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Oral history interview with Sam Perry, 2014
April 29 and May 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Sam Perry on April 29 and May 1, 2014. The interview took place in Oakland, CA, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Viola Frey Oral History Project funded by the Artists' Legacy Foundation.

Sam Perry, Mija Riedel, and the Artists' Legacy Foundation have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Sam Perry at the artist's studio in Oakland, CA on April 29, 2014. This is card number one. It's a lovely place to be doing the interview. We're sitting here amidst much of your sculpture from the past 10 years or so.

SAM PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative]. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll see how that affects what we talk about. Let's take care of some of the biographical information first. So you were born in Kailua in Hawaii?

MR. PERRY: Kailua, HI.

MS. RIEDEL: 1963?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Day after Christmas.

MS. RIEDEL: Day after Christmas. Okay. December 26. Would you describe your childhood [... -MR]? Your dad, as we know, had a canoe shop, a canoe building shop. It was one of the things he did so there was some wood influence early on.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I grew up in Kailua probably until I was about 13.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: My parents got divorced probably when I was about six.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: But I stayed in the same house. My father moved out to the North Shore for a while and then into Honolulu and always seemed to have a girlfriend. Actually, I think after he divorced my mother he married, like, an 18-year old [Laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh [Laughs].

MR. PERRY: He was a little wild.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: He's since settled down but, yes. So my basic visitation was Sunday at the canoe shop. My grandfather, who lived in Kailua, also in Lanikai, would pick me up and take me to the shop. I'd usually sit there and have to occupy myself for a good one to two hours because I'd get there at eight in the morning and my dad wouldn't show up until 10 or whatever. So I was kind of on my own, you know. There was a big canal so you could walk down the canal with a lot of junk, picking bottles out of the bank and sometimes my cousins would be there.

MS. RIEDEL: Sam, what was your dad's name?

MR. PERRY: Tay, T-A-Y.

MS. RIEDEL: T-A-Y. And your grandfather?

MR. PERRY: George.

MS. RIEDEL: George. Okay. And were they both also Perry?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And your mom?

MR. PERRY: Janice.

MS. RIEDEL: Janice.

MR. PERRY: Rush was her maiden name.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And do you have siblings?

MR. PERRY: I have a half-sister from my mom's second marriage, which is Katie [Kathleen -SP].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Katie.

MR. PERRY: Who lives up in Reno now.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And so that was kind of my visitations and then otherwise I lived three blocks from the beach and as soon as my mom would let me go to the beach by myself and go swimming, I spent after school there or whatever and, you know, it was a great neighborhood. They're all probably kids that are all about two or three years older than me.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So I got picked on a lot, but, you know, not—not bullied, just the easy guy to pick on. But also got taken surfing and whatnot because they had driver's license before I did. So it was—it was great. And then at about 13 my mom and stepfather moved up into Kaneohe, which is the neighboring city.

MS. RIEDEL: What's the city, sorry?

MR. PERRY: K-A-N-E-O-H-E.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And it's a little bit more of a working class. It doesn't have a beach and stuff, but we were right up against the mountains in a beautiful gated community that they had figured out that if they could rent out the bottom unit of our house they could afford to live there—

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. PERRY: —which was entirely against the rules of the community, but they got it. And so we had like an acre and a half, a horse, and you could walk up the thing to the base of the cliffs. And then also it was a tony neighborhood so there was a lot of rich kids. I don't know why they moved. I don't know if they thought I was hanging out with the wrong kids in Kailua, but they put me in with the really wrong kids.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I mean, with rich kids and lots of time and money—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: —to do what they wanted to so I've had some of my good friends have been to jail, but others, you know, were fine. There was great kids, and there—everybody got along and everything, but it was when you were going through your teenage years, so you did more bad things and whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a strong sense of any sort of native Hawaiian craft? Were either of your parents native or —

MR. PERRY: No. No one was native other than my father. [Grandfather was Portuguese -SP] My dad was really

focused on it because he was into Hawaiian canoes and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and even now as members of the Polynesian Voyage Society and the foundations. He does a lot of foundation work for the sailing canoes and is one of the leading authorities on canoe making in Hawaii I would say at this point.

MS. RIEDEL: How did he get into that? Do you know?

MR. PERRY: Well, I think my grandfather when he started the canoe club—I mean, my grandfather was a hard ass. He had three boys and he made them work. And so he—and he started—but he was a big community guy, too. He founded the local park, and rec center, and stuff. He was instrumental in helping to get that rolling. And I think he just started because he founded this canoe club, he started having to fix canoes or make canoes or whatever. He wasn't so much the craftsman as much as the manager.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Like he hired someone to help and my dad probably picked it up off of him.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And my uncles at certain—or at least my one, his younger brother, Colin [ph] would help and then he had a much younger brother that was kind of out of the loop because, you know, they were married and he was still going to college and then joined the military, and —but they're all there. They all live there now. Yeah, I think he just pursued it. I think he really—he really loves working with wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So and he really loves the ocean, he loves canoes, and he's gone on to, you know—he owns several —like, he'll get people to give him canoes that are wrecks and he'll restore them beautiful and then he ends up leasing them to hotels or whatever for lobbies.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. PERRY: And he still works, basically in the canoe racing society clubs they always want to have one wooden canoe, one Koa canoe, because one association requires it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And they'll only race it in regattas because—as opposed to long-distance races, because it's much more abuse on them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So he'd, you know—and every few years there's some redesign on it or something so they come back, or if someone worked on it then, or they crack. They're big boats with a lot of patches, so there's a lot of things that go wrong. They're sometimes a couple hundred years old because they—really the logs that make those canoes don't exist anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So they find them. A lot of times they'll find them somewhere that they've been sitting and sitting so long that the water's collected in the bottom and the bottom's rotted out so they'd flip it up and put a whole new bottom on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a particular kind of wood that was the most favored?

MR. PERRY: It's always Koa for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Always Koa.

MR. PERRY: Koa for a canoe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Or Breadfruit actually, smaller ones could be made of Breadfruit, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: He did work on a nice Breadfruit one.

MS. RIEDEL: And do those trees still exist in Hawaii?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: They just do—and most of them are on private land and they're mostly on the big island of Hawaii.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Every island has Koa, but it's very characteristic to the island. Like they just don't grow as big on Oahu or Maui, but there can be much prettier grains and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: They grow smaller and curlier. And to the, you know—he's come to the point, I was here in Oakland and I walked into the EcoTimber, which is like a green timber place that sustainably harvests or something, and I saw pallets of Koa. He flew over here, bought it all, and shipped it back because he got a good price. I mean, a better price than he could get in Hawaii.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And since he insures a local produce shipper that does cold shipping from here to Hawaii all the time, he was able to get them to just slip it on in a container or something and got free shipping, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Because his actual profession was as an insurance broker?

MR. PERRY: Right. He was an insurance broker, so he held the policy on their facility—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —up in the port of Oakland, so it all worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But I just thought it was so funny that he bought all this Koa and shipped it back.

MS. RIEDEL: That is amazing.

MR. PERRY: But, you know, he—that's the one thing he—his second passion is, like, I'm sure you've met most people stockpiling wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know, mostly because he—again he had his ex-wife—not my mother, his second wife; her parents passed away and they had a big stand of Koa on their property up in Maui that she wanted to get cut down, so he found a guy and they went and cut it down and he split it in half with them, you know, the wood, and they milled it all up and shipped it—he shipped it back to Hawaii. The other guy's making ukuleles probably with it in Maui, so.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's a rare wood?

MR. PERRY: It's rare and it's very popular for furniture.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I mean, it's a very popular furniture wood because it's got a beautiful grain. If I have any color in here it's in usually little spots but I have a couple of little pieces here and there that I've brought back and I do have a nice block I'm going to make a bowl out of that some guy—I bought off a friend of mine who was looking for money. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I'll have to take a look at that when we take a break. So were you interested in wood as a kid or is it just something you were hanging around and got into?

MR. PERRY: Well I—if I had to trace it back it was something I was always around. I would make little canoes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I made eight million skateboards when I was a kid.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I kind of came to the—or not—I was from the family that was, "I want that." It's like, "Well we don't have the money to buy it for you. You're going to make it or you're not going to have it." And so that's what happened and I got so good at it I'd start—you know, when I was a teenager I'd make skateboards and sell them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I'd make them out of Koa and because I had tons of scrap Koa, so I'd glue it all together in a big, you know, laminated plank and make all these great skateboards and make a little bit of extra money doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have photos?

MR. PERRY: No, unfortunately.

MS. RIEDEL: It'd be great to see some of those.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you make surfboards too?

MR. PERRY: I've made a few just for my—same thing: "If you want a new surfboard, you better make it." So I've done a few. I mean, I think I owned one new surfboard when I was a kid and my dad bought it for me on my birthday. And I remember I loved it and then I was surfing somewhere and the leash broke and it just smashed on the rocks [Laughs]. It still worked but it was just like that pristine thing was just dinged and dented to beyond belief. But after that, I've made a surfboard—I made a balsa surfboard about two years, three years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And my last longboard I made. So I still—to these days, I'll still make it usually.

MS. RIEDEL: And you still surf over here?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Actually, I hadn't surfed for a long time and then about five years ago a friend of mine who I went to school with in high school—I'd met her for the first probably—the first time since we graduated, and she said, "Oh, I'm surfing." She dragged me out there and I said, "Well, you know, with the wetsuit it's not that bad." So I actually surf more now than I have since I was probably 15 because I kind of got into windsurfing when I was in my late teens and spent a lot of time doing that and didn't surf. Hawaii was interesting, at least for me at that time, I was a tow-headed haole boy and surfing the North Shore or surfing anywhere, you got no respect.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I wasn't, you know, gaining any respect with the quality of my surfing either, so I just kind of liked the idea of windsurfing where you didn't have to sit in a crowd and sit and wait for a wave, and I just enjoyed it a lot more. I was better at it.

MS. RIEDEL: Less verbal abuse.

MR. PERRY: Less verbal abuse, less physical abuse. Although I was lucky, I really didn't ever get into fights or whatever, at least not surfing. I didn't get in fights with much else. I'm a pretty easy-going guy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. So it—

MS. RIEDEL: Any particular subjects in school, elementary school, high school, that were interesting to you? Any inclination towards art?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. No that's—in high school I went to Punahou, which is, you know, where Obama went and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It is a very competitive prep school and I'd say I got in because I was somewhat of a legacy. My mother and father went there. My grandmother went there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I got in at seventh grade. That's a year that's easy to get in because they expand the class by 150 students or something like that. A lot of my friends who I knew got in the same year so it was nice. Before that I went to a public school until fifth grade, Lanikai Elementary, that was not in our district but I could go because my grandmother lived in Lanikai.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And it was a smaller school. And went there and then my mom didn't feel I was getting—so I went to a school called Le Jardin des Enfants—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] France, I—

MR. PERRY: —which is a French school.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. PERRY: And I went there from second half of fifth grade to—finished in sixth. And we had six kids in my sixth grade class, five boys and one girl, and the girl who just got so much abuse, it was so bad.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. PERRY: But, you know—it was real small. And actually the person I just dropped off at the BART was one of the guys that I went to school with, still one of my best friends.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Going back to sixth grade?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Actually my two best friends I know from probably fifth or sixth grade, to this day.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And do they still live in Hawaii?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Both of them still live in Hawaii. One's an artist and then he's kind of property management kind of thing and vacationed here.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you speak French in this school?

MR. PERRY: I learned enough to take Spanish in seventh grade.

[They laugh]

MR. PERRY: Yes, but you had immersive—or not immersive French. We had a French class every day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But me getting in there in the second half of fifth grade and everybody being there for a couple years before, I didn't really pick it up. It was just—it was just regurgitating whatever they said.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I don't think I was comprehending anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Now how do you—Punahou? Punahou?

MR. PERRY: Punahou.

MS. RIEDEL: Punahou. Would you describe what that was like? Did you overlap with Obama at all?

MR. PERRY: He would have been a—yes. He would have been a senior when I was a freshman.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I probably—everybody asks me, "Did you know him?" I'd say, "I probably only knew him probably as one of the only black people at the school."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I would imagine.

MR. PERRY: And so that was it. Otherwise there was no—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: He was an upperclassman and I was like a little puny little freshman and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —not in the jock, you know. I could tell you probably where he hung out, but no.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And Punahou was like, I mean, having gone to college, I mean, it's so far beyond so many colleges as to the facilities and what you had there. It was ideal. Really starting in I would say even in seventh and eighth grade I had an art teacher who kind of recognized something in me.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Making—whether we're working clay or whatever I could, you know—she recognized something and actually I talked to her about a year ago for the first time because she saw my name somewhere that I'd had a show at Rena Bransten and she got a hold of them and left her number. And I called her back and it was Mrs. Van Dyke and she was actually really nice. It was nice for me to get to thank her.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were interested [from very early on –MR] with sculpture, two and three-dimensional things? You were trying—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, more so I was not a competent—I mean, I could draw but if you wanted me to draw a portrait I couldn't do that. It would have my—to this day I still can't do it, but I'm perfectly happy with the way I draw.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: It's just I'm not a good detailed graphic or, you know, portrait whatever. I have friends that can do it and I go, "Wow. That's great [Laughs]," but I didn't have an affinity. I probably felt that I couldn't draw at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But I think just working with wood and making—I was very competent with my hands, and I felt I could do most things, you know. I'm trying to remember what else I'd have to build. It seemed like I was always building something. And when I was a little kid I loved to take things apart, you know. We got our grandmother's old lawnmower and tried to make a go-cart out of it in the garage. My mom was always yelling at me because I had surfboard resin fumes doing this or that in the house.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I remember all my records I'd screw them up because I'd either be working with resin and then I'd go upstairs and put a record on with dirty fingers and then the resin would dry and ruin—I'd say, "Ah, I did that again."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But, yeah, it's—that was art but then, you know, at Punahou- art was not a profession.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. PERRY: I think more so now they take it much more seriously, maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: But it had glass blowing. It had, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Punahou had glass blowing?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And they had a ceramics workshop? They had wheels? They had kilns?

MR. PERRY: They had wheels. They had big kilns. My ceramics teacher was named Ron Simonelli and he basically built the ceramics department.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It was fairly new when I was there. It was open-air, a big roof, right next to the glass blowing. And he—I guess maybe I had two teachers, but my wheel throwing what was I really loved at that point. I mean, it was what I felt I was good at, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I could go up and I was—I kind of went through high school starting out really bad and getting a little bit better every year [Laughs] until maybe I'd pulled like up to a B minus by the time I graduated.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But I hated high school. I mean, I liked the idea. I loved the social part of it was great. I just—I didn't like math. I failed math my first year and, even with a tutor. And—

MS. RIEDEL: You're in good company [Laughs].

MR. PERRY: English and stuff was okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I didn't have any problem with that. Not a—wasn't a big history guy, and science, you know. I did it all but it wasn't—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It was—some of it was interesting and some of it wasn't.

MS. RIEDEL: So what you loved was the social aspect of it but you also loved to surf. You loved the surfboard and you loved to work with—you loved to make things.

[Cross talk.]

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And that was all—yeah. And that was part of the social aspect because you were with a lot of your friends at school and you say, "Well we're going to go surf," or, "We're going to go do this."

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And, you know, when you'd drive home we'd all catch the bus home and you'd come through the tunnels and you'd look and you'd go, "Oh, look at the waves. It's big today." You could see the outer reef breaking or something from the top of the Pali. But I guess, you know, by the time I was a senior I kind of felt like, "Hey. I'm an art star. That's about it."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Which is better than nothing.

MS. RIEDEL: That's established. Exactly.

MR. PERRY: Better than nothing. Better than feeling like, you know, and I got out of school with basically, "What am I going to do?" My colleges were—my parents, I was lucky enough that they were going to pay for me to go to school, but they weren't going to pay for me to go to art school.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MR. PERRY: Right off the bat at least.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And so I went to East Carolina University in Greenville, NC—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —for a year and sight unseen. I mean, it was basically I got in and I think I might have applied to Southern Oregon and some other small schools, but East Carolina had a very good art department for its thing, and so I figured, "I'll go there." So I went sight unseen. Unfortunately, when I got off there everybody had gone to orientation, everything—classes, art classes taken, you know. So I got into like an art history, I think, my first semester and that was it. And I, you know, the art history was 300 students in an auditorium with a lecturer. And then I got—the second semester I got into what my required art classes were and they were, you know—I don't know, it was color theory or it was something. It was drawing—one was a basic drawing class and the other one was isometric drawing, more graphic kind of stuff. And I realized kind of that I was going to have—I was already a semester behind and I was going to have to take—it was going to be like I was going to be a junior before I could put my hands on any clay or anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I don't know. And I had a girlfriend from high school who was going to Columbia. It was in—at Stephens in Columbia, MO—college. And we were both—the long distance thing was not, whatever, working out, and so she was transferring to Saint Mary's College [Moraga, CA] and—

MS. RIEDEL: Here in California?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, in Orinda. And I was transferring to—I finally had gotten my parents to commit to letting me transfer to CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts].

MS. RIEDEL: How did you do that?

MR. PERRY: I think they just saw that—I don't know. I can't remember how but I just said, "I want to go to art school. I don't want to sit here and, you know, do piddly art classes that won't let me do what I want to do."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And CCAC is the opposite. You get there, you're doing it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you need a portfolio to get in?

MR. PERRY: Not at that stage.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Not—I mean, I remember, I had heard of CCAC because when we were seniors in high school you could get out of classes to go to college—because we always had colleges coming through trying to hawk themselves and whatever, so you could get out of a class and go to a college lecture, so who didn't want to do that. And I remember we had the CCAC thing and—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. So they came over to recruit?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. They come over to recruit and I remember someone asked the question like, "What are your requirements to get in?" And the answer was pretty much, "Apply."

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Those were early days.

MR. PERRY: Early days.

MS. RIEDEL: So you graduated high school in '82?

MR. PERRY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did you actually arrive at CCAC?

MR. PERRY: I graduated in '82 so I arrived probably the fall of '83.

MS. RIEDEL: '84? '83?

MR. PERRY: Wait—because I started in the fall of '82—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I arrived the fall of '83.

MS. RIEDEL: '83. Okay.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And got right to it, you know. And worked well, actually I lived in a house right near school. My girlfriend lived in Moraga.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And then we'd, you know, meet on the weekends or whatever and it was great.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you arrived. [... -MR] Viola Frey was teaching.

MR. PERRY: Viola was teaching. She was on sabbatical that year.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And so you only heard about Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And that's almost worse than never meeting—than meeting Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Why do you say that?

MR. PERRY: Well because she came with such a big, "Oh, Viola, Viola, Viola, Viola," you know, and it was like she didn't even bother teaching downstairs students [undergraduate and non-ceramic majors -SP]. She only taught the advanced ceramics and graduate students at that stage.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And so you—she just kind of had this aura built up, like, you know, "She can crush you, or break you, or whatever." And that's kind of the thing she carried all through school. Once you knew her—I didn't—I mean, once I knew her I didn't see that in her, but anybody who didn't could be very—she could be very imposing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well she'd had her Crocker [Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA] retrospective a couple years before you [arrived -MR].

MR. PERRY: Right. And she'd actually—she'd just had her Whitney when I—

MS. RIEDEL: '84 I think.

MR. PERRY: Was it—yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So it was probably by the time I was really aware. I mean, the other thing with—when I got to CCAC and saw how their clay—it was just completely different than the clay I was used to. I was used to big stoneware, high temperature, and this was all low fire, bright colors. It was like looking to me like people were just using paint on clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I was going, "Well, geez, this is—," you know and I don't know if I was like being a stick in the mud or something like that, being the, "I don't want to change," or—but, their philosophy was like, "Man, that's not art. That's just pottery and stuff." I mean,—well I shouldn't say it. It's not that bad but it's like, "Anybody can do that. You need to do something that's unique and special," and they kind of cultivated that more.

MS. RIEDEL: So very clear from the start that this was not a pot shop.

MR. PERRY: "We're not going to do glaze tests."

[... -MR]

MR. PERRY: "We're not going to teach you a million years of glaze tests. We're not going to teach you glaze theory," and some people really hated it because of that. They wanted, you know—they wanted all that analytical, "This tile looks great."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And it was—it was good. So I did—I think by my second year I got upstairs because that's the big thing, you know. That's basically—you have a portfolio review to see if you can go upstairs.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I mean, it was a big step, or whatever. So I got up there and then—

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you making, Sam? Do you remember that early on what it was?

MR. PERRY: I was also taking a sculpture class with Paul Harris.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And he was another person that had a lot of aura and he basically—I took my work in and he says, "I don't think I'm going to work with you. This stuff is horrible," you know. Just—he says, "You need—"

MS. RIEDEL: He said that to you?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And he—he kind of—I don't know if he messed me up or made me better, but he said, "You need to go back to pure form," and stuff. So I just started doing this weird, like real blocky things and working and by the time I got my undergraduate degree I'd already kind of started into the curvilinear forms and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I could take you back and show you a piece actually. I have one piece hanging around.

MS. RIEDEL: I've seen a few of them.

MR. PERRY: And so I kind of knew what—I mean, I knew the direction I wanted to go I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Into graduate—but I'd still not had one class with Viola all throughout. I didn't have a class with Viola until graduate school. In fact—

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: I didn't really properly meet Viola until I started working for her.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating. I had no idea.

MR. PERRY: Because she was either on a sabbatical or Manufacture Sèvres, I don't know when that was but—

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry, what was that?

MR. PERRY: She went to France for—

MS. RIEDEL: '86 I think. '87? Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. So I started working for her at about '87 I would say.

MS. RIEDEL: I thought it was earlier than that. I thought it was '82.

MR. PERRY: No, no, no.

MS. RIEDEL: No. Okay.

MR. PERRY: It would've been—I started working for her—when did I graduate? If I graduated in '86, I started shortly after that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Because I was working for another professor who—he was the tech and a teacher. His name was Tony Costanza and he had gone into business making wooden toys.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh—is this related to ABZ by chance?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that happen? He had a wooden toy company?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, but it was his house.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay [Laughs.] It's called ABZ Toys?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. He was going to make kind of retro, good old retro, wooden, simple toys.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So he asked me if I wanted—and I'm not sure how—he obviously knew I could handle tools somehow or something because it was basically me. It was a one-man operation and I'd start with raw wood, have to cut it into all the parts, and make—and the toy was called the Rocking City and was basically a city skyline of San Francisco. It had the Transamerica Building, which made it look like San Francisco. I guess that was the one I.D.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And when you rolled it had the cams and it would—they'd shake back and forth, so we'd make those. I made, I don't know, thousands of them.

MS. RIEDEL: What was it called? The Rolling City?

MR. PERRY: Rocking City.

MS. RIEDEL: The Rocking City.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Playing—

MS. RIEDEL: And they were all handmade?

MR. PERRY: All handmade and the only thing I was really rotten at was putting—they had labels on it for the windows and the stuff and I could never keep my hands clean enough. I'd get glue all over them so he and his wife would end up doing it. "I don't understand why you can't do this."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And I'd say, "I'm sorry. I'm just not neat." So I did that for about a year maybe, maybe even less. I was taking any job I could at that point. I would do that. I would make clay down in Richmond at a—there's East Bay Clay, which we always used to buy our clay from.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I'd make clay one—go work there one day a week, and then—

MS. RIEDEL: But before we get past undergrad I just want to take a minute to talk about who the significant professors there, significant work, what you took away from there that was—

MR. PERRY: Undergrad I had very—I mean, Dennis Gallagher was probably my most significant. I always told people you kind of graduated out of one, I mean, symbolic, whatever. You graduated—you found a professor that was going where you were going. The one you were working for was great but now you wanted to go—so Art Nelson was the prime—my primary, and he was great but then I kind of realized when you get—I'm doing more sculpture, he was a little more pottery.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Or pot oriented and then Dennis came in—to replace Viola on a sabbatical.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And he was much more—he liked to talk, number one, and he was much more about sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Monumental forms. I can see the connection.

MR. PERRY: I'd made one or two big pieces but I didn't know that's what I wanted to do. I did—when I was in grad school I realized when I was doing my clay work that anytime I'd do a small piece it'd look like a maquette.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: But the big piece—and that's the one thing I will say about my wood is I never feel like a little thing is a maquette.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: For some reason—I don't know why. I can't explain it, but—so Dennis came in and he was there and also I was working with Judy Foosaner who was basically a composition drawing teacher and I liked because she mainly worked abstract and it was very—I mean, I remember my first class she said, "Everybody go down to Safeway and buy a bell pepper." And then they said—then she said, "Pick every—," you know, "Just start turning that bell pepper around and picking shapes you like, and this and that." And so I worked with her. I think I took a class every semester with her and then I worked with her by arrangement in grad school because I was always—even in undergrad and even though I didn't have Viola, they put a strong emphasis on drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know, "You should be drawing. You should be drawing. You're not one-dimensional," you know. So—and Viola would take it further. She'd say, you know—in any undergrad or whatever you'd have the Viola disciples, you know. They were the ones that, "You always should have a sketch book," or what she'd tell you is, "Go buy a used book and whatever and just use that. Glue stuff in it, whatever you want." So there were people who, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Buy a used book?

MR. PERRY: Like a used big book, cheap, and just use the pages to glue whatever you want to keep important in that; not necessarily—it doesn't have to be a sketchbook, per say.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: It just has to be a book of ideas and—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And then she would get into it with her clay. She'd do I think it was the 20 marks. Like if you'd do something you'd have to mark it to—I wasn't as much into that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [... -MR] What is 20 marks?

MR. PERRY: Well like, if you're building something you have to mark the clay and keep your mind occupied while you're building it, either drawing on the clay or something. In some people that worked. In my work it didn't quite work for that.

MS. RIEDEL: So was it a way to get people especially engaged in the material?

MR. PERRY: I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, I'm not—I mean, she did—had a lot of things you should do that she either grew out of or I didn't see her do as much when I did it. I mean, she was a voracious, ripper-outer of magazines. I mean, she got subscribed to every magazine in the world and then she'd have piles of pictures, whether it was a man in a suit, woman in a dress, a certain pose, this or that. She would just have piles and they'd end up at the studio or they wouldn't.

MS. RIEDEL: So [constant, new -MR] information to look at and use?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And actually that's perfect because that's what she called it. She said, "You need to have information."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So she was very much that way, especially in the early years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, let's just finish up with undergrad and then we can move [on -MR]. So how did you decide from undergrad to go into grad? You took a year off and were teaching?

MR. PERRY: I took a year off and worked.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And during that year—all I can say is when I got out of undergrad school I broke up with my girlfriend.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I think I might have even taken a by-arrangement or a class with Judy Foosaner just after, because when I got out of undergrad school I didn't feel like I was done. I wasn't ready is the best way to say it. I wasn't, you know—I didn't know—and that was part of what caused me to break up. I went through this panic like, "Oh my God. I'm going to get out of school, I'm going to get some weird job, and I'm never going to do any of this stuff that I went to school for again." So I mean, that was kind—I started, you know, working in my living room doing drawings because that's all—I didn't have a studio and I was doing drawings, taking this class, and so that was kind of, "Well I need to get back and do more clay or something." And the only reason I can say I wasn't done is because by the time I got done with graduate school I knew I wanted to get the hell out of there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I was sick of—graduate school is just—when we get to graduate school it's just such a different thing, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Anything significant about that year; that, for want of a better term, gap year between college or—

MR. PERRY: Other than doing every job in the world, I mean, what happened is I was doing every job. Then at some point I started working for Viola one day a week and I think ABZ was not doing great, so they let me pull back to maybe three days a week or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd met Viola somehow by this point?

MR. PERRY: Well what happened was I was working at East Bay Clay and then at my house I was living at—my roommate, who I—just because I broke up with my girlfriend and we were living together. My roommate who I'd moved in who was also a fellow ceramic student; he was a grad student named Michio Sugiyama and very much from Japan, obviously. And he was on his way back to Japan right about when I moved in with him and he was also working for Viola a day a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And he said, you know, "I've got this job. I think you'd be good at it," and stuff. So I met with Kevin Anderson, more or less because he was her primary assistant at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh. I remember that.

MR. PERRY: And he said, you know—he was—he was great. I mean, he basically showed me what to do, you know. He said, "We're going to do this." And I always worked with him on a Saturday. And he was great on many levels. He was very gay. Probably the first very gay person I had known in my life and—and very—he was very funny. He was just—and he knew Viola. I mean, he knew Viola. He could relate with her on the levels I never could just because I'm a different personality than he is. But he would—[Laughs] he would be very cross about her sometimes. "The queen—the queen says I have to do this. Well, you know, when the queen says it you have to do it." And so I was doing that and I mean, the most significant thing I would say of that year is I applied to grad school, got accepted, and Viola probably gave me grief about it anyways and said, "That wasn't very good. We took you but it wasn't a very good portfolio," or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MR. PERRY: But right about the time school was going to start I got a call from Kevin one night and he said, "I have AIDS. I can't work anymore. I mean, I'm not going, I can't—I'm done." And so Viola was worried probably more than I was just because, "What am I going to do," and this and that. And she was going to hire another guy and I kind of went, "No. I know what to do. You're not." And the guy I knew she was going to hire wouldn't have worked out I could probably see anyway. So basically I started grad school and Viola full-time at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: This would have been '86?

MR. PERRY: '87 probably.

MS. RIEDEL: '87.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Which was intimidating thinking about it but—in retrospect was great. I mean, what a—it

helped me immensely.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. PERRY: Because my work while not subject—have any similarities subjectively to Viola's technically was very close, what was going on inside the pieces. So I was able kind of to just trial and error 800 times faster with Viola because she was working at that pace. And I learned from how they did things there and then down the line I took things that I did and told her about them and said, you know, "We should do—you should do this because then this, this, this," and I'll get into that more when we get closer to whatever specifically.

I probably saw Kevin once after that and then he killed himself six months later, or so. And you know, all we were saying is if he'd stayed alive another year he'd probably still be alive.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. PERRY: He just missed the drugs by that much.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But, you know, when he did kill himself it's like—he had told me. He said, "If I've got to do it I'm going to drown myself." And he said that, "Virginia Wolfe, da-da-da-da," you know. "It's supposed to be peaceful, this and that and da-da-da-da." So I—while I was very sad I was—at least he got to go out somewhat on his terms.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, he was afraid of being like so many friends he had seen just stuck in a hospital bed with a brain of mush.

MS. RIEDEL: That was an intense time.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: A lot of people were really sick.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. You know Art died a few years later I think. And I had shared a studio with Art and Dennis for years. That was another—the other most probably significant time of that year off or whatever I started working for Viola and Viola is one—and Viola's—if anything she was famous for when you were just sweating, beat down, and stuff she'd go, "You're doing your own work, aren't you? You're still doing your own work, aren't you?" [Laughs.] Because you know she felt guilty or something or she just wanted to make you feel guilty.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But what happened in that year is that Kevin was renting a studio, he got into another studio, offered me his studio, so I actually got a studio space in that year off. And that helped a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: That was a pivotal year for you.

MR. PERRY: I mean, that was a pivotal year. I was able to do big drawings and I was still doing more drawing than anything there, because well, what I had was a kiln, was a teeny little kiln. It's all reasons why I don't do clay now [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about grad school and then segue into Viola because it [seems that both were –MR] starting to happen right about the same time.

MR. PERRY: Okay. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So you returned to CCAC for an MFA?

MR. PERRY: MFA, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was clear that you were going to be working in ceramic sculpture?

MR. PERRY: I was going to be working in ceramic sculpture and I think we had like six grad students that year, which was a lot: Six new ones.

MS. RIEDEL: Anybody significant that you remember?

MR. PERRY: Deirdre Daw is the only one that I have kind of been in contact with and she lives in Memphis now, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: But no, most of the other ones either have—I'm trying to think was there—maybe there was less than six. I can't remember the other two [Laughs] or three.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]

MR. PERRY: We had one guy that had to get transferred because—to sculpture. I don't know, it was one of those things where they failed him and then he threatened a lawsuit and so they basically relocated him because they had huge personality conflicts with him. But we were the first—I think we were the first grad class that was undergoing this new graduate program—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —which was a lot more. We had a lot of seminars. We had—we had it started off with a seminar and I think maybe there were—I think there was only like 15 grad students of the whole school that year.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And we had a four-teacher seminar, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Who was teaching besides Viola?

MR. PERRY: She wasn't. That was just—this was like an interdisciplinary seminar.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So this was all the grad students, all the first years together, but Viola was teaching grad and Art.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So you basically had two people you met with once each week I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there much crossover or interaction with Berkeley or with Davis?

MR. PERRY: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing?

MR. PERRY: No. Other than—

MS. RIEDEL: But was everyone aware of what was going on?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Everyone was aware of what was going on but really not—especially not Berkeley. I mean, maybe later on. I mean, Viola didn't like Peter Voulkos really that much I don't think.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: He was too good old boy for her. But in a way she—

MS. RIEDEL: Was Melchert there yet?

MR. PERRY: She liked Jim, yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But—

MS. RIEDEL: Different sensibilities.

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MR. PERRY: Loved—loved Robert Arneson at Davis, and stuff. And then the only crossover we ever had is like we'd have lectures or someone would come and lecture, I think Bob Brady came and lectured and did a critique. I actually saw him about six months ago and I said, "You know, you gave me the nastiest critique when I was in grad school, da-da-da-da." And then I saw him like a week later and he said, "I really wanted to apologize, you

know. I think I really ruined you." I said, "No, Bob." I said, "It's really just the only entry into a conversation I have with you."

[They laugh]

MR. PERRY: It's not this trauma that I've—going, "I'll show him."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] It's hard to imagine him doing that.

MR. PERRY: It was just, you know—it was just—I remember the critique. He's like, "These are kind of modern forms and I really don't—I'm not interested in them." So [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: So much of his work has been figurative.

MR. PERRY: Right. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Viola too, so it was interesting that you were very clearly [abstract and minimal -MR] from the start.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, somewhat. I mean, I always—yeah. Definitely. And I don't know, I—you know, sometimes I guess the few things that I've done that are figurative in my life have just seemed so cliché and, you know, just sappy. I don't know. But so—

MS. RIEDEL: But Viola was so interested in surface and color that there certainly were plenty of things to work with her on: Form, size, scale.

MR. PERRY: Right. Yeah, Viola—so what happened basically in that first year is you realize that it's—the one thing I remember is from these interdisciplinary critiques is that, you know, you'd have to go and show your portfolio or your work the first day and some people—you know, there weren't computers then, but some people had the equivalent of Power Point presentations, music in the background, this and—da-da-da-da. And it went through this whole thing but it would come up to the clay and say, "Why clay? Why clay?" And so we'd go back to our professors and say, "You know—" and they'd say, "Why not?" you know. It became adversary, somewhat—not adversarial, but somewhat to, "Don't let them tell you not to use clay." So you had the—you had your graduate students in your department and that was fine. We all got along great. Then you'd go out with the interdisciplinary and even the students were fine. It was the professors that were trying to—and that's what graduate school is: Is not—is making you stand up for yourself is what I think it ultimately is.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Did you consider other media? You were drawing always. You were working in ceramic. Anything else? Painting?

MR. PERRY: To some degree but, yeah. No, I did painting too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Kind of with the drawing and painting. I think I started drawing—I can't remember why I came up to like drawing a lot more than painting. It was either the not waiting for things to dry and I was mainly doing drawing on—well I think what drawing helped with me is definitely within sculpture and ceramics I was most—a lot of people are terrified of color because you can make a great piece of clay and you can ruin it with glaze.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And it's not something you can easily undo.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So that's what the drawing and everything kind of helped me with my color scheme to a certain—I mean, at least explore color—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and become a little bit more comfortable with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that something that you saw Viola doing in some ways too?

MR. PERRY: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I'd say she was very confident with color and I couldn't—

MS. RIEDEL: But there was a back and forth between her painting and her clay to be sure and that, kind of, exploration, no?

MR. PERRY: Right. Yeah. I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, either that or just, you know, historical: Either going to Matisse and trying to do his palette, and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But it—

MS. RIEDEL: Did she do that?

MR. PERRY: Oh, yeah. She has a whole bunch of pieces that she would definitely—you could definitely see the Matisse years of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Probably about mid-80s, mid to late 80s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Were there other artists she did that with as well?

MR. PERRY: Dubuffet.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: In earlier pieces, a lot of the blackline pieces of Dubuffet.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Other than—

MS. RIEDEL: Did you all talk about that?

MR. PERRY: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: The one thing I will say that I never talked with Viola is, "What are you doing? Why are you doing it?" You know, I guess because I'm sensitive to those questions and I think that if you're working with—I mean, the one thing with Viola and I is we never really worked with each other and still much—until near the end of her life—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —where it was necessary that I was helping her but other than that I was in the back room, she was in the front room, and the most I did was get her clay or something like that; but I was busy doing the nuts and bolts of the piece, and getting it to stand up, and getting it in kiln, and doing—and that was way—and plenty enough work there.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, while we're on it let's talk about her working process because I think you probably have more insight into it than just about anybody else. It would be helpful to document that.

MR. PERRY: Well I mean, from—we'll start with the working process when I started working for her—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —is she more or less came into the studio at, I don't know, I'd say 10 in the morning. We were usually there at 8 or 9. And she would—she had her big table and her TV—and had her TV on. She would sit at her table and do stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: What did she watch or listen to?

MR. PERRY: She would—well actually she used to listen to the radio a lot and then at some point she got a TV and then I think at one point I walked by and said, "Oh, I know this soap opera. This and this and this." I

explained it to her and then boom, she was sucked in, you know.

[They laugh.]

MR. PERRY: From college in North Carolina, I said, "Oh, yeah. That's General Hospital. This guy's this guy," you know. But—

MS. RIEDEL: That's funny.

MR. PERRY: She'd do that and she'd usually have anywhere from three to six pieces in process and she'd kind of float around and work on them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And build up what—you know, there was only about this much she could build a day probably.

MS. RIEDEL: So six inches tops?

MR. PERRY: She used incredibly soft clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I saw that on I think it was a Spark episode.

MR. PERRY: Oh, right. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The clay looked extremely soft for such large figures.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. It was. Well she liked it because pretty much if you just set it on it, it would stick. And she—

MS. RIEDEL: No slipping. No scoring.

MR. PERRY: No slipping. No scoring and all that. And it was easier on her hands.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And she had—well later on she had carpal tunnel and stuff, and she'll blame it on one piece [Laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: Which piece?

MR. PERRY: And it's probably true—the big—the first big globe, the first big world she built from the ground up and did it. I think—I think I built every one after that because—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: You know, it got to the point where you're building a big ball; it really doesn't matter who's building it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It's a big canvas and so we would—after that we'd build it—a dome or half a dome, fire it, flip it upside down, cut it apart, flip it upside down, and then build the other half on top.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And—

MS. RIEDEL: You could do that, no shrinkage issues?

MR. PERRY: Oh, plenty of shrinkage issues.

[They laugh]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: No. What we could do is—what we'd do is I would take the original measurement of the bottom, cut a plywood piece, then set it on the top so I knew what—about what it was going to do but nothing shrinks in a perfect circle so it might suck in more on the other side and then you grind it. I mean, there's a lot of Viola's work—my work for Viola was grinding.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Either she would—what she would do is she'd build the pieces all the way to the top and they were built on. The legs were fired, if they were a standing piece. The legs were fired and then she'd build the top and the same shrinkage issues.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And what she would do is she would lay a sheet of plastic across it and then kind of just build and try to hold up that edge so it didn't wrap all over, but ultimately it always wrapped over and cracked [Laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I would think. But a fairly localized crack, it would be trouble.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. It would just be like a little flange that would pop off and we'd either kiln cement—we used a ton of kiln cement, which is basically what they use to build kilns.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But we'd use it to glue clay together.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And not to be totally nerdy but what kind of clay body?

MR. PERRY: It's a—it was a talc and Kentucky ball clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It was—

MS. RIEDEL: Like a sculpture mix?

MR. PERRY: Sculpture mix with a real heavy grog, about 30 percent of it, a lot of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. PERRY: And it—so it was—and a lot of bentonite, so when it dried it wasn't—before it was fired, it was an incredibly strong clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So you didn't have to worry about it because you were sawing these things apart.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems extraordinary that you could saw it and it wouldn't crack.

MR. PERRY: No. And that's what I was talking earlier about kind of taking some—a little bit of what I learned in my work. I was doing elongated curves and stuff that I couldn't separate with plastic.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I'd build it in one whole piece and build all the separations in them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And kind of either drill a hole or cut a hole and look inside and see where it was going to be. But I finally said to her, I said, "You know, why don't we just build them all in one piece? We'll build the walls inside, and then we'll just"—because we used to just saw them vertically.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And I said, "We'll just saw the whole thing," because at that point I had said—again I kind of said, "Okay. We can use a Sawzall," because we used to do it all by hand. We took a Sawzall and then I found this one great blade that I could just bend the teeth a little bit more and it would last. I mean, we might only use two blades to cut down a whole piece because they'd eventually just wear away to a butter knife from the grit of the clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And that kind of allowed her to just go, be in it, and not so much "Okay I've got to stop here and make a flat surface, let it set up for a couple days, put the plastic on it, and build again." It would let her kind of

go. And then later on to the point where she could go enough and I'd say, "Okay, Viola. That"—and because she wouldn't necessarily know what I—problems I was coming across on the insides of her pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So I'd say, "How about I just build the wall here where I know there's—a section needs to be?"

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Because you—

MS. RIEDEL: So you would build an internal infrastructure?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I'd build an internal infrastructure.

MS. RIEDEL: And then she would apply the external to that?

MR. PERRY: Well—or she'd do the external above it and I'd go back inside and put the flanges on for the bolting walls—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —to do that because, again, well she wanted to make a piece that was safe and sturdy.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: She wasn't always aware of when you make a hole here, I can't get a bolt in, or if you make a hole there or I need a little bit more room, my hand can't fit, this or that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So that just kind of made my job easier and I learned to kind of go along and look, and say, "Can I do it here instead of here or at this angle because this angle will always open up?" They were all things I just learned because it was done the wrong way once and I wasn't aware or I'd done it on my piece and I wasn't aware or something like that, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Was the idea of fiberglass ever an option? I know Jerry Rothman too had incredibly strong clay that he could cantilever out. Was that an option or did you figure out your own structure and this was the right one?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. We figured out she didn't have a lot of—I mean, I did, but she didn't and usually in mine it was meeting up with something else so it's like the keystone. Once you got it in there it was going to be strong.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And, you know, the biggest pieces that we ever made with her—there's was—there's a big one in Principal Financial Group in Des Moines.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: That was probably one of the larger commissions she's done, and it was a big column with a globe on top of the column. The piece is about 13 or 14 feet tall with two figures standing next to it on either side.

MS. RIEDEL: So one of the group pieces?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, but it's just a big—it's really like three pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. This would have been the mid-90s? Earlier than that?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Probably mid-90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And we had to do a whole steel infrastructure to hold the globe up because we had to do a post-up to the top and things out to the—just because that kind of weight with the—I think the column was like six feet or something, so it was quite big.

MS. RIEDEL: Six feet wide?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Six feet in diameter.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: There's no way you could've safely put like something—you probably could've put a piece of steel on top of it, but you could also see it above so it had the edge in that thing and the steel was just under the globe. That was the biggest one. Then she did a really big one down in Pasadena, too, that was just a single figure. That was probably the biggest single figure that she's done. It's a hammering man down on his knees and each piece weighed like 200 pounds and it was supposedly permanent. I hope I never get called to do anything with it.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: A few—I think while she was still alive someone had vandalized it and broke the hammer and they were missing the thumb. So they sent the arm up, she built a new thumb on it, and we sent it to the restorer, and through the conservator and they matched it all up. I mean, that was what was nice about Viola's pieces is you usually could go back and fix them to a certain extent. These days it's, you know—it's a big deal.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you see much influence in her work from her travels? I know when you started working with her she'd just been to the workshop in Sèvres. I think she was also in the Netherlands.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I think—

MS. RIEDEL: She was [also at Pilchuck -MR] in the early '90s.

MR. PERRY: She did a—she did a—

MS. RIEDEL: And then Shigaraki and—Hertogenbosch.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I went to her with Shigaraki. And Shigaraki was more of a—what she did is she built two pieces here and fired them because we realized there was no way—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —because we were only there for like two weeks or something like that, maybe three. I think it was two. There was no way that she was going to be able to build anything, so she basically just glazed these pieces at Shigaraki. And it was like being in a zoo. I mean, there were 40,000 people a day.

MS. RIEDEL: Forty thousand?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And they'd stream through like. They'd just stream through and it was amazing. I mean, it was great. I had a great time but it was—the ceramic center in Shigaraki was, I think it was the first year or second. Michio Sugiyama, that's how she got the invitation.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: He was working there in some form, not as an artist, but in the administration.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it sort of shocking to be in a place where clay is so highly revered?

MR. PERRY: Oh, yeah, and the other thing that was shocking is you'd go buy a lunch like from the outdoor lunch thing and it's in a clay pot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And you throw it away at the end of the day. I mean, it wasn't a souvenir. It wasn't anything. It was just—

MS. RIEDEL: That was the packaging.

MR. PERRY: That was a Dixie cup, or whatever. So yeah, I ended up bringing—like every time, "I can't throw this away," [Laughs.] A bowl of rice in a ceramic bowl for whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: So those travels, did you see them influence her work in any way? Not so much?

MR. PERRY: Well, I think again in the gathering of information.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: She'd go to the Louvre and buy every darn slide they had or something like that or that kind of thing. I would say the biggest thing that I ever saw influence her is when she started collecting Jain art, Jain drawings, Jain manuscripts.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: J-A-I-N.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MR. PERRY: And she got that. She started getting into that real kind of Indianesque drawings with the black lines and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I saw that more than anything else and she had a dealer in New York that she'd like to go see and he'd always bring out the best, you know; because she was—that was the thing with Viola: You'd either go to the art store or anything and she'd drop a couple of thousand dollars in the blink of an eye and everybody was just like, "I don't believe it. She's nuts." She'd go to Amsterdam Art or whatever, when it was still open and she'd buy those big Sennelier pastels that are about 25-30 bucks apiece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: "I'll have all of those, all of those, all of those."

MS. RIEDEL: So that was where the funds would go?

MR. PERRY: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Because she was frugal other than that, yes?

MR. PERRY: She was real frugal.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: She liked clothes, liked to buy clothes. She was not frugal in art materials, not frugal in her students.

MS. RIEDEL: Or books?

MR. PERRY: Or books, oh no. Definitely not in books and publications.

MS. RIEDEL: Now with her students, could you say more about that? What do you mean?

MR. PERRY: Well I mean, like she would come in and bring in a ream of paper, a ream of this, a ream of this, plaster and say, "We're doing drawings on paper with plaster today." And you know, she supplying all the materials and—or she'd, you know—she'd take them all out to lunch. She'd do this. She was really ingratiating to these students. And she had students that loved her or students that hated her. That's—I mean, there wasn't a lot of middle of the road with Viola, and—

[Audio break.]

—because she could be fairly abrupt in criticism or bleak too. She could just go, "Huh? I don't understand what you're saying." And, I would say when you had a crit, that's when you knew what was going on in Viola's brain in her studio. Because she'd bring up these issues like—and I'd know it because I'd be in the studio. "You're dealing with this with your work now."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: "And that's why you're bringing it up so much here."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Or some book she read. I remember she read Lévi-Strauss or Claude Lévi-Strauss or something—

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, right. Yes.

MR. PERRY: —and structuralism, and this and that. And, I could never wrap my head around any of that.
[Laughs]

MS. RIEDEL: And [the bricoleur artist as -MR] junk man, that was so significant—

MR. PERRY: Right. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And while she had—I mean, there's a lot I don't know about Charles—I mean, Viola. And I would say her relationship with Charles was one of them. I know that he was probably her more—or she—he was probably her most important critic—to her.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, okay

MR. PERRY: I mean, there was always a day: "I'm bringing Charles down to the studio today, you know, he might be around." And, Charles was not one to—when he was down in the studio he was bound to look at—he was—I have letters from him when he would come to this studio and when she was still working, he'd wander over to my studio and he'd leave me a long list. And say, "I was just spending a great hour in your studio and was looking at—" and he'd sit there and go at every drawing and you know, he was incredible—he was great at that—very sensitive, very insightful.

MS. RIEDEL: He'd critique your work whether you were there or not. He'd leave you a long list of his thoughts.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they helpful? Did they seem accurate?

MR. PERRY: I mean, yeah they were helpful and they were—it was another point of view.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and usually one that you would know you would never solicit. Because he was also very volatile and he probably wouldn't like it if you asked—you know, I think for him to go and sit down and enjoy it is something different then for him to say, "Can you go look at this?"

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So you know, I think it was pretty—and but I don't think—he could be pretty coarse with Viola, too—"Frey, da, da, da." you know. And especially again with his volatility as he got older or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe that relationship?

MR. PERRY: I would describe it as—I mean, it was mutual support. And for people who don't have anybody else in a way, you know, as Squeak or somebody said, you know—what's his name? Coykendall—Corky put them together.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know, and I think it was partly because Corky was in some relationship with Charles—and again, this is—a lot of this is hearsay because this is kind of before my time, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —unfortunately, Kevin knew the stories, or he'd make them up, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But he always knew, kind of, you know, he knew what went on in her head and he knew the history, because he had a long history with her and Art, and she was very close with Art Nelson.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: They were all faculty—you know he was—I don't know if he was ever a tech, but he came out of CCAC also. But he had mentioned that—I don't know actually—well I guess Squeak mentioned that they were kind of put together and I know that Charles had had a relationship with Corky that either ended volatily, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Was that a known fact that he'd had that relationship? I'm just—

MR. PERRY: I'm not sure, I mean, but most people would say that Charles and Corky had a relationship. That

they may have even known each other from the war or something, they might've—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

MR. PERRY: And I don't know if he put them together to—again, I don't—I'd be—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —really just—

MS. RIEDEL: Speculating.

MR. PERRY: —speculating at that point. There—you know, it's along the same—you know, why is Viola estranged from her family?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: What Kevin always told me was, "Viola was an accountant at Macy's." He said, "And in her accountant mind she added up how many hours of her life is going to be spent dealing her family and decided it's not worth it."

[They laugh]

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: So I mean, that's—

MS. RIEDEL: Did she ever talk with you about any of that, her family, or—

MR. PERRY: The only thing she ever mentioned was, you know, her mother and father. Really never talked about her brother as much. Talked about her grandmother and going on the farm, on the grape farm or whatever it was, but not—

MS. RIEDEL: She never talked about her dad and all the old stuff that he had, or—

MR. PERRY: The radios and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Now, see I can't even know if I've read that or—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I would say she really didn't talk about it. She didn't have a lot of love for going back to the valley so to speak.

MS. RIEDEL: Supposedly she didn't see her siblings for the last forty years or so of her life.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And the other story I'd probably heard from Kevin is that a brother came to visit her once. She turned off the lights and didn't answer the door. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: When—I met her brothers it was at her memorial service and they seemed like perfectly nice people. I don't—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: —I don't know. And not only that, but they seemed like they helped her out a lot in her early part of her career. They drove her—you know they drove her—she's the only one that went to college in their family. And then they set her up in her houses here and there. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —I don't know what the—and I know there's been a lot of speculation of—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —abuse and this and that. She never talked about it. And that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But, I've never heard her talk about it. And I know there's one piece I think of hers that references her brothers. It's like there's a little group of people at a table and the table is being thrown up and—but there's other things like the closet that's in a lot of her paintings, supposedly Charles locked her in the closet at one point. And so that—there's always this dark closet with a man storming out or something like that.

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

MR. PERRY: And again I don't have proof or whatever, these are just stories I've heard that—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and mostly from Kevin I heard these stories.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Did she ever talk about her work in terms of gender issues or political commentary, social commentary?

MR. PERRY: She tried not to. I mean, she didn't care if other people did, but when people tried to pin her on it, she says "I just make artwork, I don't worry about that." You know, people would say, "Well, you're a woman doing this or this or this." She says, "I just make my work, that's the best thing I can do."

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So she wasn't—she didn't want to be a political. She wanted her work to stand for itself. I mean, she was cryptic about it. If anything she was a little subversive in—especially in commissions and stuff. She'd always try and sneak something in there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Give me an example.

MR. PERRY: Well she did the San Francisco airport commission—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —in the first drawing that she did for it—I don't know, I think it was a drawing—she either did a drawing or a tile piece. She had this, basically the same composition except she had a rooster coming out of the man between the man's legs and then even the one in the principal they were really careful about—"Well it looks like he—" "Oh, they're just humping and thumping all the way down it or something like that." You know, which is kind of funny because she—well, she had a few weird little things. She loved romance novels—

MS. RIEDEL: Did she?

MR. PERRY: —and science fiction, but she would never quit. I mean, when she—when I went up into her attic there was just all these romance—"Oh those were Charles'."

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: How do you know they were hers?

MR. PERRY: Because everybody's told me that she liked romance novels for a time. I think—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —she was big into science fiction later on.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative].

MR. PERRY: I mean, she had a great sense of humor. Early on—

MS. RIEDEL: Did she?

MR. PERRY: —she kind of lost it. Well, actually she lost it with the first stroke and it kind of came back with the later stroke—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —she wasn't as communicative, but laughed a lot more.

MS. RIEDEL: What would you say were the most powerful influences on her work? Is there anything that stands out?

MR. PERRY: I think—influences on her work—I think her peers. I mean, I think Arneson and even Voulkos. I mean, it was—she decided that she can go big just like the guys—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —and I think that's what did it, a lot of it. Because she could make the most beautiful little gems of pieces, too, I mean, had made the most beautiful little gems of pieces, but I think she realized that, "If I'm going to make an impact it's going to have to be big."

MS. RIEDEL: I read a couple of things that you'd said about her, and that was one of the things you'd really admired about her, is her ability to compete in the field back before it was really much of a level playing field.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, and she, you know, and she was—she had a big truck, she liked the big truck—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —so it was—

MS. RIEDEL: And she worked.

MR. PERRY: And she worked harder than, I mean,—you never know—I mean, Viola was a big—when you were in school—like if—especially in grad school, if you got married, your career is doomed. If you had a kid, it's really doomed.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: You know, and that was—a lot of people I know like Ann Weber, when she got pregnant she's like, "Don't tell Viola."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: You know it's just, that was her formula. Now, whether it was her formula because that's the way her life turned out—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know. I don't know anybody that—I don't know that she's ever been in a sexual relationship with anybody. I mean, certainly not while I was with her.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were pretty clear that the relationship with Charles was not sexual?

MR. PERRY: Absolutely not.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: I mean, unless I missed something but—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —they were basically companions. Charles didn't travel with her. Charles didn't travel well.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I mean, Charles a lot of time wouldn't even go out to dinner because he had like two glasses of wine and got nasty.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. PERRY: You know when we would get close to a deadline for a show or something she had a whole set of kilns at her house with her old studio, so we'd be firing at both places. And I'd be going over at night to turn up the kilns and one night I did that and I was busy trying to do the combination to the gate in the dark or

something and Charles would go, "Who the hell is that?" and he'd scare the hell out of me. And I'd yell at him but by the time he got home he'd be on the phone again, "Da, da, da, da." And I'd say, "Look, I'm firing Viola's kilns. You just have to deal with it." And said, "I'm—" you know, he would apologize but he was just—I had Charles for undergrad ceramics history. The first class, I thought he was insane.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: I mean, he would—he'd gone to tears in the class. He'd, you know, talking about this or that, and it was a completely non-linear class—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —which I'd ended up—grew to love it because it was just kind of, you came out with knowledge but you couldn't put it—you know. And he was passionate about everything he did, you know, about architecture— [Laughs] anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: But he was just—could turn on a dime. Because on Friday—his class was always on a Friday, so the kiln room was closed. Inevitably, someone had a Thursday class that the kiln was firing, and wanted to sneak in and see their piece and he would just let them have it. [Laughs.] It was just not there to—you know and he'd freak people out because he'd do that. He'd freak the administration people out because he'd do that. He'd yell at them—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: —and the only reason he was at that school that long was because—I mean, Viola carried a lot of power at CCAC when she was in her day. And that—the whole issue with Dennis Gallagher—because he was supposed to become a tenured professor, and he was their choice to become a tenured professor—I guess it was—they were getting another chair or something. I'm trying to think of who she was—he was going to replace. I guess it was whoever—Arthur Gonzales—took Dennis' place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And, it was kind of a power play to break Viola to not let Dennis get tenure. So they had the dean of fine arts or whoever—Suzanne Lacy hated Dennis and, you know, it was a big thing and they finally didn't give it to him and—

MS. RIEDEL: Ouch.

MR. PERRY: —and Viola was a little pissed, and I don't think she—

MS. RIEDEL: Because she wanted him to get tenure or did not?

MR. PERRY: She wanted—no, she wanted him to get tenure because she was the chosen, you know, you thought his thing was going. I don't know if she was retiring—she was starting to have health problems in the early 1990s.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Just back to her working process, briefly. So she worked pretty much from 10:00 until 5:00? 5:00 or 6:00—

MR. PERRY: 10:00 until—no we'd leave and she'd still be there. Probably until about 7:00 or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: That was five days a week, six days a week, four, depending on teaching?

MR. PERRY: Seven—

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: Seven and—meetings—you know, some days she may not come in until 1:00 or 2:00 or something like that or—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —leave early, but it was pretty much seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I mean, Viola's extracurricular activities always involved some form of art, like I'm going to a museum, or, you know, traveling to New York because I have a show—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: That's—she didn't really have a whole lot of hobbies other than reading, whatever she did at home—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and the studio.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you recall any times in the studio when there were significant shifts, when you felt like the work was really changing? There would be a new influence? When she started to show with Nancy Hoffman in New York? Or did things—

MR. PERRY: There was a time—it was more or less, I mean, I would think when she started to show with Nancy Hoffman, that's the show that mattered the most to her.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Not to say she didn't want to put great shows everywhere, but she wanted the best work to go to Nancy's because it was New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And then—she had like two or three years there where she had three—she had Nancy Hoffman, Rena, and Riva Yares in Flagstaff and Santa Fe. So she —that was when she had to crank it out and then I think shortly—probably after two shows or even one show at Riva's—I can't remember, that's when she had medical problems and she just kind of got cut back.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I would say that's when you noticed the work changing just because of physical issues and I can, you know, go through and say it like—the brico—the hand built group pieces stopped after this because she just didn't have the dexterity—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —and the slip cast, bricolage processional pieces started because we were able to slip cast everything, she could still assemble it and do that—

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. PERRY: —there wasn't all this teeny little building—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and she was slowly losing—I can't remember which hand, I want to say her left hand was getting all—it was kind of stiff and it was flayed like this—

MS. RIEDEL: This was after her stroke—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think probably the second stroke—

MS. RIEDEL: So mid 1990s—

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: 1995 or so, or 1996?

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: She also—I think when you were working with her [she moved twice to —MR] larger studios. Adeline [Street] in 1996 and then—oh, '83, maybe before you were—

MR. PERRY: '83 is when she moved from her house to 1089 Third, and then at a certain point probably somewhere in the mid or late 1980s [circa 1985-87 —ALF] when Squeak and Gary bought a building, she was able to move a lot of the stuff that was in her 1089 studio to—because we were packed solid there. She was able—

she rented another 3,000 square feet from Gary

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —and Squeak and—that was just basically her storage. It was all there in the 1989 earthquake, so—

MS. RIEDEL: How did that—

MR. PERRY: She lost a lot of bricolage pieces and a lot of early standing women.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Which is kind of unfortunate.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. PERRY: It was a mess [Laughs.] I remember when it happened I was at home in grad school and I had a big piece up in the window at CCAC, on the second floor—maybe it was the first floor—the first floor, if you got that window it was like the big window to get. And I ran straight up there and it was all fine and I was running back, someone got in a huge accident. Everybody was panicking—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: They got into a big accident at the intersection of Broadway and College—or Broadway and 51st, and I saw that and I may have called her immediately and I said—so then she said "The bronze just flew across the room," and it hit the legs of one of her pieces that she was building and it fell. She had lost some stuff in the studio but it wasn't as catastrophic—like Dennis had a whole show up and he lost it all because he built differently. He like built like a house of cards, and then stuck it all together at the end so it was all green and—so it just all went.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh [Negative.] It sounds as if the infrastructure [that was developed while you were working with her was quite significant? -MR]

MR. PERRY: Well, I would say—

MS. RIEDEL: Inside the pieces?

MR. PERRY: The primary part was there—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Was it primarily clay at the beginning and became steel later?

MR. PERRY: No it was always clay, it was even clay at the end.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: We only used steel when we have to—

MS. RIEDEL: On that one piece.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, because that needed a support but by and large the clay is—it and bolts just hold it together.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And it was just the—you know, kind of, combining—there was I guess, two phases. Like I said, Viola when we were talking about how the clay used to droop over the edges and crack off—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: She didn't mind that because it also made each piece, like blocky.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: You know, they kind of have this rock shape so there's a little pinch at every seam as opposed to this nice flat seam—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So she didn't necessarily mind that—but she didn't necessarily like waiting to put plastic on top and

the clay would slump. I mean, the big part of my job was when we cut these things apart, you open them up and you grind each surface so only the last outer inch is touching—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —so you don't have any interference. When you're putting them together you just have less problems.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —so you just grind it down a quarter inch so it's only touching here and it's open on the—it's open— if this was the center of the piece—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —it's open on the center.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that make it less stable?

MR. PERRY: No, it makes it more because it's basically got a perimeter it's all around—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Almost like a lip—

MR. PERRY: Yeah. It is a lip.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And so that would be grinding top and bottom and repairing cracks—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —which they're all loaded with cracks.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Because what happens is you get that big piece that's up there, that outside dries, and then it's got all this wet inside. And it's got to catch up, and it just pulls apart—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And so—for example, the bottom half would be built and then the top half would be built, and they'd be fired in those two pieces, and then they'd be cut?

MR. PERRY: Oh no, no. They'd be cut apart—the bottom two legs would be built, they'd be cut apart and fired—

MS. RIEDEL: While they were green?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Everything was cut while it was green because otherwise it wouldn't have been able to cut. There would've been a lot of water and a lot of—

MS. RIEDEL: And—

MR. PERRY: So what we would do is cut it all apart green, and then we had buckets of white glaze. And we'd paint everything white. Because that—she liked that [white glaze called Viola's Clear with 10 percent super pax -SP]—

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd paint it white before it was even bisque fired?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: Because she also liked the fact that the glaze would pull and drip—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

Sam Perry—and leave spots. It made it a very irregular surface and she liked that—

MS. RIEDEL: Irregular surface?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PERRY: She liked the drips and the stuff, and then it would move in the second firing—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So it would create shimmering, you know, more—

MS. RIEDEL: What cones was she firing to?

MR. PERRY: It would be—well, in the beginning it was 04 on the bisque and then 06, 07 on the glaze.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so a really low fire.

MR. PERRY: Later on we went to like an 02 on the bisque because we were having some freezing issues—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —with outdoor pieces—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —in Ohio. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: Which, I don't know if we ever solved anything with. We had tried adding glass to the clay and that made it really thixotropic. So it would just sit there and you could not move it. But when you started moving it, it just turned to like liquid or something—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

MR. PERRY: It would not hold anything. It was aggravating.

MS. RIEDEL: So—

MR. PERRY: I think she might've made one piece out of it and it was a reclining woman. I don't know who has it now but—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you just add silica?

MR. PERRY: Yeah it was basically—no, no it wasn't silica it was crushed glass.

MS. RIEDEL: You'd add crushed glass to the clay?

MR. PERRY: Powdered glass and—yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: Because silica wouldn't do it. Silica is pretty high temperature. And—

MS. RIEDEL: I'm just amazed that you could see these green pieces and they wouldn't just fall apart—

MR. PERRY: No, that's because the clay was so heavy. I mean, so strong—

MS. RIEDEL: So thick—

MR. PERRY: Thick and strong. Yeah. When I would see people I—that would want to build big I'd say "The first thing you need to do is build it a lot thicker."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: "Because it's going to be fragile, it's going to break, it's going to do that."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: With her clay, when it was—

MS. RIEDEL: A couple inches, two three inches?

MR. PERRY: An inch and a half, maybe—

MS. RIEDEL: Inch and a half—

MR. PERRY: Yeah. At some places, maybe two somewhere else, you know, but—

MS. RIEDEL: And you wouldn't set up anything to dry—try to dry it inside at the same time as it's drying outside—

MR. PERRY: The most we'd do is we'd just cover the perimeter edge—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —that she's working on—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —but if you did anything like fan, it usually came by to bite you in the ass somehow—

MS. RIEDEL: Why is that?

MR. PERRY: It just had some unexpected consequence, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —it's just like, "I didn't think that would happen."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. PERRY: "And now I've got a big problem."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, there's—there—I can't name any off the top of my head but there's pieces that just had problems, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And if I see the piece I'd go, "Oh I remember this one. This hip here has a little da, da, da." And—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So did the building process evolve over time? You were with her from 1987 until when she died in 2004 [... -MR]. Did anything change during that time or was it pretty constant?

MR. PERRY: It was pretty constant. I mean, it evolved to a certain extent when she started—I mean, only to the certain extent to where she started doing the big bases. She started finding things that I could build—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —that would, you know, like I would build all the bases to her—the square bases to her group pieces—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I built all the bases—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I built all the globes and stuff like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And, yeah, so that way—and then she liked the vases because it went back to her Portland Vase, and—but it gave her this big giant canvas to paint—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: And, she was -I'm trying to think—I'm trying to keep things into perspective as far as how bad her hand was, and—her hand was not really, really bad until about 2000 or something like that—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. But she worked pretty much until—

MR. PERRY: She worked until the day she died, but that's not to say it wasn't incredibly—you know, the last month was just agony for her, agony for me, and agony for—I don't know, she'd get a call from Nancy everyday checking on her and stuff and, even—since she had that major stroke in—I don't know when, 2002 or—

MS. RIEDEL: I don't remember when that was.

MR. PERRY: —she had the big one when she fell.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: That changed her a lot. That put her in a wheelchair, that—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I was going to ask when that wheelchair started.

MR. PERRY: Well what happened is I used to—she probably stopped driving around 2000.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So I'd come to the studio in the morning, get everything going, turn on the heat, because she hated the cold studio, [Laughs] so. I'd turn on the heat and then I'd go pick her up at like 8:30—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And, normally I was pretty hardcore on her in physical therapy, yeah, so we'd walk around the block —

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and with the dog probably, and she stumbled one day and just did a face plant like I couldn't believe. And, you know, I immediately got her in the car—she was able to get up and I got her in the car and drove her to the emergency room. And she was there for God knows how long and they checked her out and, I don't know if they did a CAT scan or what, but they sent her home.

And then I came back the next morning and she was on the floor in front of her bed. And she'd been—I don't know how long she'd been there, but I got her back up. And then I used to do her grocery shopping on those days, too, or once a week or whatever. So I went and did the grocery shopping that day and I came back and she just kept going, "Did you do the grocery shopping? Did you do the grocery shopping?" And I called Squeak, "I said Squeak you got to come over here." And so Squeak came over and we took her back to the hospital—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then at that point they had said she has a bleed and—you know, it started a long, long thing. They basically weren't going to—it was Kaiser and they were kind of like, "Well she's got cancer, she's—"

MS. RIEDEL: She had colon cancer right?

MR. PERRY: She had colon cancer, she had it—it metastasized to her liver and had it ablated probably a year before—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It was—actually it was like the millennia. I remember it was right before the New Year and she was in the hospital. And she'd had a bleed and she said, "I can't do this again." And, it turned out that it was nothing to do with her colon. I don't know what it was but, in the scan they found a spot on her liver.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So—but they did surgery on that or ablated it, or whatever, and that worked, but at this point with the stroke—and she was having a hemorrhagic stroke. She'd had ischemic strokes before so she was on massive blood thinners—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It's hard to deal when you're—so, they weren't going to—they were, kind of, not going to do anything. And Rena Bransten had a friend on the board of Kaiser who she'd always call—or he—she'd call and he would make things happen. So something happened, she was on a truck to—or an ambulance to the Kaiser Neurology Center, which is in Redwood City.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: They'd did surgery, installed shunts in her brain—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: —to drain it and that changed her quite a bit, I mean, it—for the better.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: She kind of came out of it. They tried to pull them—they pulled them, it didn't work so they had to put a permanent one in the back that drained into her stomach and then she—

MS. RIEDEL: But she didn't have brain cancer.

MR. PERRY: No, no, no she just had a horrible stroke that messed her up.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It wasn't letting her drain her synovial fluid—or whatever it is. And so that was putting pressure on her brain.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Then she had to go to rehab for two weeks and then—this whole thing took like three months or something like that. It was a long time. She had to go to rehab in Vallejo, they have another Kaiser—a big rehab facility there. And then we had to come home, I had to get her home care, which was another ordeal.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, that was an ordeal because— the hospital gives you these people, you call them and then you realize—it's a real weird industry, the home care. Because I got this big somewhat Tongan woman or Samoan woman, and like two weeks later another woman was there and it was her cousin or sister or something and you know, I was a little overwhelmed I would say—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —running the studio and doing this and that—

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. PERRY: And I always feel a little guilty, eventually we said this is not working out right, and we hired a firm that managed the home care. And she had much better caregivers then. I don't—they weren't abusing her and stuff, but they weren't giving their undivided attention and, you know, there was a little—it just doesn't seem right.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then it puts you in this weird situation where you have to fire this person—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —and they have to leave then. And you have to have someone set in to come in, because you can't say you're going to fire them and say you're leaving in two weeks and expect them to—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —you know, take care of someone and you can't be there to watch 24 hours a day.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like you were one of the primary caregivers—

MR. PERRY: Oh yeah, more—I mean, I didn't live with her but I managed a lot and we had [Patricia Thomas -SP] who was her bookkeeper.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And she helped out but—I think she helped find—when we found the second caregiver—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —or firm or whatever. And they kind of came in and—they came in and said, "Here's how you're going to fire this person. Here's how," you know, "We'll have someone come in, and they're going to—" basically said, "Okay you're fired right now. If you get out by noon you get an extra 1,500 bucks and—"

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And you know, it worked [Laughs.] But you know, they called me when she passed away and I was like, you know, "What are you doing with all of her stuff," or something, and I was just like—

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if there was a community that [was essential -MR], especially as she got older, to her ability to work and function.

MR. PERRY: Oh absolutely. Well, and she was smart all her life. She surrounded herself with people like that. And sometimes it could be irritating to me, because you'd notice that students all—as a student at CCAC, all those—there'd be this French student who's not really in school but she's got a studio space right next to you, and it was because Viola said, "Here, you can work here for this semester, da, da, da."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So she knew who'd help her out—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and who to take advantage of, or—I mean, not take advantage of—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —that sounds wrong, but—and then she had—I mean, the other thing with Viola is she had this incredible imposing character until you got to know her.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then you'd—and you said, "Here's this incredibly fragile person who I've got to watch out for."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Because she, again, had such focus or whatever when it was at work or whatever that she was a little bit oblivious to—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —what's going on around her, you know. And I remember we had a studio on Third Street and she had this guy coming by who was obviously hustling her. And she'd give him like 100 bucks or something, and I'd say, "He's—you're—he's never going to see you again." You know, but he saw her two days later, he'd come back for more and I was just like, "You've got to stop this," you know, "it's—"

MS. RIEDEL: Somebody, I can't remember who I was speaking with, but somebody said that she was very, very good at surrounding herself with people who would be able to help her accomplish what she wanted to do.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I would say—I mean, that was the case with me. And when I was saying—when Kevin stopped working, I think that's what her dilemma was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Is he going to help me with what I want to do or should I hire another person?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: You know, she didn't want a break in the—she at one point—and this is when I came to realize that I was going to work until she passed away.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Because there was no one that could do my job. And there is no—the only person that could do my job would've had to have been there four or five years. And at that rate I was bringing in new assistants—because it was always two people working with her. Because just the physicality of lifting things—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. PERRY: —and cutting things apart. So I would more or less find who ever I was working with. And they were usually a student, and then after the students ran out, when I was out of school, I would find friends. A lot of times people I would work with at Runnymede since we were only working a few days at Runnymede I would get them to work another day here, or let's see I had one who was Richard Shaw's tech for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: They were real brief. I went through—you know and it was—I had a real great assistant Raul Baeza—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh yeah.

MR. PERRY: —who worked with me from, basically, I want to say 2000 until 2007. And he was kind of on a level with Viola that I wasn't even on. It was very personable, and, could talk about—I'm a little quiet, too, and won't approach super emotional issues and stuff—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —but he could do that or whatever. But he, kind of, right when she got diagnosed with cancer he kind of either—it's still a mystery to this day, but he basically moved back down to L.A. without—he kind of either got schizophrenic or had some mental issues is the best way to put it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I—to the point where, you know, I was supposed to take him to the—it was Thanksgiving 2007 or something like that. I was supposed to take him to the airport to go see his parents and he didn't show up. I called and couldn't get anybody and I called his dad and he didn't know anything. I called his old girlfriend and she didn't know anything. I ended up calling other friends and we went to his house and I called the cops and he said you know, "I can't break in there's no cause here." But he said, "You can break in and I won't do anything." So I thought he—because he had done something like a week before saying you know, "I really want to thank you for being a great friend," and this and that. Which out of the blue and stuff like that is just—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: You know, and then adding all that up, and I was like, "Oh man I'd be"—so I went in there and he was fine. I thought he might have killed himself. And then like two days later his father called me and said, "Yeah he showed up, he's in rough shape, da, da, da." And so I said, "Tell him to call me whenever." I've never heard from him since.

MS. RIEDEL: So just after seven years, gone.

MR. PERRY: Yeah and he was—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: —he was this close to completing his graduate degree.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: And I think—you know, and then when we were going through this whole thing we were talking with his friends and stuff and he goes, "Oh, I was over there and he told me, you know, keep it quiet because the walls have ears," and this and that, so it sounds like he was—had some paranoia, something going on, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I don't know what happened.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you walk us through what a day would be like working in the studio with Viola?

MR. PERRY: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: —you know, what you did and what her working process was?

MR. PERRY: Most of the time it would be, you're either unloading a kiln—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —or loading a kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: That much work? You fire super slowly?

MR. PERRY: Usually a week cycle, especially on a bisque.

MS. RIEDEL: It would fire for a week?

MR. PERRY: No, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —from load to unload it would be a week.

MS. RIEDEL: It could cool for a long time.

MR. PERRY: It cools two days. Fires basically one day, preheats about two, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So if we were loading a kiln it would be cutting down the piece—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —doing all the repairs, and glazing it white. Then stacking.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And that usually takes about a day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It's—yeah. And then opposite, unloading, you—or another day would be unloading. Grinding drips—glaze drips off.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And then taking it out and putting it together—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —which could take a long time or real easy. A lot of times you'd have to re-drill holes because they're not—when we would cut them down, Viola would usually mark a hole with a bolt, just like a pencil or whatever would poke it, but we'd take a drill and actually drill them out so they were big—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —while it was still green.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So when it would come out sometimes the holes didn't line up—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: We'd have to make one bigger or something like that. And a lot of times it's fitting—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —so you'd be putting a piece together and you'd go, "Whoa, we got too much here, it won't close at the top—"

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: "—and you got to"—there were two rooms. There was Viola's room and our room. And our room was

mainly the dusty, dusty, dirty room that we could do all our messy stuff back there. And then her front room was her workroom—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —so she was either glazing or building.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Did she paint here, or glaze here?

MR. PERRY: She didn't—she always glazed.

MS. RIEDEL: All glazed.

MR. PERRY: Yeah but—she had finished—pretty much finished painting by the time I started working with her.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: She had done the Moscone [Center] commission [*Exterior/Interior Garden*, 1987, oil on canvas, 108" x 216" -ALF], I think is the only painting she painted when I did—but she did a lot of drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so everything here was pretty much clay.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Didn't draw either.

MR. PERRY: Oh here, at this building? No, she drew—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —but she didn't have models at this building. She had enough drawings—because when she would draw, she used to draw on Fridays because that's the days we weren't around. It was quiet and—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —you know, the models wouldn't have to feel—I mean, they never did, but—she would just have models and she would just do different poses.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Just draw them, boom, boom, boom, and keep them in a big stack. And then when she wanted to do a drawing, she'd pick this one and this one and pair it up—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —or just this one. And then she had a giant pile of stencils—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and she'd all—outline them with charcoal and just make the composition as she's going. And then she'd start color—

MS. RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MR. PERRY: —and just kind of build it. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Interesting.

MR. PERRY: But she always had the foundation, which were poses.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And she'd match them up either in four panels, two panels, one panel.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Three every once in a while, four, two on top, two on the bottom.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And she'd work those drawings for, she did even—the majority of her drawings even then—she always would never do a show with just sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: She always had to have something on the wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So that was that. And fitting it together. And then other time—with the pieces—back to assembling—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And then other times, like—things kind of went in cycles. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —what would happen is, she'd do a lot of building, build the figures and get those kind of done and then she'd say, "Okay I want to do bricolage"—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So this used to be the room for the bricolage pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And so that would set me and my assistant up. And we'd have buckets of slip and we'd just cast all day long. And we'd have tables lined up here with ten of this, ten of that, of everything. And we knew—at that point, I knew she'll use 20 of these and only one of these or something, you know, —hands. You always have to have a million hands, arms—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —things like that. This doll, the Raggedy-Ann, or whatever. So you'd spend a few—a week doing that to where she'd just fill the whole place up. Then she'd come in and do all her assemblages and put them together. And then she'd do a little bit of cleaning up, because they're very messy when she's making them because they've got slip dripped all over them. So you have to take the trimming tool and trim them all down—

MS. RIEDEL: Clean them up.

MR. PERRY: —and clean them up, clean up the seams. And then with the leftovers, she'd say, "I want to do plates."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So we'd bring out the plate molds, cast those, and then we'd have all the leftovers. Half the time she'd ripped the heads off and use—do whatever she wanted to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So it kind of went in a cycle like that. Then you'd clean it all up and then she'd have a show and then it was back to her part—I mean, that's probably when I'd have the least amount of work, is she'd have to start making feet again—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and it was about the most tedious thing in the world for her, she'd go, "I've got to make feet." And she'd have to make—she's start—make a dozen feet, three of them women, three of them men or something like that. And it's no fun because, you know, it's the same thing. There's no character until they at least get to the hands.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know, and then they've got to pose or something like that so—

MS. RIEDEL: Not even the clothing? The pants or the—

MR. PERRY: Well the pants—

MS. RIEDEL: —or the shoes?

MR. PERRY: The shoes were always the same. The women—the shoes might be a little bit different, but she used to say earlier in her work, like when she was doing it all, she would be building that top level on top of the fired legs—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —she'd already start painting the bottom because.

MS. RIEDEL: She knew where she was going.

MR. PERRY: Well she knew where she was going and she knew that she could only build so much a day and didn't have—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —didn't—you know, needed something to keep her going. And that's why she worked on six pieces at once or whatever because she—that's another reason why I switched to wood.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Why is that?

MR. PERRY: Well, the idea that you can work on something as much as you want to.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And don't have to wait for it to dry—

MR. PERRY: And you can set it aside for a long time, too. That's what you could never do with clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Unless you did it like her and you set it aside with a nice ledge, and you know, stockpiled legs. She could do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And she was also one where—and she had failures.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And you'd always put them in the corner, and she'd always come back and use them in something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I mean, she had, like—well I don't know if you'd know that big Espirit piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Which one is that?

MR. PERRY: It's not that—it's the *Decline and Fall of Western Civilization*—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: It's next door actually set up.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it? Oh, I'd love to see that.

MR. PERRY: You can probably see it. I got keys.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: It's the only piece of hers that's set up and actually it's kind of jammed in a corner behind a bunch of —surrounded by stuff so if an earthquake comes—

MS. RIEDEL: That's smart.

MR. PERRY: We're trying to get it taken down and put on palette racks, but they want it to go somewhere. They don't want it to just—but it's a piece that's—it's 100 and something parts.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: It's the biggest piece she's ever done. But that piece is full of, at least—I can name two, probably three—I wouldn't say rejects. Either, one was a woman that was too big and she just said, "This is—she's too big and horrible I'll just use the legs for something else." So she's cut off at the knees basically—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And she just sits—stands there. And the other one, before I ever started working there, the lift that we used to—because we had a hydraulic lift that we used to beam the pieces up and down when we're doing it. I guess when Kevin was working for her, it rolled and knocked the piece down before he had the shoulders on it. So it's a bust basically, of the head—Viola never let him forget it. "Oh, we'd have a forklift if you didn't knock that piece over."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: He would say, "That bitch."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But, so she kept them—you know, kept things around and reused them. The piece that is in the Smithsonian, in the Hirshhorn, is that all the people in the back—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —that have their arms around is from another piece and they've been rotated so they're doing different things. So yeah, she never threw anything away.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting insight into how all those different things got put together.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, you know, there's—

MS. RIEDEL: And why it would keep kind of a blocky feeling, or might feel a little bit disjointed. It could actually be assembled from different pieces. Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Right. And I think probably that Hirshhorn piece was probably one of the last ones she did, but I'd have to check the date.

MS. RIEDEL: And just to finish up the thought about her working after her stroke. You would bring her here in a wheelchair in those last couple of years—

MR. PERRY: I'd bring her here in a wheelchair and she hated it because the first thing we'd do is, again, I told you I was hard—I'd make her do physical therapy. I had these buckets on pulleys—like old kiln cement five gallon buckets and I'd pile glaze bottles in there. She had—I—because I'd make her keep her arms strong.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And then the other thing we always practiced on was getting up. So she could get up, because she could walk. I mean, we got her to walk, and as a matter of fact she walked to the car. She'd walk as much as she could—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —but she couldn't stand and work a long time, but also, I think—the main reason I did it for her is to feel like you're progressing and not that you're regressing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Not that it's done. You know, not that you're just sitting here waiting for something to—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —do. So I mean, she hated it,—the days that I'd go, "Oh, I got this coming or this, we can't do it this." She's say, "Oh that's okay." So—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —she didn't mind it. But she also would go, "Look how many—and I'd say, "Oh, you're doing nine bottles of glaze. She's all, "Really?" Then I'd make her do these and—

MS. RIEDEL: Pull-ups and—

MR. PERRY: Pull-ups and—raise the bucket up, with stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So yeah, I'd bring her here and do that, and take care of her grocery shopping, take care of her doctor's appointments. And get her to and from all that.

MS. RIEDEL: She would just work.

MR. PERRY: She'd work, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Did she draw at home too or—

MR. PERRY: No, at that point she was not reading a lot. I don't know what—but she could—I started doing—there's things—you have to think, like, she had done the Pilchuck work.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And I had a friend Chuck Vannatta and he used to—he's not here anymore, but he had a glass studio here—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and she'd done these pieces, and—Pilchuck that were these vases. And you basically—they were about the size of an ostrich egg and she could paint them and then they blow them into a big vase. They put another gather over them and do everything. So I got him to make a bunch of those and then I could do, like—because it was—it got to the situation where I couldn't work in the back and do the loading of the kilns, and da da that, and have her work because I had to be there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah

MR. PERRY: I had to be there to move her around—

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: Move her around—

MR. PERRY: —and stuff because she was not real mobile in the wheelchair. I mean, we had tried to get her, you know, one of those electric things and she was [Laughs] really not good at that so it—

MS. RIEDEL: But you actually put the wheelchair on a lift—

MR. PERRY: Yeah we put it on a lift.

MS. RIEDEL: —and put her in the air.

MR. PERRY: Yep. We'd do that and I made a special little palette that did that. Yeah, it was all kind of figuring out—I mean, that—when she was—after the last stroke that put her in all that rehab and stuff, the one carrot we had to hold is, "You want to be back in the studio, don't you?" And she'd say, "Yes, yes." And so it was all figuring out how to make it work. And that's where it worked with me because I knew how she worked.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I knew exactly how she worked. As far as what she needed to do and how she needed to get there, so it became a little more—you know, I was there while she was working the last couple years, but she was working.

MS. RIEDEL: Was she still glazing?

MR. PERRY: Oh yeah. She did all the glazing. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —all that still?

MR. PERRY: I was more assisting on the hand building and even that was more—by that time it was 100 percent of the interior because she just didn't have the mobility to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But she could do all the exterior and then she may say "Bang that in a little bit more," or something. So, you know, it was an evolution. It was figuring, "Okay, I know how you want to do—how can we make this work?"

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So back to the glass stuff, I mean, that was how I could work in the back. I'd give her the glass paint and the glass and she could sit there at her desk and paint them.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And it would—it worked for a while until she got bored—

[They laugh.]

MR. PERRY: And then we'd take her down to the glass studio and he'd blow them and she liked that. So there's supposed to be a piece, maybe, in this art fair of the glass. I saw the list come out. In the Art Market [a San Francisco art fair -SP].

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm [Affirmative.] Oh.

MR. PERRY: The glass is interesting but, again, it's, you know, an artist that doesn't work in—it's not her specialty so I don't know how well—I don't think they'd ever sold well, but.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: She, you know, she was selling well enough all her—while I was with her that she—even in the bad years she was doing better than most artists.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was her studio starting in '96, '97?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then when she passed away, now it's your studio?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary legacy.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, she was always—obviously realized I was doing a lot for her, so she'd always say, "You know, I'm leaving you the building." And I'd say, "Yeah." Yeah, and I'd say—you know, I'd say, "Yeah." I wouldn't say, "Thank you very much, blah, blah, blah," because it was more recognizing the current moment, which I just—didn't feel it needed anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I knew what I was doing, we all knew what we were doing. We all knew how it was going to end up. And it was, you know—I don't know how to say—I mean,—

MS. RIEDEL: It is one of the more interesting community art stories that I've heard during [an interview. -MR]

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I mean, I—when—the night she died, I had taken her home and she died of a stroke. She didn't die of liver failure or whatever. She—I got a call from the caregiver and said, "You better come over, da, da, da." I think I was here on my bike. I rode over to her house. Got there and she was more or less slumped over, eyes wide open and so we got her into bed. I was calling everybody, blabbing, crying, whatever. Everybody was at her house and—

MS. RIEDEL: Who was there Sam, do you know?

MR. PERRY: Dennis Gallagher, Trish Bransten, Squeak [Carnwath], Gary [Knecht], Black Moon, who was in the Viola circle. Her housekeeper who kept tabs on everything—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And then they were all comforting her. Excuse me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Sorry. Take your time, or we can just take a break.

MR. PERRY: Let's take a break, because I could tell this story without crying but telling all this stuff to this story tends to be a bit much.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Sam Perry at the artist's studio in Oakland, California on April 29th, 2014, card number two. And you were saying.

MR. PERRY: Oh, I was saying that she was notoriously hard to interview and I know at one point we were doing an interview and I want to say it was interview/film. And I thought it was for the Smithsonian Archives but I don't know whatever happened to it but. They were at the studio and did a few days at the studio they were interviewing us at the studio and 3rd Street is like the biggest trucking route in the world every minutes, rahhh [ph] it would come down the street and she was being notoriously hard, and then they followed us to New York for the installation of the whole show, and—

MS. RIEDEL: This was at Nancy Hoffmann?

MR. PERRY: Nancy Hoffmann, and it got to the point where it was September and it was just really hot and they were filming and they kept having to re-setup shots. So they'd say, "Could you take that head back up the ladder again? Could you do that back over again?" And it was just taking forever, and I kind of remember what—say it was a Saturday that the day opened, and they were filming and the opening was, like, in five minutes and they were trying to interview Viola and they're trying to get the phones to stop ringing in the gallery, which they couldn't do, and Nancy is getting upset because they can't open the doors, and Viola's not helping—

[They laugh.]

It was just how it was. I mean, there was a certain part of me that got a little joy out of it because, "Now you know what it's like here."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: That's kind of how she, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And I learned a lot—I'm amazed at how much I learned from Kevin in such a short time about Viola.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: He like, "It doesn't matter what you're doing, honey, if she wants the piece set up you got to set it up," and that's what you learn. And the other thing I've learned that I carry on to every other job is do what they tell you to show them it's wrong and then do it the right way.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] That's exactly right.

MR. PERRY: So.

MS. RIEDEL: [...-MR] That's actually a great lesson.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And that's, one of those things. I mean, I've learned a lot from Viola that just oozes out that I don't even realize that my work ethic. I mean, no one can measure up to Viola as far work, certainly not me. And that's how all—that's what she did to all her peers. They'd come to her studio, I remember Bob [Arneson] and Richard Shaw would come to her studio and they'd go, "Boy, I think we need go home and get to work."

MS. RIEDEL: Bob Arneson?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And they were no slouches either.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PERRY: But that was her life. I mean, in a certain way it was tragic because that was her life.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And, you know, she may have told you I made all these decisions to do it but you don't know if she made the decisions or that was how thing ended, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: That was either—again, it all goes back to whatever kind of personal relationship she had or didn't have because I think that's why she focused so much on her work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I mean, I just got married four years ago. I could tell you before that all I did was come—I worked and came to the studio. That was it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. PERRY: And you make more time, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And you become more efficient. I mean, her studio was her home it doesn't mean that she was nose to the grindstone. She could watch TV for hours, she could, you know—she had her schedule of what's on when, and this and that. Loved Bob Brinker on Sundays. Because I used to work—I mean, for a long time, I worked seven days a week. I would do—

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: —Viola Sunday through Thursday, Runnymede Friday and Saturday. And the only reason I was able to work was because I did Runnymede Friday and Saturday. If I had to do Viola seven days a week that would be—the only time that she didn't come to the studio seven days a week was probably the last four years of her life because there was no one to take her on Saturday. But Dennis would take her on Friday.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So she could get Friday in.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then probably like the last six months she probably couldn't do a Friday or something.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you do your own work?

MR. PERRY: At night.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. PERRY: I'd come back to—usually it would work out with Viola especially when I was driving her and then the later times it was about 8:00 to 2:00 and then she'd be ready to go home.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Because I'd go home from about 2:00 to 5:00 or 6:00 and then come back from about 6:00 to 11:00 or something. And then—but I—again, I did not have a lot going on, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I had over time, built my life so I didn't have a lot going on [Laughs] you know?

MS. RIEDEL: That was your focus.

MR. PERRY: That was my focus and I couldn't—I don't think I could have had much more going on without

neglecting Viola, which I wasn't capable of doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Even when I'd go home to visit my family I became a very hard—not hard, just logistically, I'd have to say, "Okay you're going to take her here and there and she doesn't have any doctor's appointments, she's got this, that, and the other." You know, it just kind of became nerve racking. There was about two or three years I didn't go home just because. It was before she had a caregiver or something like that—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —you know. And when Charles passed away it kind of changed. You know, she became a little bit more dependent. Not that—Charles was dependent on her more so because he was dying of emphysema or whatever it was. You know, he wasn't taking care. You could see he was not being able to take care of himself.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: He finally had to go to a home where he lasted like a week [Laughs.] I mean, Viola and Charles, it was always—some calamity was always a phone call away and for a while, a couple of years, it was Charles and then it was Viola, you know. So he's say, "Viola fell." "Charles went through the porch."

[They laugh.]

"Charles fell through the porch and broke two ribs," or something like that. .

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your work.

MR. PERRY: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll get to Runnymede, too—

MR. PERRY: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: [...-MR] I realize we're bouncing around a bit but—

MR. PERRY: That's fine.

MS. RIEDEL: —that's the way this works sometimes. So you would do your own work pretty much from 5:00 in the evening until 11:00 five, six days a week.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Or even seven, usually.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you started [your -MR] sculpture career you were primarily ceramic.

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Abstract ceramic sculptures, minimal—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —curvilinear.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Public installations?

MR. PERRY: No. You know, they're in probably that whole scheme that the only thing that didn't work out was showing my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I did it and well, we can talk—let's talk about up to the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. PERRY: Mainly plain drawings, because it's not the case with the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. PERRY: I started, I did a bunch of big pieces and this and that and then they kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: When you say big, 6 feet, 8 feet?

MR. PERRY: Yeah about 6 feet, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were multiple pieces that were assembled?

MR. PERRY: Yeah multiple pieces assembled. And I'd go to the studio and then you'd—what basically started developing, and this was before Viola and I and Dennis shared a studio, I shared with Dennis and Art Nelson.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I'd do drawings and stuff but kind of what started happening is you sat there and go, "Well I need to move that piece over there," and you would go, "I don't want to do it." It's just a huge taking apart and this, and that, and—

MS. RIEDEL: So taking one piece out of one sculpture and putting—

MR. PERRY: No, no, no, just moving the sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know, just if you needed to move it to take a picture—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —or whatever it just became—I was getting so bogged down because I just did this all day.

MS. RIEDEL: They're large, and they're heavy, and they're fragile.

MR. PERRY: They're large, and they're heavy, and they're fragile, and, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And I don't have an assistant here and I don't have a—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I mean,—I kind of—I would say got somewhat disillusioned with clay rather quickly—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —on my own.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I did a bunch of pieces and then I basically felt like whatever I was doing I was repeating the last thing I did or, you know, they weren't—and I didn't want to invest the time and money into another big hunk of clay that was going to sit around, and I mean, that's the one thing with clay is when it's here, it's here.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PERRY: You know and unless you are shoveling it into a dumpster or something it is not going to go away unless you sell it, or whatever. And I sold few pieces here and there, but nothing—

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't exhibit them very much, not a lot of gallery [shows? -MR]

MR. PERRY: Well, not a lot of carry. I had to—if I was going to have to—they were too big, you know, I'd have to—

MS. RIEDEL: To ship, yeah.

MR. PERRY: —go and assemble. I was in that Claremont ceramic whatever in probably '91.

MS. RIEDEL: So the Scripps?

MR. PERRY: Right after—the Scripps, yeah, the Scripps ceramic invitational.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And then I also was in a show in Italy—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. PERRY: —right out of grad school, through, it's a ceramic biennale, I guess, that was kind of organized by Stan Welsh.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: Who was a friend of Dennis' so Dennis got a bunch of CCAC students or me, I don't know, but—and then John Rosekrans ended up buying me a ticket to go.

MS. RIEDEL: How nice.

MR. PERRY: Oh, it was great. I mean, it was unbelievable, and given me some money.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: So I ended up going and staying with a fellow ceramic grad student, Hedi Ernst, who lived in Switzerland.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And she gave me the A trip of taking me everywhere, and showing me everything. And then I went down to Savona [Italy]. Got there like three days early or something. Couldn't read Italian. I kept going to the place where the show was and finally I said, "Do you know what this word is?" It was like geos, gius [ph]—it was closed until Monday, or something like that. I was like, "Oh no, what am I going to do?" So I ended up getting a train to Florence and did—you know.

MS. RIEDEL: How tragic [Laughs.].

MR. PERRY: Oh, it was—well Savona is not—I was like right above the focaccia factory at Savona and I get this garlic onion nightmares at about three in the morning.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And then the—when I went back I went to the same hotel and got a different room but it was under were the buses idled [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Uh [Negative.]

MR. PERRY: But I ended up going back to Savona when everybody arrived, and so all these great Bay Art ceramics people were there and, what's his name, Scott. I just saw him last week—he's from Emeryville [CA]. I can't remember, does concrete sculpture mainly now. Donahue, Scott Donahue. He was there and John Roloff, Dennis, and we had a great time. You know we set up the thing, we did that, had a huge party and I had to leave at like 10:00 that night [Laughs.] It's just like, "Oh, now it's fun and I have to go."

MS. RIEDEL: Right [Laughs.] But how wonderful you got to go.

MR. PERRY: But it was a great trip.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I know, it was. So that was more or less the extent of—I kind of got probably more involved in Viola, less involved in, you know—and at a certain point I just stopped making clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I made a bunch of probably small pieces with the intent of small pieces but, again, they looked like maquettes or something, and, you know, it never sucked me in again like it did. So I started drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I liked the freedom of drawing to a certain point, too, again because my, I don't want to say

source material, but my vocabulary of shapes had seemed somewhat stagnant through clay and it was allowing me to get new information.

MS. RIEDEL: The drawing was?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Nice, okay.

MR. PERRY: And I wanted to do—I started—that's when I started drawing on Masonite and kind of dealing with it more like painting. So I'd glaze them after I've drawn on them and put acrylic to make them more durable, and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] When you say glazed them, you're painting—

MR. PERRY: I just do like a—

MS. RIEDEL: —glaze, yeah.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, acrylic varnish over them just to—it's like fixing them but really fixing them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I did that and I kind of did that even when I moved into this space.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then at Runnymede I kind of just said, "You know—"

MS. RIEDEL: When did you move in here?

MR. PERRY: '97.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Right after Viola—pretty much needed the whole building to move Viola in.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Then we tore down what was left of it—that happened, and Dennis and I moved in.

MS. RIEDEL: And you started at Runnymede in '89.

MR. PERRY: '89, probably.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PERRY: Through John Rosekrans bought two of her pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Bought two of Viola's pieces?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, and so I went out to install them—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —with his caretaker at the time, and he was very—well that day he wasn't there but he called me back and said, "Oh, I've got some more sculpture. Do you want to come down?" So I started somewhat regularly on weekends, and then he said, "Do you know anybody else?" So I grabbed Raul.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then another friend of mine, Brian Wheeler—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —who was also a grad student.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And we started working down there fairly regularly installing sculpture. John was always on the crane and it was—

MS. RIEDEL: John Rosenkrans himself?

MR. PERRY: That was always kind of an adventure. "Here. No, not there, here."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] So we should describe Runnymede because many people may not even know what it is.

MR. PERRY: Oh. Runnymede is a, I guess it's a family—it's called Runnymede Farm but there's no animals on it, except wildlife. It's 100 acres. Was John's mother's, Alma—

MS. RIEDEL: Spreckels, yeah.

MR. PERRY: Alma Rosekrans actually. She was Alma Spreckels—

MS. RIEDEL: Spreckels and then married—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Little Alma.

MS. RIEDEL: Little Alma?

MR. PERRY: Well, her mother was Big Alma.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And Big Alma was actually very well—San Francisco—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: [Inaudible]. But so, it was her place and I guess John had had went to—had gone to Storm King and she had passed away, and he got this idea to do this, and he was wealthy enough to do it and he was very—I can't think of the word, impetuous—he liked to buy. If he liked it he bought it. It didn't have to be—

MS. RIEDEL: Compulsive.

MR. PERRY: Compulsive, yes. And so he bought what he bought.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And he'd buy a whole show if he liked it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: I'm sure the artists were very happy.

MS. RIEDEL: The last I heard it was about 160 sculptures.

MR. PERRY: About a 100 probably.

MS. RIEDEL: A hundred sculptures?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think 160 is too much, a little over a 100.

MS. RIEDEL: Over 100 sculptures.

MR. PERRY: All outdoor, of varying—various quality of artists, various stature of artists, from Abakanowicz to Chandler, whoever that is.

MS. RIEDEL: I read some place that John and his wife Dodie were—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —purchasing the work, right? They would only purchase work from living artists. Is that true?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that might have been true.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: I'm not sure on that. But I might argue they owned a Haring and I think they bought it after he passed away—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —but I'm not sure.

MS. RIEDEL: This was started in the mid-80s—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And it went on for about 10 years strong. Does that sound right?

MR. PERRY: Went strong until about '90—let's see, yeah about 10 years. John had medical problems that really slowed him down.

MS. RIEDEL: So what was the thinking behind it? He'd seen Storm King. Storm King's open to the public. This is a —

MR. PERRY: Well, I think it was, you know, this is my thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But what it came to become is they did hire a director for a few years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Curator, director, Mary Maggini.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And it became really—they were completely open to nonprofits—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —schools—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —kids, anything, nonprofit fundraisers, which they still do to this point at certain times. So I mean, other than because it was a family farm and not John's farm—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —you had a lot of people including his brother Adolph who was basically the patriarch now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. He had two brothers, right?

MR. PERRY: He had two brothers but one had basically—I think, sold his inheritance of Runnymede to John.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: He wasn't interested in it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And he committed suicide like two years ago, I guess. He was gay; not that that had anything to do with—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I think there's a certain amount of depression that runs in that because Adolph said his mother was depressed. John went through some serious depression due to pain and everything at the end of his life.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And he said that his brother Charles always had issues with depression.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: But it's a family farm so they really couldn't get—I mean,—the elders have more seniority, so to speak. And that's still the way it works. But, you know, John and Adolph are two different people. John was gregarious, he was out there, and you know, "I'm John Rosekrans," kind of guy, and Adolph's much more—very down to earth, and I didn't know Adolph when I started working there. I kind of—as it turned over, I knew Adolph and Adolph is, he is one of those kind of like Viola except he is more aware of things but you really, you know, you have a strong loyalty to him because he's always treated you well and he always treated you as a person not as an employee or anything like that. That's the, one thing I've always loved about Runnymede and stuff is—to me it feels like I'm a park ranger.

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm [Affirmative], interesting.

MR. PERRY: Because I mean, I get told to do stuff but the majority of my—as it became with Viola, is to know what needs to be done.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I know it because I'd been there for 25, whatever, years.

MS. RIEDEL: So you're the director of installation and conservation?

MR. PERRY: Yeah that's just what's—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: That's just I pretty much do everything, and fix leaks [Laughs.] And fix broken pipes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. PERRY: Clean out stopped up toilets, and all that kind of stuff, and I, mean, now I—Runnymede has taught me a lot about art.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to ask how 10 years of having almost [a private outdoor sculpture park ... almost to yourself, with -MR] people coming through sometimes—

MR. PERRY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —how did it affect your thoughts about sculpture and about installation, and anything else that comes to mind?

MR. PERRY: Well—what I would say is the number one affect is that some art is like a can of soda. It's meant to be drank and then it's done.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And some of the art there is—if—and it gets used up. The elements have—if you make that choice, and I think the buyer can make this choice—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I mean, some artists may not agree with me, that, "I'm going to enjoy this but someday it is going to fall apart."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And John unfortunately bought a lot of pieces with inherent vices. I mean, there's stuff you could take as much care of as you want, but when they die from the inside out you can't fix that problem, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So it's too late. And there's pieces that we've restored pretty seriously that I just said, "No, we're not putting it back up."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Because, you know, it's just trying to plug it and keep it from going as fast. You can oil it and you can do—and these are mainly wood pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're not meant to be outside.

MR. PERRY: Not necessarily, no. But they're of a scale—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: —that they really can't—I mean, I just had to talk to an artist yesterday, Ilan—who shows with Nancy, Ilan Averbuch, who does some big, large scale—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. He did the horse, didn't he?

MR. PERRY: He did the horse.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: He did the dome, the crown, and the dome.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Well, his crown is on its last leg. I sent him pictures and I said you know, "It's failing from the inside out. It's got dry rot all through it. It's got termites."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, it's wood. I didn't realize.

MR. PERRY: Well, it's wood—it's a wood skeleton and a copper skin.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And he's telling me, "Well you know it's strong, I don't know why this happened." I'm not going to argue with the guy because at this point it doesn't make any—you know. And I can't rebuild the piece. I mean, there's pieces that I've done major stuff on that the artists wouldn't know, and then there's other—another artist I know from Minnesota that I said, "Your piece is done." And he's like, "Okay just—I'm putting it—" two, George Rickey's son we had to do that, too, Philip Rickey. Said, "You know—" and I don't know if it would have changed if John was still around. He'd probably say, "Yeah, we'll fix it." You know if John was at his—the best time I'd knew him, he'd say, "Oh, yeah, no price is too much." But there were certain times with the Rickey's is I couldn't get them to pay for new timber to fix this or that, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know, it's tough, it's tough, but what am I going to do? I can only let the artist know, let the owner know, and then they can figure out how to resolve it, but some pieces just get destroyed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And that—I guess that's the consumable part of it. I mean, we have other pieces that are doing fine that are wood. They're made out of redwood and they don't rot. And then I think a lot of artists don't—when they're doing pieces of that scale, or whatever, aren't responsible enough to know what their piece is going to do 20 years down the line.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know, there's—I don't know if it's not responsible, or don't care but—

MS. RIEDEL: They just don't know.

MR. PERRY: —don't know, really.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I didn't know until I'd been watching these things for 20 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So there's that and just about what materials do make it outside and what don't. Ceramics in the—down here are very good—in the West Coast is very good. They're pretty durable.

MS. RIEDEL: And Viola has two pieces there?

MR. PERRY: Two pieces there. I have three pieces there and they're all, you know. Their color is just as vibrant as the day they were put out. Viola's got some little flaking here and there, but nothing too bad. The biggest thing you got to worry about there is a tree branch falling, you know, or something like that—

MS. RIEDEL: Right [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —which hasn't happened yet. And it's just how things look at different times of the year, you know. I mean, and that was a big thing with Viola, was her backyard, that's where she developed her glaze is watching out, you know—not having that all over with glaze but having that very shimmering—it was watching how the light reflected off of her pieces and what not with the true sunlight. She—when you look at her paintings, in a lot of her paintings you will see a window.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: That window was her backyard window that she would sit at and look out, and it's always the window with the shade half down, so. I guess that's—and then the other thing Runnymede taught me was just working with all sorts of cool pieces of equipment, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: On a scale of digging, and whatever, and putting in concrete foundations, and on-the-job-training, it was great. I was like, "I think I can do this but I haven't done it before." [Laughs.] So we usually worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: How does it—how do you think it's shaped your feelings about installations in general to have that much work installed outside? I think so often of a museum or gallery setting, this is completely different and still relatively unusual.

MR. PERRY: You know, I've done so many installations in museums and—definitely Viola's work, everywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And rather involved just the amount of labor, and what not. These were, kind of—you know, you get a piece and you'd have it, it wasn't always—so at the beginning, it was every weekend we were doing—and then we were getting them so fast we'd just plop them and then later on we'd go back and do them right.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Put a foundation, or base under it, or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: How are they sited?

MR. PERRY: Usually it was John, Dodie, or the artist in most cases. Like, in the last couple of years we've moved some pieces. And that was pretty much me going—well, because, you know, they had this one big Susan Solano piece which was—basically looks like a big caged piece. It was right in the middle of all the houses and stuff. And they had to do some excavation, so we were going to have it move it anyway. So I said, "You know, we should move it up there. It would look much nicer." And it does. It has a whole different scale. It's not in the middle of a big field, now, it's like in a grove so it almost looks bigger. You can come down a road above it and you see much more angles, and things like that. And then they had to move a big Chuck Ginnever piece, that when they sold—they sold the front property about five or six years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah [Affirmative], okay.

MR. PERRY: And they had to move a big Ginnever and a big Venet. The Venet has never been re-setup because it's quite an install, I mean, that involves engineers. And I—we wouldn't do the base because it's a giant curly cue about 40 foot high and the way it's put together is you have to make those ends meet so that they're off two different bases, so. There—and it's probably \$100,000 just to put the base in. And they're trying to donate it to the Presidio, I think, and they've been easy. The last time I've talked to Ned Topham, who is Dodie's son, he said they might be getting close.

MS. RIEDEL: So are they slowly decommissioning everything?

MR. PERRY: Slowly, I guess. They came through early—soon after Dodie died, kind of appraised everything, and then they came back and took like a half a dozen pieces that would—you know, smaller bronzes that would fit in an auction house. They took, Richards—I mean, not Richards, Stephen De Staebler.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. PERRY: Stephen De Staebler, they took Antony Gormley, John Henry.

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

MR. PERRY: I'm trying to think of who else they took.

MS. RIEDEL: So—

MR. PERRY: Lupertz, Markus Lupertz, they had a bronze of his.

MS. RIEDEL: So the—

MR. PERRY: And they—

MS. RIEDEL: —both John and Dodie [had now passed away and the kids -MR] were auctioning them off?

MR. PERRY: Well, John and Dodie had passed away and Dodie left all the art to her son Ned—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: —who is not John's son. He's her son, John's stepson, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And Dodie had never—the way the Rosekrans' worked things—I don't think, and I don't know about current, but their spouses, no Rosekrans blood gets to inherit any of Runnymede. I mean, some—people who have no Rosekrans blood are not—so spouses and wives and stuff, I think it just stays in the bloodline.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so through the children.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. PERRY: So Dodie had no claim to Runnymede.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. PERRY: So that even when John passed, the art was more or less there at the behest of the family.

MS. RIEDEL: So now it passed to Adolph—

MR. PERRY: No, it passed—

MS. RIEDEL: —well, his sons.

MR. PERRY: Well, yeah, John's sons own a larger percentage of Runnymede now, but they've already pushed some it onto their kids for tax reasons, and what not.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: So Ned owns all the art but it's sitting at Runnymede and he has to be careful because I know people that—I know—I've talked to people who are drooling to buy the Violas. But I think he—the Viola's sit right outside Adolph's house, he kind of likes them, you know, and it becomes a little sticky issue of, "Okay, well, if you're going to pull this one get the other hundred out here, too," you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And then it becomes a problem.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And another thing that you realize about art, that I've come realize about art, is that unless a person is really well known, you're not going to get a great price on a resale if you can resell it. I mean, we took a large percentage—when they sold the property off the front, we had a lot—that had horse stables. And there was a lot of pieces John bought that were either teeny, or you know, this big, or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Somebody insignificant in scale, or just could not go outside, so we kept them in horse stalls.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And so we, you know, tried to get them to whatever auction houses. We took them to Bonhams, they wouldn't do it. We ended up taking them to Clars which is an auction house in Oakland, the lower end, you know. They sold there but I don't know what they sold for.

MS. RIEDEL: Clars?

MR. PERRY: Clars, yeah it's called Clars. It's right on—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It's right on Telegraph, it's just another auction house but not quite—not the Bonham scale, maybe, or—

MS. RIEDEL: Right

MR. PERRY: So you realize that the sale price they got is probably the best sales price they're ever going to get and there's not a lot of, and some of them I could go online and I couldn't even find any current history or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: About the artist?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, some of them I could.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they primarily American, but international as well?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I would say later on—well, he bought a lot of international, too. Well, primarily American. When Dodie started getting—when they got the curator and then Dodie started—they got a little bit more serious and that's when they were buying the Mertz's and the Gormley's and I think he bought a big—they never showed up, I'm trying to remember. John used to—I don't know if this should be on tape [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we can—anything can be [Inaudible.]

MR. PERRY: No, I'm just saying he used to have a thing where he'd all put them out at Dartmouth, or something, for six months to avoid the use taxes, and stuff, and coming into California so, you know. But yeah, they were great. I mean, Dodie was scary, but—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] How so?

MR. PERRY: She was one of those people who could just shoot you a glare that knifes, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And most of the family was scared of her.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Even the brothers and stuff, you know, because she was just "Errr," you know. "We don't do that," you know. "No cars up, da, da, da—" you know, these rules that would come out of nowhere, but. I didn't have any problem with her. She was—I was always nice to her, she was always nice to me. But I've seen the look, and she was intimidating. And John: John was a nice guy, he was very friendly. But wanted to be known that he was important.

MS. RIEDEL: I understand that one of the grandmothers really loved oak trees, and so that land—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that was—

MS. RIEDEL: —was supposed to be full of incredible oaks.

MR. PERRY: Full of incredible oaks. She thought redwoods were weeds.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So this experience of working at Runnymede re-interested you in wood, is that accurate?

MR. PERRY: Yes, I would say if I didn't work at Runnymede, I wouldn't be working in wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: Because I was around cleaning up a lot of wood and just seeing—and I think, you know, also my dad started, getting his own—I mean, not that I would just go back a year, or whatever, but you kind of realize that everything is potentially something in wood, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: In most cases, so—whether you mill it up, whether you carve it or whatever. And me being at a complete sculptural dead end with my clay, I don't know—I brought a piece, it's out there somewhere hidden away, but I just starting carving it and fooling around, and at some point I said, "Well, I don't want to do—maybe I want to try something else," you know? And I don't know if I was really happy with my first pieces but I was certainly more happy—more satisfied than I had been doing anything in clay. And then, I don't know, what happened is, I'd see—I'd have a shape, and I'd go, "I know where that tree is for —" like, that piece right there, I knew that piece was going to be the barbershop pole, whatever you want to call it. I knew what that piece was going to be when I saw the tree, or whatever. It was very—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, okay.

MR. PERRY: And that's probably a pretty important piece because that's probably when everything kind of gelled, was that one.

MS. RIEDEL: And does this have a title?

MR. PERRY: Maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: You just identify that as the barber pole?

MR. PERRY: No, I just called it that now.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I don't know if it does. Actually, Rena Bransten owns that piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, she does. Okay.

MR. PERRY: Just never made it to her house [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And this is one of the first pieces, right?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that was in my first show—

MS. RIEDEL: 2000?

MR. PERRY: Oh no, it's later than that. It was in my first show at Oakland which might have been 2004 even. I was trying to think if Viola might have seen it. Might have been in January 2004.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: Because you started working in wood in '99 or 2000?

MR. PERRY: Somewhere around like that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then the first show was 2004?

MR. PERRY: 2004, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And I—yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about that transition. [... -MR] Were you looking at sculpture that could be made in wood? How did this shift happen? Was it remembering things from carving when you were younger?

MR. PERRY: I would say it probably happened splitting firewood [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: All right.

MR. PERRY: I mean, I did a lot of splitting firewood, and it let me know how all this would work. Not all wood works—but basically let me know how oak works.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I guess ultimately it was my feeling and the response I was getting from other people doing it that led me to keep doing it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: It wasn't there in clay. The drive was kind of there but it's a big pool, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So I guess, it had to be the familiarity of the material and seeing where I could take it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And that's probably the most thing is seeing the future in it where I wasn't seeing the future in anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I mean, that is probably one of the, at least—for any kind of artist—I mean, when you can see your next piece while you're still working on your last one, it's a pretty satisfying thing to have. I mean, that's why I hate shows. I mean, I love shows, but when I come back it's like, "Okay, now"—and I went through that with my last shows, you know. And I realized, just probably within the last six months, that I can't sit here and do one thing. I have to do—I have to start this piece, I have to drop it, start another piece, another piece, so I have six things going on because then I don't hit that dead end.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're preparing for a big show next month at St. Mary's?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, but that's kind of easy because it's all here.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: It's in this room so there's nothing to—it's done.

MS. RIEDEL: So a one person retrospective at St. Mary's College?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] And that's in Moraga or Orinda?

MR. PERRY: Orinda.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Moraga, Moraga.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Moraga. And I have an odd history with them because my old girlfriend went to school there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: So I know the art department, actually.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: She was an art major also.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: But yeah, so I guess that ultimately is it that I can see, you know, I can see down the line.

MS. RIEDEL: As we're sitting here amongst these pieces, there are probably three dozen here, at least, and we've talked about them falling into groups but not necessarily series. They tend to be forms that you work in small groups but then repeat.

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So the ribbons, the knots—

MR. PERRY: The knots, the loops.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-mm

MR. PERRY: I think—

MS. RIEDEL: What was your more romantic term for the blobs?

MR. PERRY: The blobs. Oh, that's just the titles, *Beneath the Aboves*.

MS. RIEDEL: *Beneath the Aboves*. They're sort of paddle shapes on their ends.

MR. PERRY: The—barbells. That one reminds me of a very heavy barbell if you put it [vertically -SP].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, you're right.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that and, you know, I think kind of if you want to look for the one thing that I really like to do is kind of get through to the center of the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And either make—or get the outside but somehow to start the mass enough that it becomes somewhat lighter, or—I don't know. It always seems where I end up is inside the wood, you know, figuring it out. And the other thing I find interesting -I've always found interesting but not necessarily a part of the work maybe a part of my working on the wood, is just the story that the logs tell you. You know, like the story of anybody's life. You know it's probably the only material that is one to one with us as far as—it lives a lot longer, but we can say its lived 200 years, it's lived 100 years. So I kind of get—especially when I know where I know where most of the wood comes from like literally—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Like, "Oh, this tree fell down, it's been sitting here for 150 years, and it decided to fall," you know [Laughs.] So—what went passed it in 150 years? I find that a little fascinating and that's more stories to myself because anything like this can be incredibly tedious.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: It's a lot of work and then you get to—your idea gets to be realized to a certain extent, and then it's a lot more work to get it there, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But anything, any art is pretty much like that, I think any art, what to outside—to the viewer doesn't necessary look tedious but at certain points has huge points of tedium, whether it's filling in a giant thing of paint on a painting or, you know, clay or anything. There's a certain amount of just basic work. And, you know, people have been telling me, "Oh, you should get an assistant so you can finish these things up," and I can't quite figure out where I end and the assistant, you know—where or how—and I guess that's just, you have to work with someone long enough.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But—and I've always been interested in that sinewy, twisty—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —motion.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] [... -MR] You have done some tables, and some benches, some bowls, so there is some quote, unquote, functional work. But it was interesting to me how you're talking about the wave shape and the bench.

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Well, I think when I was even doing my clay work, what I wanted was kind of like how the—I don't know if I could put this right, but I was always very interested in how things like waves or whatever affect an object. So me, in most currents or whatever, you don't see them but they're spinning, turning, and da da da da, and that's kind of like what a lot of my earlier—seemed to me, was how the invisible was manifested. How is making the invisible physical?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: —how wind wraps around the post, or how it does this or that? I don't know if—I don't think that's quite what I'm doing today, but it's certainly amount of movement and there's an amount of grasping, containing, entrapment—

MS. RIEDEL: Nesting.

MR. PERRY: Nesting. That piece—the piece, the elongated one with the curve at the bottom.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: That piece is called *Smoke*. The reason I knew that was that was the title I knew at the beginning because it reminded me of my grandmother's cigarette.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: That trickle of smoke that flicks off of a still cigarette, whatever, in an ashtray. And then with the wood it became, as far as that physical, it became—the wood became the physical that's not supposed to twist and turn, and now it's being turned like that. You know, it's got that contrary to its material feeling.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's being acted on.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You see the force acting on it.

MR. PERRY: Acting on it, and it's somewhat not what you would expect from—I mean, I'm not trying to ever disguise these. I'm embracing the wood. I want the sculptures to a certain point to be about the fact that they're made out of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And they're, you know, twisting. And one of the comments or whatever I like best is, "Did you bend that?"

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And I said, "No." Or, "Is that out of one piece of wood?" I say, "Yes."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: You know, so it's a certain kind of, I don't know if you call it *trompe-l'œil*, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Right

MR. PERRY: —a certain kind of magic, I don't know [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Surprise.

MR. PERRY: Surprise, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Unexpected.

MR. PERRY: Unexpected, right.

MS. RIEDEL: And there are some beautifully polished surfaces—and then very craggy cracks where the wood is split, so there's an immediate contrast.

MR. PERRY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: You were talking before we started the tape about how you like them to be burnished and beautiful, but not so seductive that you're taking away from them.

MR. PERRY: I think I had to go to being burnished and beautiful before I could say I didn't need to go.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: The piece that looks like the large Y with the things, I did that probably—and the biggest piece I've sanded the—you know, with the most difficult sanding, and after that I said, "I'm done." You know, I can do it. It was the more can I do it and can I pull it off, but then you realize I can do that and it's not that necessary to do that in that particular piece. Like that bench with the wave, I think is absolutely—because it's somewhat of a simple shape and the wood is beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: That red madrone is—

MS. RIEDEL: It is interesting to me here in the Bay Area, where there is a history of fabulous wood workers—

MR. PERRY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —and wood being worked for its exquisiteness; those rare woods polished to beautiful sheened surfaces, that you have intentionally chosen to not take it that far.

MR. PERRY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: [... -MR] It's important that it's wood, but it's not just about the wood.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, it's not about being a beautiful highly polished piece of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It's about seeing the shape and form and not just looking at the surface, which can happen and does happen in glass. Or, in the case of, having maybe a sculpture that's not necessarily, what I would call for me, that great of a piece but polished really nice. And then you're depending on the polish maybe to draw people in and hide whatever. I mean, some pieces I like a lot better than others in here and I think every artist is like that, so, you know. Most cases, I'd like—hopefully my best piece is the last piece [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But you always have to experiment to a certain—to again, to see the next piece down the line because it gets, you know, you can feel like, "Uh-oh. Starting to turn around and hit the beginning of that circle. I don't want to do that." You want to keep having that—it's like writer's block, or whatever, you know, that—another idea, and when you come up with it you're like, "Thank God."

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking earlier, too, about how your working process is very much an important part of how the work becomes what it is. That it evolves during the process.

MR. PERRY: It evolves during the process and ultimately it's with a lot of the material being chosen three to four years to five years before it can be used.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: A lot of time you'll have a great idea when you find that piece of wood and by the time you get to it, the wood being good, and you've either moved on, or you've forgotten what it was, so. I've kind of gotten a little bit away from that, but I do have certain—like that knot piece with the five knots.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: I knew what it was going—another piece, I knew what it was going to be, I knew what I wanted to do with it, but it took me four years to make it. Not to actually make it, but to start it because—there were two reasons: One, it was like money in the bank for me, and the second one was I hadn't got there in my ability yet, probably, and I hadn't taken the rest of my art there, or the rest of my work, or body of work there. So I think that, you know, was it. I had the idea but it wasn't crystal clear—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: —and by the time I got working on it, it was fairly crystal clear. I knew I wanted a tight knot at the bottom, I knew I wanted it to be unraveling at the top, I knew—you know. So there's pieces like that like the other piece I showed you outside with the trunk and that branch.

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

MR. PERRY: I've kind of known what that's going to be. And it's—I was going through the wood last week restacking it, and I said, "I might as well bring this out." It may be another six months, it might be next week before I start it, you know, who knows. I'm close to starting another piece because I'm getting to that point where the piece is 90 percent done and I don't want to do the 10 percent right away.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you always start with maquettes?

MR. PERRY: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Only—a lot of times I'll start with a drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: That's actually, I'll show you. I do a lot of drawings these days that are teeny. And they're on my old oil rags. So—because I really like the surface—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: —and they're just a prisma of color on the oil rag, and then I'll actually take the wood oil that I use and spray it on it and fix it with that, and it comes out almost a very like money almost. I mean, it's got a very cloth—it's a cloth thing, and they're dirty and stained so I have a nice ground with the oil, and they're stiff like wax paper. And I just started doing it. I kind of—I first started doing it as a way of, again, kind of like what I call the noodle ball. It is kind of way of being able to doodle and not worry about making anything; a complete thing, just letting ideas flow, or whatever. And I did that for a while and kind of let it run on. And then I started coming back to going, "Well, this could be a sculpture. I'll just draw it, you know," and got a few pieces out of that, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Where did the ideas for the work come from? Do they come from the trees themselves when you see them or it seems as if you see forms sometimes too?

MR. PERRY: Sometimes I do. I mean, I've been kind of focused on this loop thing and this knot thing which I think I'm finishing the knot thing. I will probably—one more piece I want to do. So I had—actually, I had a piece that I did that I really liked and it went—it was in the Houston—it was going to be in the Houston Art Fair and because the gallery does a mockup of—like, they hand draw it, and it's sold from the drawing before it ever got on the truck, which was nice, but I didn't really have a time—a long time to enjoy the piece, to digest the piece, I think is a better way.

It did have to come back for a little repair so I got it again and took a bunch of pictures. I always take pictures, but I took a bunch more pictures because the client was concerned the piece was splitting and I knew it wasn't. But—it started with a massive split in it. So I put some butterflies in it just to make him happy. But it, you know, I got a couple of more pieces and then right now actually the gallery is without a space, they're—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I'm not quite sure when my next show there is, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Didn't they move to a temporary space on Market Street?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, they're on Market Street right across from Zuni.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're going to have that for a little while, or—

MR. PERRY: I think so but it doesn't have any exhibition space, really.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. PERRY: As far as I know. They're calling it a project space or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, that was tragic.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: After 40 years in that space.

MR. PERRY: Was it that? They were in—

MS. RIEDEL: Close to.

MR. PERRY: —more with Ruth yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, right.

MR. PERRY: Over on Sutter for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, that's right.

MR. PERRY: When I first started going there—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: —and they were over there. But yeah, they've been there forever. And they're like family to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I've been with them, through Viola and Tricia introduced me to my wife, and [Laughs] so.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: You know, I used to go over to Thanksgiving every year, there.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And Dennis was pretty much my best friend around here.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: So yeah, they're family.

MS. RIEDEL: So when you think about this body of work, what do you think what would you say are the most important influences on the work? We talked about Runnymede.

MR. PERRY: I'm bad at that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you look at a lot of other contemporary work?

MR. PERRY: No, I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: I mean, I don't know why. I'm either jaded, or something like that. But, I mean, I look—you can't say that Martin Puryear is not here somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. PERRY: And, you know, I've definitely looked at his stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: That's the first one that comes to mind. But you see a little bit of—

MR. PERRY: It's kind of like David Smith. If it's made out of metal, you're going to have to give something to David Smith, right?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. There is a real range though.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a real range in the work.

MR. PERRY: Oh yeah, no, there is and I think—well, I think A) that's how I got to be able to do a few things, you know, and explore, and I think that for some reason, and it may be just in my head, wood lets me do that a little bit more. And, granted, I've kind of got three, directions or whatever, three themes that, you know, I'm working in as far as the ribbons, the loops, and the knots.

MS. RIEDEL: Knots, right.

MR. PERRY: But it's not to say that—because I would say I haven't done a ribbon piece in a while.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's not mentioning these linking pieces.

MR. PERRY: The linking pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Or the tables.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Or the bowls.

MR. PERRY: The bowls, I would say—

MS. RIEDEL: I'm including huge bowls—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —too.

MR. PERRY: Well, the little bowls I would say are pretty much 100 percent for me. That's like me doing—not—and I don't want to say me doing my art. That's me doing a functional little—whether it's making me think about something else, or, —but it's the act of doing something not necessarily—that the outcome is pretty plain.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know, it's there. It's going to be a bowl

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It's going to be, you know, the shape is up to my thing or whatever I'm left. But I even know what kind of bowl shapes I like. I know what it's not going to be, more or less.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're all made on a lathe or mostly, and [Inaudible.]

MR. PERRY: I would say 50/50.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: I mean, unfortunately, the ones that I don't make on the lathe seem to sell more, so there are none here [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: If it's small enough I'll make it on a lathe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: More than I would choose to. But like I mentioned earlier with that piece of koa, I'm not going to

make that on a lathe because it's going to—the shape of the wood, it wants to be an oval bowl, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And it takes a lot longer to make it by hand because it's just a lot of grinding, a lot of, you know. I can make a bowl like that in—well, those bowls I had to do some funny things. I had to coat them with epoxy because they had so many cracks in them to hold them together. So they took a couple of days.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But normally you could make one in a day.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Or less, a few hours. Whereas one of the other ones will take, quite a bit of time, a few days, or whatever. A few days and it's more physical, it's, you know. It's—I mean, that's part of the reason I probably love and loved clay: It's all a very physical—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —thing. You're pretty much a cave—coal miner, or something like that half the time. You've got so many clothes on, and masks, and goggles, and ears, and stuff, that you get to be in your own little world [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So yeah, that's it. And then I, yeah—bowls I guess are, it's like coming back to your foundation is what it is. And not that I was ever a bowl maker, and the other thing I love about bowls, you know, when I was talking about removing the middle, that's what it does. Is it, you know, again, lets you see the inside. I don't know, it's something I just like about bowls.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you accept commissions?

MR. PERRY: I do, but I tend to be right of first refusal. I'm going to do the idea, and if I like the idea then I'll do it. I'm leery of being directed because I don't think you can meet anybody's expectations of—I am—arguably it's not a commission, but right now for Adolph Rosekrans, I'm turning some acorns for the top of some finials on this fence, or gate, or railing they're putting in. I had to take—you know—since that, I just consider work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know it's not, it's just Runnymede. But I sent the [Laughs] first one in yesterday. I took a picture, I did one on Sunday just to the most minimal, getting it to the minimal shape of the acorn, and then I'd went on Google and pulled up images, and this and that. So I sent it to him with an email and said "Opinions." And then I got call from him yesterday and he says, "It looks like a piece of my anatomy that I don't normally show people."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I said, "Yeah, I thought that too."

[They laugh.]

MR. PERRY: And so he said, and then I said, "Can we get it more pointed?" so I went and bought some modeling clay and slapped it on top of it, and sent another picture to him and he said, "Yeah, I think that's more of what we're looking for." But things like that. So I'd rather do the idea. I had a commission recently. I mean, it wasn't a real commission because no money but it was I'll do this, and that kind of what led me to the I'm not doing one piece at a time anymore because I was focusing on this thing and it was just driving me nuts.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And they were vague about the date and it basically came up that I'd missed the date, so I said, "Well, I'm making the piece. If they want it, they'll come back and get it." I learned that from Viola. Viola was—I mean, she did an airport commission, was a major commission, she said, "I'll do it if you like it. I'll do a 15 by 20 foot mural, if you like it, out of clay, out of tile, you can have—" and we had to have engineers to mount it and everything, and she didn't take any money I don't think until it—until they bought it, you know, more or less.

MS. RIEDEL: That's an interesting story.

MR. PERRY: She—I'm not—I mean, that's my recollection. She said, "I'm doing it, so." And that's the one she had the rooster coming out. I mean, she didn't do that, but she just, to the point of where I was making all the tile before the commission was ever—that was another thing we didn't really cross, when she started doing a lot of tile pieces later on. And that was another one of those things where she didn't have to really work with the clay. I could just make however many, X amount of tiles for her, and fire them, and set them up on it. We had a big leaning wall out there and she just set them up whatever scale and she could paint them. So yeah, I haven't had many commissions,

MS. RIEDEL: Did they offer any opportunities that the work itself wouldn't have otherwise?

MR. PERRY: Well, it depends. I mean, if you're dealing with public, it's usually the opposite. They have lots of constrictions.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And to this point, I don't think either I'm out there enough for a wood commission. I could see it for more architecturally speaking—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —in a house or something. And I would be open to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Some of these things I go, "Oh, yeah you can do an entry way, or something like that, you could do something—" but the other tricky thing with a commission for me is someone could say "I want this made," and I say, "That's great, but I have no wood that I could make that out of," you know. "Not that piece, or—" so it becomes a little bit harder.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think about any kind of religion or spirituality in your work?

MR. PERRY: I'm fairly nonreligious. I wouldn't say I'm not spiritual.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say, a little transcendentalist sensibility perhaps?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: You had a quote that had something to do with that.

MR. PERRY: I feel the work itself is somewhat spiritual on that level but.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. PERRY: I think it's very—I guess I could find it very—for me, I find it very meditative. I mean, I can—it's very

[Audio break.]

—tranquil, even though some of them aren't as tranquil, but—I don't know, I think it is fairly quiet work, in my opinion.

MS. RIEDEL: There's also that sense of harvesting it in the first place.

MR. PERRY: Right. I always viewed—and here's a completely ego thing—I've elevated this to above firewood.

[They laugh.]

You know, it's somewhat—in a weird way it's somewhat of a tombstone to a tree.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So you know, other than being cut up into little pieces and discarded or whatever, some portion of it is remembered.

MS. RIEDEL: Something else you said about the imperfections of the tree [... -MR] made me think of that Japanese concept of wabi-sabi. Do you think about that at all?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think I do, yeah. I mean, it's always a challenge how to incorporate the imperfection. How are you going to work on them looking at that bottom of that thing where it's missing that giant chunk that fell out,

you know? And at a certain point you just—we all got to live with our scars, you know? And that's part of what it's like to me, and probably this is generally a philosophy of my—you deal with what you're dealt, and you make it work. So that is, kind of, how I feel about things. Nothing's going to be perfect. Even the perfect thing's got something wrong with them. And a lot of the times people won't even notice it. I love when clients—not with my work, actually I would notice it more with Viola's. They buy this piece, and when you're setting it up—"What's this over here? Was that chip there before?" "Yeah, that's what the artist did." You know, it's just—"was supposed to be that way." But it's so funny, when I used to do installations at the gallery in New York and stuff, we'd be putting together, and the installer for the gallery would say, "Don't do it too perfect because I want to be able to do it better when it's at the client's house."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's interesting.

MR. PERRY: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

MR. PERRY: Because they will always say, "It wasn't like this in the gallery. I didn't see this—it didn't look like this in the gallery."

MS. RIEDEL: There are, though, what could be called significant imperfections that are an inherent part of the beauty of any of these pieces.

MR. PERRY: Yes. Absolutely. And, yeah, that's the wabi-sabi, you know. Absolutely. And sometimes I seek them out, and sometimes they find me. I mean, when that piece that looks like a curly cue in on itself, the one that's right behind this -

MS. RIEDEL: Standing up—

MR. PERRY: Standing up.

MS. RIEDEL: —on that pedestal?

MR. PERRY: No, right next—the one just to the left of the pedestal.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: That brown piece. They're all brown. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: That piece, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with that piece. I took the saw and sawed it—it had no middle. It was all rotten. But it ended up working out. You can't see it—you'd have to go look at it from here, but it made me have a completely different direction on the—well, not completely, it's still somewhat what I'd thought, but—it changed and became two pieces that wrap in on themselves because it had no middle. But you can't see it—

MS. RIEDEL: So that's the very narrow, upright curly cue?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: What similarities and differences do you see in your work since you started, and the work now?

MR. PERRY: Similarities are it's about braiding, curving, interlocking, you know, intrinsic wrapping around, spooning, whatever you want to call that kind of relationship, what it were. Now, they're a little more refined. And a little more open I would say—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: —they're not as dense on a vertical. I mean, they can still be on a vertical, but it's more letting light show you that this piece is actually separate from that piece and things. And it just lets little more light and spark, it makes the piece more interesting to me because it—basically, when you're dealing with this or any sculpture, anytime you make a slit, you're adding another color. You're adding, you know, it's not—there's nothing there, but whatever's behind it is brought into it. And it adds an element to it.

MS. RIEDEL: There are a couple pieces here that feel absolutely frenetic compared to the other ones—they're much more assembled. Are these more recent?

MR. PERRY: The—

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the bowl of noodles?

MR. PERRY: The noodle ball. Actually, it's called the *Tangle*.

MS. RIEDEL: *Tangle*?

MR. PERRY: *Tangle*. And the other one is called *Frayed*.

MS. RIEDEL: *Frayed*?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: F-R-A-Y-E-D—

MR. PERRY: Yeah. They are, I guess—I kind of got this—probably an idea for these things after I was probably in New York at some museums or something. And I find that museums go for the spectacular these days. And I don't necessarily think that's a good thing. I mean, if it's bigger it's better half the time at museums. So these were kind of a way—how can I make something that could be endless? I could go as big as I want—especially the *Tangle*. I mean, it's how can I make an element that I could go in and run down a wall, or do something, —so that was that. And at the same time it was also, how can I get into a schedule of, okay I'm going to make this, I'm going to make one of these, I'm going to make three of these, and more product-like, —or more factory-like —but allow every one to be completely like a doodle. I mean, all I'm doing is following whatever bends on the branch, I'm not relating it to any other part of whatever sculpture it's going to be. It's only going to be put into a library of all these things. And then I'm going to assemble it into whatever I choose to assemble it. But it would allow me to do a scale that is much larger than any one log I can get, I like the lightness and the fragileness of it, and the fact that I can make a mass at the same time. So that's kind of where those came from.

And I did those two pieces, which were in my last show, and I'm not done with them yet. I just don't know what I'm doing next. And I've kind of played around—I have some more of these elements outside, and I've played with them in several ways, but I haven't quite come to the conclusion yet. And really, to come to that conclusion, I just need to make a whole bunch more.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's solves two problems, because then you've always got something else to do, so you're not stuck being done.

MR. PERRY: Right. No, and that's a good thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And I, you know, I just spent last Saturday cutting up a big tree at Runnymede. This is about the time of year when we get everything falling for some reason. I didn't save any of the branches, but I thought about it. Because those are the one thing—I say I have too much wood, I don't have a lot of that wood and that kind of wood is—you know when you see the branch. Because I still—I brought one home three weeks ago or something and it was like, "Oh this is a good branch," you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And then you start making something and you go, "But I need a lot more straight ones and I don't have any of that," you know. That's kind of what happened with the noodle ball. I got the basic form, and then it was like, okay, I need a couple of these shapes, a couple of those shapes. Then it's all right, you know, just no in general. But the big problem I had with the *Tangle* is—noodle ball, *Tangle*—is that I had to take it down halfway to get it in the gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. PERRY: And then set it up, and then, you know, I had like video—both of them had to—and actually, the noodle ball was nothing. The *Frayed* I hope I never have to take apart again because that just drives me nuts.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I had an assistant and it was still—it's one of those things you do—this is what happens, and this is a purely technical issue that's happened to me several times. I'll make a sculpture, it'll all work all great—and when I say work, the pieces will fit—and then I'll sand it. And all of a sudden everything's slippery, and it doesn't stand up, it doesn't do, it doesn't bind, it doesn't hook on itself. And it's kind of what happened with the *Frayed* piece,—so it gets frustrating. And then you're in a gallery and you're sitting there going, "I've got to have this

done, and it's not going to look the same, they've got a picture of it, what am I going to do?"

[They laugh.]

MR. PERRY: And the last time I set up that *Frayed* piece, I did it here by myself, just because I wanted to be able to curse as much as I could and not feel bad—but I ended up having, like, tape and string holding all these things because I'd get it just where I'd want it, and I'd put the next piece through, and it would just rhaang [ph] [Inaudible] Said, "No."

MS. RIEDEL: Gosh.

MR. PERRY: So now I have it good and I think—I have to ship that—or send it to Saint Mary's for that show, and I'm going to strap it to the stool and get it on a truck, I think [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: So they're all—

MR. PERRY: Just friction fitting.

MS. RIEDEL: Just friction is holding that together?

MR. PERRY: Yeah they're just—jammed—yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's roughly, what, 50 or 60 pieces?

MR. PERRY: I don't think it's that many, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Forty?

MR. PERRY: —it's close. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: There's nothing holding that together—

MR. PERRY: No, they're just jammed, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —other than friction?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. That's why it's a pain [Laughs.].

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So I'll just put it on a stool so it doesn't really touch, and then—anything's got to be better than taking it—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you can't transport that. Do you think it's sturdy enough to transport?

Male: Well, no, that's what I mean. I'll put a stool under the round part just so it's up on the stool leg, and then it'll be fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You'll be able to transport that to Orinda?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I mean, I can put a cart under it and move it wherever I want right now.

MS. RIEDEL: Jiggling it won't be a problem?

MR. PERRY: No, it's—they're pretty sturdy.

MS. RIEDEL: They're really jammed in there.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. They have to be because, like I said, they'll just collapse. And there was really no way – granted, I guess, if I knew that every doorway I was going to be able to make it through—I could pin it all together with dowels and everything, but.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we'll have to make sure there's a visual of this so people can see what we're talking about.

MR. PERRY: Oh yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we'll stop here for today—

MR. PERRY: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: —and then pick up again tomorrow. Does that sound good?

MR. PERRY: Or Thursday.

MS. RIEDEL: Any final—right, Thursday.

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Any final thoughts on the tip of your tongue that you would like to finish with now?

MR. PERRY: I think I'm talked out [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you.

MR. PERRY: Sure.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Sam Perry at the artist's home in Oakland, California on May 1st, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art; this is card number three.

So a couple of follow-up questions from Tuesday—I've actually been wanting to ask you this question since I started researching the interview. You've had such amazing educational experiences, starting as a kid and working at your dad's canoe shop, going for your master's and your undergrad, working with Viola, working at Runnymede, is there one that stands out as the most significant educational experience?

MR. PERRY: I think it has to be Viola because through Viola I learned how to deal with galleries and—while they teach you art business in art school—it's very simple, you know, it's like how do you keep your books, and how to keep your files—slides in order—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —you know, label your work, but with her it was really—and again, it was as a whole process of learning. It wasn't like you learned everything up front and you had to do it, it was different duties put upon you as things changed, so I think with her, I had to do, I had—number one had to learn what making art for exhibit is, finishing work, and to—for lack of a better term, making a very quality product or, you know

MS. RIEDEL: What it meant to really finish something.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think if you make work and don't exhibit it, you sometimes don't take it that last 1 or 2 percent, which maybe doesn't show in the work but's necessary to—I guess necessary for the quality of the work. I don't know what a better way—I mean, I don't want to say its craftsmanship because it's not necessarily craftsmanship, but it's just getting everything ready—and that was, I guess, partly—mainly my job. It was—Viola did the work, but I had to make sure it all worked for someone else, because it was assembly and things like that—everything had to be not just so I could do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So these sound like technical details—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, more technical details, but essential. I mean, in any kind of art even to the point where if you have a painting that's difficult to hang, or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. PERRY: So there was that, and then at a certain point—the gallery would call Viola and this and that, but at a certain point I started talking to the gallery and saying, "Okay, well," you know, "when do you need these pieces, and when are we shipping and getting all this?" And then I would go to Viola and say, "Okay, we need to have these glazed here and here because I only have this much time to fire," because—with ceramics it's a little bit different then—I mean, you need the paint to dry on a painting and everything, but you really have to plan a little bit ahead because you're going to need a week to fire this piece and a week to fire that piece, and you only have so much kiln space, so you really had to figure that kind of thing out.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. PERRY: And then, you know, even later on it became more of the same but more involved with, "Okay, when are we traveling? Who's she meeting?" This and that. So I would say number one Viola—and through Viola I got all these other jobs. I mean, I got the job at Runnymede because I was doing installations for her.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I would say that was the primary biggest one, hands down.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Has travel affected your work at all?

MR. PERRY: Not—I don't think—I mean, I'm not a huge traveler. I usually—again, you know, the places that I have gone, New York, and most of the places I've traveled other than going skiing or something normally have been for work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So I would say not a whole bunch. I would say—no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: That's the best way to put it.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Fair enough. What do you see as the similarities and differences between your early work and your recent work?

MR. PERRY: Early work being clay or wood?

MS. RIEDEL: Actually, I think it's interesting to think about it both ways.

MR. PERRY: Well, similarities is, you know, pretty obvious that the curve and, you know—the curve, the nesting, even some of that later, my—later—I forgot to show you I have big ceramic pieces up on shelves—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that would have been nice to see.

MR. PERRY: We're kind of just in the background on pallet racks but—that were like the last work I had. I always tell everything, "I can't throw them away, but I wouldn't mind if the shelf fell down."

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, from what I've seen, the ceramics are like the wood pieces: They're minimal, very formal, curvilinear—

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And I would say the difference is between that is the wood pieces tend to be a little bit more totemic, more central, as the ceramics were more—wood is in the most cases a little more vertical and the ceramics—had a little more horizontal to them, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And not exclusively, but if I was to think what I've noticed what the difference is that it's, you know, it's harder to go horizontal with wood—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —to a certain degree just because of the way it grows. I could make a horizontal wood piece, but it's —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and have—

MS. RIEDEL: Like the bench yesterday, for example.

MR. PERRY: Right, but not to the extent that I've done some ceramic pieces. And then the difference between early wood work and later wood work I would say is the earlier stuff's a little more crude. And I know the later

stuff is smoother. [Laughs] I'll easily say that.

MS. RIEDEL: The chisel marks were much more obvious in the early work.

MR. PERRY: Even—yeah, but even if the chisel mark, just the line is smother and more -like what we were talking about earlier I have a big problem—I don't want to ever reach slick. I may have already reached slick and retreated from it. So that's kind of the boundary, you know. I want to stay away from becoming too slick, and I know that the early work doesn't have any slickness. I would argue some of mine does at certain stages, more recent pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And why is it important to stay away from that?

MR. PERRY: Well, I think—in my art teachings and whatever, slick was always a bad word. You know, slick was you had all the skill but maybe not all the ideas or something. It's your compensating or something. And, you know, it could be just my—or is just my prerogative but I cannot—but I can spot it on someone else's work and, you know, "Its real slick, but," you know, "that doesn't mean it's good."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: It's well done.

MS. RIEDEL: Heavy perhaps on technique but [light -MR] on content.

MR. PERRY: Yes, exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And yeah—and it's real well done, just, not right there. I saw an artist, I can't remember his name, but we got invited to this show a few years ago in San Francisco and it was an artist and he went in and he was doing wood curvilinear wood similar—not similar, well, as similar as you could get. I would say much more mechanical than mine. And he had an army of people working for him. He had no gallery, but he had a lot of money. He had this warehouse that he put this fabulous party on and everything, and everything was slick, you know. Everything was—an idea that—and I don't have a problem with that but it was an idea that was—you could tell he started most of these things and someone else finished them, one of his assistants or whatever. And I have no problem with that, but it just seemed like—well, there were several things. It seemed like, "I need to make as much of it as possible." So there was a lot there. And he was—very spread out in what he was doing. I mean, it was, style this, style that, you know, —a lot of different styles, and I walked in and I said it was slick.

[They laugh.]

"It's real well done it's just not my," you know. And I don't know if he ever did get a gallery or not. But—I don't know, I was always leery of people who had the means to do anything they wanted but didn't necessarily have the ideas or whatever. But they could make a big splash and, you know, they get a lot of attention, but I just don't think it had any sustainability in interest from other people.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I think that all kind of boils back to having to make everything myself when I was a kid and—as far as surf boards, and skate boards, and what not. I guess it's a kind of, "be self-sufficient," to a certain extent.

MS. RIEDEL: Something you said yesterday comes to mind now, which is that you figure out a lot about the piece in the process of working it. So—

MR. PERRY: Oh, absolutely. That's—

MS. RIEDEL: —so if you're not doing the work then it's not getting figured out.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. That's what it's all about is—you know, learning. Every piece is learning. Every part of every piece, is, when you get into it. The piece that I had there with the rings, concentric rings, that I had that I was working on I had to buy ten new tools just because I knew what I wanted to do. I didn't have the right devices to get that far inside, so yeah, it's all learning and it's—and not only is that it's learning but also leading to more ideas, because again, it's a very slow, tedious—and you can't even listen to music when you're doing most of this because you're having ear protectors on, so you're in, basically, like a sensory deprivation type of thing—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —other than your eyes, you know, your eyes are—but you've got loud noises, you've got dust and

stuff, so it does become in a way very—I don't want to say soothing but it's you're inside yourself, you know. There's not a lot of exterior—

MS. RIEDEL: Distractions.

MR. PERRY: —distractions other than noise, and half the time I will look up because I'll think I've heard something or I'll think I saw someone come in out of the corner of my eye, or something like that, but usually, you know, I will do it for an hour, I come up and someone had been in and out, or whatever. So I think it's really important for me to be able to do it and move onto the next one, even if it's not—the idea is just because I'm thinking about something, not even what's in front of me, because it's such a labor at that point that its, again, just it's removing stuff, you know. It's just removal of materials and, you know, not going out of the lines [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Except if you hit something you didn't expect.

MR. PERRY: Right. Except if you hit something you didn't expect like a, you know, a knot hole—

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned that yesterday.

MR. PERRY: —but most cases, that happens at the beginning—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: You know because a piece of wood or whatever has this outside and it looks like one thing, and you cut it and sometimes it has another thing, and—a lot happens right at the beginning when you go, "I want to make this, and I have this, and—but this is this, and this is this, and how?" You know, the shape is different from the shape, but it's close. So it's, "How am I going to shift this and make it this curve do this and—"

MS. RIEDEL: Do ideas for those shapes you want to make come from pieces that you've already made, pieces that you're making—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think—

MS. RIEDEL: That you see—

MR. PERRY: These days it—to a certain extent it comes from pieces that I've already made. Its where am I going to go next? I remember I did that, and I wanted to do a couple more that took this shape and turned it around, and a lot of times it happens that you start the piece and, as I was saying with that other one, well, you say, "Well, this isn't—I realize this isn't really what I had in mind when I was visualizing it in my head in the best" So you go with the piece that you started and you do it, and it's not wrong, it's just different, and it's sometimes leads you to a great—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —new discovery, but then that piece that you didn't do is still there. And so you've got to go back and do that piece. Sometimes you do, or sometimes you answer the questions that you had with the piece that you're doing—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —and it's satisfied. I have a hard time making—if I make a piece, I have a hard time making another piece that's just a little different, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: It's tough for me to do that because then it becomes really a job.

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

MR. PERRY: I'm not—I don't want to say chore but it's,—I've learned what I'm going to learn, and I've done a few like that but most cases—if I do that it's quite a bit of time after I've done the other one that was similar.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked yesterday about the ribbons, the loops, the knots, I think we covered those fairly well. But one thing I don't think we did discuss well were the nesting pieces, and the balancing pieces, the peapod pieces, and how those fit into the overall spectrum of your work.

MR. PERRY: Well, I think—

MS. RIEDEL: They're quite different.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, they're quite different. And they were—well, I'm trying to think of the last ones that I've done. Part of them came from the balls. And when I started making balls or whatever, I liked to make balls because they're kind of like little planets to me. There all different, even if they're the same piece of wood. They have different marks on them or whatever. So I would do these balls mainly to see what all this wood that I had no idea looked—what it looked like finished, and that was an easy way for me to finish it and see what, you know—I'd go and find different kinds of logs and trees at Runnymede that I was familiar to a certain extent with oak and madrone at Runnymede because we'd have to cut it up and make it into firewood, but buckeyes and bays and even to the point I have some big poison oak vine that I haven't had the guts to do it yet.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh [Negative.]

MR. PERRY: I know—I'm not sensitive to poison oak.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm so allergic.

MR. PERRY: I mean, the person I work with is, Mike is a just, if it's in the air he's got it and everywhere where the skin touches, but I can walk through it and I don't know how I lucked it out but [Laughs.] I did. But I just found it fascinating that I can see what this wood looks like and it was relatively easy. And then it kind of became, I guess, as a much as each one to me was kind of like a little world, each one was kind of—had a personality or a little being, so they kind of meant—became personages or something like that, or symbols for, what I would call people, whatever, you know. So I think that's part of the nesting thing and then just the organicness of that seed pod and it usually in most cases they're nested or set like a setting, or something like that. I was a Runnymede yesterday and a week ago had seen these big old puffballs mushrooms and we hadn't seen—normally the puffballs we get there are small little kind of come out and you never see them, but these were big, white globes. So we went—yesterday checked them and they'd all just burst like a jester's hat.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: You know, so—and then it was just the brownest powder in the middle. So it—that kind of quality, that really plantlike or something intrigued me to a certain extent, but then I would like to take it—humanize it more so to me there's one piece there that's three balls and a like curved piece of madrone. That's called *Raft*. And so the balls to me kind of were personages or something, and that's kind of where the nesting came out of because it's using—and Judy Foosaner used to tell me using a circle in any composition is almost like the kiss of death because it's so hard to work with, you know? It's so hard to make things work with it, and that's the case within sculpture. I mean, it's very hard to use spheres, unless—I mean, for me, unless they're either going to look like atoms if you start plugging them together like that, or, I don't know what—I mean, if I knew what the answer is how to use them great sculpturally—the way I'm using them in groups, or collectives, or nestings, to kind of symbolize—and that piece *The Game* that has the two, kind of like the scales of justice, that kind of reminds me of you could take it to a battle field or whatever. When you get too much on one side, the other side loses, or something like that. So that's where that is. And the big bowls, you know, they are, I guess, kind of, I don't know. The big bowls don't come under the nesting although there's one that's called *The Bowl and the Branch* that almost looks like a nest that sits there. The other large, large bowl is more like a, I can't even remember the name of it. It references to like an egg hatching.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That really large brown one we saw yesterday?

MR. PERRY: That one, the taller—yeah, the brown one that kind of has the fold down the middle.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: It's very, kind of, organic—

MS. RIEDEL: It does feel like something hatching.

MR. PERRY: And that's a good example of—I would—what I have to do often is adaptation. I had [Laughs] I had that log, or round, whatever it was, probably 500, 600 pound piece of elm. It was about 30 inches in diameter, but had a big split in it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So I start making a bowl and then I did something that really screwed it up. I made the split vary. Now it looked like a man-made V or something in the side and it took me forever to figure out the solution. There's a lot of setting things aside and you might not look like you're working on them, but you're working in your head on them. I mean, you're working and going, "Well, maybe I can do—" and I finally kind of got it, "Well,

if I make it look like two halves and cut it through the bottom, it becomes a very elegant kind of flower, almost like a tulip."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. PERRY: So that—

MS. RIEDEL: What one is that—does that one have a title?

MR. PERRY: I'm trying to think if it was *Hatched* or not. I might be something like that [Laughs.] It's on Rena Bransten's website, I'm almost certain because it was shown there, and it will have the title. So I think that's the best I can answer the nesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed over the years?

MR. PERRY: I mean, most of my sources of inspiration have really been people I've known personally, and again that probably is in work ethic and—

MS. RIEDEL: So Viola, of course, who else?

MR. PERRY: Viola, Dennis Gallagher—

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

MR. PERRY: —you know, even Adolph Rosekrans is—just people who keep going. You know, they don't have to, but they do because they enjoy what they're doing. They love what they're doing. I mean, I kind of look what's out there, but I'm not an artist who starts dropping names, "Oh yeah, oh yeah." I read, lately I haven't been getting *Art in America*, but I do—I think I'm getting *Sculpture* magazine now, but I've never been a real heavy publication kind of reader. I go to shows a few times a year, but I'm not there for every opening. I see a lot more now than I used to because my wife is very involved, but even then I have to kind of draw the line because she's much more of a collector, and collectors and artists are two different people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And I—not all—

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe those two?

MR. PERRY: Well, I—and again this is me—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Of course.

MR. PERRY: I can only describe me. I think I'm a little—I don't know if it's jaded or cynical or whatever, and I think that because she belongs to SECA [Society for the Engagement of Contemporary Art] and all that stuff. So, I've gone to a few collectors' things and they're all about collecting and talking about art gossip, and this and that, and it gets a little fatiguing after a while. And partly because I am with my wife and I hear her end of the conversation the same, many times and I kind of go, "Well, I'm going to go over there," you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And it's—I guess that's the main thing, but when I hang out with gallery people or whatever that—or other artists, you all gossip in your own little field of gossip, it's just not about who bought what, or who sold this or that, so it's more me I should say than a general collector. And it's in a certain sense for her, when she's doing something like that, she's kind of doing—working. I mean, it's enjoyable, but I'm not, so it's—

[They laugh.]

So it's like, "Well, I would rather be working than doing this," you know, but you have to do it all.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. PERRY: And it's, you know, it's imperative to—and I'm not the best at it, but to be out there and to be sociable when you're an artist and, this is what—here's my biggest pet peeve or whatever with her is—and some artists in general are collectors. A lot of collectors—they'll buy the art, but they're really buying the artist. And, you know, they're buying the relationship.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. PERRY: And then to say, "buying the relationship," sounds like a little more—

[Telephone rings]

MR. PERRY: That will stop in a second.

[Telephone rings]

MR. PERRY: That will go to the message machine. Two seconds.

[Telephone rings]

MR. PERRY: But she will say: "I really want to meet so and so. I'm going to go to the show and I might buy a piece of theirs." And I kind of get bent about that. I just go, "You should buy a piece of art because you like it." She'll say, "Well, I like the person." [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I've heard this conversation from a number of different angles, and it's also I think, perhaps, liking the person but liking their ideas—

MR. PERRY: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —liking a lot about what their work is about—

MR. PERRY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and so wanting to be, perhaps, supportive of that—

MR. PERRY: Yes. No I should actually—

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: —and wanting that connection as well, yeah.

MR. PERRY: —supportive is a much better word.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Not, you know [Inaudible.]

MS. RIEDEL: Also we're establishing that connection, right?

MR. PERRY: No, and I mean, I realize that's important. It's just goes back to—with me to graduate school. The further I was getting along in graduate school we still had critiques all the time. And especially the first critique of the year, they would say, "Tell us about your work." And I would say "No."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: "Just tell me what you think about it. I'm not going to give you a manual."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know, it's—"Either you like it or you don't. You like it because of this or you don't like it because of that." And they would—because—at that point in our graduate school they didn't really want to attack anybody. They would say "tell us about your work," and then they could fish in and attack your—kind of say, "Well, I don't know if your idea accurately reflects this or that," and stuff like that. And I was at the point where I knew my—I wasn't going to change my ideas. I was just looking for raw input, I guess is the best. And it becomes very hard—I felt it was very hard for the professors to do that, or even other students, because it made them seem a little more vicious, I guess is the word. They couldn't disguise it in something idea or something you said. They couldn't say, well, much like what Bob Brady had said, "I just don't like these forms." That was a more valuable crit. It was a bad crit, but it was a more valuable—in a certain way, because that let me know where he was.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: You know because you realize when you're going through school, and even earlier, there's people who know what you're doing and there's people who don't understand what you're doing, and you're not going to go get opinions from the people who don't understand what you're doing.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting, too, because a lot of work these days often comes with a very long statement. There's a lot of statement involved—

MR. PERRY: Yes, and I—

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that that's not what you're interested in.

MR. PERRY: I had the shortest thesis ever.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: Which basically said how ridiculous it was that I had to write a thesis for a visual art show.

MS. RIEDEL: That's refreshingly old school [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I don't think my professors liked it that much, but I graduated, that's all I can say.

MS. RIEDEL: How does your gallery feel about that?

MR. PERRY: Oh, I think they know me and I'm pretty easy going. I talk worse than I am.

MS. RIEDEL: I gather that.

MR. PERRY: I'm pretty much a pushover as far as—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Well you've been showing with Rena Bransten for quite some time and—

MR. PERRY: I just had my third show last year.

MS. RIEDEL: The first was 2008? Yeah. And you've had a couple exhibitions with the Oakland museum [satellite galleries -SP].

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And you're getting ready now for a show at St. Mary's?

MR. PERRY: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Has the feeling of those exhibitions changed—you've been exhibiting woodwork for about ten years, right?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Started in—

MR. PERRY: 2004.

MS. RIEDEL: 2004, so yeah, pretty much exactly ten.

MR. PERRY: Sure, I think the St. Mary's show is—

MS. RIEDEL: Solo personal retrospective—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I would call it greatest hits, whatever—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] Okay.

MR. PERRY: —you know. Retrospective sounds a little more detailed than I think this really is. That show is—my biggest worries are just setting the work up. It's not a body of work made for a show, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: And that's the primary difference. And I think what happens is, yeah you're first shows great and it's like anything else, you do great, or you do bad. I did so—I mean, if you're going to talk sales I did so-so. Probably then my last show I had the best sales, and most of the sales came three or four months after the show.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And when you say good sales, is that half the pieces in the exhibition?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, maybe half. In my case, good sales.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But I think, when I have my next show it really becomes is there growth in the artwork? And in the work, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: Or, is it just the same but different? And for me, at this point, there has to be more different than the same. I mean, there can be the same concepts or ideas running through, the same ribbons, whatever, but it's got to be, "Oh no, not another ribbon, not another knot."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I'm working on a knot piece now that—I thought—well—after my last show I thought I was done with knots. I did like the one I discussed that sold before it even made it to the art fair, which was kind of a different knot. It was a very—kind of after all my loose knots this was one that was pulled as tight as possible. So I think that—I need to show the growth and something new. You know, a little new direction or something. Not dramatically—I think you don't want to lose the people that were along for the ride before, but you always want to pick up some new passengers, or new audience.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: So that's I think the most and it's interesting because I'll try to, you know, have I would say if I'm really on the ball, double the amount I need for a show. So that the gallery comes and picks it because there's only going to be, depending on the scale, you know, seven to maybe ten pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I want to have another eye choose it. I don't want to make—I rely on them, I think they have a vision, I trust them to know what's going to work best. Oftentimes though when your installing they'll always be one extra or two extra pieces like that you wish were in the show but they'll go, "It just doesn't work," you know. You say, "Okay, but that one's going to sell, I know it." [Laughs.] But you want to put on the best show.

MS. RIEDEL: How would you describe your relationship with art dealers? It's been positive for the most part? Any bumps?

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds that way.

MR. PERRY: I would say no bumps other—not for me personally. I mean, I've been related in bumps with Viola. And having—usually trying to help someone else and having it just come around and no good deed goes unpunished, or something like that, you know. Just trying to—when she had three galleries and someone would call and say, "I've got a buyer for a reclining woman," or whatever, and you'd kind of go, "Well, I know [Inaudible]" and it was kind of when she showed with galleries—whatever work she showed that gallery at least a year to sell it.

MS. RIEDEL: So she had Nancy Hoffman, she had Rena Bransten—

MR. PERRY: And then she had Riva Yares—

MS. RIEDEL: Yares, right.

MR. PERRY: Yares for a short time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: And I kind of knew—I know in my head what each gallery's inventory is. The galleries don't know what the other galleries have. So I might have called in and noted its sitting in one gallery for a year or this and that, and so I can't remember, but something went wrong. A guy called me up and yelled at me for something and I was just like, "Sorry for helping" [Laughs.] So—and you know, Viola got—and it wasn't again me, but she had an L.A. gallery that I think she eventually got paid back but basically sold a bunch of work and paid off other bills with her work but—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember who that is? Do you want to say or just let it pass?

MR. PERRY: No, I won't say. Just let it pass.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet she—

MR. PERRY: She's probably no longer alive, but I'll just let it pass [Laughs.] But—and as far as I know the debt was repaid, so.

MS. RIEDEL: And were the galleries helpful in setting up museum exhibitions, anything like that?

MR. PERRY: Viola—

MS. RIEDEL: For you—

MR. PERRY: They're helpful for me but I mean, I've been a much shorter time. Viola, as we've discussed, kind of has people surround her so the galleries did tons for Viola because they were pretty much the intermediary between anything whether it was a commission or anything because Viola was so obtuse in speaking and what not, it just went nowhere—they had to be the translator.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. PERRY: Well, I can't remember the exact story, but there was a—I think Viola was going to show and—she was looking to show with Max Protetch in New York and she had gone there—I think her and Dennis had gone and taken the red-eye or something, and they were having a meeting with Max Protetch and Dennis is there and Viola says something—her first statement was something like, "In France, they don't—" I can't remember what it was but Dennis had to sit there and go "What she means is, she was reading an article in the paper this morning, and da, da, da—"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: But if you were there, you would just have thought she was insane.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. PERRY: But yes, the galleries would always take care of all the nuts and bolts and stuff—which they do to a certain extent for me, but I also have Marianna, my wife is very competent in it, but Viola was not—and Viola, Pat Thomas did all that stuff, too, for her. You know, she—

MS. RIEDEL: Pat Thomas?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, was her bookkeeper, and letter writer, everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there a community that has been really important to your development as an artist?

MR. PERRY: I think generally it's kind of the same community as Viola. I'm still great friends with Squeak and Gary. Then I have more people who I'm the old man for, I guess, a lot of the people that rent space from me.

MS. RIEDEL: That's an amazing space. It's—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, it is. I really like it. It's really nice to have great people in there, that—

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like it's almost half a block long. Is it—how big is it?

MR. PERRY: It's 14,000 square feet.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was completely Viola's space—

MR. PERRY: It was—well, she owned the whole building, but Dennis and I rented. I rented 1,000 square feet and Dennis had about three or four thousand square feet.

MS. RIEDEL: And when she passed away, you took over the building, and you have also done work inside so there are multiple artist studios in there [now -MR], correct?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, there's eight—well, there's Dennis' storage and Viola's storage, and then six other studios.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And what's the address again there, Sam?

MR. PERRY: 1946 Adeline St, Oakland.

MS. RIEDEL: And the cross is what?

MR. PERRY: 18th and 21st. There's no 19 or 20.

MS. RIEDEL: It's an amazing space, especially in this era in the Bay Area where everything seems to be turning into condos overnight.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, and I've had friends, "Well, you need to do da da da." And everybody says, "You should charge more money," this and that. I said, "You don't understand. I've got to work there." So I want tenants that get along and that are happy to help each other out, they're happy—there is a community there. I mean, it's not going to your studio and closing the door, although you can do that if you want. You don't have to be a part of the community, but most people are because everybody is a friend of somebody and that's how it all started. I mean, one of my tenants used to work for Dennis as his assistant. Other tenant used to work for me when I was Viola's assistant and help me with the estate—catalogue all the work, so he kind of knows Viola's work, and helped. The other ones are just friends of friends, I guess. Those two primaries have been there for a long time, and then other people I've known them before they've ever moved in and then a space comes up and they say, "Can I have it?" And the most recent turnover was a woman who left but knew two other women who were renting space down the street. And all I'll tell them is it can be noisy and dusty. They have the space—the one space with a closing door and its own bathroom, so, and they're—one's a wood artist and the other is a fabric artist so,—and they're good friends so they have to be in the same more or less working space and they can get along, that's great. It has all worked out. I couldn't have planned it better. I mean, Trish Bransten still has a large space of Dennis' storage, but she did keep storage space and she's kind of been doing, not really official artist residence thing, but she's trying to get her foundation. She's trying to get artists who are interested in working in clay, but have no knowledge of how to go in there and work. And it's basically you can do what you want in clay, we'll give you a little instruction, but you're going to have to figure out a lot of it, what you want to do, and—so she's had a few people do it. Rebeca Bollinger did it. And, why can't I remember his name, black painter. Shows with Rena. I'll think of it. John [Bankston]—I can't think of it.

MS. RIEDEL: We can add it.

MR. PERRY: It's John something. But Rebeca's now moved on, and she had rented that upper space before the two women who are in it now. But she is still doing clay. So it's good. It's all worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you imagine keeping that indefinitely? And continuing this way.

MR. PERRY: Well, we'll see. Yeah, we'll see. I mean, Trish has got a lot on her plate, so it's really up to her, so.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's your building, right?

MR. PERRY: Oh, yeah, I mean—keeping the building, yes, I can't imagine—my worst fear is redevelopment or something like that. And I think I'm lucky, as long as the East Bay MUD's across the street because they're a big—they've got a little pull, but who knows with gentrification and what not, you know, some day they might want to—if they start building condos at American Pipe then I'll worry [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: It is a changing landscape?

MR. PERRY: Oh, yeah. Especially down there, it really is. I mean, they had millions of houses planned before the last crash, so we'll see if they come back along the freeway down there, by the old train station.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] And you actually met your wife through Trish Bransten, right?

MR. PERRY: Yes. She introduced us at Thanksgiving, 2009 I think was the year. It was actually the same year that Dennis died. She never met Dennis.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like such a close knit community.

MR. PERRY: Yes, my wife was director of the [San Francisco] Art Dealers Association at that point, and so she was working with Trish quite a bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: And, yeah, she introduced us and the rest is history, as it says.

MS. RIEDEL: There you have it.

MR. PERRY: And Trish was at our wedding.

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MR. PERRY: It was a small wedding. It was just at City Hall in San Francisco, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Continuing on with these [dealer and exhibition questions -MR], have you seen much change in the market for sculpture since you've been exhibiting?

MR. PERRY: I don't think so. It's a tough—it's a much tougher sell than two-dimensional work because it's harder to stash in the closet or something.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: I mean, that's my feeling. It takes up floor space, and I think that's a different thing. And I also think you can rotate out paintings much easier than—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: —you know, rotating—we can rotate out sculptures because I take it back to the studio and we do that every once in a while, so. But I think it all depends on what the sculpture is, really. I mean, Viola used to sell out her shows all the time or very close to selling out, and it was big stuff. I mean, the one thing I realized though at Runnymede is it's a lot—as I said, it's a lot harder to find that someone to buy that sculpture again or to find another person that wants to buy something that big. It's a much smaller market.

MS. RIEDEL: The resale.

MR. PERRY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.] Even in the original sale, you know—

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. PERRY: —you're dealing—the bigger you go the smaller your pond of buyers.

MS. RIEDEL: How has your work been received over the past ten years? [From what -MR] you just said about exhibitions, it sounds like increasingly well.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, well, the last—I was in a small show at the Berkeley Art Center last year that got more press than I probably had at everything else included, and so. It's being very well received. I mean, you know, that's why you keep making it, to a certain extent. If they hated it, I don't know if I would still be as much of—I don't know. It's hard to say if you keep doing it if they hated it, you know, I'm headstrong. But I had a certain amount of confidence. I knew it was good, let's put it that way. And I know when something's bad. [Laughs.] Of mine. And I've got them laying here and there in my studio. "Well, I'll get back to—" you know, it's the same thing. In abstract whether I was drawing or sculpting but much more drawing, it always reminds me of a puzzle or a math problem, that there's some solution: You just have to fiddle around and figure it out. There's some way of making the composition work. And I mean, it's true, I guess, if you figured it drawing, it's the same thing, but you have different elements that you're working with, and with abstract, sometimes the solution to that problem may be a whole new form that comes out of something you've created.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: So what was the question again? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: [... -MR] How has your work been received over time?

MR. PERRY: Oh, right. But—oh, we we're talking about bad work. And so what I was saying is that you leave those things around because there really unsolved puzzles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But you still think there's a solution. Or, there's also another kind of way I have of separating my pieces. There's pieces, pieces of sculptures, and then there's parts. Sometimes I made a part, but I don't have any of the other parts yet. I don't know what those parts are going to be, but I know it's not a whole.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that how something like *Tangled* began, or *Frayed*?

MR. PERRY: Kind of, yes. I mean, absolutely in *Tangled* and *Frayed* and then I would say the thing within the

Frayed piece, the real part, was that collar because I made that collar without knowing what I going to do with it. I just had a piece of pine that was hollow all the way through. And I said, "Well, I'm going to make it into—basically a ring, or a collar," and, you know, I had to put thing—and then I let it sit for a while. Then I said, "You know, I bet I can shove sticks in there are make it stand up on its own." So that's a perfect example of making a part.

And back to it being well received or not, I guess, —why you keep your—I've learned from Viola, you know, that you don't throw things away. I mean, the only things I throw away is rotten wood or wood with bugs in it. [Laughs.] But keep your failures around because they'll usually—they'll remind you of how you screwed up or they may lead you into something that is a direction that you wouldn't have gotten to on your own.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Those are fascinating points.

MR. PERRY: And, Viola always used to say, and I wasn't very good—but she said, "Make something dumb."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: "I want you to make something dumb." And, you know, because she thought you learned more from not doing the comfortable.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting she didn't say, "Make something that stretches," or, "Make something that's hard," she said, "Make something dumb."

MR. PERRY: Yeah, make something that you consider stupid or dumb.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. PERRY: Because other people could come—I mean, can come up to any piece of artwork and go, "That's dumb."

[They laugh.]

MR. PERRY: You know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's interesting to think about. Did you make anything dumb?

MR. PERRY: I don't know if I—absolutely. But did—was my intent to make something dumb? I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like it could be hard to make something dumb.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I think that's part of the point, too. Trying to make something dumb is not as easy as just making something dumb. [Laughs.] So it's anything to get you out of your comfort zone to a certain extent. No so much—in grad school they like to get you out of your comfort zone to the point of, and I saw this happen to a million, or not a million, but many grad students: They'd enter in ceramics and after their first year, they were on to painting, drawing, or bronze, I mean. And it always seemed to me that was not what grad school was about. That was maybe what your last two years of art school should have been but not finding a hole. And they love it because they've got a whole new field and everything's great. But I don't think there's been enough study—I don't know, again, it's a personal prerogative, but I just think it's a time to focus on ideas, not kind of—you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Explore new ones, or explore new media.

MR. PERRY: —explore new media I guess is better thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we've done quite a good job of covering the lion's share of these questions. I just have a couple final ones. And any other thoughts that have occurred to you?

MR. PERRY: Well, I would like to continue what we stopped the other day when I was talking about Viola's death because it has a few things. Viola, when we would go to functions at which I used to have to attend many, either awards ceremonies or whatever, she would do them, but she was always somewhat, "I don't want to be there," or whatever. So she would always go over as we're sitting, "Can we go yet," you know, "did I put in enough time," or whatever, or, "I think it's time to go," or something.

But in the process of the evening when she passed, she had gone—she'd had a stroke or whatever, but she wasn't unconscious, I don't think, but she was not moving. Her eyes were barely open and she was breathing heavily. And everybody, Black Moon, and Squeak, and whatever got her in bed and were kind of tending to her, and they told me, "Sam, why don't you come over to Viola?" So I went over there. She was breathing heavily.

And I told her I loved her, this and that. And I said, "I think it's time to go." And she went [exhales] and left. So I thought it was very subtle. I mean, I don't know what the word was, but I was just like—she heard me. She knew what was going on, and I don't know what to say else.

MS. RIEDEL: There's probably not much else—

MR. PERRY: No.

MS. RIEDEL: [What else can be said? -MR]

MR. PERRY: But it was interesting. I mean, it was fascinating. Just kind of made the end right, if you could say that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, clearly it suggests, too, how much she trusted you, that when you—

MR. PERRY: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That when she heard your voice and those [words, that ... was enough for her. -MR] You had worked together for—

MR. PERRY: Seventeen years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, that's quite a while. Day in and day out.

MR. PERRY: Day in and day out—

MS. RIEDEL: You were literally her right hand man for—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, and what she had going through, you know the hammer's coming down, so it's—every day is, every day it's building, its building, its building and then it happens. And it's a huge—the moment after it happens, it's a huge relief. The second after it happens, it's a huge relief. I mean, I would have loved to have it happen a different way, but that wasn't the choice. She was stoic through it all, so. But other than that—

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you. I know that was not easy.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. But I felt it had to be said, though.

MS. RIEDEL: I appreciate that.

MR. PERRY: I mean, she worked, I would say probably twenty or thirty minutes out of two hours—on the day she died. She was, had—

MS. RIEDEL: She literally worked until the day she died, is what you're saying.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. And she, I mean, the effort with her liver, I mean, her eyes jaundiced, but it was the only reason she was getting up in the morning.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: If she had hit a stage where she said, "I'm sorry, you can't go to the studio anymore," or this or that, I'm sure she would have went a lot quicker.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. There is that Spark, that local public television episode—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that was done like six months before she died.

MS. RIEDEL: It was clear. I was struck by the determination in her face—the images as you have her in the wheelchair, you putting her on the lift and she's clearly not moving very well. She's not even looking around very much. But when her hands get on that clay and she starts to work, you can see something.

MR. PERRY: Yeah,—she couldn't go to the studios like on Saturdays, she—wore—it all depended on who her caregiver was, she—at the end she had two great caregivers, but she liked one more than the other, of course. But, yeah, and then that opened another chapter, you know. That was taking apart Viola's life and seeing, you know, stuff that, you know, I knew stuff, I mean, I didn't learn anything per se, but just the amount of stuff. Stuff, like boxes and boxes and boxes of books and we had the whole studio lined up with a whole big floor with the contents of her house, more or less. All this—I mean, she was, again, going back to her generosity, and stuff, she had so much student work that was just, she didn't have it out at her house. She would just buy it and, you know, put it somewhere because she wanted to help out the students. And I'm sure she liked the work. But she

was not quite a hoarder, but could have been probably left to her own senses because she—her fireplace was full of plates. And the other thing that fascinated me—I guess, is how everything she owned changed—from junk to treasure in the blink of an eye because, you know, she had owned it and this and that. That's getting back to, you know, repairing her sculptures, which we always used to. It was no big deal, now it's a big deal. You've got to find the right person, this and that. It's usually not too cheap, or so—it's—

MS. RIEDEL: Have they held up fairly well? Do you do a fair amount of repairs? A fair amount were in public installation or outdoors—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I don't. What I tell people now is put it inside. If you can do it, put it inside. I mainly only do de-installations and installations. If anybody needs repair, I refer them to a conservator because I don't know—I wouldn't use proper conservator—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: —methods, which in some cases would be better, and in some cases not. But I'm going to always lean toward the conservative thing to do. But, you know, I've had things where they have said, "Well, this needs to be—" they'll glue a piece back on to make it all perfect and it will pop off and they'll say, "Well, we only glued around the edge." And I said "Well, when we do it we slap epoxy in there and glue the whole thing." "Well, what about shrinkage?" "I've never had it pop off." But, they have to—obviously it has to be reversible, and you know so, —I'm dealing with that at Runnymede right now.

I've got a piece that I just was on the phone with the artist a few days ago and it's a fairly large piece that's collapsing. And I talked to the artist and he said, "Well, people are probably walking in it," and I said, "Yeah, I'm sure they are," you know, this and that, and he's like—I said, "I don't know what to do. I think the piece is done. I mean, it's going to need to be—because I don't think—

MS. RIEDEL: This is the crown piece you were discussing yesterday?

MR. PERRY: Yeah. I don't think the owners going to want to pay God knows how much to restore it because it's a major—pretty much rebuilding the whole piece. And so I was looking at it yesterday going, "Well, this piece was built wrong in the first place." But I can't have this argument—I know this artist fairly well, because I've worked with him on several of his pieces at Runnymede, and I've done other of his installations of his work around here. And I said, you know, "It's just built wrong," but he's telling me, "Oh, there's steel in it," and da da da. I said, "Yeah but—" I just—I'm not going to have the out for him. My next conversation's going to be with the owner of the piece and say—because I looked at it yesterday, and it was even worse than I remembered, and I was just like, "Oh, we have to caution tape it now."

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

[Audio break.]

MR. PERRY: —so, that's—

MS. RIEDEL: When you look at all the Runnymede sculpture and you look at all the different work that you've seen from Viola and you think about contemporary art in general, do you see her work fitting in any particular place? Saying anything in particular? Is there any way you could categorize it or describe it, her contributions or her work?

MR. PERRY: Well, I think—that's a tough question for me. I think if you asked an art historian, they could give you a great answer.

MS. RIEDEL: From your perspective, it might be interesting—

MR. PERRY: I think—

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about artists, and we talked about Voukos, we talked about her getting shunned—

MR. PERRY: I think, I think she's in that class—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —of the artists in Voukos, whatever. And I think, actually, Voukos is probably just on reputation and whatever is ahead of the other two. And part of the reason why I say that is because Sotheby's came through—they didn't want any Arneson heads. They wanted a Stephen De Staebler, I think, because he died like the week before, but there's two nice bronze, there's a Jackson Pollock head there, and a nuclear warhead, which is, you know, maybe not his most popular stuff.

But, you know, they didn't—and they're nice and easy and small and could have fit on a truck, so there's some judgment there that either the market's not there for it or something, I don't—

MS. RIEDEL: Did they want the Violas?

MR. PERRY: I don't—again, I think the Violas they didn't want because they require too much assembly.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: I mean, I know Sotheby's—[Inaudible]—they had contacted Trish about buying a piece straight from the estate because they didn't want to pay to take it apart, they didn't want to do anything. So they just said, "We'll give you a great deal on it," and they bought it. And it was outside in Ohio—it needed probably \$30,000 of restoration on it. And Sotheby's, I'm sure said, "Well, if we have to take apart this piece, get it cleaned, get it that, send it to New York for an auctions and having someone install it," whatever, you know, they're not going to—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: They're not going to make their money, so they offer that. And so I think that—I lost my train of thought—

MS. RIEDEL: Where Viola fits—

MR. PERRY: Oh, right. So I think—

MS. RIEDEL: —in the scheme of things in contemporary art.

MR. PERRY: I think she's part of that very small group that has made the step out of clay into the fine art world. And I think that's where her, you know, what her accomplishment is and what she strived to do. She never wanted to be a clay artist. She always said, "I'm an artist."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: She works in clay. And also that's why she always was a painter and a drawer and drawing because she felt that was—is being an artist. And I think her stuff holds up with anybody else, and better than some. But it remains to be seen what history does because right now I think she's kind of—her visibility, awareness is not what—obviously, because she's not producing anymore—and, and she had her big retrospective; I think it probably ended probably two, three years ago now, at least. So it's—whether—it's all whether the shows she gets into or—I don't know that there's going to be a—you know, big gallery show of her work ever again.

MS. RIEDEL: But there's lots of work—

MR. PERRY: There's lot of work.

MS. RIEDEL: —currently still available, correct?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, there's lots of work still available, but with her being—selling as well as she did, most of her best work sold.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. PERRY: There are some really nice pieces and some pieces towards the end of her career that are nice, but not a lot of big figures. And the ones that showed in that room full of legs yesterday, well, that was, I think, eight pair of legs. But a couple, at least two pairs in one piece. And one's an unfinished piece. And so there's not a lot of standing figures left. There's a lot of small work, and there's a lot of two-dimensional work.

And the small work is kind of from a broad time span, so it's very experimental or not a typical Viola Frey piece. She's got a bunch of Sèvres pieces that are going to go to the art fair, I think, next week or two weeks from now. Which are trying to just show a different—a little bit more Sèvres China pieces—that she had actually, you know, painted. Painted the cups and saucers. And I guess she did an edition, or—when, when she was in her residency, they must have made her do a bunch because I looked at one yesterday and it had an edition number on the bottom.

MS. RIEDEL: That reminds me; did you work with her on any bronze pieces?

MR. PERRY: The only—well, no. I say, one bronze piece, we did, but it really wasn't working. I mean, it was pretty much—the piece that's at Runnymede, which is a big—their only big standing man bronze was done off a piece

in the studio. And they came down and took all the molds and then took it back up to Walla Walla Foundry in WA and did it all up there and then basically sent it back. But the other ones were all done before, and then she would have—and I think most of them were painted. The only thing I know that's—Pat [Thomas -SP] used to gold leaf and leaf some of them that I had seen later on. Because she basically got them all done and then they just sat around the studio for a long time, and I did pull one out yesterday that's going to the art fair, too.

And, no, I didn't do any bronzes and paintings—were not in it. I'm trying to think, what other types of work with us? I mean, that bricolage, I was there for a lot of.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But a lot I wasn't, too. The earlier pieces on tabletops and stuff like that, that was mostly done before my time.

MS. RIEDEL: And we covered yesterday that she would work [mostly -MR] in series of large pieces and then a series of plates, and then a series of bricolage, and then a series of panels—not panels—

MR. PERRY: Tiles.

MS. RIEDEL: —tiles, right. So the work was cyclical and series-based.

MR. PERRY: Definitely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. PERRY: Cyclical, but the tiles definitely came in more later—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: —later in her life when she was not quite as mobile.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. PERRY: But could still paint fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And the bricolage [Inaudible.]

MR. PERRY: The bricolage went on—the bricolage was always, always ongoing, I would say. The subject matter or subject of the bricolage changed as she got: number one, after probably her second time—I think she went to Manufacture Sèvres twice. I think the second time she—

MS. RIEDEL: That was in Sèvres?

MR. PERRY: The what? The bricolages or the—

MS. RIEDEL: No you said she went to—

MR. PERRY: Yeah, I think she went to Sèvres.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] Sèvres, right—

MR. PERRY: I think she went twice.

MS. RIEDEL: [... To Sèvres twice, and once to the Netherlands. -MR] [Inaudible.]

MR. PERRY: Yeah, one—the Netherlands was later, but I didn't see much work from that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. PERRY: Not much came back. But the second time she went to Sèvres she came back with those molds, or had the molds shipped back, which were made of her hand-built figures. So they basically look like her standing men, but were made smaller. You know, made up things—so that let her start incorporating those into the—because before that, the bricolages tended to be more constructions that were either heads, faces, or—I don't know, not creatures but they were—they were more anthropomorphic. She'd have arms on them, they'd be, you know, distorted faces and busts, and things like that. Never whole figures, per se, unless it was a figure incorporated in it. But when she got her own work, it tended to become more, like, processional group photos

with things going on, or constructions with her—the best way I can explain it is it became more like her drawings.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's—

MR. PERRY: Because, where you have her iconic—

MS. RIEDEL: Iconography, right.

MR. PERRY: Iconography in it, and you can see the man in the suit. You can see the woman in the dress and they reminded me much more of the drawings, because they became these big constructions. While they weren't as exploding, like the drawings, but they had all these little tidbits of her, her image vocabulary. She had a Woody Woodpecker, you know? She had all these—she had—Bugs Bunny. She had all this—we had two or three thousand molds. I mean, it was incredible. So she would go to these Glaze and Blaze shops, you know? There's one down the street, I think. Where they would slipcast the whole thing for you and then you got to go paint it and they'd fire it. But the molds only last a certain time before they start losing their detail, so she'd buy hundreds of them for half-price or whatever. And they loved it, you know. Again, they got rid of all her old molds and we had way too many.

[They laugh.]

We had so many. And, you know, it was the messiest, messiest job in the world. Because you'd fill these, you know—I don't know. Twenty-inch mold and a gallon of slip and as you're putting the last little cup of slip in, it'd burst at the bottom and the rubber bands open and starts pouring slip all over. I wore coveralls all the time, I tell you. But it wasn't my favorite thing to do. With—your fingers would get smashed with rubber bands, or they'd snap, or—

MS. RIEDEL: What was your favorite thing to do?

MR. PERRY: I liked cutting pieces down and, you know, setting them up. I wasn't a big fan of anything slip-related just because it's like—worse than working with mud. And she would use nylon fibers in her slip, so—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. PERRY: Which helped it connect and everything, so it would really cling on to you and you'd end up bringing it home and this and that. I remember, she used to walk, I guess, from her house home to CCAC just for—half the reason just to get the clay off her shoes.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. PERRY: And I think she got mugged or held up and then she got her truck. That was the story.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we're good.

MR. PERRY: Great.

MS. RIEDEL: Any final thoughts or—

MR. PERRY: I think I got everything. The thing I said I remembered and forgot was that Viola story about how she passed, because I always thought that was too—I don't know. Such a irony or whatever. Me saying it was time to go and her just going [exhales], "Okay."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. You guys must have gotten very, very close.

MR. PERRY: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: All that time working together.

MR. PERRY: We got very close, but we were never emotional. When she was sick, I would leave her house in tears, but I wouldn't do it with her, you know. My favorite story is we were at a benefit for—I think it was Long Beach Museum or—if it's still called that. Newport, it might be Newport Museum. She was receiving an achievement, a Lifetime Achievement Award with them and it was her and one of the Rockefeller—I can't remember which one. And, you know, black tie, I had to rent a tux and everything. I hated it.

But we're sitting at this whole thing and it's very Hollywood and some star is the M.C. or whatever, they talk her up and first of all they give it to the Rockefeller and he gets it and gives a great speech, and da da da da da. And they introduce Viola with this great speech, she walks up there, they give her some crystal thing, she looks at it

and she goes, "Thank you." Turns around. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you, Sam.

MR. PERRY: Yeah, that was Viola. I mean, that was it. She could say nothing or she could say a ton and you wouldn't understand where she was coming from, you know? With her students she was famous for her critiques, because everybody would go, "What did she mean?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What did she mean?

MR. PERRY: Yeah, and that gets back to what I said earlier: She's thinking about her own work, so she's sitting there asking all this weird stuff that you can't quite figure out how it's translating to your work. But she's really just thinking about her own work.

MS. RIEDEL: Always, it sounds like.

MR. PERRY: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Always thinking about her work.

MR. PERRY: She was. I think that's it.

MS. RIEDEL: Great. Thank you very much.

MR. PERRY: Oh, you're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]