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Oral history interview with Mara Superior, 2010 July 1-2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mara Superior on July 1 and 2, 2010. The interview took place in the artist's home in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, 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.

Mara Superior has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mara Superior at the artist's home in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, on July 1, 2010, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc number one.

Good morning.

MARA SUPERIOR: Good morning.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's start at the beginning, Mara. You were born in New York City? So you were born in New York City. What was the date?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, dear, I never give out that information. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: There's always a first time, Mara. It's for the historical record. This will be the most painful part, I'm sure.

MS. SUPERIOR: December 1, 1951.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That wasn't so bad, right?

MS. SUPERIOR: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: And let's talk about your parents, what they did, their names, what part of the city you grew up in?

MS. SUPERIOR: Okay. I am a typical American third-generation story, where my grandparents, all four, came from Sicily. And they met here. They met in the United States. They all came to visit other relatives that were here at about 18 years old. They were about 18 years old when they came. My father's side is from a tiny town, San Fratellon in Sicily, a small hill town near Palermo. And my mother's family is from Catania which is on the other side of the island.

My father has five brothers and sisters. My mother had one brother. And my grandfather on my father's side was a mason, building fireplaces and brick houses. He hated wooden houses. He just thought they were junk. He always lived in a brick or stone house himself in America. You know coming from Italy where all the houses are stone, in Sicily, you know. He knew that wood would rot. So he just couldn't imagine ever wanting or buying a wooden house.

MS. RIEDEL: And so as a child, did you visit this stone house?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, yes. A brick house, it was a brick house. And he built his own backyard barbecue chimney, and we had barbecues out there all the time, every Sunday. We had huge Sunday dinners. I'm an only child, but I have 21 first cousins that are all younger than me. So I was the first, and there were a lot of adults giving me a lot of attention. So I had a very, very, very adoring early childhood.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was this? Where you were living?

MS. SUPERIOR: This was in Brooklyn. My mother's father was a little further ahead in the American system in that he was a successful businessman very early on. And had bought some property. This was near Brooklyn College on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. And he owned a few of these brownstone buildings. And he had a butcher shop and an Italian delicatessen right on the corner of—I can't remember the name of the street, but it was Flatbush Avenue and something. In walking distance to Brooklyn College. My mother went to Brooklyn College. And when my parents were first married, my grandfather gave them the apartment above the butcher shop. So before kindergarten I would always hang out in my grandfather's butcher shop, which was immaculate.

It was the period when they had sawdust in the back area. Gorgeous wooden butcher blocks, which I certainly wish I had today. You know all the meat was pristine, exquisite in these white enamel cases with parsley around all the meat. [Laughs.] And there was a big wrapping table with stools.

And my first recollection of drawing was I would be down there, I'd be sitting at this big wooden table, and there would be a roll of pink wrapping paper. And I'd cut off pieces of paper, and I would draw with pencil and colored pencils, usually a red pencil, a black pencil, and a green pencil or something. And the first drawings that I did were of geishas because I was taken to Chinatown. And I was overwhelmed and fascinated by this Asian culture. And I had a tiny little Chinese doll with a silk outfit, baby doll, you know, and the little silk kimonos came on and off. I just loved that culture. And I remember myself drawing these outrageous hairdos with combs and pins and things hanging from the hair and the kimonos. Those were my first drawings.

MS. RIEDEL: And how old were you?

MS. SUPERIOR: Four, five. Kindergarten.

MS. RIEDEL: Very young. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And my grandfather would slice off the slicing machine a piece of American cheese for me and little pieces of meat and keep me going there. And I was very social. Was talking to all the customers. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And were both your parents working during the day? Is this why you were at the butcher shop?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, my father was certainly working. But my mother was probably upstairs. She was a fifties housewife. My aunts were all—never had to work outside of their homes. Their most stressful activities were planning vacations and things like that. This is before feminism, and those women lived pretty free lives, as I can see looking back on it. They were pretty free.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: And stress-free.

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds like a really pleasant childhood so far.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: What did your father do?

MS. SUPERIOR: My father was a businessman. As I was saying, third generation, first generation immigrants. My grandmother was a seamstress, and she happened to have worked making little children's clothes. So I had beautiful dresses that she had made in the factory. So that was lucky for her grandchildren. So that was the typical first generation. My father's generation were very focused on making money and being successful. He owned a few auto mechanic businesses and gas stations around New York and kind of managed them. One of his brothers, my Uncle Ben's story, is interesting, in that he was a policeman at first. And then he became a detective. And he went to night school and became a criminal attorney. So he had the entire—and he had three sons at this time while he was doing all this work. So he understood the system from both angles: from the police and the judicial sections. And another American story. In the third generation I was able to become an artist, even be able to think along those lines. So it's a very typical American story.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your parents' names?

MS. SUPERIOR: My mother's maiden name? Her name is Margaret Pepe, P-E-P-E. My grandfather's name was Joseph Pepe.

MS. RIEDEL: And your father's name?

MS. SUPERIOR: Charles Caiola, C-A-I-O-L-A.

MS. RIEDEL: And let's talk a little bit more about growing up. Did you spend your entire childhood in Brooklyn, all elementary school, junior high, high school?

MS. SUPERIOR: I remember being very disappointed that we were going to leave Flatbush Avenue and move to our own house, which of course was a brick house, very far away in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, which is one end of Brooklyn that's close to Long Island. And it's actually a very funny little town because there's—it's actually a little fishing village.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm. Interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: And on the water. But the subway, you know, went down there. It was about an hour to Manhattan from there, 50 minutes. So that's where I went to first grade. I think I moved there in first or second grade. And I always remember gravitating to the arts and history and social studies were my favorite subjects. Never very good at math. And my parents were math people. My mother actually worked in banks, was a bookkeeper, a total numbers person. I have very little number skills. Her brother was a creative person in performing arts. He was an actor and a singer. And he wound up being the entertainment director of the Villa Roma [Callicoon, NY] in the Catskills, which is like comparable to Grossinger's [Liberty, NY] or one of those places. And he was Mr. Personality and Mr. Outgoing. He was the most creative person in the family that I can imagine where any of these creative genes might have come from.

MS. RIEDEL: But you also mentioned your grandmother was a seamstress.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. They made things. They made things with their hands all the time, the grandparents.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you sew as a child?

MS. SUPERIOR: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I didn't sew until—no, maybe about 18 years old, 20 years old.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned that Sheepshead Bay was a little fishing village. Did you spend much time by the sea? Did you have a sense of fish coming in and out on the coast?

MS. SUPERIOR: There was an outstanding restaurant called Lundy's, which was like a Moroccan stuccoed palace. It was so strange. But we used to go there very often. And it was a time— [Audio break.] Lundy's was like a movie set from *Casablanca* [1942]. There were very tall ceilings, and this tan colored stucco. And they had a raw bar. Filled with antiques. And they had all black waiters. And they had uniforms where they all wore these sort of medium green, turquoise green jackets and sort of like orange pants. I mean these were very strong images in childhood, going to this seafood restaurant which felt like going on set, a movie set.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It sounds like a very [inaudible] fairytale.

MS. SUPERIOR: And fabulous fish. And, you know, we'd visit Manhattan a lot and go to shows. I was taken to—which I guess my mother loved it—was Radio City Music Hall when every show changed. And the first thing I ever thought I wanted to be was a Rockette. [They laugh.] And I was taken to dancing classes and was told I didn't have the right body type. So I very rarely dance to this day because I was told to my face as a little child that I had no rhythm. [Laughs.] My uncle being—he had a tap dancing teacher in Manhattan that he took me to to meet. And the tap dancing teacher said I was not the right type. And a ballet teacher, not the right body type. So we put dancing aside. Then of course in sixth grade I was a teacher's aide to the kindergarten class and helped them line up in the morning. And then I thought I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher.

And the most influential teachers I ever had were my two junior high school teachers, who saw me as an artist. They were the art teachers. Miss Lieberman and Miss Schwartz from Shellbank Junior High School. I went to P.S. 286 in Sheepshead Bay and Shellbank Junior High School. And I was on the school magazine committee and would do drawings, black-and-white drawings, ink drawings. I did a drawing for the cover. And they truly encouraged me, and they insisted that I apply to the New York City Special High School Systems, the High School of Art and Design, the High School of Music and Art. They insisted. And directed me in this path in seventh and eighth grade. Yes, seventh and eighth grade. It was a two-year junior high school.

MS. RIEDEL: And your drawings at the time, were they from life, were they from photos?

MS. SUPERIOR: They were fantasy.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know. But I always loved—I was always looking, voraciously looking at things, looking at magazines. I was always extremely visually-oriented. So I was pulling things from whatever I was seeing into my work. I loved fairytales and folk tales and children's books and all of those illustrations.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So I wound up getting into the High School of Art and Design and the High School of Music and Art.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. SUPERIOR: And had to choose. But it was an easy choice because one was an hour farther down uptown than the other. Art and Design was on 57th Street. Music and Art is on 135th Street and Convent Avenue. And I was coming from Brooklyn. So for the first year I commuted myself on the train to 57th Street and Second Avenue. Got out at 59th and Lexington train station and walked the two blocks to school. And then when I was 13, my parents divorced. And at that time, since I was commuting into Manhattan, we sold our family home and moved into an apartment in Manhattan. And there I lived on 86th Street between Second—336 East 86th Street.

MS. RIEDEL: That's between what, Second and Third?

MS. SUPERIOR: Second and Third. And my life revolved around going up and down Second Avenue. My father lived on 23rd Street and Second. My school was on 57th and Second. And we lived on 86th Street and Second and Third. So I would have to say for me that that was the very, very best place that I could have possibly had my teenage years. I wasn't athletic. I was totally focused on artwork. I had all the museums at my disposal, all the libraries, the museums. I lived a few blocks away from the Met and the Frick. And, you know, Saturdays I would always spend most of my time at the Met. I'd take the train down to Greenwich Village. But I thoroughly took advantage of everything available in Manhattan at that time and wouldn't trade that for anything in the world. And I was a fanatic—what's the word? I was a diehard New Yorker. I did not—I'm in the best place in the world. I'm so lucky. I don't ever want to leave here. I wanted to go to college in Manhattan. And my father insisted that I have a different experience, that I leave the city. So I had to do my radius research—how far could I go with the best reputation so that I could get home on weekends if I wanted to.

MS. RIEDEL: Before we get to college, let's talk a bit about high school, though.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You were focused completely on art. Was it drawing, painting? Were you working in three-dimensional work?

MS. SUPERIOR: It was an incredible, incredible experience. I believe there were four or five periods of art classes each day, with the addition of English or social studies or French; I took five years of French. But it was—it was everything. I think I was an illustration major or a painting major there. But we had everything. We had photography. We had advertising design and drafting. It was a very vocational school. I mean you were ready to get a job in New York when you left there, with some skills for advertising. You came out with a portfolio that was viable and marketable.

MS. RIEDEL: And you would have graduated in what, '70, '69?

MS. SUPERIOR: Sixty-nine. And those were the times — Andy Warhol was down in the factory. Lots of my friends were going down there. I was afraid of the whole situation. Too many scary drugs and things were going on at that time. But a lot of people that I knew would go to his projects and things. Naturally it was a very interesting student body. But it wasn't a community because everyone scattered to the four winds at the end of the day. So I had a very unusual sort of high school experience, where it wasn't the typical situation in a neighborhood school. So maybe on Saturday— Every afternoon after school we'd go to a coffee shop or something, and a group of us would, you know, our particular little group of people, would do that in a café in Manhattan before we went home. And that was our socializing. Maybe we'd get together on a Saturday, meet somewhere. But you know it wasn't a neighborhood situation.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the sort of work you were looking at that was inspiring to you? And did you have any idea what direction you were going to head?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, I was always blown away by the—like the Duccio altar pieces, the Italian religious art and exquisite paintings: the craftsmanship, the older things, the oldest things in the museum I was always attracted to. And the most magically, astounding—the gold and the beauty of the colors and the material and techniques and looking at Lucas Cranach's paintings, adoring him.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you looking at Greek ceramics? Were you look at Italian work? Were you looking at Delft ware, anything along those lines?

MS. SUPERIOR: I always loved that, but I never envisioned that I would have any way of learning those techniques.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: It wasn't available.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So there was no—there were no ceramic classes?

MS. SUPERIOR: There might have been ceramics, but everyone was throwing on the wheel. And it was either stoneware or earthenware.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I had no physical aptitude or interest in the potter's wheel.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So I wasn't drawn into it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I was really, really primarily interested in painting and color.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you doing much figure drawing? Primarily landscapes?

MS. SUPERIOR: No — animals, fantasies, goddesses.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm. Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: But I didn't have a lot of patience. Figure drawing, well, there might have been some figure drawing with people that had clothes on in high school. But I didn't have patience for rendering. I always worked from memory.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. And art was something that was encouraged. Your parents were both supportive.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, absolutely. They were so thrilled that I had found myself at such a young age, that there was no what is she going to do? They didn't have to worry about me. So I really—other than my parents' divorcing and me losing my childhood home—I had a marvelous childhood. And, you know, there were these enormous Sunday dinners at my grandmother's house with all the kids and, you know, and I was there every Sunday. That's so grounding.

MS. RIEDEL: This was in Brooklyn?

MS. SUPERIOR: This was in Eastchester. She lived— We were—I remember in my mind these drives from one end of Brooklyn. Why did we live in Brooklyn? My father's entire family lived in the Bronx and Westchester there —or Eastchester—which was like the country. There were lawns and backyards and land. So we were going to the country.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know it was a long drive. No one ever used a map. Everyone understood all these Cross Bronx [Expressway]—to me the driving in New York was so intimidating. You know we made the trip every week, but it still seemed daunting. And looking—I was just the passenger in the backseat looking, going on the East River Drive, looking at those beautiful penthouses in Sutton Place, and dreaming maybe I'll live there someday. [They laugh.] I had it all planned.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So how did you select—your BFA's from the University of Connecticut.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right, right. I went to Hartford Art School for two years.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah! Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And met Roy at Hartford Art School. And then I took a year off. That's when Roy left Hartford Art School because, well, we got married during that period. And then he took a job at UConn.

MS RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And so I wound up going to UConn as a faculty wife and didn't have to pay the tuition. And that turned out to be a wonderful school. And it was during those two years—I might have been in an undergraduate situation for five years; I think Hartford Art School was a five-year program.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: But I adored it. I always loved school. I, you know, my uncle would say to me, "Are you going to be a professional student?" You know I just adored it, would have kept going and going and going. And have always loved the academic, you know, being around colleges. So the lifestyle of the professor, I adored it. Always

loved being around schools and libraries.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you interested in teaching?

MS. SUPERIOR: No. Well, that's another story that comes on to graduate school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: Where are we?

MS. RIEDEL: We're in Connecticut, but we can also talk about Hartford if you like. If there were specific professors that were influential, classes that were significant, classmates?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, the things that happened at Hartford, that was the beginning of conceptual art. I wanted to make beautiful objects. I was completely into learning how to do things and creating beautiful things. And loved art history and always, you know, my electives—took all the art history I possibly could. At Hartford Art School there was a professor that was a freshman foundation program where you took these courses. And I remember the anti-beauty lectures that were given by Christopher Horton. And I'm sitting in the class and thinking to myself, Uh-oh, maybe I'm in the wrong place. And that's another reason for leaving Hartford Art School. It went extremely, extremely conceptual.

MS. RIEDEL: Roy was talking about that over the last couple of days.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. And the ceramics department there, because part of the freshman foundation program, that was my first experience with ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And people were throwing stoneware on the wheel, which didn't interest me. It was a prerequisite. You had to take all of these different things. And the teacher was making cast potatoes, burying them, and photographing and documenting the whole procedure. And that was his work.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember his name?

MS. SUPERIOR: I think his name was Peter McLean. So that's what—there was nothing about painting on ceramics going on in that department during that one class that I took.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And there was no slab building, there were no pinch pots.

MS. SUPERIOR: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: It was all wheel work.

MS. SUPERIOR: It was all wheel work. So I wasn't drawn to that department. So Roy left Hartford Art School. UConn was a much more—less radical school. There was, nothing pulled me in. If someone were painting, you know, or doing anything like that, I might have been drawn into it. But I was strictly two dimensional. I didn't have a lot of aptitude for three dimensions by nature. You know I was interested in pattern and color and composition and all of those things.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anything contemporary that was intriguing to you? Or you're still firmly rooted more in art history?

MS. SUPERIOR: I was rooted in art history. I mean I'd go to the Whitney sometimes. I mean I loved—well, are we going to say Matisse was contemporary or Picasso? I mean Picasso was still alive when I was a kid. And I remember, imagine, it was so interesting that an artist could be that famous and important. That seemed very relevant to young artists during that time. But it was possible to be a superstar. He was a superstar.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I took full advantage of Manhattan, everything it had to offer. I discovered foreign films, went to the Paris Theater very often and became familiar with lots of Italian realism, Italian realism. And French films. Jean-Paul Belmondo and all of those things. And I was a Francophile at the time. Learning to cook with *Mastering the Art of French Cooking,* with a friend of mine, Denise [Sargent], who was French. And she was the first French person that I'd ever met, so she was very exotic and sophisticated to me. So I thought I was extremely sophisticated as you can get as a teenager. [Laughs.] Being in Manhattan, you know, being part of all these interesting scenes but not getting into trouble. I was a scaredy-cat. [Laughs.] So I didn't get into any trouble. And I was afraid my mother would kill me. So it was easier just to stay back than deal with my mother's

embarrassing me or showing up somewhere. Embarrassing me or, you know, whatever. It wasn't worth it. So I just observed from the periphery. Did anything bad, she was such a deterrent.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: I didn't want to deal with it, which kept me in a certain line. I had some fear of my parents and getting in trouble and her yelling at me in public and embarrassing me in some way. But it kept me very—

MS. RIEDEL: Focused.

MS. SUPERIOR: Very focused.

MS. RIEDEL: Walking a straight line.

MS. SUPERIOR: And out of trouble.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What was intriguing to you in college? You took your first print class there?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, at UConn there was a larger painting department, and there was an excellent printmaking department. And there I discovered printmaking and etching in particular. I loved that process. And I loved the multiplicity. Not being precious about a drawing. Being able to make five and experiment with coloring them. And it wasn't this precious thing that a painting or a drawing is.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: I just loved it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MS. SUPERIOR: So I think my personal voice really developed during those two years in the etching department.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it the ability to experiment with multiples that really allowed that?

MS. SUPERIOR: I don't know. I took a lot of art history.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: At UConn. And I took a course in the history of decorative arts and the history of photography. This was an enormous school with 93 buildings at the time, UConn in Storrs. It's a tremendous school with great libraries and museums. Hartford Art School's a very small school—was at that time. This was an enormous university with fabulous varied art history. I'd taken an Egyptology class and it boing! And a lot of these etchings, the pattern, the composition, the ironclad compositions in Egyptology hooked me. And it was the art history, the combination of the intense art history and pulling my imagery and finding that I enjoyed animals and fantasy, I started these various series of etchings and hand colored them with watercolor. And I finally felt that things were starting to come together for me. And I was relieved and thrilled that it happened before I left school. Because it's so easy to drift off.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: The attrition rate of kids that go to art school and wind up not following through with a career is enormous. It's a very difficult thing to do. But having been married to an artist and a professor, I always had a community of artists around me, and that reinforces that that is what you're going to do and what you're going to be. But it's so easy to fall off because it's really hard.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember which pieces or which series it was in college that signified to you that you had found your voice?

MS. SUPERIOR: This group of etchings.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: These Egyptological etchings. There was also a fabulous teacher there whose name will come to me at some point [John Kohler]. But there was a special course in handmade papermaking. And I discovered the beauty of paper in printmaking because they're all concerned about these papers. And this seemed, you know, just learning this and appreciating paper for the first time. We'd experiment putting things in paper. And I was also sewing during that time. Let's say the year that I was out of school, I did a lot of sewing and soft sculpture.

And, you know, the soft sculptors: Claes Oldenburg, his soft vinyl piece of cake or whatever. It was just really a happening thing at the time, and I gravitated to it. So it was sort of a first three-dimensional thing that I gravitated to was soft sculpture, fabric, and selected, naturally shopping, like found materials, going to fabric stores or antique shops and finding beautiful materials, beautiful velvets and gold threads and beautiful linen and satin. And I made this—yes, this was probably in between the two art schools — made this soft white satin swan with symbols on it. I picked up this concept of symbols and hieroglyphics from Egyptology. And this almost life-size swan in white satin with quilted wings and little hieroglyphs, stories and symbols, on the bird about clouds and different weather conditions flying around. Baby swans attached to its back. Fabric with little images of birds. You know just very imaginative—

MS. RIEDEL: So you were developing your own symbolic language specific to a particular piece. Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Then one of the many jobs that I had around Hartford, one of them was in the display department of G. Fox, which is *the* big department store in Hartford, and where artists worked. There weren't that many options or opportunities in Hartford other than the G. Fox display department. And I built props. I was a fashion coordinator there, and I, you know, built some of these—this was probably built for a window around Thanksgiving time. Here's a soft turkey.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So I'm just trying to get the chronology right. You were Hartford for two years in school. Took a year off in Hartford.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then relocated to Connecticut.

MS. SUPERIOR: No, no, no. Hartford—we lived in the same place.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: In Collinsville. Storrs is just 45 minutes up the road from Hartford.

MS. RIEDEL: So you just commuted.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. You know we used to be 20 minutes from Hartford Art School. Now I was 45 minutes on the highway to Storrs.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: But I did a few art-related jobs in that year and when I graduated from Storrs. There was, I think, a five-year period after graduating that I did a lot of art-related jobs and worked at Fox's. I'm getting a little confused. But did sewing and soft sculpture during that time. When I didn't have access to a printmaking studio at all, I needed to be doing something. So I was teaching myself to cook, I was playing house, I was enjoying decorating and painting walls purple. And what people did in those days. [They laugh.] Yes. This might have been something—this was a kind of cuckoo piece of soft sculpture with pockets and things, little pillow things that attached. And just exactly where things were coming from I wasn't really sure.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting because it's really a little environment that you've created here, rather than a swan or a turkey.

MS. SUPERIOR: And then I would do an aquatint of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Did these pieces have titles? Dating from mid-'70s?

MS. SUPERIOR: I don't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I don't remember. Then the animal came in, and there's still sewing up there. That's another thing that I was very inspired by at that time are needlework, samplers especially, their composition; I always loved advertising and text. And at the High School of Art and Design, I did take a course in typography and lettering.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm! [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And I remember writing with a chisel-point pencil the word "hemp" a hundred times. [Laughs.] One of those assignments that we had with lettering. And I always liked it. I don't have a calligraphic hand. I don't have a great aptitude for it. But I've always loved type and text and incorporating it visually. It was always

very stimulating to me. I always loved good graphics and packaging. You know beautiful tin cans. And the composition and the text together. I'm always attracted to that visually and always attracted to art with text in it, like the illuminated manuscripts, Persian miniatures. I'm looking at—I loved Persian miniatures, the jewel-like beauty. Always beautiful art. And it was a time for no beauty. I mean one of the gallery shows at Hartford Art School was some kind of chickens, dead chickens or something. Some crap on the floor. [Laughs.] It was highly sophisticated, but it wasn't particularly what I needed. But I'm a live-and-let-live person. I mean I can get involved with the idea and think that's interesting. But it doesn't hold me. But I love artists. I love whatever any artist is doing. Or I'm interested in what they're doing. Even if it's not my thing, I respect everyone. As opposed to some artists that need to categorize and create a hierarchy.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it difficult being a student during that time? Did you feel there was space for the sorts of things you were interested in?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, not at Hartford Art school during those years.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about Connecticut?

MS. SUPERIOR: Totally different. It was a much better fit.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know I'm sure there were those kinds of—it wasn't that cutting edge an art school as Hartford Art School was. So there was more of a traditional, a much larger choice of courses and faculty. And a much bigger painting and printmaking department. And you did talk about traditional painting methods and so forth. And it was a better fit.

MS. RIEDEL: So as early as undergraduate, you really had begun to develop a voice, a caste of characters —

MS. SUPERIOR: Here. I did this—this is art history. Rembrandt and me; I did this series of etchings. Here's Rembrandt and me on a camel in Egypt, 1975.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Yes. You certainly can see the influence of the hieroglyphics and the Egyptian artwork.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know and the variety of printing things on different papers.

MS. RIEDEL: Papers, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And different ink wipings. All of these things were—the process, I adored the etching process. And then I hand colored all of these things. So the swan was made way back. There's the dead swan. And you know it's like the tomb.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: And all the things that the swan might need to take with it to its afterlife and a comfortable surrounding with other friends and swans and a beautiful pond and water lilies and trees.

MS. RIEDEL: That's very interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: This was an invitation to some exhibition. And, you know, like the real fantasy of tables and animals and pottery and animals. The goddess Maat.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, Maat.

MS. SUPERIOR: Maat.

MS. RIEDEL: So you're really beginning to insert your sense—a sense of narrative and a cast of characters into traditional Egyptian formats. And then it's a fusion. And there's a strong sense of humor from the start.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And fish appear.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, Roy was a fisherman, a fly fisherman, from the beginning.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And he brought—he has all kinds of literature about the mysterious and the elusive and intelligent fish. And, you know, it got me thinking of underwater and all that's there. And all this respect for the

fish. You know he mainly does catch and release. And just being out in this beautiful environment is enough for him. It's his exercise, it's his religion, it's his, you know, his communing with nature. And I picked up on some if it and found that the fish were interesting imagery.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And liked anthropomorphizing animals, too. And having them talk. I mean, you know, this is all--who exactly knows where this is coming from.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's the [inaudible].

MS. SUPERIOR: I loved word bubbles. I loved Hogarth. And I loved that when I saw—which I probably looked at during this time. Because there was probably a course about the history of printmaking. And there I discovered Rembrandt's prints, Dürer's prints, the Japanese prints, which I adore, the flatness, the, you know, there was always a historic course that went with this that was a huge impact on me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Did you grow up with the *New Yorker*?

MS. SUPERIOR: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I grew up with the *New York Times*. But I didn't grow up—there wasn't a lot of literature around.

MS. RIEDEL: There must have been those fabulous illustrations, though, in *The New York Times* at this time as well.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, yes. I loved the illustrators. I always—I have clippings, you know. I most recently have loved Henrik Drescher. I love Roz Chast. I adore Saul Steinberg and feel very kindred to him as a New Yorker.

[END OF DISC 1]

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, we were saying over breakfast that this was—there was very much of an attitude that was anti-beauty. It was very much focused on conceptual art. But that in the early seventies you made your first trip to the Rhinebeck craft fair, one of the first ACC [American Craft Council] shows. And that that was an extraordinary experience for you. You were exposed to all sorts of new work. Would you describe that experience and what it was like, those fairs?

MS. SUPERIOR: It was so overwhelmingly exciting to us to see artists making beautiful objects and selling them themselves. The caliber of the quality of the work was extraordinary. Albert Paley was there with his jewelry sculptures which—these are museum pieces. You know we'd visited the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York which was in a very small building originally. And they had changing shows. And Paul Smith was the director at the time. And we were friends with Tommy Simpson from Hartford Art School. He was teaching at Hartford when Roy was teaching at Hartford. He knew a lot about this world. And we probably went to Rhinebeck with him and discovered the Fairtree Gallery with him and went to the Crafts Museum with him.

MS. RIEDEL: And the Fairtree Gallery was in Manhattan.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. It was in Manhattan. And I'm trying to remember the woman's name that ran it, but it'll come to me.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did they show? Did they show craft as well?

MS. SUPERIOR: At the Fairtree Gallery?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. They sold the kind of things that were being shown at Rhinebeck: handmade blown glasses. This just blew us away. I mean we'd seen ancient Roman and Dutch blown glass at the MET, in museums. But for contemporaries, people in their twenties, making these exquisite handmade one-of-a-kind functional things to use and live with was mind blowing. This was a whole option. I wanted these things. I wanted to own and drink out of this very unique cup. I wanted to eat with handmade plates. It just blew everything off the charts in terms of a living visual style of things that I wanted to surround myself with. And at the time I was doing soft sculpture and thought I'd like to be part of this. But I couldn't, as of that moment, figure out how I could fit in. But I liked this optional job as opposed to working at art-related jobs which I did do. Tried so many different things after art school. But this was going to be—I was just going to try to figure how to make that a lifestyle.

And we went each year that we could. And it was just always a marvelous experience. And I saw Lydia Buzio's work, who was later represented by Garth Clark. And I managed to purchase one of her beautiful little cups. And Tommy [Simpson] bought me, as a gift, one of Laura Wilensky's little figurative spoon sculptures. And that was a mind-bogglingly exciting little piece of porcelain that had a big influence on me. I loved her work. I love the humor in it. I love the fact that it's porcelain. And someone making and selling these personal, marvelous little objects. It was just a very exciting time to think that one could make wonderful things and sell them themselves or through galleries. Because coming from the fine arts background, I'd thought about how difficult it might be to find a gallery being a painter or a sculptor. That's a daunting thing to figure out, how to contact a gallery and be rejected. This idea that you are there, and people come to you if they're interested, saves so much rejection and so much time in finding people that are like-minded or interested in your work. It is a fabulous way to begin a career.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And this presented itself just at the time that I needed to figure out how to begin a career. So the timing for me was ideal.

MS. RIEDEL: Did seeing Laura Wilensky's work and seeing these options at Rhinebeck influence you in the direction of ceramics? You still hadn't started graduate school, correct?

MS. SUPERIOR: I still—no. I still had not discovered how I would get connected to ceramics. I always gravitated to the decorator, to the painter in ceramics. Previously you know—There's always what's—it's not derogatory—but we call it brown pottery. The brown pottery, which is the whole Hamada tradition. And the Midwestern tradition of Byron Temple. And this functional, marvelous functional earthy pottery. And that was happening, and, you know, blossoming in America. And I think because of the conceptual intellectual angle in art schools in the seventies that a lot of those artists that wanted to make objects gravitated to this craft world. That's why I think the crafts world was so rich in the seventies, because the art schools were extremely intellectual. And lots of my friends in the field went to—had straightforward, fine art, classical training and entered into the craft world, making objects and selling them.

MS. RIEDEL: That seemed a part of the field and the continuum, the art-craft continuum that seemed a place where people who were interested in making beautiful objects could find success.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And a community, it sounds like, who supported that.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. The whole community, it was mind-boggling. And then the support in ceramics. I'm not even at ceramics yet. But the magazine publications that support that field, *Ceramics Monthly,* the *American Craft Magazine;* there were others at the time that have since folded. *Studio Potter* is still alive. There was, you know, there's *Ceramic Art and Perception*, *Craft Arts International* magazine from Britain. Just a lot of magazines that document the field and show what people are doing, what's happening, is a real support to the field. And ceramics particularly has a great community maybe because there's so much technical information to share: recipes, methods. It's a lot like cooking, too. I belong to this Asparagus Valley Potters' Guild which has 35, 40 people. And we have these potluck dinners and marvelous pottery and discuss whatever the agenda might be. But potters seem to like to cook. There seems to be an affinity between clay recipes and food recipes. But it is a marvelous community and welcoming. Just a wonderful, wonderful way to have entered the world of selling one's own artwork.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And if it didn't exist at that time, I'm not sure—well, there's no point in going there. But it was a gift.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So did you go back to graduate school with the idea of studying ceramics?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, somewhere along the line, after I graduated from the University of Connecticut, there was a five-year period where I did art-related-type jobs in the Hartford area. One was spending a year or two restoring this Stein & Goldstein Carousel in Bushnell Park in Hartford which is still in a beautiful pavilion today. Painting those animals—restoring the animals, the wooden carvings, and painting them. I worked in an advertising agency briefly. I worked in Farmington, Connecticut, painting needlepoint canvases. There was a real shortage of art-related jobs in Hartford, Connecticut. I was always interested in moving back to the city, but that wasn't going to happen.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were not— Just a quick— You had no interest in following an academic profession and

teaching?

MS. SUPERIOR: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a reason for that? Because you said you loved the academic world.

MS. SUPERIOR: I'm too selfish for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm. You wanted to focus on the work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I'm not interested in anyone else's work as much as I am my own. I'm too selfish for it. And I never loved public speaking and drawing that much attention to myself. But that's another story that we'll get to because I wound up having a degree in art education.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: For my father's sake. It made him feel comfortable if I had a teaching certificate. So as often the case is, one says you'll always have teaching to fall back on if anything. So I did that for my father's sake. And no education is a waste of time. But there were quite—the history of education is pretty dull stuff. But the psychology courses, of course. So I've had my little nibblings with education. And I did a year of student teaching six months in an elementary school and six months in a junior high school. And I love small children's artwork. But teaching small children is a completely different—it's all about, you know, classroom management. It really doesn't have that much to do with art. I mean you're— It's a crazy, so underappreciated profession. You have a 45-minute class; you have seven a day. You're giving them the little story. They're working briefly, and then they're cleaning up most of the time. Controlling children. It's more about child psychology than it is about teaching art. But I love the children's work. And then in junior high school they just want straight accurate representation. All that fantasy is gone. If you can't draw like Michelangelo, they're not interested. They're not going to pay attention to you. I did some student teaching and tried to get them interested in some art historical thing to work on this project. And I had turned my back, I'd looked at the blackboard or something. And some kid had thrown a paper airplane at me. And I said, "There's no way I'm going to do this." I don't have a rapport—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: —with the kids. And I can't do this. It's just—it's much more about psychology than it is about art. I'd rather design anything, do anything, be making things than teaching others. It just didn't work.

MS. RIEDEL: So something interesting happened in the late seventies. You mentioned an exhibition that you submitted a soft sculpture to. Where Paul Smith was the juror.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right, right. I was doing some soft sculpture at the time after I graduated. And I made this soft white satin swan.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Which seemed to come out of those early Egyptologically-themed etchings that I did during my last year of undergraduate school at UConn. So I continued on with that imagery of the birds and the fantasy animals; and the swan being the most beautiful bird, I gravitated to it as an image. And I entered this show—it's on the resume.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's at the bottom. Hartford Civic and something. Here. Hartford Civic and Arts Festival in Hartford, Connecticut, 1977.

MS. SUPERIOR: Nineteen seventy-seven, and I won a prize. I won the top prize, and it was a show that encompassed all media: painting, sculpture, photography in this sort swan. And Paul Smith gave me the award, and he was the director of the Contemporary Craft Museum. So I was very encouraged. It was a great little booster shot for a new career. And then Roy got the job at Hampshire College. So I wasn't sure what I was going to be doing in Amherst in the country going farther north, and I never thought I'd leave Manhattan. So we did move to Williamsburg, Massachusetts, which is maybe 15 minutes from Amherst where Hampshire was. And I was looking at the local newspaper very carefully when I first moved up. And I saw this ad for hand building with porcelain, a six-week course. So I said, I'll take that course.

And it was at a local potter who had been to Alfred. She was my age. She was from New York, Jane Hillman. She called her business White Dog Pottery. And she had a white lab named Applesauce. And I saw what she was doing. And it was the first time that I made contact with someone that was painting on white porcelain. And it just knocked me over. I fell completely in love with porcelain. I'd seen Laura Wilensky's work. I'd seen Lydia Buzio. I'd seen, by this time, probably Ann Kraus's work. Garth Clark had opened his gallery in Manhattan, and Ann Kraus was one of my heroes—heroines. And I just fell head over heels in love with porcelain and ceramic

history. And said, okay, I know what I'm going to do up here. I'm going to apply to the University of Massachusetts because it was the only one of the five colleges that had a ceramic department.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I will go back to school and get a master's degree in ceramics. And because I had the BFA, I was able to focus on any studio courses. I had all my prerequisites and requirements. So I was able to take 30 credits of ceramics exclusively. So I got a basic training.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was teaching there at the time?

MS. SUPERIOR: Susan Parks and Paul Berube. And I came in with a vision. I talked my way out of having to go through ceramics maybe one and maybe two, which was wheel throwing. I said I do not want to work on the wheel. I do not want to paint in the round. It's too limiting. It determines too many things. It's a different kind of experience. I don't want to do it. And they let me bypass it. You know looking back on the whole thing, it probably wouldn't have hurt me. But I don't know. Maybe I should have learned. But anyway, I don't know. But I started exclusively working with Grolleg porcelain which is the whitest and the most beautiful. It's English china clay and a Cornwall stone glaze. So it's literally like a little piece of England. Porcelain is mined, which is white clay which matures at a very high temperature which is glass temperature of 2400 degrees. That's why there's some movement and warping and melting because it literally is fusing. And is so vitreous that it moves. And at school they had gas-fired kilns; they're atmospheric kilns, and they produce specific, to my mind, exquisite effects.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I hooked myself onto that reduction porcelain with the oxides, with copper.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oxide.

MS. RIEDEL: To go for the red.

MS. SUPERIOR: To go for the red, to go for the metallic, to go for the blue glassy clay, as opposed to the electric kiln which the clay would be, as I call it, pasty and yellow. I was fixated on this gas-fired beauty of this porcelain, and I was so amazed that I had access to it. That I could actually do this and connect way back to the beginnings of porcelain and the whole great story of China and the Europeans trying to imitate the Chinese porcelain for 300 years before Bottger discovered porcelain, before Meissen, the first European. Just the whole history of porcelain and all these imitations, all the tin-glazed earthenware, copies of Chinese porcelain. The whole story of porcelain is so wonderful. And my first series of pieces had to do with the history of porcelain and the name of porcelain. And, you know, I was just so—I could just pinch myself I was so excited to have been able to connect to this material and have this limitless shaped canvases to tell stories with and on, and be able to do really precise paintings and have it be crystal clear. And you know, I was just so happy that I had found my material. And I tried many.

So I went back to school. And then Roy taught at Hampshire. And one of his students was Leslie Ferrin. And we got to know one another. I was about 24 at this time, and she was about 17 or 18. And she was graduating from Hampshire College with an art focus and a ceramic focus. And she was looking for a studio after graduating school, and she scouted around Northampton. And Thorne's Market in Northampton had just begun. Brinkley and Maisie Thorne purchased this old McCallum's department store, three- or four-story wonderful building and renovated it. And it's now 20 shops and restaurants. It's like a little mini-mall. And it's an incubator in Northampton. It's a very important—they sort of singlehandedly brought this town together by starting this incubator business, building for new businesses to try to be in business. And they moved to the main street. So Thornes really created Northampton has to what it is today.

MS. RIEDEL: And was it intended to be small businesses? Was it intended to be craft studios? What was the intent for the building?

MS. SUPERIOR: The whole building was intended to be small businesses and restaurants. But Brinkley Thorne had a vision, and he wanted the ground level of the building to be what he called a craft market, where there were working craftspeople that had a little outlet to sell their work. So Leslie decided to take this space and asked me to join her. One of the reasons she needed some partners, and she asked her old friend Barbara Walsh who she'd met at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester in New York to come up and join us up here because we needed—the first studio out of school came with a store. And someone had to man the hours of the store six days a week. And one person couldn't do it. So there were three of us that moved into this space, had our little work tables, made our little pinch pots. And it was called Pinch Pottery because that is what Barbara did and

Leslie did. They made pinch pots, which is a particular building method in ceramics. And they just named the store Pinch Pottery.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did this store start?

MS. SUPERIOR: Nineteen seventy-nine.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you had a studio. You had kilns—electric kilns?

MS. SUPERIOR: An electric kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: An electric kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that square with your love of the gas kiln and the effect on the porcelain?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, that had to change— No, no, no. I always fired in a gas kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: We had an electric kiln there for bisque firing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: But there was, you know, another connection with a local potter, and we used to bring our things. He would allow us to rent his kiln. Barbara and I worked with the gas kiln. She did stoneware with spodumene glazes, very organic forms. Functional objects made with very organic forms. Pumpkin-like teapots and— So we boxed our work up and fired it at a local potter's kiln. And then eventually we needed more space in the studio. And once again, Leslie Ferrin found us a studio which was East Street Clay Studio in Hadley, where I still work today. And we were able to build our own gas kiln on that property.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So how long were you at the Thorne's Market?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, we probably worked there for three or four years.

MS. RIEDEL: And did Pinch Pottery remain there after you moved to the other studio?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. We just had to get our studios out of there because we needed more space. But I think we left the guise of one table, and we did some tiny bit of work when we were there. But we needed the sales space.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And we didn't have enough studio space there.

MS. RIEDEL: So would you and Leslie and Barbara work during the day? The public would come through and watch what you were doing?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then somebody would get up from whatever they were doing to make sales.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Really unusual.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. And there was a weaver, Kin Cullen Weaving. And Garth Shepp who was Archie Shepp's wife, the marvelous saxophone jazz musician who taught at the university. And Holly Ghazey. They were the three partners in the weaving studio, and they taught classes, and we taught some classes in pottery, hand building with pottery for children. And there was a stained glass person, and there was a woodworker. And then gradually the stained glass person moved to Cape Cod. We expanded the pottery area, and it was just the weaving and the pottery, in the end, for a number of years. And then a space became available, I think it was 1987, on Main Street in Northampton. And they were going to be doing a huge construction project building a

new parking lot behind our place in Thorne's. So Leslie, the brilliant businesswoman, decided we cannot stay here for three years with this parking lot construction. And the space opened on Main Street, so we moved up to Main Street.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And that was the first time also that we took out a business loan to renovate this space. And we borrowed like $30,000. But we'd had this business for a decade and never borrowed a penny. We just allowed it to grow and hold its own. So it was a very slow gradual evolution for this business.

MS. RIEDEL: At Pinch Pottery, did you only sell the work of the three of you? Or were there other artists represented as well?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, Leslie and Barbara had many, many, many friends, pottery friends. So we were able to fill a store with all of our friends' work. There could have been 30 potters' work on consignment. That's how we were able to do it. All of our friends gave us their work. So we could have a store without having to buy it, but the inventory.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they had representation for their work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. So we were all kind of beginning at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you—were you clear from the start that the work was going to be primarily sculptural? Did you toy with the idea of functional work?

MS. SUPERIOR: I did it all. I mean starting—just simply everything. I loved the idea of functional work just to live and handle that work. But I made everything, from jewelry, pins, beads, tiles, and I made relief sculptures.

MS. RIEDEL: But always porcelain.

MS. SUPERIOR: Always porcelain.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And early on the sculptural forms had a lot to do with historical forms.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. Absolutely. That was one of my themes was tributes from the beginning. And the cocoa pot form, for instance, is a classical cocoa pot form. And I would just play with the scale, enlarge the scale, flatten the object out. I started making paper patterns and making two-sided objects. So it was very clean that there was one painting on one side, another painting on the other. And it was, you know, it had its termination point. It wasn't something in the round, which is a whole other kind of decorating assignment. Assignment. I still think of myself in school. I very often make the Freudian slip of saying, "I'm going to school," when I'm going to the studio.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: So I am ever in school. I'm a lifetime student. And take workshops, one a year, or in some other area. Even in jewelry-making I'm starting to take some metal-working workshops. I like gold. I might like, want to make some gold jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: So the forms were based on classical forms from Greek ceramics. We had amphora vases. Anything else? Was the primary emphasis Greek at the beginning?

MS. SUPERIOR: What's the question?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, let's describe the evolution of pinch pottery. Who had what responsibilities? Why you eventually you were forced to move the studio out of the store?

MS. SUPERIOR: Leslie decides everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [They laugh.] Leslie owns the gallery, so I guess that makes sense.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, she found, you know, she didn't like the isolation of the studio. Well, are we going to talk—

MS. RIEDEL: We are.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, we are.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, oh. [Laughs.] We used to call her at the studio: Leslie Ferrin, the woman, the phone. She always had the telephone on her ear. She'd be pinching her pots, and she was on the phone. She's Miss Social. Didn't like the isolation of the studio. Preferred the networking and the contacting artists and working on the promotion, working on everything and contacting—making contacts with everyone in the field that she could: the writers, the museum people, everyone. And she found that her strength was really being a dealer.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: And at some point she decided to focus on that 100 percent. And we—it's a big space. And originally we were seven potters that shared this space of East Street Clay Studio, 2500 square feet.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And now it's just two of us, Donna McGee and myself, that are—she works with earthenware, functional painted earthenware. Works on the wheel. And I have— So we have big studios. And the evolution of Pinch Pottery, I'm not sure where exactly we left off here. But it was our first studio out of school that came with a store, was attached to—was part of it; it was part of one large space. And we were able to fill the store because there are so many local artists living in this area. And we were able to, as Leslie would probably contact them, they would give us their work on consignment. So we could fill a store without having to purchase the inventory. So it was a very gentle, easy way to begin a business.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Which didn't take any personal investment other than our time. And our jobs were delegated. Leslie ran the gallery. Barbara did the bookkeeping. We all had store hours. And my job were the graphics and the visuals: coming up with a business card, coming up with all of the invitations to shows. Leslie had the first teapot show, tea party show that really probably ever took place in the United States. And now every other craft gallery in the country had picked up on teapot shows. But Leslie's—I believe ours was the first.

MS. RIEDEL: And what year would that have been? Here we go "Fourth Annual Teapot."

MS. SUPERIOR: "Fourth Annual Teapot." This might have been the first one.

MS. RIEDEL: And what year would this have been, do you have any idea? Early eighties must be.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Early eighties. Because we opened the store in 1979.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know we did dinnerware shows and teapots shows and earthenware shows and cast ceramic shows, where Leslie would start inviting artists from all over the United States to be part of these shows. So it wasn't just our local community. It was the national ceramic community. And Leslie decided that eventually, as things grew and developed, that we would start advertising in national magazines, *Ceramics Monthly* and *American Craft* magazine. And these graphics were very unique and personal. They're rapidograph black-and white drawings. So they stood out graphically in these magazines. And gave a definite, recognizable identity to this business right from the beginning.

MS. RIEDEL: And was it strictly functional ceramics? Was there sculptural work as well?

MS. SUPERIOR: It was pretty much functional at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: At that time, yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: I mean I did very early on do relief sculptures, little vignettes, little scenes, little interiors, or picnic food, miniature plates. I was always interested in the miniature, food, and miniature ceramics. And made pieces that hung on the wall decoratively that weren't—I'm trying to think of, you know, what other. It was mostly functional work except for these relief pieces. And gradually I started to get some attention for my work. And there was an ad — I had applied. At the beginning of anyone's career you start by applying to a lot of national exhibitions. I think I applied to the NCECA national show. And it was at the Everson Museum in New York, and I did get into the show. And then *Ceramics Monthly* did a review of the show, "Northeast Clay." And there's a big picture of one of my platters, to my surprise, in that issue of *Ceramics Monthly.*

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Or a teapot on a platter.

MS. SUPERIOR: So people started to notice my work. I didn't seek it out particularly. But people in the ceramic community started noticing my work and publishing images in the ceramic publications. And then as time went on, I wound up getting a lot of publicity and press more in the interior design world. And they'd be featuring my work in homes. You know a platter of mine in someone's home. Creative ideas for living. I did some tiles. Or they'd put like in the "Currents" section on the Thursday *New York Times*, just some hot new thing. I was in that "Currents" section. And in all these shelter magazines, you know, *Metropolitan Home*. This is November 1988. They did a spread with handmade American objects in it, which was novel at the time. But these shelter magazines started picking up on this idea as an optional thing to encourage people to support. And they could decorate their homes with these objects.

MS. RIEDEL: There seem to be multiple references to folk art in the work and pattern is extraordinarily important. Do you remember what inspired that focus?

MS. SUPERIOR: Moving up to the country. Having been a diehard New Yorker, I find myself living in an area where there are farms, and I love animals and love cows. When I drive through the country. Yes, I was just extremely inspired by the local New England landscape. I'd really never seen, having been a New Yorker and a city boroughs person, American vernacular architecture. And the power of the simplicity and symmetry of the classic New England colonial house, which I believe was very originally arrived from Palladio, and, you know, Greek and Roman themes. And I became fixated on that icon and that archetype as a symbol for the house and garden. And for years I worked on a series called "House and Garden." And it was when I was beginning my own home and thinking about, you know, the country life and the beauty of this bucolic area to be in and live in. And I embraced all things. We discovered the Shakers at this time. We were in the country. We were going to antique shops. We were going to antique shows. I got very interested in Americana.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: In all areas.

MS. RIEDEL: So the history of American art as you were experiencing it in the immediate surroundings.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. Right. Which was totally new to me, having been a city person exclusively. And I love this part of the country best because it's the most historical. So we're always visiting house museums, Historic Deerfield is right here. You know this community of homes from the 1700's. It's just a beautiful historic—and each home, it's maybe three or four blocks of these historic houses that are impeccably restored, and they're each a museum. And you can go there and observe how people lived during these times. All the beautiful decorative objects that they had. It's connected to Deerfield Academy which is a wonderful school.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm.

MS. SUPERIOR: So moving up here, we were enmeshed, entrenched in Americana.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Which was relatively new for you.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: You were very interested in European history and Egyptian history.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right, right.

MS. RIEDEL: History of porcelain, but you know.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. So that's where I would say that folk art influence came in through Americana and loving it.

MS. RIEDEL: Meanwhile, Pinch Pottery was thriving.

MS. SUPERIOR: Pinch Pottery was thriving and developing a real national presence. And Leslie was, you know, doing everything, and everyone was getting to know who she was. And her career was developing. And my responsibility, I don't know if we mentioned this, was to take on the graphics.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. We did mention that.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, we mentioned that. Okay. So that was my contribution to the partnership.

MS. RIEDEL: And you said also that right about this time, your first significant series developed.

MS. SUPERIOR: My first significant series about the history of ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: I have to find those pictures.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [Audio break.] Sorry, you were saying that 1981 was the first craft show.

MS. SUPERIOR: I applied to the Philadelphia Craft Show, and I got into it. And from what I'd heard, that was pretty amazing at the time to get into that show. I didn't have a booth. I had—there were three walls. This is a ten-by-ten space. For the back wall I borrowed Leslie Ferrin's accordion shelves, which she displayed her work on from time to time and we had in Pinch Pottery. One wall I put quilt on the wall, hanging it on the person's booth that was next to me. And on the third wall we had a set of very funky milk painted red shelves with a groove in it that were like plate racks. So I had plates on these shelves.

So I go to this magnificent Memorial Hall in Philadelphia which was like a magnificent old arboretum glass building with a glass dome, marble floors. Magnificent location! And I'm terrified because I'm hearing people drilling and putting up sheetrock walls, and putting together very, very serious booths. Like putting galleries together. And I'm thinking. And Roy was teaching—I'm not sure where at this time—and he couldn't be there. And my father drove me down to the show. So this was quite something. This was a great experience for the both of us. So we set up one day. The next day is opening night, and they gave away prizes, first, second, third prize and various other prizes. So my father walks around the show. So he says, "Well, your work isn't the worst here. But it's not the best." Or whatever. And they're announcing these awards at the show. And I wind up winning, I think, third prize for this no booth, and I was so thrilled that my father happened to be there. It meant so much to me. He was ill. My father passed away the next year from pancreatic cancer very, very rapidly. So it meant so much to me that I went to this beautiful show and came back with cash, buckets of cash, in my purse. He was thrilled. It practically sold out.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was your first fair.

MS. SUPERIOR: That was my first fair, which is, at the time, one of the best craft fairs in the United States. And the people were so beautiful; the craftspeople were so beautiful. The attending public was so beautiful. I did the Philadelphia Craft Show and the Washington Smithsonian Craft Show for 15 years. And at that time really important museum people, magazine people, writers—I met all of these people at the shows at that time. So it was just an incredible way to begin a career with really not having to do anything. Everybody coming to you if they liked it or didn't like it. So subsequent to that, I found myself published in a lot of magazines at the time, with just, you know, a photo blurb that this is happening. Mara Superior. *HG*, *Bon Appetit* magazine with fish platters. *Home Magazine* I was in several times. I did someone's tiles. Actually the woman that currently owns the Waterworks factory, you know, bath company, I did her tiles. Barbara Something-or-other. And that was on the cover of a magazine. So I got a lot of coverage. So that was the launching of my career.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you routinely accept commissions?

MS. SUPERIOR: Not too frequently for boring technical reasons about the unpredictability of the kiln. I couldn't, with the kind of atmospheric kiln that I used, I can't predict that it will come out exactly the same way. And I was afraid of people becoming disappointed. And my work is very time-consuming. So inevitably, if I would take an order, because I did go to one wholesale show which was kind of a joke—I didn't know what I was doing. But I took orders, and I wasn't able to fulfill them. And out of let's say 20 orders from 20 different stores, I wound up just maintaining one store on Nantucket. And that was my own—it was for Nantucket Looms. And that was the only other place that I sold my work aside from Pinch Pottery. And then I participated in group exhibitions around the country because that's what you do. When you're starting a career, you look at the back section of *Ceramics Monthly* magazine and see what exhibitions you can apply to. And that's another way of making yourself known in the field nationally as exhibiting in these juried shows. Then I'd be invited to shows. I was in the NCECA show a few times.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you join NCECA. Did you go to those conferences?

MS. SUPERIOR: I went to some of the conferences when they were on the East Coast, I'd have to say. I went to Philadelphia; that was fabulous. I went to Rochester. But I can't say I traveled far for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that community important to you?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, not directly in terms of the ceramic academic community. I mean I was familiar with the teachers' work. Andrea Gill was a big inspiration to me at the time. I loved her work. But I knew that I would not be veering toward an academic career.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: I did have credentials. But it didn't interest me. And I didn't— And the thought of being responsible for a ceramics department is awesome and daunting. And I certainly wouldn't want that job. You know to be responsible for glaze rooms. I'm sure big schools have technicians. But anyway, I never thought that I had that much to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: And NCECA had more of an educational focus, more of a university or college focus.

MS. SUPERIOR: For the conference itself. Although, you know, the demonstrations are fabulous. All the peripheral shows are fabulous. That's another part of the incredible clay community. It's just such an embracing field. And it's not difficult to become a known quantity in ceramics because there are so many publications. Inevitably, if the work is reasonably good, you'll be discovered. As opposed to being a painter or sculptor. I mean it's a huge world that's you're a needle in a haystack. Ceramics happened to be a wonderfully small field to enter and thrive in. So I feel very blessed that that wound up being my medium. I tried many, many media. But it was fortunate that ceramics wound up being the one that I stuck with.

MS. RIEDEL: And also very early on you had, as you mentioned, extraordinary exposure through Pinch Pottery and then through these fairs, which were very well attended not only by the public but by curators looking for artists' work or writers.

MS. SUPERIOR: Magazine people.

MS. RIEDEL: As you said, magazine people. So it was—

MS. SUPERIOR: It was a wonderful time. It was the golden age of craft shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

MS. SUPERIOR: Things have changed somehow. I mean I haven't been at craft shows for 15 years. So I'm out of it. I mean I visit them from time to time as a buyer and a friend and a looker. It's hard for me to walk down an aisle. It takes me a long time to get through a craft show because I know a lot of people. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: So it would be fair to say that you exhibited at craft fairs from '80, '81 through '95. And what sort of changes did you see in the fairs over that period of time?

MS. SUPERIOR: During the 15 years that I went?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, in relation to changes, in relation to—there were always those two shows, the highest caliber that was out there. Having gone to those shows for 15 years in a row, being so fortunate to have been juried in that many times— That's one of the insecurities about the craft show world and dependence on it—you know people always complained about that to the American Crafts Council, that there was no stability in it, and they were doing this professionally. And there's just no way to plan, you know, especially a wholesale business. Oops. What was I saying?

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about how the fairs have changed over 15 years. One of the things that Roy mentioned over breakfast, and I think you were agreeing, is that they'd gotten more professional, they'd gotten more businesslike.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, he was talking about Rhinebeck.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: Which the very beginnings of the field were hippyish. And those guys shaved their beards, cut their hair, and put on fabulous Italian suits. You know they became more like sophisticated designers or—they just didn't want to be seen per se as hippies. They wanted to be seen more as serious artists. So the look changed, and everybody got more professional at some point.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a comparable change in Philadelphia or in Washington? Or was it more consistent throughout?

MS. SUPERIOR: No. That was always the top of the line. That was always as professional as you could be. You know the most marvelous glass blowers, the most fabulous jewelers. Just the best of handmade in the United States. And they were small exclusive shows, 125 people, usually in beautiful locations.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you see an evolution in technique? Did you see a change in focus? Did you see a change in how the public responded?

MS. SUPERIOR: Philadelphia is a marvelously supported—so is Washington—art loving community. In a way that New York isn't even. Philadelphia and Washington have a profound interest and appreciation for art and handmade things and want to live with those things and appreciate those things. And the Philadelphia Craft show is the biggest fundraiser for the fantastic Philadelphia Museum of Art. And they might raise $300,000. It's the biggest fundraiser event for the museum each year. So over the years the show got bigger and bigger, over the course of 15 years. If it started with 125 people, I think at the end of the time that I was doing it, it was almost 200 people. So the show doubled. They wound up moving from Memorial Hall, which was a breathtaking location, to the armory—I 'm not sure what the full name of that armory is—to the convention center. So the show became—the location became sterile. And it lost, to my mind, its exclusivity, its charm. Those moves changed greatly. But the ladies' focus was always on the size of the gate because they were fundraising, and that was their number one priority.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So from my perspective it might have not been the great— But anyway, I had done my time. And I tapped on that market for 15 years. So my sales were probably diminishing. More general public were coming in. It had become more of a baby-stroller and amusement for everyone in the city, which is a great, great thing. But also the gate started to complain that there weren't enough things for the people to buy. So they were becoming upset. So one of the questions started to be: What is your price range? And they started looking for people that made things in an affordable price range.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: At one point to keep everybody happy. And things started to change in that direction. And my work started to become, as I had evolved over 15 years, I was being included in museum shows. My work was becoming more and more expensive and less appropriate for that market. And that's when Leslie encouraged me to think about stopping doing craft shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And her reputation and her gallery had grown over those 15 years where she felt able to sell my work herself. And I still had my gallery on Nantucket.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that the Dane Gallery?

MS. SUPERIOR: That's the Dane Gallery, yes. And I'm blessed and fortunate enough to have been working with two people who were classmates of mine and friends of mine, which is an unusual set of circumstances. And I've been truly, truly lucky to have these two friends that started as artists and Bob's wife has become the dealer, and Leslie is a dealer. Bob makes magnificent blown glass work.

MS. RIEDEL: What's Bob's last name?

MS. SUPERIOR: Bob Dane.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And they have Dane Gallery on Nantucket. And he goes to Baltimore and works with a guild and does all these fabulous wine—they're wine celebrations on Nantucket, where vineyards from all over the country come, and they exchange. And he sells his fabulous champagne glasses and martini glasses. And you know they're all Venetian-inspired. He's been to Venice about seven times; he knows it like the back of his hand. And they're called Tutti Frutti glasses. They're very colorful, and the stems are outrageously beautiful and complicated, and they're all one of a kind. And they're just great on a table. There's nothing more festive than having the table set with all of these extraordinarily beautiful glasses. So I've been very, very lucky. Very lucky to be able to support myself—

MS. RIEDEL: You've had very long term—

MS. SUPERIOR: —as an artist. You know it's still I have to pinch myself all the time to really believe that I've done it for 30 years.

MS. RIEDEL: With two of the same galleries the entire time.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That strikes me as extremely unusual.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I was called by Garth Clark once, asking me what my relationship to Leslie was. That was

sort of a highlight of my career. I've been included in a few of his books. So I'm on the radar.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: But right now Helen Drutt has retired. Dorothy Weiss has retired. I have to say—and Garth Clark most recently closed his gallery in New York and now seems to be focusing on developing an auction for the secondary market. I have to say that Leslie Ferrin is probably the most significant ceramic dealer in the United States, which is an unbelievable position to be in. And she's the beneficiary of all of these galleries' stables. Every ceramic artist in the country, from all of those stables, to emerging artists and graduate students want to work with Leslie Ferrin. So she is in an extraordinary position. So I'm very grateful to have been at the right place at the right time. And Roy got this job at Hampshire College. And I wouldn't have met Leslie. I wouldn't have discovered porcelain necessarily, and my life would have been very different if Roy hadn't gotten the job at Hampshire College and we moved up here where I didn't want to move. I wanted to go back to the city. But this move, my life blossomed. So you never know.

[END OF DISC 2.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mara Superior at the artist's home in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, July 1, 2010, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is disc number two.

And, Mara, let's start this disc with a discussion about technique and the evolution of form in your work. So you were talking about in graduate school this very first—coil pots; you were building coil pots.

MS. SUPERIOR: That's the way I started.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you had not learned to throw on the wheel. You didn't want to throw on the wheel. But you needed to make these rounded forms. And nobody had told you that making coils in high fire porcelain was a bad idea due to cracks.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, they might have said so, but I was too stubborn to listen. I was determined to use these materials because they knocked me out. It's like gold versus silver jewelry or whatever. If you want gold, you have to do gold.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: I wanted these materials. And that was the number one factor, and I was going to make it work.

MS. RIEDEL: And you wanted porcelain at reduction. You wanted reduction porcelain because of the color.

MS. SUPERIOR: I wanted glassy blue.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And in my selecting this, I feel conceptually totally linked back to the ancient Chinese porcelains. It's the same firing method in the atmospheric—either wood- or gas-fired kilns. And it immediately links me to ceramic history, which was very exciting to me for some reason.

MS. RIEDEL: Going back a thousand years.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: It's just this continuum. It just was exhilarating to me. So I started making a vessel in the most primitive way possible. Maybe beginning with a pinch pot, putting a foot on the base of a pinch pot. And then building up the form with coils. And adding my inability not to decorate, adding little decorations on the top, adding handles. But the pots were unsatisfactory. I think Roy called them my oatmeal stage. No one told me in school after the first year or so that there was even such a thing as a paddle, a wooden paddle like a kitchen tool that you just—

MS. RIEDEL: Just to smooth it out.

MS. SUPERIOR: Just to smooth out the lumps of the pinch pots. So I have these lumpy things that I wanted to make paintings on. So I had to figure out some clean surface to paint on. So somewhere along the line I started working with slabs. And this was a huge breakthrough technologically. And I thought, okay, I can make a paper pattern. Since I've been familiar with sewing, I'll make a paper pattern of the shape, the silhouette, and cut out two sides, and put it together and make it stand up on a base. And then I have— I didn't want to decorate in the

round because it's a limiting—it determines too much. I mean I enjoy it occasionally. But I like the idea of two sides of a story, the definition of it, the contained painting surface. So I started with two-sided vases.

MS. RIEDEL: And an interest more in composition than in form. So the flatness was appealing.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: And I don't mean—certainly interested in form. But two-dimensional form versus three-dimensional form.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: My formal interests are in shape, line, composition, color, as opposed to form and modeling.

MS. RIEDEL: Dimension, right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Dimension and that kind of visual accuracy.

MS. RIEDEL: So these first forms, these two-sided forms, are like pillow—they're variations on vase forms. And they're sort of pillow-shaped forms.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, this first one I would just say I like geometric shapes. And these first simple forms were conically based. They were cone-shaped forms. And I liked the foot. So I attached them to a little base. Then I started doing my typical digging into art history, ceramic history, and started looking at many books of pots. And thinking that's a beautiful silhouette. I'd like to use this traditional silhouette but make them my own by constructing them in a completely new way. And decorating them in my way. I'm not going to copy the old—I'm not going to copy the antique paintings and images. I want to put my images on this old form and make it old and new. So, you know, went through the trial and error process of making things that were able to stand up and just taught myself how to do things.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you seen Betty Woodman's forms?

MS. SUPERIOR: I knew that I loved her work early on.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: I'm not sure at which point—if I'd seen it at that time in 1980. I'm not certain exactly when I saw her work, but I loved her work.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I would think so.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. And loved her constructions—I loved the looseness, and her whole construction method is brilliant. But she threw on the wheel. And departed in the most interesting way from the wheel. Used the wheel in the most interesting way I've ever seen it used. But I didn't even have that skill.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So I had to find some clean surface to paint on. And slabs answered the question. Then I started refining the forms. I started small, maybe ten, 12 inch size to begin with. And then I got very bold and wanted to start building much larger things. And I couldn't do it except for these large boat-shaped pieces. I was able to get some scale with two pieces of clay—three pieces with the base, with large, as large, I wanted to go as large as I possibly could. This porcelain shrinks 20 percent. So everything was that much bigger. So it also had to do with how much I could lift, how much I could invert a board, just how much I could physically handle. So then after the conical and boat shapes, I wanted shapes with curves in them. I wanted to redo classical vessels. So I needed another method, and then the boxy four-sided piece evolved. And from there I could really deal with any shape I wanted. So that was a great innovation. And I was bold enough to try to work in as large scale as I possibly could. And I didn't even have any additives in the clay body, like molochite or sand of any kind or anything that might have helped the clay body. I was just using straight Grolleg porcelain which is quite challenging to work with in terms of its high shrinkage rate and prone to cracking.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And fussiness in drying. It needs to be very slowly dried with layers and layers of plastic on it. And, you know, I'd have pieces on my table for months slowly drying. So it's a very slow process. And one picks their medium based on one's patience level for certain things, where one has infinite patience for something and

no patience for something else. And your work evolves that way. I mean I see that in many different artists.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were making the form, did you have a sense of what the painted surface would look like? Or did the painted surface evolve completely independent?

MS. SUPERIOR: It's hard to say. It happens differently in different times.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know I might have just been working on a series of putting ten shapes together and then look at them and see what the shape was telling me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And then once I was onto some imagery, the imagery might come first, and I'd make a form to go with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So it works both ways.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. Like I became involved with hourglass shapes, shapes—Brancusi-type shapes but flat, and those were like separated areas, like underwater, land, sky, just that definition changing the terrain.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So this is what I was doing in graduate school. I was teaching myself how to make a form that could be decorated and painted. And doing the relief sculptures always at the same time, you know, and the little sculptural houses, fairytale-like imaginary themes. But I taught myself how to make pots that would stand up and work in this high fired porcelain.

MS. RIEDEL: And something that you wanted to mention is that technically that's no small feat. That to build in slabs constructions of this size in porcelain that go to cone 10 is a technical accomplishment.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I think it is. I mean I see something in these materials that maybe other people—it doesn't faze them; it is what it is. And to my eye it's very different than an electric fired cone 10 porcelain. And I prefer this. And I can't really think of anyone that's used porcelain in this way, this method and these materials. And it's caused me a lot of heartache. I've lost a lot of work over the years. But I keep trying. It's like falling off a horse, picking myself up, dusting myself off, and starting again with a new additive in the clay that might help, with different additions. There are always tests in the kiln, and that is usually the most exciting thing that's going on in a kiln are the tests to see a little glaze change or a something or other. So it's always a process of learning and improving.

MS. RIEDEL: The only other artist actually who comes immediately to mind, who's doing incredibly complex constructions in high fire porcelain, gas fired, is Edward Eberle.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. I think he's wheel thrown, though.

MS. RIEDEL: Some may be. But I think as they've gotten increasingly complex—I mean there's so many different components going into a singular piece—that I would think there are a lot of the same challenges that you have in terms of seams and cracking and things.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. It's the same temperature range, the same—

MS. RIEDEL: Similar technical challenges, I think.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I haven't seen his work extremely recently to know if he's still throwing. But he doesn't use glaze.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Not that that's that much of a change in things. But at least there's a certain particle alignment when you're throwing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: There are certain advantages to throwing.

MS. RIEDEL: It gives the clay a consistency throughout.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. The wall might be a similar thickness. There could be some advantages to something that doesn't have appendages or little appendages might be just fine. But when you're working—he's building those pieces in a wet stage.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And these are built in a dry stage, in a leather hard stage.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Which makes it even more finicky in terms of making a piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I don't know his the exact process.

MS. SUPERIOR: Making a piece. You can't stand a piece of flat slab up like a giant tile without it being stiff enough to support its own weight.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. Yes, I understand.

MS. SUPERIOR: So they have to be pretty dry to put them together. And just that fact alone is pushing the materials to their outer limits.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's a little better bet if you're working wet.

MS. RIEDEL: So was the material itself then part of the inspiration for that early series that was about pots—"Pots About Pots."

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Once again, when I'm interested in anything, I go to the source. I go to the history of what my inspirations didn't per se come from a contemporary. It usually starts with a historic reference of inspiration. Then of course I admire contemporaries when I discover that we're kindred spirits. But I'm sure it always comes from a historic place.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about that series, the "Pots About Pots." This was the mid-eighties, '84 or so, I think, was the beginning of that series?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. And I made the piece called *Keramos* in 1984. And by this time I'd been going to craft shows for three years. So this is a tall—maybe the body of the piece is about 24 inches. And there's a lid with three small vases on top of the lid which maybe brings it up another nine inches. So it was a pretty tall piece. And *Keramos* is the Greek word for ceramics. And they're little images. They're Greek columns. And there is a vase on a pedestal, a classical ionic column. And there are little classical Greek amphora, Hydrea, Krater, a dish and a vase. So I have three paintings of classical Greek ceramic form and two of my own contemporary ceramic forms at the top of the piece. So I'm mixing historic references and my own sense of vase painting. And calling myself a contemporary vase painter with looking back at the historic tradition. And down comes a hand, which is probably from Giotto, from above, guiding me in some way. I think after my father passed away in 1982, my work started taking on a bit of a more serious tone, and I was thinking more. I just was reflecting more about the content.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's very interesting, too, because on side of the amphora you've written "sculpture," it looks like. And on the other side "utility."

MS. SUPERIOR: It can do both. All the things that can be done with ceramics: It's both utilitarian and sculptural. I'm just praising the material. I'm the newly converted. And it can be so many things, have so many functions; what a fabulous material. I was so excited. And these are just an outburst of my excitement for the material, to have found it, and to be able to be doing it. So they're just—

MS. RIEDEL: And this was part of a whole series where you did variations on the amphora form, variations on teapots.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I did the tea temple, which is in a temple form; and it's about the Greek order as well, with ionic columns and balance, unity, and order, which are, you know, design principles. And emphasizing the design principles that the Greeks embraced in their work. And the title of the piece is *Continuum* and my connection to

ceramic history.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was roughly the same year, do you think, 1984?

MS. SUPERIOR: Maybe '85. And 1989 a piece called *Land of the Idea*. And *Library of Ideas*. I obviously—in my home you can see I've probably 20 bookcases. Libraries and art books are very important to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Imagination, invention, interpretation are the three words you have on this *Land of the Idea*.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. On one side there's an image of myself with the concentration center. It's me with a bald head looking inside the brain as to where the ideas come from and how they're little zigzag lines coming out of the brain about when you're excited about an idea. And I'm looking at a photograph here myself, and I can't even read all of the little words on it. But the top talks about little floating words saying "Lost Ideas," "Fragmented Ideas," "Undeveloped Ideas." So it's just about being an artist and where these ideas might be coming from. Going to the sensory center in the brain.

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, when did text become part of the work? Was it true from the very beginning?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I'd say I started using it pretty early on.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that way.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Going back to studying printmaking. I looked at a lot of Hogarth prints with the word bubbles and the riotous people just spurting things. And I just loved that use of the characters saying things to one another. And in pre-Renaissance paintings there are very often words of ribbons, ribbons that have Latin—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: —words and letters on them. I've always been very attracted to those religious paintings with these words. Those were early word bubbles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That's an interesting way to put it, yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: The ribbons with Latin on them. And I just love them, love packaging, good packaging. Tins with text and, you know, their ironclad compositions. I really respect so many aspects of the arts: you know commercial art, illustrators.

MS. RIEDEL: Graphic design.

MS. SUPERIOR: Graphic designers. I just love it all. And I look at it all. I'm a sponge for all of these things. It's like my religion. It's sustaining enough to fill that spot, unusual to say, but it gives me— Going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art is like going to a high cathedral for me. I just feel this sense of reverence to beauty.

MS. RIEDEL: I understand.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I've gone on these travels, museum pilgrimages, and feel the same way at the Louvre and the British Museum and the Uffizi and the museums in Rome. And as I travel and see more and more and more, it just builds a greater sense of weight to the whole thing that I'm connected to. And it gives me great satisfaction to connect with the entire history of art. So we had *Keramos*. We had *Meissen and Me* at that time where I did a tribute to the first European porcelain factory.

MS. RIEDEL: Which was in Dresden?

MS. SUPERIOR: In Dresden, yes. Böttger was an alchemist. And the king of Prussia kind of captured him and insisted that he work on a recipe for making gold because this king loved beautiful things and needed gold. So over the course of a number of years, he wasn't able to come up with gold. But he was able to come up with a recipe for porcelain, which turned into gold and the first porcelain factory.

MS. RIEDEL: In Europe?

MS. SUPERIOR: In Europe. After the Europeans had been trying to imitate the Chinese export porcelain for 300 years, finally Böttger solved the mystery and came up with a recipe for high fired porcelain. And all of the Delft ware, the faience imitations that had gone on for 300 years in every European country just is part of that porcelain story that I love so much. And there's a tremendous humor in all of that Delft ware, English Delft ware. There's just a casual humor to the Adam and Eve plates, English Delft, and the chargers of the kings and queens. But they're almost cartoon-like, and they're just so happy and funny and humorous. And I wanted that to be part

of my work, too, that lighthearted humor, but in a very formal material handled in a very sort of informal way. It's a very formal material.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Which is a strange juxtaposition. You know you expect the perfection of a Sèvres bowl in its utter perfection of form. But there are ceramic engineers there that have devised ways to coddle and make those forms possible in all sorts of technical ways, by firing them with no glaze on them in supports that don't enable the form to deform or move or change. And then they're glazed in a low fire kiln that doesn't affect the form of the clay body itself at all. So there are all kinds of things in industry. And now at this late date in my career, I'm thinking—I mean the Kohler factory has sort of always been in my mind over the years as some place that I might want to go. But now I'm thinking that I have things that I might want to pursue technically that might be useful going to industry. And going to residencies. I'd love to—I've been to Deruta, Italy, and gone to the Grazia factory and observed how some majolica is produced. And visited—my goodness, in Deruta there are like 200 potters, little shops, one next to the other. And we did go to the Sèvres Museum in Paris when we were there. I do have to go to Staffordshire, and these are the themes for our travels.

MS. RIEDEL: When did the reference to New England architecture and Americana, when did that really begin to develop in the work? We were talking about this early series, which is really very much about the history of ceramics. When did—

MS. SUPERIOR: And here, this is an autobiographical piece; *One Life Story* it's called. And one side is about my life's work, working on ceramic forms and shapes and parts; there are flying handles and parts of sculpture flying around in the background. And the other side is house and garden. So my home life and my work life.

MS. RIEDEL: And what year is this piece from? Do you remember? You also started to talk—we haven't talked about it yet on disc—about the anthropomorphic aspects of the pot and how significant that was to you, to develop and explore those, the body.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: The lips, the ears.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. Early on I did work on this series. In throwing a form, terms that apply to the human form are applied to a ceramic vessel.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Sure.

MS. SUPERIOR: So the foot, the body, the neck, the ears, that just kind of—okay, here are the parts; let's organize some shapes based on these things. And I define these shapes based on their body parts. Anthropomorphizing. I haven't had talking pots yet. [Laughs.] Maybe I actually have.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say.

MS. SUPERIOR: In that pearls in porcelain thing that graphic ——

MS. RIEDEL: And there's all this text on these pots.

MS. SUPERIOR: True, true. I mean sometimes these ideas come about in stream of consciousness.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Is that an important part of your working process, things evolve as you're—

MS. SUPERIOR: It all expands, you know. As you're in the zone, you know, a piece tells you what to do with it. You know I start with things that I love, like symbols for instance, that originally probably came from Egyptology. And try to come up with my own symbols about my own life. Here I have this decorative panel on this my life story piece with an open book with a vase on it, looking at ceramics books, the eye as a symbol for the artist ever looking. The sketchbook of ideas. The time clock, paintings, history, museums. Another pottery about pottery piece was this grand *Teapot Upon Teapot*. Two teapots. This is from—oh, dear, I don't have a date on this. Oh, 1985. I'm sorry. It's 24 by 18 by 3. And I've always liked using bases to just give it that formal presence of elevating the object so that you look at it more seriously or take it more seriously. It is important. I'm saying it's important. So it needs its plinth.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And this is definitely still "Pots About Pots," that series.

MS. SUPERIOR: And the cocoa pot actually.

MS. RIEDEL: And we should talk about that because that eventually became part of the craft collection at the

White House.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right, right. And that cocoa pot is a classical European, probably Meissen-based, cocoa pot form that I enlarged the scale, flattened the scale, exaggerated it.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did this piece come about? Was this a piece that Michael Monroe saw at the Philadelphia fair? Was this a piece that was commissioned for the White House? How did this evolve?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, having gone to the Washington Craft Show for years, I'd met Michael Monroe. So he was the curator in charge of helping Hilary Clinton put together the White House Collection of American Crafts. So he was familiar with my work from the craft show, and he thought of me and wrote to me. And I believe this piece was available. I sent him a group of slides of available works. And he chose this one.

MS. RIEDEL: And this would have been '94?

MS. SUPERIOR: This is '93.

MS. RIEDEL: 'Ninety-three. Okay. So we're jumping ahead a little bit. So this would have been the tail end of the craft fairs for you.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And how extraordinary that must have been. You went to the White House.

MS. SUPERIOR: Got to go to the White House. Went to a Christmas party. There was another opening at American Art [now Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, DC] that we were invited to because the whole collection was also exhibited at American Art. And coincidentally I was on Nantucket a few years ago, and Hilary was beginning a campaign for something. And she happened to be campaigning on the island. And I was at Dane Gallery. And she came into Dane Gallery, and we met again and remembered each other. So it just has been an incredibly gratifying life experience. And it seems, you know, if you say one thing about your career, everyone understands that, everyone thinks that's incredible if you're in the White House collection. I mean you could be in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I think people are more impressed if you've been in the White House. So it's something that's universally understood.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So it has been a marvelous career asset. And I attribute it partially to having gone to the Washington Craft show and met so many great people early on in the eighties and nineties.

MS. RIEDEL: So the series "Pots About Pots," seems to have continued on for at least a decade. Because here is a cocoa pot in 1993.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. It's something that I return to from time to time when I discover a new form. I mean I've been doing it most recently this year, last year, with tulip vases, you know, the multi-spouted extravagances, extravagantly crazy, ridiculous forms that I'm redoing.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And it's an ongoing source of—a source of inspiration and material to explore all these hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of form varieties that have been produced. Well, each theme I appear to work on is based as a positive—what did I just say?

MS. RIEDEL: Celebration.

MS. SUPERIOR: A celebration of one thing or another. The ceramic about ceramic pieces, were about my enthusiasm and excitement for being involved with this material. The "House and Garden" series was my celebration and enthusiasm for living in New England and discovering Americana and American antiques. And working with those symbols, the archetype home and all the symbolism that home evokes or gardening. Things that I've developed—become interested in over the course of my life have been areas for me to celebrate in my work. So it's an ongoing whatever I happen to be interested in. Most recently I had a big travel section, you know, we're documenting all of our travels.

MS. RIEDEL: And we'll get to that. The animals have been an important—animals have surfaced again and again in your work from the very start. There seems to be a very mythical quality, a fairytale aspect to the work that comes alive through some of the imagery.

MS. SUPERIOR: I've enjoyed having dogs for 30 years of my life. I love animals, I love pets. I love birds. It's

always a great source of material.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think of the pieces as nonlinear forms of narrative? Or they more must image, juxtaposed images?

MS. SUPERIOR: But let's say a Nantucket scallop dinner or Rosa Ragusa beach roses by the sea, a Fourth of July dinner, sometimes the stories are very specific.

MS. RIEDEL: So then that comes back to commemoration.

MS. SUPERIOR: Commemoration is a, you know, there's a whole world of British ceramics that commemorated every queen and king going back to the Delft and so forth. And I love that. I love children's ceramics, the series of cups. Once again, they're British. And they were presents for good children. Lots with alphabets on them and "A reward for John." "A special plate for a good girl." There's a whole historic tradition of British commemorative ware to children.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I'm not familiar with that.

MS. SUPERIOR: I love children's art work, I love all things about children, too. Having had the gallery on Nantucket has encouraged my making mermaids and all themes about the sea. Pearls and coral and all of these sort of things are— I've had— it's been a marvelous source—resource—of content, that whole mythological world and fantasy world of the mermaid. And it's also been an area where I've gotten to deal with the figure which is something I'm very interested in right now. I've made figurative pieces throughout the years. And we can go over that series of work. I've made some kind of romantic pieces. I wouldn't say erotic pieces, but I've pursued the figure over the years.

MS. RIEDEL: So do you see the work over time as having a series of threads that run through continuously that you continue to revisit?

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. It's just, you know, like any artist, what I might be most currently excited about. You've got to go with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And it sounds like the ideas often come from your travels or what you're reading, art history, what you find in an auction.

MS. SUPERIOR: They can come anywhere. They can come from the title of a piece of music, bits of a poem. Anywhere. Titles I usually love. For whatever title it might be could truly spark something. What am I thinking of? In terms of so many pieces of music are titled for—Like Bach, the *English Suites* or the *Italian Concertos* or, you know, so many—*Espana.* So many people, artists, have been inspired naturally by traveling. It's just endless. I mean the potential.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about travel because it has been a hugely significant part of your work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Well, the first trip that I took when I was about 16 with my family. We did our roots trip, and it had a profound effect on me. We to Italy for five weeks. We were 15 people. We hired our own bus driver and bus. Started in Milan and drove down gradually. Went to Florence and Rome and visited the museums. And drove all the way down to Naples, Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, Capri. Pompeii, yes. And then from there we took a small plane to Sicily and spent a week in Sicily and visited the home towns. And I never—you know it was one of the highlights of my life to that point. And I knew that I always wanted to continue to travel in Europe specifically in the future. So Roy described that, you know, finally a time came about that we were able to do a bit of traveling. So I—

MS. RIEDEL: That started in 1999—was that the first trip?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. And we were able to do a lot of traveling over the course of— He explained that his cousin had bought a house in Italy, and we had the unbelievable good fortune to be able to stay and live in a place for months at a time and use it as a base. And take off trips to Florence or wherever. But we were on art pilgrimages; that was the basis, the core of our travel itinerary. And one trip we took—yes. Our first trip we went to London for a week and did a little bit on the outskirts of London. Then we flew to Pisa and met Roy's cousin. Went up to her house. Then went to Florence and Rome and probably—did day trips in Siena, southern Tuscany, northern Tuscany. And then another trip we— [Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

The next trip we started either in Amsterdam or Paris; I'm forgetting which was the beginning and which was the end.

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, quick question: Did these travels immediately begin to appear in your work?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So it shifted the focus immediately.

MS. SUPERIOR: Immediately. Yes. The piece on that cover is *Oh, Britannia* on the cover of the catalog.

MS. RIEDEL: From your museum retrospective.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. I immediately came back from Italy and started using this Italian imagery on my forms.

MS. RIEDEL: Or British imagery or—

MS. SUPERIOR: Or British or French.

MS. RIEDEL: Or French.

MS. SUPERIOR: Opera is another, and music is another source of inspiration. This is *Madame Butterfly*, and I intend to do *Porgy and Bess*, which I adore. And have plans for pieces about Bach and Vivaldi.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm!

MS. SUPERIOR: In this Venice piece that I'm planning to do since he's from Venice. So, you know, I could probably use a few more lifetimes to execute, and let alone the fact that I really want to paint, and it's really just a matter of time. And I think it's served me well to focus on one material all these years. But I am pulled to want to do other things. It's just, it takes time to do things well. And just to take off— I mean I usually plan six months or a year in advance with deadlines for shows. So I'm in this—it's hard to break out of it to get some free time to explore painting. But I'd love to.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you paint or sketch while you're traveling?

MS. SUPERIOR: I draw.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: In sketchbooks.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: Not anything— I mean I did, since we were able to stay for such a long period of time in Italy, I did have watercolors with me and do a few watercolors. And I worked in Cousin Helen's printmaking studio and made a few etchings.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: While I was in Italy. And I used a Plexiglas plate, you know, and just scratched into the Plexiglas rather than dealing with all the complications of the material in metal. You know when it's available, we'll do it.

MS. RIEDEL: And since you've begun—since the late nineties when you really traveled, what, annually, every other year or two years for two or three months?

MS. SUPERIOR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: That really became the content for the work. And it became less about the history of ceramics, less about home. But more about your travels.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. So it's just a reflection.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] How did Nantucket surface in the work? Have you spent time there or just related primarily to the gallery?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, as I said, my first and only wholesale account was to a shop Nantucket Looms at the beginning of my career. Like 1982 I might have gone to my one and only wholesale show. So that was my one and only account.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And he was attracted to the fish platters and nautical themes. So I was sort of given an assignment. Ideas come from yourself, from your own life. Then when you're working with galleries, you're often given assignments. When you're invited to a show, you're given an assignment. Leslie gives me assignments all the time. A spring assignment, a fall assignment for what her themes are going to be at SOFA. Whatever. So I feel so much as if I'm still in school. [Laughs.] And it gets your mind moving in a direction that you might not have thought anything about.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's fabulous. What was the question again?

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about Nantucket.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, Nantucket.

MS. RIEDEL: And how it surfaced in the work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Nantucket. Well, then that inevitably let to mermaids somehow or other. But I was connected to Nantucket through this shop. And each summer I would give them about 20 objects. And then years later our friends, simultaneously with me stopping craft shows, a former classmate of mine, Bob Dane, opened a gallery on Nantucket. A very wonderful glass gallery with a little bit of ceramic sculpture. And naturally since I'd sold things on Nantucket and had a bit of a following, he invited me to be in the gallery. So I've had that as a constant. My entire career I've been selling my work on Nantucket. So I've, you know, and visited many times and have friends on Cape Cod. And that's a whole world unto itself. The nautical world. My husband being a fly fisherman. So that whole world is part of my life.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So it's an easy place to go. The whole joy of the fantasy, and I have big mermaid tea parties where they're eating cakes and drinking tea out of fabulous teapots and sauce boats. And, you know, all kinds of food-related pieces. You've seen that I enjoy cooking greatly. I have many, many, many cookbooks. So I always incorporate figures and food in my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: That's a whole other source of themes. I did all kinds of Italian-themed dinners and Nantucket-these dinners. Yes, I did pieces about chianti and about miniature porcelain, about the joy of having fine china. I don't even think about it. It's just so, it's such a normal natural flow or evolution. I don't worry about it at all. It just happens.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, food and travel in particular and fantasy seem completely intertwined with your work, as they have been from the start. And just continually surface, sometimes for prolonged periods. They never seem to go away completely.

MS. SUPERIOR: We still keep eating. [They laugh.] We still keep gardening. I still keep discovering new plants and flowers. And now I've got this whole world of the figure to pursue. I seem to find myself with a new appreciation. Maybe there's a lot of ceramic sculpture going on, and there are lot of figures out there. And I'm finding that I've done figures over the years. But I'm also finding that I want to study the figure a little bit more. There's always a challenge out there. My current challenge is to improve my figures. I'm working on a sculpture called *Mother Earth*. Or *Mother Nature Says.* And it's a lovely nude Mother Nature holding the globe. And she's warning us to take care of this good planet.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this on a sculpture?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. It's a highly raised relief. It's a triptych, a tile triptych.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: She's in the middle surrounded by two trees, and she's hold the globe.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So I have a number of images with figures coming.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you done many tiles?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, we were talking about my most current work. And I am using a lot of tiles. I did come home after my travels, and we redid our kitchen a few years ago, and I made all the tiles for the kitchen. And intend to do it with my bathroom, too. So I'm just like the porcelain—I'm plastering the world with porcelain in any format I can come up with. So I've started using more tiles to cover bases.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And the thought of creating a shape and just placing tile on it, and eliminating some of the technical issues about warping and slumping and scale and things that are difficult in porcelain, I can just cover wooden shapes that will definitely stand perpendicular with tile and just worry about the content and not so much worry about whether a piece will come through or not in the final kiln firing. Because sometimes you've invested hours—months—the piece has been on your table drying for months. It could be a six-month investment of having this piece on your table. And it's the very last firing. You didn't notice there was a subtle crack somewhere. And the thing comes out of the final kiln, and it's not viable. You can't use it for this show, which is—that's really rough. You know most artists when they're on a deadline and working down to the last minute or accumulating paintings, they can see the paintings are right there; they're going in the show. With a ceramic sculptor, if they're working do the last minute, you're never certain of what is going to absolutely come through with certain construction methods. But it's always Christmas morning to open the kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's a big, exciting surprise.

[END DISC 3, TRACK 1]

MS. RIEDEL: You were just saying it's always been about—

MS. SUPERIOR: My work has always been about an idealized reality. Early on I made the decision not to use my work as a platform for particularly negative content. I just wanted to make beautiful things, and that would be my stand. That's what I would offer to whoever. You know that's what I wanted to do since I was a kid. So, you know, I never—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's especially interesting, given the current work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. I had to go there.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is a 180-degree turnaround.

MS. SUPERIOR: I had to go there. I surprised myself that I went there with these political pieces. You know it's—I was never really particularly interested. I'm not an activist. I mean I have opinions. But, you know, I wasn't that active about—you know I vote, but I don't belong to groups and get very highly charged up politically.

MS. RIEDEL: But then George Bush—

MS. SUPERIOR: George Bush just drove me into politics. And I just couldn't—I listen to NPR every day. And the whole Iraq War and the pointlessness of it and the suffering created on all sides for no purpose just to enrich the military establishment. It just seems criminal, stupid. It just disturbed me to the core. And it wasn't until the last year of his presidency, that I had had a vessel, a two-sided vessel that was sort of—more horizontal than—on my table that had come out of the bisque firing, and it had had a fine hairline crack in the middle of it. And I knew that it needed to be thrown out because I knew that the crack was going to open. But I hadn't gotten around to bringing it to the dumpster yet. But one day, I'm listening to the news, and it's almost the end of his presidency, in the last—maybe the beginning of his last year. And I was saying, you know, that form would really take on the map of the United States beautifully. And what I could do, I know it's going to open up a quarter of an inch; I could drill holes and tie the country back up together with a golden thread. So the cracked form spoke to me and said I can use that. And the piece made itself.

MS. RIEDEL: What's the title of that piece?

MS. SUPERIOR: *Bushwhacked*. We've been really, really upset by this presidency: the US economy, diminished jobs, this expensive, ridiculous, painful war. It's just the worst baloney I've ever heard. Every day the news is more irritating than the next one. I don't know why people aren't marching in the streets. So I made this piece. And then I thought of an elaborate base that would have shards, broken clay, as he broke—the country is breaking up. And, you know, I used these little plates using words on plates to dish out this information. So I had this US economy with cracked lines on it, painted cracks in Iraq, which painted red cracks on Iraq. And all of the irritating and his favored groups that were enriched: the oil industry, the military, that were enriched during his time, and he just wasn't doing anything to benefit the people. You know he was just focusing on these groups

that are the worst parts of society. You know, why emphasize these negative things and enrich the few and make the masses suffer with healthcare issues or whatever? So I was moved to complete this piece, *Bushwhacked*.

And then moved on to *Tulipomania* relating it to the financial crisis and irrational exuberance. Greenspan's comment about irrational exuberance being in the housing market. So this is pre the *Great Recession of 2008*. Then just the news each day, each day I'm listening to the news, and I can paint another plate. The *Piggy Banker* piece and the *Great Recession of 2008* is broken up—one side is the events that took place on Wall Street starting with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the date and all of these toxic assets and all of this new language that we all learned in the country during that time. And the other side is how Main Street was affected by the loss of jobs and foreclosures and, you know, the upset that's been caused and so forth. So it's a visual document of the buildup to the recession of 2008. And it is topped with a golden, like a golden idol, from the Bible, a golden pig that's gold-leafed. And he's sniffing down onto his golden portfolio. And he really cannot see the damage that's being created. He can't see beyond his own enrichment.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you shown—

MS. SUPERIOR: These pieces just made themselves. It's just the news.

MS. RIEDEL: And have these pieces been your focus then for the past year or two?

MS. SUPERIOR: They've been my focus—yes. These all have come about since Bush's last year in office. This is now Obama's—the end of his first? Or first year and a half. So in the past two and a half years I've made these pieces. The *Smart Planet* about the economy and globe with Mother Nature on top of the lid. It happens to be a teapot. And she's warning us to protect the planet and take heed to this climate change problem that's going on. The *Piggy Bankers*. And now I've just most recently completed the *Obama White House*. And there's a bust of Obama on top of a white house—the White House. And there's the lawn. And plates that are describing all the positive things that he's done in his administration so far. So we're ending this series, I'm hoping, on a very positive note.

MS. RIEDEL: So you see this as the final piece in this series?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I can see doing—I have a piece in the works that I can't even go for because I'm just letting it sit in its box half done, called *American Villains*. [Laughs.] And they're going to be little portraits on the plates of Bernie Madoff, of Rush Limbaugh, of Sarah Palin. I can't even do it. It's just too disturbing. But these people seem to have sprouted in groups in the past couple of years, too, that seem to warrant some acknowledgement. But I need to take a rest from all of this negativity and go back to fairyland and fantasy world and beautiful things. I've done my—I was naturally moved to it. The work made itself. And it happened.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you exhibited any of these yet?

MS. SUPERIOR: I have exhibited them. Leslie Ferrin has exhibited them in a few at SOFA Chicago and SOFA New York. And the pieces have been well received. I do have— There's been a current article in *Ceramic Art and Perception* magazine about—the interview is called "The Political Imagination of Mara Superior." So that's out in the June 2010 issue. So it's gotten some coverage. But I think the information—these pieces will grow some patina with age, I think. They're so current it's, you know, it's such current events.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're interesting in the spectrum of your career because they are extraordinarily different content-wise than in anything you've addressed before.

MS. SUPERIOR: But they're beautiful objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Telling a disturbing message—giving a disturbing message. But disturbing content doesn't have to come in an ugly package.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And we've talked about—we've touched on anyway—the importance of juxtapositioning your work. And this is perhaps one of the more pointed examples of it. Beautiful, lacy porcelain pieces, but charged political commentary.

The forms about these pieces feel a little bit different as well. They feel very—they feel almost like pyramids, they feel like steps, the forms of these particular political pieces. Do they have precedent in your work?

MS. SUPERIOR: There is a piece that we didn't talk about called *Clay Heaven.* I believe, which had another shard base on it. And it really referred to having used this material, and there's been so much loss through cracked pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: You know I took a lot of my shards, hammered them up, and covered the base with shards. I have to get a photograph of that piece for you to see. And that was another piece that before *Bushwhacked* that I knew was going to crack. And I believe it was an hourglass, a wide, horizontal hourglass piece. And it was where—*Clay Heaven* being where these broken pieces go to. And that was made quite a while—maybe 1995.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And that was a big statement about working with these materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And I wound up golf-leafing the interior of this crack because there's a Japanese tradition—I'm forgetting what it is called, the name of it.

MS. RIEDEL: That whole Wabi-sabi sense maybe that [inaudible] perfection.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I'm forgetting the name of it, but there's a certain tradition that when a tea bowl might have cracked—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: —you feel it with gold and reemphasize the crack. It does not diminish because the kiln did such marvelous things to this thing as it is, it's not worthless—

MS RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: —because it's cracked.

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all.

MS. SUPERIOR: And that's a Japanese philosophy, attitude. That doesn't hold true in the United States. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to go to a museum and look at the porcelain objects that are in museums and see cracks on them. You know, the ancient Chinese things. Some of these large sculptures, you know. I was in the Asia Society once looking at this show, "Blanc de Chine." You know all these fabulous Chinese sculpture that are not decorated. They're just breathtaking sculptures in white porcelain. And seeing—yes, there people have the same problems. But here they are in museums, and the pieces are not worthless. Like in this world, being a working professional artist, these pieces can't be purchased, you know. Collectors will not buy a piece with a crack in it. The piece could be fabulous. But it's not within our philosophical range to accept something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Unless it's intentionally part of the content.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. And I did do that, I guess, twice. Where I knew it, and I worked with it.

[END DISC 3, TRACK 2]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mara Superior at the artist's home in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, on July 2, 2010, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, disc number three.

We're going to start this morning, Mara, with, as those thoughts have come to you over the evening, a review of some of the very significant pieces that started a new series or started the work off in new directions. So we're looking at a piece in front of us called *A Collection*, yes?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: This dates from 1982 roughly?

MS. SUPERIOR: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And this piece—does this predate the teapot collection?

MS. SUPERIOR: No, *The Teapot Collection* was first.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I did— *The Teapot Collection*, I believe it's—I imagine, although I did do these little figurines when I first started with animals having tea parties in very miniature pottery, tea sets and things like that. But

this is the first relief piece with miniatures. And it started— It was my—at graduate school at the University of Massachusetts, and it was 15 miniature teapots of different classmates' teapots. So it was my own and others. And I did get a lot of good feedback on this from the professors. And I made a decision to decorate the teapots with glaze in the way that the individuals—I borrowed little bits of their glaze and used their glaze on their pot and decided not to glaze the background slab for it, which was a very unusual thing to do. That seemed to really take it out of the world function altogether. I mean I was making this little relief about functional objects, but it was a piece of art about—

MS. RIEDEL: Objects.

MS. SUPERIOR: These objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So I liked the idea very much. This particular one didn't have any text. This is pre-text. But I liked the idea. And over the years I've come back to it. I've done collections of my own platters. I've done collections of my own teapots. And I did it collection piece called *Orientalia*, which were little miniature blue-and-white Asian porcelains. And I did a very extravagant large-scale teapot sculpture called *All the Tea in China*. And it was an enlarged silhouette of a classical Asian vase form with two probably 14-inch spouts on either side of it, that just came out like birds necks, swan's necks. But they were very long spouts. And the surface was covered with miniature Ming porcelain plates.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So you were playing with scale. You were looking at art history. You were beginning to be self-referential and insert your own work into your work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. And so where are we going from there? Another piece that I consider to be very important—

MS. RIEDEL: Now *All the Tea in China*, just to clarify that piece, came much later.

MS. SUPERIOR: It did.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: It did. I kept enlarging the teapot forms and becoming—there was one called *L'Extravaganza* and, you know, adding an absurd number of spouts just for the fun of it. Just because it was a fascinating object.

MS. RIEDEL: And that actually—the fun of it—makes me think about a point you made earlier this morning, which is how important joy is in your process and in your work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. Usually the work has always, except for this political series, started through an inspiration and passion—passionate love or inspiration—about a particular topic. And I sense the work is always coming from a joyful place. It's always through extreme excitement about a topic that moves me to want to make a—commemorate it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you've mentioned also that the work very much reflects what's going on in your own life at a particular time and which you're enthusiastic about at that time. Correct?

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. In the beginning, that first series of "Pottery About Pottery," I was over the moon about having discovered porcelain and how to handle it. And I was so excited about it that I delved into the history of ceramics deeply, and all kinds of ideas were moving around in my head. The "House and Garden" series is something that reflected my joy in owning my first white clapboard New England home and my enthusiasm for American antiques and Americana. [Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about Americana and when you discovered that. How that became part of the work. And how what you're enthusiastic about in your own life is very much reflected in the work.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. If I'm gardening, gardening appears, a particular rose or a particular peony. I've made blue hydrangea reliefs with homes.

MS. RIEDEL: So gardening, teapots.

MS. SUPERIOR: And cooking.

MS. RIEDEL: So food—we haven't talked yet about the food-related pieces.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right. You know the miniaturized pottery with these wonderful scenes of picnics and outdoor—lots of al fresco meals in Europe. There were many Tuscan al fresco dinners with linen tablecloths and flowers and prosciutto and cheeses and breads and wines from the region. And Nantucket scallop dinners and striped bass dinners. Which gave me the pleasure and joy of being able to decorate these miniature plates. And it's like playtime.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: An aunt came and looked at one of my shows, and she said, "It looks like you're just playing." [They laugh.] So I mean in a way I'm lucky enough to be able to do that. You know just making little bits of food, prosciutto and melon and decorating miniature plates. It's just joy. It's just a sheer pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: And you mentioned also that there is very much a thread of domesticity that runs through it. And that might relate to also your discovery and enthusiasm for Pennsylvania Dutch artifacts artifacts and communities here.

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. It's interesting that in high school I loved world history. I thought American history was a bore. And then once I—

MS. RIEDEL: Why was that?

MS. SUPERIOR: I don't know. It just seemed so dry in comparison to stories about Greece or Rome. I was out there. I was, you know, very, very excited about the other. As I said, when I was a little child, I was taken to Chinatown and immediately linked onto that Asian culture and artifacts. And I always liked the other somehow.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: But when I went to college in New England, suddenly a light bulb went off, and I discovered American vernacular architecture, American antiques, and the Shakers and all of this American, simple, honest powerfully strong forms. And all of this export china. And we live close to Historic Deerfield, which is a series of 30 homes that have been fully—each home is a museum as people had lived in the 1700's. And just fell in love with the whole aesthetic. And then also discovered, you know, a New England aesthetic and then the Pennsylvania Dutch aesthetic. And I was mentioning to you—did I mention my trip to Italy with my family?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: I didn't mention that two summer trips I took with my mother across country America road trips.

MS. RIEDEL: When you were in high school.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. One southern route and one northern route. So I got to see a large part of America, which is a fabulous thing for a young teenager to do. So I saw America, and I saw my roots at a very early age. And I knew what part of America I was interested in and wanted to be in. I didn't like the Southern California culture at all. I hated the newness of it. My mother loved the newness of everything and of course loved the weather. But I knew because I gravitated toward the historic part of America, and it was closer to Europe. And I knew where I belonged at 14 or 15. You know through comparison. And I became a Europhile. I was taking five years of French in high school. And all things old and European is where I was going and what I loved. So I was thrilled that I lived in the right part of the country and could just immerse myself in all of this American history and domesticity. It just simply is that. My work in that period and the "House and Garden" period was a celebration of loving all things domestic: cooking, sewing, decorating, gardening.

MS. RIEDEL: So then was it a bit surprise when you became—

MS. SUPERIOR: Roy is making coffee. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a big surprise then when you became so fascinated with Egyptian art? And what about Egyptian art was so compelling? We were talking a little earlier about the sense of space and the symbols.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, that was earlier. That was in undergraduate school at the University of Connecticut. And the art historical offerings were so vast that there was a single course in Egyptology. So at UConn I took some fabulous art history classes: the history of Asian art. So Egyptology came earlier. Just this love of the pattern, the stillness.

MS. RIEDEL: The flatness of the space. The use of symbols which then you—

MS. SUPERIOR: I made my own hieroglyphics for my world that had meaning to me. It was a huge springboard for me artistically, all things Egyptian. And there must have been the first King Tut show came to New York, too,

about 30 years ago. And I was just in love with everything Egyptian. And I think of the things that I love, and there's a similarity to them that also comes through in the things I emphasize in my work: and that's Egyptology, Persian miniature painting, flattening space, Japanese woodblock prints. There's a strong sense of shape, line, composition, and color. And on the other hand I also love dream space where things are floating in air or whatever that space might be. So once again, in Egyptology I loved the formal frontality and stillness. It appears to be important. You're stopping and observing something that's just strongly standing there motionless. There's just a power to Egyptian sculptures. They just demand your attention.

MS. RIEDEL: And in certain ways they focus on and celebrate some of the content that you have focused on in your contemporary life, what's happening all around you. They're not necessarily always grand events or battles, sometimes they can be very simple

MS. SUPERIOR: They are magical animals. That was a big source of inspiration, too. The human figure with the animal heads. The Canopic jars with a very kind of funny cats' heads on them. I find a lot of humor in Egyptian painting, too, and rhythm and pattern and gold and just beautiful color palette that seemed limited. Maybe at that time there was a limited palette of about ten colors. My palette is limited with the porcelain because only the basic oxides work at that 2400 degrees. Everything else burns away. So that limitation of color has worked for me, in that when I painted, I would spend an inordinate amount of time mixing and changing colors, which I love but they can drive me crazy. As you will see— As you will see, the walls in our house are all white. But they're several shades of white. Just getting me into a paint store and having to choose colors drives me crazy because I have to analyze every gray; you know, every cool gray or green gray or, you know, these minute subtleties of color.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the difference between an electric fired porcelain and a gas fired porcelain. Something you've been extremely, extremely attentive to.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So the limitation was extremely helpful.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It allowed—as you were saying.

MS. SUPERIOR: It allowed me to produce and move through ideas much more rapidly than if I was agonizing over—it takes a lot of time to select colors. I mean that's a whole issue unto itself that's very time-consuming. And I love it, but it's something that's been a benefit for me with the porcelain.

MS. RIEDEL: Now something that we just looked at earlier this morning, is the difficulty, however, with porcelain that occasionally happens with slumping at high temperature. Are you ever inspired then to consider firing at a lower temperature, going to something like china paint, going to white earthenware? Doesn't look like it. [Laughs.]

MS. SUPERIOR: White earthenware is just—

MS. RIEDEL: Too horrible for words? [Laughs.]

MS. SUPERIOR: Awful. Well, my clay is so exquisite at every stage. It's like cream cheese, number one. I feel like a baker in my studio. All of my dust is pure white. I love the romance of where it comes from and what it is. I feel like I'm handling a little bit of England. It's from Cornwall. It's the Dover Cliffs, the White Cliffs of Dover. Ground Cornwall stone glaze. It's a bit of southern England. White earthenware is an awful material to handle. It's talc, it's gray, it's just unpleasant to handle in the raw state. As well as, to me—I mean if it's covered completely with color or other things, it really doesn't matter that much. Or if you're making a piece of sculpture and painting it with oils or acrylics or something else, then it doesn't matter really because you'll get very little deformation. There's very little shrinkage in comparison. And it works. It makes sense for sculptors. It really does. But my work is—I mean I'm open to these ideas, and I do think about it, and I do have to reduce my temperature range to try to stop some of the warping and movement. But I have, you know, I hate whining or complaining. I hate the idea of it. But I've been very stubborn about these particular materials. There really is no predecessor. One of the only people I can think of contemporarily that's working—that works with high fired porcelain is—she's in Philadelphia.

MS. RIEDEL: Vessels, figurative? I'm trying to think.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, large-scale unglazed porcelain. Paula Winokur.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: Paula Winokur is one of the only contemporary ceramic sculptor. I guess Ruth Duckworth—

MS. RIEDEL: Duckworth, also, come to mind.

MS. SUPERIOR: —also works with porcelain of course. And they're in parts and pieces that are assembled.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: And I talked to Karen Karnes, and I've talked to Paula Winokur about a 50 percent loss rate. And Karen, wide-eyed, shaking her head saying, "This is impossible. This has got to stop. This is too painful. This is—" If I might make ten sculptures or 15 sculptures a year, maybe I'll get half of them that aren't cracked and you know. As time goes on, and the skills develop and more and more neurotic behavior about drying and assembling at a particular moment in time when the clay matches and you're not upsetting the porcelain in any way and all these things that one does. But for me this subtle shade of glassy white, because I'm exposing the clay. The clay is part of the content. And this clay pulls me right back to the ancient Chinese porcelains from a thousand years ago. And I feel like I'm here today doing—using—the same material, firing it in the atmospheric kiln, doing the same kind of thing. And it's this link to this tradition.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: That means a lot to me. So I consider it not necessarily in the sense media-drive, but the media is part of my content because it's always referring back to a source. And it means a lot to me. It doesn't mean—no one, very few people would know what I'm talking about. More people in the field that could recognize the differences. But certainly the typical collector wouldn't see the subtle difference. Or they might not know why they recognize my work or like my work. They can't verbalize it, that there's something about it. And I'm thinking sometimes that that is what it is about it. It is—in part with the content—it is the materials that are so unusual—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: —and beautiful and, you know, what they like about my work. But they don't know—

MS. RIEDEL: They might be drawn to the imagery. They might be drawn to the forms. They might be drawn to the stories behind it. But you're thinking that there's something that's very subtle and nuanced that they may not even be aware of, which is that color and that sheen.

MS. SUPERIOR: And it's white glass really. That's why there's so much movement. I don't know if I mentioned that yesterday. I probably—I do all the time. That's why there's so much melting because we're pushing these materials to their edge.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. Now is it because it's such a high silica content in the clay? Is that it?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, yes. It's the same temperature as glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. So the glaze melts.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, the glaze and the clay fuse in a glassy way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: And there's so much vitrification, the particles fusing together, and they become so dense. As opposed to porous earthenware which is very airy and open and permeable. Great for flower pots, you know. The air comes in and out. This becomes a solid glass particle alignment thing. That's why there's so much cracking and warping and all these things that go on. And that shouldn't be the emphasis of the discussion about the work, but you can't get away from it. It is part of it. And I chose this material because I loved it in the way that someone might choose to work with gold as opposed to silver.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So you work with your problems. And I've worked with my problems. And sometimes I've turned lemons into lemonade with several pieces on my shelf that I haven't tossed into the trash bin yet. And the form has spoken to me in a different way. One piece that I think is very significant for me—I'm trying to think of, maybe this is early nineties.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's something called "Clay Heaven" on one side and "The Art Life". And what it is, is it's a vessel, an hourglass-shaped vessel. And in the bisque fire I noticed it had a fine hairline crack in it when came out. And I

knew that it would open up at least an eighth of an inch. So I liked the form and thought maybe I'd remake the form. So I didn't throw it out. But I was reading something about Japanese tea bowls and the tradition of filling a crack with gold and emphasizing the crack. And because it happened to have cracked in the kiln firing doesn't make it a defective, worthless piece of junk. [Laughs.] As we might think of it in America as a second. A dirty word, a second. They revered the kiln and the kiln gods and all of that special—the special effects of atmospheric kiln firing when you're hoping for exciting things to happen. You're not certain. You hope the weather, the other pots and glazes that are near each other, all of these uncontrollable factors have something to do with the final result.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So once someone has gone through that much for something, a minor crack is only one tiny aspect of all that's gone into that object. And they just go with the flow, let it be seen and celebrate the crack by filling it with gold. So I said, okay, I've got something here that's going to crack. I'm going to fill it with gold, emphasize the crack. And I'm going to make this object about loss; and the fact that just because something has a minor imperfection, it doesn't make it worthless. So this might be one of the first wooden bases that Roy made for me. And I had, naturally, working with porcelain for years, I had things that had broken. I have lots of shards around that I saved for one reason or another. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with them. But I had plenty of shards in boxes and bags. So I decided to cover a base, to do some controlled mosaics where I made some labels and titles on one side says "Art Endures." So I surrounded some miniature plates and regular shards. So it's some kind of a control to this mosaic base. And the painting that's on the body of the vessel is a mountain of drawings of my pottery forms that all have the zigzag cracked line. So it's a mountain of cracked pieces. And where are they going? They're going to this imaginary place with happy speaking, singing angels. They're going to clay heaven somewhere.

And it's about the life of the potter that you cannot be doing this if you become too attached to your work. You've got to let things go because there's a tremendous amount of loss in ceramics and huge learning curves, you know. And most clay people in one way or another are winging it to some degree. This is not industry. I mean industry have brilliant ceramic engineers figuring out how to make things for Ginori and Sèvres and Arabia, and all of these beautiful ceramic porcelain companies. So that they have a flawless object. It's very, very highly technical for it. So for our little individual artists, I mean especially with this kind of porcelain, there are problems and the way I'm handling it with dry slabs. So the pieces that do come out perfectly are very, very, very valuable to me emotionally because they're a scarcity. And you know no one really comprehends that, you know, the collector, and the dealer is not interested in that. That's my problem and my story. But it is part of this work. And when they come out perfectly, it makes it all worthwhile. And you just—you know you're on to the next kiln. You've got to, you know, opening the kiln can be—it's Christmas morning. It's fabulous, it's so exciting, but it could also be filled with a lot of disappointment and upset. Especially if you're counting on something for an exhibition or a deadline. But you have to just let it wash over your back and march on and think about the next kiln. Or change your materials.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned preparing for exhibitions. And we talked a little bit about commissions, we talked a little bit about participating in theme shows. Are there any theme shows—for example we were talking about—yes, Linneaus.

MS. SUPERIOR Oh yes, saying that when you're invited to a show, it's like being given an assignment?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But have any of those "assignments" led to new series of work?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure. Of course. Even my graphics for Pinch Pottery led to objects that I would make in the future just by having to think about the forms and the things I was drawing. So everything always feeds the bigger picture.

MS. RIEDEL: Something that we mentioned earlier this morning that I want to be sure we're able to address is the importance of icons and archetypes in your work. Probably dates to your interest in Egyptian work. But then certainly with a lot of your favorite painters from Italy.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, the Russian icon? I love all of those icon paintings. I love them. That's another, early Renaissance painting. Once again, to me that links to Egyptology, the stillness, the sense of shape, the lack of movement, the frontality of most pieces, the beauty of the materials, the gold, the exquisite palette and the flatness of the surface. It's before Botticeli, you know, was able to come in and start sculpting the form and filling out the flesh. These figures are flatter at this time. I think Giotto was one of the most brilliant painters, revolutionarily ahead of his time. Those little hands from heaven coming in at the edges of his painting in 1350 or whatever year that was are outrageously—conceptually outrageous.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is the piece of yours that has the little hand imagery too?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, I do that from time to time, have little hands coming in from outside from above, doing something or other. We were looking at something yesterday which—But I love that idea of hands coming down. And in Egyptology Akhenaten, the sun god, there were will hands that came out of the sun, rays. And that's an often common image in Akhenaten's and Nefertiti's period. The sun god period. And gods and goddesses and mythology. I love all of that stuff. I loved folk tales, reading folk tales in school. Just imaginary materials. And Egyptology was very much like the goddesses and gods and magical animals, and it just sparked my imagination tremendously. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Please.

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I was just saying most of my inspiration comes from the past. But I adore many contemporary artists as well. But it's more I'm fed and nourished—it's like the vitamins come from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And the pastries might be the news things that are, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So do you think of yourself as a part of an international tradition? Do you think of yourself as part of an American tradition? Or do you really not think about that one way or the other?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I'm always being told that I'm not categorizable or out of category. So I just see myself as doing my job every day and enjoying myself and having a good time. And, you know, I think I've got something going on if my aim is to make something beautiful and joyful that others most probably will like it. You know which puts me in an okay position to be a self-employed artist which I can't believe, but I have done this for 30 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see yourself as part of a romantic tradition?

MS. SUPERIOR: Unquestionably. Absolutely. I can't help myself. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Has technology has any effect on your work?

MS. SUPERIOR: Just driven me even crazier than I already have been with my research.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh.

MS. SUPERIOR: [Laughs.] It's now ah! Oh, it's—

MS. RIEDEL: So now just instead of rooms full of books you've got the Internet.

MS. SUPERIOR: I can go to any museum in the world. I can visit the Museum of Archaeology in Naples and look at their collections. I can go to the Museum of Cycladic Art. It's mind-boggingly marvelous as an information tool. So I'm ecstatic about it. Roy really grasps the whole thing and, once again, helps me a lot with anything technical. I mean I can Google, I can search, I can send an email. But I don't do very much more than that.

MS. RIEDEL: One thing we really haven't talked about in any depth yet is your working process. Would you describe it and how it's changed over time?

MS. SUPERIOR: Is that anything that we might see at the studio?

MS. RIEDEL: Except we won't have the—

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh!

MS. RIEDEL: Well, if we can talk about it here and then maybe we'll have a chance at the studio.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. I mean we could talk at the studio, too.

MS. RIEDEL: I just am not sure of the timeframe. Well, also the noise factor.

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, okay. Well, what are you asking?

MS. RIEDEL: Just your working process. Maybe if things start with ideas, if they start with the actual process of building the piece? What your working process is in the studio, outside of the studio, how a piece comes about? And if each one is different? If it's changed over time? Any of those questions that resonate with you?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I made a piece—maybe we talked about it yesterday—called *The Land of the Idea*, which is about the artist's thinking process and where ideas come from.

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect. Let's talk about that.

MS. SUPERIOR: Looking for the image with the words, what is it, invention?

MS. RIEDEL: Alright. Interpretation? Innovation, I think, isn't it? Innovation, interpretation, invention.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, I did think about where ideas come from. And made this piece to once again to thank wherever the compliments go for allowing our mind to work as well as it does and come up with ideas. It is a gift.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: And I've been very fortunate in that I've never been through a period of artist's blocks, never. I've always got too much to do. I've got a million sources of inspiration to tap on. So there's never a shortage of work to do.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. SUPERIOR: That's never been my problem.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you work on multiple pieces at once?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you work on multiple scales at once?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, possibly. I mean that's kind of the nature of ceramics. There are certain practical things that dictate certain things, like the size of your kiln. These are not issues that, you know, would affect a painter. Maybe the size of the linen, limitation of the width, or something like that. But there are certain technical limitations. And, you know, my kiln holds about 20 objects, let's say. Let's say I fire the kiln three times a year. So that's, you know, sometimes I'm working on larger-scale pieces, and I need to get them through, and I might have to sort of fire an emptyish kiln or just with kiln furniture in it or with other friends' work in the kiln so that I could get my two sculptures through. So there's a lot of juggling. And sometimes I fire pieces if I need something for a deadline in a friend's kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So there's a lot of that neighborliness borrowing a cup of sugar from the other potters or sharing kiln space, which is once again a wonderful part of the ceramic period. They understand. [Laughs.] Everyone understands.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking, for example, of the travel pieces, some of the ones we've mentioned, about *Oh Britannia*, the piece about France. Those are very specific forms suited to very specific images. Do you sketch those out before you begin?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You have a very exact sense of what's going where.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. After having gone to England, I just thought about all the things that I loved about it most. And you know getting the food in there, the little miniature English breakfast; they do that really, really well. Although, you know, their food is really great. Now there are a lot of wonderful chefs in London. But a little miniature William Shakespeare portrait and some of his words, his beautiful poetry. A little relief vignette of the London Bridge and the Parliament Building and ships on the Thames. And of course a British charger of King Charles, a blue-and-white Delft, English Delft ware imitating porcelain on top of this real porcelain surface. So it's the imitation is made of the real thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, just these funny insider porcelain and ceramic historical jokes [laughs] amuse me.

MS. RIEDEL: When did the stacked forms begin, and what was the inspiration for that?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, achieving scale in porcelain is a difficult thing to do. I kept pushing bigger, larger pieces, and wasn't succeeding very well. So I had to think of other building methods. And I like stacked objects. I have stacked tins. I like wedding-cake-shaped pieces. And I'd been making two-sided pieces. So these stacked

marquis shapes seemed like an inevitable—a good solution to stacking objects and achieving scale. And then I have a great time with spouts, putting them wherever I think they might work. And I'm attuned to symmetry. So I make these completely impractical, nonfunctional porcelain extravagances. But, you know, I just happen to be working in porcelain, in this medium. So the teapot is just an iconic form to be working with. But it's like a canvas for me. It really doesn't— It just has all of—it's loaded with historic references. And it's just the canvas that I'm telling the story on. So I can make it as wild and crazy—put 15 spouts on something and, you know, handles or lids. Just play with all the elements involved with the anatomy of the teapot. As I've played with the anatomy of the vessel and the cup and the plate. It's just been a vocabulary.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned a few moments ago some of the community—

MS. SUPERIOR: I just have to get something to drink here.

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, have you done any teaching at Penland, Haystack, Arrowmont, anything like that?

MS. SUPERIOR: No, I haven't done the workshop circuit at all. I felt one saint in the household was enough. My husband taught for many, many, many years, and I was a faculty wife often entertaining students. But I never had a desire to teach. I prefer just being in the studio making things or designing things rather than talking to others about their work. I think we mentioned it yesterday—

MS. RIEDEL: We did.

MS. SUPERIOR: —that I'm just too selfish to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: I'd rather make something.

MS. RIEDEL: And something else that's come up in our conversation is that in many ways—you have a graduate degree, but you didn't go to Davis, or RIT, or Alfred, or Cranbrook. So in many ways there's—

MS. SUPERIOR: I'm out of the circle. I'm out of the scene, the national clay scene. So I'm off the radar charts for most academic ceramists. And that's all right, I guess. You know I suppose it's fine. But when you're among the academic surrounding, the hierarchy becomes an important issue. I mean I'm not really affected very much by it because I'm not involved frequently in that community. But I'm definitely an outsider.

MS. RIEDEL: And yet your painting skills, your background, your undergraduate degree in painting, and then going into clay, really set you on a different trajectory.

MS. SUPERIOR: Exactly. Than the typical route that the ceramic sculptor has taken. They might have been in the sculpture department. I was in the painting department. The High School of Art and Design set me off on a really powerful path, feeling that my course was set at such a young age. Being in Manhattan, knowing what those schools meant in Manhattan—meant you were very special because you had to apply to get in. It was a big acceptance thing. You were accepted out of thousands of kids that were applying for these things, New York being what it is. All the boroughs, everyone was applying for these schools from all the art departments in the five boroughs. It's a huge thing in New York high schools to be able to be accepted to the science high schools, whatever the special high schools are, is a fabulous gift to New York City high school students. So I had great—it was a marvelous ego-boosting start. [Kitchen noises.]

MR. SUPERIOR: Sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: Roy is so graciously making us lunch. It's okay. It's almost done.

MS. SUPERIOR: He's so unconscious.

[END DISC 4]

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, let's talk about your retrospective recently at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was 2006?

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And an extraordinary collector who's been almost a patron to you, Melinda Sullivan, when did she first become aware of your work? When did she start collecting? How did the retrospective come about?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, the story that she has told me is she had a house on Nantucket, and they were window shopping one evening after dinner. And were looking in the windows of Dane Gallery on Nantucket, which is a great location on a corner with solid windows wrapped around the entire gallery. And there she saw one of my mermaid relief platters; mermaid's have a tea party probably. And she came in the next morning, and she bought the piece. And then ever after she was asking the Danes to see anything of mine that came in. And she started collecting.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that roughly, do you remember? Early nineties, before that? Eighties perhaps.

MS. SUPERIOR: Nineties. Nineties. I don't have the date at my fingertips, but I can find it at some point. But Melinda is a jewel, an extraordinarily generous person. She's passionate about whatever she does, her home, her parties. Her home is impeccably magnificent, filled with all kinds of treasures from around the world. The most beautiful carpets. And, oh, porcelain collections and collections.

MS. RIEDEL: Porcelain—is that her focal point?

MS. SUPERIOR: That is, yes. Yes. What I was so, so excited about Melinda, is that she was a major collector of antique porcelain. And she branched out into my contemporary porcelain. And she did admire the quality and character of the clay. And with her knowledge, that meant a tremendous amount to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: Because those are all sources of inspiration. And for this knowledgeable porcelain expert and collector to want to move out, make a reach like that—I've known many antique collections, and they just don't go beyond the antique ground except maybe tiny, tiptoe little bit. This is a major collection. She's collected my things in the way that she's collected groups of Staffordshire or Limoges or whatever it is she's collecting. She had a huge collection of DuPaquier porcelain. She's just written the main authoritative three-volume book covering the first Viennese porcelain factory, DuPaquier, who's been very under documented. And she took care of that, and it was a five-year project. And she did a magnificent job, and she had an exhibition and a symposium last spring at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that was fabulous. And she had a wonderful party at a great restaurant in Manhattan for everyone at the symposium. She's so generous and enormously, wonderfully-hearted person. And she's on the board, I would imagine, of the New Britain Museum of American Art. And I think she asked Douglas Highland to come and take a look at my work. And he visited the house and took a look at my work. And at this point the idea was that Melinda had collected so much of my work that she had, I don't know what, maybe 40 pieces. And then I, as you see here, have a lot of my own work and could supplement the show. So the show was a combination of her collection and important pieces from my collection. So she made that happen. And she produced a catalogue for me. So I'm speechless—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: —at the support that she has given me. It's just—she's been like this angel guardian.

MS. RIEDEL: Almost like an Old World patron in Italy.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. It's just things that you read about in books. So I've been blessed. I've been very lucky over the years to have, from time to time, found women especially, women appear to be mainly purchasing my work and collecting my work. I think it maybe fundamentally has a feminine character to it or attracts women anyway. And I've had a few over the years that would get into heavy collecting, you know, where they would just—every year they'd buy a piece or two pieces or sometime like that. And amass 50 pieces. Years back, one of my first collectors, Pat Wilkes, who discovered us the first year that we opened Pinch Pottery. She's the only person that has a 12-plate dinnerware set of mine with hand-painted animal plates. And she has a tremendous collection of my early work, the first ten years of my production. She loved to use things. She particularly liked to be able to use and have functional work. Then as time went on, she began to move into these nonfunctional crazy teapot pieces and acquired a major piece, maybe a tea temple of some kind. She has commissioned some pieces to go in special architectural niches for her home in Martha's Vineyard. There have been a few other collectors like that that seem to appear every decade or so, in addition to all the people that have collected my work over the years. So I've been very, very fortunate to have made something that other people enjoy living with.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Given the number of decades that your career has spanned now, have you seen changes in craft over that time that you would point to or that you can single out? Any changes in trend, any changes in focus? Anything that's been noteworthy to you? I mean given your perspective in the longer spectrum of ceramic history, I realize this is a relatively short period of time which I'm talking about. But from the time you started those first fairs to what you see now at Ferrin Gallery. We were talking earlier that there's almost a full circle with the functional work. Started out with functional, functional disappeared for a while, now functional is coming back.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes, well, the economy has changed the business so much. And there were years— I have friends that continue to do craft shows and talk about the graying of the—there's a bear out my window! Whoa! I'm in shock.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, okay, there was just a bear.

MS. SUPERIOR: [Laughs.] An bold bear.

MS. RIEDEL: A bear outside the back door. That's a first. Okay, let's see. We were talking about Melinda and patrons that you've had over time. We mentioned Pat Wilkes. Anyone else?

MS. SUPERIOR: A woman named Holly Hobbie.

MS. RIEDEL: Alright.

MS. SUPERIOR: Who was an interior designer. And she—actually I'm sorry, we did finish that. We had moved on to craft and any changes in the field over time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well, I've been out of craft shows from many years. But friends that—or when I visit a show, there've been things said: the graying of the craft field and that the craftspeople are old. And if they have kids that are 16 to 20 years old, they'll say things like, Oh, Mom, that's just a place for old people. That the demographics weren't coming. But suddenly, especially with online shopping, I am seeing this new crop with this do-it-yourself kind of fashionability. We're finally seeing the next generation coming in. The 30-years-olds are here now making things. The new potters, the new—people are knitting things. The new group of craft artists are arriving, and that's great to see. Slightly different because they're all over and they're starting their businesses online and having astounding effect and getting off the ground so quickly. Everyone of their generation is looking. And we're overhearing young exhibitors say to one another: On, I saw your work online. It's a whole different world. As I said, I was so fortunate to start my career in the way that I did. The Internet is going to once again change every artist's career.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So it's a tectonic shift is taking place now. And I'm, you know, researching it in little bits, finding these things, looking at people's Etsy page. And great for them. It's such a great way for artists to be in control. And everyone in the generation is interested in the same approach to shopping. So that's huge. And of course over the past decade, I'd say, I cannot believe how the entire global artists are here in the United States looking to sell things. That's something I don't remember. I just remember, you know, American artists in all media. But now Eastern European, Asian, internationally, the artists are here.

MS. RIEDEL: Definitely the caliber of the SOFA shows has changed. It's a very different group. It's much more international than that exhibition was even when it began ten or 15 years ago as Chicago International New Art Forms.

MS. SUPERIOR: Right, right. So the computer has flattened and leveled everything, as [Thomas] Friedman has written in his books. And it's happened to our field.

MS. RIEDEL: Mara, when you look back, how has your work been received over time? Has interest been constant? Has it ebbed and flowed? Did it peak and then come down, peak again?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I had sort of two distinct careers in a way. The craft show period and the period where I owned a shop and had a lot of contact with the public.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So you're referring to Pinch Pottery.

MS. SUPERIOR: Pinch Pottery and craft shows. I was out there. I was meeting people all the time. I got feedback constantly, usually positive. My work didn't, you know, evoke much negative commentary. And then I've sort of been in isolation in the past 15 years in my studio with barely, no contact with the public. And it's difficult. It's, you know, that's a wonderful thing to get, that feedback. That could keep you going in itself. Or just the support of positive feedback.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you attend the SOFA fairs at all?

MS. SUPERIOR: I do. I got to SOFA New York. Occasionally I go to Chicago. But I mainly just go to New York. So that's one show a year that I attend. And it's a three-day exposure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: So, so much appears to be hinging on three days' exposure. Although things are online.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's a funny change. I'm forgetting the other parts of the question.

MS. RIEDEL: How your work has been received over time?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, I've always had positive reaction to my work. As I think I said—I'm not sure if I said it on line, on tape—that women are usually my collectors, which puts a certain price limit on things, too. Men spend differently than woman do.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think so?

MS. SUPERIOR: Absolutely. Unquestionably. They'll buy something at a higher range. They're much more decisive. They make a decision, and they just do it. Women, it's much more agonizing for women to spend large amounts of money.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm. That's your experience?

MS. SUPERIOR: That's my experience.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: My observation.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: You know I've been at shows where I've seen a glass artist next door to me or across the way selling $5,000 items without a blink of an eyelash to men. You know an iron sculptor or something. Where their work, they're attracting men. I'm attracting women. It's hard for women to go over $2500 in a craft show.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm. Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: So that's a very practical analysis.

MS. RIEDEL: Given the fact that your work is—given the quality or the content, the fact that we've talked about it tends to be of a romantic tradition, have you seen a difference in response to that over the past 30 or 40 years?

MS. SUPERIOR: Well, things are certainly rough and ready, and edgy is current. I never wanted my work to be fashionable per se because I want it to be perennial. And I've heard remarks made like a country is out of fashion or something along those lines. And if they categorized my work in relation to country, because I was at the craft shows out there at that time, and if I was producing things from the "House and Garden" series—I just don't buy that. I think something classically—of classic quality—endures these fashionable ups and downs. And that is one part of my work, one small part. And also over the past 15 years I think about my resume, and I've been more involved with museum exhibitions and being added to museum collections, which is a different business than dealing with the public and getting lots of feedback; it's a quieter business. I think the other was more fun, to tell you the truth. [Laughs.] You know it was fun getting out there and interacting with the public that much. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the camaraderie. I made all sorts of friends, mostly with jewelers. We trade in beautiful, beautiful things. Roberta Williamson, Lily Fitzgerald, gorgeous, gorgeous jewelers. And did we have fun going to restaurants in Philadelphia and Washington. Just a marvelous community. Those shows were so social and fun with friends. Big dinners, ten, 15 people going to Chinatown in Philadelphia. They were wonderful times. They were social times. And even if we didn't make any money, we would all come back—I'd come back to the studio. I'd have one or it wouldn't be a great show or it would be a down show or something like that. But you'd always say, "We had a fabulous time." We always had a fabulous time because we reconnected with these friends every six months.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: So.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think I've just got a final question left. Two maybe. When you look at the spectrum of your career, what do you think of as the strengths or the limitations of painting on clay? Ceramics in general and particular painting on clay. What about that?

MS. SUPERIOR: You say what are the benefits and the—

MS. RIEDEL: What are the strengths and the weaknesses?

MS. SUPERIOR: Okay, so those are two questions.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about it always brings you back? What about it has held your interest all this time?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, well, there's an endless, there's just an endless road to pursue. With form or I mean I haven't even dealt, spent much time, visiting majolica or earthenware or the other clay technologies that interest me.

MS. RIEDEL: Earthenware interests you?

MS. SUPERIOR: Earthenware interests me in majolica. There's a big tradition of painted low-fire ceramics. I did some of that in school and in some of my early years, too. And I did that at Watershed at a workshop—I mean a residency—a few years ago, 2005.

MS. RIEDEL: In Maine.

MS. SUPERIOR: Worked in red earthenware.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting. I didn't know that.

MS. SUPERIOR: Yes. That was part of my early start. This is a—

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired that?

MS. SUPERIOR: Quimper. All the European faience which was copying porcelain.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: These are the two methods and techniques that I'm attracted to, the painted traditions.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUPERIOR: Of tin-glazed earthenware and high-fired porcelain.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUPERIOR: That's what I'm interested in. So I've just scratched the surface. Even spending 30 years in this, you just scratch the surface. It's so complicated, endlessly—you know ceramics can achieve any surface, any form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUPERIOR: It's vast. As its mask changes, what can be done with it, it's just the greatest medium. The limitations for me have been color. Ceramics gives so much back. To my mind the most difficult medium is painting because you have to create all the magic yourself. You're not getting anything back. You have to be a brilliant painter to my standards, what I'd be looking for, to create magic with paint. The porcelain is giving back to me. It's a 3-D object. It's beautiful in itself. I'm enhancing this beautiful material. I'm starting with something. Like if Roy's working with wood, that's one of the things that probably attracts him to it. It's an exquisite material. When you're a gold jeweler, when you're working with wood, you're starting out with an exquisite slab. You've got something to begin with that's already saying "I'm beautiful. Do something with me." When you're looking at a board or a canvas, you're looking at a white blank, and you're bringing it all. That's rough. I mean that's a very difficult medium.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: So that's one of my things I've thought about painting versus ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Any weaknesses in particular? Any difficulties? We've certainly covered technical issues.

MS. SUPERIOR: The weaknesses in—

MS. RIEDEL: Of the medium. Painting on clay, ceramics in general. Clearly it's breakable. It warps. But anything else? I mean in some ways the limitations you've described as strengths.

MS. SUPERIOR: The limited palette. I mentioned to you a while ago that I worked in soft sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUPERIOR: You see the object that I made in 1979. I did quite a bit of fabric work. And what drove me crazy about that material was that it faded. It didn't hold up. Textiles don't hold up for me. So I needed something permanent. And the fact that you go to a museum and you see a Ming vase from a thousand years ago, whatever, and it's still there, is very attractive to me. And it doesn't change. I have a funny story in relation to that. I once sold a relief piece, an interior scene with table and cupboard and miniature plates to a woman at the Philadelphia Craft Show. And maybe five years later, seven years later, I get a call from her, telling me—I'll often get calls from people that have broken things and want to know if I repair them or who to send them to or whatever. But she called and said she didn't know what was happening, but the color was fading on her piece. So I thought to myself, this is not possible. It is not possible for this to change in any way, shape, or form. What on earth could this be? So I was starting to ask her questions. And said to her—I think she hung it in her kitchen—I said, "Have you ever washed it?" She was afraid to wash it, and it was just covered with a layer of grease and dust. She was afraid to wash it because of the relief surface. I said, "Just put it in some dishwashing liquid and use a Q-tip. Thank God! I was terrified. I thought, my God, here's another technical problem that I haven't even imagined could happen.

No, the permanence of the porcelain I love. It can break, it can drop. But I can use the shards and turn them into something else. But the permanence and the unchangingness of the medium. Even paintings will fade. Mediums will crack. Technical things—strange technical things—can happen with these alchemical surfaces. But porcelain doesn't change, and I like that. Yes, and I don't usually like to spend my time on ephemeral things because I like a tangible object at the end of my work. Although I do garden. Yes, but performance art could never suit me. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Where do you see your work fitting into contemporary art?

MS. SUPERIOR: Oh, dear. Mmm. That's an important question.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe the continuum is longer than your perspective.

MS. SUPERIOR: Could you repeat that?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I'm wondering where you see your work fitting into contemporary art.

MS. SUPERIOR: I'm a little concerned that it doesn't. And it's something on my mind, and it's something that I think about with my dealer. I mean I'd like to fit in. I'd like to belong. And I am curious about what's happening and how my work fits into it. It's very funny: I actually mentioned something along these lines to a painter that does quite well that's my age or a little older than me. And I told him I'd love to have a conversation about contemporary art with him and how we fit in it. He said to me, "You're too old to worry about how you fit into contemporary art." Like his work was staying the same. He wasn't— I mean he's one that sells everything he makes. He doesn't have to—he's not concerned. [Bell rings.] Roy, there was a bear here!

Since there's so much explicit sexual content and shocking, shock art, which doesn't come naturally for me to think about doing. That could be a generational difference. But I can't chase and run after things that are happening. I have to have things that make sense to myself to work on. I'm curious about it. Now a generational thing is happening where the new graduates, the recent graduates, are referring to things that I'm not quite familiar with. And it's curious to me as to what they're being taught in art schools. I've been removed from art schools for a long time. What they're being taught and what's in the air for them. There's always, you know, artists will work on things, and there's just an idea in the air. And somehow or other an artist will be in California or New York, and there's something going on. There's people doing similar things. And that always happens. But I see things that are going on that I just wasn't sure what the references were and what they're being taught.

And I'm suddenly finding, figuring it out, and it's a big reframing of craft and design. And they're teaching a lot more of design history in art schools now. And I've finally figured out where all these big, hideous patterns are coming from, that were hideous when they were popular in the sixties, and they're still hideous today. But I see them all over young women's sculptures. And it's this looking at textile design and repeat pattern. And wallpaper. I've just discovered in the bookstores tons of new books on the history of wallpaper design. And this reemphasize on design. And I think that's what's in the wind among the 30-year-olds in recent graduates. And I'm not interested in it. I was curious about it, but I'm not interested in those sources. So I can't be part of that. You know, why am I seeing these patterns everywhere? Where is this coming from? What is this about? And I finally figured it out, and I'm not interested in it. It's way to meaningless and superficial for me.

MS. RIEDEL: One final question, which is when you think about your work over the past few decades, the series, the particular pieces that have been especially significant, what about your work in particular matters to you?

MS. SUPERIOR: It's very satisfying to look back at all of these tangible objects that exist and will exist way beyond I am here. You know they will exist way into the future. That gives me a lot of comfort. Also since I do not have children, I think sometimes it's not that unusual for an artist to think about their production as their

children. And it makes me feel great, especially to have connected with someone like Melinda, that has helped move my career a lot in that she will—I think she's mentioned that she will donate her collection to a museum someday. So the idea of having had a career and a marvelous life's work, fulfilling marvelous work, a joy, it's my job, is so ingrained in me, it's a job that I adore. And feel blessed to have the job. But it gives me great satisfaction to think that these pieces will be in museums and people will—this is what I am, this is the future. This is what remains. It's my mark.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

[END DISC 5.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]