and Mill Valley?

MS. MAYERI: We moved to Tam Valley. There was someone on my block who was watching a small group of toddlers, and I could leave Rachel there for a couple of hours. I discovered a wonderful place for learning and experimenting with clay, the Sausalito Art Center. This was a place very close to here. It was run by artists. This was in '71 to '73. There was a ceramic studio there, glassblowers learning Art Nouveau/Art Deco techniques, dance, painting classes, drawing classes, mixed-media classes, film classes. I took a class in film animation.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember who was teaching?

MS. MAYERI: I don't remember who was teaching, but I bought his camera, and I loved doing animation. That was really fun. There was someone making shoes— playful platform shoes. It was such a vibrant place. I loved going there, and I learned more wheel-throwing techniques. I learned how to fire cone-10 kilns. I learned raku, and I started to do some production pottery. It was really low production, with big faces on planters, and bowls with carved faces. I did a water sprinkler with a big head, where the water came out of what looked like curlers on her head.

Unfortunately, I think it was too hippie a place for Sausalito, because there was some pot smoking there, I have to admit. It was too much for the town, especially at one point when there was a party and someone flew the Vietcong flag, because this was during the antiwar movement. Sausalito didn't like that. They didn't like it, and they demolished the place.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you mean, "demolished"?

MS. MAYERI: They completely tore it down. They gave us about three months' notice, and they decided to get rid of it. There has never been another place like it in Marin County. I have very fond memories of the wonderful studios and people.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was from, say, '71 to '73? Was that as long as it existed?

MS. MAYERI: It probably existed from '70 to '73. It lasted just a few years.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember who ran it?

MS. MAYERI: I don't remember her name. She was a wonderful woman who had a cat, and I remember taking one of the kittens. I think the glassblowers tapped into the gas line. That's very possible. And maybe even the ceramics kiln was run that way, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: I don't think there's any place in the Bay Area that had such an amazing community of artists working together in a non-academic setting. And it's a shame that that was the decision taken. It's now a parking lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there studios there, too, or was it solely classes?

MS. MAYERI: It was mainly classes, but there was plenty of studio time between classes and in the evenings. I still have friends from the Sausalito Art Center. We actually started a women artists co-op in Marin County after the end of the Sausalito Art Center. We met monthly to give each other critiques and to arrange for one or two shows a year in various empty stores, to show our work. So that was kind a of support system that we had in the early '70s.

MS. RIEDEL: How long did that last?

MS. MAYERI: That lasted three years.

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MS. MAYERI: I worked in my garage, like lots of other artists.

MS. RIEDEL: So you set up a studio in your garage.

MS. MAYERI: I did. And I did some of the art festivals.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this all still production work at this point? Functional work?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I did the Mill Valley Art Festival. I had cups with little sun faces, and bowls with faces. But I was burning out doing this. I didn't enjoy the production work after a while. I was doing painting at this time, too, watercolor painting.

I remember getting a first prize in painting at the Sausalito Art Festival. When it first began, it was run by artists, and then it was taken over by the chamber of commerce. But in those days the artists started it, and we met at the Bank of America parking lot. That's where we set it up. It was a little thing in those days, but it was great. It was run by artists, and it was definitely not expensive, as the booths are today.

But in '73, I saw a show of ceramics that was a revelation to me. This was Karen Breschi's work. It was a solo show, with her very large, amazing animal/human combination pieces, some of which were called *Pig Boss* [1973], *Mother Rabbit* [1972], *Man Disguised as Dog* [1972]. There was a huge snake with a human head.

I was blown over by this show. It was like an epiphany for me, in that I realized what clay could do, that it could express this kind of social and personal commentary on your own life or life around you. That's what I felt her work was doing. I realized that the subject for art could be whatever you wanted it to be. It could go into things in your life. Having concepts in your art that related to who you were and how you felt about your life hadn't occurred to me consciously before in the work that I was doing, which was very whimsical.

MS. RIEDEL: So all of a sudden there was substance—there was the potential for substance.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It could have a point to it. And so immediately my mind came up with a series of pieces based on motherhood, which was a big part of my life. It was a kitchen series—mothers in the refrigerator or popping out of the toaster. I still have some of them. I did a number of pieces—I didn't realize that this was happening elsewhere. In the women's liberation movement, artists were doing similar work. I had no idea about that. I saw some later on.

And with that, I decided to go on to graduate school. Karen Breschi was teaching at SF State [San Francisco State University], so I applied there, and I got into the ceramics department based on this body of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you were applying to graduate school, and your undergraduate degree was in zoology, yes?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. But it didn't matter to them. They counted my art classes at UC and what I had learned in non-academic studios, and this body of work was fine with them. I was so happy to be accepted there.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was Karen Breschi and Steven De Staebler. Anyone else?

MS. MAYERI: Well, I'll go into the things that were important there. Just being exposed to other students, the visiting artists who showed slides of their work, having critiques on your work with the other students, hobnobbing with professors like Steve De Staebler, who were great artists in their own right but were regular people. They took their art seriously, and I had never run into real artists before.

Breschi had a tremendous impact on me, because she taught me technically how to build up figures and torsos. She would go around to each student and talk to them about their work. She looked at us as individuals who had a story to tell. She worked with us to help us figure out how to build up our pieces.

I switched out of ceramics into sculpture because she was in the sculpture department. She believed that you should be true to the meaning in the work and not necessarily true to the medium. In other words, in ceramics you had to be pretty pure. You had to use glaze material for your coloring and the clay; whereas in sculpture, if you wanted to augment it with plaster or fiber, or use paint on the surface, as long as it was true to what you were trying to express, the material didn't matter. There was a lot of freedom in switching over to the sculpture department and being exposed to different media. I think that was good for me.

With De Staebler, I remember our conversations. "Take this slowly. Don't jump into the art world and the gallery world. See who you are with this art. See if you really like being an artist." Because you're really alone when you do the work. It's not social. He took a long time before he had his first solo show, and he taught me how to have patience. I enjoyed the talks that we had.

MS. RIEDEL: So they were as significant, really, as the critiques. The conversations were really important.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. He had a gentle personality, and I think he's a wonderful person. It's not that he was encouraging anyone to be an artist. He wasn't. Because I think he saw that it's a life where you're focused on

your own work and it's not a very social life. It's hard to survive as an artist. It's not as if you can expect to make a living from it. He didn't really want to encourage people to do it. And I think that was a good point.

But there was another very important turning point for me at SF State in meeting José Argüelles. I don't know if you remember him, but he wrote a book on the Mandala [*Mandala*, 1972]. He introduced me to the spiritual in art. I took a course with him, I think called "Religion and Art," which I wasn't looking forward to.

MS. RIEDEL: You were not?

MS. MAYERI: No. I thought it would be about Bible stories or something like that. But it was a real eye-opener for me, especially one book called *The Great Mother* by Erich Neumann [1963].

MS. RIEDEL: So you read that in college—in grad school.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I was introduced to this by Argüelles. I was so amazed at Neumann's analysis of art through the ages and how it corresponded to inner feelings, growth, and transformation, and how art through the ages showed how inner growth related to nature and its cycles, of birth, fertility, and death. Myths were so important in the different religions. It introduced me to the psychological world within and how that can be expressed in myths and art.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's about archetypes and primordial images that are implanted in all of our subconscious, and how they resonate with so many different people, through so many different cultures, through so many different eras. It makes a lot of sense in regards to something you were talking about yesterday: if you'll be really honest in your work, it will really resonate with others. And did that thought occur to you when you were reading that book?

MS. MAYERI: Well, it didn't occur to me then. I wanted to see how I fit into that picture myself. And I wanted to see what was inside me that fit into this bigger picture.

MS. RIEDEL: So it wasn't necessarily a search for the feminine archetype in different myths and cultures. It was much more an interior exploration.

MS. MAYERI: At first, it was a researching of everything that he was talking about. I wanted to learn more, and I wanted to understand what was in all these intriguing pieces of art that came from around the world. This fierce, angry god or goddess, and then this loving god/goddess. Who were these characters? Who were they in me? It led to, where was all of this in me?

MS. RIEDEL: And they often went hand in hand, yeah.

MS. MAYERI: This panoply of gods, maybe, personifies parts of ourselves, and it's very gratifying to feel there is a cosmology that addresses who you are inside. This whole idea was new to me. The spiritual in art was a visual experience that had meat to it.

MS. RIEDEL: So with the spiritual came the psychological?

MS. MAYERI: For me, I translated it all pretty much into the psychological. Later on, I went back to school and took classes in psychology to learn about feelings. What was it all about? What was the internal picture about? Where do these feelings come from? What does it mean? Later I took classes at CIIS [California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco].

MS. RIEDEL: Was this still at State while you were taking the clay classes, or after?

MS. MAYERI: No. State ended in '76, and I took pysch classes in the '80s. We could go into the different themes that started in graduate school.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Sure. The early work—the early pieces?

MS. MAYERI: If you want. I think I can tie this into the Neumann book.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. How that affected your work would be an interesting place to start.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. When it occurred to me that some of these images were so scintillating, I knew there was something extra-important about them.

MS. RIEDEL: Like what, Beverly? Do you remember any in particular?

MS. MAYERI: I remember one about the Fates weaving a cloth that brought in all the different threads of a life

together. And I thought, That's so intriguing. That seems to make sense. That's such a good metaphor. How could I think up a piece that maybe uses fate and weaving?

I remember planting those words in my mind, and I came up with an image that was a complete surprise to me, a piece that I called *Man and Knitting Woman*. This was done in '76. It was a man walking away from a woman who was sitting and knitting. His sleeve is unraveling and she's making up a baby garment—knitting it from his unraveling sleeve. I didn't know what this was about, but I felt it was intriguing, and I felt there was something there that was maybe archetypal.

But the piece didn't quite look finished. The realm where the woman was sitting should be differentiated from his realm in some way. I remember thinking, What would do that? And again, I had this inspiration of using a black-and-white tiled floor that was feathered into the ground that he was walking on. This began an important series for me after I left graduate school.

MS. RIEDEL: Based on pattern?

MS. MAYERI: Based on this checkerboard pattern.

It occurred to me to apply it to a face, which became *Checkered Face* [1979]; this was a small face of about 10 inches. And then I did *Checkered Woman* [1979].

With *Checkered Face*, bunches of hair were coming out of the checks in the scalp, almost like a Northwest Coast Indian work. But when I did the torso of *Checkered Woman*, I couldn't quite get the hair on; it just didn't seem right, so I left a bald head with the checkerboard on. I felt it looked like the old phrenology charts. [Riedel laughs.]

The checkered patterns on the body, leaving the face, the breasts, and part of the back skin-toned, leading into these very rigid patterns of squares in black and white—it was very provocative. It had a lot of power for me. I didn't know what it was about, but I think it was about restraint versus freedom, or the cerebral versus the emotional.

It set up a conflict, or tension, within the piece that I've used a lot in my work, where there are hard and soft aspects going on. The patterns that the two-dimensional checks made on a three-dimensional form became important. It took a long time to do it, but I realized that it was worth it—that it was worth spending time on the details of each check, which was painted individually, to go from flesh tone to a slightly darker tone. There was a gradation of color in each check, and it took me a long time to figure out how to paint them.

It was an endeavor of at least two months. It won first prize in the California State Fair, and Joan Brown was the juror. It was a strong piece, and it did a lot of things for me. I felt very brave in doing that piece, but I felt that it captured something true for me, and it apparently worked for others, too. Sometimes you produce a dud, too, in the same amount of time. And yet you're learning from it.

If you think about novelists, they can spend a year on a book and it might not be published. But if you're learning and trying, I think that's time well spent.

MS. RIEDEL: And even in that early piece, two of the things that strike me—there's a boldness to it, which I see from the very beginning of your work all the way through, and there's a restraint, a tension. From the very beginning, all three of those things. Also, a very strong psychological presence, a meditative presence. Ken Johnson, I think, talked about it as a distracted, meditative quality to some of the portraits that you've done, and I think that's really accurate.

MS. MAYERI: Thank you. I think that is true. I think she's looking internally. She's very still. There's no gesture. It's all focused on something that's happening internally.

MS. RIEDEL: She also has such a juxtaposition, between the busy pattern, the black and the white, and such a stillness in the figure—a lack of gesture, as you said.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. And those black and white squares became symbolic of other things— I've used them in later pieces to suggest modern technology versus the natural world. In some pieces it seems to take that connotation. The game of producing new gadgets might be suggested from a checkerboard.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: The patterns that came out were fascinating to me. I think of [Rosaline] Delisle's work, if you remember her stripes. I think there's a point where precision in geometry becomes beautiful. When it's so precisely done, and the making of it requires such discipline, in the finished piece the pattern flies and has such beauty.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also a distortion of the geometry. It's not a flat checkerboard. It's literally draped around multiple curves. And there's something about the distortion of that, and the changing of something that's often two-dimensional to 3-D. All of that plays into the tension and the surprise that makes that piece work on many different levels.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It was a really interesting piece, and it came early on. It was shown in Sacramento and in the San Francisco MoMA in a group show there, and then it ended up in L.A. So it had a nice audience, and it made me feel that I could keep going as an artist.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a lot of validation to get quite quickly, fairly early on after grad school.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's really true. With that show in San Francisco, I remember I had to come up with another piece for it, which was a big pressure on me. I remember thinking, I can't allow myself to have this much pressure to produce work. I slow down when under pressure. Some people get fired up and they'll work day and night, but I slow down and I can't think as well. Now I protect myself from show deadlines. I learned that in that year.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, if that piece had taken two months to complete, to have to come up with another piece, I would assume, fairly quickly –

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It was hard. Karen Breschi introduced me to acrylic paint in graduate school, and I had to figure out how to use this paint. At first it was opaque, and then I learned how to use it more like watercolors. In that one piece, *Checkered Woman*, I used both techniques. The checks were quite opaque, and in the skin areas it was more of a wash. I started to discover my way of using acrylic paint, and probably my background with watercolors helped me there.

But at that time I had to come up with a piece very fast. I did *Mantled Woman* [1979] for that show.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, *Mantled Woman* was the second piece?

MS. MAYERI: Do you remember that?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, actually. I thought that was a really significant piece. I wanted to talk with you about that.

MS. MAYERI: I had the hardest time figuring out how to color the mantle of the piece to look sort of like the ground, but also different.

MS. RIEDEL: It feels very volcanic. It feels like a—as I remember—hot oranges and then contrasting with the black. That was an incredibly complex surface. I thought that piece was really interesting. It embodied so many of the interests that you were going to explore for years.

It established that whole idea of surface and skin, both of the earth and then of the woman wearing this cloak. So it established the whole parallel development of your exploration of the human interior as well as the earth interior and exterior. A sense of layers. I got a real sense of fragility out of that piece, contrasting the volcanic-looking mantle with this incredibly delicate human form.

And also porousness. The whole idea of porousness and mutable borders, which is something I think you do a lot—back and forth, across borders, often between realism and surrealism, but I see that constant crossing in your work. And that's the piece that you were pressured to come up with. I thought that piece was so strong.

MS. MAYERI: The painting was really hard to figure out.

MS. RIEDEL: I can see why, because it was not like anything you had done before.

MS. MAYERI: Right. These days I try to have several major pieces done before I look for a show. You need time to indulge yourself in playing around. In those days I didn't quite have the faith that I'd figure things out, so I was tormented at night also. If I hadn't figured something out during the day, then I worried a lot at night. But finally, through the years, I found that answers come.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Did they come to you at night at all?

MS. MAYERI: Sometimes. It could come at any time. I could have a piece not working for months, and then one day suddenly the answer was there. You just need patience. I remember [Richard] Diebenkorn saying he had paintings that he couldn't solve for years, and then suddenly he would solve it. He would keep them at home and look at them. So when you learn that about the great artists, you can indulge yourself a little that way.

I realized that my brain could intuitively come up with an image—a full-blown image of what might be an

interesting piece—if I just fed it certain words or certain questions and then waited.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MAYERI: I call this intuition, or insight, and this is one way to come up with ideas. I read a book by Maya Lin, the landscape sculptor. She apparently works similarly, where she waits for her brain to come up with the form of something that she wants to do.

Novelists do this all the time. They ask themselves, Well, what would this character do next? What would he say next? What's going to happen here? It's a sort of unconscious insight, letting the brain do the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you start new pieces this way—with certain questions or certain words—or would you evolve pieces that way, or both?

MS. MAYERI: Well, I was going to get into that with the next series of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MAYERI: As an example, I wanted to do some animal/human combinations, like Karen Breschi's but my own version. So what I said to myself at one point was, How could a snake turn up in my work? And I remember an image of a woman with a braid, where the end of the braid turned into a snake, and the woman is looking over her shoulder at it. That became a piece, a very powerful piece called *The Braid* [1980].

MS. RIEDEL: Did that image come to you, or have you seen that?

MS. MAYERI: It just came to me, by asking myself, Oh, I think I want to do a snake piece. A related piece was *Renaissance Woman* [1980, a bust of a young woman wearing a blouse with Chinese-style buttons, called frogs. They start out as buttons and] become fighting lizards at the collar. I think somehow just the name “frog” led to this image.

MS. RIEDEL: So this established the back and forth—the beginning of the back and forth, the arrival of the animals in the work.

MS. MAYERI: I just did a few early on in '80, '81.

MS. RIEDEL: And *The Braid*, to me, really was interesting, too, because that piece, more than any of the others, brought the sense of danger and the sense of tension from a place you couldn't even imagine it. And it gave a sense of what you were talking about yesterday, the coexistence of angels and devils right in the same spot. And here's this lovely braid dropping down this woman's back, and the very tip is curling back around as the head of a snake. So it really—danger, for me, appeared in your work with that piece.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I think it was kind of daring to do it. But it also just felt right. There was something there that was important to say. I still don't really know what the piece is about, but something feels right there.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to take a break for a minute?

MS. MAYERI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: We were going to talk briefly about *Medusa Head* [1980], which was an interesting piece, I thought, because it really brought the image of an ecosystem to mind, with all the small animals crawling all over the woman's head, in and out of her hair. And there was something at once comical and terrifying about it; all the rabbits look really scared. It was the first time I'd seen an ecosystem so clearly in your work in a human format.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I think it hearkens back a little bit to my zoology days.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MAYERI: I thought to myself, How would animals express sides of myself? I had in mind each animal having an aspect of myself—a timid rabbit, a ferocious lion, a giraffe trying to peer into the future. Unconsciously, I put the lower animals, the simpler animals like the amphibians, in the lower part of the piece, and it seemed to work up to the higher vertebrates.

MS. RIEDEL: The zoology background seeping in.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I was asked to send that piece to the Renwick Gallery [Smithsonian American Art Museum] in Washington. Michael Monroe was curator there, and it was exciting to be included in a national show.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that your first?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. That was in '81. I was so happy to be included; [it] was a good piece, because it was an oversized head. I had spent many weeks on that head. It had a lot of detail to it.

MS. RIEDEL: A lot of detail. The hair I remember, too, as being very elaborate. A lot of curls.

MS. MAYERI: Right. After doing pieces like *The Braid* and the new *Medusa*, I felt that the faces were so lifelike that I decided to actually try portraits. I chose my husband and daughter first, and took lots of pictures of them from various angles, and decided what they would be wearing. With Earl, I put him in a suit, even though he never wears one, and I put a little lizard hidden away in the back of the piece, because I felt I had to have an animal associated with each piece, even though it wouldn't be seen by anybody.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Why, Beverly?

MS. MAYERI: I don't know. I liked including the animals, like personal mascots. I wanted to do lifelike portraits and see if that was a good direction for me. I discovered this book by [Edouard] Lanteri [*Modeling: A Guide for Teachers and Students*, 1902], who was [Auguste] Rodin's teacher.

He modeled from life in clay, and he taught me so many things—for instance, how to get the placement of the features. I was measuring their features and the spaces between them. He was good with teaching you about the slant of the ears and how the distance from the nose to the ears is equal to the distance from the ear to the forehead and to the chin. If you're glancing in a certain direction, the tear ducts are distorted in a certain way, and the high point of the eye is where the iris is looking. He taught me how the hair grows in three clumps out of the skull. I spent months on each piece learning the anatomy and bone structure.

I put clothes on and learned how to do drapery and folds of cloth, which are not arbitrary. I had to learn that there's a direction they take from the high points of the body to low points, and how it stretches.

MS. RIEDEL: Were these *Girl With Pocket* [1982] and *Man in Suit* [1982]?

MS. MAYERI: That was Earl and my daughter, Rachel. I put a little frog in the back of her piece because she loved frogs. We used to go collecting frog eggs and taking care of the pollywogs that came out.

MS. RIEDEL: Why was it important to have animals on these otherwise straightforward portraits?

MS. MAYERI: I was still so fascinated by symbolism and how animals are so appealing to us, I think, because they correspond to something within us. A soft, fuzzy little dog or cat brings out a loving, soft side of ourselves. And so we have a lot of correspondence with animals.

I did my studio mate Gail Van Dyke. I spent months doing a large torso of her. That was a straight torso without any animal accompaniment. I did a commissioned portrait at this time, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk real briefly about that?

MS. MAYERI: Do I want to—

MS. RIEDEL: Why you don't do commissions?

MS. MAYERI: Well, yes. With that commissioned work, someone in New York wanted a portrait of herself, and she wanted to give it to somebody as a surprise. It was hard to do it, because she was in New York; I was in California. I could only work from photos, so that made it extra difficult. I think she liked it, but he didn't, and I wondered whether that was a good thing to do. There was a lack of freedom in doing it that I didn't like. And also, after doing all these portraits, I learned so much about anatomy and about draperies and how do to hair, but it was exhausting. It was such disciplined work, and I missed art of the imagination.

I spent a couple of years, '82 to '84, doing those. But I had to go back to a swifter approach, a more immediate approach to art. I decided that the way to work was to experiment with ideas on small pieces—on small faces—and then try it out on larger pieces if it looked interesting. This ended up being very productive. I came up with lots of ideas for work. I call this approach "playing around with materials." That's a common expression for artists.

MS. RIEDEL: So this is just technical explorations.

MS. MAYERI: These were explorations that, if they excited me, I knew I was onto something meaningful. So in '84 I started to cut up pieces.

One direction resulted in a piece called *Fractionated Face* [1983], where I cut out pieces and then put it back onto the face a little askew. This led to a piece called *Beachcomber*, for instance.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That was '87, so that was quite a ways ahead, yeah?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. That was. But I was working on many things at once: *Beachcomber* and *Camouflage* [1988], where I took triangular sections out of the torso and then laid them back slightly askew, giving the pieces the feeling of shifting thoughts or water reflections. The feeling of movement came from the extra texture that was added.

Another cut-up one was where I made slats out of a face and then spaced them apart. This was a very intriguing image. The first one was called *Spaced Out* [1983], where it felt like the face was coming apart, but it was also trying to hold itself together. It had these two things going on. It was very [M. C.] Escher-esque. It had a surreal and ethereal quality to it. I set these slats on a wooden outline of the face with dowels and glue, and then it was put up as a wall piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this one really large?

MS. MAYERI: This one was just 12 inches.

MS. RIEDEL: But it led to the really large one.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It gave an elongated look, because I started with an eight-inch face with real proportions. Then, in dividing it up and stretching it out, it became an elongated face. I liked it, this Modigliani look. So it showed up in other pieces.

After that, I decided to try larger ones. I did a two-foot one, and then I did a 63-inch one called *Divided Mind* [1984]. It was set on a huge piece of plywood, and with the outline of these slats, it was doweled and glued. I loved the impact of this massive head. I was so amazed at how this scale worked in its power that, to this day, I always do one huge face in each show.

I did other cut-up pieces. *Lithe Diver* [1988] was 80 inches long. It was done from a full figure of a man, cut up into slats and tilted a little bit so that the clay held onto itself; there is no actual space there. It became more and more elongated, like stepping stones in clay. I made the piece in five parts, to hang on the wall.

There was also a three-dimensional piece using slats. It was a full figure of a runner. He was cut up, and then, in the greenware, sutured back. This runner had the feeling of speed because he was being pushed into these different elevations. But I ended up, maybe a year or two later, cutting it at the thighs, and it looked more powerful. It wasn't literally a runner anymore. It was just someone moving fast.

MS. RIEDEL: Trying hard to move fast.

MS. MAYERI: Moving fast through the pedestal, almost, because the rest of him was someplace in the pedestal. I realized that less is more, sometimes, in a piece, that spelling everything out has less mystery. That's why a lot of the wall pieces work so well. The wall itself presents a mystery of what's behind the piece. I learned something from that, because I tend to want to fill in all the slots.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because at the same time—the mid-'80s—you did *Waterline* [1984]. And wasn't that a significant piece, in terms of paint? That bust piece had the water just above the nose, and it was one of the first bust –

MS. MAYERI: Yes. That was in '84, and that led to an ongoing series of pieces that suggest water.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. And the water is often hovering just above the nose, so there's a huge sense of tension and unease.

MS. MAYERI: Right. That was a result of experimenting with paint and setting up a difference in color right at that point, giving the illusion of what is below the surface and what is above the surface—what is conscious, what is unconscious. I used that in lots of pieces. It changed from the psychological to a more exterior direction, depending on the subject matter.

Light and dark areas were used in *Iowa Tan* [1987] and *California Tan* [1984]. Then I did a piece in '92 of my father, actually—a portrait of my father—called *Undercurrents* [1992]. There, below the surface, were aspects of his life and personality. I used that idea in *Shadow Faces* [1989]. And then a piece in '01, called *Shrinking*

Boundary, became a sort of heaven/hell piece, with the line of color at eye level. I had gotten this heaven/hell idea from going to Santa Fe and seeing the folk art museum [Museum of International Folk Art], where there are a lot of pieces –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MAYERI: —that are spectacular. In the darkness I put human foibles—things in this world that are not quite working out. This was done with a scraffito technique [drawing scratched through the top layer of glaze] I stumbled on later.

After the piece was fired, I painted, on the lighter section, the wonderful aspects of life. This was one piece that used that idea. It was another large head, and it was a technique that I use today, breaking up the very light clay with a dark stain, leaving soft and then hard-edged areas.

Visually, I like the impact of these darkly stained pieces. I find that, in a show, they anchor the show in a very strong way. Just doing all light pieces somehow becomes very ephemeral or ethereal. So I have used that dark underglaze a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: You like variety when you put together a show.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I do.

MS. RIEDEL: There was another technique that you were developing simultaneously with the cut-ups, and the continuing of the pattern. The textual work, too, was happening with those really large heads. *Under Scrutiny* and *North Face* [1987] and *Tundra Man*, they were all mid-'80s.

MS. MAYERI: Right. I was finding it a little plain to just have the clay smooth, and I realized that, with *Beachcomber*, added texture was exciting. Clay is so good with texture. So with *Under Scrutiny*, and *Tundra Man* in '86—both were done in '86—I used a toothbrush and laid on a kind of slip or soft clay on certain areas of the pieces, leaving smooth areas in little circles around the eye or the nose and the mouth. It was exciting to get this texture.

I even used sand—black sand in some places—gluing that on with Elmer's glue on the surface of the fired piece and getting a differentiation between the soft, vulnerable areas versus rough areas. Giving that contrast of texture I found very exciting for these pieces. I look at it as a sort of defense system, and I've used that concept in other pieces, like *Rapunzel* [1997] and *Sanctuary* [1994]. In these pieces a wall of bricks is set up on her body.

MS. RIEDEL: That piece was really interesting to me—I know it's much later—because it combined so many of your different themes and ways of working. It had pattern and it had really very clear psychology and the most obvious connection to mythology, or story, that wasn't uniquely your own. That piece was really unique.

MS. MAYERI: That's true. I always think it would be nice to have pieces that come to me from myths or fairy tales, but I can't force it. If it happens, how wonderful it is when you get these ideas. Psychologically, I think that fairy tale is about a growing, young thing, afraid to leave her fortress. Girls are sometimes too protected by their families.

MS. RIEDEL: But there's also—there's that pair of hands hanging on the base of the braid that implies it's all about to change.

MS. MAYERI: Right. It's all about to change. It's about coming of age. The fairy tale is so beautiful because everything worked out. She was able to leave her tower. She found a true love that helped her leave, grow up, and join the world.

MS. RIEDEL: The extreme delicacy and tenderness of her face, contrasted with the brick—or what looks like brick—the armor really, the pattern around her. And there are little windows and doors; there are a few, as I remember that would allow access. And then nothing but two hands hanging at the very end of the braid.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's about her fortress leaving a little opening for the world to come through.

MS. RIEDEL: That one's so clearly interior and exterior.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. That was a favorite.

My mother said, "Remember when Pandora's box was opened? All the evils of the world came out, but so did hope." I think that is true. Don't be afraid to look at what is there, because along with ugly, difficult things, there are wonderful things. It's good for artists to be fearless enough to open the box.

Another good quote [is from [Rainer Maria] Rilke, who said, “I’m afraid if my devils leave me, my angels will take flight, too”]. An embracing of who you are is a wonderful thing—a wonderful, freeing thing. I think people who are open to all the emotions, and comfortable with all the emotions, help other people do the same thing. To try to be that kind of person is part of growing up. Art can lead you in that direction by fearlessly facing all aspects of yourself and getting that in art.

MS. RIEDEL: That actually feeds perfectly into a piece that happened right around that time, *Gothic Woman* [1987].

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I had taken a trip to see [the Cathedral of] Notre Dame [Paris] and some of the Gothic cathedrals in Strasbourg [France]. Certainly all of us remember those monsters hanging out of the roofs of the cathedrals that were actually water spouts, I think, for when it rains. But they certainly stirred my imagination. With *Gothic Woman*, I set up little demons peeking out of this woman.

MS. RIEDEL: They're actually popping out of her skin. They're not hiding behind her; they're emerging from her.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, they're really coming out there.

A psychologist friend of mine said that women are not supposed to show their anger, so it comes out in little ways. And maybe these were my little ways; I'm not sure. I like the tension set up between the little demons and the beautiful face. She looks very soft, vulnerable, and refined. I’ve been very affected by early Renaissance painting, so I think of her as an angelic kind of character. But she, too, is aligned with these little inner demons. Maybe they’re her protectors, too.

Some of my pieces are hard to live with. For instance, *Barbed Man* [1983] was an early piece that has little barbs sticking out all over a rather soft and vulnerable-looking man. One person who bought the piece returned it—[Riedel laughs]—and couldn't live with it. It bothered him. I like contrasts. For me, once again, that piece showed his defense system, but inside he was gentle. Maybe that's how we have to be in the world. It's a harsh world, and to survive we need to be tough. We need a tough skin, but inside we also need to encourage and be true to our soft and loving side. We have to be both things at once.

MS. RIEDEL: This led fairly quickly in the late '80s, then, into the relief work, yes?

MS. MAYERI: Well, in '85, I started to do the relief work, and it's somewhat reminiscent of some of my father's early wood carvings. The first piece was called *Crowded Face* [1988]. I carved a whole bunch of faces on a larger face, with different expressions on them. That was fun and interesting to me. Very exciting to do, because it made me feel that I could add more information and detail on a piece, and at the same time produce a texture. I did *Crowded Face* and then *Shadow Faces* using a similar idea. At this time, I also went back to school in psychology.

One of the concepts in the classes led to a lot of pieces, and that concept was about sub-personalities, that we are one main personality but with many aspects. In *Shadow Faces*, I asked myself, Well, who am I? Who else am I? Who are my sub-personalities? And I went through different aspects of myself and carved this on the surface of the clay. It was an exciting piece, with her hair flying back. With those two pieces I worked in bronze to see whether I would like it.

I did my own patination, because I found that when I let the art foundry—Artworks in Berkeley—do it, it was too bland. It looked too commercial to me. I decked myself out with air-filter protection and shield, and used the acetylene torch in one hand and spritzed the patinas on with my other hand, using flame and poison flying through the air. I ended up doing some really nice patinas on these pieces. But it was very unnerving to do it, and the wax-chasing was time-consuming.

I loved Artworks. It was sculpture heaven. They're Italian artisans who know how to make bronze, pour bronze, and make the molds. And the pouring is exciting, but it's very expensive, and it felt more process-oriented to me than freshly spontaneous. It didn't have the ease of the clay. Once you're in wax, it's very rigid.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also a level of detail in your ceramic work, in terms of surface decoration and what the finished piece looks like, that I don't see in bronze.

MS. MAYERI: Well, bronze is very shiny, and it does very well with relief work because you can get the darker patina in the crevices. And then it shines out in a brighter color on the surface. So it has a great impact. And it relates to medieval times and to armor. It's a lot of fun to think you're participating in something through the ages. You have that with clay, too. I'm glad I did it, but it wasn't really for me.

MS. RIEDEL: And, short of the watercolor that you started doing and continued to do throughout your life, that's been the one other medium that you've really worked in besides clay.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I've done some handmade paper. I sometimes work in plaster; especially when I mess up the clay, I'll finish off a piece in plaster. Clay has been the best medium, and I still like watercolor painting.

MS. RIEDEL: This actually is a perfect time to ask, what is it in particular that clay does better than anything else does?

MS. MAYERI: Well, it's so malleable that you don't need much in the way of muscle power to make it do things, and then once it sets up, you can make forms that go up into the air. It's very sensual to work with. I have always been struck with how a little flick of your nail or a little blip of clay can change an expression and lead you in a new direction. It's so responsive that it's like setting up a fast-moving dialogue with your piece. It answers back with every little move that you make, whether it's intentional or not. I've liked that. I can draw on it, paint on it, and sculpt. I can have two and three dimensions going. It's a three-in-one art form.

MS. RIEDEL: So many levels. So many layers, which speaks directly to your content as well. So as a form, it's just really well suited to your subject matter.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. Wood is very hard to work with—to sand it, to carve it. As I said, there are limitations to the bronze. Clay lasts for 30,000 years. It's a very long-lasting material. One problem with it is that it doesn't get off the ground very easily. It's very earthbound. So you have to figure out how to get it up into the air. When I do a hand at 30 inches, each finger has to be held up by an armature, for instance, and it's hard to work that way. So there are limitations to it.

MS. RIEDEL: We're talking about relief work and *Embrace* [1988].

MS. MAYERI: [*Embrace* was the first bust to have relief work on it. Here, a 2-D man is embracing a 3-D woman. *Second Growth* [1992] also had detailed relief work on it.] It was a bust that took up the idea of sub-personalities. I was asking myself, Who is hiding out in my backyard? I asked myself this question over and over, and got lots of answers. In other pieces I added swirls of grooves between the faces and figures. That added more texture in *Undercurrents* [1992] and *Torch Singer* [1994], which was flame-like patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: *Second Growth* had those flames, too, didn't it? In *Second Growth,* it felt very much like flames, and all sorts of relief was going on in that piece.

MS. MAYERI: *Second Growth* used leaflike textures, like Henri Rousseau's paintings.
They were garden—plantlike forms. What was growing in my backyard—another piece that opens the closet and lets in whatever's there.

MS. RIEDEL: One piece I thought was so interesting was *Treading Water* [1989], because it just seemed so different than everything else. It seemed so peaceful. All the other ones feel much more angst-ridden; either there's some dilemma or there's some tension. *Treading Water* just felt like a release.

MS. MAYERI: *Treading Water* was a really interesting piece. First I did a taller piece, where a figure was standing on a rock underwater, and her head was peering up from the water. Everything below was going to have underwater detail, but I soon realized that it was the head with the hair floating on top of the water that was really the key to the piece. Here, too, less is more. I cut her off at the shoulders so it became a small piece, and then I remade it as a head and called it *Treading Water*.

Lead weights in the inside of the chin to counterbalance the long hair—I think the off-balanceness of this long hair floating back has a very powerful effect. It had a little water line on it. Somehow she was staying afloat. She was holding her own. The gesture was very strong for me. Looking at it from above, you saw this head with –

MS. RIEDEL: The hair just streaming behind.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's perched on the small neck and just balanced. I've done about four of these, with different ideas imposed on them. I'm glad you like that piece, because at first I thought it was too plain, but now I realize how gesture can be very strong. In that piece I learned the importance of hairstyle, too—the sculptural aspect of hair. I learned how to get away from realistic hair and made up a sculptural style. It was a challenging piece. I had to have little stilts holding up the hair, and I could hardly see how it was going. I had to guess, in a way, because it would fall over without the supports.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there any way to invert it?

MS. MAYERI: I don't think so. I feel you have to see a piece as a whole when you're working on it. Getting it to the kiln without having the hair break off was tricky.

MS. RIEDEL: And you don't insert any fiber or anything into the clay, Beverly?

MS. MAYERI: No, I just gradually grew the hair out with coils, and then thinned out the walls to make the hair as light as possible. The chin area is as heavy as possible.

MS. RIEDEL: And you don't run into cracking problems with the contrast between the thick and the thin?

MS. MAYERI: I fire very slowly. I have cracking, of course, but I haven't had a major catastrophe in a long time. If I can get the pieces into the kiln, they are fine.

MS. RIEDEL: And are they fired in a kiln right here in your studio?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I have a crane for the lid because it is very heavy. I dismantle the kiln every time I fire it. It's been a good kiln for me.

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Beverly Mayeri, at the artist's studio in Sausalito, California, on September 15, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc number two.

We are picking up in 1995, when you began working with some dark clay?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I had been aware of work by Robert Graham, these figures in dark—I think they were in bronze. And I decided it would be interesting to try a dark clay rather than the white clay that I'm used to. I found a dark clay called cassius basaltic clay.

MS. RIEDEL: It's really black, almost volcanic-looking, yes?

MS. MAYERI: It gets darker and darker the higher you fire it, and once it's fired, it is a really tough clay. It's a little tough to work with, too, because it has—I think it's manganese in it.

MS. RIEDEL: So is it less pliable, or it's just very groggy?

MS. MAYERI: It is less fluid. Also in the dark clay, it's hard to see the features because it absorbs the light.

I didn't know what to do with it, and I started making little dots of white clay and put it on the dark clay, and I liked that effect. I did a little foot and made holes in it and inset little specks of my white clay. It was a beautiful contrast. I made a piece called *Inner Circle* [1995], a figure with little white dots in the dark clay set on her lower leg. The little dots of white spilled over onto the dark ground. It was a beautiful effect. It just seemed magical. It reminded me of stars in the sky. So I sometimes call it “Stardust.”

In another piece I put the little dots of white in a dark face, and it looked like a dark star, something from the sky. On a larger figure called *Veiled Thoughts* [1996], dots of white clay were separated by maybe half an inch from each other all over her body. And it felt like she was in a fog of thought. I had a lot of fun painting it. It was a new experience to paint on this dark clay.

I did several pieces with the family tree as a concept. I took some underglaze—a light tannish underglaze—and put it on the dark clay and then carved in some grooves that were bark-like. I did *Family Tree Man* [1997] this way. And I loved the impact. On this one, *Family Tree Man*, I carved members of my own family on his body, with his limbs and his head incorporated in this bark-like underglaze.

MS. RIEDEL: And you don't just use it as a slip on top of another clay. You work exclusively in that clay.

MS. MAYERI: Right. It was fun to paint. I was feathering the paint in from a light color back into the dark clay—letting the dark color breathe through the light paint. They were very bronze-like. But I found that the dust was toxic to me, and I had to give up that clay. I thought of using a dark underglaze on white clay as a substitute. And when I did that, I realized that I could use this scraffito technique; I could draw in figures or narrative or patterns that would show up through the underglaze. So this started the scraffito work. The first was *Domestic Veil* [1995], where I was thinking of a Persian rug.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That piece is so interesting to me because it feels like a sort of covert political commentary, too.

MS. MAYERI: It is. This is really a social commentary piece, I think, where the woman is serving tea, and everyone is watching television, in the domestic scene on the rug. But the rug also acts to keep her housebound. So it looks like it's fencing her in. I was thinking of my mother-in-law when I did this piece, and how her whole life was involved with the domestic scene and serving everyone.

MS. RIEDEL: The other—I don't know if this was a conscious decision or not, but it's the only piece I've ever seen

of yours that is very pointedly red, white, and blue.

MS. MAYERI: Oh, that's interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a red section just by the nose and the rest of that blue, and then the upper part just all white. I hadn't seen that in any of your work before.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I was thinking of the colors of a Persian rug. But also with the blue, it looked like the night sky, and that led to a piece called *Night Vision* [1998], and *Stargazer* [1999]. There I came up with the idea of memorializing the "stars" in my life. Those pieces refer to people who are no longer here, but who were very meaningful to me. I put in patterns of the night sky, like falling stars and night storms.

MS. RIEDEL: Those pieces have more of a sense of awe than anything else I've ever seen. There's just such an awe and wonder and magic in their expressions. There's nothing tense or—they don't feel tense. It doesn't feel dangerous. I don't feel the same juxtaposition of meditative, sort of scientific, detached observation and then some burgeoning evil hatching someplace. They feel much calmer.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. They're really pieces that I hold close to my heart, and I think of all the people who were important to me in my life. I enjoyed the technique of drawing on the surface of the clay. The hard part, I think, was using acrylic paint on the areas that didn't have the underglaze. The underglaze is such a strong color, I tried to get the paint to relate to this patch of stained clay so that it would end up having a coordinated look.

Those pieces were psychologically oriented. Then I used the scraffito technique in pieces like *Shrinking Boundary* [1999] and *Daybreak* [2001], where the dark part suggests a world with problems, which I feel acutely. And so I changed the focus to the environment, where environmentalists hold a net and try to save endangered species but where there is overpopulation, waste of water, and too much fossil-fuel use.

These themes were drawn in on a lot of pieces like *Daybreak*, *Shrinking Boundary*, and the more recent *The Toddler* [2004]. In *The Toddler,* he's reaching out hopefully to be picked up out of polluted waters.

MS. RIEDEL: And there has been an environmental thread that's run through your work from the start, whether it's endangered species or vanishing species or clear-cutting, there's –

MS. MAYERI: The environmental theme really began in '98 with *Clear Cut*. Going from human frailty to environmental frailty was not a big leap. The world is harsh for us and the animal and plant life as we've known it in the past. I believe we are the cause of that. So with *Clear Cut,* I wanted to do a piece about the clear-cutting of old-growth redwoods.

Initially I didn't know what form it would take, and I had to wait for an image to come to me. It took, actually, a couple of years before I got the right image. I was walking in a beaver meadow, and where the beavers had gnawed through the trees, it looked like a throat. Then I knew I had the piece; the piece came to me right then. And, in fact, I've heard that tree cutters—where they cut the tree is referred to as the "throat" of the tree. That piece was a tree-man being cut down, with the life story of the tree carved on the bark.

That led to other environmental pieces, but I felt my art was not [as] effective as *An Inconvenient Truth* [2006], a film that does lead people to change. I joined a local environmental group in 2000. I'm still active in it because I think that is an effective way to change legislation.

[But my art is one more voice in the environmental movement.] A recent piece—which is called *Vanishing Species, Western Face* [2006]—is an oversized head that's 33 inches high. Forty-four threatened species of western North America are carved into it. I used my old zoology books to ID them. Today much of the local animal life has disappeared or is threatened. For instance, 98 percent of the frogs in the Sierra Nevada Mountains are gone; they're just gone. And local frogs are gone. They're the most vulnerable because they need cleaner water and air. I feel it very keenly.

Another piece, called *The Baby* [2006], is a child being held up by two strong arms, and it suggests to me not only the pride of having a baby, but also it suggests that she’s being rescued from some catastrophe below.

There is a cat piece that I call *Cat's Life* [2006]. On it is textured some of the songbirds it's killed off. Cats are really a menace to the environment. Cute as they are, they are problematic that way.

MS. RIEDEL: That's the main form that your political pieces take, is environmental. There is the *California Marriage* [1990], which seemed more a societal commentary; but if I think of your work in political terms, I think of it mostly as environmental.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. We all care so much about our natural environment. We don't want to destroy it. We want to live with it, and it's really unfortunate that we need so many resources and gadgets. Environmental damage is

our major problem. It's far bigger than our wars and, I think, our social problems. Climate change will make life harder for everyone.

MS. RIEDEL: I was just at a wonderful clay studio in North Carolina where they're actually fueling their kilns with methane gas from a decomposing landfill. You'd probably –

MS. MAYERI: That's great. I'm also at the point where I feel I have to reduce my fossil fuel use. I do start feeling guilty about using the kiln, and I think, Maybe I should become a 2-D artist. I have thought about that.

MS. RIEDEL: It might be interesting to mention, too, that you've had this studio for close to 30 years. Which is an incredibly stable environment in which to work.

MS. MAYERI: Right. I have beautiful natural light, so I don't need any lights. I feel very virtuous that way. [Riedel laughs.] But when I run that kiln, that's a different story.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: I'd like to talk a little more about the use of scale difference in the pieces. *In Balancing Act* [2001] and *Family Support* [2001], little heads are holding up a big head.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. MAYERI: *Woman with Many Faces* [1999], if you remember that piece, a number of little faces on the neck, sort of like a community—her community supporting her.

I had one called *Budding Thoughts* [1998]. I don't know if you saw this one.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MAYERI: Coming out of his head are the suggestion of little dialoguing heads, as if he's thinking these thoughts and they're budding through. I did a series of 34 little heads, cascading down like a waterfall, that I call *Free Fall* [1999]. It was difficult to figure out how to place them on the wall. I was constantly moving the nails to make different configurations. But I finally got one that worked. I had fun doing that, but it was stolen—all 34 little faces were stolen out of a show, and that was very disappointing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: I think the hardest thing for me is that I have lost track of pieces—like *Checkered Woman*—I don't know where they are. If I ever were to have a retrospective, I couldn't recover it. So that hurts, because I'd like to see that one again and some other pieces, too.

MS. RIEDEL: So you don't know who bought it in the first place, or you've lost track of that person?

MS. MAYERI: The gallery that sold it is out of business.

MS. RIEDEL: But they're obliged to give you the name and the address of the collector.

MS. MAYERI: They aren't obliged. Now they are in California, but not in other states.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I've lost track of many pieces, because some of the galleries don't share that information, and also people give their pieces away and then you can't track them either. I try to ask the galleries to share that information with me. In case they close, at least I would have it as an archival file. You can't repeat pieces from the past.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That's actually—it's funny because one of the things we talked about—as we were going through your series—is how you cycle back to certain ideas and do them again. We were talking about the variations in scale, with the smaller heads holding up the larger heads, and how one of the very earliest pieces was very much like that. I can't remember the title of it, but there were actually full figures holding up.

MS. MAYERI: That's true.

MS. RIEDEL: And pattern comes back, over and over again.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's almost an unconscious thing. Either your brain thinks it up fresh each time, or if you've done it once, you're apt to think of it again.

MS. RIEDEL: So when I think of your work, I don't think of a range so much as constant cycles. Pattern will overlap with a psychological level, or it will overlap with a gestural piece, and so it will become something different. The cut-up pieces, depending on the content, felt very different, but it was still a cut-up piece, put together with a different kind of content or subject matter that would make it completely different, or combined with texture or patterning or change in scale. So there are certain things, themes, that repeat over and over again—techniques that make up almost a repertoire of the range of what you've done.

MS. MAYERI: It's true. I like the freedom to be able to do that. Usually the first piece I think of that has a new theme is very fresh and unusual. But then if I have to think of other pieces on that theme, it becomes pedestrian. And so I tend not to be able to work with a theme for one show, although through the years I have my themes.

I have to work where each birth feels independent. When you come on to something fresh, it's as if you're reinventing yourself, and that's a good feeling. That's a good, exciting feeling. Even though sometimes you're reinventing it, it still feels new. And if you've done a massive piece that's taken months to do and you're exhausted, it's nice to be able to do something small and simple, so you recoup your energy again. It can be whatever you are at the moment.

[END MD 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Beverly Mayeri at the artist's studio in Sausalito, California, on October 3, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three.

Hello.

MS. MAYERI: Hi.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought we would start the second part of our interview with a discussion of stillness versus gesture in your work.

MS. MAYERI: Okay. I started out with very little gesture in my work because I think the pieces are about an inner focus, a look inward at feelings and thoughts. The pieces show an intensity, a reflective look. And it wouldn't be appropriate, I think, to have much gesture.

There's a lot of restraint in the expression and gesture of the pieces. That's not to say there is no movement, either. For instance, in a piece like *Family Album* [1987], which was a big head that was focusing inward, there are bodies and people crawling over the piece. *Family Album* focused on the people in my life and my family and all the dynamics of the family.

This is also true for *Shadow Faces* and *Entanglement* [1989], where 2-D figures are embracing each other. There's movement there, but it's very subtle. It reminds me a little bit of Frida Kahlo's work—her portrait work—which is very intense and reflective-looking. Behind her she'll have monkeys or operations or other scenes of her life that she seems to be thinking about. I think that I'm doing a similar thing, but using the body for tattooing-in the detailed information or narrative.

Occasionally, there is a feeling of gesture in some of the pieces that make them very special to me. For instance, in *Treading Water*, she's very carefully balanced on her neck, as her hair flows out. She has this expression of holding her own. How long will she stay afloat there? There's a suspense. There's a kind of poignancy in this very still gesture.

I like a recent piece called *The Baby*, which I mentioned before, where a full-sized baby is held up by two large hands. It's a precarious feeling that this baby is being held up, maybe over someone's head. There’s a drama to the piece.

MS. RIEDEL: And there's always a fragility and a vulnerability that creates tension.

MS. MAYERI: That's true. I'm really very concerned about human frailty, the fragility of life. So I do like to get that across in my pieces. But I also like pieces that have strong gestures, like *Emerging* [2001], where this figure is leaping out of the dark into the light.

And the same with *Ready to Change* [2001], where there is no detailed information about her. Originally, I wanted her to be changing out of a dress that was inscribed with narrative. But after I did this gesture, where she seems to be stretching the cloth for breathing room, it felt complete. It didn't need any more information.

MS. RIEDEL: And that piece is so interesting because it includes all the gesture of the gestural pieces, but it's without any of the detail that goes with the psychological work. There's a huge psychological presence in that piece, which isn't necessarily so with the other gestural ones.

MS. MAYERI: That's true. There's something about the tilt of her face.

MS. RIEDEL: The title. The gesture itself.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. This piece led to other work. Susan Cummins Gallery had *Ready to Change*. When I was asked to do a show in New York, they wanted a theme show. Since this gallery liked *Ready to Change*, I thought I would do a whole show about gestures that involved either buttoning up, dressing up, braiding hair, or combing hair. [Modeling the hand gestures was difficult, and I was relieved that they came out looking natural. Thinking up the gestures was also hard.] There is a difference between getting an idea that's inspired versus saying, Oh, now I'm going to do more of these.

As soon as I'm more consciously in control, it's hard to keep up the freshness that comes from that moment of inspiration. So I guard against that now by avoiding theme shows. In New York, they are very invested in doing theme shows, probably because they can give more choice to the buyer.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's antithetical to what you were talking about the last time we got together, which is the way you like to work. You like different types of pieces in a show—you think that makes for a strong, more interesting show. That's your inherent, intuitive way of working. And this was completely against that.

MS. MAYERI: I feel my best pieces have come from a moment of insight, where the form for the piece is set in my head full-blown. It's like a gift. For instance, *Big Birthday* [2000]. I had no idea where it came from. All my birthdays seem big right now. [They laugh.] But suddenly in my mind I saw a woman walking on her birthday cake, trying to get through the lit candles safely. I think it's a very interesting image, because when you start out in life, you have many choices. But as your life fills up with the job, you end up choosing—and family obligations, all the slots seem to fill up, and you feel like you have fewer and fewer choices. In a way, it seemed related to a cake filling up with candles through the years.

Clear Cut came from such a moment of inspiration, too.

MS. RIEDEL: *Birthday* is interesting, too—just a quick insertion—because it again has such a festive feeling, and a feeling of danger at the same time.

MS. MAYERI: That's true. Yes. There's something precarious about her situation on the cake with the lit candles. And that is how I face a big birthday. In a way, you're happy you made it, and you can celebrate that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: But then you wonder, What is it about your life that you could change to have the feeling of flourishing? Some of those things come into your head when you're having your birthday. What will make the next year good, or better?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. You were starting on *Clear Cut*, as well.

MS. MAYERI: With *Clear Cut*, as I mentioned before, I was determined to participate in the environmental movement. I knew I had to wait for the right image to come into my head, because it's just too obvious or clichéd if I force the image. If I ask myself questions, my mind might give me inspiring answers or images. But I have to know the difference.

MS. RIEDEL: So the trick is finding the right question. Are a lot of these pieces self-portraits in one way or another?

MS. MAYERI: Some of them are—I'm thinking of other people, too, but a lot of them are about self-exploration and new ways to see yourself. It's surprising what comes out. How I work—I find myself coming here every day and fooling around with half-finished pieces and exploring little things that happen. Suddenly that can spark an idea. I have just enough of a rich environment right now, with a bunch of half-finished pieces, and that's a good time to explore new ideas.

As an example, let me go into one idea that I'm working on now. I like mosaics, and I wanted to see if I could come up with my own version. I recently went to Italy and went to see those Roman floors—marble floors—with their mosaics. It's so wonderful that it's lasted 2,000 years. They're so beautiful. We went into one house in, I think, Perugia, where each room had its own rug of mosaics. I realized that's where rugs must come from, because each room had its own unique coloring and border of little stones. It was so exciting to see that.

I came back and I thought, I'd like to use mosaics in my pieces. One of the first ones I did was a large eye, where the iris was made up of photos of people with dark backgrounds, and the whites of the eye was little photos of people with white backdrops. And that became my mosaic.

Then I did a face that was blocked off in kind of a graph, and I set little photos of some friends in different little squares. It was no longer a mosaic, but it didn't matter. It was interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Are you setting the photos in clay?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, fired clay. I xerox photos in the size I want, and then glue it on the clay, leaving a face in a few squares. Now I'm doing some actual mosaics, where I cut out each little piece of clay and put it flat into a mold, build it up, and it comes out as a mosaic. It's beautiful, but a time-consuming process.

MS. RIEDEL: I'd love to see that. I haven't seen any of those.

MS. MAYERI: It's like a three-dimensional Roman floor.

[END MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: You're preparing for a show right now. Let's talk briefly about the process of preparing for your show and this different group of pieces—how they feed off of each other and come into a larger whole that you're designing for a show, so the piece is larger than itself.

MS. MAYERI: I found out through the years what makes for a good-looking show with certain spaces that I was in for a long time, like Dorothy Weiss. I got to know her space very well. She had one 12-foot-long pedestal, and often Ted Cohen, who was a brilliant installer, would put one piece at the end of that long pedestal. I knew how many major pieces the show would need, and that scale change was important.

I like the color palette to change from piece to piece. Usually the show is put together so that several colors will form one area and feed off of each other. Color change is important and so is scale change, and change of form. I think it's boring to have a show of busts of all the same size. It's interesting if you have one six-foot piece on the wall, a head, maybe three busts, and small pieces.

The pieces that have darkness to them can hold a corner because the darkness against the white walls is very striking and dramatic. But you can't have just one piece like that—you need maybe three, so it becomes a little series in itself.

For this present show –

MS. RIEDEL: And this will be in New York or Chicago?

MS. MAYERI: This is in Chicago, at the Perimeter Gallery, in February. It has an environmental theme behind it, but some of the pieces can be interpreted in psychological ways, too. I was trying to stay focused on the theme of the environment, how humans are affecting the world.

Working with Susan Cummins, it was so easy for her to come here, and we would work together on what would be a back-room piece and what would be in the front room, for instance. With Dorothy Weiss, Esther Saks, Garth Clark, and Frank Paluch, they accept whatever I send them. But I have noticed that it's much better to send your strongest pieces. It's much better to keep your best foot forward for the shows, and they appreciate that, too. Even if it's a small show, they can do a lot with spotlights and focus on a few pieces. Or change to a smaller room.

MS. RIEDEL: So now you have *The Baby* you're working on, and you're working on a bather?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, *The Baby*, and there are three bathers in the next show, *Knee Deep* [2006], *Up for Air* [2007], and *Staying Afloat* [2007]. I use the metaphor of swimmers in a sea, because when you consider how we conduct our lives, it feels like we are not on solid ground. It seems like we are in a sea that is sometimes calm and sometimes rough, and we have to deal with it.

In the Perimeter show there is also the *Vanishing Species* piece and *Hoping* [2006]. *Hoping* is a 25-inch hand with crossed fingers, partly inundated with inscribed images suggesting the forces of good and evil in the world. Some smaller pieces fill out the show. The show will have maybe 12 pieces of different sizes, different forms, different colors. Frank Paluch is very good at installing a show, and I'm really looking forward to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this a good time to lead into the artists who have inspired you over time?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I think that's a good idea. I thought that I'd just mention some of the art that affects me strongly. I would start with the early art of the Greek sculptures. I especially like pieces like the *Venus de Milo* and the *Aphrodite* at the Getty museum [Getty Villa], where the drapery of the marble clings to the body and then in complex ways leads off, as if a wind is blowing it. The delicacy and the attention paid to these drapes is so moving to me that, to me, it feels like a spiritual experience to see these pieces.

There are just a few left in the world. When it became Roman, it became different—the portraits were strong and realistic. With Greek sculpture, the faces and the figures are more idealized. But those draperies affect me very deeply, and I love them.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it the gestural quality of them?

MS. MAYERI: The movement in it is so powerful and lovingly worked that I seek out those pieces and try to see them. And then, as I mentioned before, Notre Dame and the other Gothic cathedrals of the early Renaissance. I've enjoyed the surreal Adam and Eve, these elongated, simplified figures, and the monsters have always piqued my imagination. I enjoy going back there to see that. And early Renaissance art like Hieronymus Bosch and Fra Angelico, van Eyck. I love the stillness and the imagination and the attention to detail, and the meticulous painterly quality.

MS. RIEDEL: The density of images, and the contrast between good and evil, and the number of animals present.

MS. MAYERI: Right, it really has beautiful scenes from the imagination, especially the early Renaissance. When it gets Baroque-y, it's beyond me. I'm not as interested in it. But those still images with the background landscapes, and often refined portraits, where each hair is so delicately caressed in paint, that is very touching to me.

And then moving closer to the 20th century, I've always loved van Gogh's swirling brushwork and Matisse's color and forms.

I love to go to the [American] Folk Art Museum in New York to see the naïve artists, who do their own cosmology in drawings, where they have strange landscapes that are unreal, but you know it has something to do with their inner feelings, about what is going on in them. Some of these artists are not very sociable, but there's such an imagination and such an intriguing sense of life and order to the world that I find them endlessly fascinating to see. Adolf Wolfli is one such artist that I admire.

And then there's Robert Arneson. I loved his mind and especially his own portraits. He had a great mind. I knew him a little bit, and I remember talking to him about the [George] Moscone affair and the Moscone bust. I asked him did he know he would get so many headlines and controversy over this piece? He said no; he had no idea that this would happen. He felt he worked so hard on this bust, and he was not expecting it.

I don't know if you remember this, but after he did that, he did a series of himself as a dog who felt that he'd done something bad, and he had these colorful turds on the floor, as if his art had been worthless gestures. I love the way he transformed everything into art in his life. He died at my age now, exactly my age. He had one piece where he marked off the years of his life in Roman numerals, which stopped at 62. He knew that was his last year.

I love Roy De Forest and De Staebler's textures and the soft coloring that he uses. I don't know if you remember John Buck's early work. I love those devils that he came up with. Michael Stevens's refinement in his painted-wood heads and dogs. And [Michael] Lucero and Sergei Isupov's imaginations. There are many artists that I love and I follow their work.

MS. RIEDEL: And have they been significant to you, then, at different times in your own career?

MS. MAYERI: With van Gogh's brushwork, I think so many artists have been influenced by some of the patterns in *Starry Night*. I find myself thinking of that painting when I do some of the scraffito patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: I could see that. Certainly some of the ones that work with symbolism—the mythological, and the symbolic back-and-forth between human and animal nature.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I like to get animals in my pieces. I always get my cat in my pieces. [Riedel laughs.] She's been an important figure in my life.

MS. RIEDEL: What's your cat's name?

MS. MAYERI: Pumpkin.

MS. RIEDEL: Pumpkin.

MS. MAYERI: I think that my father had a very powerful influence on some of the characters that I've come up with. But I think my idealized faces and colors are very Renaissance-y. Some of my colors are like Steve De Staebler's. I remember when he used pinks and pastel blues.

MS. RIEDEL: Very soft.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I like that coloring.

MS. RIEDEL: Washes.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. Sometimes I get inspired when I go out to gallery shows and something will strike me. But usually I'm best on my own—working from my own repertoire. I don't work in a vacuum. I certainly am not a hermit. I'm influenced by other art, but I don't believe in appropriation. I don't like that idea. So I try to work with my own ideas and not incorporate art of the past into my work, for instance. I really don't want to do that. I feel best about myself when I invent my own forms. That's the most exciting thing for me to try to do.

I have been using these little photographs of people. Maybe that's Postmodern. I don't know. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the working environment and the community that's been important to you over the years.

MS. MAYERI: Well, as you can see, I have a beautiful studio. I have skylights here.

MS. RIEDEL: What are these, 40-, 30-foot ceilings?

MS. MAYERI: It's a 30-foot ceiling. I have a bank of five huge windows for light. And I use this hydraulic lift so I can go up, down, and around with the Lazy Susan on top. I can move it any place I want. This is my worktable. It's a piece of farming equipment from Grainger, and it's just been great.

I'm very fortunate to be in a building with about 80 other artists. Just walking down the hall is a treat, peeking in and seeing what people are doing. I often have lunch with Joanne Fox, who is one of the artists here. We're good friends. I've had terrific studio mates. Gail Van Dyke was a marble artist. She was here for 22 years. And then Wendy Gruber, Mimi Chen-Ting. I've been very close to them.

Part of what I need as an artist is a good critiquer, and Gail Van Dyke was wonderful. She taught me a lot about critiquing. For instance, if your eye notices something too strongly in a piece, that can be a problem. She taught me that art needs a focus of three. So I enjoy talking about that with her. She also said that a palette of three colors is a good way to work. I've learned a lot from her.

Another artist, Daniel Goldstein, comes in before a show. A couple of months before a show I will show him my pieces and go over some trouble spots. It can often take years to actually resolve a problem piece.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you do in that case, especially when it's a clay piece?

MS. MAYERI: Well, for instance, *The Runner* [1989], which started out as a full piece, ended up being cut down. Sometimes I've had a piece where the arms end at the elbows and I've had to make the rest of the arms separately and glue them on. I'm lucky because I'm working with low-fire clay. I can saw it, glue it, and fill it. Sometimes I use plaster. Like with *BigBirthday*, I didn't like the cake. I ended up making a plaster cake. It's very nice to be working in sculpture, where you don't have to be a purist.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to ask you, given that Karen Breschi was such a big influence on you early on, that you never felt more inclination to work with found objects or to work with more mixed media. You've really stayed true to clay. There must be something in that that really resonates with you.

MS. MAYERI: I feel if you use found objects, then it can bring the piece down to the level of that found object. If you find a little Mickey Mouse figurine, and it's on the piece, sure, that can show that your piece is making a comment on popular art and high art. I don't like little Mickey Mouse figurines—[Riedel laughs]—but I like natural forms. If there were a way to do it like Margaret Ford does, using willow branches, that would be more my cup of tea than something manufactured.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

Community? Working environment?

MS. MAYERI: Wendy Gruber, when she was my studio mate, she would just come by, look at a piece, and say, "Oh, the shoulder's off."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What a gift.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. She knew anatomy so well. She was a lot of fun to be with. I have a Jungian friend, who is a psychologist. She gives me thoughtful interpretations of my art. And sometimes, if I need to do teapot art, I go

to a potter friend.

My daughter, Rachel, and Earl and my brother Arthur sometimes help me name pieces. Naming a piece requires another act of inspiration. It needs to suit the piece and not lead the viewer too much in a certain direction. It can't close the piece to other interpretations.

MS. RIEDEL: Your titles so often have double meanings—the double meaning of the piece is implied in the title.

MS. MAYERI: I do try for that. If you can come up with a really good word, a really precise word, that is the best way to go, but sometimes it's hard work. Just like a poet trying to come up with the right word.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. MAYERI: Another source of good critiques that I wanted to mention is in New York—it started out with Allan Frumkin, and now George Adams. I go in every few years and get wonderful feedback from George Adams. You call the gallery the day before, get on the list, and then show up early in the morning and wait there with other artists. He will see 10 artists one day a week and give a nice tête-à-tête review of your slides.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Have you ever shown with him?

MS. MAYERI: No, it's not really for showing. He will just honestly tell you what he thinks works in your work and what doesn't.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. MAYERI: It's a service that Allan Frumkin started, and then George Adams when it was the Frumkin-Adams Gallery. He just continued doing it to this day.

And through the years, I have met with Linda K. Smith in San Francisco, and we've gone to the art shows every month. Usually, I don't like what's out there. Usually, I like 10 percent of the art, and that still makes it meaningful. One gallery I enjoy is the Art Exchange Gallery, because she has a real feast for the eyes. She, herself, Claire [Carlevaro] is so knowledgeable about art.

I have had a model for 20 years. Peggy Davis-Nixon would pose for me for female pieces, and she has been wonderful to work with, but recently she's left to be a ballroom dancer on cruise ships. [They laugh.] So now I need a model. For men, my husband models for me. So that's very nice.

Gallery directors have been supportive. There's a real trust and loyalty with the gallery directors through the years, and I've enjoyed that friendship with them and their honesty. They've been very helpful.

MS. RIEDEL: You've worked with a lot of different galleries over the years, too.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. Very early on, I was with the Ivory Kimpton Gallery in San Francisco, in '81. A friend of mine told me this new gallery was opening up and they were looking at art. They took me on before they opened their doors, and they didn't mind that I worked in clay. This was a fine art gallery. I had a couple of shows with them.

When I got my first NEA grant, Garth Clark came over here to look at my work.

MS. RIEDEL: When was that, Beverly? Do you remember?

MS. MAYERI: That was ’82 or ’83, because I got the first grant in ’82. I had that huge head, *Divided Mind*, on one of my tables. It was six feet long. He really liked that because it was different, a slatted face. We had a couple of shows, and because New York is seen by so many curators and other gallery directors, that led to other galleries. One in Michigan, the Robert Kidd Gallery, and Esther Saks in Chicago.

What a gallery needs to be able to do for you is not only sell the work. He needs to show the work really well and get reviewers to come in, because that is very helpful.

Other good galleries have been Dorothy Weiss and Susan Cummins.

MS. RIEDEL: You showed with Dorothy for a long time.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It was so stable. It was wonderful being with Dorothy. She had beautiful shows. It was a real loss when she decided to close her doors.

MS. RIEDEL: She was open for 20—what, 15, 20 years? A long time.

MS. MAYERI: She had such a good eye, and a good relationship to the artists and to the collectors.

MS. RIEDEL: She was a San Francisco institution. And you did for most of your career. You were with Dorothy Weiss. You showed with Susan Cummins, Ivory Kimpton here.

MS. MAYERI: Right. Susan is a friend and very supportive.

MS. RIEDEL: So right now you're focused in New York and in the Midwest, in Chicago?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, Chicago and the Detroit area.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MAYERI: Another part of my community has been good photographers. I've had Mel Schockner and Lee Fatherree. They have worked very hard to get the most flattering view of a piece and the most revealing of what the piece is about. Getting the lighting right is critical to having a good shot of your piece. Often when a piece isn't working, and they're not able to get that good shot, you know the piece needs reworking. So it tells me a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MAYERI: Their photographs tell me a lot.

There have been collectors who have been very supportive over the years, following my work for 20 years and more, like Karen Johnson Boyd, and Sonny and Gloria Kamm. I know that they're working to have the collection end up in museums, such as the Racine Art Museum [Racine, WI]. That's very gratifying to feel that it will be in public view at some point.

I did want to thank some of the significant reviewers who are able to be so attuned to my work that they're able to—to tell me what it might be about. [Riedel laughs.] I'm gratified at how beautifully they've been able to verbalize on what the work means to them. So I wanted to mention reviewers like Marcy Timberman and Victor Cassidy and Stephen Luecking, Maria Porges, and Ken Johnson. Their language has shown me the poetry that's in the pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MS. MAYERI: It's very nice to feel that it has an impact on them.

MS. RIEDEL: You were talking earlier about Stephen Luecking and how he brought up the concept of tattoos—the skin as a landscape and a surface, and the permeability of skin, and a different kind of tattoo being revealed through your work.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, and he also talked about the open mouth, how it leads you to the dark center inside, and how one's respiration is the portal between the inner and the outer worlds. There is a spiritual significance to respiration in a lot of religions.

MS. RIEDEL: And those articles have really been very important to your career, some of them.

MS. MAYERI: I think so. I think it had an impact on others.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they in any particular magazines that you yourself have found valuable over time?

MS. MAYERI: Certainly *American Craft*—when they did this last review by Maria Porges, they did a beautiful job. I was impressed with that.

I have supported *American Ceramics* and *American Craft*.

MS. RIEDEL: What sorts of magazines do you find interesting?

MS. MAYERI: The *New Yorker* is my favorite. I like to see art in person by going to the shows. I go to New York twice a year. I like the museum shows the best—at the Met, especially—because the Chelsea galleries are so in your face. It's too much. It's just too much for me. But some galleries have nice retrospectives of, say, Alice Neel, an artist that I love. I pick and choose what I'll see.

MS. RIEDEL: And you go specifically twice a year to look at art?

MS. MAYERI: Well, let's put it this way. I have a brother in New York, and my mother's in Connecticut. So it's as much to see them as to see the art.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you go to L.A., as well?

MS. MAYERI: I go to L.A. because my daughter's there. We just went to the Villa Getty Museum, where I revisited the Aphrodite piece. They will apparently get traveling exhibits from Italy. So it will still be an exciting museum to go to. I go to Bergamot Station occasionally and see the galleries there, LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] and MoCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles], as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Any scientific writers—any scientists—that have been important to you over the years?

MS. MAYERI: Well, yes. There's been one scientist who's been very supportive of my work, Howard Fields. Scientists love to hear what is in the work, what is it about. Scientists are very creative themselves, and they are interested in art. They're interested in ideas and they're a very thoughtful audience. They're full of wonder about the world. I like scientists a lot. Psychologists are good, too. [They laugh.] And if we're talking about my community, I'm in a book club. And I'm in a group that watches films together once a month. Many of them are artists in this building.

MS. RIEDEL: And your daughter's a filmmaker, too.

MS. MAYERI: My daughter is a filmmaker and a professor of art. In her films she often uses a scientific theme. Her latest film is about primates—baboons—and people.

[END OF MD 03 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your teaching experiences, which have been mainly residencies and workshops.

MS. MAYERI: Right. They've mainly been workshops. I did some college semester teaching early on and found that it left me little time for doing my own work. I prefer doing workshops, where I can focus on the students for a short period of time. The workshops have been two-, three-, five-, six-day workshops, here and there.

MS. RIEDEL: And where have they been, Beverly?

MS. MAYERI: Sometimes at different universities and sometimes in art centers. I just did a five-day workshop in Santa Fe at Santa Fe Clay. I was just called to do one in Oregon. It's a private clay studio. And that's fine. I feel I understand now how to do it.

Your challenge is to stimulate ideas so the students can get into their work and complete a project within a short period of time. I have a series of slides where I show other people's work to the students the very first day, the very first morning of the workshop. This does a lot of things. This helps them see that art takes many different forms and that anything you decide to do is cool. There's not one way to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: You show them a range of media, abstract, representation.

MS. MAYERI: Absolutely. Usually it generates some ideas for them, something they want to try themselves. After the slides they're raring to go. Usually I start a little demonstration, and if it's a five-day workshop, it'll be a head; I'll call them over through the days to show different ways of building it up and moving on to complete the piece.

One book that's been helpful for me in developing a kind of philosophy about art is a book by Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write*. It's very inspiring on how to express yourself in art, how you're sharing a part of yourself with others. It's a gift from you to others, and you work from real feelings. If you tell the truth about yourself, it usually strikes a chord with somebody else. So if you feel like you're in a fury, you can address what makes you feel that in the art itself. If you feel bored, just start doing something out of boredom and you'll find the boredom will lift.

She has a wonderful sense of humor. She'll say, "If you feel like murdering someone, do it in art." Sublimate. I remember Kafka saying, "Art is the ax that breaks the frozen sea within us." Go for it, that says to me. If you have raw feelings, the legitimate place to express them is in art. And it not only frees you, in some way, therapeutically, but it frees other people who see it, too.

I end up being energized by the classes, because people are so thankful to take some time out of their normal, ordinary life to do something creative. It feels like a magical act. We start with nothing in the room, and after a few days we have exciting projects going on. So we feel like magicians. I've always felt that when you come up with something new in your work, it feels like you're reinventing yourself in some way. I think that's what the class feels. It's very exciting. It's very satisfying to jump into something new. I often tell them, "Do something different from the way you usually work." I'll have a student who's used to doing little things, and I'll say, "Do something big." And they'll feel so excited by taking a big leap like that.

In the Santa Fe workshop, one woman who was 84 had done clay sculpture portraits when she was 24. She said she just wanted to do a portrait of herself with all her waddles and all the wrinkles. She did such a wonderful job, an oversized head of herself. At the end of the class she said, "I was told to find the joy in my life, and I found it." I thought, Oh, wow. Isn't that inspiring.

Another person was a dentist who did tooth molds for the crowns of teeth, something very precise. He worked from a book on how to make a sculpture of a boxer's head. He was following what I said, but he was also following the rules from this book on how to build up a head. At the end of the class he looked around and he said, "Well, I see how everyone has done something that's expressed who they are, and I don't feel I'm like this boxer, so I'm not going to do this for my next work." There are little gems like that from the classes that make it very exciting.

It used to be that I was afraid to divulge how I worked because I felt that it would be copied. But I have found that everyone has their own way of working. No matter what you teach them on how to use paint or how to use clay, they will find their own way, and it will always be different from yours.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you want them to leave a workshop with? Do you have any specific ideas in mind?

MS. MAYERI: Well, I think that their attunement to themselves, trying new things, loosening up—I would go to each student and we would talk about their piece. Of course, in a short workshop you don't get to know people all that well. But we've had chats, and I think it's been helpful for students. I feel like I'm a good teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a bit about the clay, and then the watercolor paintings that you've done on and off—well, consistently—for 30 years? Forty?

MS. MAYERI: The clay and the watercolor?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MAYERI: I started out doing a lot of pen and ink and watercolor. I enjoyed going on vacation and capturing some scene that would remind me of the place we were in.

MS. RIEDEL: And your watercolors have been exclusively landscapes.

MS. MAYERI: They're landscapes or cityscapes, with or without people there.

MS. RIEDEL: But very different than the clay work.

MS. MAYERI: Yeah, it is. It's very different. It's a more realistic palette, for instance, more color to it. It's a lot of fun to try different brushstrokes and loosen up and see where it all goes. It requires a lot of stamina to be outside in the elements. You're fighting the sunlight or the cold or bugs or wind. It's difficult to be in plein air. It's more relaxing to come into the clay studio.

The clay is completely different from the painting. It takes longer working three-dimensionally. You're getting your whole musculature involved in what you're doing. Painting goes much faster. You're dealing with illusion. But, of course, on my clay I also do a painting on the surface.

MS. RIEDEL: And the body becomes a canvas in many ways.

MS. MAYERI: It does. It's like a three-dimensional canvas. How do you do a two-dimensional image on three dimensions? How does it get distorted? How do you deal with getting under the arm into the armpit for your scene to go on? And deciding where the shaded areas and the highlighted areas are on the piece. It involves a lot of similar decisions as painting, where you also are going to have certain focal areas too. In my clay pieces I might have extra color in the eyes or in the hair to draw attention there.

With the clay, it's such a feeling of accomplishment if a piece comes out. Of course, there are many duds, too. But when a piece really works out and you've pulled that off, it's a good feeling.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you consider a dud?

MS. MAYERI: When a piece doesn't come together, or it's static. Or when I've made mistakes and I haven't paid attention to certain details. A piece has to work on the grand scale and also the details, because the human eye takes it all in. You can have a failure at any point. But you can also have a rescue. So I tend not to throw these pieces away. I always have great hopes that I will rescue them at some point.

MS. RIEDEL: And you paint with acrylics on the clay?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I paint with acrylics. I paint on layers of washes, which soak into the clay. The glue keeps those particles of paint on the clay, and then at a certain point I stop, before it looks like plastic. I like the clay to show through. If I want to go back to the clay surface, I just rub it with alcohol. Glaze is so permanent. That's why I like using paint. I can make mistakes and make changes.

MS. RIEDEL: That seems to be one of the draws of clay, too. At its essence, there is a sense of breath.

MS. MAYERI: You mean versus –

MS. RIEDEL: Any other medium.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, that's true. There's something about it that's flesh-like, I think, compared to bronze.

MS. RIEDEL: And porous.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, bronze is tough and more closed-feeling.

MS. RIEDEL: Even paper doesn't have a similar—or canvas doesn't have a similar sense of porosity.

MS. MAYERI: Well, I think watercolor paper does, though.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you?

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I think the watercolor paper shows through in a similar way to the clay.

MS. RIEDEL: There is a watercolor quality to the painting on the clay.

MS. MAYERI: Yes, I like the background color of the clay to show through. I like some artists better in watercolors than in canvas. And I think it's because the watercolor paper breathes, but canvas is usually too covered up. I like [Francesco] Clemente's watercolors, for instance, because it breathes. His washes of color are very loose.

MS. RIEDEL: And gestural, often.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. I like that.

MS. RIEDEL: You never threw in the towel with clay, though; you never decided to work exclusively in painting, so there must be something that's kept you consistently doing both over decades.

MS. MAYERI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Working out different things.

MS. MAYERI: I have always felt that I can go back to painting and enjoy that. A lot of the concepts I've used in pieces—especially from the scraffito work—could become two-dimensional. I might make that transition and include it in my shows. I have recently done little clay board pieces where you can scratch through and make your drawing. I've been doing some experiments with that. It's a direction I might continue to try, because it's like a transition back to painting.

MS. RIEDEL: And are your watercolors as detailed as the clay art pieces? You don't exhibit your watercolors.

MS. MAYERI: I don't exhibit my watercolors. I can show you some, but they're very different because they don’t involve concepts of the mind.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MAYERI: They deal with the beauty of the outer world or what's happening in the outer world. But I may do two-dimensional conceptual work. Through the years I often combine two different directions into a single form.

MS. RIEDEL: The psychological and the environmental, for example?

MS. MAYERI: Something like that. When I started the scraffito technique, it was used first in a psychological direction and content, and then it became environmental. I've enjoyed playing with those light and dark areas on the work. Like in *Daybreak*—in fact, if you remember, that one’s like the earth in eclipse, maybe moving towards the light. You don't know whether it's moving to the light or—

MS. RIEDEL: —to the dark.

MS. MAYERI: I love pieces like that. New things seem to come up. I'm still very engaged with the clay and also with painting and drawing.

I think that in looking at the market for clay, I've done figurative work at a time when it was not popular in the fine art world, but I was supported by the craft galleries and collectors who liked figurative work. Clay is put in the decorative arts category. If you look at people like Andy Goldsworthy, big installation art, or installation of monitors, or Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* [1981], and then you compare that with small clay sculpture, there is a world of difference. And yet small art, like Ken Price's art, is very intriguing, and there's a place for it in the world.

[END OF MD 03 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: I think we've done a great job of covering what we've needed to cover here. Do you have any final thoughts?

MS. MAYERI: Well, I feel art is good—that we, as artists, are working on pieces of the puzzle of what it is to be human. It's beyond what the consumer is about, what making money is about, the corporate world. Artists are offering part of the answers of how to be in this world and what kind of world we are making. I have come to realize that, because the world is changing so fast, I have to become more of an activist in the world. My art actually led me in this direction.

MS. RIEDEL: That comes from your early training and then all these years of working on those ideas consciously and less consciously through your own work.

MS. MAYERI: Yes. It's very interesting the way reflection has led to external movement in my life. There’s a back and forth between my life and art.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you so much.

MS. MAYERI: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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