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Oral history interview with Richard Zane Smith, 2010 August 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Richard Zane Smith on August 26 and 27, 2010. The interview took place in Wyandotte, Oklahoma, and was conducted by Linda Sioui 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.

Richard Zane Smith has reviewed the transcript. His 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

LINDA SIOUI: This is Linda Sioui interviewing Richard Zane Smith at his home in Wyandotte, Oklahoma on August 26, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number Smith-one.

Hello, Richard. How are you?

RICHARD ZANE SMITH: Doing great.

MS. SIOUI: Do you want to tell us a little bit about your childhood? When were you born and where — where were you born and where did you grow up?

MR. SMITH: Okay. I was born August 18, 1955. I was born in Georgia in an army hospital. My parents were down there living while my father was stationed. And my two sisters had been born the year before and I came right after, the year after. So my folks had three children all in two years.

And it was shortly after that we moved to Ballwin, Missouri, which is a suburb outside of St. Louis — 20 miles or so outside of St. Louis. And that's where I spent my growing up years until 14 years of age.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your childhood and your family background?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. I grew up, you know, in a very loving family. My folks really, really cared for us kids. But there were all five of us. They really encouraged creativity. They read to us in the evenings. We would sit around a coffee table and sketch and draw.

My dad was a designer, and he worked for McGraw Hill at times and freelanced and — other companies doing book design and that. And sometimes he would bring home blank books and samples of paper. And we spent a lot of time drawing.

We didn't have television very often. And when we did have television, we were restricted pretty much about what we could watch. And so, evenings were spent usually by reading. My folks would read to us and we would draw.

And, as I said, you know, that was something that was just foundational in our growing up, all of us kids. Sometimes we would be listening to the story and sometimes we'd be a million miles away, you know, just drawing and sketching.

But my mother is a Wyandot tribal member from the Kansas Wyandot Nation. We were always taught to be proud of our ancestry. We didn't know a whole lot about it, and my mom really didn't know a whole lot about it either, but this is something that began to become more interesting to me as I got older.

When I was young, going through school, art classes seemed to be my favorite classes. They always were. And I didn't seem to do real well with the academic subjects. I was maybe a little slow because I didn't go to kindergarten. And I remember going into school and it was — all of sudden I realized that it seemed like most of the kids around me knew more than I

did, and it was kind of intimidating.

But whenever art class came about, I always felt that that was my — Okay, let's bring out the paper and let's bring out the — and I was always pretty good at that all the way through sixth grade and then on through, up into my second year of junior college — or second year of — sorry, second year of junior high.

And then, as a ninth grader, at that period my folks decided they wanted to move into the city in St. Louis and see if they could maybe expose us to more cultural things, more — oh, it just seemed like it was a period of time — that was in '69. A lot of people were fleeing the city, and they were a little more thinking that maybe the city was the place to go.

So it wasn't something I really enjoyed because I was more content with being in nature and being around ponds and catching, you know, tadpoles, and I just loved nature more. I was always that kind of a kid, I guess. So it was a little difficult for me. But we went to a high school and a junior high that had really good arts — good art department.

MS. SIOUI: Okay, regarding your background as an artist, you got interested in art classes as a very early age. What motivated your choice for pottery? Because you are a pottery artist —

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: — if I gather?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. In high school, that's where it started. My first year of high school was really hard, very difficult for me and I barely made it through. But the second year I decided to take a ceramics class and take a couple of other art classes too, and that saved me. They really did. And I immediately, you know, fell in love with the potter's wheel.

We did a little bit of handbuilding in school, but the potter's wheel is what I really loved, you know, just watching people on it. I couldn't wait until I had my chance to do it. And so, that's where, you know, just the feel of clay kind of got into my system, I guess.

And the art teachers at the time — there was Carol Wigger and Tom Lawless. Tom Lawless was the crafts teacher. Carol Wigger was the ceramics instructor there at University City High School in University City, St. Louis — near St. Louis.

They were very cooperative with me and they allowed me sometimes to stay for several hours, you know, in one room or the other, working either in — you know, when I was stone carving in the crafts room or welding, or even getting permission to stay in the ceramics room, you know, for several hours during the day, which was great.

So I was able to really center that time and focus on one thing or the other. And they were very encouraging. They were very encouraging to me as a student. So, yeah, I feel like probably some of my best mentors really came out of high school, Tom Lawless for sure. He was one that really encouraged me a lot.

Whatever I showed any interest in, he was there to try to help me with it. We did casting, we did some jewelry, we did bronze casting, and we did, like I mentioned, stone carving, welding, some woodworking, drawing, design. And then the pottery class was, you know, another thing, but it all kind of — to me it was all the same, you know. I was just enjoying working with natural materials, which was my favorite there.

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

You talked a little bit earlier that — you mentioned that your mother is a Wyandot tribal member from the Kansas group. We both know that pottery is a distinct cultural trade of the Wyandot, and Wyandot people from a long time ago. Like back at the time of contact, the 17th century, there was a lot of pottery-making among the Wyandot, the ancestors.

Is there any link between your primary interest with pottery and your Wyandot background, or it just happened that way?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, you know, I think it kind of just happened because at that time I didn't even know that much history about the ancient Wyandot, or the Wyandotte. I had no clue, you know? I knew that my ancestors had come from Ohio, but beyond that I didn't know that

they'd come all the way from Ontario and the homelands back there.

So at the time, no, I guess I didn't even really know that connection. It wasn't until later that I realized that our people had a pottery tradition too. It was something that had phased out, you know, once the settlers had begun trading and bringing in brass and iron kettles. So, yeah, that's something that sort of came out later.

MS. SIOUI: What type of pottery did you make when you first began to learn?

MR. SMITH: I was really fascinated with pure functional things that were like jugs and bowls and cups and pitchers and plates, making useful things, things that were functional, things that could be everyday useful, you know, kind of pottery. And that just — that was enough for me at the time when I was young, all the way through two years of junior college.

And at the time I was able to attend Meramec Community College in St. Louis after attending high school. And, again, more art classes, drawing, figure drawing and the ceramics. And, again, the ceramics just kept pulling me in more and more. And under Bob Allen, who was the teacher there, he really saw that I had a little bit of a talent, and he really encouraged me to officially take the class.

The first year I didn't think I had room for a ceramics class, so I would just come in and visit, and I'd work on the wheel, on the potter's wheel, just to keep in tune with it. And he kept watching me and finally he said, "You know, you ought to be taking my class." [They laugh.] So I said, "Oh, Okay, well, I don't know. I've got a really full schedule." And he said, "Well, we'll try to fit you in here somehow."

So we somehow worked it out and I was able to get in there. And I just went — I just went crazy with it. I just fell in love with that clay. And I spent as much time in that ceramics room as I could.

But at this time, you know, when I was young and in school there, I didn't have any patience for handbuilding. I really loved that potter's wheel and, you know, being able to make 20 or 30 pots a day; that was just so wonderful to me. You know, I just loved it. It wasn't until later that handbuilding really got interesting.

MS. SIOUI: You said you did take some college education in arts. Did you go to university for further art training?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I did. I went to Kansas City Art Institute. And I came in as a junior. And right away I talked to the instructors there and I told them, you know, that this was really expensive for me to attend a school like this. And I was living off of my own savings. My folks really weren't able to help much with my education, so every dollar was really important.

And I found a place where I could rent in — I guess it was '76, maybe '76, for — I think it was $75 a month, which was about all I could afford. And I had a very strict budget I had to live by — $30 a month for food. And I was able to do it but it was tight. And there were a lot of students who were living the same way.

But I told the instructors right off, I said, "I'm coming here for one year and this is all I can afford, so I'm going to be a junior and a senior at the same year." [Laughs.] I think they might have thought I was joking about that, but that's really what I felt. And so I was there to absorb everything I could, everything about kilns, about firing, about glaze-making, glazes, slips. As much as I could absorb I was there.

And I came and I worked hard. Mornings, nights, I was there, you know, either working in the studio, you know, making pots or trimming or, you know, doing glazes, slips, whatever. But I really gave myself to it, and it was all I could afford. And my savings kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

And eventually, you know, the time came and it was my last critique. Victor Babu was my junior instructor, and then there was Ken Ferguson was the senior instructor. And Ken was always — I think he really enjoyed, you know, having me around because I was a hardworking student, and he would always be teasing me about things.

I'd show up at the senior functions and he would say, "Zane, what are you doing here?" And I said, "Ken, I told you." I said, "This is my last year. This is my first year and my last year. I

can only afford one year." He just would just brush it off.

But the last year, my — well, when the year finished, my junior, and I was having a critique and I had all my work out on the table, and they were talking to me, I just said, "This is it." And they kept — because Ken kept talking about next year. You know, he kept talking about, you know, next year, and I said, "I can't do that." Oh, he was pretty upset.

But anyway, I left after that and returned to St. Louis for a while to work and try to raise some money. And I was really thinking about opening a pottery shop somewhere out in one of the rural areas, one of the rural towns outside of St. Louis. And we were looking into that.

At that point I was also engaged to be married, and that didn't work out. And in 1977 I packed up all my belongings, everything I owned, all my tools and all my — you know, the things that were important to me, and loaded up my little truck and my little Chevy LUV and took off and went West, and spent about a year just living on — living off of different jobs, working jobs.

Sometimes I'd visit friends of the family. I'd make sandals. I did a lot of sandals. The years before, you know, paying for my school, I made sandals, leather sandals, and cut tire tread for the soles. So that helped pay, you know, for a lot of my education.

So I did that whenever I could, and traveled around, and eventually ended up at a little mission school outside of Holbrook, Arizona, where I had stopped in to visit some friends. It was a Navajo mission school.

Mostly it was a little — the kids that would come there were Navajo speakers, little kids who Navajo was their first language, and they were coming to attend school. I believe it was kindergarten through ninth — ninth grade. I don't think — maybe they had a — yeah, I think they had a tenth grade. Yeah. They had one or two students. It was pretty small.

And it was there where they asked me, they said — you know, they were telling me — they said, "We have no art teacher for the — how would you like to be an art teacher for the year," realizing that those kids would be tortured by having teachers who didn't know anything about art. And I saw what they had and what they were doing to the kids.

When I saw the art department and I saw the room and I saw the back storage room. They had all these bottles, like bleach bottles and glitter. Oh, boy. I said, "Yeah, I think I'll do it. I'll hang on. I can do it." But they said, "Well, we can't really pay you much. We can pay you $50 a month." I said, "Oh, that's okay." As long as I had a place to stay and eat, I was fine.

It was there, when I was an art teacher for those kids — and we had a really, really limited budget, another $50 for the year for art supplies, and I realized that we had to really do a lot of scrounging around.

So, on weekends, some of the boys in the — or some of the kids in the boarding school would be stuck there because their parents didn't come to pick them up like they normally do. So to cheer them up, you know, we'd let the boys get in the back of the truck and we'd just go out in the desert. And sometimes we'd get a can of watercolors and they'd paint themselves up and they'd just play Indian — [they laugh] — out on the hills, running around.

But it was out there that we found clay — not only clay but pottery sherds too, which was wonderful, seeing these ancient pottery sherds. And I'd never seen that, you know, back growing up in Missouri where everything is covered with grass. So to see just open country, I loved it out there.

I mean, I loved the desert and I really connected with it. And then to see pottery sherds, you know, and little mounds, you know, where you could see the ruins of people that had been there for, you know, up to a thousand years ago and they're still there, still sitting where they left them. That just intrigued me so much.

And I started looking at these sherds, I started looking at the designs on the sherds. And there was a particular type of sherd that I was interested in because I'd never seen it before, and it was what I — it's known by anthropologists and archeologists as the corrugated pottery. I had never seen that stuff. I'd never read about it. I really had no knowledge of it all. And here were, you know, little pieces of it all over the place.

And so I would take a piece or two back to the dorms where I was working and study them. And we would take some of that clay back and we'd experiment with that clay. And we made a lot of pots that year. The students really, really enjoyed it. And that's where I started handbuilding and really took it seriously, and started actually trying a few of those corrugated, you know, pots to see if I could imitate that technique, to see if I could really understand it.

But I was trying a lot of different things. I was looking at the Anasazi pottery sherds, the black on white, the red, black and white, and I was just trying to imitate that too and trying to see if I could kind of get a feel for that technique.

MS. SIOUI: When you talk about corrugated pottery, can you explain a little bit what it is?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, it's a technique of building a pot where you use really small coils, very tiny coils, smaller than a pencil-size coil. And these coils are rolled quickly and they're shingle-lapped over each other. So it's not like stacking coils but it's more like building something in a shingle method.

And I found it was really a very strong way to build a vessel. By doing that, those shingle — that shingle coil, there was a lot of contact with the coil below it, so it had this long merging of those two coils, and it made it much more strong.

You know, in high — or — yeah, in high school, where we were doing coiling, we'd just stack coils on top of each other. And then you had one coil bulging out from the other and, you know, some inside, you know, not bulging, and there was all that.

But by laying these coils in the shingle method, I was able to achieve a symmetry and a lightness, a thinness to the pottery that I couldn't do before. And so I really enjoyed that. But it wasn't the only thing at the time. I was interested in just slips too, you know, the painting of slips.

And even then I was doing things like, well, you know, the Anasazi people, they were looking around at their world and they saw mesas in the distance and they saw these geometric patterns. And they were putting things into their work, you know, that they saw every day.

And I thought, well, you know, I see cars going down the highway. So even then I would have pots — I'd make pots with, you know, cars cut into them. You know, even though it was kind of a native technique, it was — you know, with automobiles and more contemporary things as well.

So I was kind of flipping back and forth with that and the corrugated stuff was just on the side. But it was fascinating, and I really — I didn't think anything would come of it. I had no idea what was coming.

MS. SIOUI: So is that what you would say, that these were the best influences, the influences at play in your early artwork?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I really do. I would credit the ancient stuff the most. But, I mean, to have those influences I did at school, they were definitely strong influences, and probably even more than I realized.

They were — you know, when I went to Kansas City Art Institute, there was — it was more of a — it was — well, our ceramic culture, in a way, this sort of — I don't know how you'd say it — more of a — there was the American culture but there was also a connection with Japan and with European ceramics.

And so, these kinds of techniques and things were all being kind of blended together with a lot of experimentation encouraged, you know, for students. These were all good influences, but none of them were really of my own indigenous background. So there was also something missing, and something I always felt missing, you know, when I was working with more European ideas, European designs and that.

MS. SIOUI: At that time, what would you say would have been your most rewarding educational experience — education in the wide sense of the term?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah. Having those mentors, you know, who would help me just to —

because they knew I was interested in learning and learning and learning, and I was just curious about everything, any technique. You know, that was a strong one.

But then those — you know, coming across those ruins, those Anasazi ruins, and seeing work that was created for everyday use, you know, there was beauty attached to it. There was design. There were all these elements that were in the clay that were not just decorative, and I knew they weren't just decorative. There was something more important than decoration, that these things were part of their life.

And that really touched me because I hadn't seen pottery, you know, from our own — my own Wyandot tradition. I'd never seen it before. Up to that time I'd never seen pottery from our ancestors.

So I'd kind of almost attached myself to that, those Anasazi people, just because I was around them for that whole year, and actually for the few years after that too — many years after that. So they were kind of my — yeah, I mean, the fingerprints in the clay, the — you know, the little slip of the brush you could see. From their little yucca brush you'd see a little movement, or you'd see a bump in the pot sherd. You know, you'd see something where there was a mark left.

All these things spoke to me in a way that probably maybe other people wouldn't respond to, but that was my language, you know, because I was so — because I worked with my hands instead of my, you know, other more academic stuff. You know, I was much more —

MS. SIOUI: When you talk about the Anasazi and their work and the corrugated technique, is it the same? Did the Anasazi practice the corrugated —

MR. SMITH: Yes.

MS. SIOUI: — the small coils?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, they were the ones who did — and the Mogollon — the Mogollon people too — Anasazi, the Mogollon, Mimbres. There were different groups in the Southwest there, from Northern Arizona to Southern New Mexico, or kind of mid-New Mexico.

This technique was being practiced up until — I think the archeologists say up until the 1400s. Somewhere around there it sort of phased out and it was being replaced by smoother ware. So, somewhere in there it kind of — it just stopped being made.

MS. SIOUI: You were saying just a little while ago that while you were doing your artwork from the early European style of artwork that you learned in the pottery and ceramics to the influence of the Anasazi — and you said that you felt like there was still something that was missing. Can you tell me a little bit more about it? What do you feel was missing at that time?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's a tough one. I mean, to actually — to try to figure out — or to think what that was. I think it was a grounding. There was a — it was like a sense there was a root missing. I mean, I knew I was rooted with the Wyandot people somehow in the land.

In fact, when I was in Kansas City, you know, the old Wyandot cemetery, it was right down the street. I mean, I could — I mean, it was a few miles, but I would take my bike down there, you know, and drive out — ride out to that and visit the cemetery. And I'd sit out there and — these were some of my own — my great-grandmother and my great-grandfather. And my mom actually has two brothers buried there.

And this is, you know, downtown Kansas City, so it's in the middle of chaos of a city. And here's this little park, you know, with these old tombstones. That was my — you know, my kin, my ancient kin. I mean, to me they were ancient. They weren't that old, but — but not knowing a whole lot about the history started making me curious.

And I'd see names on those tombstones and I'd think, oh, that one is familiar but that one's not. You know, so I'd start — the curiosity started growing more and more: You know, what do we know — what do I know about the Wyandot people? And people were asking me.

I remember people asking me what kind of language was spoken by the Wyandot. And I said, "Oh, I think it's Algonquin." [They laugh.] I didn't know. I think I just — I was just — I

wasn't certain. You know, I knew they weren't Iroquois. I mean, I just knew that somehow, but I didn't realize — there was so much I didn't know, and so much of what our Wyandot people — had been so important to them had just began to fade away.

MS. SIOUI: You were talking a little earlier, when you would take off in the desert with the Navajo people, the Navajo boys. Was there anybody, whether it be in the Navajo community, with your educational background, or after you left school where you apprenticed — did you apprentice with anyone in developing your early techniques?

MR. SMITH: No, it all happened pretty much on my own just by studying those sherds. So, yeah, I can't say that there was any — now, there were some other artists that I was seeing their work, like *Arizona Highways.* I remember an edition of *Arizona Highways* that came out.

And I think I was still in St. Louis at that time, and I was seeing what was being done with the pueblo pottery; you know, new pueblo potters. And I was seeing what they were doing. And I thought, that's incredible. That's wonderful. You know, that's so neat. It's exciting because it's contemporary but it's all rooted, and that's what I was missing.

You know, when I was doing a lot of pottery that was more European-based, the things that really pulled me were things that had to do with more of an ancient European culture too. You know, I mean, stuff that was more rooted in medieval culture or, you know, these older things. I wasn't really interested in a lot of — some of the modern art movements and things.

I mean, I probably learned from them vicariously just by being around it, but I wasn't too impressed with it. It seemed like a lot of the art scene when I was going through school was about shock value and trying to impress people and trying to just kind of blow people away with the weirdest stuff.

And, fortunately, at Kansas City Art Institute, the ceramics program, the ceramics department was pretty grounded, you know. I mean, clay is pretty grounded stuff and it has a history of its own. So it wasn't quite as influenced, you know, by the craziness of the art culture but it still had its influences, and some of that stuff to me was just appalling. It was just ugly. It was like a degrading of beauty.

It was like — you know, it was making fun of people who wanted to create beauty, as if beauty was a crime or it was stupid or it was old-fashioned. And I just couldn't buy that. I felt like there had to be something beautiful in life, and I was — that was just important to me.

MS. SIOUI: Have you had any involvement with Penland School of Crafts [Penland, NC], Haystack Mountain School of Crafts [Deer Isle, ME], Arrowmont School of Arts and Craft [Gatlinburg, TN], Pilchuck Glass School [Stanwood, WA], the Archie Bray Foundation [for Ceramic Arts, Helena, MT], or other educational institutions devoted to craft? If so, please describe a little bit — tell us a little bit more about it.

MR. SMITH: No. I mean, I've certainly met people that had attended some of these, and they really seemed like great, great institutions, you know, because they were — they did seem to try to root people in a skilled craft by really refining their skill and then encouraging creativity. But I never attended any of those kind of things myself.

I was pretty self-disciplined as a — I still am. I mean, I'm pretty self-disciplined, even as a youth. And I really was proud of my own ability to, you know, take care of myself and to push myself. So, yeah, I can't say that any of those really affected me personally, though.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. You said you began traveling and you ended up in the Navajo community for a while.

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: How long did you stay there?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, before — just before we did that, there's another important thing that happened.

When — well, it was after that school, the little mission school where I taught for the year. I met Carol there, and she was a teacher. She was teaching third graders. And we kind of hit it

off, and that spring we were married. And we got married in the desert, out there near the Painted Desert.

And it was our own — you know, we designed it how we wanted it. But neither of us had much money because we were both being paid about the same. We had our $50 check come in every month. And so we saved what we could. We sold her car and we just took off and we hit the road.

Basically we lived out of our car, out of our truck — my truck. We lived for a year that way, pretty much, camping along the side of the road, going visiting little towns and taking some, you know, temporary work.

We eventually worked on a ranch in Idaho, and that whole summer was spent pretty much just working cattle work and whatnot, which was great. It was great. But winter came along and it was getting cold. And the people hadn't really had a place for us to stay. We had to live in a little hay wagon. We made it — kind of converted it into a little shack.

And when it started getting cold and the snow started falling, we decided it was time to go south. So we started heading toward the south. And down south — actually I was thinking, maybe I should finish school. Maybe that's what's missing. Something is — maybe that's what I need to do.

So we went all the way to Tucson to check out the art school there and see if maybe I should, you know, get my senior — I should become a senior and do the whole thing. And we checked out the school and nothing really seemed to click. It just wasn't right.

And we were driving north from Tucson and we were approaching the area of the Superstition Mountains south of Phoenix. And it's a place where I'd camped for a month before, out in the desert out there. I was just isolated out on kind of BLM [Bureau of Land Management] land.

And I talked to Carol and I said, "What do you think if we just camp out for a while? I'll make pots and we'll try to sell them, you know, into town." And at that time I guess she was gullible. [They laugh.] So we did. And we just pitched tents. For four months we did that. We just lived out there.

And she would go into town to get water and get groceries, and I would sit there and make these little pots. I found clay in the area. Also I think at that time I was actually buying some clay too, because I didn't know much about these local clays there.

So we'd make these little pots and we'd take them into town, and we'd park the truck and we'd just set the pots out on the hood of the truck and try to sell them that way, you know, I mean, just for grocery money — $7, $8, $4, whatever anybody would pay. [Laughs.] And that's really where — as far as actually trying to make a living, you know, selling pottery, that's where it started.

MS. SIOUI: What kind of pottery did you make at that time, the ones to sell? Were they Anasazi pots or early — what you've learned, European style, or what kind did you make?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, they were the little handbuilt, polished, burnished, stone-polished pieces that would be more like the Anasazi, or, you know, kind of pueblo style. And I did some etching in them, and some of them had painting. Some of them I actually did have automobiles, you know, carved in them and that kind of thing too, but it was pretty tough. We didn't do real well.

I've never been very good at selling my own work anyway, but we survived. And finally it got so hot, though, we thought, you know, this is — the snakes are starting to come out and the scorpions are showing up, and so we packed everything up and started going north again.

And Carol at that time said, "Well, you know, Richard, I do have teaching degree. We could get maybe a position out on the Navajo res, you know." And we really enjoyed working with Navajo people. So she applied to several schools, and Ganado, Arizona, wrote back — one of the first ones that wrote back and said they had openings. And we just took it right like that.

And she — we had both been through Ganado. I'd been through there a year or two before and really loved the area too. And so we said, "Let's do it." And they first moved us into this

little trailer compound, a teachers' compound. And fortunately we had a place that was on the edge of it.

But to me it was really constrictive, used to being out in the open and living camped out, and this was a little bit tough. But, we endured a year and then we found an old stone house that was out, further out, by the lake, and we rented that for seven years after that. And that's where the pottery started. That's really where it started.

MS. SIOUI: Were there further travels that had an impact on your life and work? You said earlier — I'm still coming back with that same question — there was something missing.

MR. SMITH: Oh, yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Did you further travel — did you find that something that was missing, and what was that something?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah. That's a good question.

Yeah, it was at this time — and of course working with Navajo kids. They're asking me about myself and I'm — you know, they're asking me, "Are you bilagáana?" You know, bilagáana is a white person. And I'd say, "Well, you know, no, I'm Wyandot." And they go, "Yeah, you look bilagáana to me, you know." [They laugh.]

So it was in that time where I started becoming really interested in my own identity. You know, I'd say, "Well, I'm Wyandot" but I didn't know really what that meant. So I started writing to the tribe here in Oklahoma, starting to gather as much information as I could.

And there I was told that — they said, "Oh, you know, congratulations. We've just finally got the government to pay some debts for the lands in Ohio that had never been paid for, and you're one of those who will get a check because you're a descendant."

And so, from that point we started — I don't know, I started becoming a little more active in writing. And somehow through correspondence came this name, Charles Buser — Aubrey Buser, and I started writing to him. He was a Wyandot historian — not Wyandot tribal member but just somebody who became fascinated with Wyandot history.

And we started writing back and forth, back and forth. And he had a lot of connections with other people — Chief Bearskin, Sallie Andrews. And so I started — all of a sudden it's like this awakening — you know, this awakening, which was just — it's like being asleep for all these years, not knowing anything, and all of a sudden all these little pieces of this puzzle — you know, this sense of being kind of unrooted. All of a sudden I'm starting to feel roots.

And once I started feeling the roots, I had to find out more and more and more. People would ask me, "So, does anyone speak the language anymore?" And I'd say, "Oh, the language is extinct." I remember saying that myself, which is — I had heard that and I just parroted it. And I thought there was nothing left of it. There was nothing left of the language. The culture was all assimilated. People were all assimilated. There was nothing left.

So, I was finding out history and I was finding out things that Wyandots used to do. Even the pottery, though; still there really wasn't much knowledge about it until probably the late '80s, maybe early '90s, when I started realizing, you know, that there were villages up in Canada that would have been considered our homelands.

But at the time, see, I was making these corrugated pots. And I entered a piece — you know, when we first moved out to Ganado, I was still playing with the clay, still making things. And I was still fascinated with this technique that I had picked up from the Anasazi. I had only done two or three pieces.

And I made this large piece, and I thought, well, this turned out pretty nicely. And I fired it in a mud kiln that I'd made. And I thought maybe I could enter it someplace. And I called the Heard Museum and they had said, "Well, you ought to enter it in our" — you know, Heard Museum, their annual Indian Market that they have down there. And I said, "Oh, okay."

So I drove down, dropped it off, and made the price really cheap. I thought, well, if we can sell this, this would be really nice — that and two other pieces, actually. There was one polished piece that I don't even remember — I don't even know what happened to that

piece.

But because it was corrugated, it really drew the attention of people because nobody was doing that. You know, it just — there was a — I mean, Acomas had been doing a type of corrugated pottery but it was more of a wiped, kind of fatter coil, but it wasn't quite like the ancient stuff. And the stuff that I was bringing looked like, you know, really ancient-looking kind of pottery.

And I got this call in '83 — I think it was '83, 1983, from one of the judges. And he called me up and he was asking me who represented me. And I thought, represent me? I don't even know what that means. And he says, "Well, I have my own gallery. I'm one of the judges. And, by the way, we just voted your piece best of pottery this year." And I was shocked with that.

And then he kept going, and he was saying, "You know, I'd like to buy your work. I'd like to buy it for my gallery." And so, all of a sudden, you know, this one technique, which is this corrugated pottery — it was just to me on the side — you know, I was doing so many other things — became really interesting to people.

And then I started thinking, well, I don't know if I could do this for a living. This stuff is tedious. You know, this is really hard. This is hard work. But, you know, it was almost like the demand for it gave me permission to experiment with it and to really, you know, push it in a new way. And it kind of helped me to zero in on one particular technique and just really go for it, and kind of put some of the other techniques away for a while.

But at that point — again, see, that was a time where I didn't know much about my Wyandot ancestry as far as their crafts, their clayworks or anything, so this was all — I was still kind of, you know, building on that Anasazi foundation, you know, to express myself.

MS. SIOUI: Yeah. Which gallery was that, the first one that represented you?

MR. SMITH: Oh, gosh, I don't even know the name of that particular gallery, but the — eventually it turned out that there was a person who lived not far from us in Keams Canyon [AZ], Bruce McGee, and he found out about my work, you know, and since he lived so close — he was just in the Hopi mesas like 45 minutes away — he began to come visit us and buy work from me.

And we pretty much started dealing just with him alone back and forth. And he introduced us to Gallery 10 [Scottsdale, AZ, and Santa Fe, NM (no longer exists) –RZS]. And Gallery 10 was kind of one of these galleries that really encouraged people who had skill in a traditional way but were also pushing the edges of tradition, beginning to be expressive; you know, kind of having one root in the past and one — you know, one foot forward and one foot in the past, that kind of excitement, I guess.

And he was really interested in promoting artists like that. So when he saw some of my work, he wanted me a part of their gallery. And so, eventually we got pulled right into Gallery 10 with other — you know, a lot of the other contemporary artists at the time. So it just kind of happened, and it was pretty exciting, pretty exciting years.

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

Were there other travel — and I see — I know I'm probably beating at the drum with this. You mentioned Canada and some old Wyandot villages, and that you zeroed in on the Anasazi technique. But all this discovery was going on at the same time —

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: — in the background.

MR. SMITH: That's true.

MS. SIOUI: And was there a later influence of that Wyandot background and history —

MR. SMITH: Yeah, it —

MS. SIOUI: — because the Wyandot people, as we've talked about a little bit, they did make some pottery. As your search — as you were searching more about your background, did

you find it? Did you find that? Like, I mean, the pottery-making. Was there a link between your background and all of a sudden the discovery of your Wyandot heritage and the ancient Wyandot pottery-making? Did you merge with that at one point in your career?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, eventually it has, you know, and it's one of those things that — yeah, it happened gradually.

When I first started seeing pots from our villages, our old village sites, you know, the first thing I wanted to do was to be able to imitate that, to know — to touch back with that, because I knew it stopped being made once the people were rooted out of their villages and they began to take on the kettles and things that traders were bringing in, and the pottery tradition, which was a woman's job at the time, just like farming and — anything village-related was basically a woman's work.

But all that pottery, that tradition itself, just kind of phased out. And it was important for me to go back as far as I could in my thinking and pictures and to try to replicate some of those ancient things first, you know, to see if I could touch base with it.

So I started doing that. I started making kind of copies, almost like reproductions, you know, of ancient stuff. And then, slowly, those reproduction things started coming into my artwork. They started — like the rims, the crown-type tops, the incising. And I started integrating. It's like these things started merging. Yeah, they started fusing together.

So I have Southwestern Anasazi construction methods — you know, these tiny coils — and now I have rims, you know, that are much more — and forms of the pieces, even, that are much more reminiscent of our ancestors.

MS. SIOUI: From the Eastern Woodlands.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah. So I'm getting these blends coming — and I really enjoyed that. I really enjoy that, and I still do. I really enjoy mixing these ancient blends together and then coming up with something that's contemporary also.

MS. SIOUI: And it's really beautiful work to see — the end product is really beautiful.

MR. SMITH: Well, thanks.

MS. SIOUI: Do you want to tell — tell me a little bit more about what do you think of yourself, and as part of an international tradition. Do you consider yourself of an international tradition or a, more particularly, of an American tradition in your art?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think there is, in some ways, an international — if that "international" means people are wanting to know their own roots and they're wanting to — there's more value in being grounded, knowing your culture. Culture is becoming more important. As people lose it, it seems like it becomes more valuable.

And as there's a sort of globalization of thinking and everything, people are all of a sudden more desperate, you know, to hang onto roots, as if they're being spun off of something or they're all becoming one big gray mass. And there's a — there does seem to be a real strong movement, you know, to recover roots, distinguishing differences in our — you know, in all our people, differences and all that.

So, in that sense, yeah. But as far as does my work represent some kind of American movement, I don't know. I have no idea. That's not important to me. You know, it's not one of those things that I try to do. You know, if people see it, then that's great, but to me it's much more important for me to create beauty, to create beauty that's grounded, that has connections to the Earth, that really represents, you know, something that my ancestors would be proud of, something that they would be happy that something has gone on.

Yeah, I guess that's —

MS. SIOUI: So you're really rooted in the North American Indian tradition, whether it be Anasazi and Wyandot merging together —

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's where I feel — I mean, I feel my greatest influences, in a way, yeah, have been — there's probably techniques and things I learned when I was at school that have been helpful.

You know, in fact, actually all those years at the potter's wheel were really helpful for me to learn symmetry. And I still do a lot of very symmetrical type forms, so even though I'm coiling, those years at the potter's wheel have really taught me form, I think in a real positive way.

And I encourage people, you know, when they're going to school, to — if they're going to work with ceramics, you know, to work on the wheel. You know, work on it and get good at it because it really will tell you — you know, teach you a lot. So I think it really helped me train — you know, train my eye. It really trained my eye for form.

MS. SIOUI: You were saying earlier that in the traditional Wyandot culture, the pottery-making and the farming, and more especially the pottery-making, was the women's duty. How do you relate to that, knowing about the ancestors and who made it?

And what was the purpose in the old days of making those pottery, as opposed to what today you're making? You say for you it's important to create beauty.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah, it really has changed. And I know this is something that's been real — an issue and an interesting kind of thing across all native arts in a way because, you know as we say — as most people will say, you know, we didn't have a word for art — you know, we don't have a word for art.

This idea of art is sort of a new phenomenon, you know, where it's something that's come out of, more of a — just an appreciation of cultural differences and uniqueness. And so there's a sort of thing that's grown up to respect that.

But, yeah, when you think about it, our villages were all woman-centered, and our language, we found out, of course, that everything is feminine except for warriors and those who can fight, basically young men and — as long as they're warriors they're masculine, but everything else in the world is pretty much feminine. Vessels, nets, building, farming; all that was done by women. The women did so much of that work.

Everything was made for a use, so vessels were made for cooking. But you look at them and all of them have meaning and all of them have beauty, and they all have a beauty that's — it's almost — you could say, well, it's not necessary. You know, it's not — like, it's not necessary to make such beautiful pots for cooking, but it was necessary. You know, I mean —

MS. SIOUI: Like the high collars —

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: — that were so elaborate.

MR. SMITH: Exactly, yeah. It's like, you know, they're — and I think those are the things that are really appealing to me too, and the same with the Anasazi. You know, I'd see these gorgeous pieces, and yet they were made for cooking, you know.

And you think, people had a quality of life, even when they — you know, people today, by our standards, would say they're in poverty, you know, living from mouth to mouth — or from day to day. But there's a kind of existence that we miss because there's a longing — you know, we kind of long for something that they had that we don't have anymore, and that's kind of a thanksgiving for every little gift that comes our way. Every little piece of food, everything, is given honor.

And so, yeah, even the — imagine making your own robes, your own clothing. I mean, every thread is important to you because you twisted it and you got it yourself. I mean, you've made your baskets. Everything was made by hand, so there was almost like a natural honor and respect for everything around you.

And, of course, you know, nowadays, the arts — you know, these vessels that I make are not made to be cooking with or whatnot. I mean, I do make water drums and I do make some pieces for — traditional pieces for cooking if need be, but, you know, things have changed, so that these pieces are really made for the eye more than they're made for function, so in that sense it's different.

MS. SIOUI: Do you feel the same way that your ancestors did when they said that they made things, pottery, and they had honor and respect for everything that was made? Do you feel the same way when you're creating beauty in your artwork?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I think it's really helped me to appreciate, you know, the things around me. And I think that's why the older stuff — the older the stuff — my inspiration is really ancient stuff. I love looking at archeological books. I like looking at old things.

The new stuff can be exciting, and there is a remnant — there really is a remnant today of artists and craftsmen who are doing beautiful pieces and things. They are there. They're out there, but for the most part, my inspiration really does come from ancient stuff because there's a way of life that was simpler, more direct, more in cycle with the moon and the stars and the sun and the crops and the winters.

And everything was done in a forward — well, just more direct, I guess. Our life was just more direct. It related with creation itself. And that kind of becomes missing a little bit in our craziness of modern life.

MS. SIOUI: How has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime? You were saying you started out with small Navajo pottery, and you said you were not very good at selling. I guess somebody took over the business side of selling your art.

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: But have you noticed some change in the market since your early time when you sold pottery?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I kind of came in — we actually came in at the right time because when I started making pieces, even just to sell for, you know, $5 or $6, there was already an interest in Native American art, and there was kind of a renewed interest that these things are important and valued.

So we kind of came in at just the right time, and in so many ways, the way things happened, it was just amazing. It really was. I mean, the people — there are people that are hungry to have pieces of art in their home that they look at every day, that it gives them joy, it gives them a sense of beauty, you know, and value.

And I think this is something that's really growing. I think the more industrialized we become and the more removed the civilization becomes from the Earth and from, you know, really working with our hands, the more those skills become valued, you know, that a person can make something out of ball of mud and can do something beautiful with it.

All of a sudden that person — maybe in an ancient culture that was just something that people did all the time. It wasn't thought of as anything necessarily great. But in a cultural context of this high-tech stuff, you know, and living so removed, in a way, from the Earth, to see work that's created in wood or created in fiber, created in clay, these things are all of a sudden more important.

And it does seem like there's been a change in America about art in the round, too. You know, it used to be that — in this culture anyway, that flat art, you know, was the valued art. Paintings were valuable but somehow pottery or things carved in wood or woven weren't considered art. You know, that was just a craft, and so that was sort of a lesser — it was given a lesser credit. But I think the country is really moving in a positive way and realizing that these things too are expressions of art.

MS. SIOUI: I've seen one of your pieces of artwork, your later pieces of artwork. It seems like it's something is woven, but it's really clay. How did that influence come along? Like, it's really amazing to see that work, like you could swear it's something that's woven but it's clay. It's made out of clay.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah, that's part of the technique itself, you know, which is great when you're working with those little coils. And, I mean, yeah, it actually looks like coiled basketry —

MS. SIOUI: Yes.

MR. SMITH: — because you can see a part of the process of the building. I guess that's something I really do enjoy when I do work on something. It's almost like every coil that you're adding is like a day or an hour. It's showing the progression of the thing you're building.

And so, there is kind of another movement in Native American art today, which is — to me is a little bit worrisome, and that's where people cover their flaws, they cover their — you know, any kind of little human touch. And I see that happening more and more, and I think that's — it's almost — to me it's the flaw of perfectionism.

It's when people — outsiders, basically — begin to value that which is perfect above that which is human, you know, and that's influenced a lot of Native art. And I see that happening today, especially in the Southwest where, you know, pieces are being judged and they're being valued by judges, you know, outsiders looking at them and going, "Oh, that one's got a little flaw in it. You know, that one's not as important as that one."

And so those kind of things disturb me, you know, some of the new directions I'm seeing art taking, because the most beautiful pieces to me are pieces that just — I mean, the whole entire piece has got a human touch, it's got a human feel to it.

You can see almost like where a child might have bumped the piece, you know, when they were running around, and grandma was working on this piece but, you know, a little kid got their elbow into it or something, or else her hand slipped, you know, when she was painting, and so the line went out of the pattern a little bit. And it was left there. You know, it wasn't trying to be covered up.

But those are all those little human touches that are so valuable, and yet today, you know, there's a tendency to want to erase anything that looks human, so the surface — the surfaces of the pots are so burnished that you can't even tell they've been stone-stroked. You know, you can't even see the stroke of the stone. It looks like glass or it looks like the finish of a car.

MS. SIOUI: It looks like machine-made.

MR. SMITH: Exactly. And it's like, why are we competing with a machine? You know, it's like what are we doing this for?

So those are kind of some worrisome trends I see, you know, in some of our Native American art. But it's difficult sometimes to talk about this stuff with people because, you know, you want to see — the craftsmanship to be strong. You want that to be excellent. And you want people to continually push their craftsmanship until there's a skill that's just, you know, wow, amazing.

But it's the same with music, right? I mean, it's like if somebody plays something on a piano, they want to play Mozart or something, but you still want that person to not just be an imitation of Mozart. You want them to have their own, you know, something in there.

So that's what's missing, I think, with some of the stuff that's being made today. I think there's almost a — yeah, it worries me a little bit. It's almost as if the art direction is being swayed by outsiders. You know, it's not really coming from culture within.

It's coming from pressures from the outside to — you know, if you want to win, if you want to get an award for this, you have to — you know, you have to — I don't want to see those stone strokes, or I don't want to see that brush slip off the pattern there.

MS. SIOUI: You were saying earlier that you started out, like, using natural materials, like you went out in the desert and you started collecting clay. Has that continued throughout your artist career? Are you still using natural materials? And do you want to talk about it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, it really is important to me, but it's maybe important in a different way. I mean, I think the importance — well, I love digging my own clay, and I still do that. Part of that is just because it's superior. It's better material than anything I've ever bought. And it works better.

But there's also something about gathering your own materials, you know, even making your own tools, where you're actually — you're more involved in the whole process. When

somebody just goes to the store and buys 25 pounds of clay, you don't know where that clay has been. You don't know what it's made out of. You don't know where it came from. It's almost like bringing a stranger into your home.

But you go dig your own clay, you process the [inaudible]— you do everything yourself, you know everything about it. You know, you know its strengths. It's like a — you know, there's more of a relationship with it, I guess. I like that. I like having that kind of closeness to the — plus when we gather clay, you know, we have a ceremony and we — you know, we give prayers and we put down tobacco and we give thanks.

And where we do that is on our friend's ranch, who allows us to come and dig her clay there. And she's so happy, you know, that it's done that way. And she joins us usually, and we do some prayers and give thanks, because this is so important and so valuable.

So, yeah, that — now, there are certain things I do use in my colors, that I'll buy certain stains, you know, to add to my slips, my clay paints for color, you know, like blues or something. I can't find that. And so I'm not — I don't limit myself completely and say, oh, it's got to all be natural completely.

Now, if I was doing something for a ceremonial use — say I was making a pipe or a water drum for ceremonial use, then I would want not only that clay to be dug from the Earth, but if it was going to go to somebody, I would want that person to give me some earth or some stone or something from a place that's sacred to them. And then I would crush it up and add it to that clay, you know, so that that piece carries it. But that's a whole different thing than pieces that I'm making for sale.

MS. SIOUI: What are the qualities of your working environment? Do you want to tell me a little bit about it?

MR. SMITH: You mean as far as what I like to —

MS. SIOUI: What's your working environment, and what are the qualities about it? Where do you mainly create your artwork? In what kind of environment? And what do you appreciate about it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I like to work — I like to really work in silence, really, most of the time. Sometimes I listen to some music or some lectures or something while I'm working. But I work in a studio that's pretty small, actually. It's not a really big space, but it's quiet, and I need that. I guess I need to have that kind of reflective peace, you know, when I'm working.

If I'm teaching or something, then — I usually can't create at the same time. I can't work on a piece of my own when there's students in there, you know? It's like I can't do that, because I can't give my full attention to the work.

MS. SIOUI: Where do you work?

MR. SMITH: Just right here in Wyandot, just right outside — just right at the house a little ways there's a studio we had built. And, yeah, it's got two — it's got a dogtrot right in the middle. Part of it is for clay and the other side is for leatherwork or stonework or other projects like that.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. Do you want to talk a little bit more about your relationship with dealers? You said you did business, when you started out, with Gallery 10. What were the other dealers you dealt with throughout your career? And which one — who is your actual gallery who represents you? What kind of relationship did you have with dealers?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Actually they've all been pretty good. They've all been pretty good relationships, first of all. You know, we realize that people who own galleries are in a business, and so they certainly are going to look at things in a little different way then artists will, who are just making things from their heart or, you know, things that are important to them.

So I understand that, and sometimes that's caused a little friction because obviously galleries, they're thinking of their clients and things that they'll buy. And an artist is hopefully not thinking about those things. They're just creating, and they're creating from their own inspiration.

But the gallery that we work with right now is Blue Rain Gallery. That's the most prominent gallery, although we do work with others at different times — Blue Rain Gallery in Santa Fe, with Leroy and Tammy Garcia.

And they're great to work with. I've really enjoyed working with them over the years. They've been fantastic. They've been great at promotion. They just — they're like, you know, artists. Well, Tammy is a great artist herself, so it's just — you know, it's great to be around people who really understand the arts that way.

So, yeah, it's been a good — it's been a good thing. It's been so nice not to have to sell things on my own and to not deal with commissions and just to be able to — and we do; we sell directly to the gallery, so it works great for us.

MS. SIOUI: Is there an element of play in your process or finished work of art? You talked about the Anasazi influence. You talked about the old Wyandot influence. Is there anything else or an element of play in finishing a work of art?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, occasionally. Some pieces I do are real playful and then others are more serious and more —

MS. SIOUI: Can you give an example?

MR. SMITH: Okay. Let's see, playful ones. Playful ones seem to have more things with contemporary themes of — oh, okay, here's an example. I did one on — well, what would you call — TV evangelists, you know. I did this one piece where it was — the pot was built more like a Peruvian figurative piece with a person on their back and their feet up like — kind of like a frog, actually.

And their head was off to the side and their legs were sticking out a little bit like — with their knees bent. And they had their hands over the belly, and their hands were holding this Bible, like that, and that part became a lid. Well, you could pick the lid up, and inside was another pair of hands and between the hands was a dollar bill, you know. [They laugh.] So it was like a — it was just a playful jab at some of the TV evangelists that are always begging for money. So that's kind of an example of some funny stuff.

Serious stuff, though, I've done pieces that deal with war and violence and crimes against women. And these are ones that are heart-wrenching, and things that I've done that take so much out of me but I feel like they're things that I need — it's almost like something just comes on you and it's so important that you just can't put it aside, and you just feel like you have to say something, and so I'll use my art to say something.

When I do, though — even when I do something that I'm talking about an uncomfortable subject or something that I feel like people need to face, even though we don't want to face, I still try to create something beautiful out of it so that it's not a hideous — you know, it's not something you look at and just be grossed by it. It's something that it pulls you in and then you get the message and then you kind of go, oh, oh, you know.

There was a piece I made recently on the bombing in Afghanistan, you know, about how — collateral damage, you know, how villages — some villages are just strafed because they're told that there are Taliban in there and it ends up being women and children.

And so, I have this one piece that was — it was like a low piece that had a ruin — it almost looked like a ruin on the top of it, sitting there, and adobe — kind of adobe bricks. And of course people are drawn to it just by that. It looks like, oh, this is neat. It look like an Anasazi ruin on top of this pot.

And you get up close to it and you see there are bodies in there. You know, you see a woman that's laying there and part of her leg is missing, or a child is there and the clothes have been ripped off and it's just laying half, you know, naked in the dust. And there are these craters from all the bombing.

So, yeah, occasionally I'd do pieces like that, or the — I did one on the genetic engineering of corn, you know, which to me is just so awful to see something that our native people have contributed to the world, corn, which has saved so many people all across the world, really, and yet now it's being engineered by people who want to make profit and they want to — sure, they're thinking of high yield and they're thinking of creating these special hybrids, but

a lot of them are also messing around with the genetic — their ability to produce — you know, reproduce.

And those kind of things just infuriate me, you know, when somebody sterilizes something that can't be planted again. So these are issues I get to as well.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. You said you're creating something beautiful out of something of pain, like you said violence about women, or even — would you say there is a healing component to the piece of art that you're producing?

MR. SMITH: I hope so.

MS. SIOUI: If you're creating something beautiful out of something that's ugly or very hurtful on this planet.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I hope so. I mean, that's part of my —

MS. SIOUI: Transmuting the energies.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, because, you know, I've been in art museums or I've been in galleries where it seems like people are dealing with really harsh subjects, but the art is offensive, you know, and it's really even hard to look at because it's just so — it's just either so ugly or it's so affrontive, and it's just kind of in your face.

And I think, you know, they're losing the message because you're not being drawn in. You're being repulsed by it. So if you're repulsed by something, you can't appreciate it. You can't really — you're not drawn in to what the artist is trying to say.

And so, by presenting — almost like giving a gentleness to the issue, you know, it's like you're welcoming them in and then you're presenting them with something, you know, to deal with. And it just seems to be more the way I work, I guess, too. I'm just not really an in-your-face kind of person.

MS. SIOUI: A way of educating people.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, hopefully.

MS. SIOUI: And you were talking about that piece you did on — that artwork you did of Afghanistan, and the issues — so international issues, current issues, what goes on in the world really touched you and have an influence on your artwork as well?

MR. SMITH: They do. But, you know, I don't do a lot of social commentary pieces. I have other things to do. You know, I still — I can't just be a billboard, you know, for all the things that are wrong in the world. I have to promote what's good and what's beautiful too.

And that's so important to me, you know, that I'm not just out there whining, you know, whining about things, and having my art just become like a protest or something. I'm not — I can't do that. Some people can do that but I — that's not my thing. It's just occasionally there's some issues that just keep bothering me and bothering me until I get it out, and then once it's said and once it's created, I can let it go and move on.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. Is there — you talked about the influence of the Anasazi and the old Wyandot in the development — in your development as an artist. We've talked about also a little bit of international issues or things that are really dear to heart that are artful. Are there other communities that have been important to your development as an artist — communities or event or issues, mainly communities?

MR. SMITH: I think maybe being here in Wyandotte — you know, being among Wyandot tribal members, also the Seneca-Cayuga people who have maintained their traditions, you know, these are things that spur me on and encourage me and help me go — you know, keep going, because in some ways this is why we moved back here, you know, from living out West for so many years and then coming back here to help with cultural revitalization and language revitalization.

So, being around in a community where I can just go to visit my friend, you know, Paul Barton, and to be able to discuss things and talk about important issues, yeah, that's been important too. It is important to kind of touch base with a group. But I can't really say that

there's an art community here, so — I mean, I wish there was, but there really isn't at this point. I'm still kind of on my own, which is okay. It's okay.

MS. SIOUI: According to you, where does American craft — glass, wood, fiber, clay and metal — rank on an international scale? Is the field moving in any obvious direction or not?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's kind of beyond my realm of life, I guess. You know, I would hope it is. I would hope that it's something that's a message, you know, to the rest of the world, that don't lose your roots, don't lose touch with our indigenous roots, no matter what they are, because these are all things that bring us back to the Earth and give us value, you know, here.

It did seem as if art for a while was starting to get to the place where it was just so negative, so intensely antihuman and just shocking and gory and all that, and I'm kind of glad that stage may be coming to an end.

And I've noticed in some of the shows, like SOFA [Sculpture Objects and Functional Art] shows, that there's — again, it's so nice to see a collection of real skill; you know, work that represents amazing skill, you know, that people are refining their skills. And years and years and years it takes to refine these skills, and they're creating this work.

And to me, to see that, it's kind of like, oh, that's a brother, or that's a sister. I mean, they're on the same path. They may have different cultural background, roots, but you can tell these things are important to them and they're meaningful.

MS. SIOUI: Do you have something to add as far as the most powerful influences in your career regarding people, art movements and technological developments? You've touched upon these things, but do you have something to say about the most powerful influences?

MR. SMITH: That's a tough one, in a way. Yeah, that is really a tough — that's a tough question. I feel so — you know, I feel like I've been — there's probably a lot of influences that I'm not even aware of.

But, you know, even the smallest things influence me. When I see people who are farmers out here, or ranchers, that — they're hard-working people, you know, that live close to the land, as opposed to the rednecks, you know, just good country people who work hard and do what's important to them. You know, these are people that inspire me too. They always have, you know, people that make something out of the Earth, that make their living out of the Earth.

I mean, I feel like, in so many ways, that I can relate to that, to people who are like that, you know, than I can even people who are just super artists somewhere, or celebrity artists, which I can't relate to because it's all show and glamour and I don't really — I don't connect with that. It's just not interesting to me.

So I guess I do tend to — I'm inspired by people who work hard, see vision in their life, you know, want to raise a good world for their children and are looking into the future. That's my influences, I guess.

MS. SIOUI: What goals have you pursued with your work, and how have they changed over time?

MR. SMITH: In some ways the same goal is to be able to create art and get away with it, you know? [They laugh.] To be able to do it for a living is just — I mean, it's just such a blessing to be able to do — and not to have somebody standing over me and telling me what I'm supposed to do or, you know, to have somebody — some kind of boss. I guess I never was really good at that anyway.

Yeah, it seems to me that — probably the things that have changed the most is that I've become a little more focused on my Wyandot ancestry, and so in some ways all that creative energy is kind of being narrowed down into a channel, you know, where I'm coming up with songs, you know, for kids, and I'm trying to think of creative ways, you know, to get the language to children, and trying to do more classes where we're bringing back traditional pottery methods.

So kind of squeezing a lot of that wide creativity into a deeper channel right now, this has

become really important to me right now.

MS. SIOUI: Okay, so you talk about your teaching experience. Who do you teach? You have the — who do you teach and do you travel in your teaching?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I don't just do workshops for anybody at this time. I mean, occasionally I'll be asked to do something for a day or two and that's okay, but I've really limited my workshop classes that I teach to indigenous people from either this area or from Wendake, Quebec.

Wendats or Wyandotte, or those who are connected, Iroquoian peoples, I really have — I have done a class with some Cherokee and would even be glad to do some with Quapaw or Shawnee. But people in the area who are tribal who are trying to gain something back that was lost, these are the people that I would reach out the most to — the Seneca-Cayuga people in the area.

We all have that pottery tradition and we've all had it erased. And so it's come back — I mean, there's an interest in it. There's a little more growing interest in those ancient techniques and things. So, if I'm there to help encourage people, you know, that's really important to me, if I can be used that way.

And we've had some great classes here at the studio. I can't do huge classes because my studio is small. And it was kind of made that way on purpose. I really don't like really huge groups to teach.

But we have had some great classes — Wendake, Quebec, too. There, several years, we've had pottery classes through the college there. What's the name of the —

MS. SIOUI: CDFM, Centre de développement de la formation et de la main-d'oeuvre huron-wendat.

MR. SMITH: Ah, yes. [They laugh.] Yeah, it's been fun. Those have been really good classes too. I've enjoyed those, because it's like an intense week of just, you know, day after day, almost eight-hour days of going with students. And they really did some great work. Some of these people have never done pottery before.

They're not all Wyandot. You know, some of them are Inuit and some Ojibwa, Anishinabe, but it's been great. It's been really — those have been great classes we've done.

MS. SIOUI: The language barrier doesn't present a problem to you?

MR. SMITH: You know, actually in some ways it's helped because I know some of the students in the class, you know, they're talking among each other and sometimes they're saying things I'd probably not even want to know about, you know? And so I can focus. They know I'm only English-speaking here.

And so I come in, I tell them, okay, before class we do a prayer song, or something. I'll do it, you know, with the water drum. And they really enjoy that. But it allows me to focus just on helping the students. And they can be talking about whatever they want to talk about, you know, and it doesn't phase me because I'm not having — I'm not comprehending, you know, and so it doesn't — it's not distracting me from helping a student.

They may be cussing me out, I don't know — [they laugh] — but at the same time I'll still give them the attention they need, you know. And so I kind of like that, actually. I kind of enjoy that.

MS. SIOUI: You said you traveled to Wendake, Quebec to teach the other Wendat or Wyandot people that are living there in francophone Quebec —

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: — as a matter of fact. I guess that your ability to do pottery — artwork with pottery, which was a traditional art form among the Wendat and Wyandot people, and to be requested and invited to teach it in that remote Northeastern Canadian community, do you feel a community responsibility towards teaching that ancient art form?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I do. Yeah, I feel like I've got something I can share, you know, and I feel

like this is something that if people are listening, and if there are people who really want to learn something and they really want to reconnect with clay as part of an art form, I'm there. I'm there to help. So, yeah, I feel like that's an important part of my life right now, giving back.

MS. SIOUI: We talked a little bit earlier about the American craft — glass, wood, fiber clay, metal — rank on an international scale. About the academic side of learning art, what do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement? Or do you relate to that question?

And specifically for artists working in clay, glass, metal, fiber or wood, you said that going to college and getting some university background really helped you with your method of working. And working with the wheel, it helped you to gain more symmetry in your work.

Would you say that it's the place for school and colleges in teaching art?

MR. SMITH: I think it is. I mean, I think the best thing that a school can give to a student is a skill, help them develop a skill. Just stay out of the philosophical areas, you know.

When I was going to school at Kansas City Art Institute, at the time there was almost what I consider a brainwashing going on. And this is where they were basically telling students who were coming in that whatever they believed in before, whatever they held valuable, we're going to take all that apart and we're going to start you in our foundation program. We're going to deconstruct every idea you had in your mind about what's beautiful, what's important, and we're going to straighten you out.

I talked to students who had been through that, and it was — to me it was like a brainwashing. And that might be severe but I think the best thing that schools can offer is just skill development, getting kids to be — to develop skills in whatever it is, just sharpen those technical skills, that when they walk away, you know, they have this; they have this ability, you know, these abilities.

That's what I think they can — they should just leave alone all the other — the philosophical or the, you know, religious points of view or whatever, and just —

MS. SIOUI: So we're going to stop right here.

[Audio break.]

MS. SIOUI: This is Linda Sioui interviewing Richard Zane Smith at his home in Wyandotte, Oklahoma on August 27, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, card number Smith-10-2.

Hi, Richard.

MR. SMITH: Hi. Good morning.

MS. SIOUI: Yes. Yes.

We're going to pick up where we left off yesterday. I was going to ask you about religion — religion in your artwork and how does your inspiration — how do you get your inspiration? How does religion or sense of spirituality play a role in your art, and in what way?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, of course these are difficult subjects to talk about, but for different reasons. But I can say that when I — as I grew up, I grew up in a pretty evangelical home and very strong Christian background.

Over the years a lot of questions have come up and a lot of maybe uncertainties about the religion of Christianity itself have appeared as I seek to, you know, look at bigger pictures. But there's always been a sense of a creator. I've always known that. As a child I've always known there's something — there's something that's beyond the seeing world.

And so it really does have — or it has had a strong effect in my life, from early childhood all the way up. I think it's — it's not always clear, it's not always certain, but I've always been convinced that there are unseen forces at work and that there is one being above all that seems to have some kind of control, which is something way beyond my comprehension of what control is all about.

A creator — just knowing there is a creator, I can relate to that because I create with my hands, I create with my thinking. Sometimes, you know, being a creative person, you know, can be a problem too because your mind is always challenging everything and it's always trying to turn things upside down, trying to understand things that sometimes are too big to understand.

But it's always been a part of that creative process. That struggle, I guess you'd say, is trying to come to grips with what's really there, what's true, what's real.

MS. SIOUI: Would you say that the Wyandot traditional beliefs and spirituality influence your artwork?

MR. SMITH: I think they have in the last, oh, maybe last 10 years, although I think Wyandot, like any other tribe, you know, they have pieces of the picture. They have pieces of the puzzle, as far as seeing, you know, a universal picture of something.

But one thing I really have learned is that it's through these little pieces, it's through these little puzzle pieces that we really do grasp — because we can only grasp so much. And our own creation stories, our own songs, our own ways of perceiving reality, a lot of that is what distinguishes us, you know, from other people, from other cultures, from other tribes. And it's that which gives color.

And yet, at the same time, I'm looking at it — I look at it as an insider, as a Wyandot, but I also look at it as somebody who realizes that it is pictures we're talking about, you know. A lot of the stories, they represent realities that are bigger than the actual stories themselves. And I think that was my biggest problem with Christianity. Taking a lot of the stories in the Bible as literal, you lose something of the bigger picture.

So I'm trying to do the same, actually, even with my own roots, is that I look to those old stories for inspiration to gain an insight for how my ancestors used to think, but also realizing that they weren't seeing everything told to them as science; you know, that science, this whole idea of seeing things in a scientific way, or is this fact or is this not fact, is this true or is this untrue, these are not questions that our people even asked, you know. These were just — there are our stories.

And so I'm still grappling with a lot of these things, trying to understand them. I think I've become a lot more open-minded, though, in the last 10 years, I'd say, trying to really allow things more to flow through me and not so much trying to argue with them in my mind, you know. That's what I mean; it's kind of a difficult — it's a difficult subject to talk about. I love talking about it when we're dealing with specific things, but it's tough sometimes to discuss.

MS. SIOUI: How would Wyandot spirituality be different from that of other tribes? Do you draw the line only because of the stories, the mythology that is passed down or —

MR. SMITH: Yeah, from things I've read, things I've, you know, begun to grasp with the language. Our language itself is a language of verbs, so it's a language that's about action. It's about description, you know, whereas English is so noun-based and it's so — it's based on labels.

And all these things — the English language is great for designing a bridge or for designing systems and all these things, and for taking things apart, deconstructing things and constructing things, but our native language, on the other hand, is more — is much more about relationship, who you are in the world around you.

It doesn't necessarily separate light from darkness the same way our kind of western minds do. It doesn't put things in such tight categories. So, whenever you find — even in our stories we find what we call the — what we've labeled in English the evil twin and the good twin, well, these are concepts that one isn't necessarily all evil and one isn't necessarily all good. You know, those things are imposed on the stories from the outside.

So there's these — we understand — as Wyandot we understand there are forces moving, and to — you know, to grasp them we have to describe them, these certain forces, but they don't always — they don't always translate well into English. There's something that's really missed with that.

And that's part of the beauty of the language and trying to recover the language is trying to

grasp those — a different way of seeing things. The stories, our creation stories, are ways of — they're foundations — they're foundations of how we view the world and how we react to nature itself, and the respect we have for the land, and also for unseen forces too. But it certainly came in conflict with the Western European insight, way of life, you know, back in the past.

But it's been a struggle. I mean, I started out — a lot of my early artwork I had very, very Christian-influenced work, and I see that. I even see that in some of my old record, you know, the record of my own pottery, and some of it makes me cringe a little bit. It's not that I've, you know, totally given up on the universals of Christianity. There are some things there I think are really bedrock, but then there are some — most of it, I think — a lot of it is just cultural interpretation.

It's a big topic. It's a huge topic.

MS. SIOUI: Yes, it is.

When you said you did some work that were influenced by Christian beliefs, can you give me an example of an artwork that you made?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, let's see. I think I did one, a piece — yeah, I can remember now. It was about all these devils or spirits falling, falling into the flames. It was like a quote from scripture saying, "I saw Satan fall like lightning" into — "from the heavens." And it was a quote from Christ saying — and it was kind of like an exclamation. Something really wonderful happened, and because something really wonderful happened, Christ — I think it was Christ who said that — all these — he saw the devil fall like lightning from Heaven, or something like that.

So I illustrated that on a piece, you know, that there was something really wonderful happening and all these evil forces were just falling. They were crumbling around me. I mean, they're great pictures and they're great, but it's like now I would refuse to use a Christian picture and I would try to say something similar to that in a Wyandotte [Wyandotte Nation of Oklahoma; we of the Wyandot Nation of Kansas refer to ourselves as "Wyandot" – RZS] way, you know, in a Wyandot interpretation, just because it's my own — you know, this Christian thing is something that's been placed on me.

Now I want to discover more, well, how would I say that as a Wyandot? How would I say that, you know, the beauty of something is so strong? I would probably use a reference to, you know, the evil twin is again defeated today, you know. The race — the good twin has fooled his brother once again, has moved on, and so some beauty has happened. Or the good twin has corrected something that his evil twin has done and made it more beautiful.

So, things like that, I mean, just using those images, those visual images; you know, not being restricted to the way I was brought up to see using Middle Eastern creation stories to say things anymore, but using things from my own ancestry — my own Wyandot ancestry, anyway, to try and explore that more.

MS. SIOUI: Yes. Okay. How has your work been received over time?

MR. SMITH: Well, I like to think it's been received pretty well. [Laughs.] I think because when I started, especially with the corrugated work, because it was something in the Southwest that was rooted in the Southwest and Southwest arts were strong, native work was strong, when that corrugated work started being seen, it was exciting to people because it hadn't been seen before, or they'd only seen it in archeological reports and pictures of archeological pieces of corrugated ancient ware.

So nobody had really seen that technique used so strongly in a contemporary way, except for maybe some of the Yakama, you know, what they call corrugated pieces, where they used the little popsicle stick and made little dents in it. But I kind of took it to a different level, I guess.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. And when I'm asking that question, I'm really seeing the big picture, too, because I know that you've been traveling internationally. You're recognized — your artwork is received internationally, even though you don't talk about it too much and you're humble about it. Can you tell me a little bit about it and your travels? I know, for instance, that you went to China and to New Zealand.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, those were wonderful experiences. And in both situations, too, I found myself drawn to the indigenous peoples, you know, of the area. In fact, in China, when I was there in Kunming, I came as a guest with the International Festival of the Arts, which brought all kinds of artists together into the city of Kunming in the Yunnan peninsula — or the Yunnan province of China. And it was for just a week of all kinds of events happening at once.

And I worked in one of the little art schools there in Kunming, and I can't quite remember the name of it. But I worked for a week, and I was moved by all the indigenous — what they call the minorities — people there in that area. And there seemed to be at least 28 different groups of minority people right in the Kunming area.

And that was real exciting to me because here I am, you know, bringing in something — I'm bringing in clay also from the other side of the Earth, and at one point I was able to even introduce some of the clay from the land right there too into my work. So I actually was building this pot that had to do with — you know, this whole International Festival of the Arts was about bringing peace, brining unity through arts.

And so, to create a piece while I'm there, using Chinese clay and also using clay from this side of the world, was just a real wonderful — I just loved it. Those are the kind of things I just love doing. You know, they're very meaningful to me.

The same thing happened in New Zealand just in the past fall. "Aōtearoa" [the meaning in Maori is "the land of the long white cloud" –RZS] they call it. And I was invited to go with — to come as a guest artist to the Maori Market, what they call Maori Market, which is similar to our Indian market except that they don't do competitions and that. It's just a showing — and huge showing of Maori art — Maori art I should say. Pronounce it right. [Laughs.] Maori art from both islands and from communities all over.

And I was able to spend three weeks there as a guest, and it was just incredible. I spent three weeks with Maori people, being shown around, and made great connections because our ancestor roots, even though we're different in so many ways, the same symbols showed up. I even did the same thing when I was there when I created a piece. I actually used Maori clay. I used the clay from their — from the land itself, and I used clay that I had brought.

And I made this piece, you know, as a demonstration piece. And it was more just a blend — you know, just a blend to show that — a lot of our indigenous people are in the same place. We're trying to hang onto something that's being easily swept away, you know, by modern technologies, by kind of an assimilation of just coming into a lifestyle which is more based on just ease, you know, instead of a connection with the Earth.

So, yeah, those experiences really — are really meaningful to me. I love that. And the same — you know, traveling into Canada too and working with the Wendat too, same thing. These are all about connecting really with indigenous peoples of the area.

MS. SIOUI: In your opinion, who are the most significant writers in the field of American craft? Do you do much reading about writers in American craft or Native American crafts?

MR. SMITH: There's a lot of good writers, but I really don't read a lot of reports about art. I like to look at art. I like to look at things that are being made, but personally I'm just not much of a reader of writers about art. I'm more inspired by seeing the work itself. And so, yeah, I would have to kind of bow out on actually listing names of people.

There are writers, you know, who I consider artists themselves, but I just — as far as people writing reports about art, it's just not my big interest, I guess.

MS. SIOUI: What about criticism? When you have an art show somewhere and there's a writer or a writer/artist that writes a criticism about your — do you get to read them? Do you read them? Are you interested in that?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I love that. I love it when people challenge, you know. So those would be things I'd be really interested in hearing because those are the thing that sharpen me. I love to be — I love to — a lot of people tend to keep their criticisms to themselves. They think that somehow criticism is going to be offensive or something.

And it might be a little offensive, but to me I kind of — I would rather know what they are. I

would rather know what people are grumbling about, because I certainly have a lot of grumbles of my own about directions and things that I see happening in the art world. So I enjoy writing about such things myself.

So, yeah, I kind of like to read what people are writing too, but I do like to hear what artists are saying, you know, instead of just people who appreciate art and what they're writing, because they tend to be a little more as outsiders, in my opinion. I mean, they might, you know make things a little more romantic than they are.

MS. SIOUI: Would you say that specialized periodicals have played a role in your development as an artist?

MR. SMITH: They have in the past. I don't really get a lot of inspiration from that anymore. I used to subscribe to certain magazines, but I found in some ways that some of those influences I didn't think were helpful to me. I really don't want to be inspired by a lot of stuff that's going on in art schools.

Some of it to me is really negative, and I don't like the negativity. I feel like the negativity is — it's a reaction. And to be inspired by a reaction, you know, I don't — I'd rather not be inspired by reactions or protests. I mean, it's great to see that people can use materials to express themselves, but I feel sometimes that artists are using their work as a billboard, you know, or it's created only for a photograph, or it's created for an expression that's dated.

And I like work that has roots and it's going to be there — it's going to be appreciated no matter what time period, you know, just like when those — that incredible discovery in China with those — that emperor's tomb, you know, with all those terra cotta figures.

Yes, it was created for a particular time, and who knows what was going on when that — in the thinking of the emperor at the time, but those are the kind of things that are eternal. I mean, in a way — they'll be valuable and important long before — I mean, long after we're gone they'll retain that. And to me those are just important things to shoot for as artists is to create work that's timeless.

MS. SIOUI: Okay. What about — you mentioned something about the periodicals that you subscribe to. Which ones are they?

MR. SMITH: [Laughs.] Well, I don't know if I want to mention names because I don't want to give anyone bad credit, but I'd say — Okay, I can —

MS. SIOUI: Those you're interested in.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, the ones that I used to look to a lot were ones like *Ceramics Monthly*, which, for what it gives technically, you know, the technical stuff — a lot of times artists would share their secrets, you know, how they were able to achieve certain shapes or certain techniques that are fascinating. For that it was interesting.

But I found also that it was kind of pulling me into trying all these things. And I was getting so spread out with ideas that I wasn't focusing anymore. And it's like I needed to bring all my creativity into — and really channel it into a certain flow because the possibilities are endless.

And if you have an endless possibility, it's kind of like looking up into the sky. You don't even know where to look anymore. It's too vast. And so you almost need a focal point or something to gaze at and to concentrate on. And so I had to just drop some of those subscriptions just to be free of those influences.

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

You like working with clay a lot. This is your medium, as they call it. In your view, how is it important to you? I mean, aside from the fact that you like to work with this medium, what gives you the greatest creativity potential? Why does clay give you the greatest creativity potential, and what's its limitation?

MR. SMITH: One thing I've learned working with clay over these years is that clay really is a — it is like working with the Earth itself. You know, it responds to your touch. It's yielding. And yet it has its own limitation just like anything — any kind of person or any kind of —

anything that exists. Any kind of material has limitations. But clay seems to be so willing, you know, so willing to allow your own voice to be carried in it.

And I think once you understand it, once you've developed a relationship with it, you know its strengths; you know what it can do and you know what it can't do, and once — and when you're young you're pushing the materials to their limits because you're trying to see what you can get away with and you're excited about impressing people with, "Look what I can do with clay," or, "Look what I can do with wood."

You know, that's one of those youthful things. And we all have that desire to stagger people with our skills, but to me it's become more important lately to — in some ways to collaborate with the material itself, so that, sure I have an idea and I'm going to take this material and I'm going to create something, but I also want the clay to have a voice too.

I want it to be seen. I want it to — I want people to realize that that's clay, or that's something — I know a lot of people do look at it a first time and they think baskets because it has that — just like baskets are created by adding one reed at a time or one level at a time, my clay also has a record. It carries that record of a coil at a time, one little coil at a time. So there's that similarity.

But it's just — it's been important to me to allow clay to become a little more — I guess just allow it to have something to say so that — I think this came from actually looking at Japanese basketry, you know, that's been made over the years, the ancient stuff, you know, the discipline that was involved in basketry making in the past.

Disciplines like that where — you know, an artist could only — I mean, somebody who's being trained — somebody who's apprenticing could only split bamboo for the first five years, you know, couldn't even make a basket. The teacher wouldn't even allow him to make a basket until he learned the material.

When I see the work that's being created in that kind of — with that kind of discipline, it's awesome. It is amazing. To understand clay that well is a goal, a lifetime goal, to understand it that well. But these masters I saw — that I've seen in Japan, you know, they can do anything they want with bamboo, but eventually there's this turning point where the craftsman allows the bamboo to speak for itself and allow that bamboo to really be bamboo, you know, even in the artwork.

And I like that. There's something really wonderful about that. It's something I've always appreciated about ancient work too is that, sure, you know, a lot of these artists are amazingly perfectionistic, but they allow for the clay to be clay. There's a — they're not forcing t into some kind of a mental image all the time. There's a relaxed feel. When you work with clay you have to be pretty close to the Earth. You have to. It's just — you've got to be somewhat of a laid-back person.

MS. SIOUI: You've got to be spiritual too.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Well, I guess there's people that make toilets and — [they laugh] — you know, tiles for a living and that's —

[Cross talk.]

MR. SMITH: Yeah, but when you are working and you're making vessels — you know, vessel forms and you're doing sculptural pieces, it does sort of demand a connection with the Earth.

MS. SIOUI: You were talking about wood a little bit, because I — from having seen some of your work, you do work with wood and you do amalgamate wood with your potteries. Can you tell me a little bit about it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I do love working with wood. I really do. And one of the things we've been doing maybe in the last five or six years, I've been using some wood collaboration with my clay collaborations.

And my favorite thing is to find pieces of weathered wood or wood that's a root from a tree that's got incredibly beautiful growth to it, and twists and curves and maybe even some rocks stuck into the wood itself, and incorporating that into my work.

And so, my nephew and I will occasionally take what we call a business trip. We get the canoe out and take a — take a trip down the river and look — you know, keep our eyes peeled on the banks and see if anything really neat is sticking out of the bank, any kind of roots. And we'll pull over there and jumping all over ourselves by finding really neat roots. And we saw them off and bring them home.

A lot of times those roots are gone the next year after floods come through, so we also feel like it's kind of a rescue thing. But I really love that. I love incorporating wood with clay — in stone as well if I can, you know.

MS. SIOUI: You have done some work with stone —

MR. SMITH: Yes.

MS. SIOUI: — incorporating stone?

MR. SMITH: Some stonework. Sometimes they're pieces that I'll carve from just a beautiful pebble I found in the stream. I don't really use anything really fancy, any fancy rock like — I've never really incorporated turquoise or any of the really valuable stones. But occasionally I'll find just a beautiful stone.

One recent piece was a stone I found in the creek that had a white side and a black side. And, I mean, they were just white and black. And so, I was able to shape a little figure out of that so that that white — the line of separation came right down through the head all the way down, you know, the body.

And there was representing those — again, those two figures, you know, in our creation story, the good twin and the evil twin, which show that, you know, we have both of these things within us. We have the propensity to do well, to do good, to create, and we also have this propensity inside us to break things, to destroy things and to hurt people. So we have these — both things in us.

So, yeah, incorporating stone is another thing. And I'm still working on that. We're still kind of getting to know each other in that way, getting to know the stones and —

MS. SIOUI: What's your most important piece of artwork that you were commissioned to do?

MR. SMITH: Well, I don't really do commissions too often. Commissions to me have been always a little bit risky. The commissions that I — the only commissions I really like are open-ended, totally open-ended. And, you know, a museum — I don't mind doing a commission for a museum. A museum will say —

MS. SIOUI: Like can you give me an example? What museum have you done work for?

MR. SMITH: Let's see. Okay, the one in Tulsa. There's the cowboy museum there.

MS. SIOUI: The Gilcrease?

MR. SMITH: No, actually — no, it's Oklahoma City, sorry. It's the — what is the name of that cowboy museum and Western art [National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum] —

MS. SIOUI: Rogers?

MR. SMITH: — cowboy —

MS. SIOUI: Not Will Rogers or something like that?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I'm drawing a blank on it. But they did give me a commission to create a piece for them, and I just — and they gave me total open end, you know, "Just do something, whatever you want to do," and I did. And that kind of thing I don't mind.

When I do a commission where I'm trying to please somebody, that's where I get into trouble, because if somebody — and we've tried this in the past. You know, people will walk into a gallery. A piece is sold, and that's the piece they want. So they'll tell the gallery owner, "If he ever does a piece like this again, you know, we want it."

And so of course the gallery owner is trying — it's a business and they're trying to make

money, and so they tell me those things. And eventually I'll give in and I'll say, "Okay, I'll try a piece like that." But the problem is that when I'm trying to replicate a piece that I've already done, it's like that first piece, what people see in it, is something — it's because it was unique and because it was something fresh and it came out of my own creativity, and they fell in love with that.

That stuff comes through on a piece that's made from those responses. But when I'm trying to create and I'm trying to think, I wonder if they're going to like this form or this color — I'm not sure; maybe I should try this; maybe they'll really like this, and then I'm creating with a wholly different approach, you know, and it just doesn't work.

Those pieces have never been the best. They've never — because they're always copies. They're always copies of something that was already done. And so I really try to stay away from that unless they're open-ended, totally open-ended.

MS. SIOUI: The inspiration is not as strong as when you've created the first one?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I think that's it. There's a guy in New York who I recently did make a large piece for, because he collects large pieces. And I specifically — I told him that. I told these people — you know, I've told them before, you know, with the gallery, I need a lot of room here for creativity because if I start getting demands for color, shape, size, you know, specific things, then I start getting — it just holds me back and I'm no longer creating; I'm just trying to — I don't know.

Something happens in the process where I lose the actual creative spark, and it shows in the work. It just shows. And everybody — you know, maybe people don't see it like I do but I certainly feel it. But this last piece I did was open-ended for him and it turned out fine. It was great.

MS. SIOUI: What was it about?

MR. SMITH: It was a large wind-up piece that had more of a crown top that —

MS. SIOUI: High collar?

MR. SMITH: High collar, yeah. And the pattern on it was just ribbons of color, you know, that were like ribbons into the design, kind of a three-dimensional surface. And it turned out fine. But I really avoid commissions as much as possible, yeah. I'd much rather just create pieces, take them to the gallery and let them go that way.

MS. SIOUI: Can you tell me a little bit about the similarities between your early work and your recent work? And you can tell me about their differences too?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Like, do you see some similarities with what you used to create when you first began and now, with all the different influences? And how are they similar, or are they totally dissimilar?

MR. SMITH: I think there are a lot of similarities. There are — you know, when I have looked through my old slides and I see earlier pieces — sometimes I totally forget what I've done and I see this piece and I go, "Oh, my goodness, I don't even remember doing that one," you know. And there are similarities, though.

Yeah, I look back at the early stuff and I see a crudeness. You know, it just shows up in me. There's a crudeness there that I hadn't developed the skills yet that I might have now. But there is a pretty — kind of a theme, I guess you'd say, coming through the work. And it's all rooted, again, on ancient — you know, the ancient work. I'm always more pleased with work that has — feels like it has one foot in the past and one foot leaning forward.

For a while, when I was first really plugging away at it, I did a lot of very, very complex pieces. And some of that complexity, to me it just became — again, I was just trying to outdo myself. You know, I'd create a piece and I'd think, oh, the next one I'm going to take it even further. I'm going to make it more complex, you know, and I'm going to make it more complex.

And so I had that kind of thing going for a while. And I think I reached a point where I

realized that complexity is not always beautiful. It's not always as great, and simplicity does have value. So I have noticed that recent work, I've been really weighing that out, weighing out what's just — I'm just getting something — creating something that's just busy, busy, busy, or is this something that's going to be wonderful to live with?

These are always kind of struggles because I know some people are really — what some people consider beauty or something they want to live with is something that's exotic or something that's very colorful and bright and flashy and draws the eye. And yet, I'm not always — I'm not always motivated to do that kind of thing. You know, I don't necessarily always want to do that. Sometimes I want to do quiet little messages, you know, quiet things.

MS. SIOUI: When you talk about complexity, when you want to do more complex work, do you mean that complexity takes into consideration all the influences that you had in your artist life so far, like you're trying to amalgamate all this?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, it's like trying to pile everything at once all into one piece, you know, and that's not always effective. I mean, it might be something to impress somebody with, you know, but it's not really necessarily good work.

MS. SIOUI: Is that how you describe the pottery or the artwork that you make when you make a pot in the shape of a traditional Wyandot pot, what — you make it with coils like the corrugated work, but with the Wyandot traditional high collar?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Because those are beautiful, in my mind.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that's going to be a standard. It's probably going to be there for the rest of my life. And part of that is a way of saying, you know, the Wyandots are still here. We're still here. And, you know, just the fact that when those pieces with the high collars and — those things are kind of coming back in an artistic way. They're not just reproductions of archeological digs. You know, they're really creative pieces, but they do have those things added to them.

Yeah, they're going to be around to stay because that's my heritage coming out. And, yeah, it's going to — one of the things I have — and this is something I talk with students about too, is that a piece should — a good work should be something that looks great at a distance, and it should be compelling. You know, it should be something that looks — it's good form when you approach it, you start seeing more, you know, and you start seeing more. And then you get close — very close up to it and you see detail that you wouldn't even notice from far away.

So, to me, a valuable piece of artwork is something that has all that. You know, it has something that's beautiful from a distance and it's also interesting when you're close up to it and you're looking at the surface. That's not always easy to do.

MS. SIOUI: I understand that you don't only make pots when you do pottery, because I've seen some of your work and you do all kinds of different shapes, like not only pots that you can put things in — although your artwork is too beautiful to put things in it, but you also do other shapes. Like I've seen some of your artwork that are — they look like pots but in the shape of a star. Or you make those beautiful corrugated plates and you include natural elements like sand and shells in it. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, the sculptural forms. Yeah, those star forms, they kind of came out of — actually, I was looking at a book on New Guinea pottery, pottery from New Guinea, and I noticed there was a picture of a women who was making a bowl by laying out a coil in a circle on the ground on banana leaves, and then from that opening of the bowl she actually domed it in and then closed it off.

And just by thinking of that and making a piece upside down, starting from the rim, I thought, wow, that's a — what a fascinating idea. You could make any rim shape you wanted

and then you could just build it up and finish it.

So it just kind of gave me a totally different way of building. It's like, wow, what if you start from the opening and work down to the base, you know? And so, everything changes that way. And I've done several forms like that. They ended up looking more like stars because the opening itself, that first coil, was more like a star shape.

And these are pieces — yeah, you're right, they're not vessel forms, necessarily. They've kind of gone beyond that. And the platters that I do with coiling inside and that, these are more like — they're almost like — how would you say it — like a satellite dish, you know, projecting upward. And it's not something that would be — they're reminiscent of plates or they're reminiscent of vessels, but they've surpassed that.

I guess you see that somewhat even in the Grecian pottery. You know, some of those early Greek pots that are found, those amphora, you know, that — some of them were obviously made for use but some of them are made to — you would never put water in them. They're too beautiful, you know, the color and the black and the — they're just — they were made for just as beautiful statements.

MS. SIOUI: You talked about getting inspiration from a New Guinea pot. When you were in China and New Zealand, were there any influences that you're retained from these potters in any way in your late work? Like, I know you've been to New Zealand just last fall. Do you still retain some influence from the Maori in your work? And how about China? Can we find that in your artwork somewhere?

MR. SMITH: I think with China it was a little different because I was in an area in Qingming where the pottery tradition wasn't very strong. I mean, you think of China as being a place of porcelain and beautiful — you know, the big dragon kilns and that, but where I was at, it was not really part of the culture, not a strong part of the culture. So even the things I was doing there was really different. You know, in the art school they didn't have a pottery class, or classes or anything.

But, I mean, obviously I was drawn to books over there about ancient Chinese things, and their use of — their way of cutting stone and their way of — oh, just the skill, just the awesome skill it took to carve jade, you know, and things like that. Those are things that were drawn — a crystal, rock crystal. You know, without diamond tools, how did they — I mean, just those things always got to me. So I'm always impressed by the levels of craftsmanship of ancient material.

With the New Zealand trip, though, you know, when I was — I was actually around — the whole three weeks I was with a Maori group of potters, or what they call themselves — they call themselves muddies.

MS. SIOUI: Muddies?

MR. SMITH: Muddies, yeah. And they're ceramic artists. And some of them aren't necessarily potters. They don't actually make pottery, but they're sculptors and they use clay. That's why they call themselves muddies, I guess. They can kind of bridge all kinds of groups with that. Great people. Just really wonderful people.

The Maori themselves say that their clay heritage really comes not from New Zealand but comes from another island, from where they had come — you know, they had come in their past. So there's not a strong tradition of clay there.

This is — clay is actually kind of a new thing for them on the islands. They see themselves as being there for 800 years, so this is somewhat new. But the clay artists themselves today, they're using a lot of forms that are very boat-like. They're using their clay as they do carving on wood, jade things. They have their own kind of jade — they call it a greenstone — that's there. So, it's pretty exciting what's going on there now in clay.

And so, another thing I was seeing a lot of when I was there is the spiral. And I was seeing this spiral coming — and everywhere I looked. I mean, I was seeing it on their maraes, on their longhouses, on their own traditional buildings.

MS. SIOUI: Marae?

MR. SMITH: Their marae.

MS. SIOUI: Marea?

MR. SMITH: Marae I think is what it — the way it's called, a marae. You know, it's a community spiritual building for ceremonies and that. And a marae might actually look like a longhouse at the Six Nations, where it has a community building next to it for eating and socializing, and a cook place, you know, a place for cooking.

And then they have their marae, which is their building for — where they honor their ancestors. They have ancestor pillars all throughout the building. And this is where they would honor them. And they have a special ceremony for that.

But the spirals, I kept seeing these spirals everywhere. And I noticed them in ancient Chinese work. I've noticed them everywhere across the world, and this spiral has become something I've been really thinking a lot about, what it means, what it can be used as.

It's like a word in itself, and it's a word that's bigger than just a word — you know, just one single word. But the spiral is a word and it's communicating a lot. It's a universal symbol. And I've seen it as a symbol — symbolizing death and rebirth.

As, you know, life changes, you come around as the seasons come around. They come around but you're at a different place every time it comes around. But there's just so much in that, just in itself. That could be a lifetime study, you know. It's just — it's beautiful. So I've been incorporating that spiral, actually, in some of my work.

And one thing I was blown away with in — with the Maori art was their boxes. They have these beautiful boxes that they stored their feathers and sacred things in. And they were just these beautifully hand-carved wooden boxes, and they're just amazing. So I have actually done a few pieces in clay now, you know, that are sort of reminiscent of those, and —

MS. SIOUI: Clay boxes?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, clay boxes, yeah, with carvings, you know, instead of actually — instead of coiling, they're carved, you know. So they're made in slabs and then they're carved into —

MS. SIOUI: In the clay?

MR. SMITH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. And those have been fun.

MS. SIOUI: When did you begin — when you did begin exhibiting your artwork, can you recall the character of those early exhibitions?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I remember — I think my first exhibit with Gallery 10, I was so scared. I was so scared being there. I mean, first of all, it was so new to me to have a show, you know. I had been — pots had been going down to Gallery 10 from where we lived in Ganado, so they had been shipped down. They already were there. They'd never met me.

And so, when I showed up for the show with Carol, we came in and I was just kind of terrified. The place was packed with people, and I was just kind of wandering around and looking, and not sure who to introduce myself to, or if I wanted to introduce myself to anyone.

And we heard somebody — I think it must — oh, it was the gallery owner's son — it was Phil Cohen — he was saying, "Yes, we're thinking the potter's going to show up here. We think the artist is going to show up here sometime this evening but we're not sure. We're not sure he's here." And finally Carol, she looks at him and goes, "Oh, he's right here." [They laugh.]

So, yeah, my first show was really pretty amazing. It was kind of — it made me feel great. It made me feel wonderful, you know, first of all. These were things that I had — these pots that I had created, they were things that I put a lot of work into, a lot of effort into, and they were important to me.

But to see how they were responded to, you know, by other people, to see how people responded to them, that was really — that was wonderful. You know, it was such a great feeling that, wow, the things that I value are also valued by other people. So, yeah, it was a real boost.

MS. SIOUI: Can you tell me a little bit more — you talked about — you have some experience as a teacher now. You want to pass on that knowledge. Can you tell me more about your teaching career?

You mentioned too that you were invited — like you're giving workshops here to the Seneca-Cayugas, and you've offered to do pottery workshops to the Wyandots. And you did come to Wendake, Quebec, Canada, to teach the Wendat or Wyandot people up there. Can you tell me more about it? How do you like it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: How does that fit in, in your career? And what do you think of that experience, that teaching experience?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I love doing that. I really enjoy that. It does seem like it's a brand new thing for our people, you know, to be exposed to. Even though it's something that has been a part of our traditions, that's in such a distant part of the past, you know, that there's no continual — there wasn't a continual marker — identity marker of our people. It actually faded for a while.

And so, to kind of go backwards and to reconnect with that and to bring it back has been really exciting. And it's exciting to watch students, because I pretty much make them process their own clay, make their own tools. We start from the ground up, and so they learn the whole process, everything. Especially here it's easier to do that.

You know, to see that excitement in the students, to see students just getting really drawn in to their work and feeling really good, you know, when something works, and to see how emotional they get too when something doesn't work. Everybody reacts so differently, too.

There are some people that have instant success, and then in a way that works against them because their next two or three pieces, you know, all of a sudden they're encountering problems. And they think, well, what's the matter? I mean, that first one went so well.

And so that's one problem. And then we see some people who just struggle from the beginning. You know, they struggle and struggle with it. And you help them along, you coax them along, and you feel like, oh, man — it's so hard for me to relate to this. This must be like a musician watching a first — somebody first touching the piano. It must be like, "Oh, my goodness, I forget what that's like, you know, to have all thumbs." [Laughs.]

So it's wonderful, but it's also kind of painful too because I see that struggle with people. There's not the connection I have, you know, that's developed over the years. And I don't even think about it anymore.

To me, somebody will ask me about a piece and I'll go, "Oh, that one was an easy piece. Oh, that was easy. That wasn't even a struggle." And then I kind of think, well, yeah, it's easy for me because the skill has been — you know, it's in my hands and in my mind now, and of course it's easy, but for beginning students it's not easy. It's like a whole new language that they're learning.

But I love it, and I love to see the pride that's coming out of people when they — you know, when they actually create a work that their ancestors would have been proud of. And that really makes me feel happy. I loved seeing that here when we had the Seneca-Cayuga here, the women — all-women class, and it was just great and they got so excited about it. And they're wanting more — more classes, you know.

But what I'd really like to see is a whole revival of it again. I'd really like to see the pottery work. Yeah, we're starting from basic — oh, almost reproductions of ancient stuff, but eventually I'd like to see those reproductions become real expressions of their own, you know, so that they can custom make their work so that it's really theirs.

Yeah, you look at it and you think, oh, that's an Iroquoisan pot, but it also has their own

expression, which is really fascinating. So I'm really hopeful that that can happen, something — almost like a revival of a craft, the way it happened in the Southwest, you know, with pueblo pottery, you know, where at one time these were just things that were used for dishes and bowls and water containers, but now it's something that's valued as an art piece, you know.

MS. SIOUI: How do you feel regarding that, the ancestors or the early native people that created the pottery? Do you feel that those pots — they were created and there was some inspiration put into them? You said that some — earlier you said that some of the artwork are also beautiful. Do you feel inspiration when you touch — I remember you telling me one day that when you gather a piece of an old pot, you can almost feel the way they worked the clay.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, that is wonderful. And I know — I love sherds for that reason, to be able to pick up a sherd or an old vessel and hold it because, as a potter, as somebody who works with clay, you know, it connects to me in a way probably that it wouldn't necessarily with somebody who's just, "Oh, that's a nice cooking pot," or something.

And, you know, my hands can sense things that probably can't be sensed by just normal people, you know. [Laughs.] "Normal people."

MS. SIOUI: Do you have a sense of the inspiration that went into it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah. Well, sometimes I do, and then sometimes I have that mystery, like — because I notice that there's a real reluctance in some work to be — to break away from anything. You know, it's like an anthropologist and archeologist can almost tell periods of time by designs. You know, designs were very standardized, and there were certain patterns that were to be used.

And I'm not sure that that was — you know, that creativity was discouraged, but it was just, "This is how you do it, you know. This is the designs we use on our village." Or, "This is the clan symbols we use." And so, you didn't even think about it. In the past you didn't think about, "Well, I want to have my own expression," or, "I want to have my own" — that's all new. That's all new stuff. That's coming out of this age.

It was much more important to belong, you know, in the past than it is today. People, if they don't like a village or they don't like a town, they can move somewhere else. If they don't like their church, they'll go to another church. It wasn't like that in the past. If you left your village, you were dead. I mean, it just — your village was so important.

So, to be connected to that village meant you learned from grandmother and mother, and, you know, what she tells you, you do. And it wasn't even a question of, "Oh, shucks, I don't want to do what grandma does." [Laughs.] You know, it's just — that's what you do.

MS. SIOUI: Exactly.

MR. SMITH: So, yeah, in that way too you're connecting with pieces that have a record of a period of time that was, this is how things are done. But I also — you know, when you pick up sherds, you can tell some people had a skill level that was totally different than others. Some people had an eye that was in love with the canoe form, you know. They loved those curves. And you see that in the work and you think, oh, now this person really had a gift.

And then you'll see another piece that almost looks like an imitation of that but it's a little crude and it's rougher and it's — okay, it's got all those correct things in it, but it's not a really — it's not a work of art. It's just a functional pot that has sort of that "grandma made it this way" kind of pot. [Laughs.]

So, yeah, I love it when I see a piece that, oh, man, this person really took pride in getting those curves just right. And it takes time to do that with clay. With wood it's a little different, but to make clay into something — to make lines that are, you know, canoe forms or canoe shapes, you know, that took deliberate, deliberate work, you know, and a deliberate eye. So, yeah, I love that. I love seeing the variations, though. I love that.

MS. SIOUI: Where do you get your ideas for your work? Where do you get your inspiration? You've talked about your travels that have influenced you.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, a lot of my inspiration just comes from just everyday life; you know, whatever is happening, nature itself, you know, just — one of my best inspirations is just to wander up the creek, you know, when the creek is running, and just to put my water sandals on and just walk up the creek without thinking, without thought, you know, and just observe, and just to be a sponge and just absorbing everything around me.

And because it's a creek that I'm familiar with, it's not like I'm exploring. It's more like I'm just being in the presence of everything around me, all the sounds and all the smells and the animals and the creek. These are the kind of experiences that fill me, and I think really have the most influence.

Occasionally, as we talked about before, you know, there's some kind of issue that comes up. I have done a series of issues on abuse, and I've done those because I wanted to make a strong statement. And I thought it was something that nobody is addressing. You know, nobody is addressing the sexual abuse of children, and why is that? I want to do something that breaks that — you know, breaks the silence, breaks the taboo about mentioning these things. So I'll venture out on a ledge, you know, and do the statement.

And that will happen once in a while, you know, when things are just really strong and in my heart, and I feel like something has to be said. But for the most part, most of my pieces are quiet and they're, you know, just things that — one piece sometimes will lead to another. They evolve. You know, they've evolved in different directions. They've gotten complex and then they've gone simple again, and then they've become complex.

And there are just so many avenues to explore it's like life is so short, you know, there's not enough time to do it all. I have been blessed to have my nephew come and study for me — study with me for a year, and he was — he's very talented already, just to begin with. He had a lot of skill, he had excitement, he had the tenacity to stick through something — hard worker. He could do detail, he could do the finest detail, but he could also be loose and he could be free with his work.

And he didn't — it didn't seem to bother him if something blew up or, you know, it was destroyed by some kind of mistake he made. He was able to see that as a growing experience, and just the experience of creating becomes the real blessing. And, to me, that guy is going to go far because of that reason. You know, he's got that kind of — he loves what he's doing. He loves the — it's not about selling and about, oh, what is the market buying right now? To him he doesn't even think that way.

MS. SIOUI: What's his name?

MR. SMITH: That's Jamie. And his name — full name would be Jamie Zane Smith. So he's been working now and getting some recognition, and it's just so wonderful because I was really hoping that I could, you know, pass this along in the family, and he's somebody that's come forward. And I feel like this is — there's something happening. And I hope he'll do the same. You know, the things that we both learn together, you know, he'll be able to pass on eventually in the family line too.

And it's just really good to see clay coming back into our family, into a Wyandot family context, and having the Wyandots getting an international voice too, in the arts. To me I feel really wonderful that I can represent our people, our Wendat and Wyandot people on a big scale at times.

MS. SIOUI: International scale.

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: You said you made an artwork that talked about when you — you had a strong message to convey about child sexual abuse. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Because I know I've seen some pictures of it, but I think it was an interesting piece.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, this was during a time —

MS. SIOUI: Because there was an active part of it from those that were abused, I believe.

MR. SMITH: Right. That's right, yeah. Yeah, it was during a time it seemed like it was just ripe for this thing to come out. My own son had been exposed to some of that from some outsiders twice, and so I was kind of angry with that, you know, the fact that he was abused, and I realized that there was so much suppression of these things.

And I started to notice something like sexual abuse as being something that — it's like a disease that thrives in the darkness, and that as long as it's not exposed, that it doesn't come to light, it keeps festering and it keeps going from generation to generation. And the only way to stop it, to put an end to it, is to expose it to light, like cockroaches. You know, they scatter. It can't be done in light. It can't be done when everybody is watching. It has to be done in secret. And this is how it spreads.

So, actually, that was the name of the piece too, is *Exposed to Light*, and what it was, was a bowl with a lid. And I had written to and gathered from people who experienced this kind of abuse when they were growing up, and they all sent something, whether it was a poem, a writing about it, an experience they had, or even an object.

Maybe they didn't feel like writing something — you know, they just couldn't put it into words — but they made something, or something — there was one — one of the things in the pot itself was just a ball of tinfoil that somebody was just wadding up in their hand; you know, was just wadding up while they were thinking about this subject or talking about it. And that was it. That's all they could really contribute.

But this was a piece that had — the lid was — it was almost like a bed on top with a pitted figure, this figure of stone made out of volcanic rock that was tied down to this bed, and it was all pitted with holes, you know, and all this. And that was the lid.

There was a woman who helped me by making this silk cover for it. This cover was tied down on four corners by individuals on the jar. There were four individuals representing the different directions. And these individuals had this — almost like a wooden pin. It was a wooden pin stuck into the piece. And that held down one of the corners of this covering.

So it was kind of like the family keeping it a secret. You know, they had this body up there on top, and yet from all directions around they were keeping this secret pinned down and covered so that it wouldn't be revealed.

And it was interesting because when I did the opening for this, I asked our gallery, I said, "Do you mind if I express what this piece is all about?" And so this happened, and it was great. It was in Taos at the time. And during the show there was just an announcement made that I was going to explain this work. And so everybody gathered over and it was quiet. And I began to talk about the piece and what it was all about.

And I said, "What I'm going to do now is to uncover this person who's here. And this is an act of bringing this crime to light. You know, we're going to expose this to light." And so I took the pins out, you know, from these figures' hands, and the cloth came off and everybody could see the little pitted figure that was tied to this bed on top of the lid.

And then I opened the lid and started taking out the objects and the writings and the poetry and the things, and just putting them all around the piece, and so people could come up and read them or look at the objects.

And I began to mention, you know, that this was something that was starting to affect — well, it's been affecting our native community just like it's affected the rest of the world too, but it's one of those secrets, you know, that's been so hard to deal with because there's so much shame involved. You know, there's so much — well, it's just one secret begets another secret and a person's infected by it and it just continues on.

So, I was really so glad — and the proceeds for that sale, that piece, went to a women's shelter there is Taos. There was no way I could take a penny for that work. I just could not do it. So that was neat because the women who ran that shelter happened to be at the show too. They were there, and so I just — those are things that I do occasionally, you know, when I just have to do something. I have to do it. I have to say this. This has got to come out.

And in a way it's kind of like using my — you know, because I'm known or because I'm put in

the spotlight, I can get away with that, you know? It's like, I can get away with this. And so occasionally a voice will be spoken; something has to be said. And it gives me a chance to do that and I'm really thankful for that.

MS. SIOUI: In what way do political and social commentaries figure in your work? You've touched upon it, like you talked about creating a piece for Afghanistan. Or this — this is really like carrying a strong message on sexual abuse of children. Are there other ways in which your work carries a message, political?

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Have you made some political statements?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I have in the past, and I've made — and again, these are not things I do all the time because I don't want my work to be billboards, you know, for political activism. I just want them to come out occasionally. And I want to be — I guess I don't want to be known as somebody who that's what they do, but occasionally somebody who has to say something.

And I have done some pieces — I did one on the whole Christian — what was it? The Christian militia. The Christian militia. I made this Christian militia ammo box, and it was a church made out of — it was corrugated, actually; just looked like an old white clapboard church. And it had a lid, and it had the steeple and everything.

And when you opened it up and looked inside, it was all full of 30-06 shells, you know, gun — rifle shells in there. They weren't loaded. I made sure to take all the gunpowder out of them, but they looked like a bunch of missiles inside there all stacked, you know, and tight.

I've done a piece on — I've done some on TV evangelists, which I always thought were, you know, great targets. I've done pieces on war, violence, using the human being as a target, and race issues.

I did a piece that was all about looking at a racial — racist kind of activity where a human being is a target, kind of like a figure of human beings all around the pot, all in different colors — red, yellow, white and black — and then having a target right in their chest and having bullet holes in it. And then the interior of the pot, you could look inside and it was all full of bodies, you know, just laying there all over the — just piled. So, I've done things like that.

I did another one on sexual abuse too. This was a — it was a pot that had all these burning churches on it. It was like churches that were just floating in the air, and they all had flames coming out of them.

It was actually made during a time when people were concerned about some of these churches that were being burned in the South, but in my mind I kept thinking, you know, there are some churches that need to be burned — that was my thinking at the time — because they still house a lot of secrets and they still are still abusing people, you know, whether it's my explicit — the explicit thing of sexual abuse or if it's other ways, spiritually abusing them by controlling them and by basically just saying, "Well, God said you have to do this, so you have to do this," you know, this kind of abuse, spiritual abuse.

So, yeah, this one on burning churches was a strong piece. And right off, those are the ones that just come to mind.

MS. SIOUI: You did one on globalization too, if I can remember.

MR. SMITH: On —

MS. SIOUI: Globalization, the one with all the flags, the different flags and blood.

MR. SMITH: Oh, that's right. That's right.

MS. SIOUI: The various flags. That was a beautiful one too.

MR. SMITH: That one actually was on — this was — I made this piece that had to do with the conflict over there in the Middle East. And it was all these flags that were involved — you know, Iran, Iraq, Israel, America, Lebanon — just all these flags that had to do with the Middle East.

And this was — I made that one right before the Gulf War. And when I heard about what was going on over there and how, you know, Kuwait was being saved by the Americans, as soon as that happened I just knew something terrible was going to result of this, you know.

And this kind of trying to save the world by violence, you know, attacking — using force, it just — I just knew something terrible was going to happen. So this piece all had flags that were all bleeding and torn, and all the flags of the different countries involved, Kuwait too, they're all dripping blood, yeah.

MS. SIOUI: Yeah. Would you say that your sources of inspiration have changed over the years?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I think so. I haven't, you know, done any pieces that really are a real obvious, what you would call, you Christian-based stuff anymore, because I'm really — I've been doing so much research and study on that whole issue and realize that a lot of the things that I thought were so certain are not certain. You know, things I was taught growing up are not so — not as really based in truth as I really thought they were.

So, I guess I'm often more trying to get to a spirituality that's more universal. You know, I think in some ways maybe Christianity can point people to a bigger picture, but it doesn't always. And some people get trapped in it itself. But the same thing could happen with our traditionalists too, I feel like, and sometimes our traditionalists can become so narrow-minded and also ritualistic that they get caught in that small view and they forget that these are pictures of something that's bigger.

You know, the more we learn, the more we realize, you know, our universe is so vast, so huge, and that if we have a vision of a creator, it's got to be bigger than all our pictures combined, you know, all the Earth's pictures combined. They're all human constructs of something that we're trying to grasp and we're trying to put into words but — are trying to put into visualization, but they're all small and they're all human.

And if there really is a creator, it's going to be somebody who's a being, because how can a nonbeing make being? How can — you know, how can that which is personal — or unpersonal make something that's personal? He's got to at least be personal. How can something so vast be explained? How can it be — how can we relate to that?

So, you know, we've all been struggling with that. Humanity has been struggling with those issues. And of course some people have decided that there's nothing. You know, it's just all random and it's all chance and it's all — it just happened. I don't have that kind of faith. [Laughs.] I know there's more — I think there's more than that.

MS. SIOUI: Do you think that your working process has changed over time? You —

MR. SMITH: The process —

MS. SIOUI: You said you worked alone most of your life too —

MR. SMITH: True.

MS. SIOUI: — but you worked recently with your nephew. Do you mainly work alone or with others?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I do my —

MS. SIOUI: And what are the processes?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I do my best work alone, yeah. I have tried different processes, you know, as far as different techniques, and I'm working on some things now that are new. Actually, I've started mixing volcanic ash into my clay, which I've never done before, and that way I can actually carve into the clay.

And I've really enjoyed carving clay because there is a point where it's like carving — cutting chocolate, you know? It feels so good. These are things I've been experimenting with a little bit more, not that I've given up on the corrugated or the coil method, but just to expand a little bit, try some other things.

But it is true; I think my best work is when I'm alone and I can really focus and my mind can

be free. If there are other people around when I'm creating, I tend to be thinking about them. You know, I tend to be thinking about the people in the room. And I don't think about what I'm doing or — my mind isn't free. And I have to have kind of a free mind when I'm creating something. It has to be just —

MS. SIOUI: And that's when your inspiration comes?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, yeah, it seems like. Yeah, it does.

MS. SIOUI: Have you had any involvement with national crafts organizations like the American Crafts Council, the Artist Blacksmith's Association, or the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, and with local crafts organizations?

MR. SMITH: Not really. I haven't really got involved in any kind of just groups, groups of stuff, I mean, other than just keeping in contact with other artists off and on. But as far as these big — these organizations, I really don't — I don't really associate with them. I don't know; it just hasn't happened for me, and just doesn't seem to be that interesting to me. I'm more interested in connecting with our traditional people and helping them along than trying to think of art in that kind of a way, I guess.

MS. SIOUI: What about as far a teaching experience is concerned, do you follow any specific teaching programs, or do you have some insight to provide on the formation and philosophies of various teaching programs? Or do you follow your own philosophy the way you were taught as an artist or the way you conduct your career as an artist, the way you get your inspiration? Do you teach the same thing?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, I think when I teach, I really do — I do have kind of my own way of doing it, and I start every class with a prayer song. I want people to realize that this material we're working with is something that's sacred. It's something that our ancestors may be inside.

I mean, we've been here for so many generations, hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands of years, and that this material is something that's not just — that comes out of a plastic bag, you know, like a loaf of bread or something. This is something that's our Earth. It represents our whole Earth itself.

And so that when people start a class, you know, with that kind of sense, you know, there's much more respect given for the material. We talk about traditional things, you know, while we're working. I don't do a lot of — I just don't do classes, you know, without traditional people anymore — or native people anymore. I just don't have time to open it up to anybody, so I have to kind of narrow myself.

And so much do I want to see a revival of the pottery of our people that I just have to limit myself in that way. I've worked with some Cherokee people and I wouldn't mind working with Quapaw and Shawnee, others in the area, but I just have to kind of put a limit to it.

And by doing that, though, I bring in prayer and I do bring in these kind of things that — when I gather the clay itself, you know, there are prayers for that. And there are certain ways of approaching it. And if we make certain pipes for certain purposes, there's certain things we do with those pipes too. There are certain things we include in that clay, you know. There are certain things that have to be done in the right way.

And if I was just opening that up to the public, I don't know that the public — they might appreciate it but it wouldn't really make sense to them. It wouldn't be their own. And so, I guess — I guess so.

I mean, I think, again, when I do a class, my first intention is to get people to connect with where the ancestors left off. You know, what pottery, what styles, what development — what was going on when that tradition stopped, and let's go back there and reconnect. Then we can bring that back, that whole technique and everything, into the 21st century. So it's to kind of regain what was lost first.

MS. SIOUI: Were there major shifts in forms in your artwork and in technique? And in material, what was the motivating factor behind you using volcanic ashes, for instance? Did you want to — well, you said you want to be able to carve, but were there other motivating factors at play whenever you had a major shift in shapes or forms and techniques or materials you used?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, when I first started I was pretty much in love with a lot of pueblo forms. And I still love them. I still love a lot of the pueblo-type forms, the Anasazi forms. And of course, the closer I got to my own Wyandot roots and looking at, you know, ancient Wyandot forms, then I started incorporating those into my work.

But I still like to use vessel forms. That's my primary thing. Vessels are still the important thing. And people sometimes wonder about that. You know, why not sculpture? Why not just break out of vessels completely? But there's something in a vessel that's really special for me. And these are things that probably need some discussion about. It would be good to discuss it with other people too.

That hawk just went through there. [Laughs.]

It would be interesting to talk about why — you know, why the vessel is so important. But I think that vessel is something that ties us to our roots. You know, it's something that we've had for so long, and to leave it behind and just do objects, you know, that don't have any roots themselves is a departure that I'm not ready for. I don't want that. So I like vessels.

Even though they're not something that's going to be filled with water or food or cooked with, still it's like, these are things we lived with around us. You know, they were things that we had around us. And there's just that connection to — maybe it's like gardening too.

You know, it's like, we don't have to garden. You know, I don't have to plant all that corn, but somehow when you plant a garden and you eat your own — you know, you make your own hominy and you prepare it in a traditional way and you eat it with deer meat that's from the land, it brings us back and it ties us, you know, to our roots and our ancestry.

Sure, you know, we could just say, ah, why waste all that time, you know? Or why do that? You know, why not plant something exotic or plant something that's real showy? But we still like our gardens. We still like eating fresh foods. And there's kind of a desire to keep that foot back in the past, I guess, you know? It keeps us grounded.

The same with language, you know. We have one linguist who might tell us, "Oh, you know, you can make words yourself. You can make them however you want. You can put them together any old way." But to me it's like, well, maybe eventually we can get to the place where we can come up with words for "computer" and we can come up with words — we're going to need those things, but first, you know, let's find out the way our ancestors thought, and let's find out their words first. Let's really build on that.

Then, when we get to the place where we say, okay, how are we going to describe writing — we've actually had to deal with questions like that, but instead of just kind of creating something totally out of the air, like a sculptural form, what do we have — what did we have in the past?

Well, we had people who were trackers and they followed tracks in the snow. And they could look at tracks and they could see, "Ah, this animal was disturbed here and they moved that way and they were frightened." You know, people are reading tracks, so they're reading. And so, well, here's a way to describe reading, you know, right there. We can say that we're reading by — we're watching the tracks, or we're seeing the tracks.

So that's grounded in the past and it makes sense, you know, so it's a good way to describe it. Those are the kind of things — to me it's the same as working with clay and still working with vessels, too. You can do a lot with a vessel. You know, a hollow form can go a million different directions and it's still reminiscent of a cooking pot. And so it still ties you to the ancestors in a way that way.

MS. SIOUI: Has technology impacted your work in any way?

MR. SMITH: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. SIOUI: How? Do you want to tell me about it?

MR. SMITH: Yeah, it has in a lot of ways. I mean, even my wood kiln out here that I use, I mean, it's lined — I have it lined with a fiber insulation. It's adobe block but, you know, I've got this fiber insulation that keeps the kiln from cracking, because, you know, it keeps the heat in.

And I've got it covered with stucco, so, you know, even though it's made from the clay right off the land here — you know, the whole kiln was built out of mud, you know, and just scrap stuff that we found, it's still — I use technology too, you know, and some of the materials that I use — not my clay but my stains — you know, these are stains that I buy, and I don't know — I know they're minerals but I don't know where they're from, you know. So those are technical advances.

The screens I use for screening my clay, oh, man, I don't know what I'd do without those screens, you know, to screen out the — and plastic buckets. I mean, you think — these are all things you take for granted, you know, or even a table. These are technologies, which are great, wonderful technologies to integrate into the work and make things — oh, even my little banding wheel.

I use a little turntable, you know, for working on my pot. To me that's like a really high technology right there. Instead of running around the pot — [laughs] — you can actually turn the pot itself with your hand and then work on it with your hands, and your hands are free that way.

So technologies have — you know, they've always been important to our native people. They've always embraced new ideas, new technologies. Guns were a wonderful invention. Unfortunately, they also meant that fighting became much more dangerous and became more deadly and provoked more hatred probably too.

So technologies have to be — just because it's new doesn't mean it's good, but it can be useful, and these are things that have to be weighed. And actually, the computer itself, I mean, to do research, you know, to find ancient pottery, it's not like you can visit every museum. You can't afford doing that, but there's so much — you know, things you can find out online, and connecting with people.

So, yeah, I'm for technology but I also realize that it's fragile, you know, and that it's — it may not be permanent. It may be something that's here for a while and crumbles.

MS. SIOUI: Still, you make use of the technology around you to help you in your artwork but you're still using natural clay, I believe.

MR. SMITH: Right.

MS. SIOUI: You go and you gather your clay from nature.

MR. SMITH: That's right.

MS. SIOUI: And you use traditional techniques like having wet, flat rocks to make your pots look shiny.

MR. SMITH: Right, right.

MS. SIOUI: Okay.

MR. SMITH: Yeah, so it's kind of a combination of using, you know, contemporary things and traditional things. Yeah, that word "tradition" is always going to be a hard one to define. At Indian Market in Santa Fe, you know, they have classes — you know, when they're giving awards, you know, for certain groups, they're, "Well, this is the traditional group, this is the contemporary."

But "tradition," that's a pretty interesting category because it usually means pots that are fired under a milk crate. Well, I don't know how a milk crate is decided that that's traditional, or tin — using tin. I don't know how — when that was decided that that was traditional. They still gather their clay with plastic buckets and shovels and all these modern things, and work on tables and in air-conditioned building, so what's really a traditional pot? [Laughs.]

MS. SIOUI: Exactly. And I believe you do some pottery that you do fire the traditional way as well —

MR. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. SIOUI: — even though you're making use of a little bit of modern technology —

MR. SMITH: True.

MS. SIOUI: — in the way you build your kiln, you fire them the traditional way.

MR. SMITH: True. True, but, you know, I still gather my — I cut my wood with a chainsaw and — you know, I mean — so it's like the whole process — I can't — you can't escape from some technology.

MS. SIOUI: No.

MR. SMITH: And even with my little pit that I dug, you know, I have — the center of that pit itself is a sewer pipe that goes down, and it goes underground and it goes downhill so that air can be sucked in through there and really make it hot. So even that, you know, it's using these old clay pipes.

MS. SIOUI: Nothing wrong with it.

MR. SMITH: Yeah. [Laughs.] But, again, I think that sometimes traditional should be defined as using whatever is around you. You know, it's using what's there. And that's the challenge me and my nephew really enjoy together. When we're building a kiln — when we built that kiln out there it's like, "Well, what do we have, first? What do we have to build with? Well, we have the clay in the creek. We have the mud on the banks. Okay, so we don't have to worry about buying bricks. What else do we have? You know, what's around us?"

And I try to influence people too when they come — the students when they come. It's like, "We are not going to buy anything. This is not a class where you go out and buy art materials. If you need a tool, you're going to make it, even if it means snapping a CD in half and grinding the edges, that's your tool, you know. And these are all going to be things that you could do at home. You could do this on your kitchen table."

That's what I want people to realize. You know, working with clay can be so simple, and it can be so direct. And you don't need a lot of fancy equipment for it.

MS. SIOUI: That's it. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview before we conclude?

MR. SMITH: Gosh, you know me. I'm a talker, so — [they laugh].

I appreciate you, Linda, and I appreciate you being able to be here and ask these questions, because I know, with you as well as me, you know, these things — our traditions are really important, and trying to bring back an appreciation and an awakening, you know, of things we've lost, all these things are so important to me right now.

I mean, right now I feel like I'm just scratching the surface, you know, and yet when I see tribal members who don't seem to know anything about their past or don't know a word of their language, it's so troubling to me. It's so — and they have — maybe they've never made anything with their hands. They've never made an arrow or an arrowhead, or they've never learned how to work buckskin or they've never — you know, it's just — we're so removed nowadays.

And anything we can do to bring people back and start respecting the Earth itself for what it provides and really watching out the kind of influences that come into our lives that are negative — you know, those negative things, the destructive forces that have come from the popular culture, even things like hate and greed, these are all things too that are important. You know, they're just as important as making a pot, to me.

And keeping our lives clean; you know, really watching our lives so that we're not just hypocrites. You know, we're not just creating beauty on one side but then we're living like the devil on another side.

MS. SIOUI: No.

MR. SMITH: So, you know, these are all things that are important to me.

MS. SIOUI: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: Being an example too, because we have to be an example. You know, we don't

like that. We don't like being a role model. I hate that word, but, you know, there's a lot of kids that are growing up — traditional kids here too that just don't have role models to follow. They're coming from families where there's a lot of abuse, there's a lot of just being under domination from the popular culture. So we're trying to encourage them and trying to make their heads lift up and be proud of who they are.

MS. SIOUI: Yeah.

Well, I thank you very much. And this concludes the interview. And, well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

MR. SMITH: Thank you, Linda.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]