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Oral history interview with Bennett Bean, 2011 June 16-17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bennett Bean on June 16 and 17, 2011. The interview took place in Frelinghuysen Township, New Jersey, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts.

Bennett Bean has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Bennett Bean in the artist's house in Frelinghuysen Township, New Jersey, on June 16, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number one.

So, let's begin with some early biographical material — take care of that and then move along. You were born in Cincinnati?

BENNETT BEAN: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: 1941?

MR. BEAN: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the date?

MR. BEAN: March 25th. My father was a doctor and he was working in the hospital there. Actually, he was there when I was born and then he went to Louisville, I think, to work on the discovery of what caused Pellagra, which is not a stylish disease anymore because they solved the problem.

It was big in the Kentucky mountains where they lived on beans and back fat and didn't have greens 90 percent of the year. And so I think it was the Vitamin B deficiency, and he was part of the group that was discovering that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. How long was he gone?

MR. BEAN: I don't know, but I've got a set of letters that my mother wrote in, where I had just been born. And she was extremely fond of me.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you the first?

MR. BEAN: I was the first.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have siblings?

MR. BEAN: I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Brothers, sisters?

MR. BEAN: A brother and a sister. Sister deceased; brother five years younger. And my sister was two years younger.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And he makes violins? Is that what you said?

MR. BEAN: He taught higher education in Bloomington at the University of Indiana. He is retired within the last two weeks. And he's extremely joyful because he can now make violins full time.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. Did he teach music?

MR. BEAN: No, he taught higher education.

MS. RIEDEL: He taught higher education?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, which is why people leave school and the statistical variations thereof, which I found extremely boring and he found extremely safe.

MS. RIEDEL: Aha. Aha.

MR. BEAN: He didn't have to worry about having his paintings sell or having his violins sell or any of those things. He could do this job and he did it well, although, as his wife said, he tried not to let his work interfere with his life. And so — yep.

And so, brother and sister and —

MS. RIEDEL: Your father was a doctor. Your mom —

MR. BEAN: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she —

MR. BEAN: She didn't work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: She was extremely smart. She really was smart. I mean, neither of them were dummies.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And it was interesting because they grew up — my mother grew up in Cincinnati and my father grew up in Virginia. His father taught at UVA, and so he grew up on the lawn.

MS. RIEDEL: What were their names, by the way?

MR. BEAN: William Bennett Bean and Abigail Jane Shephard Bean.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And, yeah, my father was actually extremely well-known as a doctor, and lectured and wrote and edited the Archives of Internal Medicine, et cetera. And my mother was "the" quintessentially perfect wife. Cathy [Bao] used to come and visit and she said, "You know, I do not know how, with no effort, meals suddenly appear on the table. It's just not fair." And so, Mother had that, you know, running the world down.

And so — but they — I really grew up in Iowa. I mean, most of my early, early years were during World War II. And my earliest memories were of being at Fort Knox and having the B-29s, or whatever they were, fly up over the house, because my father was in the Army then and they were doing two things: one, trying to figure out — they were going to go fight Rommel in the desert and they had no idea how much water a man needed if he was in a tank.

And so they were running tests. They had the hot room and the cold room. And you would take a man and a steak and put him in the hot room and turn it up to 250 degrees, and if you gave the man enough water, in an hour and a half the steak would come out done and the man would come out fine. And so, they just wanted to know how much salt, how much water, all of those things.

He said his real contribution to World War II was the — I think it was the sea ration. And basically he figured out that if you were in a group in a war zone and you got one box, you could get all Spam or all canned peaches or all Charms. And so what he did is say, "You should mix the contents of a box so that if they only get one box, they get everything." And so he said, "That was my contribution to World War II," which I think is a reasonable one.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. BEAN: Anyway, so my early memories are actually of German prisoners, because there was a German prison camp there. You know, when they catch them in Europe, there was no place to put them over there. They didn't have Guantanamo. So they came back to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and they did all of the work around the base.

And so, I remember when we had — I think we had measles or chicken pox or something. My sister and I were sick, feeling terrible, and the German prisoners were painting the inside of the house. And these guys were big and scary German prisoners. They were not like the sweet ones. There were sweet ones.

I mean — and my mother used to be a nervous wreck because they would have some guard from the hills of Kentucky and he'd be sitting out on the front steps smoking a cigarette while the German prisoners painted the house, picked up our beds, moved us to this side of the room, painted that side, moved us back.

But one day I was sitting on the steps and this darling, sweet — looked like a 16-year-old boy comes up, and he had — they had been cutting brush down in the ravine and he had an alder thing, stalk that was just shaped like a perfect cane. And he said, "If you get me the sharpest knife you have in the house, I will carve you a cane."

And so I went in and got the sharpest knife I could find and gave him the knife. And he went away and he came back after their lunch break with a cane carved in perfect Tyrolean patterns, with little people dancing around it and berries and leaves all the way up and down the cane.

And I ran into the house and said, "Mother, mother, look what the German prisoner did. He made me this cane." And my mother went, "You gave him the sharpest knife in the house?" She had an absolute fit. And so —

MS. RIEDEL: But the knife came back and you got the cane.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, it was perfectly fine, and it was a really good cane.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you?

MR. BEAN: I must have been four-ish.

MS. RIEDEL: That's — well.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I would say roughly in there because we left there, I think, when I was five.

And so, my early recollections of going out with the family were to military parades. And they had these War Days where you'd go and they'd set up bleachers. In front of you would be a big field or a terrain and they've have big target cloth things and they've had tanks coming around the bend and shooting them with flame-throwers, and planes dive-bombing and letting flower bombs go.

And this was, like, the entertainment. It was like, wow, look at that? Is that cool? And, you know, not live ammunition but shooting boom, boom, boom, the whole thing.

So, that was growing up in Fort Knox. And at the end of the war we went to Fort Thomas for a short time. Then we were back in Cincinnati.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that you have such a vivid memory of that cane, though.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Well, it was — my mother yelled at me, you know? That clearly impressed the whole process on my mind. The other time she yelled at me was — that I'm clear about — is there was a big circle called Custer [ph] Drive, and down the center of it was an alley. The houses faced out.

And the chicken truck would come down the alley, and the guy would have live chickens in the cage. And you would point to one and feel if it was fat, and then he would take it by its feet, bang it on the ground, put his foot on his head and pull him off. And then chickens flop around and flop around. Well, I had my new sailor suit on and the chicken flopped by me and sprayed me with blood.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: And my mother went, "Look what you've done to your sailor suit." And I said, "I didn't do it. I'm innocent. I'm just standing here. The chicken did it." [They laugh.]

So, yeah, those were the kinds of days that I remember clearly. But I have to say, you know, there are a lot of people who had really terrible childhoods. I think of my childhood as idyllic. I mean, it really was the time to grow up in this country because when we moved to Iowa after Cincinnati —

MS. RIEDEL: So you moved back to Cincinnati when you were five.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I would say about five.

MS. RIEDEL: And then —

MR. BEAN: And then at seven, I moved to Iowa —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — because my father had gotten the job as head of the Department of Medicine there. And this was a tiny Middle Western town. Then maybe there were 12[,000] or 13,000 people.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the town?

MR. BEAN: Iowa City. And now there are — you know, with 4,000 college students. Now it's, you know, 100,000 or something —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — with a million college students. But then it was a suburban neighborhood, not in the middle of town, woods down behind the house, a neighborhood where, after dinner, everybody would go out and play.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, no parents. You'd tear around, do whatever you were going to do, see if you could keep the dogs from fighting, because everybody had a dog, and if you petted the wrong dog there would be a dog fight, you know.

And so, it was idyllic '50s United States where things were much simpler, or at least they appeared so. But then, if you were a kid —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — you know. But it was really, you know — parents were charming, nice, and seriously WASP family. So disapproval happened at about 20 yards with a raised eyebrow.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: I only heard my parents have one fight in their entire marriage, and we were driving — this is when I was 20 and we were driving through France and we were lost. And my father said it was my mother's fault, and she broke into tears and he totally collapsed and the fight was over in 30 seconds.

So it was really — you know, it was, like, pretty civilized living.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it sounds like it.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it was really — they were — they loved each other. They just adored each other. I mean, I can remember, you know, hearing — their room was here; I had a sleeping porch there — hearing them laughing in bed. You know, it was just — it was really like — they had a great relationship, really a great relationship.

So, Iowa City was a little more rugged than I was used to because Cincinnati, which is where I was from five to seven, was where my mother had grown up, and her family was — they founded the Cincinnati Shaper [Company, which was a big industrial company in Ohio, founded in the 1880s.

And they were the Marches. And my grandmother was a March. And so, there were two houses, the Marches and the Keys, and Jaunty, who was another — the other daughter, my grandmother's sister.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the name?

MR. BEAN: Jaunty.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: That was — I mean — yeah. I mean, it's like "Puffy," one of those names.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so they had these two houses, and Jaunty's was Victorian and Mary Jane's was baronial Southern with the four big columns and the blacktop driveways and the tennis court. And they had their own church. And it overlooked the Ohio River. You know, their yards sloped down to the Ohio. And it was so beautiful.

So I'd go from Fort Knox to that. And, you know, Fort Knox was pretty austere. Officers' quarters were, like, terrible — green walls and hard floors. And then you'd go back to Cincinnati and the floors were waxed, black and shiny with white rugs in flower patterns all over them. And if you looked at something and it looked like a Song Dynasty lamp base, it was a Song Dynasty lamp base. Everything was real. And black guys hosing down the sidewalks. It was another universe.

And I remember they had a swimming pool and box bushes — and still the scent of box bushes brings back the memory of those hot afternoons — because it's Ohio and they hadn't invented air-conditioning.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And you're out there drinking RC Cola with lime in it in Waterford crystal glasses. And they are really an amazing glass because they're cut —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and so each little hobnail is sharp, actually physically sharp, and you can feel it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so, that life was really an amazing contrast. And I'm not sure in some way I'm not now trying to recreate how perfect that felt to me —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: — and how physically, inch-by-inch, lush and elegant it was. And so —

MS. RIEDEL: And as a child you felt completely comfortable there.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Well, you were totally protected. You know, it was like — I remember my cousin one day called me a fool, and I'd never heard anybody called anything. It was, like, the first time. And I was, like, six — I don't know, maybe five. And I just was like, what — I knew it wasn't good but I had no idea what it was. And nobody had ever called me anything.

So it was this amazingly sheltered universe. And then my mother, of course, set me up as, "You are the prince of the world. You can do anything that you want to do. But remember you're representing this family and you need to do whatever it is honorably and well." And it was an interesting kind of double click because you knew that you'd better behave well. Well, of course nobody behaves well —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — you know. You're always doing things that are maybe not perfect.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But there was always that feeling like, eh, I'd prefer not to be caught at this. [They laugh.]

So, yeah, that was an interesting time. And then Iowa was just rougher.

MS. RIEDEL: So that's where you were until the age of seven.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, from five until seven.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were your mother's parents.

MR. BEAN: Mother's parents, grandparents —

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. BEAN: — aunts. It was the tribe and, you know, the big compound they had. And then my grandmother lived over in this house. And so it scattered in this area were all of the people that came out of the Marches.

MS. RIEDEL: And an extraordinarily aesthetic environment.

MR. BEAN: Oh, it was beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Incredibly cultured and cultivated.

MR. BEAN: It was really beautiful, yeah. I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: Antiques. Contemporary work at all or —

MR. BEAN: No. No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. All antiques.

MR. BEAN: No, it was all antiques.

I can remember once I did an acid trip — "Owsley Acid," the very best. And I —

MS. RIEDEL: Not at seven, I hope.

MR. BEAN: No, no, no, this was in Berkeley in the '60s. And so I did this interesting kind of regression, and I remember being back at that place and seeing a totally polished black — or blue-black Buick with those portholes in the sides move past me, and realized that it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And that was in there someplace as this place is beautiful. It's not like the war.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: It's not like the Army.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And people behaved extremely graciously. And it was really — it was an ideal world that is entirely gone.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I mean, it just doesn't exist. So it was an interesting place to be, because then in Iowa it's the Brogans down by the river who are fierce. You know, they fight. And so you're going, eh.

But pretty quickly — I went to the local school and then I went to the university experimental school, and that started in the 3rd grade. And I just went back for my 50th reunion and it was really interesting because one of the women who was there had studied the theory upon which the school was founded. And it was — you know, you had all of these guys thinking theories in the '30s and '40s, and this school was founded on one of those theories.

And I remember the 3rd grade, going in, and they gave you a problem and in the back of the room was a shelf with a hundred books on it, and the solution for the problem was in those books. And so you would go back and research it and then come back and do whatever the problem was because you'd gotten the solution out of the books.

And while she was talking about that I said, "Oh, I remember those problems perfectly." I remember when we made soap out of lye, you know. And you can't do that anymore in school because lye splatters and burns.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But we made real soap. And, you know, somebody got burned, not badly but enough to — you'd go, "Well, that was dumb; you know, she told us not to get those lye things on us." And so, it was — it was interesting because I think that laid a foundation of the kind of problem solving that I do now. It's the same kind of thinking where — like the iron pieces I'm thinking of now, all right, well, you start off not knowing what iron does.

The most shocking thing was how heavy it is. You know, physically I'm used to clay, I'm used to wood, I'm used to other things. Iron is heavy. So there's that logistical thing. And then you — after you know it's heavy, then what are you going to do with that piece of information? How thick can you have it? Even though you might like it an inch thick, you know that that's not going to sit on anything but the ground.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So it's that kind of thinking that came out of that educational experience that I hadn't paid a bit of attention to until hearing that woman describe it. I'm going, oh, my God, that's me now. And that's out of the 3rd grade.

MS. RIEDEL: So the sense that you can research anything and figure out how to problem solve anything just by

doing enough research?

MR. BEAN: Any making thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, I now know — well, see, I'm dyslexic —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And they didn't figure that out, you know, until — of course, dyslexia was discovered after I'd finished school.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So I was just "stupid." So there are things that I really don't do well at —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — which is remembering things that go in a row. Like if you have eight steps, I can't remember them. I can get them in there for a little while but they're gone in a minute. But if you give me a random piece of information that fits into a field, it's in in a second.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And then, the cool thing about dyslexia is in that field, Bs, Ps, Ds, sixes and nines are really all the same thing. They're just spun on a different axis.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so it gives you — I mean, I think about people who are artists that are not dyslexic and I go, too bad for you, you know; you didn't win that prize. And also, the statistics on what happens to dyslexics in life are pretty much I fit them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, artists, yeah. Entrepreneurs, yeah. All of those things. Verbal abilities, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Math? I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So there are things that I know I can't do. You know, if you'd give me a whole complicated math thing that I can't structurally visualize spatially, I can't do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I mean, it was interesting because at the university experimental school — it was in Iowa and they were inventing the Iowa Every-Pupil Test on us.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: So we'd have it, like, four times a semester. And at one stage they came in with a spatial relationship test. And I took it. And they came back two days later to figure out what had happened because they'd never seen anybody that far off the scale in terms of the ability to perceive spatially.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: Because the rest of my stuff was just like, duh, not — you know, not amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But that one — and they figured — they tried to figure out if I had somehow cheated, but they knew that was impossible because they were making up the test.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So it's an interesting kind of — you know, the mind will, given a chance, compensate in any way it can for its deficiencies.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so, what I'm exceedingly lucky for in this life is I have found a life that fits my deficiencies. You know, it's great. It's really great.

MS. RIEDEL: About how old were you when you had that test?

MR. BEAN: I think that was 4th and 5th grade.

MS. RIEDEL: So then, did you have a clear, conscious understanding that you had a specific gift or a specific ability that was off the charts?

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. BEAN: Not from that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I just remember that they came in and kind of quizzed me, like, "Uh, did you do something wrong here?" And I'm going, "mmm" — because I didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I didn't really have a sense early. You know, I knew what I liked to do, but it was —

MS. RIEDEL: What did you like to do?

MR. BEAN: Well, I mean, it was like — I thought I was an Indian, and so it's all right: Fine, make yourself the war bonnet. Get the kit with the fake eagle feathers and do the whole thing, and tan a cowhide — except that didn't work out too well. Tanning is disgusting.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you try —

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It was actual tanning a real hide.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, a whole hide. It weighed 80 pounds. I could barely move it, much less tan it. [They laugh.] And so that was — it stayed on the garage door until finally my father, who was long suffering on my projects, came and said, "You know, it's been there a year-and-a-half. Do you think we could get rid of it?"

And so we took it down and put it where the wood was, and for about a year dogs came to chew on it. [Laughs.] That was actually quite cheerful.

Anyway, so —

MS. RIEDEL.: So you built things?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, made things, built things. Well, because after I figured out — I didn't figure out I couldn't be an Indian until I was about 12 and realized — I read this ethnological study of the Cheyenne, and it was really depressing: you know, gonorrhea, syphilis, you know, the whole unfortunate thing that the tribes went through in the '20s and '30s. And I just said, "Whoa, that's not cool. The thing that I wanted to be doesn't exist anymore. And besides, I'm the wrong color."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: I was a little slow on that curve. But from that I went to archeology. I was going to be an archeologist. And they had the Archeological Society and I was its youngest member. And so I read all the dinosaur books and blah, blah, blah, blah. And it was kind of this odyssey, like what will I do?

Well, archeology led to ethnology, and this is — now we're at 14. Then it led to architecture, and then having some math issues, I decided I would be a decorator. And then that wasn't cool, and so I hit college clear that I wanted to do something but not clear what it was.

I mean, I thought probably art, probably something in that world, but there had been Uncle Harvey. Uncle Harvey was my —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — mother's brother.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: No, Uncle Harvey had been way too good looking. He got in a lot of trouble. But the first time I saw him I'll never forget. He was walking up the driveway to my grandmother's house. And he's 6'2", has black curly hair, has a patch over one eye. He's got a .45 on his hip. One arm is cut off here and the other arm has a tattooed bird on it. And I looked at him and went, "Oh, my God, that's a man."

I mean, it was really — all of those things were pieces of his adventures, but he always got into trouble. Things never worked. So he flew — he became a pilot. He flew over the hump into Burma during World War II. At the end of the war he and his friend bought a surplus airplane and were flying strawberries from California to New York. And just when the business was about to take off, his partner ran off with the money.

And so, it was a life like that, always something going wrong. And my mother, the way she said it: "The real problem with Uncle Harvey is he didn't finish college." [They laugh.] "And so you have to finish college. Remember Uncle Harvey."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so that was kind of like this pendulum swinging in front of me.

MS. RIEDEL: So before we move on to college, just a couple more questions about —

MR. BEAN: Oh, no, we're not done with high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, good.

MR. BEAN: High school was huge trauma.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: High school was probably the worst — the first — okay, so I'm in Iowa —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and I go through junior high, right?

MS. RIEDEL: And is this all about Iowa University experimental school?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: All the way through.

MS. RIEDEL: What was it called?

MR. BEAN: The University of Iowa — it was called UHI, University High School.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: It's gone now.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: It kind of died with the philosophical underpinnings of the reasons that it was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And budgets.

Anyway, so, in the 9th grade — 8th grade my father said, "You're in Iowa. You're really not getting any culture. You should attend my prep school," which was Episcopal High School of Alexandria, Virginia — seriously Southern, seriously East Coast, seriously racist. And so I went, "Huh, cool; I'll go do that."

So off I go to high school. It was the perfect nightmare because I grew late so I am short, fat, I have no family connections. My mother said, "Oh, look at this nice tie," and gave me an orange knit tie. That was not — I mean, they all — you know, they wore repp ties and they bought their shirts at Chip, you know.

So it was really — and they had a hazing system, you know, where you would wait on the upperclassmen for a year —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: — and all of the general brutality that older boys do to younger boys. And so it was terrible. But when I'd gone, I'd gone, "Oh, you poor people in Iowa; you know, you're stuck in the cornfields." And then I went back being completely miserable. And it was not ideal.

All right, so then I go back. I'm not wanting to go back, but I go back. My father comes maybe a month into the semester and says, "You know, if your grades don't get better, we're probably going to have to take you out of here." And I flunked everything — everything except sacred studies because they didn't give a grade there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so I went back to the University High School, which was great. I mean, it was — but now I was totally branded as really stupid because I had flunked everything —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — at that other school, so I had a grade point of X. And so they had tracking there, and all my friends went off to the university track and I went to the cretin track. But it sort of didn't matter a whole lot. I mean, you know, I knew that they were in the harder courses, but they were screaming that they were dying from work and I was hunting ducks in the morning.

That is so funny, the duck hunting thing, because I had totally forgotten, but my senior year, I guess it was, I had a duck blind out near the reservoir and a bunch of decoys sitting out there. And every morning before school I'd go out and, you know, hunt ducks. And then if I didn't catch any ducks, which was pretty often, I would drive straight from there to school and then put my shotgun in the locker. You don't do that anymore —

MS. RIEDEL: I know.

MR. BEAN: — but it was entirely — nobody thought one way or another about it, you know: "Oh, he's been hunting." And, you know, you could lock your locker. And so, it was a very different day.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting, yes.

MR. BEAN: And the other thing, at UHI, kind of — I had come back in disgrace, sort of, and then it was, like, construct the universe. So you end up going with the homecoming queen and your social universe is now constructed, and then it's off to college. And I applied to two schools, Antioch and Grinnell, and accepted at both of them.

MS. RIEDEL: We're not done with high school yet, though, right?

MR. BEAN: Oh, we're pretty much done with high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, were you taking other — were there art classes in high school?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah —

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about that.

MR. BEAN: — they had an art department.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But it wasn't — it really — it kind of — it was clear I was good at it.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you working in 2-D, 3-D, painting, drawing, clay.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, all of that. All of that. You know, I mean, it was —

MS. RIEDEL: Let's describe that a little bit.

MR. BEAN: Okay. There was this guy named Wokoviac, who was head of the art education thing at the college, at the university. And he was our art teacher, and then we had student teachers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And so, the teaching was really pretty good, but not serious. It was like high school art where — taste this, taste this, taste this. And I made this "eland" as in the antelope out of sculpt metal and plaster, or whatever, and it was actually pretty cool. And the guy that taught sculpture at the university saw it at my parents' house and said, "Oh, that's very good," blah, blah, blah, which my mother was encouraged by.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But I am still not in the art world. I am going off to college to figure out what — you know, what to do.

MS. RIEDEL: So, were you interested in art or you —

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, sure.

MS. RIEDEL: But —

MR. BEAN: But I was interested in everything, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, my life has been serial affairs with, oh, my God, is that cool; how does that work? And it was just like that then. It was, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: So duck hunting was as interesting as sculpting.

MR. BEAN: When I was doing it, it was way more interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: You know, ducks are delicious.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so — I mean it was like you grow up — I grew up there and everybody hunted, so you hunt too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Now, you'd gone from this incredible house of your grandmother's —

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and all your family is in Ohio —

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — to out here in Iowa. Were you going to museums?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, of course. They have —

MS. RIEDEL: Were you seeing regular exhibitions?

MR. BEAN: They have the museum there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And we would go to Chicago and go to the Art Institute.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, my mother was always improving us.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: You know, we'd go to the Indian mounds, you know, the big snake mounds, all that stuff. We would go see Frank Lloyd Wright houses that were being built, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And you'd go and see the big curve — there were clamps all the way around because they were bending it.

So it was — yeah, she — and, you know, she painted —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: — and my grandfather painted.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Now, both of them were really terrible painters. And my mother also wrote poetry. So there was — and it was an extremely literate and cultured group of friends that they had. This was not doctors, by and large. This was the music department and the English department and the classics.

And then, because my father was as famous as he was, everybody who was famous who came to the university came to dinner. So whoever was, you know, talking to the White House about diet, you know, would be at dinner. And my father was also head of the Archeological Society, and so when the Explorers would come through, they would come to dinner, or stay.

Or Dylan Thomas would be there, you know, because he was speaking at the thing, and then he would do something terrible and they'd cluck about it for weeks. And so, it was an extremely kind of literate and I would say intellectual atmosphere.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, my parents, I can remember them carrying on a conversation with Shakespearean quotes, each one answering the other at dinner. And dinner happened every night, 6:00. Everybody sat down, everybody stayed until it was done, everybody was expected to make reasonably literate conversation. And so, that was — it was that world that I was kind of in the middle of.

MS. RIEDEL: And your parents weren't overly upset about the East Coast prep school not working out?

MR. BEAN: I think it hurt my father's feelings because he had seen me following in his footsteps.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But it became clear pretty quickly that I was — he said to my sister and my brother and I, "None of you are doctor material." [Laughs.] And so — and I said, "Bulletin." And my sister was, like, hurt.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And she finally became a doctor, a psychiatrist of course.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: Couldn't be a real doctor. But it was — yeah, it was — he was absolutely hilarious, though. He was also amazingly funny.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, good.

MR. BEAN: And he would — you know, I can remember — but he was bad at us after we got to the age of reason because we would disagree, and we'd disagree in a way that we'd been brought up to disagree, and it was annoying that we disagreed and annoying that we were good at it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yep.

MR. BEAN: And so, things were rougher as you pass 13. And my sister went away to boarding school, and she stayed. I mean, she didn't come back. And so, I think he had a rough time with us, but, boy, when we were kids, he was perfect.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: He was really, really good at that. He just wasn't so good at having people disagree with him.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you were clearly up on a much different trajectory than he had been —

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — or he had envisioned for you.

MR. BEAN: When I was 40-something, we were at my sister's house on Cape Cod, and he said, "Bennett, let's sit down for a minute," and I went, "What is this? Where are we? I'm 42." [Laughs.] And he said, "Well, I don't know exactly what you do, but I'm so glad you found something and that you seem to be good at it." But that's as much as he could do with that, which is fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, I mean, my brother and sister — you know, every child has different parents, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — because you hit them at a different stage —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and you're a different person. My brother and my sister think my parents were just terrible. My father — well, my father — according to my sister, my father abandoned her for the art department — I mean for the hospital, and was over there all the time, so she didn't get him. And my mother really loved the boys more than the girls. So we got that going on.

My brother couldn't really find anything wrong with my mother except that he had been the golden favorite when he was younger, but as he aged and he became this kind of academic that spoke "sociologicalese," he was less interesting to the family. I mean, he recovered after 10 or 15 years but then I became the favorite, which I, you know, hadn't been with my mother. And my father, you know, who the hell knew?

MS. RIEDEL: Because your mother really understood what you were doing, yes?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I think she did.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And she liked me, and I liked her. And so I thought they were both — I thought my father was great. Although he and I didn't have any roaring relationship, what did you want?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You know, you don't get everything you want. He sent me to college and paid for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, he — it was really funny because he sent my brother to college and paid for it, and then he kept paying for my brother until he was 32, because it was such a deal. And I can remember, I was in graduate school and I got a teaching job, and my father sent me some money, and I sent it back to him because I had a job. I didn't need the money now.

My brother never figured that out. He goes, "Why would you send it back? It was money. It was perfectly good. It worked perfectly well. Don't send money back." And I said, "Well, I didn't need it."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And so, interesting kind of difference between the way we functioned. But — I don't know where I was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, well, we moved back to high school to just look at the art experience that you'd had before college.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I guess I didn't think the art experience was huge. I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: No materials that spoke to you in particular?

MR. BEAN: No. No, you know. I did the — made the Indian stuff —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and did that, and then read art magazines because they were in the house, and went to museums. And then we'd go to New York because my father would be lecturing there. And so we'd go to all those museums and whatever. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So quite a lot of exposure.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Then you were trying to choose colleges between Antioch and Grinnell. Is that correct?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, because I had an academic record that was terrible.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But Grinnell said, "Fine, we'll take you." And, you know, you get there and you realize, oh, my God, I really have to work. This is much more work. Because at that time you would average four hours a night studying. So you would have classes, then you'd have sports, then you'd study, then you'd collapse.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And then you'd get up and do it again.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So the first semester was like, oh, how does this work? And then you figure it out and you go, oh, okay, now I know how — I can work this hard.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And my grades were never spectacular except in art.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And I think I had, like, a 2.5 or something like that. And I know when I transferred halfway through my sophomore year to the University of Iowa and my grade point jumped to, like, 3.5 to 4, simply because it was all art courses and I liked them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And if I liked the course, I did wonderfully. If I didn't like it — like, I really liked biology, so I did pretty well in biology. But, you know, there was stuff. Algebra was just a disaster.

I can remember doing a graph of a sine curve or something, and the guy — I handed it in and the guy looked at it and said, "This is a beautiful line that has nothing to do with the point you were supposed to pass through" — [they laugh] — "but it looks great," which it did. It looked exactly — I made that curve look just like the one in the book.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: It just wasn't right.

But Grinnell was really — it was extremely smart teachers and extremely attentive. You know, if you were — but I really didn't need much attention. It didn't want much attention, because attention usually came with being told what to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And I was not at all, and never have been, interested in being told what to do. It just — no. My tendency is to be right. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So what were you studying at Grinnell and what provoked the move to the University of Iowa?

MR. BEAN: Oh, well, you know, I started out with the usual. They had a core course, which was humanities and historical studies, and it was, like, every semester you had this monster course and then you'd take other things.

So there were two years of that. It was really great because it was all the great writers that you're now not supposed to read because they're all dead white men, and all the historical stuff, but taught by really interesting people, really smart people.

There was a guy named Joe Wall, and I can remember his lectures, and they were crystalline. His construction of the way history unfolded was so beautifully conceived and spoken that you just go, oh, my God, this — and you'd entirely get it. It would be like this physical image of history.

And so there were great teachers. There were really great teachers. And then, you know, of course there's the social world.

MS. RIEDEL: And was reading a problem, though, if you were dyslexic?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, I read — I've read — it's funny. William [son of Bennett and Cathy] had this thing on Facebook like all the great books.

MS. RIEDEL: Your son?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And I had read — he said, "You know, six is not a good number." Well, I had — I think I got — I did something to the computer and punched in 86 and I only hadn't read four of them. So all of the stuff you are supposed to have read, I have read —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and forgotten.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: You know, most of all it just disappeared, but I've read it all at some time.

And we have this great thing in the studio. Every day a word comes up. The computer sends you a word and you're supposed to know the word or not know the word. Today was "lignify," and I went, "Of course." And Barbara went, "I have no clue." I said, "What's lignite? It's a wood fiber. Therefore, it's to become wooden." Click. Yeah, it's that. And that stuff, I have no idea where it got in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: But it's all in there, all those words. I mean, my score on the "Words in the Morning" is like five times theirs simply because I read all that stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Partly, I read a lot of it because life is not kind to you and you can take refuge in books. And, you know, in high school, especially right before I went to college, they gave me the reading list. And I managed to get fired from my job at the union washing dishes.

A friend of mine and I had two matched dishwashing machines for the trays where the dishes would come out. And we got so fast we could stay ahead of the machine, so we set up a chessboard between the machines. And the manager came in and said, "You're not working." I said, "We're doing the job. We're getting it done. There's no problem." He said, "Well, you've got to look busy." And I said, "I don't think so." And that was the end of that job.

And so that summer I just lay on the riverbank and read for, you know, seven hours a day all summer, which was a great summer.

MS. RIEDEL: So you loved reading.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I have dyslexic problems, like I'll grab words from across the page, and if you give me a word problem, I will get it wrong because if the train left this town at this time, I will reverse all those things.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And they sent me to stupid people school in prep school because I could never do word problems,

and because they hadn't invented dyslexia they just went, "You're dumb. You need help here." So —

MS. RIEDEL: But it's not a problem reading complex books —

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: — complex literature.

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: No, no. I mean, I'm sure that "and's" and "the's" and stuff get messed around, and I know when I'm doing Buddhist chants, you know, words will come from across the page and jump into the middle of the chant because your eye is kind of granting things out of order.

But, no — I mean, I am not a totally dysfunctional dyslexic. I know people that are. You know, they just can't function.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, or can't read very well.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I'm just mildly messed up, which I — of course, as I told you, I think is fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: I need a drink of water.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so you transferred to the University of Iowa. And why was that?

MR. BEAN: They had an art department.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. So at this point you had decided —

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, I figured out — my mother walked into the room one day — I was reading a book — and she said, "You know, I guess" — and it was kind of rueful. She said, "Maybe you should become an art major." And I went, "Got it." It was, like, all I needed to clarify the situation.

And then it was like all bets are off. I suddenly — you know, I took art courses. I think maybe that was the summer I was taking art courses at the University of Iowa in the summer and I realized this is a real thing.

MS. RIEDEL: What were you taking, Bennett? What made you think —

MR. BEAN: Oh, I think ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And I think I took life drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know who was teaching? Do you remember?

MR. BEAN: Ceramics? A guy named Fracasini. And I don't know whose life drawing I had that year, that summer.

MS. RIEDEL: And what clicked?

MR. BEAN: Actually, the ceramics thing clicked because it was a complete unification of mind and body, because I was really physical. You know, I played hockey, I played soccer, I played tennis in high school and football and all that stuff. I was terrible at football.

And so, here was a thing that you showed up for physically and it required your physical deal and your complete mind. And so, as sort of a jock, this was the solution to my needs. All right, so — and Iowa City was really — culturally, that was — let me see; was that the summer — that was the summer of *Blue Velvet*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: It was like discovering the underside of a city where you go, oh, my God, you know, this half of the bar is gay, and that's a "fag hag," and this guy is living in the steam tunnels above the art department and beats

people up and — you know, it was just like the world appeared in all its rawness.

And I went, "Hmm, this is actually pretty cool," because Grinnell was seriously stratified. And, again, they took good care of you. You know, they fed you well. They gave you a nice place to live. They taught you with smart teachers. And you were not ever in any real danger. You could get screwed up in Iowa City, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: It was like — there were people that weren't really nice there. But the art department was so good compared — because, as a rule, the better the school, the worse the art department.

You know, who's ever heard of the Harvard art department? You know, Yale, yeah, but that's an anomaly. And Grinnell was no exception. They had a really second-rate art department with people who weren't in danger of dragging too many students away from the life of the mind, because this was the life of the hand —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — which is a totally stupid thing.

So I wanted to go to Iowa, and that — so I left halfway through the year, and really loved it down there. The art department was big. It was, I think, 500 undergraduates, majors, and 300 graduate students.

MS. RIEDEL: In art?

MR. BEAN: In art. It was the big — there were two other big Middle-Western art factories: that and Ann Arbor. And Madison was kind of up there but not as big as Ann Arbor — maybe a little better, but — so that was — Iowa was perfect. It was fun. It was like a great adventure.

MS. RIEDEL: The world opened.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it really did. And, you know, you can work 15 hours a day every day.

MS. RIEDEL: The studios were open 24 hours a day.

MR. BEAN: The studios were open, materials were there. You know, there were the usual clashes between students and faculty, like the guy that taught sculpture who had liked my piece of sculpture was really on his way out. I mean, it was time for him to retire. There were people doing work that he didn't understand at all because it wasn't the kind of classical stuff that he was used to.

But you got the classical art education. You had life drawing forever. You had printmaking, you had sculpture, you had bronze casting, you had ceramics, you had painting, you had, you know, the whole thing.

And it gave you a real kind of basis — and it ended up, by the time I got out of graduate school, I'd had 13 semesters of life drawing, you know, just from the beginning, because I always took it, you know, and I'd take it in the summer. And so, that's actually, I think, good for you, you know. It doesn't actually damage you at all.

So the school was great, and the — essentially in a school like that you learn from your peers, and there were some brilliant students there.

MS. RIEDEL: Who else was there?

MR. BEAN: Well, none of them have really gotten famous-famous, but my favorite one was a guy named Jim Carney. Now, he had more raw talent than, I think, anyone, but he was also the most screwed up. And he had real issues with finishing work.

And so, he was doing these Pietas. He had gone to Notre Dame and studied with Ivan Meštrović. And he would do these big Pietas in his studio. We all lived at this compound, Black's on Brown Street, where they — I think he had 38 apartments. He'd just keep adding little rooms.

And so, Carney was down in the back, and you'd go down there and he'd have this choral music blaring, and he'd be there with these great 8-foot paintings. And it would be almost done. It would be spectacular. And then you'd come down on Sunday morning and he would have stripped the whole thing down. He'd got drunk on Saturday night, hated it, couldn't solve it. And this went on forever.

Finally — the rule was, to be able to graduate from the University of Iowa, you had to donate a painting to their collection.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, and there was never a painting. He never finished one. So they went down — they got his schedule. They knew that Saturday night he would get drunk and strip it, so they went down Saturday afternoon and stole the painting so they could get him out of there, because he was going to nest there forever.

You know, and people like that — and my friend David Wham, who had been a — he was in the writer's workshop and he'd been a forward observer in the Army because — I think he went to basic training. And he had a temper and he was really big — he was, like, 6'4", and big, raw-boned.

And he was doing, like, present arms where you pull your bolt back to, you know, be inspected. And his finger slipped and it cut his thumb. And he looked at that blood and he looked at the sergeant and just nailed the sergeant and knocked him out. That's bad behavior in basic training.

And so they gave him a choice. They said, "You can go to the brig or you can become a forward observer." And at that time a forward observer had a life expectancy of about 23 minutes, because they're the guys that went out and told our guns where to shoot. This was pre drones flying overhead with TV cameras.

And so, he went out there and became a forward observer, which scared the hell out of him because the people were pretty serious in that group. But he was — and he wrote all the time. He was afraid to go to sleep because he had nightmares, so he would write all night.

And he'd lie on the end of his bed, put the typewriter on the floor, type, and then throw the cigarettes at the wall. So the wall became kind of this slope of cigarettes out onto the floor because he never cleaned his room.

And so, it was people that were a little eccentric, and some of them were flat-out crazy. I mean, they — Woody was actually — he was extremely hyper, and he did these drawings which were wild drawings, fabulous drawings, and it turned out that he was colorblind, and so these vibrant, amazing colors were there; he didn't see them.

So the guy that had to train him, he said, "Well, you can keep drawing because that looks like what you want to do, but you need to draw it all in sepia, and then you can see what is actually there."

And so, I mean, there were people like that, all kinds of interesting people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And it was — I mean, it was fun. It was really a great time to be in that world. And dope had not arrived, so it was a drinking culture.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was the early '60s.

MR. BEAN: This was — gosh, this was '62 and '[6]3.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you immediately clear that clay was your priority?

MR. BEAN: No, it was clay or painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Makes sense.

MR. BEAN: It was back and forth —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BEAN: — but my painting instructors, they were so neurotic. They would come to your studio and talk about themselves. And I'm going, "Hey, I'm the one here. I understand that you find yourself more interesting than anything." But I could not get a word out of those painting guys.

One of them, I took him 18 paintings, and he looked at me and he looked at the paintings and said, "You know, you better go to New York."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And I didn't know what that meant.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And he didn't tell me what it meant. I totally get it now.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: He said, "The way you're working and the kind of energy you have and the talent you've got, you deserve to be at the center of things," because all of the teachers at the University of Iowa, or almost all of them, were failed New York artists, and they all felt terrible they were in Iowa.

And so, it was an interesting thing because it made me think that if you taught, you were a failure, because those guys all saw themselves as failures.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And that's when I formed my view of teaching art —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — because that was where I was right in it. I mean — was it Nipshield? One of these guys came. He painted with lacquers in New York, and it was killing him. And so, he would come to the University of Iowa in the summers to teach so he could get treatments, and then go back and paint with lacquers again, because that was his deal; he was just going to die from lacquer fumes.

But it was — actually, it was — out of that many people you're going to find great people. And I did. I really found really — people that were a lot of fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Who comes to mind?

MR. BEAN: Well, you know, you've got Carney, you've got Wham, you've got Marco Cilatti, who was this Italian guy who was really — he painted extremely kind of European paintings, and dark. And he had been in the Italian army, and it was the high point of his life in Italy because he — he had a uniform and he was so attractive that he had had a great time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so — and his girlfriend Marby, you know. And his deal was you had to — it took two hours to make a real Italian dinner, and she spent two hours every night to make him the real Italian dinner. And I think they're still married, living in a perfect place in Pennsylvania, which she — and he's probably still painting in the attic. He got a job as, you know, a bus driver or something —

[Audio break.]

BENNETT BEAN: [In progress] — and which is a kind of a more European approach to being a painter. You know, you have this other job. You know, you're, like, the toll collector or the tax man or something. And then you paint — whereas, you know, in this culture, you get a teaching job, which I think erodes your desire to work over time.

I mean, it's really interesting how many people went into teaching and how many people stopped working, you know, just over time. There are, of course, the exceptions, you know. But there aren't a ton. I mean, Soldner taught, and he worked, worked, worked.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. And we will definitely talk about the bit of teaching that you did, what you thought about that, but maybe we won't get there quite yet. Yeah.

So you graduated from the University of Iowa in '63.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And your degree was Master of Arts?

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Or, sorry, Bachelor of Arts?

MR. BEAN: A B.A.

MS. RIEDEL: B.A. Right.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it was a straight B.A. And I didn't have to — after I left Grinnell, I had all of my other stuff, so I took only art there, which was great. It was exactly what I wanted to do. It worked out perfectly.

MS. RIEDEL: And — [inaudible] — and — one quick question too — the painting critiques were pretty much

nonexistent. Did you get anybody to — better feedback from the clay instructors?

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: This was the period where you didn't get a lot of teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: You were doing wheel work then? What was the work like?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, wheels.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, wheels. And, you know, my first semester — because I was down there all the time. And they had these 90-pound kick wheels, so at the end of six weeks, my right leg was an inch and a half bigger than my left —

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. BEAN: — because I had been down there five, seven hours a day, every day, kicking.

And I had a lot of pots; I don't know, I had 50, 70 pots. And you're never supposed to do that the first semester. And so Fracassini comes in and he looks at it, he says, "This is too many pots. We should break some." And so we went through and broke about two-thirds of it. And I actually thought that that was extremely cool. It was about the coolest thing he did because he had never — I mean, the only thing he said is, he'd walk by and goes, "hmm, mm-hmm." And then he'd go to his office.

And so that first — but the graduate students, you could get information from them. They were the source of stuff because they — you know, they had some information.

And then there was a guy named McKinnell, Jim McKinnell. And he had been a — I think — whatever the second-in-command on a Navy destroyer is. And he had come out of that thing in World War II and gone into a studio and lived as a studio potter, and that was tapering off. So he'd come to teach. And he had such problems with me because I was not — he was precise; he was by-the-rulebook — I mean, one day, he had designed this kiln called the Minnesota Flat Top and he blew it up. You know, you can blow up a kiln pretty easily if you're not paying attention. You light it; it goes out. The gas doesn't clear. You relight it.

MS. RIEDEL: You light it again, right.

MR. BEAN: Well, this was a soft-brick kiln, so it didn't — it just folded over him when it blew up. But it turned him black and shocked him badly. And he — you know, a graduate student came running into the room, and McKinnell was lying on the floor black. He struggled to his feet, he went over to the phone and said, "Call the chairman of the art department." And he said, "Professor McKinnell reporting, sir; I have just blown up my kiln" —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: — and then hung up the phone.

And then he went home and washed himself off. And another graduate student saw him up by the bus station going into a liquor store, buy a bottle and come back out and go into the bus station. So he went in and said, "Hey, what's up?" And he says, "I'm leaving town." And the graduate student said, "Want some company?" He goes, "Yeah."

And they got on the bus and drove to I don't know where — some town some place north. And they got out and he checked into a hotel and got — I guess they shared a room or something — and he said McKinnell was crazy at that hotel. First thing he does is he goes to the window and looks out and makes sure that he can get out if there's a fire, and then goes to sleep.

So finally he goes back home, and he said, "That fire thing was really extreme." In McKinnell's house on the second floor, they had a rope ladder pinned to the wall — big screws into the wall — and then on the window sill, they had a knife. So in case you couldn't get the screen out, you could cut it out, throw the thing out and escape.

And so Jim's relationship with me — with me was problematic. And he gave me a — [phone rings] — oh, that's — [inaudible, phone rings] — he gave me an assignment of 20 covered jars.

MS. RIEDEL: Twenty covered jars?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, which is fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BEAN: And I threw the covers one day — I mean, the pots one day, and I threw the covers the next — not wrong — [inaudible] — bad. And they didn't fit really well. And I remember him coming by after they were fired, and he's taking these things and going — [makes sound] — with the cover, smacking it on the pot. And finally, I made him so crazy, he said, "Listen. I know you want to teach an adult class. There is one on Saturday morning. We'll make an agreement. Don't sign up for my course and I will give you that adult class —" so he wouldn't have to put up with me. And so I did. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So this was when you were still at Iowa.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were teaching as an undergraduate.

MR. BEAN: Teaching, yeah, but a Saturday morning adult class, yeah.

So, yeah, he and I pretty much had a running battle. But he had a lot of running battles.

He finally left teaching. He hated people to come to class late and so — and he had this temper that would get loose. And so he was standing outside. It was after, you know, five minutes late. And he was standing and talking to one of the — [inaudible, phone rings].

So he's standing there. And this girl who walks around the corner; she's five minutes late. And he looks up at her and he goes like this. And she backs up and then she starts to back up and he starts to follow her. And she starts to run and he starts to run after her. And she runs all the way up the hill and he chases her all the way up the hill into an administration building and into her father the dean's office. And he comes pounding in after her. And that was pretty much the end of his teaching career.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. The world was different then.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Anyway, so —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you said he had come from the Navy, right?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, there were rules.

MS. RIEDEL: There were a lot of people coming back on the G.I. Bill that — [inaudible] — the student body was different.

MR. BEAN: I mean, I totally get — I mean, and he lasted a long time. And he actually became a friend of mine later. As he aged, it was really interesting because he got that transparent skin where you look like you're going to look right into this person.

Yeah, he lasted quite well. And he made kind of very precise workman-like boring pots. And his wife kept him on the track, really — pretty much took care of him. But they were fixtures in the ceramic universe for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: And her name was Nan, right?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

So, yeah, University of Iowa was fun. And then, it was, like, where do I go?

And I had been to the East Coast and I really didn't want to go back there. I've — so a friend of mine went to the University of Washington, had a semester ahead of me. He came back and says, "This is great; this is great." So I went out, drove to Washington, drove down the coast, looked at schools, drove back, decided I'd go there — went there. Whoa. Disaster.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: First of all, it rains in Seattle.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Not so much now, but it did a lot then.

MS. RIEDEL: Robert Sperry was teaching then?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well —

MS. RIEDEL: And who else was there?

MR. BEAN: Oh, crud — Fred — something [Ron] Myers. I can't remember which Myers.

MS. RIEDEL: In clay?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I think he's still in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll have to look.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Except Sperry was on leave. He was off making films —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, right.

MR. BEAN: — because he never engaged deeply with clay until really late when he came back from the filmmaking world and started the black-and-white stuff, which was really good.

So I went — I had gotten engaged to this woman before I left Iowa who is named — her name was Faith O'Reiley. And she was about the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. And I remember the first time I saw her; and I walked into this room and there she was, and I looked at her and said, "I want that."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Just as clear as a bell. So I set about getting it and got it.

And so I was engaged to her when I went to Seattle, and then she was supposed to come out and that — so I —

MS. RIEDEL: Was she an artist as well?

MR. BEAN: No, no. She — I don't know what she — she was probably studying history or sociology or something political.

And so I was out there, and the first thing I — you know, I got there and said, "Well, what do you do in Seattle? Well, oh, there's houseboat — you live in a houseboat." So I had a Volkswagen bus at that stage and parked it in front of my landlady's — well, this apartment — and went in with the landlady, and the apartment was beautiful. She was just great. The rent was perfect. Everything was fine. I was in a great mood. I walked out. I was going to jump over the fence between her houseboat and mine, and I jumped over it and broke my ankle. So now I have a broken ankle.

Then I'm not getting any phone calls back from Faith. This is a bad sign. So finally, two or three weeks after I'd been there, my best friend calls me — Curney [ph], the one with all that talent. He said, "I'm marrying Faith." And so — yeah.

And then it rained for 45 days in a row, just nonstop. There was no sun. I said, "I'm out of here." It's clear my ankle will heal. My heart will probably heal. But this rain —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: — it's really terrible.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And so — I mean, in a houseboat, you have water under you — water is falling out of the sky. If you don't put a heater in the every week, your clothes mildew.

And so I was off to Southern California to study with Soldner. I said, "You know, let's go down there where there's sunshine and Soldner," because there were really two big places: There was Soldner on the West Coast and Alfred on the East Coast. And I wasn't going east.

MS. RIEDEL: So how far along was Soldner's program at this point? He was at Claremont?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Oh, yeah. He was — I don't know how long he'd been there, but he'd been there a while. He had a batch of students, because I can't remember when he left Otis Art Institute, or wherever Voulkos was —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I can't imagine. That was the '50s, to be sure, but — yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, '50s. And this was '63.

MS. RIEDEL: ['6]3, okay.

MR. BEAN: Probably, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So the program was well-established.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. It was well-established. There were plenty of graduate students. It was — and it was a great program. I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, let's talk about that because we haven't really touched on that at all.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, it was interesting because Soldner's theory of teaching is, you never say anything about your students' work. You live a life and you open that life to them and your life is an example of how it's possible to be in the world with clay. And it was — it was actually extremely annoying because I wanted analytical, I wanted verbal, I wanted talk. There was none. So I was so pissed off at him for not being who I wanted.

On the other hand, he was really good in that the students that he did produce, none of them were Soldner's. You know, he'd produce — you know, he had Dennis Parks, he had Joe Soldate, he had Phil Cornelius — all of those people were there when I was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yes, completely different styles.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, completely. And so I think his teaching technique really worked; it just wasn't what I wanted.

MS. RIEDEL: Was he continuing the technique he had learned from Voulkos, do you think? Or you just all worked together and observed by watching each other?

MR. BEAN: I never had thought where he got it. I don't know where he got it. I just know that's what he did. I don't think ever he was — well, his — I guess it was very close to Voulkos. I don't know how much — see, I didn't really — I wasn't with Voulkos a lot in a teaching situation, so I don't know how he did it. I know that his perfect magnetism was just amazing. I mean, in the early days, before he kind of distanced himself through the — from the world through drinking and drugs, he was so magnetically warm. He was just amazing, really amazing.

And then teaching out there at Pomona was John Mason. So you had Soldner, Mason — both there in the same place — and then a bunch of other guys. These were real guys. One of them was a communist, what is his — Mac McClain. Yeah, he was out there. And then there was his friend — I guess Mac wasn't a communist, but his wife was or something.

MS. RIEDEL: It's the early '60s. It was another era.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was — and, also, it was Ken Kesey's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* — that was then. You know, I knew people that went to those things.

I was not a big drug user. I did acid maybe three times and then I said, "That's enough," you know. This is — this is, like, "Okay, that's enough." Marijuana, on the other hand, was fine. But there were people then who were just beginning to get into heroin and other stuff. And you didn't have the idea that it would kill them yet, but they died when I was there. You know, they began to — you know, you began to see the drug culture not working in the way we thought it would in the very beginning because it just — you know, I just don't think you work as well with drugs. You know, it's just like —

But being out there was great. I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: So what were the strengths of that program for you and what were the weaknesses? Were there demonstrations? Did you — [inaudible] —

MR. BEAN: Yeah, he had class once a week, and there would be kind of a project. Like, I remember he said, "Okay, if you break a chip out of a pot, here's how you make a silver patch."

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. BEAN: And so he — you know, it's a little steam thing. It's very primitive, very direct, and it works. You know, you take your coin and you heat it with a torch. You have a can that fits over a can and you got your little shape in here. The silver's here. You put a little bit of felt in there or rag and make it wet. Steam drives the silver in; bang, it's cast. So —

And there were — he would have a Thursday night class, that was it. And we kind of — he never said much, but people would say it, the odd thing, but it wasn't at all the analytical critique thing that developed later. This was, like, nonverbal, pretty much. It was, like, "What did you do this week?" "Oh, here's the technique." And you could think about that. And kiln building; we all built kilns. That was, like, the core of his deal. And so the semester that — my last summer that I was there before I went — I guess it was before I went back to teach — I taught the kiln-building course for the summer. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So these were arch kilns, gas kilns —

MR. BEAN: Yeah, so — you know, Soldner's catenary arch.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: You know, his big thing that — that was his deal, gas, because gas was cheap. We all used Lincoln fire clay because that was cheap.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there any Raku or pit firing going on?

MR. BEAN: No pit; Raku. I mean, he had the whole Raku thing going. And a lot of people did it; I didn't have to do it. You know, I don't — I might have — I don't think I have any Raku pots from — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: But no pit firing?

MR. BEAN: None.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: No. Well, kind of where it was, it was difficult because you're in that little brick place. And —

MS. RIEDEL: But nobody went down to the beach and —

MR. BEAN: No, no. I mean, people would go to Mexico to drink, but that was kind of — that was kind of it.

But as a community, it was great. I mean, it was really a group of people that were tight. And we saw each other a lot and — because although he wouldn't have class, he would go to the bar regularly, after class, for sure, on the night, that night. And he'd be there until the bar closed, you know, talking about whatever it was. And, you know, that was kind of his deal. So —

In the middle of that, I went that summer — which summer was it? I think it must have been '64 — I went to Portland for the summer to become a professional — you know, to be a professional thrower — throw eight hours a day. And the clay was a deflocculant — it had a deflocculant in it — so it was terrible to throw, so you had to get really good and really fast. And that's where I really learned to throw.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that?

MR. BEAN: Portland, Oregon.

MS. RIEDEL: But where? Was there a school?

MR. BEAN: No. It was a —

MS. RIEDEL: It was a studio?

MR. BEAN: It was a guy who had bought a ceramics factory. His name was Bennett Welsh. And he bought the ceramics factory from an alcoholic who had run the thing into a ground — into the ground because he drank. And Bennett once said, "The first month I was there, it was just taking the liquor bottles out," because the guy just — you know, there were rooms filled; there were kilns filled.

And it was a flowerpot factory. And they — he hired this designer who made something called people lovers, which was a little rawhide cord going through a head and a body and legs, and you'd either get a bell on the end and a name. And that was actually paying for the factory. They were awful but people were buying them.

And so we just sat down and threw. There were two of us. And you'd — we didn't have to mix clay and we didn't glaze.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you even hear about this place? And what prompted you to go there?

MR. BEAN: I don't know. I don't remember how I heard about it, except maybe I visited it, you know, driving someplace.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, down from Washington.

MR. BEAN: You know, and the world was so little. How many people worked with clay then? You know, when I started out, you could drive from Iowa to Seattle and visit all three potters. You know, by the time I moved here, you could drive from here to Newton, which is 20 miles, and you'd run over three, you know. Now they're all gone, but there was that kind of shift because this was early, early to the party.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anything going on at Archie Bray? Had you — did you visit there at all?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I spent about three weeks at Archie Bray right during the period where Shaner was coming in and Ferguson was leaving.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And I had just come from that factory and Shaner was not ready for it because in a week, I filled the place. You know, at that time I could throw 40 bowls in an hour. So —

And he was trying to find his way in and establish himself there, and this guy shows up and suddenly the place was all full of somebody else's pots. So it wasn't — it was rough on him, you know. And I just kind of was — well, I was — they wanted to send me to Vietnam then anyway. So it was not a tranquil time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It turned out that I was crazy, so I didn't have to go. But — yes, it was easy to be crazy then. But they — you know, it was, like — that was a stressful summer.

MS. RIEDEL: I imagine.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, that was — that was really not relaxing.

But didn't have to go to Vietnam, and got my pots all fired in Archie Bray, and went back to California and finished up down there.

MS. RIEDEL: And at the — at the time, these pots were all high-fire, functional work — [inaudible] — ground?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Crockery — you know, teapots, bowls.

In fact, I was trying to think — I made a bunch of teapots there, one of which was very good, and I put it aside — and I was thinking the other day, I wonder if that teapot still exists. I wonder if I still have it someplace packed in a box. So I was thinking, I should look for that pot. They could have it for their museum because they're doing that entire thing this summer. You know, there's some big Archie Bray centennial or something.

MS. RIEDEL: They had a 50th — I thought it was a 50-year celebration a few years ago, but I haven't heard about this.

MR. BEAN: Oh, well, I don't know. They're doing this one to honor something.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Anyway, so, yeah — at that stage, the guy that I looked to the most was Fred Bauer. He and I met, and we became really great friends.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you meet him at the University of Washington?

MR. BEAN: I may have met him before that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But I was there when he was there. He and Patti were there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so — yeah. And he and I really became great friends. We were at Haystack together for — he was teaching, and I went up to learn how to blow glass from Marvin, which was — [expresses relief] — cured me of glass.

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MR. BEAN: I think that was '67.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And they were — Marvin and — oh, it's the guy who does the little tea potty things —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Marquis — Dick Marquis, yes.

MR. BEAN: Marquis — Dick Marquis was Marvin's assistant. And so — and I'm — you know, I learned that stuff fast. So I was learning fast and making a whole raft of stuff, none of which was really very good but it was — you know, it was things.

And it became clear to me that I wasn't going to be a glassblower because glass was just like clay, but you could see through it. It was large physical plant. It was physically attractive process, but why do that?

MS. RIEDEL: So the transparency didn't appeal to you. It actually —

MR. BEAN: No, no, it really didn't. I mean — no, it didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: What was — why did you prefer the clay? What about that was more attractive?

MR. BEAN: You can do with more with it.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

MR. BEAN: You know, I mean, it's much broader. I mean, I suppose you can make glass bricks, but —

MS. RIEDEL: So it wasn't just the transparency or their path; it was the — [inaudible] —

MR. BEAN: No, no, no. I just think — I just thought, why go there? Why, you know — it's another one of those things that takes 10 years to learn.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so you're well into this one. Don't go to the next one.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: Because, at that time, I had this theory about school and teaching that when you start doing something, it takes 10 years to learn it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and — before you can be any good. And I always thought, it takes 10 years for it — to get all the things that they stuffed into your head, in college, out.

MS. RIEDEL: Out.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, well, I thought that for a long time, and then they're doing these studies on creativity and intelligence. And one of the guys at MIT was working out — working on a computer that was going to beat the chess masters. So he said, "All right, I need to program 2 million decisions into this thing to match a human being it will be playing against." And then he thought, well, that means the human being has made 2 million decisions to get to that degree of mastery. How long does that take? Well, it takes about 10 years. And he said, "You know, you look at Mozart. He began at four and finally was writing mature work at 14, and he had moves."

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: You know, his basic equipment was extremely good, and so now I think that's the deal.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It takes that long, and the problem with a lot of people who went to school and then got a job is, as soon as you get a job — in this culture, you do what you're paid to do, you know, although, you know, you can work and then you could — it was easier before not to do any teaching, you know? You could spend a lot of time in the studio —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — if you wanted to. But, for whatever reason, most people want to spend less. And so those people never get their last four years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so it makes it harder for them to really be wonderful. Actually my favorite one is Rick Dillingham because he started out and hit the ground with mature work. I mean, really wonderful work. I was thinking about him the other day because he had a pot come up for auction, one of his gas cans, and I was thinking, such bad luck to have AIDS and die the year before the triple cocktail. You know, if he'd lived that year longer — because there are people that you're not done with —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: — you know? Either — but for him, it was in terms of work. I wanted to see what he did, where he went, because he never went any place boring, you know? All his work was interesting —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and so you want to be there and figure it out; what's next?

Diane Itter was another one, who I really — I wanted to see what was next because I thought her work was really beautifully conceived, really interesting. And then she died.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: So — all right, I'm not sure where I was.

MS. RIEDEL: We'd been talking about Soldner and the snake. And then we talked — you talked about Fred Bauer at the University of Washington.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, the other thing — other thing: when Paul used to go up to Aspen. So, he took a sabbatical while I was there, and he put Henry Takemoto in charge. Well, Henry Takemoto hadn't made a pot forever. He made pots for, like, three years, and then he went to work for Gladding, McBean as a glaze chemist —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — never made another pot. And I mean, it was to the point where he was driving with Voulkos. Voulkos was driving, and Voulkos was really racking on him, like, "What the hell's with you," or, "You're never going to make any more pots?" And Henry Takemoto never said much; he said, "Shut up." And Voulkos kept right on. So Henry Takemoto reached over, turned the car — and they were driving down the highway — turns the car off, took the key out of the ignition and threw it out the window. And at that time, it didn't lock up the world. You could still steer. Now your whole world would lock, and you'd die. But it — but it got Voulkos' attention and Voulkos stopped ranking on him.

And so Henry was there, and I had — I'd moved into this great house on the way to Mount Baldy, and it was big, stone, huge kiln, and I'd just fired a monster kiln-load of pots. It was like five by five by five inside, and I'd filled it and fired it. The glazes were — [groans] — they'd left something to be desired. But I had the best ones on this big rack. And Henry comes in, and he looks at the pots for a while; then he looks at me, and he said, "You used to be a dancer in college?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You should consider that again," and walked out. That was the entire semester's teaching with Henry Takemoto.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, and I went, "Well, fuck you!" [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So when you look back on that experience at Claremont, what was particularly — what were its

strengths for you?

MR. BEAN: The people.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were the — okay.

MR. BEAN: It was really the people and the life. It was such a fun life. I mean, being a potter then, you really were — I mean, you look at all these kids now who are out there with DIY and stuff? This was like an early round of DIY except you were inventing the way the world was going to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: You know, people would do perfect drugs, and they would live ideal lives with mindfulness about using perfect handmade vessels. This was seriously idealistic behavior.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And it was not corporate.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It was, you know, you were actually improving the world, making it more beautiful, making it more wonderful. You weren't — you — nobody thought pollution much. I mean, they really didn't think pollution much.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: We used to let glazes there on the Raku, you know, and you'd be smoking a cigarette, eating a sandwich and glazing pots, which — you know, I was smarter then.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Brain damage is subtle, though, you know. You're too dumb to notice.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Anyway, so that was — I mean, it was just fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: It was really a great place to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there particular weaknesses to that program, do you think? Things that didn't work for you as well?

MR. BEAN: Oh, well, you know, Soldner's inability to talk, you know, to speak and to think analytically — that was the big one. But it was also — California life was just fabulous. I mean, I lived up in the orange groves; Mount Baldy was up there; the weather was perfect — California was sweet, you know?

It — I would not go back. Now, I've become East Coast. And when I go to California, I go, "Not too rugged here; a little soft." People are a little easier, but oh, it was — it was — it was really great. It was really — it was so much fun.

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back on all of your schooling, is there a particular instance that stands out as something you would call the most rewarding experience or time?

MR. BEAN: Rewarding — no, it's not hierarchical. Each one did a different thing. But, academically, Grinnell was fabulous. They were so good. You know, they had really great teachers. Seattle, I really can't say too much good about —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — you know, except Fred and Patti were there, other people were there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: That was, you know — that was — and the life was pretty wild. It was really fun.

Claremont, it was, I mean — that — we were the last generation who pretty much had a guaranteed teaching job

when we got done. And the interesting thing — nobody ever discussed doing anything else. Nobody made a living from work really. It was just not thought of. There were no craft fairs. There were — there were the odd store selling things, but that didn't happen until later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And so you were going to get a teaching job. That was it. And — but they were running out; they were running out. And so the only teaching job I could get was in the New York, and I didn't really want to go to New York. You know, California was being perfect. New York had had a lot more time to make karmic mistakes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: You know, California's caught up now. But then it was like — it seemed like, "Oh, Mom, no, California's is really — it's great. It's really wonderful."

MS. RIEDEL: So you finished graduate school in '64?

MR. BEAN: Six.

MS. RIEDEL: '66, okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, because went down there in '63. Well, half — went down there, yeah, halfway through. I stayed one semester in Seattle, and then so — and then finished halfway through, you know, mid-semester; got my teaching job in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that?

MR. BEAN: Wagner College.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that on Staten Island?

MR. BEAN: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was teaching undergrad?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, they had no graduates —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — or at least they didn't then.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you packed up and moved to New York.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. By then, I'd met Cathy, we were engaged; she had to finish graduate school out there —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — she was going to come back, and we were going to get married. So went to Wagner.

Wagner was pretty horrible. Academically, it wasn't much good. My — the general culture there was — I mean it's kind of exemplified by meeting the dean, and he was this beautifully turned out, very crisp German guy — German Lutheran, because this was the Lutheran school — and he said, "Herr Bean," bowed and clicked his heels. And I went, "I may have made a mistake."

MS. RIEDEL: Ooh, yeah.

MR. BEAN: And so that was the universe at Wagner.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: But it was — I kind of — I liked teaching. I really did like teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. BEAN: I just didn't like any of the rest of it and made it pretty clear. My diplomatic skills were not well developed then. And as I said, I thought I was right and made it clear to those who disagreed with me. Well, deans hate that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And the head of the art department — I got there, and he was an alcoholic. And he was also slightly corrupt in that he had bought an entire darkroom for the school and then had it installed in his basement by the football team in return for passing grades for all of them with no class attendance required. And so this was not good.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And so I pushed him to be better, and he pushed me to leave.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: So, he said, "You're done." But there was a student strike, and the students said, "Oh, no, we love you." So my reinstatement was one of the strike demands, and so there was a hearing.

This guy's name was Tom Young, and he was exactly where he ought to be in his drinking when he came to the hearing. But they were in there discussing things for another hour and 40 minutes before he could go in. And by the time he went, he needed a drink a lot. And so I don't think he did well in there and came out, and I went in, and they said — [makes repetitive noise] — and so I got my job back, and he got another teaching job someplace else. So that was the first time Wagner fired me.

The second time is they waited about seven years —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, you taught there a long time.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, I taught there a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: How long?

MR. BEAN: Thirteen years.

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't realize it was anywhere near that long.

MR. BEAN: I think it was 13, yeah. And so I — let me see. The second time, I can't — oh, the deans were still mad about the first time, that I'd gotten back. And so they said, "You're fired."

MS. RIEDEL: For what?

MR. BEAN: They didn't have to say. "You're fired." And so I went to the union, and they said, "Oh, the administration's not too brilliant." The rule there is six years, tenure, up and out. I had been there six years; I received automatic tenure.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. BEAN: So they had to give me my job back. Now they really hated me because I — they were dumb twice.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so the third time they fired me, they did away with the phys-ed department, the nursing department, half the art department and tenure — because by then I had tenure. And so this went to the NLRB —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I would imagine.

MR. BEAN: — and it turned out that some of us had our jobs offered back to us. By then, I had doubled my income as a functioning potter in the world. So I said, "I didn't want the job back, but I'll take my two years' back pay." And they said, "Our job is to make you whole. You are wholer than necessary on your own, so you don't get anything."

And well, this was Reagan's NLRB. He had just reseated it on management's side. And — but Cathy said, "Oh, well." They said, "Oh, well, we do owe you something for your wife's work." She was doing the books or, you know, basically running the logistical side of the business, which she always has done. And so she said, "Well, why don't you just take the money you owe me and put it in his retirement fund?" They said, "Oh, no problem." Well, it turned out if they put in there, they had to match it. So it doubled the money. And it's been sitting there forever.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: So that's the unpleasant side of Wagner. The pleasant side of Wagner is it paid the bills and required very little of me. They didn't want me on any faculty committees. You had a minimum amount of contact hours —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: — and so I guess we moved out here — I'd been teaching four years — and then we moved out here.

MS. RIEDEL: So 1970?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And then it was commuting. But it's eight months a year, and it's three days a week most — at tops. So it went really terrible, but by that time — by the time I'd moved out here, I knew I didn't want to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. BEAN: Why? I wanted to make art. You know, I just wanted to make things. And besides, the students had changed; they'd stopped being the students from the '60s, and they'd become the students from Saturday Night Fever. You know, they came over from Brooklyn; they came to class with their disco outfits on and didn't want to get clay on them. So, you know, by then, it was pretty clear to me it was time to go.

MS. RIEDEL: And had you been teaching strictly wheelwork? Had you been teaching kiln building?

MR. BEAN: No, no, I'd been — I taught everything but painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Everything, okay.

MR. BEAN: You know, the first year I was there, I had to learn how to teach jewelry, enamel-making — [makes repetitive noise].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. BEAN: And then I taught drawing, taught three-dimensional design. I guess I didn't teach 2-D. I didn't teach two-dimensional design, didn't teach painting. But I taught everything else there was —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — because it wasn't a huge department.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. How many people in the department?

MR. BEAN: Three to five, depending on when, you know, when they'd fired people or whatever, and as it grew — got older, it grew bigger. And I think Wagner is better now, I hear. But, at that time, it just wasn't appropriate for me. So when they finally fired me, I was euphoric.

They actually — the faculty liked me, so they gave me a sabbatical. And then, the administration not liking me, the day before the sabbatical began, they said, "When your sabbatical is done, don't come back." So they slid me into the world at half-pay. It was perfect. It really was perfect. And by then, I had a network of galleries —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — that I was supplying pots to. And then, right about then also, the work changed, and I finally got to the point where I was making something that I really liked.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about the work that you were making while you were still teaching, and then we'll move into this other —

MR. BEAN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: — this transitional work.

MR. BEAN: So I come back from California.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And I'm living out in the salt marshes on Staten Island. I go to the fire department and say, "Do I need a fire permit from you guys to build a kiln out there?" And it was just like uncomprehension [sic].

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: It took me a long time to realize that I could have built the kiln if I had given them money because this was Staten Island, but I didn't get it. So I go, "Well, I can't make pots. Well, what do you do in New York? Oh, well, you make art."

So I bought this book — by Gregory Battcock, I think — and read it, and figured out, oh, I get it. And —

MS. RIEDEL: What was the book?

MR. BEAN: I can't remember its name; I'll give it to you. It's in the studio. I got that back the other day.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I think it was called The New Art or something like that or Cool Art, something. And looked; you know, kind of went, "Okay. I know what I'll make."

So I started working with Plexiglas and made this piece, and this guy in the art department said, "Hey, you know, there's this thing that the Whitney has. It's called 'The Viewing,' and you can — anybody can take their work there; you don't have to be gallery-affiliated." And this was the Whitney's way of protecting themselves from the criticism that, oh, you only take work from galleries; independent artists are — well.

I got there with the work, and the work that was there was terrible. It was everybody from Long Island who was a hobbyist. There were carved tikis and scary things. But I got a call the next day. They said, "This has never happened before, but we'd like to buy your piece." So six months after starting making sculpture, I sold a piece to the Whitney.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing.

MR. BEAN: And I thought, that's kind of wrong. You know, you're supposed to labor — lo, these many years in the vineyards and be discovered — and — but I took the money and made more stuff and got a Madison Avenue gallery. I showed with Royal Marks up on Madison Avenue; had, I think, a one-person show; was in the Whitney Annual.

MS. RIEDEL: Which year?

MR. BEAN: I think this is going to be '67? '68, '67, '68. You know, went to the Whitney's receptions as their hot new discovery. Zsa Zsa Gabor would be there; Salvador Dali with an ocelot around his neck.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, a living one, as a kind of a KP [ph] thing. You know, Yoko Ono — the whole — that world at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And the only thing it was — I still thought it was kind of like, "What — this is backwards." So I made — I guess I made sculpture for three or four years, and then —

MS. RIEDEL: All Plexi?

MR. BEAN: Plexi? Yeah, it changed from gray Plexiglas to — I began to do lacquered Plexiglas. So it would be like these transparent cubes. And then I got to a point where I thought, you know, what I really want to do is I don't want to make these things; I want to have these cubes of color float in space. But I couldn't figure out how to do it. There was no technology. Now you could undoubtedly do it. But I got — you know, I'd done a bunch of paintings on the ground, you know. You paint — especially if you paint on puddles, they change. You know, spray paint on puddles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And spray paint on the yard. And so I'd done all those paintings. So I had to — in my mind, it was time to move outdoors with this stuff. And I'd made a big — a big piece for a showdown in Bethlehem, and then I just — I looked at the thing and I said, "I can't make what I want."

One of the things that happened is, I walked out on my porch on Staten Island, and I looked up, and there was a rainbow. I said, "That's kind of the feeling I want, but I don't know how to get it." You know, I wanted that foamy, translucent, Plexiglas color, this glowing stuff to be just floating there; didn't know how to get it. So I said, "Well, if I can't do that, I'm not going to make it."

So I kind of quit that. And then we had moved out here, and so I thought, "I'm going to make pots again."

MS. RIEDEL: Let's hold this for —

MR. BEAN: Yeah, you want to change —

MS. RIEDEL: — [inaudible] — I want to switch the card.

MR. BEAN: Right.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Bennett Bean at his house in Frelinghuysen Township on June 16, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number two.

We were talking about — you just moved out here in 1970 and you were going to make pots again.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, it was an interesting kind of move because we were sick of New York. We hadn't — I hadn't liked the art world.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you been living in the city?

MR. BEAN: We had been living on Staten Island. That was our choice — either move to Manhattan and get a loft or move someplace. And we looked at — you know, we looked on Staten Island, not going to happen. Looked at South Jersey — no. Looked out here — and we kept moving farther and farther and farther out until we found this. And then it was really the barn, because I was making — I needed 15-foot ceilings because I was making big sculpture. So we bought the barn and everything else came with.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was there then, Bennett? What was the house —

MR. BEAN: This was a dairy farm.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: This was — the place was falling down. There was manure in the — on the floor, the stanchions were still in, upstairs didn't have hay in it but it had still a hay pulley and all of that stuff. And it was — this was an old falling-down farm house. I mean, William — before this wall was taken away, William could sit in the middle of this room and throw a ball anyplace in the room and it would come back to him because the floor dropped from the wall to six inches to the center.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I mean, it wasn't a rich person's house to start with. And so — and it had been lived in by two families for years.

MS. RIEDEL: And it dates to 18-what?

MR. BEAN: Oh, earlier. Probably late 17's for the fireplace.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Okay.

MR. BEAN: That's the only early thing left because everything else has been either torn down or added to. Yeah, I would — maybe 18 — I don't really know, you know? I know that it was supposed to be 250 years old when we moved in and that was 40 years ago. So 290, and you count back and it's whatever. And there was a barn over that way, but it burned down and so they built the barn that is now my studio in 1934.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And so — and the way that works is I was working in that studio with nothing but a table and a wheel. And then you get a thing, and then you sell something, and then you do this improvement and so it's been an ongoing work in progress for 40 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And when the economy's good we'll do something. When the economy is bad we wait.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so — like right now we're waiting. Although it's a little better, it's still not good. So — and the house, I mean, I really think of this place as my toy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: I'm not really precious about it, but I really like doing it. You know, that's the fun part. Once it's done it's okay, I hope it works. But it's — and as I said before, if you don't make any distinctions between house, cooking, pots, painting, gardening —

MS. RIEDEL: Rugs.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, rugs — you end up here, you know, with all this stuff. And there's still the guest house — you know, which I would really love to do. I mean, I really have things that I want to do down there. I mean, okay. But it's — the economy has to get a lot better or else my son has to strike it rich. And so I don't think either of those is going to happen this week.

MS. RIEDEL: Or you have to sell some of those tansus. [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Nah, that wouldn't even do it. I mean, that's a hundred thousand dollar house down there to do it because it needs septic and it's in a marshland. So that's $40,000.

MS. RIEDEL: You already did some structural work on it though, on the outside, right?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And then it needs a well. And then, of course, it's impossible for me not to do it perfectly.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And perfectly is always way more expensive. I mean, I'm now at the, oh, soapstone counters. Yeah, I'm definitely — but it would just be nice to have that done so that when the grandchildren are here we're not, you know, doing triage with things. I mean, the piece of sculpture that I had in the Whitney annual in the '60s no longer exists because it was in the — Williams trike run. And he ran his tricycle into it one day and knocked it down and it came up in fragments. So — kids in this house are no longer perfect. But down there it'd be great. So, you know, it's just time and money.

MS. RIEDEL: But that's different than the piece that the Whitney actually bought, yes?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah, the piece that they bought — I mean, the great — it's still in their basement. You know, they haven't deaccessioned it as far as I know. And they give you — if they buy a piece from your collection you get a lifetime pass.

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty wonderful.

MR. BEAN: Which is actually cool because when you go up to get your tickets they look at you and go, do we know this artist? And they haven't a clue.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Anyway. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about the work that you started — you came back to making ceramics when you moved here.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Built a catenary arch kiln, stoneware, developed my own glazes — because one of the things about graduate school — you know, when I got out of graduate school I thought I was really hot — I knew a lot of stuff. But one of the things that I didn't know how to do was make a glaze come out twice the same way.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: In graduate school you didn't have to. You were creating.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So every new thing was like the new thing. And you kept moving on to the next one. It wasn't — that was not about a production environment.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: So out here I figured out how to make a product and started doing the fairs and —

MS. RIEDEL: Rhinebeck was happening that — [inaudible] —

MR. BEAN: Just started.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But I went to — the first one was up north and then Rhinebeck — maybe I came to the second or third one something. I think '74 was the first year I did that.

MS. RIEDEL: You think so? Okay.

MR. BEAN: And partly I did it because I knew that my students were never going to get a teaching job. So what was possible for them, could they make a living? Well, since nobody every discussed making a living in school, I better figure out how to do it. And so I started doing those fairs and worked my way through them until I was actually making money at them. And that was, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: This was the functional work?

MR. BEAN: Started functional and then slowly was not.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So it started out dinnerware, casseroles, mugs —

MR. BEAN: Yeah, yeah. That stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: In a variety of glazes, stoneware, greens, browns, plain —

MR. BEAN: Yeah, all of that stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, Okay.

MR. BEAN: Except with a Japanese hit, really, because I was still suffering from the Japanese syndrome. So then I decided, all right, I need — I was 30-something and I thought, I'd copied everybody now. There's nobody left to steal from.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: I need to invent something that I — is actually mine.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: So I started as —

MS. RIEDEL: So it was a conscious decision.

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And it was also — I — because in ceramics everything is so endlessly technically based, what is the first thing you do if you want to change — you change your glaze. And then — so I changed the glaze, and I changed the forms. And I was making these things that didn't have feet. And the glaze didn't really melt. It was like barely a slip. And it went on the wall and I remember Cathy came down, she looked at them and she said, "Jeez. These are terrible. Nobody's ever going to buy these." And so I took them off to Rhinebeck and sold them all.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing.

MR. BEAN: And at that time, you know, you got cash for a lot of stuff. So I came home with my pockets full of cash and she was upstairs in the bedroom when I came in lying in bed. And I took this money out of my pockets and I threw it up in the air and money rained down on her. And I said, "There! They actually bought them!" And so for a long time she was my barometer. If she liked the work I was in trouble. But if she hated it, it was like: Oh, good, this is going to be fine. I mean, now she's figured it out.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: She — her taste is perfect. But then she was like the other side. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So these were wall pieces?

MR. BEAN: They were. Well, they actually — some of them sat on Plexiglas rings because they had no bases. But they also had a little bump there where you could hang them on the wall. And it was interesting because there was a lot of that look. And I thought — that came after — but I thought I'd invented a new thing entirely. Now I look at them and — oh my god, these are totally art deco motifs. I had simply recycled art deco.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they plates, were they slabs, what were they?

MR. BEAN: They were, like, disc-ish.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Plates. Plate-ish. Thrown.

MS. RIEDEL: Thrown and altered.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well, not much altered.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: You know, just — [makes buzzing noise] —

MS. RIEDEL: And painted?

MR. BEAN: Airbrushed with stencils.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. How interesting — the stencils.

MR. BEAN: The stencils were hand held, painter stencils made out of neoprene that were that thick, because when you spray if the stencil's real flat it tends to bead and the bead jumps onto the surface and then you have terrible thing. I don't know that I have any downstairs. I have some upstairs someplace. And there's some in the barn. I think you looked at one — you pointed to it, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the plate — the — in the room by the rugs.

MR. BEAN: Yeah those guys. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. So it was — and fairly monochromatic — whites and creams and browns that sort of thing.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Kind of —

MS. RIEDEL: Was it still stoneware then?

MR. BEAN: No, no. White earthenware — that's what took me to the white earthenware I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And lower fire then too.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah, and so — but I didn't like making those. I didn't physically like the process because you had to wear a mask and I had a big explosion-proof motor from when I sprayed acrylic lacquer, and so the fan moved 3,000 cubic feet of air a minute — so I was heating New Jersey.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And it was really — it was just an awful process. So when I changed I said, whatever I'm going to do

next is going to fit my neuroses perfectly. It's going to be exactly what I want to do. And if there's anything bad about it, I don't want to do that step. I will change it so that this process fits me.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And with the work that I'm doing now it does. There's not any of it that I dislike. The only thing that kind of — I'm irritated by is crumpling the papers for the firing. That always seems to me to be something I could do without. But every other thing in it I really actually love.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's saying a lot because there's so many steps in the process.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, the steps have grown and grown and grown. I don't do the gilding because basically there's only one decision and that's what color gold. And so I do what takes decision and Barbara does what doesn't. So —

MS. RIEDEL: And various people have gilded for you over the years — yeah.

MR. BEAN: Oh my god, there's been a stream of them. Yeah, and Barbara's really good. She's — you know, she's been here a year and a half, she's got it down, she's as fast as anyone's ever been, she's smart — which is really nice. So — no, she's good.

And I — it took — working in the studio by myself was great for a while. And then some woman came and said, oh, I'm going insane. I'm out of college; I'm going through art withdrawal in the Poconos. I'll work for you for nothing.

And I said, let's try minimum wage because for nothing means I have to provide something for them. If I'm paying them then they should do what I want. And I don't want that negotiation, I want — they're there as an extension of my brain and my hands. And there is a — there's a kind of a back and forth, and things do change because of them. But still it's pretty much about me. And that's why I had apprentices one summer — I'm done with that. I'm not doing that again.

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that?

MR. BEAN: Because the point of the studio is to get the work done and the point of an apprentice is to get the work done and for them to learn what they need to know. So it dilutes the work. If the work is what's important then you don't want apprentices. I mean, unless — if teaching is important, great, have an apprentice.

MS. RIEDEL: So how did the — how did the work come to be pit-fired? How did you come to make that decision?

MR. BEAN: I was teaching and I wanted to build a Raku kiln for the students. And the school, of course, said no. We don't want any kilns, they're ugly. And so I brought the students out here. And I had heard of pit firing. And so I thought, okay, you buy a — it was actually sawdust firing then — you buy a garbage can, you punch holes in the bottom, you put sawdust in, you put the pots in, you light the thing, they smoke and you get this smoky pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So I did all those things, got the sawdust at the sawmill, built this thing — the sawdust would not burn. I'm going, "What is that about?" But I am seriously, at that time, in the animal realm. In Buddhist iconography they have a picture of the world and one of the — there's six varieties of behavior. And one of the less attractive ones is the animal realm, which is like a pig rooting along. It's got total focus here; there's no idea about its environment. So I had total focus on this thing — like, this is not burning. It needs to burn.

So go get some kerosene and put that on, throw a match on. It was a perfect candlewick. You know, the kerosene burned; sawdust didn't burn. And I'm going "god damn, this is stupid, aren't I? Damn it." So I kicked the garbage can over and built a fire on top of the pots — a big fire. And that's my firing technique today.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: Basically what happened was I was using green, hardwood sawdust.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It doesn't burn.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It chars. It makes the best black of all. But it just won't burn. And so now that — you know, put down the sawdust and you put the pots and you sprinkle some copper around and then you put on newspaper, kindling, cordwood, light it, walk away from it. So that's how that developed.

And it was really the original — you know, when I brought the students out here, you know, we fired some stuff. And I'm going, oh, look at the subtlety of smoke and mark of fire and they were these gray and white pots. And they said: gray. That's just gray. That's not interesting. And so they left.

And I looked at them and went, damn, that is gray. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Is that when you started sprinkling on the copper?

MR. BEAN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BEAN: That came later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: This was more — well, how do I get color on there?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so the first thing I did was take some ocher, which is an acceptable ceramic material, and some linseed oil and I had to rub it on.

MS. RIEDEL: On your pots — on the pots?

MR. BEAN: On the pots, yeah. It was sneaky but it looked good. And then if you can do — I mean, it's like if you can do that then you can add more things after the firing. So I wasn't going to go whole-hog then but I did go down to Nanny's Mold Parlor [ph] and buy some kind of ceramic paints. And —

MS. RIEDEL: For post-firing?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. BEAN: And another thing happened right about then, is I had been using masking tape to tape off these patterns. And I had got off the wrong floor at Pearl Paint and there was a big rack full of Chartpak tapes, starting at a 64th of an inch marching up to a half-inch. And I went, oh my god, these are better than masking tape, which I was beginning to have to cut and work with.

So I bought those and that — big change because now it gave me the same kind of ability to have a variety of line that a pencil gives you. And so big, great find — putting that on. And then I began to paint inside the tape. You know, once — tape it once it was glazed, paint it. And it was right about here that — I really like these pots. They didn't look like anything I'd seen.

And they fired me — perfect timing because I had to work. And I remember the first time I did Rhinebeck after I got fired and I — this beautiful French woman walked into the booth — she smelled great, she looked great, she was fabulous. And she picked up this pot and she said, "This pot is beautiful." And I said, you're right, and you should have it. And it was just like I'd poured warm syrup down her necks. She kind of quivered and bought the pot.

And I suddenly realized in that moment, like, for — up until now you've been telling people not to buy your work. You've been going, oh, you should see what I'm working on now or let's see that — you know, the next thing will be. And people are unsure. So if you actually want them to buy the work you should say: this work is fabulous and you should have it — you deserve it. And from that moment everything sold. It was really just as clear as that because I then loved the work. And you transmit that love. So that was — that was actually interesting. And then, you know, you build a business.

MS. RIEDEL: How about the forms, Bennett? Were these early forms bowls? What were — when — how did the forms begin to be altered?

MR. BEAN: They didn't become bowls until later.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, they weren't bowls until later. What were they now?

MR. BEAN: No. They were closed forms — kind of Indian-looking vessels, gourd-like, no lip.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: Then because I was sort of stealing from the Indians — I'd stolen from everybody else — and I remember — I had made these pots and I'd been teaching throwing — you know, the traditional thing — strong lip, clear foot, the middle will take care of itself.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: Right. Well, that's based on utility. If it has a strong foot it won't tip over and if it has a thick lip and set lip it won't chip or break. The Indians had another agenda. So it was doing these pots — my students were horrified. They go, these aren't what you're teaching. And I was going, well, that's life.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they thrown, Bennett?

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: That's the skill. I got that skill. I can throw. And it's fast. In fact, for most of the time that I was working before I began these triples and four-part and five-part pieces I would throw four days a year and that was a hundred pots and that's how many pots I made in a year.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? In four days?

MR. BEAN: Twenty-five pots a day.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: I mean, that's not much.

MS. RIEDEL: And then were you beginning to use slip and burnish these early pots?

MR. BEAN: Oh, the — yeah. They immediately — they started out burnished and then slip came later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I just wanted them whiter. And so terra sig I put over that. And so — and the — see, these pots — all right, so here's this sed [ph] piece. These pots are vessels. Vessels are like paintings, they have a subject. And the subject is drawn from all the traditional elements of historical pottery. So in my case they are not drawn from utility, they're not drawn from volume, they're not drawn from those things. They're drawn from space inside and decorated surface outside. And those are the two elements about which my pots have always been.

And the things that I do are at the service of that idea. You can mess with them a little around the edges, but pretty much — pretty much that's the rule because in this world you can make anything. The questions is what — you know, what to get rid of, what not to make. And once you've — I mean, once you've got those rules — it's like a sonnet — within that structure you have amazing freedom. You can do whatever.

And so that's what these pots have been about. So the early pots came up and were closed and they were painted black inside. Okay, so I am this woman's house and she — Esther Saks, she ran a gallery in Chicago — and she had a nice collection of stuff. And I'm in the guest room and I wake up in the morning and I look across the bed and there on this shelf is this beautiful Mimbres bowl. And I fall in love. I go, oh my god, I want that. You know, I need to make that.

But the problem is when you make a bowl it had surface outside and surface inside because the other ones were closed up and black. So — space. So I tried paint, I tried this — finally I hit on gold. Gold is an — has an indeterminate depth. It also has no color. It has materiality. That's why they use it for picture frames, because it goes with anything because it's not a color.

So that was when the gold pieces began. And it was few years in, you know, I —

MS. RIEDEL: When was that? The early '80s?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, exactly. I think it was like '82, '81, '82, something like that. Maybe a little earlier.

MS. RIEDEL: '83 maybe?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And so — and then — it was interesting because half the people went oh my god, we hate this.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah. The guy that ran Habatat sent them back. He said, "These are really terrible." And he's now driving the art moving truck. And then other people loved them because gold is magic. I mean, it's really — there's a thing about gold that nothing else has that — I've tired — interesting, I've tried copper, and they looked like saucepans. You know, I don't hate copper saucepans, but these — there is a different feeling about it.

So that's when the gold began. And then — dit, dit, dit, forward a little bit — the Andersons — Doug and Dale —

MS. RIEDEL: Doug and Dale?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Commissioned to do little pieces for them — one each —

MS. RIEDEL: Little pieces?

MR. BEAN: Little tiny pieces. They said, we haven't got much space. We love your work; we love you. Here, make some little pieces, one for each of us. So I'm thinking about that when I'm thinking about them. And I'm thinking about them and their life and how they're kind of interlocked. And I think, oh, they're married, bum, bum, bump. And so I'm going to — I'm going to interlock these two bowls.

And so I cut a chunk out of them and put them next to each other. And as soon as you've done that you get it. You know, it's like okay, got it. And so that began the whole pairs' series. And if you can do two, you can do three. If you can do three, you can do four. If you can do — you know, I can make them a mile long.

MS. RIEDEL: So when was that commission for Doug and Dale?

MR. BEAN: You know, I'm trying to think, I think it must have been — the economy was about to get better. I think —

MS. RIEDEL: Late '80s?

MR. BEAN: I would — no. I think — let me just think. I think it was early-'90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Early '90s.

MR. BEAN: I think. But I'm — you know, you've have to look at the thing that I wrote up because I can't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well, but then it seems before that you began to play with the rim and the lips.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. They got cut early.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And then they opened up into all those pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a lot happening with still a single form?

MR. BEAN: And — yeah. And that connected to the serial pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I kind of took those two things and took the seriality and the two pieces so it wasn't like fresh from the standing start. I mean, I'm reading this book about this guy who is inventing camouflage. And he said, usually the changes that you make are half-steps. If you make the half-step, fine. And so this was like I had this

piece, I had that piece, you put them together and it's not like from nowhere. It's just the next half-step.

MS. RIEDEL: So those niched pieces and this idea of an interlocking piece — which is interesting then because the — in many ways a commission was the catalyst —

MR. BEAN: Commissions are great.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that's —

MR. BEAN: I love commissions —

MS. RIEDEL: That's an unusual perspective.

MR. BEAN: — because they make you leave home. I mean, you know, I'm sitting here I know what I'm doing. I mean, the iron pieces now, not a commission. But the gridded pattern on my pots and it's like that — you know, came from a commission on a triple piece. It was going in a kind of colonially looking house. And they had windows that were, I think, eight over eight — paned windows. And I thought, it's going to sit in front of that, I'm going to pull the motif of the windows and put it on the pots.

And so that motif I've used a million times, later.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: So it's very much — for me, it's generated from kind of the moment. I — for a long time I was doing these twisted patterns which came from Cathy's screensaver.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: You know, I'd be standing up there and she'd be working on the computer and the screensaver would be making these string lines, string lines, string lines. And so I began putting the string lines on the pots. So you never know where — I mean, with my new machine a lot of what I'm doing are images from the garden. And then the leaf form is actually an image from the curtains in the house that my wife grew up in.

And so who knows where this stuff comes from. But if you add an image every two months, you know, in a few years you've got an entire vocabulary of formal solutions you can play with. And I'm always kind of adding something to change it. So how that — you know, and the changes are incremental because I kind of felt like I had time — don't be in a rush. That — and it's interesting on these iron pieces I'm going, I kind of know where they might go. Am I going to go to the end first or am I going to work my way there?

And I'm back and forth about that. I mean, I've done it both ways but mostly I've had the most success if you kind of take your half-step, and then take your next half-step. And pretty soon you are in a place that doesn't look like where you began. I mean, it is similar because I have a sensibility that appears straight through what I do.

So we'll see how they turn out. I'm actually really looking forward to them, because I get a million ideas. My brain is a thing that makes ideas. That's its job and it's good at it. And it makes so many of them I couldn't make them all or I couldn't get them all done in a million lifetimes. So it's which are the things that you're going to make? So which idea do you actually decide to turn into a thing in the world because it takes time to do that — to make the thing appear in the world and get it to work. And then to get to rid of it — you know, have somebody buy it, whatever.

But the iron idea has been around for three or four years. And the shapes that I'm using have been around for 15 years — maybe 20, slightly modified. But intended to do them in silver — in sterling. But it was going to cost me $20,000 to make something 15 inches long — there is no economics of that. I would have done it, you know, if I'd won the lottery. But it's really interesting because there's thinking now — people say, oh, struggle is a great catalyst for art. I think that's totally wrong.

When things are rough you buckle down and don't risk. It's when things are flush — I mean, look at the '80s, it was a complete cultural explosion — kaboom! Look at it now, everybody's making stuff from 1950. You know, I'm looking at midcentury and going, "Boring. Why aren't you guys making something that's not been already made?"

But it's safety. It's like, this is a scary world we're living in, you know? The culture and the country is not where it was. I'm actually struggling against that some. You know, I'm going, "Yeah, I could do that." That's kind of what those glazes that I showed you were about. They were, like, going to that place.

MS. RIEDEL: Which place?

MR. BEAN: You know, that '50s place, that safe place that we're not risking anything here. And it's all sort of been done before, and I can tweak it just a little, which is what I see most of the market going to. You know, Pantone — you know, the guy in England — patterns on all kinds of stuff. And it's just like, eh, come on.

All right, there's one more piece of where I see my work kind of fitting. All right, so set piece — history of art. Modern art begins in the 1880s with Cézanne and those guys, and basically what they're doing is beginning to take a painting, a traditional painting, and break it into its elements, into its constituent elements. So that's the beginning of modern art, and it goes through and each one of the modern artists takes element [sic] out, elements of what happens in a painting. Picasso in his Cubism is going, light falling on planes; Dali, psychological — whatever. And then you get up to Abstract Expressionists — it's process. It — and then you go to the next — the Minimalists are going, most of what we conceive — most of our perception of art is not in the presence of art. So if we're going to have an art experience, we ought to make an object that can be totally conceived of. So you make a cube without fingerprints, which you can conceive of even when you're not in its presence. Figure-ground painting — the shaped canvases that go on the wall become the figure; the wall becomes the ground. The gallery becomes the background.

And each one of these things — finally, in the — beginning in the '60s and into the '70s they get it down to either it's written on the wall, so there is no object there and it's only conception — the conceptual thing — or it's happening in the street, so it's moved to theatre. And so we've used up the content. Post-Minimalism is you now have all the pieces that you can recombine in any configuration you want.

Well, the same kind of thing happened with ceramics. An object becomes art when it ceases to have a socioeconomic niche. So painting became art when the Church decided they would use Bibles instead of paintings on the wall, and so they — basically the painters lost their job. And so in doing so — because the Gutenbergs had put them out of business — and in doing so, they made things that were without socioeconomic niche, and they had to find one. And that's how painting became art. Sculpture came off the wall, you know, as an architectural element. So now you've got the same thing happening in ceramics. The last viable bastion of ceramics was in the South and they were making jugs for whiskey. Prohibition came along, and the Mason jar put them out of business. Plastic, glass, tin — all of those things are cheaper and more utilitarian than clay. So clay has lost its niche.

A perfect — another perfect example of this is photography. When I grew up, all of the visual images came to us through the photograph — Life, Look, all those photo magazines. They invented television; those magazines are all out of business.

[Off-side conversation.]

MR. BEAN: Oh, where was I? I was right in the middle of that thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, let's see. You had clay, and you'd — clay had — clay had been lost as a — it lost its niche because now you had Mason jars, and —

MR. BEAN: Oh, okay, the photography thing. All right, so we've got the video thing. Video put that out of business. And so that thing has made ceramics sort of art, but kind of not, too because most people haven't taken it where it could go. Most people haven't said, all right, my work is like a painting. It has a subject. So that's where the vessel fits into that process. That vessel is a ceramic response to losing its socioeconomic niche.

Now, a lot of people simply haven't gone there. They're still back making crockery, which is fine. But that's kind of where I see myself positioned in doing what I'm doing. You know, I make vessels because I think it is — it's our territory. You know, it's not about painting issues. It's about containment of space, and it's about skin outside. And these iron pieces are the same thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interior and exterior?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, exactly. And you know —

MS. RIEDEL: The interior becoming the exterior and vice versa.

MR. BEAN: Right. It's just scale is different, materials are different, you know, how you apply it is different. It's not so much about interior decoration. It's more like landscape event. So that's kind of, you know, how I think I fit in what's going on.

Now, the interesting thing I'm seeing is it's entirely possible that I have moved out of style. I mean, it was interesting because I was in a — doing a fair, and some woman came into the booth, and she looked at the work and said, "Are people still buying these?" And I went, "Seem to be." And so — but in terms of what's being done

now, this work is really — it's out of the '80s. It's very much out of that period, and although it has evolved and it's become more complex, it is still that universe.

And I'm not kind of interested in having it not be in that universe. I kind of like that universe. I mean, the iron pieces will not be there, but think — they're not going to be from now either because there isn't — I mean, my feeling is there isn't a sense of the materiality in most contemporary sculpture. I mean, it's much — it's much more — I don't know. I think of, what is it, Sze, the woman who does all those Styrofoam room installations. They're spectacular, the string and all that kind of stuff. I really love them.

But I'm not that. I am really set out of another period, and I don't think I'm likely to evolve into that. You know, I can see it and it's not like — I actually like it a lot. I mean, I think it's really beautifully done. But in terms of what I'm doing, I'm not done working. I'm not done evolving. I'm not done. It would be such a shame if I died.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Let's talk about the work — how the work has evolved. We haven't talked about the dolmens, how those came to be — '85, I think, was the first one of those, yeah?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, the — yeah, they were about issues of display. I mean, one of the things I've always dealt with is how do you put a thing in the world? Those slabs that go under my pots were about that. The dolmens were my first run at that. So I said, okay, if these are like painted surfaces that are like paintings, they should — you don't want to put them on the coffee table and throw socks in them. So if I could put them next to what they should be next to and at the sight I think — the height that they should be seen at, then it would give me some control as to where they went in the world.

And so that's why the dolmens started. You know, I had a deal with the granite. And so that was great. And then I begin buying precious, semiprecious stones to put under them, and so I really thought, okay, this is not real different from Brancusi in this hierarchy of materials that work up. Except I was working up toward the gold interior. And so it worked from granite, which was rough, and then it went to semiprecious stones, you know — gosh, I can't remember the — there's a — there's a — I don't know, it's a stone with layers of seashells in it, but I can't remember its name. And then the pod goes on that, and then the gold is on top of that. So there's this hierarchical thing going along. And they were fun. And they were right at the end of the '80s, and so they were selling. And I was selling them to an art gallery in New York, which was great because these —

MS. RIEDEL: Which gallery was that?

MR. BEAN: Gimpel Weizenhoffer. And the gallery was great because the people who ran the gallery — their manners were so good that you could never tell what was happening. And one day I went in, and they were out of business. Gimpel or Weizenhoffer or whoever, who was the backer, had decided it was more — it wasn't any fun to go into a gallery and see nothing had sold, no half-million-dollar paintings sold, so he was like, "Well, I'd rather put my money into Broadway productions. They have better parties."

And so — but it was — and so — then the economy — that was the end of the '80s, and the economy went in the tank again, and people weren't buying those things. But I did do a series of bronzes, and I had a show that — where the object came up, and bronze went on top. And they were — it was a kind of a shift because they were kind of offering pieces. Like, it came up from the ground, and then here, instead of just golden space, there was an idea about offering. There's one in the living room that's a chicken offering. And it looks like it has a wing, and it also has this shape, which is — when you butcher a chicken, they have these cones that you drop the chicken in and slice its neck. And it bleeds out there. And so I took — I haven't announced that to any prospective buyers, but that was the idea about a chicken offering, that — and then there was a corn offering.

MS. RIEDEL: So these are bronze pieces. They're cast?

MR. BEAN: You want to see?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, let's take a quick look.

MR. BEAN: Economically unfeasible.

MS. RIEDEL: The bronze pieces, you were saying, were fun but economically unfeasible.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And they were in the mid-'80s as well, same time as the dolmens?

MR. BEAN: End of '80s.

MS. RIEDEL: End of the '80s, okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, they were the moment at which the real estate market went in the tank and there was that terrible economic thing, which put the gallery out of business, which put the bronzes out of business. But then the pots came back as pairs. And the clay world hated the granite pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I kind of remember that.

MR. BEAN: They really just thought, oh, now, what the hell? This is not pottery as we know it. So I can remember this woman — I don't know, she ran a gallery, or she — oh, she was a museum curator someplace in the Middle West. And I'd done my first paired pieces, and she walked in and she said, "Thank god you're not doing those terrible granite things anymore." [They laugh.]

MR. BEAN: And I went — I mean, that's one of the things I really actually like about being at shows and being at fairs is you get a really clear barometer of the work, you know, because it's always difficult for your friends, spouses, gallery owners to tell you, "No, we don't think this is very good" or — but people walking into the booth will say anything. And I think that's somewhat healthy because there are a lot of people who don't hear a lot of critical stuff about their work. And I think you ought to hear it. You can ignore it and say they're stupid, or whatever you want to do, or listen.

I mean, the great thing about Facebook is — I showed — I put some pots on that just had the black and white — you know, just the stencils stuck to them — and said, "Here are the pots at the stencil stages, and this is my wife's favorite moment during the pot." And this quilt maker whose name I've lost — he's out in Nebraska — emailed back, and he said, "You might consider" — he didn't say it exactly this way — "You might consider stopping here." [They laugh.] And that was great because I'm thinking, all right, now, what does that really say? It says, really, do I want to back off? Do I want to make these things less colorful? I mean, because you can't go much more extreme than that. We are really into the baroque. That is entirely over the edge, fun to make and amazing to be around because they're big, and they are completely seductive.

MS. RIEDEL: We're talking about a big triple now that you —

MR. BEAN: That's five pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Five pieces?

MR. BEAN: I think that one's five.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's on a base.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And what's the overall scale of that? Three feet wide by two feet tall?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, a big urn. That was for the — actually, that was the one that came after the cruise ship commission.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and you did three pieces —

MR. BEAN: You know, another one of those commissions that pushes you someplace where you wouldn't go because I had to fill a niche that was bigger than I make.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you ever decline commissions?

MR. BEAN: No, that would be unsporting.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: I mean, it would — I mean, I like commissions because I like to see what will happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: Really, I mean, the deal is if I can't figure out how to make it interesting for me and have them get something they like, then I've failed. You know, I think that's — and besides this almost Pavlovian response from years of academia, it's the assignment. All right, now how do we get this to work?

MS. RIEDEL: It's problem-solving.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it's totally problem-solving. I mean, how can I take this thing — and also, I know it's going to move the work. I know the work won't be in the same place as before I started.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And that's always fun to see. Sometimes it moves a work, and you go back from where it moved it because it wasn't really a very fabulous place. But still, interesting to see what happens. And you know — and I kind of like people that have ideas. I mean, that's the really interesting thing about Andersons is they think. You know, they think, okay — and they risk. I mean, they were the first ones to buy a rug. They said, "All right, we're going to commission a rug." It took about a year for us to work out what they wanted, and they wanted a rug that looked like my pots. But it took a long time to get there.

But it was — I mean, that was actually — it was really a fun commission because they're fun to work with. I mean, I don't mind those things that keep going on. It's a little — you kind of go, you know — except they knew where they wanted to go. There are a lot of people that don't know where they want to go and don't know how to say where it is they want to go, and they are a little annoying. But most people are pretty good.

MS. RIEDEL: So they were very clear they wanted a rug that looked like your pots.

MR. BEAN: [Negative.]

MS. RIEDEL: No?

MR. BEAN: No, it took me to the very end to figure it out.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, but did they know that?

MR. BEAN: They might have known it, but they didn't say it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: They just said, "No, that's not what we had in mind. Can't you do something more like" — whatever. You know, so — no, I think commissions are always fun, really fun.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've done them fairly consistently throughout your career.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, there's always — I mean, I'm working on one now, except this one is the — really, the reason it's a commission is because the piece I have that they like is too big for their table, so I have to shrink it down. So I'll shrink it down. Whatever, that'll be fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk — we've talked about the dolmens, and we've talked about these early bronzes. Let's talk about the architectural work that was developing at about the same time.

MR. BEAN: Oh, the terra cotta?

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.] And also, the — weren't the columns —

MR. BEAN: That's what I mean, the terra cotta, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, right. How that came about.

MR. BEAN: I wanted a temple.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: That's usually what gets me to start is I want one. And I usually can't afford what I want. Therefore I'll figure out how to build it. And then all the good temples are in England and they're on the National Register and you can't have them anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so I wanted — my image was, when we put that pond in, we built a big mound. And I wanted to build a folly on top of the mound with columns and have wood nymphs dance around it in the evenings.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds nice.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, well, it became clear to everyone, my wife first of all, that I had put that mountain clearly in the wrong place. But I was broke again. So I had to wait till money came, and then we took the mountain and pushed it into a hole. But by then I kind of knew that it was time to build a temple, so I called up Mike, my friend the bear trainer — because he's really big and strong — and had him — we built this weird mold that totally didn't work, but you ended up with a column that was hollow.

MS. RIEDEL: Out of clay?

MR. BEAN: Out of clay. You had an inside; you had an outside. You pounded the clay in; you slid the inside out — the whole thing.

And then an interesting thing happened. So I put the same decoration that I used on my pots on these column sections and put them in the yard. And they looked like smudges, because I had never realized that the motifs on my pots are designed for less than 30 feet, because that's an interior. But it's like travel: Until you leave your territory, you can't see where you were very clearly. And so by leaving that I realized, oh my God, I had no idea that all these motifs are designed for interiors. So I have to figure out what I'm going to do for the column.

So I invented this glaze that looks like stone and it came in 16 colors, and had an extruder that extruded the columns. And then I took pictures. We built a colonnade out there, which is in shabby disrepair at the moment, but it looked really crisp and good. And we sent out images to the shelter magazines. House and Garden published it as a new product and we had 800 inquiries, and in a month and a half, we were in the column business.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: We were selling columns all over the East Coast. You know, I had eight guys working for me glazing columns, doing installations.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you need a special kiln for that now? Did you have to build a new kiln?

MR. BEAN: No, I did them in sections.

MS. RIEDEL: You did them all in sections.

MR. BEAN: I designed them to be in the kilns that I had. And so it was — you know, we were in the architectural terracotta business, which — it turns out I hate installations. We did a room in a house that Ziff, the publishing family, was doing up in — I don't know — [in] Pawling. And it was the ice cream parlor.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, you mentioned that.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, and they sent me a floor plan, but I couldn't figure it out because it looked like there was no wall on one side. Which, it turned out, there wasn't. It was an open space for which we ended up designing a balustrade that overlooked the women's aerobic studio on one side and connected to the basketball court on the other.

MS. RIEDEL: This is their house?

MR. BEAN: Huh?

MS. RIEDEL: Did you say this was a house?

MR. BEAN: This was a $50-million house. It started out $25 million and ended up 50. It was thousands of square feet.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: It was big.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And it was annoying because we made the work, and then we'd drive up to install it and they'd say, "Oh, we've raised the ceiling two inches." Well, with terracotta that means you go back and you remake the thing two inches taller. But I mean, we had — it worked out. We ended up with a lot of parts, though.

MS. RIEDEL: So you weren't just making columns and shipping the columns. You were doing them as installations.

MR. BEAN: We were doing both. But it was architectural — it was to fit into an architect's plan. And it got — I mean, the last job we did was way too much. It was a job for Clodagh in New York. It was their first triple penthouse, and we signed on for a lot more work than just the columns. We were doing stonework — God, big aluminum things, all kinds of stuff. A wood grating that went on top of the colonnades. We made —

MS. RIEDEL: When was this done?

MR. BEAN: Huh?

MS. RIEDEL: When was this one?

MR. BEAN: Jeez, I don't even know.

MS. RIEDEL: A while ago, though.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it was really — it was the end.

MS. RIEDEL: So you got into a whole interior design.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, but we weren't designing them; we were supplying them. It was a product. And it was — at the end, two things. One, I knew I didn't want to do any more installations in New York, because you have to bribe everybody, or at least pay them some — you know, to get the elevator to come down, you give him 20 bucks, or he'll leave you in the basement.

We had to have a — we shipped stones from a quarry in Minnesota, I think it is, one of which was five feet by seven feet by two inches thick. And it weighed 1800 pounds. And we had to get it into the building through the basement, onto the elevator, upstairs, down the hall and then lay the thing down as a hearth for the fireplace.

Logistically, it worked. But it wasn't any fun. I mean, we built a pivoting dolly that slid the thing into the elevator and then it pivoted, because the elevator, diagonally, was seven feet two inches. So we had two inches to drop this thing into. And it worked, we got it. But it was just a nightmare.

You know, and there's — yeah, you have to have a cop when the truck comes and unloads the stuff. You have to have a forklift come up from someplace else. You know, all of these logistical things, which are just boring. And so it was either hire a $40,000-a-year manager and have him take over that stuff, or close it down. Well, I think the economy died right at that moment, again. I think that must have been —

MS. RIEDEL: There was a recurring theme.

MR. BEAN: Oh, it is. I mean, the economy is great and then it's bad. And for years I thought the badness was an anomaly.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Now I totally understand: It will be bad. It's just a fact. It's a cycle. Unfortunately, this time I think it's going to be bad a little longer than necessary. But that one, you know — and then I went on a retreat out in Colorado with my Buddhist people. And it was two months.

MS. RIEDEL: When was this?

MR. BEAN: This was '89 or '88 — yeah, I think I went in '88 and '89, two summers worth. And when I came back, it clear to me I was out of the column business. I wanted no more to do with it. It wasn't any fun. And what's life worth if it's not any fun. And so the guys that were working for me all had — they had reached moments in their life where they needed to go do something, and I encouraged them to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was the end of that. So it was very — three years, sounds like.

MR. BEAN: Probably, yeah. It was plenty long.

MS. RIEDEL: And how many pieces do you think happened during that period of time?

MR. BEAN: I don't know. The Sollicito job was 30 columns. Yeah, we actually made money. And then in the winter, when people didn't need colonnades, we did tables. We had a production table that — I don't know how we built the thing and sold it retail for $2400, but we made money on that too. The slate, I think, was $75. Welded frame — or maybe the slate was $130, the welded frame was — whatever. I don't know. But we sold them. And we sold a bunch of them. They were pretty much a design product.

Because it's very interesting that until recently, the craft world and the design world had no relationship. Now one is developing. But God, then I was making columns and they were in all the magazines and doing this whole thing, and the craft world had no idea they existed. They just didn't have any idea.

MS. RIEDEL: And you managed to work back and forth from those two worlds with no problem?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, if you don't define yourself as this or that, it's possible for you to show up and be what's necessary. I mean, that's kind of the way I think of — you do what's necessary, not what you'd like to do. I mean, there are so many people who try to fit the world to them. The world is not going to fit. It has its own agenda. And so they end up miserable.

If you start out with the fact that you know you're going to have to adapt to the world, then it's not a problem when you have to adapt to the world.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] But you've still found a way to structure things so you can do things that you primarily think are fun.

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I have been extremely lucky, and not entirely stupid. You know, I've gotten some things pretty right. Yeah, but it really is — life is so much fun, and it's so interesting. I mean, it really is interesting.

You know, this thing happened to me. I'm on my computer and I buy something. And they said, because you have bought this, you can have four magazine subscriptions of your choice for $2 apiece. And I went, damn, that's cheap. And the only trick is, the trick is, you will be automatically resubscribed unless you can call this number before the due date. And so I thought, we can do that.

We wrote down the number; we printed out the magazines. I got the wine thing — that big wine magazine that costs 50 bucks a year. I got *The Atlantic*; I got some cooking magazine — *Wine and Food* or something, and something else. And I already get about five magazines. And so I love those magazines. I love *Wired*, which is all the new technology stuff that's going on, and *Fast Company*, which are like the business things.

In terms of — oh, what do they call it — the Facebook marketing, all that kind of stuff?

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, social networking.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, that. That deal. I'm a little late to the party. And I don't know how to do most of that stuff, but luckily, Elizabeth [Rand] and Barbara [Livar] both do it. So we're on. You know, we have a Facebook thing; we have a rug Facebook thing. I'm on LinkedIn, which I think is amazingly stupid. I haven't figured out any reason it should exist yet, but maybe it will. People keep asking me to be their link, or whatever it is. And so I go, okay, fine. We'll see, at some stage something may happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Connect, right.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. But that stuff is actually — it's actually really interesting to watch how things change. And I adore eBay. I mean, I am dabbling with putting my work on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Well, there is my work on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, well, yeah, that would make sense.

MR. BEAN: But it's secondary market. And so I piece up there and I put it — I started it just a little below wholesale.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: And nobody bid on it. But the piece before that went, and the piece in Garth Clark's auction went, and so —

[Audio break.]

MR. BEAN: [In progress] — so I'm thinking, I had enough trouble selling these pieces anyway, but watching the secondary market is really — it's really interesting because you can tell whether you live or die, and there are people that are DYING. They're great in the subculture and dead in the market.

I mean, you look at Frank Boyden. I have one of — one of the pieces that he traded me that I tried to offer up to Garth's auction. He said, "There's no market" —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: — you know? It just isn't there. And so — and kind of watching my survival or as people forget me, it's like, okay, how do I put myself in the world? Because I'm not done with the world.

So we'll see, because the high end of the world is great. The SOFA shows are great, you know. [William] Zimmer and I have a relationship. He takes me to those shows, he gives me space, he's very good, he's loyal, and so I'm loyal. And so that as kind of a working event —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: — keeps me at SOFA because if you're not there, you don't exist. I mean, the first year that I had missed, after I stopped showing with Barry Friedman, there was like — maybe I wasn't there for two or three years, and then I was there again. Some woman walks into the booth, and they — turns to, like, Bill or Elizabeth or something, and they said, "We thought he was dead." And that's happened a bunch of times.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, so — and it doesn't take long to be dead —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: — you know? It really is quite interesting how that works. And so you need to be out there. And I like being out there. I — you know, I like doing those shows. Santa Fe is so — you know, it's no fun if you're not talking. If you're just sitting there —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — then it's no fun. But people are nice.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, Bennett, just listening to you, the course of this conversation makes me think of something that you've said about the work early on and the way the work's come about that I think is a thread that runs through all the different ways that you work is that "many of the changes in my work come from accidents, but show me directions that I could go." And it seems like that's true of the commissions, that's true of how the earthenware vessels have evolved, it's true of how the columns came about and went away. It seems like it's probably true of how the rugs came about and went away. Or another thing that I associate with you is "I could make that better."

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I want that, I like that, and I can probably make it better.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And I could probably make it in a way that I could afford it too.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well, it's interesting because I — when I was in graduate school with Soldner, he wrote this thing on the wall, and it was some kind of a Zen saying. It said, "The fruit falls from the vine of its own accord when it's ripe." And so I went in there and wrote, "But if you're not watching, you'll miss it," and so it's paying attention.

You know, the whole Buddhist thing is interesting. You pay attention to what's there —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: — not what you want to be there, but what's there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And I mean, it's so funny to see all these emails coming and see some of these people really remember a lot and have focused on that past and what that meant and blah, blah, blah and blah, blah blah, and I'm going, "I've hardly thought about it."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, because I'm doing what's next.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: I'm interested in, oh, so, what's happening next? Won't that be fun or not fun or whatever. So it's — and a lot of it, you know, it's the gene pool. I won the gene pool.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] How so?

MR. BEAN: Well, you know, they pretty much figure that people revert to mean in terms of their emotional state.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, if you're depressed, okay, you feel bad, and then you go back to where you were. And if you're joyful, you're joyful, and then you go back to where you were. But it reverts to mean. And if you're really depressed, you're going to go back to being depressed all the time. And if you're really happy, you're going to be pretty happy most of the time. I won that gene pool.

I suffer from euphoria attacks. You know, I can be down in the studio going, "This is way too cool. This is amazingly fun." And so — and my sister, no, she didn't win that, and so she was less happy than I was. And my brother, he worries more. And so it's just, you know — and so much of it's just luck.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Just flat-out luck. You know, you go — you're 23, you walk into a party, there's somebody there, you marry them. If you didn't go to that party, you would never see them, you would never marry them. You know, you marry somebody, and they die. You know, all of that stuff is just, who knows?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So I have been exceptionally lucky, really exceptionally lucky, and also won the gene pool. So I've been lucky and enjoyed it.

MS. RIEDEL: You've mentioned your Buddhism a couple of times, and that is one of the questions that we should address. So is there a way that that has affected your work?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Oh, completely. It's interesting. I got an email from this woman up at Karmê Chöling, which is a retreat center in Vermont, where I used to go and do retreats. I gave them a pot, one of those bowls, with gold inside. And she emailed me, and she said, "Oh, it's so nice to have that pot here." You know, "I know your work. I used to be a potter; now I'm a painter. I really connect to it."

And I thought — I read her email. It came about a couple months ago, and I thought, what I — what do I think about giving that pot? I mean, I knew on some level I thought it was appropriate for their vision up there, the way they think the world is — should be that thing. And so it took me a while to figure out that that's what I wanted to say to her. Say, you know, I've spent thousands of hours in front of those Tibetan shrines, with their unbelievably rich colors. Of course that's going to influence the way I feel about a pot and when it's finished. It seeps into your interior.

And then other stuff, like, risk. You know, all these artists say, "Oh, I took a big risk." And I'm going, "Come on. Give me a break." What was the risk? You do something stupid? You do something bad? Is that a risk? Here's risk. All right, so you got a painter in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period, and Pol Pot says, 'You're going to paint my painting of me — picture of me. If I don't like it, I'll kill you.'" That's risk. You know, then you've really got your — some skin in the game on — in terms of art.

But I don't feel any anxiety about my work at all, you know. I mean, it can be annoying when it doesn't work. But it's not a — I mean, I remembered I had a show, and I had, I think, three days to finish the work. And I thought, if I screw this up, I won't have the work for the show. And I just kind of went, "Well, I won't screw it up." And so you just do it. You drop that anxiety, and you just deal with what's in front of you, and you do the best you can. And at some stage, you have solved so many problems so many times that you're — I mean, it's like back to the computer thing. You've got your moves.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You have mastery. You can solve it this way or that way. Some are art or you know, some — [groans] — they're not quite as good as others. But I don't give up on them. You know, there are pots sitting there being ugly because they are ugly for a while before they get better and, you know, I'll keep working on them. Every so often, we had a quality control day and got out the shotgun and shot them.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you really?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Oh, you should go see it on Facebook. We have a video.

[Phone rings.] Oops, that's the studio.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: So you had quality control day?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And got rid of the ones that just really did not work.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, and it was really a funny video.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that — was that pots that had been sitting around for years?

MR. BEAN: Some of them were pieces of pots that had been broken, and other ones were pieces that I had thrown and didn't like the shape. And so it was — it was just like, "I need to get rid of these." And I've got some more I need to shoot, and the girls love to shoot them. [Laughter.]

They thought, "Oh, can we shoot pots again?" [Laughter.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty great.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That was probably not their average day. [Inaudible.]

MR. BEAN: No, it wasn't the average day! [Laughter.]

MS. RIEDEL: How did — how did you get involved with Buddhism in the — did you grow up with any kind of particular religion?

MR. BEAN: No. First time, with Buddhism, was in Seattle, when my girlfriend married my best friend, and I thought, I have made a mistake in my life. I need to reexamine it. So then I was reading Zen Buddhism, but there was no practice. So — because nobody was sitting. There wasn't a, you know, a formal sitting structure at that stage. So, you know, it was lifestyle Buddhism. I was like, "Oh, Zen pot, how cool."

Then, I would say '73, I was in the studio, and there was this program that this guy used to put on, on alternative religion and stuff, and this guy came on and started talking about suffering, and I went, "Holy cow! He is so on." And at the end of the program, they said, "This is [Chögyam] Trungpa Rinpoche; and he has a center in New York," and I went in there, and that was it — bang.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: It was just entirely — his vision was so accurate, and I was exactly ready to hear it. And so it's right in this mixed with what he presented, and he was, you know, he was like the millennial teacher. He was an astonishing teacher — really.

MS. RIEDEL: That was the '70s, you said?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And —

MR. BEAN: And I was pretty much active up until he died.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And was that one of the first reasons that you went to Nepal?

MR. BEAN: It was a reason. I mean, you have three choices: You have Nepalese rugs, Turkish rugs, Chinese rugs. Chinese — unless you're related to someone — and I am related to somebody Chinese, but they don't live there —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: — it's tough to do business there. Turkey — Turks scared me. And so that left Nepal. I might find a new teacher, and I'd never been to Katmandu; I'd missed it in the '60s. So that was what was — those were the three pieces, and I needed an adventure, you know? I was about to be 60, I think, and I knew how to make pots,

and I knew that world, and I knew the gallery system, and I needed to do something I didn't know. And I didn't have a clue about rugs.

I mean, the first rug I made, I made it, and then had it made, and then I got it back, and I went, "Oh, my God! The rug's upside down." I had made it like a painting with an "up," and rugs don't have "ups." They, you know, so —

MS. RIEDEL: So how did — when did the first rug start? When was that and how did that come about? What was the — what was the catalyst for a rug?

MR. BEAN: The catalyst was, "I need to do something I don't know how to do." I need to go — you know, and I wanted a rug.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: You know, I really — it's back to, oh, I wanted a temple. Oh, well, figure out how to make temples.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Oh, I want a rug. Figure out how to make rugs. And also I had gotten to the point, after having made the columns in house, I was out of manufacturing. I didn't want to have to manufacture anything anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: I have learned enough techniques; I don't want to have to learn another one and, especially with rugs — impossible!

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: You know, I mean, they're amazingly labor intensive —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: — and I'd never make a rug.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: But you could hire Nepalese weavers who were happy to have the money —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: — you know? It — they were a little bored with it; but, you know, they wanted to do it. So off to Nepal, off — you know, I'd learned Photoshop roughly, made some Photoshop images, took them over there, handed the same image to three people.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you even know who to contact? Just started looking around?

MR. BEAN: One guy had been recommended to me by some Chinese that I met at an opening, and the other one was — that was that guy — the other one, I drove past his showroom and went in. And the third one, this absolute reprobate named Dutch Bob had a kind of salon there. He dealt in stolen things from Tibet, women from around the world, and was a totally charming fellow.

If you went to Nepal, you went to see him, because you — you know, he had a table that was like 15 feet long. He sat at one end and there were cushions along the side. You'd walk in, and he'd say, "Tea or scotch?" And then he'd go over and choose a bowl off this rack of silver Tibetan tea bowls, and he'd give it to you. Well, actually, he always chose the one that he had — numbers and numbers of them reproduced so he could sell it to you.

And so, you know, you'd go "tea" or "scotch," whichever, and you'd sit there, and everybody who came to Nepal went through there: antique dealers, photographers, Tibetologists, all the wives of the embassy staff — American embassy staff from Singapore — just everybody you'd meet there. Oh, well, God, what's his name? Moynihan's daughter was kind of a fixture there, and it was just a great place to go. And so he — I had heard about him from an antique dealer in Bangkok who I bought the first Tibetan chest drum.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: He said, "If you ever get to Katmandu, go see Dutch Bob." And I thought, well, I'll never get to Katmandu. Well, there I was in Katmandu in a year and a half. And so I looked up Dutch Bob, and he said, "I'll send my person to come get you," because my hotel was right around the place from his house.

And so he gave me a guy. He said, "Oh, you're make — want to make rugs? I got a guy. He and I used to party together; now he's into prostrations, so he's not partying so much." And so I met Tashi.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And so Tashi and I made — and we made rugs together. He was — I figured he wasn't a total crook because he's doing prostrations, which is a pretty major Buddhist practice, and so we made rugs for four or five years. The early rugs were all made with him.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But he wanted to get — he knew the Maoists were coming in, and he wanted to get his family out. So this is a bad country to be a refugee in.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it — yes.

MR. BEAN: Canada's much better. So his family went to Canada. And then he began spending half a year in Canada, and the rug quality deteriorated. And so I found some other guys, and now I've been through maybe five or six guys, a number of them. Right now the economics of the rug business are terrible because the Nepalese can make more money working in the Emirates than they can making rugs, and so they're out of there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: It's hard to find weavers.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: We have a guy that we worked with for three or four years, and he's great. He — I mean, he will do our rugs, and we do very complicated rugs.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: We do rugs most people won't pay to have done. You know, it's — if you have a three-ply yarn, you can have one ply of silk, two plies of silk or three plies of silk. And you can have one color, two colors or three colors. Or you can have — I mean, there are 20 permutations.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And we do those permutations, and you don't know they're there. You can see the difference if you look hard —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and know what you're looking for. But it's the kind of thing that — I suppose it's the difference between a really good diamond and a pretty good diamond —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

MR. BEAN: — you know. We make the really good diamond, and it costs us more, but we'd rather make the good diamond because I want to make the beautiful thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So — it's — and it's been a great adventure, you know. We've gone trekking, white-water rafting, met people that you would never meet in a million years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Didn't ever find a teacher, but still gave it a shot. And now we're down in India, and India's big. I mean, there's a lot to explore there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so we'll be back and back to India to just check on our weavers.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like the rug story in particular seems like a great example of what you've said repeatedly, which is, it's a great illustration of the fusion between your art and your life, your design and your life, in that

one leads to another leads to another that leads to some place that neither alone would have taken you.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's that complete fusion.

MR. BEAN: Well, I mean, part of the thing is my son's over there. He's in China. When he was in Hong Kong, it was perfect. Fly to Hong Kong. Then he was working for Deutsche Bank, so great, great meals. Eat with him, see the grandchildren for about four days, because when they're like under two feet, four days is plenty.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. BEAN: And then go up to Katmandu, see the weavers, give them the samples or the colors to match, and then go for a trek for five days, go for, you know, go do something for five days, come back, see the weavers again, fly back, see the grandchildren again. It was a perfect circuit, twice a year, for three years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. BEAN: And we really nailed down all the odds and ends, the loose ends in our rug deal. So the guy understood that, you know, they're not going to accept 80 knots. They want a hundred knots.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so it's work, but now the supply situation is really bad. They're having trouble getting silk — well, silk is not quite as bad as the wool because there are less — in Tibet, there are less guys who are willing to farm. They're all in the cities trying to make money.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: You know, it's a slow — it's — I — it's — I'd never kind of been involved in a cultural change like Nepal —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: — because the entire economic, social — I mean, there's been a revolution.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: They've thrown out a king.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: They have had the Maoists elected. They have unelected the Maoists. They have gone through so many amazing changes. It's still totally screwed up.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: There is no industry. It's all tourists, which they — I mean, we would go during the Maoist times, and there would be no tourists, which means, nobody had any money because, you know, State Department says, "Don't go, don't go."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: We're going — [groans] — "We're not going to stay downtown."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You know, we're going up in Boda, which is much more tranquil. It's actually beautiful. Oh, what a place to stay. It's a big stupa that was built a thousand years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And all the Tibetans in the community — because most of the Tibetan community is out of there; they're not down in the tourist thing in Thamel — they circumambulate morning and evening. And so it's just — but going back there, you walk in and you just go, "Oh!" It's just a wonderful place, and I don't much believe in magic places, you know. But this one is really — it's really pretty good. So — but I don't know whether we're going to be there forever —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — because I don't how the rug thing will go. There's a possibility in Sikkim where we've been and that may work. So the rug thing is up for grabs, but up for grabs in an interesting way. If we could just break it even and then make a little money on top, then I would be happy to phase out and let Elizabeth have it, you know? Because I don't want to do this forever. I'm — I mean, especially if this iron thing works. You know, you can't do it all.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so — but Elizabeth has to actually make money to live.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: My pots are keeping me alive. So it's — it actually is an interesting dance.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. BEAN: Well, which way do you go, you know? Which one of the things do you go? How far do you commit to the rug thing? The rug thing — we were a little late to the party. The economy — as the economy got better, we were getting way better. We were about to have a fabulous year when things fell off a cliff.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BEAN: And there's — they're coming back, but they're coming back in dribs and drabs and slowly.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that, Bennett, that it fell —

MR. BEAN: That they fell off a cliff? I think it was '08.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: What is it now? It could have been —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It fell off a cliff, but we didn't lose all our business, I think, until '09 —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: — and we had four projects that cancelled in a month. And so — and you know, some of these things are like $100,000, but we're not getting them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BEAN: We're getting, you know, maybe a $20,000 rug here, another one there. I mean, that's kind of where we are now, but it's expensive to do those rugs. It really is kind of expensive. So that's — I think that's kind of the rug deal.

It turns out though that the — my favorite thing about the rugs is thinking them up and then getting them made. I like the thing when it comes back. That's the best part.

So if we're — you know, and we decided, "Oh, well, we're not going to make rugs; we're going to make samples." That way we don't put so much money into inventory, which is lying on the floor out there —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and not make any money on it. And so — but that's not as much fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: What's really fun is to open the thing and go, "Whoa, did we get that right!"

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, you open that red rug in there and you go, "Damn! That's good."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. BEAN: Or you open it up and go, "Hmm, not exactly what I had in mind; we have to make that one again," which I'm totally good with.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But it's — you know, there are rugs sitting around everywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes — [laughter] — there are!

MR. BEAN: And we need to get rid of some of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: So that's kind of our dance at the moment.

And also watching Elizabeth grow into the job is really interesting. She came here when she was like 23 or 22, and she's 28 now. [Sound of door opening.] Must have been 23.

So, I mean, that's been really fun. It's been really fun because having kids around is very good.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Otherwise, I think you ossify, and these kids — I mean, it's so interesting to watch the political correct thing because what was fine when I was a kid is not fine anymore. And we had this discussion this morning. There was like — there's a local political conflagration up at the town hall where the town committee and the general township got extremely angry at this woman who was writing a — [phone rings] — damn, that's loud — who was writing a — [phone rings] — ah, good, it's Cathy — [inaudible] — a novelistic blog about the township.

And so they were roasting a pig, and the heroine of the blog is called Amelia and they labeled the pig "Amelia." And she did not take it well and has given to an ultimatum to the township that they need to have an investigation, and she expects, if there was a board member involved in this, they should resign from the town council. And she is not messing around; she's really ferocious.

So that kind of stuff is like going on here, and it's really actually kind of interesting. But what — so we were talking about that, and Barbara was saying, "It's totally awful! It's terrible that they did this." And I'm going, "Yeah, but what you've got is a generational divide" —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — "these guys are 40 years older than you are, and they thought it was a cheery joke" —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — "whereas you think it so politically terrible and hurtful and awful." And I said, "It's so interesting because I'm old enough now that I've seen Indians go from Indians to Native Americans to I-don't-know-what and then back to Indians again. So what is" — and I'm — and I told her, I said, "Listen, what you think is perfect behavior now, your children are going to think was scandalous because look at what you think." And it was an interesting kind of thing, and so I'm going, "Yeah, it was really a stupid thing to do, and it was really bad — great. But it's not the end of the world."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You know, it's name-calling. It's not like savage beatings or all the other terrible, terrible things that go on in this township, you know, just people not being nice to each other. But it was really interesting when you've seen things change that way, you don't take "this is right and this is wrong" quite as seriously except when it comes to being unkind —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: — that is unchanging. Being unkind is not acceptable at all, ever. But labels? They'll come and they'll go. And what's acceptable politically, it will change. I mean, look at Weiner.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Just —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: — give me break. And what's so annoying about the whole thing is the press —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes, yes.

MR. BEAN: — who I totally hate. I really find them to be pretty repulsive.

MS. RIEDEL: That's really changed.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: All right. Well, before we digress — [laughs] —

MR. BEAN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: — shall we stop here?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I think. I've run out of gas.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay. We'll pick it up tomorrow.

MR. BEAN: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel, interviewing Bennett Bean at his house in Frelinghuysen Township in New Jersey —

MR. BEAN: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: — on June 17, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, card number three.

Let's start this morning with some of these questions that we should address, the first being, what do you consider the most powerful influences in your career?

MR. BEAN: It's varied because it starts out one thing. And we talked a little bit about involvement with Buddhism and general Buddhist iconography.

Pretty clearly, Japanese art has been there, especially because in California, in graduate school, we all thought we were Japanese. And, for me, it was totally appropriate, because they have the tendency to embellish and decorate; they cover surfaces with decoration, which is my inclination. If I have an object, I will do something to it and then do something to it and then do something to it until it reaches a kind of a level of richness, which, in a way, corresponds to a Tibetan shrine, you know. So it simply gets to that point. So Japanese art, textiles — their general aesthetic has been major.

MS. RIEDEL: I was thinking, actually, last night about — you mentioned that you got into Buddhism in the early '70s, '73, and I was just thinking — and then when you talked about how art history, ceramic art history in particular, has influenced the work or the way you think about the work. And the combination of those two things really does seem to have come at a fortuitous time in the work. In the early '70s, the work was really beginning to take off. And it seemed to really begin to develop a sense of interior and exterior vessel, form, interior and external skin surface. And was it — do you think there was a very direct back and forth between the work in the Buddhist studies?

MR. BEAN: Oh, I don't think it was a direct back and forth, but it is in there, you know. It simply is an underlying element. It's a kind of sensibility.

And the interesting thing about that sensibility is — part of the Buddhist thing is — don't take yourself entirely seriously, you know, because you're, you know, just in a kind of an illusion anyway. So let's not get deeply involved with defending that illusion if you can help it, which makes things pretty relaxed and sliding back and forth between categories.

I really think of it as, if you don't make walls between this and that in your mind, then it's, like, walking — you know, they're like fences. And you have — every time you come to the border of one of those things, you go through fence reaction, "Oh my God, it's the other side, it's a barrier, do I climb across or do I tear the fence down? Do I do anything?" If you don't construct those fences in the first places, then it's meadow that you can

simply wander around in and move from painting to cooking to the house to any of the other things that I do in my life with about the same sensibility.

And so it's in that way that I think my work has been most influenced by practice and by the general philosophy of Buddhism. I mean, it's sort of — when I — when I found out, it answered the questions. Whatever questions there happened to be, it took pretty much care of.

So that's — I think that's the relationship between the two — really, between the work and the life.

MS. RIEDEL: And how have the influences changed over time? What were some earlier ones and what are more contemporary ones?

MR. BEAN: Well, in art school, it was, like, oh, let's find out about art. So you fall in love once a week. "Oh, look at this new painter." "Oh, my goodness, I am totally — this is" — you know, "Cézanne is perfect." "Oh, my goodness, Gauguin is the one, you know, so I'll be Gauguin for a week." And you're just churning through them trying to absorb whatever that was going on.

And at some stage you get to the point where you pretty much gone through everybody. And it's a matter of, then, the relationships that you have with whatever is influencing you begin to take longer. So, you know, in graduate school, maybe it takes three months to choose through something. And sometime in graduate school, I got to the point where — well, actually, no, it was — it was much later because I — in fact, it took me almost into my — when I was in my early '30s for me to get to the point where I say, "Okay, there's nobody left."

MS. RIEDEL: Had you been through Shoji Hamada and *wabi-sabi* and all of that?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. All of that. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So that whole sense of imperfection had come early on to you? Yeah?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it was — but it was — it was — as I say, we thought we were Japanese. And those were the Japanese that we thought we were. And so —

But at some stage, I really got to the point where I said, "You know, enough of this Japanese stuff; I'm not Japanese," you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Same way you were a Native American, right?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: As a — [inaudible] — yes.

MR. BEAN: I mean — okay, so it's time to do an American — to do American pottery. And I was — the forms were kind of American Indian, and that's when I began to use the tapes because, before that, it was Japanese brush. And I really thought of it as the tyranny of the Japanese brush; you can't make a mark with that brush without having it read some kind of Asian. And I did not want to make Asian work. I was really interested in making something that was homegrown. And those tapes had no corollary anyplace that I knew of. And so to discover those was to figure out, "ah, now I'm making work that is actually American and my own."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Yeah.

MR. BEAN: And that was the moment at which I really began to like my work. And when I really began to like it, it sold. And luckily, that was about the moment when I got fired. I mean, it's just been a series of wonderful kinds of events that — where the timing was really pretty good.

But the thing about ceramics and — the annoying thing about ceramics is that it is so technically burdened. It takes forever to figure out the technique. And most people never get past the technique. They become, you know "queen of crystal and glazes" or "queen of kilns" or, you know — I don't know, "king of earthenware" — whatever. They find a technical niche and build a nest there.

And I have never actually — I find the technique annoying. It took me forever to get it. And it never stays gotten. I mean, if you think of yourself as a problem-solver, you will never have a crisis in ceramics because there will always be problems.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's right.

MR. BEAN: The materials change. I mean, there's always something. I'm going through a thing now where I do not know why the firings are coming out as badly as they're coming out. And you change this variable and you

change that variable. And sooner or later, I'll figure it out and get it and then they'll be good again. But, boy, I have done some ugly pots in the last six months.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you say "badly," what exactly does that mean?

MR. BEAN: Well, you have expectations. And in the firing, things happen. Sometimes they're good things and sometimes they're bad things. Well, one of the things that's nice is the contrast between the black of the carbon that builds up on the pots and the white of the body.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well, there is no white at the body. It is now black and gray and not good.

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

MR. BEAN: So I'm — and, you know — and so you got out there and look at it and try this and then you try that and you try this and you try that. And it's — this is being — it's taking a long time.

Like, when we were gilding, there were things in the gold. And we could not understand why these pots of dust and garbage was in there. We built a room that was clean. We had people wear Kevlar suits to go in the gilding room. There was still junk. We went through the entire process. And then somebody new came in and took over the gilding, and it went away. And we suddenly realized that the woman before, although you said "wash the brush," was a hippie girl. And her idea of cleanliness in terms of brushes was not enough. And so the size was — [inaudible] — next to the ferrell [ph]. It would seem clean, but when you dipped in the size again for the next pot, out would come these chunks of size and garbage. And so it's things like that where you never know exactly where the technical problem is.

And I am — I'm not interested in learning another technique. I mean, with these iron pieces, I don't want to know how to make them. I mean, I am happy to have somebody who has spent 30 years getting really good at welding dothem, you know. So — off they go.

But that's always the money dance, you know. In the beginning, you can't afford anything so you do it yourself. At some stage, you — you know, I bought my wife a silver ingot, and — when silver was $4. And it's 100 ounces. And so I said, "Hey, she's been saying, sell this, sell this." Well, now, silver is up to, like, I don't know, $36 or something like that. Maybe it's more, but plenty. So it's time to sell the silver ingot and the silver ingot should now finance these pieces, although she claims it's her money because I gave it to her, so it's going to be an — [they laugh] — an interesting dance how that unfolds.

So the technical thing is always there. And as — you know, the employees that I've got in the barn do all the things that don't require a decision. So when we make those stencils on the machine, I choose the image, we put it in there, and then Barbara pulls all the pieces out so that it's just the part that you want on the pot. So it's called picking and it's boring and she's very good at it and very fast and she does it wonderfully, and so I don't have to even think about that.

MS. RIEDEL: So you choose the pattern for the stencil, but she actually applies the patterns.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. It — you know, it's, go out and take the photograph; put the photograph in Photoshop; cut out the image; transfer the image to Cut Pro, which is the program that the stencil cutter has; then send it to the stencil cutter and that cuts it out. And so in the morning, you can go from a morning glory vine that's in bloom to that being on the side of a pot, which is — it was really great — I mean, really fun.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, we're — since we're here, let's talk about — how technology has changed the work because it doesn't seem like it has in many ways, but this new arrival of the stencil — first, the graphics tape, if we can call that a technological change, but now, really, the stencil cutter, and — when did this — yeah.

MR. BEAN: Well, two things happened. Well, the graphics tape was, like — actually, you can't buy the graphics tape anymore except online because now, everybody builds their objects not on a drafting table, but in a computer. And so it's almost outdated.

Then the next thing that came along was the computer-driven kiln, which means you didn't have to be up all night turning it up or doing something with it.

MS. RIEDEL: That's used for the bisque firing.

MR. BEAN: Bisque, yeah. Or for the porcelains or, you know, whatever.

So there was that.

Now, the stencil machine, which I actually bought to use for sandblasting — but you have this toy and you begin to look at it. It's, like, when we learned to gild, I gilded everything. You know, picture frames, ledges, clay arts —

MS. RIEDEL: A computer or didn't you actually — yes.

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah. Yeah. Well, the first computer I had, we thought it was ugly, and so I gilded the monitor.

MS. RIEDEL: I remember, yes.

MR. BEAN: And so you kind of — I fall in love with and explore them and then fall in love with something else. And so it's this wandering from thing to thing, which never gets boring.

I mean, I do love the studio. I love being in there. I mean, I talked to Susan [Cummins] and she said, "It's amazing you're still doing that after 40 years and still liking it and still having it be rewarding." And so that — for me, the studio is like — it's a wonderful place to be.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the studio too because we want to cover working environment. And would you describe it in your words? I'd like to hear your description of your studio.

MR. BEAN: This is a dairy barn built in the '30s after the original ancient barn was burned down. So it's a Depression barn designed for cows.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Downstairs, the ceilings are 8 feet and less. When we moved in, it had straw and manure still on the floor. The stanchions were there, their manure trench was there, the whole thing was there. It had no insulation. And so, over time, we have turned it into a functional workspace.

Upstairs, which is the reason we bought this entire property, the ceilings are 30 feet. That's where they used to keep the hay. And so I was making sculpture then and wanted those ceilings. The house came along.

MS. RIEDEL: The downstairs space, though — it's, what, 30 feet long?

MR. BEAN: It's 32 feet wide and 94 feet long.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And you have set up in there all sorts of different little work areas.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe this?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, well, there's the area where I throw; next to that is there area where I glaze. Moving next to that is the area where Barbara gilds. And then, next to that is kind of an indeterminate storage space where things are coming and going. Then, at the very end, there's a room with all our saws, woodworking machines, lapidary tools — that's all in there.

The kiln room is across from that. Then there's the tiny gilding room, then the place where the gold leaf is put on, then where I sit and work, and then —

MS. RIEDEL: Which is a big, easy chair that you — [inaudible] — in.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's a — it's a recliner. And I've gone through a number of them.

But it's perfect because I — a lot of these things, when you start taping — less so now with this stencil cutter — but some of those things, you'd make a decision and then you'd cut squares for an hour. And so you want it to be reasonably comfortable, reasonably relaxed and hope that NPR came up with something that was entertaining. So —

MS. RIEDEL: And you would spend hours. You said you would work all day. You'd have a break for dinner and go back and work until the evening, seven days a week.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, pretty much, I worked. I just — like, that's what I did. My father had done the same thing, you know. And so you're out there at 8:00. And then you work till lunch, then it's a half-hour for lunch, and then you work until 5:30, come in, have dinner, go back out at 6:30 or 7:00, work until 11:00. And I did that for, I don't know, 25 years and without actually paying much attention to it. The only time I was worried about it is when I got fired; I wondered, at 37, whether I'd be able to work that hard. I look back on that and go, "You idiot, you were totally in the prime of everything."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: You know, at 60, it becomes more of an issue. And around 60, I stopped going back out at night, you know. It just, like — there isn't the energy there. And so —

But for years, that was the time I could get everything done because there were no employees. And the employees have, depending on what we're doing in the studio, run from one in the beginning up to nine when we were doing the architecture terracotta installations as well as the pots because the pots have always been the core activity. And there — you know, there was terracotta, there were paintings. There are these —

You know, and then there is building, you know. Every time there is a building project, you can figure it's going to take two or three hours out of your day because you have to go and make sure they're doing everything exactly the way you want it done and oversee them and think about the decisions and do the drawings for them or whatever because all of the stuff in here is my decision.

Cathy does not care; you know, as long as the place is clean, so there's enough money, we have somebody come in and clean, fine, she's happy — and do the dishes. She is not big on dishes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And I am totally not big on dishes. So it's wait for Diane [ph] to come and hope the dishes haven't reached the top of the sink.

The other [thing] that's really fascinating is, our marriage has been a working marriage; we work together, you know. I make enough money for her to do what she wants, and she takes care of the money. When we first got married, she said, "You know, in Chinese families, the women take care of the money and it allows the men to go think important thoughts."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so I was at a — I was at a dinner and I said, "oh, that's good, that sounds fine, that sounds perfect, you take care of the money." And so — look, she knew, if I had it, I'd spend it. And I was at a dinner party not long ago and I said that and the woman across me looked up and said, "Had any important thoughts lately?" — [they laugh] — which I found perfect.

But, you know, she pays the taxes, she does the bills, she knows where all my pots are.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BEAN: Oh, she does the entire computer thing because for a long time, I thought computers were, like, a pet, you know, that she had — you pat it. But it took me a long time to get to the computer. And now, we have, you know, a whole archive of everything that gets made in the studio all on the digital something in the computer.

But she still is the final arbiter of, this is here and this is here and — every year, we'll send out to the galleries this thing that says, "Here's what we think you have." And the gallery will go, "Oh, yeah, oh, except for we sold one just yesterday and here is the money" — just to keep everybody up to schedule, kind of, but so — because if it gets three or four years back, it gets almost impossible to undo.

So she has done that. And the corollary to that is, she really doesn't care what's in the house. She doesn't — she — so the house is my house in terms of the decisions about what goes in here.

So that relationship has worked for — gosh, since 1966. We've been married a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: That's — yeah, that's extraordinary.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, it's one of those things, it's wonderful here, it's not so wonderful there, but it's still a perfect deal. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. So we — this — we began this conversation — [inaudible] — but —

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, bring it back.

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect. Absolutely. It was great because we covered some of the things we need to cover about influences.

MR. BEAN: Gotcha.

MS. RIEDEL: And you just started to talk about them. Anything else that we should discuss — mention?

MR. BEAN: Well, interesting — a lot of the influences are how you build a life, you know, because there's the work, but the work exists in a life. And for me, it's pretty much seamless. So I would look at the people who were my teachers and say, "how is their life working out?"

And it's one of — you know, I talked yesterday about all the people who taught at the University of Iowa, feeling like teaching was — they taught because they had failed as artists. But when you look at somebody like Soldner, who was — who used his life as a demonstration — he said, "Here's how you do a life." And he made it entirely available to us. It was a — really, a great act of generosity. So that was his teaching mechanism.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did his life look to you? What did it look like?

MR. BEAN: It looked so California.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What did that involve?

MR. BEAN: All right, so it involved — if you went there and were at all technically inclined, you could get a scholarship which consisted of working in the mornings for him in his wheel-making, clay mixer-making business. So — and everybody, you know, kind of — that was the thing that those guys did. I had no inclinations mechanically, so I wasn't there.

MS. RIEDEL: Gotcha.

MR. BEAN: It consisted of, we went drinking regularly after the day or after class and discussed whatever was going on. He —

MS. RIEDEL: What was —

MR. BEAN: — had a schedule that was quite amazing because it would start Tuesday and he would make some pots on Tuesday and they would dry. Thursday, he taught us — Thursday night was the thing. And I think he taught some beginnings classes for Scripps, too, but I don't know — I don't really remember much about that. Then Friday, he would leave for a workshop. He'd be gone three days. He'd come back and recover on Monday and start again.

And I can remember, he said, "I finally figured out to take care — how to take care of all my correspondents" because people — you know, you go to a workshop and they forget what's that glaze. So we were in his house and he said, "Look at this system." And he'd take a letter and he would write the answers to the questions in marker on their letter, put it right back in an envelope. And he said, "That way, I can keep up," because this was pre-email; this was when people still wrote.

MS. RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MR. BEAN: And so it's that kind of thing that you looked at.

And then the photography thing: He had been a photographer during the war. And so, you know, it's, like, okay, you need to photograph your work, you need to learn how to do it and then you need to put it out there. So it was all of the — and building kilns — it was all of the pieces that you needed to build a life. And he simply said, "Here's how I do mine."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And that was great.

The other — the other person I would say that had been a big influence was Fred Bauer and mostly because he was just about two years ahead of everybody else — you know, in the early '60s. His work was great. His life was great. He had the teaching thing and the ceramics thing and the house building thing all together.

And I remember he — you know, we were talking about why he was where he was. And he said this thing to me that I thought was really interesting; he said, "I simply have gone — I've taken what I do farther than anybody else." And it was, like, "huh, well, that's what you do. You take whatever it is and you just push it."

And if you — I was reading this, you know, book you gave me, and it was Al Held, you know, [Richard] Serra, talking about simply taking what he did and going farther, and you end up in a place that is not like anybody else's. And we talked before about the fact that I find this moment in our history interesting because people are not doing that. They want to end up someplace much safer because the world is a little scary at the moment and things are very unsure, you now, how things will come out.

So Fred —

MS. RIEDEL: Soldner.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Those were the people —

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting that you say that because many, I think, younger artists would say there's a disconnect between art school and how one actually makes a living or how one has a life. And you're describing a completely different experience.

MR. BEAN: Well, I think mine was a different experience. But then, you got to remember that there were 13 years of teaching in there that took care of me from the time I got out of school knowing practically nothing until I found a way to make a living.

MS. RIEDEL: And one other quick question, going back to Soldner and grad days: Who was out there? Who was in the group? It was you and Paul and John Mason?

MR. BEAN: John Mason was teaching, yeah, and Phil Cornelius and Joe Soldate and Dennis Parks and Janet Braley and —

MS. RIEDEL: So, one — would she go out to the bar too?

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah. Oh, bouhaa [ph]. My favorite story about her is, she — they went down to Long Beach State. And there was a — some kind of a clay conference. And the guy got up there with 25 pounds of clay. And they were dressed for some party some place. And he proceeded to take his 25 pounds of clay and throw a lamp base, and he said, "Of course, women can't do that." And Janet, who had on those gloves that come up to your elbows because she was going someplace fancy, said, "just a minute," and pulled those gloves off and went down there and took a 25-pound block of clay and threw a bigger one that he did.

So she was a competitor and good. Yeah, so —

MS. RIEDEL: And was it a competitive spirit? Was it a collaborative spirit? Both?

MR. BEAN: Not, it was we — it was us, the Soldner kids, you know. It was, like, we are the best.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: And so it wasn't competing against each other I don't think much at all. At least I didn't have any sense of competition. Maybe other people did; I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there an awareness of Alfred and what was going on there too? Or was it fairly focused —

MR. BEAN: Alfred was looked on as pretty much a thing that had happened. It was historical. It was tight-assed. This was California; this was the way the world was going to be. And we were inventing it, minute by minute. I mean, my graduate show was kind of — it was all utilitarian, all useful stuff. Well, there were a few models; there were a few things that you really couldn't use well. But it was the kind of things you would need to live a life in a cabin by yourself. You know, grain jars —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: — and bowls for salad and soup. It was that kind of stuff.

And the statement that I had for that graduate show was, if you're going to live a life that's based on contact with the world and awareness, this is the kind of life that — this is the basis, this is the foundation for that life. And, of course, then you go get a teaching job, and that really falls knocks everything into a cocked hat because you don't end up out there, you know.

Some people did. And some people survived it. Dennis survived by going someplace that it didn't cost anything to live and having a wife who worked, you know. I mean, people ask me, "What is the absolutely most important element if you want to have a career in crafts?" And it's, "marry well."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Either marry somebody who has enough money to take care of you or marry somebody who doesn't care whether she has any money or not.

But I think, you know, that's — and you need to be lucky for that because it's such a random thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Back to influences?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. The art world. The art world, because when I came to — there was no real discussion of the art world in graduate school. It was all the craft world. I mean, there were some painters, but it wasn't really art world; it was, like, academic — "oh, he teaches painting."

Got to New York and really immersed myself in what was going on — studied what was going on in terms of sculpture because the idea that there's this subgenre of ceramic sculpture is, to me, a little horrifying. It simply means that this stuff could live as sculpture. So it has to have a material niche that makes it safe and survivable. I mean, there's a little less of that now and there's some crossover, but for years, ceramic sculpture was this safe thing that had no relationship to what was going on in art. The art — the sculptural issues in art in the'80s, '90s, were — had nothing to do with the craft world, nothing. And so that kind of, I think, understanding of what's going on out there in that art world — I mean, there's less of it now because the art world is much more diffuse. I mean, there isn't a style, there isn't a mainstream, there isn't — it's just like this whole river delta with a thousand tributaries.

But that has fed back to me a lot. And so I can remember, you know, painting for a while and then going back to pots and thinking of — you know, thinking about sculpture and realizing that I don't know much ceramic sculpture that deals with — in fact, I don't — I can't think of anybody that really deals with the formalist issues that were going on in the art world in the '80s and '90s: you know, Caroline's [ph] idea of sculpture exists in relationship to the plane of the earth. And you know, a traditional sculpture is anything vertical that you can walk around, no matter what shape it is. But that — you know, that's what a figure is. A figure is vertical, and you walk around it. Well, all that vertical sculpture is then traditional, based on that earlier stuff.

So things like that have kind of — I haven't thought of going anywhere near clay sculpture, because I just don't think, by and large, it works. That's why I chose the vessel, because that is very much out of the craft tradition.

MS. RIEDEL: At some point, though, the vessel really began to deconstruct in your work.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it did.

MS. RIEDEL: And to the point that the pieces became — still they were vessels, but they were very flat in relation to each other. I think more recently, there was almost a ribbon-like line of them.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But is that — was that inspired specifically by your examination of sculpture or thoughts about sculpture, or was that just in your own vocabulary — deconstructing it?

MR. BEAN: No, that was — that was, you know — it was like, you know how I got to the two pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And as soon as you're at two pieces, you can go to three or four or five.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It was just a continuation of — it seems to be that most artists, if they want to stay with something, make it slowly more complex to keep it interesting. And so these pieces became more complex, but they were still always skin outside, space inside. It just — the space inside got much more complicated, and the speed at which you went in and out of the pots became much more complicated.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But they still had — I mean, basically, ceramics is two-dimensional because — it's wheel-thrown ceramics — because the wheel creates the third dimension, and what you get is outline. So it's always about the edge.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: And — because the fatness of it is an artifact of having it thrown on the wheel. So you really don't think about fatness; you think about edge. And those pieces of mine are still two-dimensionally — they have two sides, and they have an edge. And that profile to me is really important.

MS. RIEDEL: Because some of the pieces, though, the interior — I mean, you made those fabulous round balls that had — that were all about interior and space.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That brilliant gold — and that became a huge presence. But then, in contrast, there were pieces that were much more flattened out.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well, the flattened-out pieces — really, they started from — I was making those bowls and I was cutting pieces out of them. And I looked at the pieces that I was cutting and I thought: Those are beautiful; how can I make them do something? So you put two of them together and stand them up, but then, they don't fit the subject, because there's not much space. But if you take two of those things and sandwich them together, then you have space —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — created by the two of them. And then you can just — you do that, and then you can make a line of them. You know, it's just — it's one step, one step, one step, one half-step. And it's interesting, because a lot of these things, you know you got there and you don't know quite how you did it, but you can invent a story.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Because that's what the mind does. The mind figures out reasons and patterns. And so there are — there are moments that I know I went from here to there; I have no idea why. I just don't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: It is interesting, because if you look at your work over decades, you can see there are places where it is much more expansive on the interior. And then I think of the encaustic paintings —

MR. BEAN: Yeah —

MS. RIEDEL: Where they were completely flat.

MR. BEAN: No, not completely flat.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you're right. You're right, because they're not. They are —

MR. BEAN: You know, they have feet because —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah — and — [inaudible] — those ledges, yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, exactly. They are objects —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — objects. They are objects, right.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, and — because I did — the year we bought this place, the studio wasn't done. It was winter; there was no heat in it. In fact, we — until November, we couldn't afford the heat in the house because we just didn't have any money. But the San Francisco Museum had a show and they packed up one of my big Plexiglas pieces, a sculpture, and shipped it out there and had the show, and then they packed it up and shipped it back, but they packed it upside down. And it arrived in shards — just completely broken. And it had a valuation of $1,700, and that's exactly how much the heating system cost. So if they hadn't broken that thing, we would have frozen that winter. I don't know what we would have done, because there was no heat. And $1,700 at that — that time, I was probably making $8,000 a year, teaching college full-time. So it was perfect.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: All right, where was I?

MS. RIEDEL: Well — [laughs] — we could go back to influences. We were talking about going from flat to expansive —

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: I have no idea where I was going with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Well, so maybe we're finished with that, then.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And the final thing I can think about with that is — are the pieces that we saw in your studio

yesterday that were actually the 3D wall pieces, but they were flat. They were 3D pieces —

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — pots — they were flattened out, deconstructed —

MR. BEAN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and assembled into a wall collage.

MR. BEAN: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: I mean, there's — you know, there's always like — okay, like right now, see that big base on that thing?

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: Well, I tried to make some bases like that and then decorate them. And I'm still not quite done with it. It's just a matter of — I think it lost out to the iron pieces. But the iron pieces, the great thing about them is — is the model is not going to take forever. And so, so much of my life has been the mechanics of making things. And with the iron pieces, there shouldn't be any mechanics. You know, you make the rough model —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and then Barbara comes in and refines the model. Then it goes to the welder, and he makes a thing of the model. And then it comes back to us, and I find somebody to prep the inside for the gold leaf, and we're good to go.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. The interesting thing about those pieces — those are brand new, so maybe we'll touch on these now briefly, too. These are evolving this year, 2011? Did they start 2010?

MR. BEAN: They started — they started a month ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And that's when I — some magazine I was reading said, "This is the world's perfect pencil, and they've decided to make it again." And so I bought the box of pencils, and then I did the drawings, and then the drawings ended up with shapes that would work really well for the bases for the shapes of my iron pieces. And so —

MS. RIEDEL: The bases for your — but you hadn't — had you conceived of the iron pieces yet?

MR. BEAN: No, it happened right at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, I conceived of that, yeah. I knew kind of — I was going there. But I had — I didn't know how they were going to be, because they can be a lot of ways. You know, I've got like this drawing which goes — this is like a completely different version of the iron pieces, which is either going to be big enough to walk into —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — or little enough to be like that on a table, but solid. So it's so heavy, as opposed to these guys, which are totally — like my pots, you know. That's —

MS. RIEDEL: But the edges feel much harder — [inaudible] —

MR. BEAN: Oh, they are harder. Yeah, they're pointy.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: I mean, these things — it's interesting, because I was actually talking to Susan about doing these, and she was saying, "Oh, it'll be so great to have all those curves."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And I went, "I don't think they're going to start there, anyway. Maybe we'll get there at some stage. But I want the real distinction between that sort of seductive, sensual clay, and iron."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. BEAN: You know, because I think they're different, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Right.

MR. BEAN: And if I wanted that, I'd maybe — you know, if I wanted that softness, maybe I'd make them in clay —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — and then cast them in bronze, or something, you know. And who knows where this exactly goes? But right now, I like that crispness.

MS. RIEDEL: And is that what is inspiring the work in iron, is wanting that — those crisp edges that don't come as easily in clay?

MR. BEAN: No —

MS. RIEDEL: Or what is inspiring the iron, then?

MR. BEAN: Scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And outdoors.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And it would be nice to have things that didn't break when you shipped them.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: I mean, there are — it's the material. It's really like, okay, I know this clay stuff. And to keep the clay fresh, I keep going on vacations, you know. And this is a vacation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

MR. BEAN: This is like, okay, let's make these things and see how they work. And of course, I'm such an optimist that I'm convinced that these things are going to be spectacular and the world will love them, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And I've done that a lot, and every so often the world does love them. I mean, it loved the pairs. You know, it loved my first pots. It loved the columns. It hasn't really loved the rugs so much, you know. That's like a tougher sell. But that's — it's sort of a — I came to that party late. I mean, and it's very much about timing. And when I made the columns, I remember I was talking to Ivy Ross, and I said, "You know, I've had these columns in my head for six years. I made the first one six years ago." And she said, "You know, it's not always necessary to be first, because you can wait a long time for people to catch up." And my timing was so on there, you know, people were ready by — at the time I got there. Now, are people going to be ready? Are these — you know, and how do these read? They're not really contemporary sculpture, per se.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: They're more like vessels, again. These are iron vessels.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Yes.

MR. BEAN: And they behave differently and they function differently. I don't think of these essentially as tabletop; they weigh too much. So it's off the table, into the world. And then, you know, do we — you know, what do we do with them? How do we put them in the world? You know, are they architectural, going with buildings? Are they — what are they?

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: And so those are all the things — and that's what's so much fun, because you don't — I — at one

stage, I was teaching, at my wife's conference, a group of the children there how to make clay masks. And one of the kids was a[n] unbelievably genius violin prodigy, who could, you know, do math and everything perfect. And he was so smart. And I remember giving him the clay and having him start, and having him go into a rage and begin pounding the clay, because he knew what he wanted but he couldn't make it happen. And I'm much more patient than that, you know. I'm willing to work on it until it happens the way it makes sense to me.

And so that's kind of — if I were really smart, I wouldn't have to make these things, because I could figure them out in my brain. But I can't figure them out until I see them.

MS. RIEDEL: I see. Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: And I love that process of, you know, you get this idea — because, really, art is ideas made real in the world, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Right.

MR. BEAN: You have this idea, and your mind is in the idea business, and then it's what you put out there. And so — and that's — that process of putting it out there is really — it's really fun. It really is fun, I mean, because you don't know how it's going to come out. And you're on the line — which I think is great. I mean, one of the great things about doing fairs was that people would walk in and say terrible things about your work, okay, but you were there, and you knew everybody else, how they were doing, as opposed to safety — you know, going into the back room and doing something and showing it to your two, three friends, which I don't think is entirely healthy, you know. I think, make the stuff and put it in the world, and see what happens.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Do you always begin with drawings, Bennett? Is drawing a big part of the process?

MR. BEAN: Drawings are a way to keep the ideas in my mind. I don't make drawings any more. These are — these are sketches.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: They are not a drawing-drawing. A drawing is a thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: These are just, oh, here's the idea.

MS. RIEDEL: So sketching is a big part of the process. Is that where it starts?

MR. BEAN: Well, sketching is a — it's not a big part of the process so much as a way to remember what I'm thinking. Because you have ideas, and they go away.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You know, because you're just in — you know, as I said before, you're making them all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So — and then you can look at this thing and go: okay, all of the — this is an interesting progression. So you have this thing, which is one piece, this is split, and this is all about the split.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so that little thing there, I can check back on that. And if I check back on it and I still like it, great. But, yeah, I do draw, but it's really as a reminder. And I don't solve problems in — by drawing. I solve problems — that's where we are now, with the models, because I had Barbara make some, and they weren't right, you know. I mean, fine, I figured they would come out the way I wanted them to, but they didn't. And so, the next two days, I'm making models. And I won't worry about them being completely perfect, because she can come back and remake them perfectly on Monday.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Right.

MR. BEAN: And so then by Wednesday, they're — the drawings are back at the welder — I mean the models are back at the welder. Then I get them in three weeks.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, when you're talking about making models, you're actually building them with tape and with cardboard and — [inaudible]?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, mat board and tape. And I bought this machine that's like a paper cutter, but a fancy one, and it'll bite a piece of mat board right through — bump. And so it's pretty quick and pretty direct. And you — it gives — you can play with it. The thing that I'm on the edge of is, okay, do I put a curve in here? At what time do I put a curve in here? How do I get a curve that'll be the one I want?

We tried — we built the model, and I thought, oh, in this techie age, I can have it photographed, put it in the computer, there will be a machine that scans it, creates a CAD drawing which can then be sent to the welder, and everything can be welded to a thousandth of an inch.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: We tried Google SketchUp. It's not quite that easy. I mean, it's doable, and if the — the way we're doing it now, because the welder it's going to is really good; I mean, he is extremely good. And if he — if we make three, four, five, six of these, and somebody buys them, then we can go, all right, do we want to — because I — you know, on mine, we could send them to India and have them scanned and done, and get back the CAD drawing, and so do I want to do that?

I don't know yet. I mean, this is like how — I described the process that I was going through to a friend of mine, and he said, "Well, I couldn't do it that way. I need to touch it. I need to —" he said, "I went down to my welder, and the thing was a little off, so we put a pipe on it and gave it a tweak." And he loved that tweak, you know, he felt he was totally engaged with that process. I'm kind of not sure I need that. I mean, he's — he loves the contact —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: — with that stuff. And I kind of — I've got the clay. If I want contact, I like clay. It is smooth and seductive, and I can control it and it does beautifully. The iron — not so much.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. So is it a back-and-forth, then between the model you'll build and variations you can make in a CAD drawing?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, the thing about a CAD drawing is you go — "eh-eh-eh."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And it moves.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so we just — Barbara sat down and did about eight tutorials, but it was like, "We need somebody who knows how to do this."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: To either do it or come in and tell us how to do it, because there are only three or four things we need to do, but the program doesn't want to do what we want. It has — I'm sure we could get it to do it if we knew more.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But when you drag those things, it goes, "Oh, you have put a bend in me, so I'm going to make this two planes instead of one." And so you go, "Oh, no, I don't like that." So that dance between technology — I mean, I'm actually fascinated by what's possible technically now. I mean, these MakerBot places are great. So I don't know where this totally goes, how it evolves, but I know it's fun, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: It really is like: Oh, boy — hmmm. Even when it totally wasn't working in Goggle SketchUp, it was being like, "Hmmm, this — I'm sure this thing can do things that will be better than our modeling system. But let's make some with the modeling system and — because otherwise, Barbara's going to go crazy, or we're going to have to hire somebody, and who knows what that'll be like."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: So it — we'll see. It's step-by-step.

MS. RIEDEL: And what's going on with the pots right now? Where are they?

MR. BEAN: The pots that I'm working on are commission. But the commission is being annoying because they're the ones that keep coming out ugly — black. And so I'm probably going to have to redo the pots again for the commission to get them a good one. So that's kind of where they are. I'm doing a lot of little bowls, because they're like — they are relaxing. They're just — there's no agenda. You know, it's a little tiny thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: You can do it quickly, and so they're the bowls — I will be doing monsters, probably two of those, this summer, because the gallery in Palm Desert, Imago, wants more, and so —

MS. RIEDEL: And is the process the same for the small ones as for the large ones?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, really, it's the same thing.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's thrown and altered?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You put on some Terra Sig and burnish it?

MR. BEAN: Burnished, and then put on the Terra Sig and polish the Terra Sig.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And then —?

MR. BEAN: And then fire it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: It comes out looking like a white ostrich egg. Then the tape applique. The area where you do not want the glaze to stick is waxed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And then it's glazed, the tape resists —

MS. RIEDEL: What is it glazed with?

MR. BEAN: I made this glaze that is not really a glaze.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: It — it's hard enough to stay on the pot, and not so sticky that things stick to it, because if you have a gooey glaze, all the wood sticks to it and becomes crust.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BEAN: And so you don't want that. So it just — it's some kind of semi-something slip.

MS. RIEDEL: And is it a colored slip?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You Mason stain and you get some frit and you get some Borax, and you put it in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. So some amount of color is on the pot before you start painting.

MR. BEAN: Oh, a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't realize that.

MR. BEAN: All the background.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay — oh, I didn't realize that.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So all the background is resisting —

MR. BEAN: All the background above the line.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Below the line, it's just slip and fire.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Okay.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah — no, and it's really interesting, because in this process you make rules. Well, there — the light blue is taped stuff, but the dark blue in the — on the pot is all background.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, and that's all Mason stain?

MR. BEAN: Yeah, Mason stain and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so there's a real back-and-forth between the paint and the actual stain.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, and they look different.

MS. RIEDEL: And the slips.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, they look different, so you've got those two different things going on there. But the reason that I really started painting originally was I'd get things back from the kiln that are not what I want, and I wanted control.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Yes.

MR. BEAN: I mean, it's just like some potters are willing to go, "Oh, put it in there and we'll see what happens."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: No. No, when it comes out, I want it to be the way I want it to be, and I want it to stay that way. And that's not the way pit-firing works. So that's — that was how that thing happened. And it's perfect.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: It works — it's — you know, you don't have much control in this life.

MS. RIEDEL: So you apply the Mason stains, those slips — glazes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then they're pit-fired.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you paint —

MR. BEAN: And the tape burns off.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: The Mason stain glazy stuff melts enough to stay there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Uh-huh.

MR. BEAN: You get all the fire paintings. And they come back in; they go to Barbara. Two coats of gesso on the inside, but it's not really gesso, it's just fancy Canadian spackle; and sanded so it's smooth, and then sprayed with SEPP bole — well, no, it's Kölner bole. It's this stuff this German scientist figured out, and it's like Armenian bole that they use on Renaissance frames.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: But it's not. It's — it doesn't have all the terrible problems that bole does because bole — it's got Rabbit skin glue in it, and all kinds of terrible bugs like to live in it.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. BEAN: So if you — if you put it away for a while — comes back moldy. So this is — this is — the German guy has got it totally worked out. So that's polished and then lacquered and then sized and then gilded and then urethaned. And then it comes back to me. And the last thing that happens is the paint, you know. And then it's just painter's problems: How do I get this thing to stop being ugly and start looking good?

MS. RIEDEL: And Bennett, when you first began painting on the work, had anybody else begun painting this way?

MR. BEAN: No, this is — this is actually the thing I did first.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And it was so illegal. I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes, I would think.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it was like: Not dishwasher proof? Oh, my God.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. So it — and it took a little while, but it wasn't really a problem. You know, people kind of got it. It was — it was — you know, it was just good timing. People were ready. And I had just gotten fired, and I put the work out there and — when I got fired, I had this show at the New York Museum in the Mini Gallery. Well, the Mini Gallery is a glass case on the third floor. But I printed up this card that said "New York Museum, Bennett Bean," and way down at the bottom, it said "Mini Gallery," and with a picture of a pot on it, and sent that out to — I don't know, 300 people. And that's all it took. You know, I was on the workshop circuit that week, because there was nothing else like it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — but it was still not far enough from clayness, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — for it to be a challenge to what was going on. And so I was on that workshop thing for 10, 12 years.

MS. RIEDEL: And the palette that it made possible was extraordinary.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Compared to what had been available through glazing.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: It's interesting. I just sent — there's this show in Korea, and I thought, "I have never sent to a show." But I sent them a picture of it. I'll be interested to see what happens because —

MS. RIEDEL: What do you mean, you've never sent to a show?

MR. BEAN: I mean, for years I have — if there's a show that requires an application, I don't send to it. It's just like —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: — if they want to invite me, that's great.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But this one, I thought, "Well, now, that would be interesting. Maybe I get to go to Korea. I haven't been to Korea." So we'll see how that works out.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm also amazed that one of your most recent commissions was three huge pieces for a cruise line, was it?

MR. BEAN: For —?

MS. RIEDEL: For a cruise ship?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: How does that work, ceramics on a cruise ship?

MR. BEAN: They glue it down.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would guess. I can't fathom —

MR. BEAN: That's the first thing I asked them. I said, "Hey, you know, this —" you know, because they sent me this thing, and it had all of these rules for sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And I said, "You know, there are some issues here." And she said, "Oh, no, we'd have to glue." And she gave me the glue number. And so when we made those things, the bottoms of them are painted, and we didn't think the paint would be strong enough. So we calculated where the foot would be, taped it off, so it's clay glued to clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. Yes.

MR. BEAN: There's no paint that's going to pull off.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right. Yes.

MR. BEAN: But it's still a scary prospect.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But they did it. It's their glue. And good luck. [Laughter.] I had actually hoped that they'd break one installing it, so I'd have to go over there and fix it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Where is that?

MR. BEAN: It's — I don't know, Norway or something, where they're building the boat.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes — oh, so they're just building the boat?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. This is — it's an interesting thing they do. They put together a collection, and then print a book, and it's the collection that's on this cruise line.

MS. RIEDEL: What's the name of the cruise line? Do you remember?

MR. BEAN: Carnival. And the boat I think is called *Silhouette*. And they have some people in this one. Damien Hirst has got something there, I think — I don't know, a bunch of people. I could go online and figure it out.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: But art people, and craft people, too. So it's like they have a really eclectic mix —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: — of what goes on in that boat. Then the book comes out and — but there are only two more boats, because the cruise lines are suffering the way the rest of the world is suffering.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And so they're only that far out. And the people that are doing it are going, "Hmmm, that could be a problem."

MS. RIEDEL: When you look back on the many commissions that you've done over time, which ones stand out as especially significant?

MR. BEAN: Andersons.

MS. RIEDEL: The Andersons? Those first two bowls?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they have been really great supporters. And they — so that one. The

Picchis.

MS. RIEDEL: Which ones?

MR. BEAN: The Picchis. They commissioned a bunch of stuff. P-I-C-C-H-I — I think that's it.

MS. RIEDEL: And were these pots? Were they architectural pieces?

MR. BEAN: It was one of the Dolmen pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: And he said, "It's for our anniversary," so I did two interlocking pieces on top of it. I mean, they were great because they would buy a piece and they'd say, "You know, your piece just drove the table out of the room, so I think we need something else to fill it up." And finally, there was nothing in that room but my work and — of different styles of different — you know, a piece of furniture, one of the Dolmens, a big three-part piece — oh, and they had a big painting they commissioned, too, so — and a rug. So whatever I made, they would keep buying and — God bless 'em.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that's a — I'd love to see that room. Do you have a photo of it?

MR. BEAN: No, it's gone.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, it's gone?

MR. BEAN: They moved. You know, and I didn't think about photographing it at the time. Yeah, it was — it was that — it was that crazy room. But it was — everything related and —

MS. RIEDEL: Had they ever been to your home?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. They were friends.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And so, yeah they knew it. And Bern [Picchi], he would like more, but they haven't — they downsized their apartment. And so they can't quite figure out where they'd put it.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. And are they in New York?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I mean, they — he's an oil analyst — at least, he was. I think he's kind of on his way to retire now, because he doesn't have to work. But they live in New York, and they moved there because their children were there. And then I think their children moved to Vermont and so — I — they said, "Well, we might get another apartment." And I said, "That would be a really good idea. Could be very helpful." [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Anything else, besides those two that were catalysts for — and what in particular about the Picchis? Was it the fact that they were —

MR. BEAN: That's the windowpane — you know, the window pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that, right. Right.

MR. BEAN: That was the one — that.

MS. RIEDEL: That came up with the grid.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You did some hearths — some hearths, didn't you, some fireplaces?

MR. BEAN: Oh, well, that — see, they were —

MS. RIEDEL: Did that go anywhere?

MR. BEAN: I've done a bunch of show houses over time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

[Audio break.]

MR. BEAN: Which are — you know, I just — it just takes more stuff. And it's really no different than the house house, you know, except I'm filling up the room. And so we — Dan Mack and I collaborated on a room for — my god, they just closed the magazine — I can't remember its name —

MS. RIEDEL: *Metropolitan Home*

MR. BEAN: Yeah, that's it *Met Home*. And we did a show house for them, and it was actually the first rug I'd made. And it was done completely differently.

MS. RIEDEL: This was the mid-'90s?

MR. BEAN: I would say. Maybe even earlier. But they'd sent me big FedEx boxes full of color samples and rug samples, and you'd go, no. And then they'd send you another one the next day. And it was really — it was amazing what money does. It was just, like, this is not the way I work. And then so I made a little drawing and I put numbers in to control the color and I put it in the fax machine, and six months — six weeks later I walked into that room and there was a rug on the floor. And it was magical. It was really magic. And I thought, well, that's fun. But if you make them yourself, it took longer. You know, if you go through all the process. They were doing cut and glue, so it wasn't really like — these were not high, super-amazing rugs.

But it was interesting to do those spaces, where you really control everything you do. But they never made any money. People would go and go, "Oh, what a great idea," and then they'd go home. But, you know, you're in the world and people see it. So they don't think you're dead.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What do you see as the similarities and differences between your early work and what you're doing now, or do you see any differences?

MR. BEAN: I usually make what I don't have. And so when I have enough of it, then I'll go make something else. So the early pieces, I didn't have dishes to eat out of and jars to put things in, and then I got plenty of those. And then middle-range pieces, I didn't have decorative pieces to go in the house, so I made those. And then — now I want — you know, originally the bronze pieces went outdoors, you know, because I needed garden pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And now I'm doing garden pieces again, but, mmm, as more installations rather than just an isolated piece of sculpture. I really see these things as mounted in some way, maybe sitting on a big slab of stone, something going on out there.

MS. RIEDEL: The iron pieces.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So then in a way it's a return to the Dolmen idea, the change in scale?

MR. BEAN: In terms of being outdoors. But the idea, one was hierarchical, and these are really about vessels. You know, they're back to that thing. So it's as much where they go as anything. And I am not lifting any more stones, although these things are going to weigh a ton. They're just going to weigh a ton. So.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about Nepal a little yesterday. Are there any other places in particular, or travels, that have been influential to your life or work?

MR. BEAN: Actually, the thing — the trip that I took that probably was the most important trip I took was when I was 20. And my father was going to Europe to — he was going to report back on what had happened to the Marshall Plan money that had been given to hospitals all over England and Germany and France and wherever. So he took the family.

MS. RIEDEL: How fascinating.

MR. BEAN: And — actually it was fascinating. He loved it. And he said every culture did it different.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BEAN: He really thought that the French had done it the worst. He said, they're still using leeches. Of course, now leeches are back in style. [Laughs.]

But it was a great trip. And being from the Middle West, I thought that's the way the world was, and you get back from Europe and you realize, no, the world can be any way you want it to be. You don't have to be like whatever you're around. And that was really a revelation. It was like, oh, you can be whatever. You can dress whatever,

you can do whatever, there is no "way." And that was really great.

And then Cathy and I, you know, we traveled in Asia a lot, and then Elizabeth and I have traveled to Nepal a lot. So it's always fun. I mean, it's — like it's not home. And it's interesting, we went to India at Christmas. And, you know, people go, "Oh, my god, India is going to be — it's too much, it's whoa, we couldn't stay, it was too crazy, too many beggars, too many — too real." And Elizabeth and I got back and looked at each other and said, "You know, if you've been to Nepal as much as we have, India's a piece of cake." [They laugh.]

It wasn't that extreme — although we almost got blown up. We went over there, checked into this hotel, and we had a day before our meeting with the rug people, and so —

MS. RIEDEL: Where in India, Bennett?

MR. BEAN: Oh, I can't even remember. It's up in the Rug Belt. Oh, no, this was in Varanasi. Yeah.

And they — you know, we said, "Oh, what's to do here?" And so the tourist guy was saying, well, tomorrow you can go this, this, this, and this, and tonight you could go see the fire festival. And we kind of went, "You know, we're a little tired, let's skip the Fire Festival tonight." Well, the next day Elizabeth came down — I was downstairs and she came down and she said, "They blew up the fire festival last night. There was a terrorist bombing." And it was just random that we weren't there. And it was — so, you know, that kind of stuff, it makes a great story, but — and you do leave home, you know.

And so we still have more stuff to do over there. I mean, India's big, and there will be more rug things we're going to go out to deal with. We thought we were going to be doing a hotel in Dubai, which would have required a trip just to make sure everything worked.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: But I don't know, something happened, we didn't get the job. It's mostly I know what it's like here, and Patagonia sounds like the place I need to go next.

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. BEAN: Oh, it looks good. I mean, it's really — and I haven't been there. You know, we've been to the usual —Machu Picchu And Chile and Mexico and Villa Manta, Spain, and, you know, all over Asia.

MS. RIEDEL: Any place that's been particularly significant?

MR. BEAN: Thailand was nice. It was just nice. It was just a great trip. William was with us. It was the last full trip that he took with us. And that was really — it was just a pleasant trip.

Culturally, I don't think so. I mean, you go, you look, but, you know, unless you live there and become immersed in it in some way — I mean, we've learned a lot about Nepalese culture working with our weavers, and, you know, its function and dysfunction. So — I mean, I don't think that those places are about inspiration. At some stage, the work does not refer out, it refers in and back. You know, like, okay, what — because, you know, what are the ideas that you work with? Well, I work with a vessel. Okay, fine. And so in thinking about those pieces outside, that was — you could take those, flip them open and have a whole other thing, but I want them to be — you know, it's talking about the thing I've talked about for a long time, just with some different words and a little different content.

So, you know, travel is fun and — the other thing is, if I'm here, I should work. That's kind of the deal. If I'm traveling, I can't work. So that's a vacation, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: So then to the next question: Where do you get ideas for your work? It sounds as if the work itself generates the next idea.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I mean the mind makes ideas. It's just endless. And the real problem is what not to make, because all those ideas aren't good. And so if the idea stays around long enough, then you're going to go, oh, well, maybe I should think more about that, maybe I should do that. But there was one stage where I had lots of money and lots of people working, and I would get an idea, and I'd go, "Oh, let's make this," and in three weeks it was made. And some of those things were dumb. You know, they should have had a little more time in the incubator to see whether it would evolve or grow or get good or be worth it or not.

I mean there are people that — and it's sort of interesting. There are people that get an idea and deal with that single idea all their life.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: And it's just not what I do. I have — there are ideas. There's the vessel. There's putting an object in the world. There are these things which are pretty much — there's embellishment — that are pretty much what I do. But how they appear and manifest and what they get stuck onto is continually changing.

MS. RIEDEL: It does seem, though, that you came up with a vocabulary fairly early on and you've continued to explore that.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Oh, I got the subject. I figured that out. I said, here's what pots are, and here's what — this is how they become art if they're going to be art. They have a subject like — you know, as I said before, like painting, and so that stayed the same. But it took until I was — it was actually until — I did a residency in New York and I was making a bunch of stuff, pieces that got cut up and you'd make two of the same shape, you'd put one on a pedestal and you'd slice the other one open so it became a thing on the wall behind it. And I did a bunch of piece and — wall pieces, and this was — I don't know, must have been early '80s.

And — oh, I lost it. [Pause.] I don't know where that was going.

MS. RIEDEL: Evolution of the word vocabulary, early on, vessel interiors?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah yeah, gotcha. So — and one of these pieces that I made, it was — actually it was a — in Japanese ceramics, they feel that the foot is absolutely the most important part because it's not covered up by glaze, so you can see the direct touch of the artist with his trimming tool. Fine. I thought I'd make my version of that, which is a big, flared piece like this, and all the decoration was on the bottom of the pot, so you couldn't see it. You could own it and pick it up and look at it and there it would be. So it was this conversation with the Japanese about the bottom of the pot.

Well, the problem was, it was open, and I looked in and I went, "Oh, my god, this is not space, this is surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm.

MR. BEAN: And so the next pot I made more vertical, and the last pot I made closed in. And I went, "Ah, now it works." And it was the first idea-generated form I'd ever done, because it was in the service of an idea. Because traditionally, you have two forms. If it's open, it's serving; if it's closed, it's storage. And, you know, you play with that endlessly. But this thing was about making it conform to my subject, and it produced that pot that went like that. And that was — it was a revelation, because I knew it wasn't working, but I didn't know why. And by the end of the time, I knew why and how to solve it. And then by then it was really clear, okay, it's about that space inside.

MS. RIEDEL: And when was that?

MR. BEAN: That must have been — it could have been '80. It's about as early as I was making — well, it wasn't early early. I'd been fired, so it was probably '79.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of a few pieces you did in 2004, 2005 that also had very narrow, tiny bases but then they opened up dramatically, almost like kimono shapes, very flat. You know the pieces I meant — I mean?

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, those things. Yeah. I don't know — I don't know how I got to those. It's one of those things that I made a bunch of them and they were sort of interesting to make, but I didn't really — they didn't quite do it, you know? They just — I don't know what it was about them that they didn't do, but they — you know, they were okay, but maybe if I'd pushed them more, I could have taken them someplace, but the way they were, that series, I thought, oh, that's interesting, but no, I'm not making more.

MS. RIEDEL: It felt very much more just about surface and not so much about —

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Yeah. It really was about that flatness, and profile, again, but it just had gone completely flat.

MS. RIEDEL: One other group of work I want to touch on that we haven't mentioned at all, which is in the early '90s, the No More Anonymous Wood series.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, that was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: And that almost — that had an environmental quality to it.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, it did.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you think about it as political or social commentary?

MR. BEAN: I thought of it about — when you have furniture, you don't know where it came from, and I thought it

might be interesting to make, quote, "site-specific" furniture, like the tree came from here, and here's how it got to be a tree in furniture. And also, it was a summer that was so hot and people were getting along really badly in the studio, and it was such a pleasure to go to the sawmill. And they had — there had been a storm and there were a bunch of trees down. That was one group of wood. Then there was another thing where there'd been a big development, and they had gone in and bid on the wood that they cut down. So this was recycling salvaged wood, one from the storm and one from the development.

And then I put the story of the wood inlaid into the piece of wood that was used. And I thought it was an interesting idea. I've got a screen, still, that is about decay. And it's spalted maple, and spalting is decay. And it's about snowflake obsidian. And the flakes in snowflake obsidian are decay. And so it was about two different speeds of decay. And it was a good-looking screen.

So, you know, there should be some content somewhere in these things. Good looks is great, and I think it's where I want to be. I want to make — I don't want to make depressing, unhappy, miserable things. It's just not what I want to do. I mean, there are people that make scary stuff, and maybe their lives are scary, maybe they're unhappy, maybe that's the texture and subject that they want to express about their lives. Hm-mm, Not me. I really — you know, you may not improve the world much, but if you make something and somebody walks into the room and they go, "Oh, my god, that's wonderful, I feel better," you know, that's about as much as I can expect to do in terms of making things better, but I certainly don't want to make things worse.

All right, what time do you want to eat?

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Before we break, we've been talking about travel and its impact on your life or work, or not. Do you — do you think of your work as part of an international tradition, or does it strike you as very American?

MR. BEAN: Oh, it's totally American.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, that would by my thought as well.

MR. BEAN: Completely American, yeah. It's — yeah.

MR. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BEAN: Although it's interesting, people have said, "Oh, your rugs are going to be better off in Europe." But the ceramics — it's out of — it's out of American tradition and American market, and the entire thing — I mean, I really look at what happened here with my work and with the craft movement as a — it was a movement. It began in the '60s. People looked at the world and said, "This is not good. We need to make it better." And out of the hundred thousand people that went into the woods, you know, a thousand of them came back making pretty good stuff.

And that wave has been a generational event. And so the collectors and the makers grew up, got better, developed a marketing system, developed a gallery system. The whole thing kind of rose as a wave. Now it's greying. The wave has crested. The next generation — first of all, they haven't got enough money to spend on this stuff because slowly but surely, this stuff got expensive. The next generation is collecting Japanese tea mugs, you know. That's what they buy because they're a hundred bucks or 60 bucks or 40 bucks. They can afford them. And the generation — I'm interested right now — the generation that I grew up with and who are my collectors are now losing husbands and wives and shrinking their houses.

And so the thing that I find interesting is the secondary market and who survives and who doesn't. And so the issue for me is as long as there are enough people to keep buying my work, that's great. And there seem to be, you know. But what's happening is they're not now coming from the craft-collecting group. They're just people who go to the show and say, I think that's really nice; I'll take that. They have no idea about my history, any of that stuff. It's about the thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this a younger group of collectors or people coming from outside the craft world who are somehow —

MR. BEAN: I would say yeah, 40s. They seem to be mostly in their 40s. You know, they become lawyers, they've done something, they've got money, and they want beautiful things in their life. But you know, it's not about craft. And it's about — not about collecting ceramics or glass or those things. The people that I think have really taken the hit are the glass people because they'd built a pretty interesting bubble, and it seems to be in jeopardy. So we'll see how it all plays out.

MS. RIEDEL: How has the market for craft changed? It seems as if you're saying it's peaked, it's gone down, and

now there's a new — there's a new wave coming of —

MR. BEAN: Yeah. There's a — well, I think — I actually think the people that — two things have happened. One thing is there is a great deal of work that is about green, sustained, communitarian, which has picked up on the whole idea of communes that was in the '60s. They've taken that aspect of it. The beautiful object aspect of it has gone to the design universe — elegant, spectacularly refined European designs, really innovative, clear — that's where that has gone.

So in America, there isn't a — you know, those — the next generation is not into perfect objects. They're into DIY. They're into knitting communities. They're — it's some other aspect of making things, but it isn't the one where you wanted to make the most amazing, innovative, fabulous object you could come up with. They're just not there. So it's kind of split between the two. And so my son — he'll shop at Moss, you know. He's not going to — he'd — you know, he'd like one of my pieces because I'm his father, but they wouldn't go looking for one. And so I think that's the kind of split that's taking place.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your relationship with dealers over time?

MR. BEAN: It's actually amazing. The first gallery I had was an art gallery in New York. And I had — you know, the Whitney had bought a piece. I was making post-minimalist lacquered Plexiglas objects — gallery was called Royal Marks. I had a show, and then he decided he would be going to deal privately, which meant he was a little bored with his gallery and wanted to do something else. And so he closed, and I ceased to exist in the art world. I was gone. I had no representation. I was just like, that's the end of it. And so when I began making ceramics again — and I had also been a little, shall we say, stiff-necked about who got my work. If I didn't like your politics or your lighting or whatever, you did not get my work. As a result, I was the largest collector of my sculpture in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so when I started making pots again, I said let's not make that mistake twice. Let's — anybody — if they have money, they can have it.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: And so — started out with pots — anybody that would take them. You know, you'd say okay, here, there's a weekend sale at the church. Here are some pots. And then you start showing in galleries. And then you'd do the fairs. And then —

MS. RIEDEL: And by the fairs, you mean the ACC fairs?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. That's — and actually, that's the — Peters Valley and the ACC are about the only ones I ever did. I did Smithsonian — maybe I did it, maybe I didn't. I think those were the fairs because — they were just beginning then. And it was the '80s, and I'd been pretty much working since '74 back into the ceramics thing. And the '80s were an amazing time. I can remember — we were at Rhinebeck, and you looked out, and the show opened at 9:00, and they had this big — it was a fairgrounds, and so they had this big gate about probably 50 yards across with a rope there, and behind it were about 300 women at 9:00 in the morning. And they dropped the rope, and the women ran to buy — ran.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? [Laughs.] Oh, stop.

MR. BEAN: It was like a stampede of people trying to get to who they wanted. By noon some people were sold out for the year. That was the beginning of the '80s.

And it was so much fun. You know, it really was because the rest of the economy was not doing well in — for parts of the — actually, in the early '80s it was a kind of a bump. And it didn't damage us because we had just been discovered, we were relatively cheap, and people loved it. It was like — the way they cover design now is the way they covered ceramics then, you know. You were in *Time* magazine. You were on the cover of this. It was like — it was the hot new movement that was the American future.

So the fairs were really good. And you start out, and the way the gallery system works is the worst galleries consign; the midrange buys; the best galleries consign. So you start out consigning pots and, you know, hoping they sell. And then at some stage you're doing these fairs, and you have orders, and you take orders based on how many pieces you think you can make, and you book yourself through the year, and then you stop taking orders. And then if there's too much demand, you raise your prices. And so it's that process, then, as you raise your prices, the galleries that were struggling to sell your work — they get off the bottom, and better galleries get on the top. So it's this development that kind of works up through the gallery system.

And then at some stage you reach the point where the galleries are going, we think your work is too available, and we don't think you should be doing fairs. And so the galleries say stop doing fairs and just do galleries. And so you stop doing fairs and just do galleries. Now, the thing about galleries is when I had a gallery, he disappeared, so I decided I would never do the same thing with clay. So I would always have as many galleries as I could manage, giving none of them enough power to damage me. All of them were irritated by that because they all want to be the gallery. But I've always had between six, 10 galleries that either are doing wonderfully, so they're getting work, or they just had a show, so they'd tapped out their pond, and — or they're kind of building toward another show.

And so that's the way it — and it worked really amazingly well for years for most — aside from the economic trenches that we keep stepping in, most of my career, if I'd had 20 pots, I could send them out that day. There was somebody who wanted work that there was not enough work for. And so that's been an amazing thing. Now I've got work, you know. If I had bigger work, I could send it out because that seems to be what's happening, and the larger pieces are selling more easily — the tiny ones and the large ones. The midrange is a little shaky.

And so that's the way galleries have worked. Now it's really interesting. I went through the SOFA directory from 2000 and looked at how many galleries are not there anymore. They're simply not there, I mean, for a number of reasons, mostly economic. I mean, Susan [Cummins] is not there for other reasons. But Mobilia wasn't there. Snyderman's weren't there. All of these galleries simply weren't there anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: At SOFA?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. BEAN: Which is the big playground.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: And then you get other galleries who are using — well, Zimmer simply closed his physical gallery. And he is only at the fairs.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: And Jane Sauer said most of her sales are also just at the fairs. So it's a — it's a kind of — it's an — always an evolving marketplace. You know, it just — it keeps moving.

But Cathy has always handled the bookwork end of the galleries. So that's great. And then I handled the, "Oh, here's what you should do for me or here's what I should do for you" end. And she tends to want to murder them when they're behaving badly. And I go, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, let's not murder them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BEAN: They're — you know, this'll work out in time." And so it's this balance between —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: You know, she — but she can write a letter that you open it and that letter bursts into flames.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] One question, and then we'll take a break for lunch.

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MR. RIEDEL: Is there a community that was — has been important to your development as an artist?

MR. BEAN: Community — aside from the Buddhist community?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think — yeah, I mean, we could — if you — if that's what you — is the significant one.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, actually, it's interesting because I was part of the craft fair community. You know, that was — we were all together in that deal, and it was so much fun. And — but since then I don't think there's been — and it wasn't development as an artist. It was just, like, this is the subculture, and these are my compatriots in this culture. But that culture is aging, greying, retiring, fading. And so I don't — and — but in terms of work, I mean, there have been — you know, there's Dillingham [ph] and there's — what's her name — Iter [ph] — you know, aside from the odd person like that, I don't feel connected to a craft community. It's really, like, much of — you know, I have friends from that period, but most of our community — community is local. You know, it's the

people that live around here. It's the people we have dinner with, you know, once a week.

MS. RIEDEL: It does seem that throughout your career there have been interesting collaborations. I think of the rugs.

MR. BEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I think of the work with Dan Mack. I think of even the commissions to some degree, that they — different forms of collaboration come up.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I like that. I mean, I actually really like it, partly because it takes you to someplace you weren't. And in the work and in everything else, I mean, in — all right, where — are we going to have a show? Okay, how are we doing to do this show? I mean, that — with Dan, that was really a lot of fun for quite a while. And then, you know, stylistically he went off into some woodland culture deal, and I went — I stayed in the let's make objects world. But that — it was really quite a lot of fun while it lasted.

And we did some interesting installations and things. And to watch somebody else like that, how they construct their lives, I mean, a lot of what he did was rent real estate in New York. He rented a very large building at 125th Street and then leased it out to other artists, which is — you know, I was asking somebody, "What is the future of anybody coming out of art school now? How are they possibly going to make a living?" And he said, "Well, there are two possible ways. One, you move to a destination, a tourist destination, and people will buy your work that are being tourists. Or you rent a building and become a landlord." You know, you set up a communal situation and the rents — the differential in rents is enough to keep you going, both of which, I think, are reasonable solutions to the problem because — and people are beginning to get the idea that you need to work when you get out. But when I was there, it was like, oh, you'll teach and that's it, because there is no way to work.

But I — there's such a marketing movement among schools. When you go to NCECA — which I don't regularly, but I do go occasionally — there are 30 to 40 colleges recruiting. And I'm going, "This is disingenuous because you're recruiting so you can keep your job, but what are you — where are you sending these people when they get out?" And there are people who go, "Oh, the kind of thinking that you develop in that situation will take care of you all your life," which has always been the English major argument.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BEAN: You know, be a liberal arts major, and you are set for any career. Well, yeah. Or no. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that begs one more question, which is, what do you think the place of universities is in the future of the craft movement? Is there one for universities?

MR. BEAN: Well, they still need some teachers, but not many. There were seven jobs this year — tenure-track teaching in the country. You know, I don't think about that much. I think about how annoying it is that they aren't doing their job, as I see it. But I don't know what their job would be if it was perfect. I mean, it is a great place to go for four years, and if you go to a good one and get a good education, it will be extremely valuable. I mean, that's what Grinnell was. It was extremely valuable in terms of, you know, learning how to learn. But there is a great deal of discussion now about the — how much it costs and how much you're going to get back. And there is no hope to get back anything in art school. You know, if you become a business major, there's a chance. But you know, to come out with a hundred thousand dollars' worth of loans? That's a tough row to hoe. That means you really have to leave the studio almost immediately. You get six months grace, and then you have to make a living. And you cannot make a living straight out of school — maybe one or two people a year. So it's — and even the teaching jobs take years of campaigning, you know, to get one. So I think it's — I don't know. It's one of — those things are saying, well, maybe you should just go to a trade — you know, take a year of junior college, then go to a trade school and learn a trade and live on that. And if you're a plumber, you're going to make $150,000 a year if you're good. So that's a — that's a life if you want to be a plumber. I mean, it's a really — it's an interesting kind of dilemma because we didn't have it, you know. We would be teachers, and it worked because we were. But the people now — there isn't that solution. On the other hand, they don't seem depressed by it. You know, I look at Elizabeth, and I look at Barbara, and they're going oh, no; this is working out. I mean, it's tough to make the payments of this and that, but —

MS. RIEDEL: Did they both go to art school?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Well, Elizabeth went to Kansas City Art Institute, and Barbara was an art major at Syracuse, I think. Someplace up there.

MS. RIEDEL: So they both have art degrees?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Oh, yeah. And they're working for me, which is not a lot of money. I mean, that's — I think you

can do it, but at some stage you go, this is not a life. This — you need more. They need more.

MS. RIEDEL: But they work for you part-time, and then they have part time to develop their work, yeah?

MR. BEAN: Elizabeth has — works for me part-time and then has another part-time job because her work is the rug business.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, really, the idea of that was that she would take over this business at some stage. With the economy as bad as it is, you know, we're running the business, but there isn't enough for her to take over and, you know, hire somebody else, hire another person, two people. We're thinking about hiring a publicist, but that's a thankless process. You know, does that really make money? I don't know. And — but they want a ton. So we'll see. But I — when I started with Elizabeth, I thought that by now she would be pretty much running it. And she is pretty much running it, but we just need more money to make it work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But it seems as if you think the university degree — your experience is still an important part of an artist's training, no?

MR. BEAN: I think it's an important part of a person's training, you know. And yeah, I mean, someplace like Grinnell I think is worth going to for the education you get.

MS. RIEDEL: In your experience with Soldner, though, could you have done it without that? Would you have — it would have happened without that? Iowa — at the University of Iowa?

MR. BEAN: I needed the — I needed the time. It's time as much as anything and learning the world you're going into.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BEAN: I mean, that's what Soldner said: Here's the world you're going to go into; here's how I do it. So I don't — I'm happy I did what I did. I don't know how they're going to do it now. I mean — but I don't have to know, you know. It's their problem to figure it out. And they're figuring it out. They seem, you know, pretty good with it. And I keep going oh, no, no — but there's also — Elizabeth says, you know, you just don't need to go to college. You — if you're smart, you can figure out a life without college. And so there's — there is that thing going on.

MS. RIEDEL: Take a break?

MR. BEAN: Take a break.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is a Mija Riedel with Bennett Bean it the artist's house in Frelinghuysen, New Jersey on June 17, 2011 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art card number four. Let's begin to move towards the end of the conversation about the George Ohr pots that you've collected, and the experiment of sorts that you've conducted with them.

MR. BEAN: Well, George Ohr was really the culmination of trying to understand historical pottery. And the way that I think you need to understand anything is to live with it. So, when I was still teaching, I began to buy pottery. As good as I could afford. Well, there was a lot of American art pottery out there.

I bought them for 15 years. When they got to $25, I decided that was too much to spend. And stopped buying them. Since then, they've kept going. So I had a lot of that.

MS. RIEDEL: When you say American art pottery, going back as far as you could find?

MR. BEAN: Nothing really after--well I was buying early American stuff. Redware. But most of that was Nova Scotia redware. Then, when I started collecting antiques down here, it was more like, I wasn't buying stoneware.

So the art pottery movement began about 1880. And really hit its stride at the turn of the century, up through fifteens and eighteens. I think the Second World War put a dent in things.

And the Bauhaus killed the movement. Modernism was not that. This was the previous handmade world.

So anyway, I started buying these pieces of pottery. Well, it turns out if they're broken, they're a lot cheaper. So, I have a great Northern Sung pot that had been, A. in a fire, and so was totally black. And B. somebody had

drilled out for a lamp base through the bottom.

And I had no problem with that, because it was a porcelain. Or proto-porcelain and it is unaffected by paint remover. So you can take anything off of the outside of an old Sung Dynasty pot, which is what I proceeded to do.

And I set that on the mantle, and then I would bring in my pots from the studio and set them next to them, next to that pot, and would see if they lived. This was like my watermark. And for ages, the Chinese were winning. And finally, I brought in this piece, and I went, okay. Now, I am as good as they are.

MS. RIEDEL: Which was the piece?

MR. BEAN: That one right there. See the double lip in the back with the two lugs?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. And which piece of yours came in?

MR. BEAN: I don't even remember. I just remember, okay. Gotcha!

MS. RIEDEL: Was it the '70's when this happened?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. I don't actually know exactly when it happened. But I just know, okay. I'm holding up. Because I had basically been copying everyone. Moving through--first the Japanese, and then the Chinese, and then early English, and then American Indian.

But It's really interesting, buying these things--a friend of mine who was a picker came by, and they said, here's what you need. And it was the master restorer's kit.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MR. BEAN: And I said, great, I'll take it. How much? $18.50. All right.

So, I was buying pots with chips, and flakes, and problems and fixing them and I don't really much care about chips and flakes and problems. There are people who are obsessive about them. So, I had this tradition of fixing pottery.

And then, I remember, really clearly, I was now fired and I was making a living. And there was this big pot that I needed for a show and it cracked right down one side.

Oh my god. What am I going to do with that? So I thought, well, fix it like the Japanese do. And so, I got a big furniture clamp and clamped it together. Glued the back of the crack. In turns out the glue was really stronger than the clay. And then, ground out a little butterfly. Which is what the woodworkers use to bridge a crack. And inlaid in epoxy. And I went, okay. Good to go. Sent it out. And there was kind of a flutter at the other end of the world. Because they went, what do you mean you're selling cracked pots?

And I said, all right. Well here's the theory, if am in this dialogue with process, I do something. The pot does something. I respond. If the pot does something like crack, do I take my toys and go home? Or do I respond to it?

And so, I said, "Okay, I'm going to fix it." So that little butterfly went on there as an announcement of the repair. And then I went, well, drilling this little piece of the clay was a boring process. Since the glue is what's really holding it together, rather than the butterfly, why don't I do an applique? Which is an announcement. And so I began putting these butterflies on.

MS. RIEDEL: The gold leafed ones?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. And at one stage, I had this guy the studio who was going through some emotional crisis with his first love. First girl he'd ever slept with. And she was leaving him for somebody with more money and he was heartbroken, and not paying good attention, and he stood up under a ware board, and there was this finished pot, he knocked it on the floor into a dozen pieces. And I went, aw damn, that was a good piece. So, I glued it back together and encrusted it with butterflies. It was as much butterfly as pot. And sent it off to Canada, and the Toronto Museum bought it and it was perfect, because the guy who was the curator bought ancient art. He didn't buy contemporary stuff. And so, he bought this piece. And broke into tears at the presentation announcement, because he was dealing with a human being. It was just so sweet. He was just a darling. And so, that's where that pot went.

So that was the history of repairs. And still, if something gets cracked in the firing, I'll fix it, because I'm still working on it.

So fine. I know about George Ohr. And a friend of mine, who's the picker, who brought me the restorers' kit, said, "You really ought to buy some of these. These are great." And with standard arrogance, I said, "Well if I want them I can make them."

And then finally, I said, "I should go up there and look." By the time I got up there to look, they were too expensive for me to buy. But since I didn't have any problems with repairs, I said, what do you got that's broken? And maybe an eight-inch pot was $800, a whole one.

He brought out three boxes. I bought three pieces for $300. And then took them home and fixed them. And so that's my Ohr collection. Glued them back together. Did gold inlays. Did all this stuff. And so they're really Bean-Ohr pots. It's our collaboration. It's my collaboration with history. So that's what the Ohr collection is about. And they really are good pots.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say what did you learn about George Ohr from the process?

MR. BEAN: I learned that he could throw thinner than I could. That's what I learned. He really had moves. And so there's no way I was really going to reproduce those. And why? I mean, somebody has since then. They made an identity out of faking his pots. But, it's not for me.

So that's my relationship with repairs and Ohr. And people adjusted to those repairs. That butterfly became a motif. And I actually used it a couple places where wasn't necessary. Because it's a great looking thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed over time?

MR. BEAN: You know, I think it was-- who's that painter in New York who paints the monster heads? He's in here. I read about him this morning. And he said, "Inspiration is for amateurs." Artists just show up and work. Because what if the inspiration doesn't come? You don't get anything done. And so, I don't really think about inspiration. I just go to work every day. And you have good days and you have bad days, or whatever. But that's really how I think about it. It's like, show up. You go to work. Solve the problem.

And so, I'm not waiting for, like--I mean, I get excited about stuff and the tendency is to get excited about the thing you've just done. It's like your recent baby and you're going, oh my God, this is really amazing. But I don't think much about inspiration.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it Chuck Close?

MR. BEAN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your involvement in some of the arts schools over time. Some of the craft schools. Because you've been involved in Artpark, way back when.

MR. BEAN: Oh, in the olden days? Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then Penland, yes? And Arrowmont?

MR. BEAN: I was on the circuit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So let's talk about those various schools and your interaction with them. And what you thought.

MR. BEAN: Every one was different. And at that stage-- that was after I printed that postcard and I sent it to all those people. They said, "Oh my God, we love this work. You should come and teach." And so I went and taught. And mostly the way that worked for me is, I was disciplined enough so I worked at the workshop, because you lose money off of it. They don't pay you enough. Because, basically, they expect to hire teachers who are getting paid and don't need the money. And most potters are, or were. Now there are more that--since there are fewer jobs and teaching is so ferocious now. They really kill you. They make you work all the time. And so, I approve entirely of that genre, of those schools, because you can go find out what you need to know. I mean, I took a *Mokume-gane* class with Hiroko [Sato] Pijanowski. I just decided, I'm fascinated by this. Because I have this sort of ongoing romance with knives.

I've taken blacksmithing workshops to make them. I'm never going to be a knifemaker. But I did the ceramic knives that we built in Rhino. And so, if you're interested in something like that, somebody somewhere is teaching that. And so, that's what I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And what do you teach?

MR. BEAN: I went and taught what I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And you taught that no matter what the school?

MR. BEAN: Exactly. I mean, this is why they hired me. They want to know what I do. So you go teach what you do. And Peters Valley is the one I've had the longest relationship with, because it's right up the road. And it's, shall we say, struggling.

I mean, at one stage I was President of the Board. Which means you know how much it was struggling, because I was not in a position to raise great funds for them.

MS. RIEDEL: There's an anagama [kiln] at Peters Valley right?

MR. BEAN: Yeah. We built that.

MS. RIEDEL: The only anagama on the East Coast for a while.

MR. BEAN: Oh, no. There are lots of anagamas.

MS. RIEDEL: But early on—

MR. BEAN: There's an epidemic of them.

MS. RIEDEL: But way back?

MR. BEAN: But that was the first one.

MS. RIEDEL: That's what I thought.

MR. BEAN: And we brought this Japanese guy over to build it, who was the most astonishing prima donna in the history of ever. And he built it for us. And then it was very annoying thereafter. Anyway. Peters Valley has a lot--I'll teach there in the fall. I have been on the board. I will never be on that board again. I am now, as I say, boarded up.

I've been on all the boards available. I've been on the craft council, and ACC, and whatever. I went through that more than 15 years ago. Which was the perfect time to do it. But, the next generation can do that now. But Peters Valley, I'll go teach. Because they're up the road and I like them. But they're locked into a federal park. Which means, who's going to give money to the government? So it's much harder to generate money than for someplace like Penland. Or, Anderson Ranch is the one that's really got a pile of money. And they really all feel different, and yet the same.

I've taught at Haystack, not because Haystack hired me, but because the main designer craftsman, or something like that, hired me. I went to Haystack. I actually studied glass there. So I've had experience with all of them. Anderson Ranch is almost as pretty as Haystack. I'd say it's a dead heat. You know they're both beautiful.

Arrowmont, I don't know what's happening with them, because the sorority's having second thoughts and the sorority owns them and the property could be worth a jilion dollars, because it's right off the strip in Gatlinburg. And it's such a schizophrenic place, because you're either 80 yards from the place's honky tonk entry to the south, which is cheerful. So each one has its different kind of flavor.

MS. RIEDEL: What about Artpark? That was early on—

MR. BEAN: Artpark was early, early. And it was split between artists, and then they had a few crafts people. And they said, here, we're going to give you a voting booth. And it was a movable house that they would take around and drop. And then it would become a voting booth. So for two weeks, I went up there and just worked. And hardly anybody found me. So soon after that, they decided, no that's not working out. So they put everybody down on the boardwalk. So you were like a carnie event. That I didn't have to do. But it was an interesting time, because there were a lot of artists--artists' artists--up there doing conceptual work--sculpture. And the place was interesting, because essentially it was poisoned.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Some toxic waste stuff.

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah, absolutely and so, here you are in this art environment and you walk out, and you're looking at the piece and then you look down, and here is iridescent stuff coming up out of the ground from some, I dunno, evil power plant dumping spot. But I had a good time out there. But I think I had a better time than most people, because of just the timing that I got there. I was early in the process.

MS. RIEDEL: And I have heard of artists going there to do installations. But you went there and just worked.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Just made pots. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And there were no students? And there was nobody to observe.

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah. People would come to Artpark.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So they would come and watch you work.

MR. BEAN: Yeah, but not many people found me in that house. That's why they moved everybody down to the boardwalk. And then they'd set up, and you had a tent and whatever. You worked there and people would come up and offer you peanuts.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Yeah, but it was a lot of fun. It was actually a lot of fun. That one was early in the workshop, in my workshop process. So I was still fresh and open to whatever happened. As time went on, I began to go, I've already been there and I don't want to go there again.

And at one stage, I remember, I got to the point where I was scheduling so many workshops during the summer, I was gone 10 out of 12 weeks. I was just on the road. Out there.

And my son didn't like it. He was irritated. I was the one who was supposed to be at home working and I was gone. And so he didn't like that. And I remember waking up in Aspen, and knew I was hung over. I didn't know where I was. But I knew it was the third day of the workshop. And I finally struggled to the window and looked out the window. And I went, oh, Aspen. I forgot about altitude and liquor. And so, I had really hurt myself. And I said, "That's it. I'm home." So I raised my prices. And it's amazing how people just dropped off. The two places I haven't--I haven't been to Louisiana. And I haven't been to Alaska. Every place else is done. Really, I've pretty much been there. Florida, boy, Florida.

MS. RIEDEL: So sounds like you think these are successful for picking up skills.

MR. BEAN: For somebody who's going to take the workshop? Yeah. You get a dose of whoever. You get to look at their life. You get to get what you can from them.

The only thing about a workshop is, it's a matter of rightness. You're going to get up and do what you do. If the people in the workshop, if each one of them can get one thing out of the workshop that actually fits their life, then you've succeeded, because a lot of times, what you've got to say doesn't fit what they need.

On the other hand, they can just be great entertainment. Soleman's [ph] workshops were amazing entertainment, because he would do entertaining things. And he could be, pretty much, counted on for that. I was less entertaining.

I think they're really good. And if I was a kid, after undergraduate school, if I could do the workshops circuit, I would simply go do it. And now, of course, they have Archie Bray. Which wasn't exactly a workshop, it was more a residency. And I was there for just a short time.

And then, oh my God. In San Francisco, I remember doing a workshop for the San Francisco Potters' League, or something like that. Some potters' group out there. And one of their members, or supporters, was a chef. And I stayed in his apartment. And I remember opening the icebox, and there was a fruit bowl with everything that you could possibly ever want. Perfect. Figs, and guavas, and, it was just like, Ah! I've gone to heaven.

And then, after the workshop, he said, "Oh, come to eat at my restaurant," where he was cooking. And I'll never forget my first flour-less chocolate cake. It was so good. It was really great. But that's San Francisco.

The workshop thing was great for a period, and now I just don't want to leave home. I like it here. I'll go someplace-- well, I did a residency in China.

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MR. BEAN: Two years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: In where, sorry?

MR BEAN: Ji Lin. Up in Manchuria. It was the Korean potters, who ran the thing pretty much--it was in a Chinese school, but the Koreans had control of it. And they found me at SOFA when I doing SOFA and invited me to do that thing. And so I negotiated a deal. So they would buy this pot. And I would go over and do it. And that was interesting because Ji Lin is way up there. And it's been conquered by everybody. So potatoes, because of the

Russians, were in their diet. Pickles of all kinds, because the Koreans were in their diet. Rice was in their diet. The food was just amazing. And then, they were so adapt at showing you, hey, let's go to this kind of restaurant this night and this kind of restaurant that night. And also, since they were all Koreans there, they were interested in drinking. Big time.

And I'll never forget the night they took us to the roast sheep place. And so, you walked in and they had this covered shed with these things that looked like the front of the ancient sports car. But behind it, they had a man sitting with a crank in either hand, spinning these lambs that were spread eagle on metal frames inside this char cooker.

And so you go in, and you start eating. And then they wheel in the lambs. On their spit and so, I thought, great. And all the Korean guys got up and had three mouthfuls. And they gave you a plastic glove in one hand, and a box cutter in the other. And you ate. And it was delicious. And the Korean guys burned out early, but I was not giving up. And so I looked up there, and I had one whole lamb to myself. And other lamb--all the women were around that lamb, working it over. So there was nothing left. That was really fun. That was a lot of great eating.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it sounds like it. And were you doing demonstrations there as well?

MR. BEAN: No. We were all working. Everybody did what they did and I decided I wasn't going to do what I do. So I did another thing with sandblasting and woodfiring. And it was interesting. I think they were a little irritated that I wasn't doing gold leaf. But the thing was so disorganized, it never would have worked. It was just amazingly badly run, but worth the experience of just going and watching all the Koreans work. And watching the Koreans do what they did. And my son came up for four days. And then we went up to this crater on the border of North Korea. And jumped into North Korea for one minute. And then jumped back. Because the women had just been grabbed up. But there were plenty of tourists that could camouflage you. It was just a little rock. But you could see the Korean guards on the other side. And a patrol boat wandering around in the crater. Making sure that nobody tried to get to China. But that was fun. And we went, oh, another country I can check off my list.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] Well, I think we've covered just about everything here that we need to touch on. So I just have a few summary questions.

MR. BEAN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: So, in summary, would you discuss your view on the importance of clay as a means of expression. What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? And what it does better than anything else. The essence of it that appeals to you.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Originally, as I said, it was the physicality of the process. The fact that, if you're throwing on the wheel, it takes all your body and all of your attention. And that, to me, was extremely attractive.

And then the stuff is addictive. It pretty much does what you want, sort of. I mean, you have to learn where it will go and where it won't go. And what its rules are, because it's got them. I mean, if you're throwing on a wheel, you have enemies. You have gravity. You have time. And you have centrifugal force. All of those things are conspiring against you.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BEAN: But, it can do just about anything. It can be high tech-- Kyocera, the centered zirconium that I used on the knives. And it can be red ware dug out of a bank with rocks in it.

So there's a range. And the ability to find where on that range you fit. Because so much of my life has been figuring out where does what I do really fit? Where I can be the most effective. And clay gives you a start. Whereas with paintings, there is no start. There's a big flat white thing. But clay, you put it on the wheel, and this wheel spins. And there are things that will happen. So it's not from a standing stop. You start from a tradition, from a process. And the process takes you into it. But, I mean, the bad part of clay is, it takes a long, long time to master it. The technology of it. The glaze chemistry of it. All of that stuff. You're talking about 10 years, but I still like it. I still go down there and I go, throwing is still fun.

And the interesting thing is, as I age, I slowly begin to weaken. Well, I bought the weight machine. And so, my strength is increasing. And I suddenly realized, oh this is much easier than it was five months ago. Before I did this weight regime. So there's a physicality about it. And who you are and what you are is registered on that stuff. I think of my work as evidence of my behavior. And each step leaves a mark and a piece of something and the finished piece is the accumulated evidence of what I did. And it should, if I did it right, not be too overt. I mean, I think there's a lot of work where the ideas stick out. There isn't enough working through them so they are totally a part of the thing. And it's kind of nice to make things you use. There is that. That old romance is still

there. I mean, every so [often] I'll go, oh, I'm gonna make porcelain cups. And drink out of them. And that'll be fun. And it was fun. Or, I'm going to make a cheese plate. I ate at Per Se in Napa. And their dishes weren't very good then. And so I thought, I could make the perfect dish for them. And so, I designed a set of dishes. And then I thought, I should send images of these. And we can get them manufactured. So I went to the guy's website. He'd already had somebody else design his dishes by that time. And he was selling them. So I figured, not going to work. But mine are still much better than his.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you ever think about marketing those?

MR. BEAN: No. I mean, there's making things, and getting rid of them. And they're both a lot of work. And so, you decide--the rugs were an adventure to market. They were fun. They were an adventure. You got to go to Napal. And you got to learn other cultures. And you got to understand what makes a really fabulous rug. And how you can make rugs that nobody else could make. Because they weren't willing to either figure it out, or they weren't able to find weavers who would put up with the complexity. What was the question?

MS. RIEDEL: About marketing the porcelain in a functional way.

MR. BEAN: Oh Yeah. So you just decide, no, I don't want to do this. I know what this is like. And I don't want to do the same thing again. So you've got to find somebody. And you set up slip casting. And then you do shows. Or you go to China and have it manufactured, and then it gets screwed up. And there's not much money in dinnerware. You're better off doing something that's a little more high value, because at my age, I've only got so much time. I do not want to waste it. Because there's too many things I want to do. I'm in more of a hurry than I used to be. It's interesting, because when you're young, you've got all this testosterone and you're just going, [growls] charging along.

Well, I've got a theory that as men get older, they get nicer. Because their testosterone goes down. Women, on the other hand lose estrogen—

MS. RIEDEL: Hang on—

MR. BEAN — and amass testosterone. And they'll go, I'll do any damn thing I want.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BEAN: Anyway, so that's my theory of aging.

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

MR. BEAN: Depends on when. In graduate school, it was understood at that I was pretty good. So that was fine. It got me a teaching job. But, then when I stopped making sculpture and went back to ceramics, let's say the response was tepid. And I started doing the fairs. The response was still pretty slow.

When I began with the airbrush pieces, it got better, and because I was distinguishing myself. Nobody's seen anything like that before. When I started with the earthenware pieces that I'm doing now, somebody said, well you were just kind of bumping along, and then your work took off. And it really did. It was like, prices doubling twice a year. So you were starting out at $25, and then you were at $50, and then you were at $100, and then you were at $200, $400--bam, bam, bam. And pretty soon, you're selling the stuff for real money. And so, then, I would say, at the end of the '90s, there was that economic ditch-- the bubble burst. All of that huge amount of money at the end of the '90s, which was unbelievably a lot of money. And people were flinging it at around, big time. Since then, I can feel it just slow down, because as the collectors get older, they're not buying. As their houses fill up, they're not buying. And the high-end collectors are my collector base. So right now, people love it, but they go, oh man, I'm so glad that I bought mine when it was cheaper. So right now, demand is holding, but I have extra pots for the first time in a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: And, pots, of course, will continue to be part of the future, but that also makes sense as to why the rugs are more interesting. As to why the iron pieces are more interesting. As to why you'll continue to branch out and explore—

MR. BEAN: Yeah, I don't think it's so much economic. It's more like, it's more fun to explore new territory. And see what will happen. I know it's going to happen with the pots. They're pretty much going to be there. And they're gonna sell. But it's not going to be fireworks. And so, I got that. So where is my next adventure? The rugs were that adventure. That was like, all right. I know how to do this. And now it's, okay. I know how to do this, but what else is there? So, will these iron things work? I dunno. But, are they fun? Yeah.

And I should do them now, while I think I can still lift 150 pounds. Because soon, it's like, hire somebody to lift everything. So that's the dance. Although, I never thought 70 would be this. It's really not. It's so interesting,

because I look at the kids that work for me. They're young, young, young. But I don't think of them as much different than I am, because I've been their age. I know what that's like. They haven't been my age, so they think of that as really different, because now I've kind of figured that out. So when I look at somebody who's 90, I go, hm, different, but not, maybe, as different as I think. It's all about function. If I continue to function it's fine. If function-- either brain function, body function, — pieces of it are falling off. My memory was never great for names. Now it doesn't exist. So there's that.

And day-to-day, things go faster and faster. It was so interesting, because I wondered, why are things going faster and faster? What is that? And, I was doing a trek in Nepal. Because I know, when I was a kid, days took a long time. So we're doing a trek, and we're coming down this mountain. And it's raining. And the guide says, don't skip step on the yellow rocks, they're slippery. And watch out for the mule droppings because they're slippery. So, every step you take, you have to make a decision-- where's the black rock to step on. That day took as long as the ones in my childhood, because I was paying absolute attention to every minute. So, you know I am now ignoring a lot of life, because I've seen already.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it's familiar.

MR. BEAN: It's already in its category. I don't have to go, what the hell is that? But if you go someplace where you don't know quite what to do, it gives you that sense of, oh, this is like being a kid again. This is that playfulness. That attention to moment by moment.

MS. RIEDEL: That wonder.

MR. BEAN: Yeah. Which really exists. It hasn't gone away. But time does speed along most of the time, anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think about your career in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct, or do you see a thread of continuity running through it? I mean, clearly, the pots. There's a huge set of continuity. But do you think about—

MR. BEAN: Oh yeah. Well the big break was when I made art in New York. That was an entirely different world. It lasted for, like, four years. Then there's the agricultural period. When we moved out here, the barn is a mess. The house is a mess. I'm trying to build a kiln. The glazes aren't working--there's that period. Then there is, getting fired from teaching at the perfect moment, when my work is grown up. And then there's a long run. And then terracotta, the columns, that thing, which changed the texture of the studio. It was full of people. Nine people were working in there. Then the columns came to an end. Then there was the terrible economy. There was that period. So there are lots of periods. I don't think of them so much stylistically, I think of them more in terms of the way my whole life is going--what's happening. It's entirely clear to me that it's more fun to have money than not. And so, the times that have been really fun, is when I could do lots of projects. Because I don't care about money, per se, but money means you get to make something. That, for me, is what money is.

So, since I always to make something, it's okay, get the money and make that. Which means, I'm never going to get rich, because I'm always going to be making something. Which is great. That's what I want to do. That's life. That's the life I have chosen. It is, let's make things.

And, I talked before about the rugs-- my favorite part of the rug is the design. And then we get to see it. And then it's a thing. It's designed in the mind and becomes a thing in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the work in particular matters to you?

MR. BEAN: It stays a little surprising. It's not going to be shocking. But at the end of the piece I go, hm, never did that before. Now that's interesting. Otherwise, I might as well be standing on buttons or something. I mean, I have nothing against button makers. But, that it stays fresh.

That especially when I make something that I didn't think-- like the big pieces for the boat. Those were surprising. Because I'd never made anything so big, because I never had to make anything so big. And they were a little scary.

Because I had a dead line date, on which day the packer showed up. And I went, it would be really bad--this had 16 separate pieces of objects that made up the four pieces. It might have been 17. Anyway, if I broke one, I was screwed. And I was a little edgy. It was so nice when that thing went out the door. And I went, huh, nothing broke. I got that done. But that was really fun because, especially, there were four of them all in one room. And it was like, whoa, that's something. That's something I didn't think I would do. I am surprised. And that was really a lot of fun. And then, of course, there was the money, which means we can fix the roof. And slate is so expensive.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] That's all I've got. Do you have anything you want to add, or shall we leave it there?

MR. BEAN: No, I think I said everything on my list.

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MR. BEAN: Good.

MS. RIEDEL: Thanks.

MR. BEAN: What a pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: Same here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]