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Oral history interview with Neil Williams, 2014 June 5-6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Neil Williams on 2014 June 5-6. The interview took place in at Williams' home and studio in Auburn, 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.

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

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Neil Williams in the artist's home and studio in Auburn, CA on June 5, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number one. So let's start with—a description of this fantastic place that you have. It dates back to 1937, is that right?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I believe '37 or '38—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and it was built by a horticulture professor at U.C. Davis who, when she passed away, it went to a U.C. Davis trust. And then the family I know got it about 65 years ago. It's in the family partnership and it's been a rental on and off since then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, for some reason, it attracted a number of groups of artists, writers, dancers, visual artists, and it's got that special open energy of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And my wife connected with it. She actually kind of stalked it, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —in a polite way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And when it came up, we were lucky enough to get it. It's been a fabulous place to land for as long as it lasts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Do you know the horticulturalist's name?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I do not.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I certainly could find that for you and supplement, but I do not—I—

MIJA RIEDEL: The walls feel very thick.

NEIL WILLIAMS: They are.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's brick with concrete and plaster.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just an exquisite old home.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the redwood beams that were from the old timbers, which thank God they don't cut down anymore, they're protected. And I believe the bricks came from a factory across the road, which built a number of houses. There's one on the hill behind us here that was also built from the same bricks that was one of Ernest Borgnine's ex-wife's, had assumed. And, I understand she has since passed, but last I heard, there was an amazing cache of two floors or three floors of antiques and such that are kind of lying dormant. So, there's a number of stories like that in the area.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: This area is rich in history.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: We had spoken earlier even—Mark Twain and H.P. Lovecraft as writers had landed here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Jason Rhoades grew up here, and was thought to be one of the more important artists of post-modern artists in the '90s and 2000s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Passed away in '06, and a childhood friend and went to the local high school. Special ed kid, had trouble reading and writing. Parents owned the local feed store. He was kind of an Ag kid, but had a rare take on reality and visual arts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I think by the time he had finished he was in every major museum in the world, Whitney Biennial multiple times, Venice Bienalle. He had—I mean, every time he would do a show, the Germans who loved him, the young Germans, would write a book on him.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But he's one of our pride and joys, and we still think about him and talk about him a lot. But it goes to the—there's something special about this area and producing talent and creativity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: A lot of it being nurtured ironically by the local high school art faculty department.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—so very fortunate. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —from Arts and Crafts, art school days, I gravitated back here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Let's talk about some of your early days. You were born in Oakland in '59? September first?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, Highland Hospital.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was cheaper to have me down there, apparently, even though the parents had moved up here. My father was a county exec to the Board of Supervisors for Placer County. So, he came up and started work and my mother stayed down there because apparently it was a little less expensive, so—but, grew up in this area.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, so you grew up here?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You didn't grow up in Oakland?

Neil: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you grow up in Auburn itself?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And what was your dad's name?

NEIL WILLIAMS: James Williams.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And your mother?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Shirley Williams.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any siblings?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I had three older brothers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I have two left.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so I was the youngest. My—father was a naval intelligence officer, anti-submarine warfare, and was always involved in local—he was county supervisor, welfare director. And he was the director of SACOG Council of Governments in Sacramento. So, he was very involved with the light railway station down there, and he also—there's a series of domes, a cluster of domes over here that were built—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —some time ago, over. And he built them, and they were the original administration buildings. And him and his friend, during a drunk night and dinner, conceived of them. Well, by the time they finished them, they had a dedication ceremony, and Buckminster Fuller came out to dedicate it because it was based on his geodesic dome design, and he was absolutely enthralled. He said, "I always considered these, or conceived these as individual." But they clustered them, so they morphed together and they were honeycombed together, in multiple—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where is this? In Auburn?

NEIL WILLIAMS: In Auburn, yeah. And he was very fascinated by them, them being clustered and so—

MIJA RIEDEL: And so I'm trying to—your father was an engineer?

NEIL WILLIAMS: County—he was a county executive to the Board of Supervisors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Which are operations guys. So city has the city manager—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —county has the county exec, which administers all of the—so he administers welfare, purchasing agent, law enforcement, D.A. —there's an administration aspect to orchestrating all of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So when you say he was working with these domes, where these proposals brought to him and this was something he championed?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Him and his friend Nick Bishop, in a drunken stupor one night, conceived of them as the new county administration offices, because they needed new ones and they were completely inexpensive to build. And they were totally inefficient after the fact, but they conceived of them and instigated and had them—got them built.

MIJA RIEDEL: And are they standing still?

NEIL WILLIAMS: They are.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where are they?

NEIL WILLIAMS: They are over at the end of Elm Street at 49.

MIJA RIEDEL: 49 Elm Street?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Right over—

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's right across from the Veteran's Cemetery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. And there's a whole other story about a local dentist who did these huge, enormous, really terrible sculptures, that came up about the—we'll go take a look at them later maybe and laugh at them. But it's funny because even Huell Howser, when he came through Auburn to do one of his, Ameri—California specials?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Remember him? He had the California—Huell Howser for KVIE? Wonderful guy. He did all of those California specials where he—'We're in Auburn, and we're'- and he goes through and interviews people about the history. But he even came across the sculptures of Dr. Fox, which are laughable, but they're amusing. They're just the overblown concrete monstrosities that this local dentist made that were still there.

MIJA RIEDEL:

Well, there is an amazing history in this gold rush area of inventive people taking off and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's also—

MIJA RIEDEL: —making things happen that wouldn't happen elsewhere.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But also I think there's a great sense of humor and a take on things that's pretty broad-based. And, I think it helped me growing up here a lot, to be able to go to off to school, or to be able to relate to such a variety of different people successfully.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, would you describe your childhood? Where you went to school and what that was like?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Local elementary schools.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Auburn?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Probably the most profound influence there I can remember there was third grade? Mrs. Tremble. She was a member of the Sacramento Symphony. And really articulate. One of those classic, magnificent madams that happened to be a teacher. She made us sing Shakespeare.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sing Shakespeare?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sing Shakespeare sonnets, and we used to go around and perform at different groups like Lions Clubs or Soroptimist, and sit through Shakespearean sonnet performances in third grade. She made us do, like, a wildflower collection, so we learned all about genus and species, the whole- and she was just—I remember her of all of those elementary school teachers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, that carried on. But high school is where it really started to—the art department at the high school was really—because they were incredibly supportive, very enlightened. Mario Ferrante was there at the time, and he had even kind of taken over, filled a really important role as kind of a surrogate father to me, because my own was MIA though, he was very detached. So, he—was really supportive of the arts and creativity. He had a great background from San Jose State.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Spent time in some of Thiebaud's early workshops. Great stories about Thiebaud he had, and he was just such a positive guy that—it was very impactive on my life and my interests and becoming—but I knew immediately, as soon as I started working with clay at 14 years old, what I wanted to do and what I was going to do. And I didn't doubt it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I haven't doubted it since, but I've had moments of, you know, 'what the hell am I doing,' but at

the same time I've always known that's what I was going to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was always clearly clay?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting since we've talked briefly and we'll talk quite a bit more about this going back and forth between two and 3D.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you work in slabs and flat clay pieces as well? Was it—

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, always in the round—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Of course you do a lot of—in your studies or—you're going to work on flat pieces from now and then, but mostly all in the round.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this is interesting. In high school, there were ceramics classes?

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, they didn't have them then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: They just had me in the back room working, and those guys and the local—him and the local principal, so supportive, they were always giving me POs to go get more materials. And he'd say, 'Here, Here is the keys to the truck, go get some more clay.'

MIJA RIEDEL: There must have been kilns?

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, I got hooked up with a local potter up the road here. And he had experience in Japan. And so he had discipline of throwing and formulating on clay and materials; glazes and firing wood kilns and things that I was really fascinated with when I was young, because it was a great introduction to realizing how many different hats—I mean you have to be a chemist. You have to understand thermo-dynamics. You have to understand earth, fire, and water in their most extreme conditions, and that was really—it made sense to me for some reason.

MIJA RIEDEL: How were you first exposed to clay?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I just started working with it. I was given a bag of clay and started working with it. There was a little wheel in the back room that nobody worked with, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Who gave you the bag of clay?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh my gosh, where did it come from? My older brothers had a friend who was a parolee out of Soledad. He did some time for—let me see, just dealing in weed or something. Just a wonderful guy though. And he was harmless—got caught selling weed in the wrong time. And—but he was a mad cobbler because he was a shoe—leather and shoe smith, and we'd call him the mad cobbler. And he was—he had a creative streak, so he said something about, 'I have some clay, and why don't you work with this?" Because I was 2D at the time. Drawing and painting, I just wasn't connecting with. And, for some reason, clay immediately. And then I realized, once I got to Arts and Crafts, what that was about.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I was working with clay. I was actually working still with drawing and painting, but with only clay and marks and light and shadow, and not paint and pencil.

MIJA RIEDEL: Before we get to Arts and Crafts, though, I thought we could just spend a little more time here in Auburn. Was your mother interested in the arts? Did she encourage you?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Ah, there's the hidden gem right there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She has a degree from U.C. Berkley in '47-'48, in art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And mostly textile arts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—always incredible number one supportive of. Really enlightened. She was very enlightened in her time about a number of things—civil rights, human rights. She had some issues in other areas, but she—was really good in some critical aspects of life that luckily rubbed off on me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: So would she take to you to museums, would she—

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, nothing like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: —would she talk to you, show you books? What rubbed off that was good?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Just the green light that it was okay to pursue this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I think because she didn't – she got married instead at the time and had four kids and—went that route.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did she make textiles? Did she study textiles?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She studied and made.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the irony about it—fast forward—this does relate. There's an elderly woman, Marjorie Blodget, who is the head librarian and a wonderful old San Francisco socialite, socialist—[laughs]—who, very mouthy, very verbal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Socialite or socialist, or both?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Both.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay [Laughs.].

NEIL WILLIAMS: But Marjorie was a character.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But very literate—

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and Marjorie, before she passed away, a few years ago—my mother passed away nine, 10 years ago—and Marjorie passed away just last year. But before she passed away, she kept talking about "I have one of Neil's mother's drawings. I have Neil's'—Shirley was her name—'I have Shirley's drawing of a nude." And I said "My mother never drew a nude." And I had never heard of it, never saw it. And for some reason, when she passed away, Sheri scampered over to the people who inherited her estate and said, "Look, is there any way we could get Neil?" And it showed up on my birthday, and this was from 1947, and it's like "I didn't even know they were having full nudes, let alone African American nudes, in drawing classes at U.C. Berkeley."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I had no idea she had that sensitivity towards rendering a figure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, I mean, I knew she—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, do we know for sure it happened at U.C. Berkley?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. That was from when she was studies at U.C.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because she—

MIJA RIEDEL: This is exquisite.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and afterwards, she didn't pursue that. So that was one of those round-about stories. But she was talented and had a great eye. But didn't pursue it herself. Just, anything I needed, she would give to, as far as materials or whatever you wanted to do. And so, and she, I think, got a lot of it. Her mother was a dancer and used to tour with Arthur Murray in that era.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, the ballroom.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, one of my bothers was creative, who passed away. He was very interested in the music and the arts. So, there was a—healthy push, not a lot of information but a healthy push, and a reassurance that is was okay to pursue this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so I didn't know when I was getting out of high school, I wasn't sure what to do, and I ended up—they gave me scholarships to go to Arts and Crafts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I didn't know it was even available, and they said, 'Oh yeah, they're encouraging it.' One of them was Joseph Johnson Memorial Scholarship, which was Crocker Museum-affiliated at the time, through Bank of America. And they said "You better take it, because it's renewable for four years."

MIJA RIEDEL: How extraordinary. Did you need a portfolio back then, or no?

NEIL WILLIAMS: A few photos to get in, but, you know, and then they were letting—and then when I was there, they weren't screening their graduate programs very heavily, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: So when did you graduate high school? Which year?

NEIL WILLIAMS: '77.

MIJA RIEDEL: '77, from Auburn High School.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Placer High School.

MIJA RIEDEL: Placer High School, okay. And, were you working in clay at the high school?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes, from day one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So you would make pieces there. Was there a wheel? Did I understand you say that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: There was a wheel in the high school that nobody was using.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Nobody was using.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the principal and art teacher encouraged you to use it and then you'd cart the work over to—

NEIL WILLIAMS: To a potter's up the road

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and fire there.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And fire there, and glaze there, and learn about glazes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's extraordinary.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—hang on a second.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So these kinds of things came out of 1974. This is an old photo thing we found cleaning up, of just old pots that I was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Beautiful, functional pots, vase and lidded jars.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, from—

MIJA RIEDEL: And these are all yours?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: They're extremely competent. Beautiful form.

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's one thing—that's one thing that I realized that I do well is—since I was 14, is I was able to throw very well—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —consistently. And that was my skill that—I mean we all have our saving graces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was my one skill that I was able to do, in porcelain or in stoneware that I've been able to survive with, because it—worked on so many different ways. It fulfilled—spiritually, it fulfilled self-respect. And I was able to—every good piece I've made since I was 14 I've sold. You know, some of them I've sold for a buck, some I've sold for more. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —at the same time I got—the quality, I think, was there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, absolutely.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So—

MIJA RIEDEL: And I'm curious, when you say "spiritually, it fulfilled self-respect." Would you say more about that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Boy, I don't have it. It filled—I think what it is, the youngest of four boys, by the time I came around, my mother had nothing left [Laughs.]. Father was completely emotionally detached.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Never around. And—so I had to find something to get into.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I could have gone either way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I didn't. I went, I mean I—it was high marks all through school—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —graduated with honors and all of that and found clay to fill the void that—but it filled it in a wonderful, wonderful way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, growing up with three older brothers, I just got my ass kicked all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

NEIL WILLIAMS: They'd tell you to grow up, and yet—but at the same time—it was empowering and working with clay. And the magic of making something from nothing but a ball of mud became very—entrancing and enlightening, and there's a certain nurturing aspect about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I think that's why I made so many bowls. The bowl goes all the way—bowl form goes all the way back to the cupping of the hands to drink from the stream and primitive man, and it symbolizes so much, still, the concept of a vessel. So, I think I gravitated towards vessel-making, and connected with it immediately, and it's certainly evolved to other things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but it gave me a discipline, and it gave me sense of accomplishment and self-respect, I think, that was healthy and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —it made me realize that it was possible to pursue this. And I could do something that would stay alive and interesting, I wouldn't get bored after 40 years. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, clearly, you had an extraordinary facility early on with the material. These photos are dated '74. So, long before you were graduating high school, and there are—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

MIJA RIEDEL: —dozens of them, and clearly the Japanese influence is very—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: —apparent.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Had you see Paulus Berensohn's book *Finding One's Way with Clay*?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: It talks about begging bowls [ph]—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and yours have a little bit of that sensibility.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: These are exquisitely beautiful pieces, and I can see—if this is what you were doing already in high school, why—

NEIL WILLIAMS: At 14 years old.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, to—

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it made sense. It was a wonderful food, but it was also a wonderful fuel, because I wanted more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I wanted to keep—so the compulsion was there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I think that's also what—and the discipline was there, and I think that also what helped—in

the future when we talk about Viola, why she connected with me, and why I connected with her and why she was immediately "Would you come help me and work with me?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I was her first assistant which was really—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you graduated high school—

NEIL WILLIAMS: '77.

MIJA RIEDEL: In '77—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —and then did you go directly to CCAC?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I was going to take the summer and travel and do, but they said, "No, you have to use your scholarships." So—

MIJA RIEDEL: So you started in the summer?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, I went down there and my brother was living in Berkley.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I got to live with him and started—yeah, graduated here in June and started down there in—whenever it started—end of August.

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

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, so it was immediate, but it was also really—fascinating to me. I remember the first day I was there, I met a woman from Beirut. It was really interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: At CCAC?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, and people from all over the world, which was really fascinating to me, because we were all on the same, kind of—unexplored—it was new territory. But there was maybe 800 people there, students there, and they were from everywhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And Viola was there in the ceramics department?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think she arrived in '70 or so.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, she was there, and she had—I remember the first day of class was the morning after Richard Behrens, the glaze guru, the elderly gentleman, the wonderful—had passed away. And she was talking about it and trying to talk about samples of other students' work and Viola had a real—she was very—fragmented in her approach to—and like I said, and I'll say again, at her memorial service, I said, "If we"—"If I don't"—the first thing I had to say, "If I can't get through this, or I speak in incomplete sentences, it's because Viola did, too, and we used to love to fill in—finish each other's sentences, and fill in the blanks." And one of the famous things, we would laugh, and she would get in these vapor brain locks about trying to make a point. She'd say, "On the thing, on the thing, on the thing, you the thing, the thing, the thing." And, for some reason, I always knew what the thing was. I said, "Yeah, okay, I'll take care of it," or "Yeah, that thing, I'll do, yeah." So—

MIJA RIEDEL: And was this was when you were already working as her assistant?

26:50

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right. But also, for some reason, I remember us thinking I knew what was coming just from her first—the first day of class there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So—was it somehow familiar to you?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was—as it is in the sense that the clay environment can be very comfortable, and Viola used to talk about—and I agree—that clay people are more of friends and family, and it's more of a communal thing, pot shops are. They had a wonderful one, too. And, it wasn't that way necessarily with painter and sculptors. They worked alone, and they were more isolationists. Clay people were always very positive and helpful of each other, and loved looking at each other's work. So it was a completely different sense. And I know she—

MIJA RIEDEL: And she said that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes, it was a draw for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, because she made such a clear distinction between her own work and pottery.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this must have been early on, before she had—

NEIL WILLIAMS: But being around the clay people, and being around a pot shop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But she also said there was nothing wrong with good pots. She would have never thought there was anything wrong with them. She used to make them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, she made absolutely exquisite pots.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, in your experience, she never drew a line and said she was done with that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Done with pots?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, of course.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. But they kept coming up. I mean, she's making huge vases—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —right up until the day she died.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She just took on—she expanded the meaning, but as far as her liking to be around and finding—families, so to speak, in a clay environment—

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —she found it there because of her estrangement from her own family I'm sure contributed to that, unfortunately. And then—but even after a time she spent with Diebenkorn and Rothko in a magnificent artists and painters, she—I know she liked being around the pot shop. She liked being around the school. She used to work there in the summers, she liked being around the students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's a very heartwarming story about her, about her vulnerability, too. I'll remember—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, tell it now, if you like?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, it was in her—in relation to how she loved being around students, and how it filled a kind of a void for her. I'm sure it was—she was—and also how—she had a—you know, as amazing as she was, prolific, and as tough as she was, out-producing any other Bay Area artists two to one – even the macho guys—she had a real soft, fragile side. I remember we were driving back from installing her Crocker retrospective [ph]. And it was two floors, and hundreds and hundreds of pieces. It was her first big coming out show since she'd hid out for nine years and just made work, put it in your backyard or up your attic or—and, she was talking about the opening, "Well, I hope so-and-so's going to be there." And she says, "I hope some of my students show up.

They're going to be there, aren't they, Neil?" And I said, "Oh yeah, of course, there's a bunch of us going to come up," and luckily a whole bunch—but it was like, "They're going to come too, aren't they? I hope they come." She was a little nervous of whether she was going to have that kind of a—and I said, "Absolutely, we wouldn't miss it." So, it was nice for her to see so many of her students show up there. And of course after that it was everywhere, and everyone wanted to tag around and see what she doing and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —get into her studio. [Laughs.] But—

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you—became her assistant fairly quickly. You became her assistant in '77? Is that correct?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, within the end of the first semester there, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, your Freshman year, the end of the first term?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She saw—I think that she had some things going, and she saw that I had—I mean I was strong then.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I still am physically, but back then, she got an incredible amount of physical labor out of me, and it worked really well for her, because I was learning so much. And we became really good friends—because it wasn't just about working hard for her, it was about giving her a sounding board, and then we talked a lot about things outside of the arts, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She saw that I was—I worked hard and I had a good discipline, and I got a good sense, I think, of what she was doing immediately—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —or wanting to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because she was—sometimes it was hard for her to communicate with people or with students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And unless you understood, and you could fill in the blanks, where with some students it was just like "What is she talking about?" Because she spoke in gaps back then. And she jumped, back and forth, which you may or may not see in her work, but there was—in fact, working for her early on, it was so funny, she was very excited—she was getting very excited, because so much beautiful work was coming out, she was starting to come out again, not out of the closet, but of out of the backyard. [Laughs.] And people were looking in and were discovering what a powerhouse of knowledge—not only just a clay person but a painter, and an artist she was. And, I could feel that there—I knew from when I first walked into her house and her backyard and helped her, there was something just really—like, oh my God, there is an energy, an electricity, and there's—an exploration. There's a calling here that is just going to be-I knew it was going to be interesting, and I knew it was going to—my sense was it could get crazy at times, but it was manageable. It was not easy to—work with, but at the same time—to work for, she was. There were some really—a lot of good moments.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it was hard work, because she worked so hard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, one of the stories about Viola. She'd work anybody under the table. She'd teach all day and then she'd go and work in the studio until 2:00 in the morning, or I'd work for her until midnight and go home on Friday night and collapse, and I'd get a phone that'd ring at 7:00 in the morning, and the conversation would be like, "Oh Neil, Rena called and the Red Woman in the Dress, and Charles [Fiske] asked if you could do this, and wondering so-and-so is coming over to see it at noon," and it was all scattered. And I let her go, and I said "Well," and then she would go, "Oh, so I'm wondering if you could come and unload the kiln and put the Red Woman together so it could be seen." I said, "Okay, well I'll be right there, of course." But it was—she was so—amped up on what she was able to do. And she could work so long, and then the next morning, it was like she

was right back into it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it was funny, because she would get so scattered that she would almost like self-implode on the verbiage.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's what I meant about speaking in incomplete sentences, and then realizing instinctively what she wanted and what she needed help with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, because you were there in the studio working side by side so frequently that you could follow those fragments of thought.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I saw what she was doing, and I got a sense quickly of her rhythm and how she produced groups and clusters of work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And show she—and I knew there was something extremely special, and I didn't have an art background. I was just a kid. But I knew, just to see the magnificence of color and form, that there was something very special going on here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, would you walk us through her working process, and if it changed over time, or if it stayed fairly constant?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, it was always, like she said—again coming out of the Crocker retrospective—which was our first major, like, together, helping her install pieces because there-she had stuff delivered there that I hadn't seen before, and was like, "Will you put all this stuff together?" And I was like, "Oh my God."

MIJA RIEDEL: That was in '81, so you'd been working with her for four years?

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the quote coming out of that was that she said, "You have to remain compulsive and leave some work unfinished."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. But, there was stuff that got taken—

MIJA RIEDEL: She meant that literally.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And there was stuff that got taken out of the backyard and just dumped up there that I hadn't worked with. In the meantime, she was producing stuff like crazy. She was—the figures were getting bigger. She had started doing the big men.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She had—finishing up the beautiful little, smaller grandmother figures which were my favorite, will all the really nice painting and the fine china paint and lines. Before they went to just color field, and more of a wash water color block of areas of color. She was doing wonderful paintings, big paintings. But she'd also—we're doing these bricoleur, these junk pieces out of the cast molds, that I thought were absolutely fascinating. So, she had me casting thousands of little pieces from these molds, these commercial molds that were given to her, and she spent all summer assembling them into overall images and they looked like—I don't know. Some of them reminded me of Hieronymus Bosch for some reason. There was just something delightfully twisted and humorous and perverse and edgy. And so I always liked that. She later on started just hand building them and nixed the molds, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: And would she work—you said she'd work on multiple pieces at once, correct?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: The flow, and if she had a group of figures, say she would make a dozen figures in a year, she would be building, say, a pair of them. And as they dried, we would be taking, disassembling them and bisqueing them, while she continued building the others, and then she would shift back to the painting. And I'd whitewash, get a basecoat, and she would go with blocks of color in and out of the kiln, sectionally. She would do that, during the bulk of the day, and then she'd go in the house and paint and draw all night, and get right back up and do it again. And she was tenacious. I remember one of the great stories about that, about making so much work was—oh my God, when she had an open party, like a little dinner party and Richard Shaw and Arneson and Manuel Neri had come and a bunch of other people, and Rena Bransten, and, of course, who luckily was repping her by then—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —thank God. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Why do you say that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, because I just think it was—I just think the world of Rena and I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it a big change, then, for Viola?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She might not want to have admitted it, you know. Viola was—liked to be in control. But, Rena was a lifeline and an essential part of, I think, why Viola was able to—she really helped Viola blossom. She understood her. I think she knew what she needed. Rena was very, very patient with Viola, and very, very patient with making sure that she got connected to other people—the proper representation in New York. Not just everyone who wanted to grab her once they saw this incredible cache of artwork in her backyard. And such a cache—it's funny because at this party I remember, Richard Shaw and Arneson and Manuel coming in, Neri coming in, and looking around the backyard, and they hadn't been there, and there was a period, there was this silence, looking around and I was standing and listening to—I can't recall who said it. I think Arneson said it, because that there was so much work, he said to Richard Shaw, he says, "You ever get the feeling you're not working hard enough lately?" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It's so funny because Rena just told the story very similar to that, it was the same conversation, Shaw and Arneson, I can't remember who she thought made the comment. Pretty much verbatim.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I know, it was great. And I know—I remember also that it was funny because they knew how magnificent she was and how much, I mean, Manuel wanted to trade with her and she—they knew there was something really, really special there. But, it was funny because—I think Bob and Manuel each had cigars and they were smoking them back in their cigar days, and as they left, they left cigars in the grandmother's little thing and handed—they left their little cigar butts, and then next morning Viola just, "Ugh!" And I said, "Viola, it was a compliment. It wasn't—they weren't being offensive. It was a compliment. They were letting you know how magnificent your full-sized ashtray was." No—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but—

MIJA RIEDEL: So respect by significant peers.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because I know she—for both of them, she was—everyone loved their work, and they were like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —two of the premier Bay Area figurative artists of the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now which two are you talking about?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Arneson and Neri.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, and yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But, she was—just extraordinary and raw, pure energy and just that her tenacious way she devoured images and devoured the process of making stuff and working with color and form, and fluidly between two and three dimensional like that was really rare. I understand now I didn't have much exposure to it,

but even looking and taking art history courses at that time, it was unusual. I didn't think a lot of artists worked that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: And, did you see—being in the studio, seeing her working clay all day and then go home and work on two dimensional work at night—did you see the real back and forth, the conversation or the influence of one on the other?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, absolutely, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you see that evolve? Could you say anything about how they connected?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I—well it connected to the images she was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —working with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Story telling was really important to her, and she talked about that. Even though it may have been obscured, she had—she wanted to tell—be able to tell stories with her work and with her—I always thought it was—she was asking more questions than she was answering in her storytelling, which is what I think is what good art should do.

MIJA RIEDEL: What kinds of stories—were they related to politics, or gender, or social issues, personal narratives?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not back then. I would think they were more personal narratives. She talked about her connection with the grandmother or with the grandfather who had the pile of junk and nobody moved it, or they stayed away from it because it was his pile of junk, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: So the grandfather had junk even before the dad had junk? Because I know the dad had a huge collection of junk, too.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I understand that. I thought it started with the grandfather. So, I don't know if hoarding is generational? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Or genetic?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

[They laugh.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I knew the father did, too, but I thought it went back to the grandparents, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that's interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I may be mistaken, but—those kinds of—

MIJA RIEDEL: The density. And there's a frenzy in some of the—certainly the bricoleur pieces and the paintings, there is an energy, a density, a frenzy—

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's a—well, we always kind of laughed a little. Duchamp said that art was a drug, and I think Viola was a premier, thank God, example of that. She was intoxicated by color and form, like one of the—as any good art junkie could be. [Laughs.] But, she did it in a very celebratory way. I never saw anything she was doing was morose. So there was a—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —there wasn a—there was a celebration of life. In all of her work, I never saw an area—even in the *Mystery Man* series or the series she did when she got robbed at gunpoint and did some little figures based on that. Being held up—a little grandmother being held up by a man in a hat and with a gun. There was nothing

real morose about her work. And it was very celebratory. I never saw that it was an effort to work out—the dark side or her dark past, whatever it might have been.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did she ever talk about it at all?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She talked about—well, she talked out milking depression for all it was worth. So she took—if that ever came up, it was fuel for her, too. Her Oakland retrospective was getting reviewed by Thomas Albright at the time, and he could be a real—I mean he could be a nasty reviewer [Laughs.]. I mean he was a nasty critic; he just ripped people to shreds. But – she was—I knew she was worried about it, because I could see she was nervous. But he gave her a glowing review on *Myth Maker Art and Fantasy* and he was, she said—oh she came and she was so relieved, I think. And she said, "I was all prepared to be depressed, and you know what we did with depression—milk if for all its worth." But, he gave her a really good review. And it was nice for her. She earned it. She deserved it. But it was also another sign of how vulnerable she was, I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You were with her during both the Crocker retrospective in '81 and the Whitney exhibition in '84?

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, I had ended towards—no, I didn't do the Whitney—I took down the Whitney exhibition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Someone else installed it. I think Kevin Anderson at the time was helping, or part time help for installing.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were working at the studio though, right? Until '85?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Part-time back and forth until '85 and part of '86 a little bit. Because I had been back up here, but I would go back to help. She had so much going on, and she was building things so big, and they were getting so over the top in scale. And one of the reasons that was happening is because I could handle the disassemble. I mean it was just me and a ladder. And there were some of those sections, were 150 pounds and they were 10 feet in the air, all in sections, and I had pull them apart without breaking or chipping anything, get down the ladder, get them in the kiln—

MIJA RIEDEL: Now would you take chainsaw, as well, or whatever the saw was that Sam was describing and cut them up that way? Was she making them as whole figures?

NEIL WILLIAMS: They became—no, they were in sections. There were built-in walls together with pieces of plastic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then they—she started the cutting of certain sections.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: We had a hand saw, we didn't—we weren't as upwardly mobile as they became.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She replaced me and my ladder with Sam and all kinds of hydraulic equipment. I think she had two full-time and another part-time at the same time afterwards, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But—

Female speaker: Big shoes to fill.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was – I was really proud because I had felt really honored to be able to work with her. It was hard work, physically, but I knew it was special—

MIJA RIEDEL: Now were you the only assistant at the time, Neil?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes. And, her pieces were getting larger and larger and larger because, sectionally, we could handle it. We expanded into bigger equipment, bigger kilns. She'd have a show in L.A. or Rena's, so we would go to fly down there, and there's 100 body parts laying there and the stricken gallery—look on this gallery dealer's face, and like, "Ahh." And so we'd have them all numbered and ready to go, but we'd put the show up in a few

hours and they were like—everyone was happy and purring and ready for a reception after that.

MIJA RIEDEL: So were you there, as the pieces got bigger and bigger, part of designing the infrastructure that enabled them to get that large?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not designing them. Viola—you suggest and you try and have a—help guide her. Rena can probably attest to that. There was a certain suggestion and guidance, kind of, or a guidance through suggestion. Like, "Viola, it's really great, it's really beautiful, but if you did this, we'd save me a couple hours of work here." That kind of a thing, and "Oh, Okay." But she thought things through very well, but she was also really stubborn when she knew she was right, and of course she was always right, it was her work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So logistics—I don't know, I look back. It's amazing some of that stuff was made and successfully made and not a piece got broken, and there was hundreds and hundreds of body parts travelling across country and for ceramics as a material, it traveled well, and it was successful, and it was tremendous. They were magnificent pieces. She got—it was the height of making those big men, and they were enormous.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I guess she had to go with it. There was a symbol of power to her, the man in the suit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I think it was also—I also know that she had to delight in the fact that she was a little, short woman who was able to do that, and then splash all these great color field, you know, bring it to life with color, and still, at the time, outwork anybody around her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a sense of humor or spirit of playfulness in her work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: All the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: All the time. It was serious and hard work, but she said, "There's no reason why we can't have fun." And she was giggling all the time about stuff, yeah. She had a very infectious giggle. She would especially giggle and laugh if she was nervous, you know, nervous in company, or, nervous in front of a collector or nervous in front of—she would giggle and laugh.

MIJA RIEDEL: I remember reading that it was important to her that some of the characters—some of the sculptures, the figures feel slightly menacing.

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] In their scale—in terms of their scale alone, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, and then Charles, who she lived with for so many years, was slightly menacing. [Laughs.] He could go off and explode and it could be pretty scary. And then he would pull back and he would – he'd be fine, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Different people have described that relationship in different ways. What was your take on that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was a very unique one. I had never seen anything like it, or since. Like I said, he was older, did a lot of her reading and her—writing for her, and was the premier voice behind her of how good she was and how great her work is, and going to be. He had very strong opinions of where it should go, of course, but she—she definitely was her own woman, and she was going to make what she wanted to make. But—it was—a very different relationship. I don't know how to describe it. Viola was a very asexual person. Completely. I mean she'd give up anything to make art. She had said, even once that there was nothing that she wouldn't give up to make art.

And I think that came about—she went to a Betye Saar lecture and they were asking Betye Saar about what else is really important, be said, "Well, my children were so important to me, I might take some time off from my work for my children." And Viola said, "No way, I wouldn't"—"There's nothing"—"Making artwork is the most important thing, that's number one." And for some reason, that mix with Charles worked. And he had a really interesting background himself,, being an architect historian, ceramic historian, writer, and friends with the people he knew. I mean, like I was saying, he knew Frank Lloyd Wright to George Rickey to—I understand, maybe, I'm not sure—but I understand even Gertrude Stein in some of her Oakland years. I may not be accurate

in that, but I recall him saying something about that. And like I said also, he was the first one to encourage Peter Voulkos to hand build when he was at Arts and Crafts in the '50s.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's the first time I've ever heard that.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

MIJA RIEDEL: Did anybody ever corroborate that besides Charles?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Viola did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anybody besides Viola?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, the people around Arts and Crafts there at the time. Gosh, who was there then, [Vernon] Coykendall—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Boy, I can't think of who else was then. I think – Manuel was there in the late 50s, early 60s, too, wasn't he? Manuel Neri? But, no, I remember mentioning something about that at one of Charles' services about—memorial services about wanting to thank him for—I understand he's one of—he's the one who encouraged Peter Voulkos to hand build. And Viola said, "Yes," she yelled, "Yes, that's true." So—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's hard to imagine that.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. He was extremely difficult. Brilliant. Like I said, you never knew when you were going to catch him. He was volatile, and scary. I mean he'd chew you a new one if you did something wrong that he didn't agree with, or you were in his space at the wrong time, like trying to photograph when she set up a photography session in her living room when he was trying to have dinner and it interrupted—I mean, there was some toilet lid slamming going on there. [Laughs.] But then he would calm down, and he—and I don't know, I'm sure that has to do with his also being a veteran and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —you know, he nearly died from malaria and whatever other issues, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: I did speak with someone else who said that the war was deeply traumatic for him—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and that he really had a poetic heart and spirit and that [the war had really –MR] left its mark.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Absolutely, and he was a magnificent, generous source of information. And like I said, some of the most amusing moments is when he had vermouth in one hand and a cigarette in the other and he was ready to talk. And he would talk about, "An ism," he said. "It's virtually impossible to write about an ism when you're in the middle of it. You can only write about it in retrospect." I mean, he's the one who talked about diachronic and synchronic time. You know, in that relation—and how an ism is born when the art world is going one way and somebody does a 90 degree, that's where isms come from. And—but he—their relationship was real unusual. He didn't like people in parties or company, was very isolationist. But on one-on-one, he was magnificent. But, he wouldn't go to openings. If he would go, you'd have to keep an eye on him, because he would scamper out or he'd, like, hit the wall and want to go. And—they had, it was an unusual couple. Very unusual.

MIJA RIEDEL: [. . . –MR] I think it's a source of interest because it was so unusual.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I've heard people say that there was a deep love between them, a deep respect.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Some people said that Charles was gay—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you—and that that was part of that whole dynamic and part of what made it unusual?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. I didn't—really think of that much—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —when I was—and I saw them as—almost like roommates and artists who were sharing space and enriching each others' lives.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Like I said, she was very asexual—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —like he was, too. But, I know they were very affectionate, too. I mean—in certain ways, I mean [Laughs.] she used to buy these boxes of doughnuts and bring them into either to class or she'd bring them home because she thought I would want doughnuts when I'm working. And, she walked everywhere until she learned how to drive, which was a horrifying thing to learn how to do for her. And she'd bring these boxes and of doughnuts up and, "Neil, I'll make coffee, I've got doughnuts." And Charles walked in one morning and saw these doughnuts in front of her, a big old plate of them. And he's trying to pull the plate away, and she's growling at him, and she's got her arms around the doughnut and it's like—I said, "Oh Charles, I don't know—"

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: "You might—"

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NEIL WILLIAMS: "—might want to—she looks awful mean. You might want to pet her first."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, then I realized later on—an analogy for how she hoarded images, too. And now him, her, and Squeak kind of went back and forth at a certain time when Squeak was getting out and getting established. They were trying to—they had a healthy rivalry of who discovered which image first, who used it first in which painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And there was the famous candlestick incident, where [Laughs.] Viola was trying to claim she—Squeak took the candlestick image from her, and Squeak was, "No, that wasn't my intention; I was just—" so Viola came in—back in, all fired up. She was very competitive—came back in all fired up one day in the studio and made me pour about 80 candlestick images that she was going to use in her, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —new series of jug pieces. It's like, "Oh god, Viola." So she was very competitive—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and competitive with other female artists too. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Just female, or across the boards?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Across the board—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but for some reason, especially with female.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I don't know—where that—I didn't know—understand what that was about. But Viola and Charles' relationship is, like I say, more of artists and sharing the same space, and in mutually enriching each other's lives. And very asexual—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and—but also very intriguing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —because he was a brilliant orator when he wasn't—when he was stable, and when he was fluid, amazing source of information, historically. And insights of—how the mind works, how the creative mind works—you know, how the primitive mind works in relation to creativity. I mean, I learned so—palace-and-cottage artist. I said, "What is that?" He was like, "You know, palace-and-cottage, it's like—Michelangelo was a palace artist; Van Gogh was a cottage artist." "Ah, that makes sense to me. I get that." It was a public and a private—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —side. And he talked about—Viola's a cottage artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the other profound things he would say, like, "You know, all of—all of art and all of the way that [we] identify the world around us can be divided into two categories: straight line and curved line." So straight line, you've got analytics and rational architecture and structure. Curved line, you've got figurative and intuition and emotion. His tangents were always really fascinating to me, when he would go off on—and then, he would just run out of gas and say, "There; I'm done. That's all I have to say." In other words, it was time to go; session was over. Coffee was over. I got to back out and work for her, or—but he was—he was a—he was a treat. But it was one of the most unique, unusual pairings of couples I've ever seen. But I know he really fed her a lot of reinforcement in what she was doing. She was tough in the first place, but I also know that it helped her toughen her up in a number of ways because it helped her with the—he helped her with the identifying and articulating the verbiage behind her imagery—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and behind her work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So it bolstered her—I could see it really bolstered a certain competence level, to be able to—you know, even though she wasn't necessarily good at speaking in some public arenas, she was really thought-provoking when she was talking about her work. And, even though there were gaps in her thought processes, like there are in all of our lives, in all of our dialogues, you could tell there was a depth of thought there. And I think a lot of that was nurtured by Charles' influence on not losing touch with how important the idea and the spoken word is. Like, he would earlier talk about you becoming a writer more so than a clay person because it was—it was essential to life's calling and consciousness. And it was also, like I was trying to get at filling the—image filling the gap between the thought and the spoken word.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [. . . –MR] From what you're saying, it sounds as if he gave her—he helped her work with words, and a verbal way to think—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —and describe, talk about her work. And then he also, with his extraordinary knowledge, helped to give some context. I know she read—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —constantly, and she was a huge acquirer of images, but it seemed—

NEIL WILLIAMS: She liked looking more at images than reading.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: He did a little—most of her reading for her, I'm certain.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And edited for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So here this relates—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —this is important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And his writing, too, especially about her work, was very strong.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Very powerful. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did he write much about her work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, but not necessarily for publishing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: He would write stuff—I mean, I'd find little notes all over the place, little critiques about, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —there. As it stands now, I remember one beautiful one—as it stands now, this backyard is as good as you will see in any premiere gallery in the country. Go to a show and you see incrementally [ph]. And those things—you never knew what happened to them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, I used to—I found a note crumpled up—or stepped on, on the floor of her truck. It was a thank-you note from Joan Mondale, who'd just visited her studio and was—couldn't believe what she saw. She was just, like, gushing over it. And it was like, Viola read it, and it ended up on the floor of her truck with footprints on it, because she would embrace these things; she was, "Alright I own it," and it was—she wasn't attached to those kinds of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So of course, I cleaned it off and give it to Charles or something, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —it just slipped her mind, because she was on to other things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: On to visuals. So, he filled the word in her life, and she filled the visuals in his.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And there was a beautiful Byronic, unique, very—peculiar dialogue and relationship between the two that worked in a—I don't know what the word is. It's not ephemeral—it worked in a very—

MIJA RIEDEL: Elusive? Subtle?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was elusive; it was not subtle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was—I mean it was even disturbing at times, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —I mean, they were together a long, long time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: They were together when you became her assistant?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes, and they had been for quite some time before that. But they were—

MIJA RIEDEL: Were together until he passed away.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And what was the last word he said when he sat up? "There she is!" And then he passed away.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's what I understand.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I wasn't there, but I think that's what—he came in and out of consciousness; he said it was hard—"There she is!" and passed away. But, yeah, I learned a lot from that. I mean, it was like a crash course.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, not only going to art school and a new environment and people from all over the world—trying to encompass that and digest that—art history classes, other classes—

MIJA RIEDEL: Two more quick questions—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —just while we're on this topic of her working process and you in the studio—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —clearly Charles was a huge influence on her. What else did you see, while you were there, as significant influences on her or her work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: We used to go out every Saturday to the—or, every other Saturday to the Alameda Flea Market, where she collected all her little—her little images from a lot of—

MIJA RIEDEL: You went along on those trips?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Have you seen the photograph of her in the closet with all of the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of the little figurines and things that she had—

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't think so.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —she had hoarded? Oh, it's a great little photo. She's standing on the closet door and surrounding her on all the shelves are hundreds and hundreds of these little figurines. The little discards, the little salt and pepper shakers, the little tchotchkes, all of the—

MIJA RIEDEL: What did she look for, Neil? Was it discerning, or was it more just grabbing a range of things?

NEIL WILLIAMS: She was very greedy. And like I said, she was a hoarder of images—I think Squeak once even called her the Mother of All Images.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I like that; we got a kick out of that. Squeak Carnwath said that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —about her. And, she was—voracious. She would just clutch, and she'd have a connection with it, and once it got in her hands, it wasn't leaving. And it was—it was almost like she had hunted, killed it, brought it home for display.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it was funny because she didn't have to taxidermy it or anything; it was already pre-done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it was already in color, but she—and she literally used those directly in some of her images when she exploded. You know, like, the little chicken image or some of those other images that she made eight,

nine feet high. The camel—you know, all those little figurines, they were wanting to explore, like she said, small figurines on a colossal, larger-than-life-size scale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did the figurine that she was drawn to need to have anything in particular, or was it just to build a range of things that spoke to her for a reason she wasn't even clear about?

NEIL WILLIAMS: That makes sense to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: That says very well. Thank you. Yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] That's—that makes sense to me. It was—having an arsenal, collecting an arsenal of weaponry—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —in order to take in to battle, in the field of painting and sculpture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so she—collected a lot of ammo in that area. And they would go off in other—all kinds of different directions, and—I remember one exercise, she had us do in a student environment, was making a still-life; bringing objects in; making a still-life, drawing it, then sculpting it in clay, and then photographing it, so that you had that experience of two, three-dimensional and building a still-life—contemplating—resourcing and contemplating the image, and then picking it apart, putting it back together.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she thought in the—I—the process of that was personalizing the image. I remember—images were very personal to her, of course, and it made sense because she was in a panel once, a discussion panel at NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts]. One artist was talking about art in the panel; she was talking about, "Art is about art" and was being very egocentric. And Viola would yell out of the side, "Art's about personal experience!" "No, art is about art!" You know, it's like, "Personal experience!" [Laughs.] So, in exercises like that, and in encouraging students to connect with or bring an image or an—important event in their life, it's about personal experience. And that's where you got—that's where the questions started to create a depth of experience, and hopefully would manifest in the work, having depth and character and room for growth in that. So, she encouraged that and nurtured that very heavily, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: It was almost an unconscious sense of personal experience, from what I understand, because none of the work equated directly to her own personal experience, but somehow—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I thought some of it did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, do you?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you talk about a piece or two?

NEIL WILLIAMS: The—I know some of the first endearing works that everyone was raving about, it was—and of course she—you saw them immediately, you would be grabbed by them, were the grandmother figures in floral dress.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because they were—at the time, they were smaller—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: They were just big enough, but they were also—they had this—sense about them that obviously somebody was very tied, emotionally, to this image. Even though they were colorful and they were kind of drawn and animated and doll-like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —I always thought they had this beautiful bittersweetness to them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That makes sense for those pieces. I'm thinking of a story that someone told [me –MR]—something happened to Charles and he was in the hospital, and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —a couple of friends came over to visit Viola, and they said there was just no conversation, nobody was talking. And Viola finally just said, "Let's play with clay"—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and took out the clay, and they all just sat there at the kitchen table—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —working with clay. And I think she actually made a little goblet—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —that she actually then gave to this person as a gift.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Clay seemed a way for her to channel experience that was personal, but not necessarily make the piece be self-referential.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right. She gave that to me as a—also—her students, as a way of unlocking experiences and—personal experiences. Especially, she thought it could be for any artist when they reach a crisis period in life—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —with their own work. She thought that if more of them had this simple little formula, this simple little exercise might have helped in another crisis period in time that so many artists, I mean—Rothko, Van Gogh, Gorky—we lost all of them in a certain period of time, when they reach that crisis period. And it's something that, if you were able to—however they needed to work through it, who knows what could have come from them? Some of them were meant to be shooting stars, of course. But she told her students and was—I remember it stuck with me—there—to get yourself out of those—she said clay was such a natural conductor for that. You do a series of three pieces. The first piece, you make as technically virtuoso as you can.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, whatever the image is, you stay focused on the—whatever you're compelled to make. The second piece, you don't care what the outcome is. And the third piece, you play.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she thought that was a great way to start unlocking and getting the—those agents that are bound up in a creative psyche or in an emotional, personal—dam, or whatever was locked up.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She felt that was a way to start unlocking that and getting things to start flowing and coming out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, of course, whatever happened after that, whether—she wasn't going to be responsible for it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —because she wasn't really into some of the hard personal discussions about life and death.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She's not—she wasn't really—those kinds of things made her nervous. She wanted to keep things focused on her, and her work, and her love of color and form, and her images, and—so—and also, it kept her isolated in a sense that she—unless you had something to do with the direct aspect of production of her work, or assisting in that, you—she didn't have—she had little time or energy for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I think that was a good—real healthy—she needed to be in a teaching environment too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She admitted she would go nuts if she was just isolated in her studio full-time, if she didn't have that contact.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But there was a certain—it was so unusual, because she had only her own life, personal experiences to relate, but she tried really hard to relate on—that they were universal ones. And so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —that's why some of her students were good and excelled and a lot of them were like, "What is she?" You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's what I was trying to get at earlier, is that straddling of the personal and the universal that works, that seems profound and present in her work.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But isn't that the case with so many great artists in history?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure. Sure.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, there's a—that's why the attraction-repulsion dynamic is to be found with so many of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: In their work, and in—also, in them as human beings. There's a—there can be a—

MIJA RIEDEL: It starts off feeling so personal. Those grandmothers that you described—Mrs. National Geographic? I think—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. Exactly. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But, then it does seem to transition. I wanted to ask you about [. . . –MR] the transition from the more patterned painting on, for example, the women's dresses—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: —to a more color-filled, abstract painting, and how that came about.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I think it became—she still—she kept—still kept the great detail—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —a composition, the clarity of image, the figure groundwork in the paintings and the charcoal, or the pastels. It shifted, I noticed, when she graduated to the big overblown men.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I think she was trying to—I thought it was two things. She was trying to strip it down to the essence of just being a power suit image and an image of power; a man in a suit—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —with a tie; a big man in a red suit, towering over you. There was something about the big block of color, although there was good color change and wonderful painting in it. But the lack of detail in that—

the simplicity of it just being this eruption of massive form and color, right in your face. I also think the simplicity of being able to do that because I know they were so physically demanding—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —that she said at one point she would have gone nuts if she spent too much time going back with all the—you know—fine little details on the big men, she would lose—they would lose their vitality, she thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I think there was a physical aspect of it, that they were simplified into color field from some of the early detailed work, and I also think that there was a conscious effort, that she thought there was something more powerful on big blocks of color—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and in your face.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Unedited, raw.

MIJA RIEDEL: How about the female figures? Same idea?

NEIL WILLIAMS: In the later ones, especially the reclining ones.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I think. But, we were talking about the emotional endearment of when she had the early grandmother ones as the connections, emotionally, to those. I think that—for me, when she started doing the larger works and the color fields, I didn't feel the emotional connection that she had with them before.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you think she did not either? That—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I'm sure she did. She was always in it, for her, with all her heart. She always was in it. But I also think that the pressure to produce and the pressure to produce large monumental-scale pieces, colossal pieces —when everyone was around her saying, "Oh my gosh. This is a woman that did this work! It's incredible!" There was that pressure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so, for me personally, I thought some of the larger pieces were—that they looked unfinished.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I know after she started some of her health issues, there was—some of them looked tired, but at the same time they were still nonetheless magnificent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But in looking back, I—there was a period of time I was fortunate enough to work near her—assist her—that—it seemed to be a click and across the board. And I noticed that, in later years, the paintings got really good, and some of the figures were just big.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: The paintings became spectacular. Some of the last charcoal drawings I thought were just—oh my God. But, earlier, when she was younger, and she was able to do the painting, and I think the sculptures were much more—glove-like.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Fitting together.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, I don't know if that answers your question or helps to—

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking of something that Rena said last week, which was—she said—something that Viola said to her. [. . . –MR] A wonderful nugget that Rena remembered was that men were in their positions of power

in blue suits, and women were in their positions of power [when –MR] naked. And I thought that was interesting, to think about her work with that in mind.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it is—and yeah—I—that's got to—that's true. That's got to be true. And I remember even—yeah, now that you refresh my memory, she did—mention that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —directly. That was intentional.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it's—and it's perversely somewhat true.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Certainly in art.

NEIL WILLIAMS: That sexual—well in society today. And it's – I don't know how—I mean, that dichotomy and that—that dance is still going on, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—

MIJA RIEDEL: And I'm sure there are people who would disagree with that heartily, but it's interesting—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, I hope so, but what is interesting is that it asks those questions—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —or at least proposes those—suggests those. So that's what I thought – I mean, you, being a writer, would know that great visuals—can be great food for great writers, too. So, there is a—what we talked about earlier, that good art should ask more answers—might ask more questions than it answers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I think her work—did that. But there was also something very—resolved about it too. I mean, Viola didn't necessarily go off on abstract tangents that were – required a lot of slick verbiage to flush it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And that's why I think that—Charles' point, when he was talking about her being a cottage artist, and not a big palace artist, where there's a—whole dedication ceremony that goes along with it publicly.

Female Speaker: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

NEIL WILLIAMS: She was sharing a private aspect of a life that celebrated color and form and figure images—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and the American imagery she grew up with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she wasn't necessarily challenging people on deeper meanings beside, or beyond that—which may or may not have contributed to how powerful her work was. But she was—in the middle of all that, she was just a delightfully crazy person and artist [Laughs.]. Arneson, one day said—they were telling Arneson about, "Well, she's got a"—"she's pouring concrete in the bottom of her men and bolting them into steel plates." [Laughs.] And he said, you know, they look like, "She's crazy; she's definitely crazy."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But, it made sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it worked and it made sense, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you see as the similarities and differences between her earlier work and her later work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Similarities was a consistency of all figure work—figurative work, the male and female roles. It may have impacted her growing up and her experiences. Consistent need to tell a story with a number of images that keep—kept repeating throughout. The power of color throughout is very consistent. The other thing that's consistent, I think, with her is the physicality of being able to build that amount of work, and that scale of work. You could tell she really—that was a—she was driven by that. Making something that had a physical presence stayed consistent throughout. Differences? I—like I say, it got larger and larger. And it—and then something got softer about it, I thought. A little more—not overblown, but unfinished and a little more amorphous. There was something not as—wasn't as detail-concentrated—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —wasn't as finished, and it seemed driven by a need and a compulsion to keep—to keep working, to keep building, to keep it—keep it big and—so, I don't know if that helps answer that question.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you have a sense about the motivation or the influence between the single figures and the cluster of figures?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, isn't that—I mean, isn't that—common with all of us? It's loneliness.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Doesn't that go back to the Tao in China, that loneliness is our common denominator?

MIJA RIEDEL: Something we were talking about maybe before we started recording [. . . –MR]—you were talking about the importance of family to her.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's the invisible ground of sympathy that commonizes pauper and noble, is our loneliness.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And—her compulsion to fulfill that loneliness was found in the exuberance of being able to make a single huge, giant man, or a cluster of them. And I know she would—I hope she did completely relish the fact that she could do that, and it was filling the bill for her. Like I was saying at her memorial service, there's two ways towards immortality for a person—children and artwork. And that can come in—artwork can come in a number of different facets—how you live your life, writing, how you influence, impact, socially, your circle; how you are remembered; or it can be through artwork. I mean, how many artists—looking back and they're still talking and writing about? And this is just a fresh—relatively recent passing of a—local, prominent, prolific artist —

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —female artist. So, I mean, "immortality" might be a little grandiose, but it's all in—I think how you want to be remembered, what you want to leave behind. And it's just like dealing with any person's life, if they're elderly or if they're passing young. What do they want to do? They want to review their life so that they have a sense that it had some meaning, that we had a cause that we at least embraced and tried to fulfill. I mean, I always think of that wonderful Gauguin painting, Tahitian women on the beach." Was the title of it loosely "Where do we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?" [*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,* 1897-1898]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And they're all looking off in—different directions with this vacant, yet intriguing look on their faces. So, Viola was driven—I mean, people are going to be writing and trying to figure out what—driven to fill the void and to—embrace a fulfillment in life that—I mean, we all want to feel like we had some cause and purpose and we were here for a reason. I know it's probably wrong, and a lot of people will take themselves out of a direct experience—a rich experience in life by trying to apply reason to figuring out why we are here. That was interesting—that was, I forget the writer—talked about perception, conception, and practice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Perceive an object—you perceive your environment, you—as you become an adult, you conceive how you're going to react to or embrace that object. And then you practice. You react to that or you embrace that object.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, as a child, you perceive an object and you react to it; you practice it. There's no conception in that; you learn conception. And his point was, you—I forget who it was, the writer—his point, you remove yourself. You distill the depth of the experience if you conceive too long, or too much, or at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, it's like Picasso said, it took him what, sixty years to learn to draw like a child again?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So the perception and practice—I think—I mean, Viola was there. I mean, she wanted to—she was so compulsive about stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So I think that she was naturally—she was on that energy of that elusive whatever-it-is about perceiving and then practicing and reacting to it. So she would get – she'd see the image at the flea market, she'd grab it, hoard it, and run it home, and she'd want to make it big immediately. And then Charles would say, "Well, why would you want to make it big?" You know, that kind of a thing. So he would keep the conception always around her. So she got the the words and the—descriptors with it. But her compulsion, her raw compulsion, I believe was the perception and the practice of – perception of the color and the practice of wanting to paint it all over something.

MIJA RIEDEL: There was a Spark episode that was about Viola. You may have seen it. She was already ill and she was working in a wheelchair. Sam would go pick her up and take her to the studio.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it is fascinating to see—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —her focus, and the life that comes into her eyes and comes into her movement in the studio, and at the same time, just that practiced routine. The way you're describing it, it's clearly been there for years and years and years. So there's almost a quickening of the pulse, and at the same time, it's so completely familiar.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, and when you need it, like Duchamp said, if art is a drug and you need your fix—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, Van Gogh said that, art is a jealous mistress; she does—she prefers herself to ill health or anything else. And—yeah, I mean, even De Kooning had Alzheimer's. They were having to dress him and shave him, and he was still doing some spectacular paintings. I mean, go figure that. It's a drive and it's a calling, it's a compulsion. It's a—what was it—to me, it's like—for me, it's like the vital and—was it [Henri] Bergson? The French philosopher talked about *élan vital*, the vital energy—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —that surrounds all of us, that—I mean, to me, I see the vital energy as, in context of Viola's work, it's—and why I like color so much, and her impact on me, is that—to me, it's the vital energy. It's the—color that surrounds us and brings us to life. It's like the same—to me, it has a direct link to the chemical in our hearts that cause it, our cells to beat. And they're still not quite, know why, but there's an electrochemical in the cells of the heart which causes it to beat.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And to me, color is that vital energy that can bring a piece to life, or it can kill it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, let's transition to your work, and the evolution of your work through undergrad and graduate school, through these Japanese functional and utilitarian, beautiful, exquisite pots that you were making in high school to what we're looking at here on the coffee table—the cup and the teapot, highly deconstructed. The evolution of your work, how Viola influenced it, and then where you decided to develop.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She was—when I first got to Arts and Crafts, she saw that I was very disciplined through will, any scale was—she was working on me, on surface—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and activating the surface. In other words, conceiving it as a surface for painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, canvas in the round.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it didn't make sense to me right away, but there's no reason why it all—drawing and painting color can't apply to a simple vessel. I was hooked on and was dedicated to making vessels as a concept.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what about the vessel spoke to you?

NEIL WILLIAMS: The idea of interior and exterior—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —being simultaneous and—

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense right here—

NEIL WILLIAMS: —concept of transport—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And luckily I went—got connected with her, and not some other instructor at the time who could have impacted it elsewhere, because they would have said, "Ah"—so many of them would say, "Ah, the vessel. It's not art." You know, "The pots aren't art." And she honestly defended it and believed that a good pot is art if you look at history.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And if you look at so many aspects of ceramics and pottery, it's extremely important in every culture.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking culturally—how you learned ceramics so early on and worked with a fellow who studied in Japan, the feeling about ceramic pots there is completely different.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah. Yeah. Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's very much a cultural construct, to think it's not art—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —would be highly disagreed with in many other cultures.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But luckily, she got that, and instead—so she saw where I needed to be challenged, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And where was that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, seeing in terms of a painting, a canvas.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, drawing and painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so the early activating surfaces, and—so the color influence was seeing what she was doing with color, and also looking and seeing what other artists in history were doing with color. And my own inclination to seeing and knowing that color could bring something to life. And how it—the electromagnetic attraction to the profound impact of what color can have on a person. And also the palliative qualities of color context, and—it was all very fascinating to me. And so she encouraged surface which, so the early ones, were very textual, very tactile. You know, large, tall, six, eight-foot pieces with lots of drawing and clay on it, literally crawling with energy. And then—started to cut straight-line. And she said, "That was a little more bold than some of the others." I thought, "Okay." So they're just straight-line cuts all the way down, in thirds—

MIJA RIEDEL: So cutting a vessel in half, cutting a section out of it.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And all the way down, like here. This cut here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: All the way down.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So the walls stay intact, but they're separated?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Here. So what it was doing—she pointed it out to me—of course I was young and naïve—well, you're—it's a three-dimensional canvas, because if you cut that out and laid it out flat, you'd have a two-dimensional painting. So, it's a painting in the round, and then—like I said earlier—it was five years to get the front side, another five years to work on the back side, and still working on all the transitional sides.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But its main—it kept the vessel alive and interesting for me—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —because it brought in painting and color concerns, which I had no experience in. And I had some experience in color when it does fit form from making glaze, traditional glazes. But, to able to approach them as a painter with a brush, and a full pallet of color, I think, was probably one of the most profound impacts she had on me, besides reassuring me that it was okay to do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she's like, she would say, "This is our thing, Neil." You know, I said, "What about those other colors?" Because everyone was doing brown.

MIJA RIEDEL: Still?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Brown, old—you know, '60s work. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: And in the late '70s.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right. Right. Well, Kenny Price and some other people were doing some pretty profound—

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, this definitely has that fetish finish feeling to it.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But hopefully, I make enough mistakes and leave enough open-endedness, because I wouldn't want anything overly finished and—but it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: That doesn't feel thoroughly finished to you?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I hope it has a certain clarity. But I hope there's some—there's always, to me, some areas that need work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's just that it was slow progress. It would take years to make a little jump in progress, it seemed like. From straight-line stuff in 1980 or '83—horizontal, vertical, and cut in thirds and large planes of color—to diagonal and feathering and curvilinear, which they took—a long time to get to. But, it was nice that she said, "It's okay to do that, it's okay to stay in a vessel image. Good teapots and good cup images are perfectly legitimate. And just keep them interesting for yourself." So, that's how these have evolved and stayed interesting. And, I also found it was really interesting because they were—they found themselves into collections of paintings and other paintings and sculptors that I really like, too. And so, that was just overwhelming to me, that some of those same people were—I mean, like, Betty Asher and her cup fetish—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —that Asher form—and I remember, because meeting her through installing Viola's show and realizing she had the cup fetish, and, "Oh my gosh, I make little cups." And I said, "Do you know anyone down

here that might be interested in them?" "I would," she says. "I'll take them." And she bought most of them and took them home with her. And then she gave them to L.A. County and Scripps and Otis, and that's how they ended up in some of those—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —those collections, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Then you showed with her very early on in the mid-80s, early '80s, couple years—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mid-80s, when Viola was there. No, I just her—was in her gallery and group shows.

[Phone rings.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's mine. And, she just helped with the cups. I really was never motivated to doing the solo show thing. I had two of them with Dorothy Weiss, and a couple others in Sacramento. And I owned a gallery in Sacramento briefly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm. What was that called?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was Neil William's Galleries. It was a little vanity gallery and—

MIJA RIEDEL: When was that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: '07, '08.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, so recently?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. And—but I was never motivated to doing the—pursuing the whole—I don't know why. I wasn't—it wasn't driven like Viola was, or so many other artists, you know. "Having a solo show. I got to have a show." I was content to just whoever connected with it, whoever wanted to rep it, was—Rena was amazingly helpful. I mean, she was—so nice to me and so—because the vessel wasn't her thing really.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She wasn't committed to it, but she was gracious enough to encourage me, and help. And, I was really, very, and profoundly appreciative of that. Like I said, she was also Viola's lifeline, I know, too. We can talk about that more. But—so, I was surprised at how many people collected teapot images, or cup and saucers. And when I started meeting them and seeing their collections, it was like, "Oh my goodness." I mean, Betty Asher's, Stéphane Janssen's collection was—are you familiar with him at all?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And he became an—

MIJA RIEDEL: That was an extraordinary collection, extraordinary.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —very dear friend, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, when he was on his deathbed years ago, I was fortunate enough to go and be able to take, help care for him for a couple of months. And, he has an extraordinary collection. His is still the most important private collection of COBRA painters, I think, in the world. You know, [Pierre] Alechinsky and Yorin Appelle [ph]; Brian Oll [ph]; Gilais [ph], his favorite painter, just a magnificent—I mean, all of the guys that really impacted American abstract painters, too. But he's a whole—that's a whole other two days' worth of talking about him and his collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But he liked them and started buying them from Betty Asher. And then he called one day and said, "Neil, I'm opening a little small gallery in Carefree, outside of Scottsdale. Can—I want to buy some pieces for the gallery." The gallery was—he was going to do sales and donate it towards the Shanti Center or to hospices, or to Bates' Hospices, or to the arts down there where he was. Because he moved out of L.A.—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: – because there was an earthquake and they were rude to him. He went to give some beautiful,

huge Alechinsky paintings—oh, just masterpieces; 10-by-30-foot, 10-by-20-foot, extraordinary. And this foolish curator at the time said, "I just don't think we have room for them," and rejected him. And he looked, and he said, "Excuse me?" He was going to donate fantastic paintings, and it's like, "Well, but you have Motherwell's all over the place in storage." And the fool wouldn't take them. Millions of dollars in painting. So, an earthquake happened a couple months later. He moved to Scottsdale, or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —north, in Carefree.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And he had a Picasso he had inherited from his father. Got tired of insuring it, so they put it on the market, and it was the beginning of the craze when the Japanese were buying. And they thought it would bring about 17, it brought $39 million, and he took it all and he gave it to—you know, museums and charities, and he put it back in the arts. But he did it elsewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And you know L.A. had to be kicking themselves over that, because then they realized, "Oh my gosh, this guy's got 2,000 paintings and for thousands"—he's got a billion dollars' worth of artwork, and he did it because he had such a great eye, and he could afford to buy. But, so anyway, that's how he—that's how their pieces ended up at A.S.U. Museum, is through Stéphane and his donations, too. But they just quietly—like Viola was saying, "The little cups are looking good, Neil. They're quietly sneaking in the back door of some really nice places."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it was nice for me, because it opened up—you know, they would come back and they'd see some larger pieces, and they would—and it helped. It was a nice little fit for me, because it was able to keep it alive and interesting, and keep the sharks swimming forward, so to speak. So, they supported the cost of larger pieces, and then big pairs of columns and such, and we're back to the little cup and saucer again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is nowhere near so little. I mean, we should be very clear.

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Neil Williams at the artist's home and studio in Auburn California on June 6, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number two. Any follow-up thoughts from the conversation last night? Anything you woke up thinking about when the owl woke you up at about two o'clock in the morning?

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] Besides how grateful I am to be here, and be able to look back in retrospect and—I just thought—one of the things I thought, I was saying to my wife this morning that, it seems like I've done more in my life so far than I'm aware of.

MIJA RIEDEL: How do you mean?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I—just looking back when you were asking questions about my past and stuff, I don't think about that much—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —anymore. And, in retrospect, looking back on it, it's like it was pretty—it's been pretty full.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I thought it was much simpler than that, and much—not that it hasn't been a rich life, but—I've never been one to draw a lot of attention to myself, like consciously. So, looking back, it's been refreshing, so, thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, thank you.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Other than that just—like you'd mentioned last night, earlier—or about the second day talking, and feeling more comfortable about what to say and how to say it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Normally, I tend to edit, I think, to—not that I'm—"PC" is my, you know, my forerunning concern in life, but I try and be respectful and not hurt anyone's feelings.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But, in this case there's no need to.

MIJA RIEDEL: What we're hoping for are your candid thoughts and memories of your experience—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —Hopefully all these interviews, especially [in relation –MR] to Viola, built together, will give us a much more complete understanding of her work, and career, and character. So, nothing came to you in terms of a new thought, or a new perspective, or—now I'll approach it from a slightly different angle today?

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's—yeah that's just it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Nothing that's going to be profound or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —newsworthy.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Well, we'll see. It's early yet. [Laughs.] I had a couple follow-up questions that occurred to me this morning. I just wanted a couple of specifics. When I spoke with Rena, she talked about introducing Viola to Patterson Sims—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and you talked about how instrumental Rena was to Viola's career, what a difference her arrival in Viola's life seemed to make to getting her work out there. Do you have a recollection of Rena introducing Viola to Patterson? Or Patterson coming into Viola's life after meeting Rena?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, I was there when he first came to her home and studio, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Rena talked about [a trip –MR] she and Viola took back east, and sending [Viola and Patterson –MR] on a train to New York together, coming up with a reason that she couldn't go so they would have a chance to chat.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh. That was very wise of her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I remember Rena being extremely—not cautious, she was just so patient with Viola—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and she seemed to intuitively know how to handle her and what would be the best way for her. So, she was protective of her in a very dignified way. Uncontrolling, completely uncontrolling, but she—you could tell she really cared about doing the right thing by this artist and by this person. And she did, every step of the way I saw.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, she didn't press her to make a certain line of work. She didn't press her to accept an offer from another gallery in New York right away. She was very patient and she—sized people up and, as far as what would be the best fit for Viola.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I think one of the great—it's very unusual I think for a dealer in that it wasn't about Rena. And it was—she was so sincere in her dealings with Viola—I know, I'm sure Viola used to frustrate the hell out of her sometimes about certain things.

But, Rena was extremely generous and paid for all kinds of promotional shippings and before she even considered sales from Viola's work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she always wanted them to go to the right collections and the right collectors and—she was just—I don't know, she was a—really unusual, because you don't hear that. You usually hear artists complaining and in some form about their dealer, or being stressed by the dealer, or being pressured to make certain lines of work or—but that never came. I never saw a sign of that. Viola was—in that arrangement had carte blanche to, of course make and do whatever she wanted, and Rena picked it up with her and went above and beyond many times.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I especially remember her being very patient, very thoughtful, very generous, but also very caring about Viola—the bigger picture of Viola's life. You know, and I knew Rena was fascinated by her, and intrigued by her because she told me once—she said that it was so interesting to look back when she was younger and to see how different her and Viola's lives where—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and that they connected over this medium and was really—it was really good for her too. She was really—but—and Viola was the superstar of her gallery. So, conversely it opened up other things for Rena in her gallery, but I always thought it was a rare thing she was in it—you could tell Rena was in it for all the right reasons. And that's unusual.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, I'm sure her independence helped all that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and of course having her daughter Trish and Calvert working for so long for her.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean another couple of angels who—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, it was—it seemed like a really good fit.

MIJA RIEDEL: We didn't talk at all, yesterday [. . . –MR] about Viola's plates, or the bronzes. I wanted to touch on those today. Maybe starting with the plates. I think Viola, herself, said they enabled her to deal with a mixture of two and three-D, in the round. They got increasingly deep and—I can't think of the word I'm looking for right now. But, increasingly three-dimensional, over time—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: [… -MR] Garth Clark suggested that the plates were a way that she worked with mass—let me read this exact quote: "Volume just appeared in the junk pieces, volume retreats before mass, and as mass increases, volume diminishes in most of the work." He says that, "Volume has gone to her paintings, and the plates were the bridge." Does that resonate with you? Does that sound accurate, or would you put it another way? How would you describe her plates in relation to the rest of her work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's—that makes sense to me. I would certainly buy it as a reader but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —I always thought the bottom line, Viola just did them because they were flipping fun for her to make.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And there was – it might echo back to her early years, and she could do them in multiples—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —so she worked fluidly if we had 10 or a dozen going in molds.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She worked hard on them but they were also—I know, quite fun. She got a real delight over them, but they were bridging the gap between the painting and the sculpture in a sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She, of course she talked about seeing them as little round convex canvases.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: The earlier ones, I—the *Mystery Man* Series, and then the additions she did for Crocker for her retrospective—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —was a funny story about those plates. They had an intern—a volunteer installing her plate collection, and there was, I don't know, 50, 60, 70-something plates. And they had one huge wall, and this [Laughs.] kind elderly gentleman spent the whole week hanging these plates, and he would measure each one and try and hang it so that they looked spatially balanced. And, when we got there, he was getting towards the end, and he was off on the last three plates, and it just about threw him so he had to—Viola kindly went up to him, "That looks so good, thank you so much." We thought he was going to have a stroke—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughter.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —because he worked so hard and so careful on it, but they looked magnificent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean that whole wall—I don't know if you have seen an old photographs of that, but you walk into the second floor in the earlier Crocker and it was—oh my God, it was—you know, they looked like little moons, little colored moons everywhere. But the plates, yes, they were—she saw them as paintings, and then again she saw the—the line did get blurred in a wonderful way because she was using some other elements in them later. Well, started off with stencils and brush, and then it went to some of the molds and even some thick-lined Egyptian paste she would make, which would melt and fuse onto it. She would roll out long lines of this paste and use them as, literally, as drawn lines.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, there was physicality. It was mass and volume questions, and dichotomies there. And the later ones, yeah—the animated ones, where she was taking molds and recreating the dog's face or a still life. They got very pronounced.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Technically, was she firing everything in gas kilns to the same temperature as electric kilns? Were the plates the same process as the figures, same process as the junk pieces?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Junk pieces, early junk pieces, there were summers that she did at the college.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So we fired all the kilns—I fired all the kilns in the summers, they were gas kilns—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and then she had electric kilns at home.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And expanded when she moved her studio down to Eighth Street [ph] to larger electric kilns with whole series with hydraulic hoists and rolling kiln floors and – anything to try and get some of the stress off of me and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —make her work more fluid, because I knew that there was a finite time that I could have—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —physically kept working. That was one of the reasons why we had—I had to move on, not only because I wanted to be an artist, and she knew that, but there was no real future in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, I felt complete and accomplished because she had—was just coming out in a big way from hiding out and working, keeping everything for nine years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it was a nice transition for her to go into her next phase to—but I was really pleased to be able to help her in that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what—how—were they all relatively low fire?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: All of them?

NEIL WILLIAMS: All—yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where they all fired multiple times?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Most of them, yeah, because she got to a point—there was some re-fires, but she got to a point where she could usually get it in an initial bisque, which had a white wash glaze on it, with a block pattern of some colors, and then a follow-up second attack of colors. So usually we got them in two.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fire?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And they're commercial glazes?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. So, she had a full palette of color to work with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Interesting—

NEIL WILLIAMS: And they were brushable and they—to her, they acted like paints.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Although they were pastel until fired, there's a certain projection you had to do and prediction. But there was also part of the delight for her too because she—the magic she always felt about seeing things coming out of the kiln for the first time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Like, "Oh, what a beautiful red" and she would layer colors like she would painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the delight, again, back to the plates and the delight of the plates , no matter what the historians need to say about them, there was a bottom line, just pure delight in making them, just like it was pulling things out of the kiln for the first time. She said, "I never—as long as on Christmas or Thanksgiving, I have a kiln to open and look at" that's what she did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That's interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, she sacrificed a lot to be able to do her work but—so—

MIJA RIEDEL: One other quick question, unless you had a follow up thought?

NEIL WILLIAMS: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: The bronzes—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Ah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and the evolution of the bronzes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I didn't really see much of an evolution of bronzes there—she—

MIJA RIEDEL: They started in the early '80's, yeah? How did they—well, the arrival of the bronzes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: My take on it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There was a casting—it was up in Walla Walla, Washington, the Foundry of Mark Anderson, I believe was the name of the—was casting Manuel's bronzes—Manuel Neri's bronzes, and I think even Bob Arneson did some bronzes. So Viola was starting to get some income and looking for something to do with her money and—another funny story here—and she wanted to cast—she cast some little things in bronze. I think it was a hand with a carrot mold piece, and then she wanted to do a whole figure in bronze, and paint it in alkyd oils and it just—for—it sat and she painted it for a while, and it was outdoors. It just didn't really go anywhere. It was one of the grandmother figures—I didn't think it – it's not like followed up and said, "Alright. Bronze, bronze, bronze."

She still was immediately drawn back to building things in clay, and painting, and doing the pastels, and junk pieces. But the bronzes, when I was there, I—two things—I kind of thought they were more of a reaction, her competitive spirit: "I'm going to do bronzes too." And, a way to maybe find an area that she could put some—reinvest some of her sales into.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I didn't—certainly didn't feel the thrill of them that she felt for her other work. I didn't feel her thrill—she was feeling that thrill about them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I remember when it showed up, it was all bright and it was a metal bronze thing and – I mean, they were okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I didn't think she got that excited about them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, I don't know how—where they, after I left, whether they were pursued and that's the—but I can only assume that they didn't take off like—

MIJA RIEDEL: They were more of an experiment with a new material [. . . –MR] and scale.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah. And I also remember something funny about the Thomas Albright. She was in NCECA. There's a quote, a little funny quote. She was at NCECA, and Thomas Albright and some other artists were teasing her about, "Come on Viola, let's go do—" because she knew how—they knew how naive or how inhibited she was, and how awkward she was socially sometimes. And they were, "Come on Viola, let's go do some," you know, "let's go do some drugs or something on this break and go back to talk" and she had a huff, "I'm going to go blow all my money on bronzes and sandwiches."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: "I don't need drugs."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: In fact she talked about when she was young and smoking all the time, she would have to stop and smoke and stop and she realized, "Oh my god." She added up the time one day she spend doing that rather than the action of painting or drawing, and she said, "That's enough, I'm not smoking anymore." And did it, stopped smoking. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is an interesting detail.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. I think color, clay, and donuts were her thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Her ally and her nemesis.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Would you add Charles to that list?

NEIL WILLIAMS: And Charles.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You said something yesterday that I want to go back and revisit briefly. You [said –MR] Viola talked in fragments, and it seems almost thought in fragments, and that you also, in working with her, were able to do that and would finish, almost finish, each other's sentences. Do you have anything more to say about that? I think that's actually an interesting [aspect of –MR] a working relationship.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I don't—I never worked so hard—I mean, I never tried to figure it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it was something that seemed natural, and I felt comfortable just to finish her sentences, or, if I knew what she was about and she got hung up on a—or if she—because she would ask, "What do you think?" You know, "What do you think?" So, she was inviting, you know, "Do you like that? Or should I change that?" She was just using me as a sounding board, of course, a fresh, young eye, whatever it was. And ultimately, she would do what she was going to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She would decide. But she—especially if she was tired or nervous, she would jump around and, you'd never know what would come out of her mouth. And she would start in on a certain story or a certain thing, and then it would jump to something else, and I would be able to—because we had work to do. [Laughs.] You know, it was like, "Viola, okay, let me take care of this now," and I knew she would be thinking about something else, and I would say, "Let's do this first and I'll – we'll address that after coffee or lunch and I can take care of that then," or I would ask her, "What do you think about this?" And it would help to get her back to—because she was so—I mean, whatever they were, nuclear hormones, or whatever they were, she was so full of exuberance and energy at that time, and there was a lot happening for her. And she had—of course, she said "ideas are 10 years ahead of execution sometimes," and she—was jumping ahead, and then jumping back and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —you know. Two steps up, one step back, three steps sideways. And, not that she wasn't focused and she couldn't focus and obviously get a lot accomplished—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but she would sometimes talk, and start a sentence or a thought and it would drop. And I would know, for some reason, what she was talking about and then I would pick it up. Or, that's what I mean about—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —you know, completing sentences back and forth. But then it was interesting because it became contagious. I started doing it around her after a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, it's just like, when I was taking care of my grandmother, and she had Alzheimer's, and we would go out to lunch and visit and talk. And, I would get up and I would go out and leave my keys sitting on the table, that kind of stuff. So there was a certain contagiousness about—you know, you're around with someone, I don't know if the molecules meld or morph or whatever they do, but there's some transference going

on there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Good and bad and indifferent, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Moving on to your career, was Viola encouraging about your career? About your work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: She was very good about directing what – the good work from the bad work, and what had longer running time, and more interest, I think, in the long run as far as what would stay engaging for me. And, she liked the vessel too, so she stayed. She didn't encourage me to stop and nix it and do something else and—but very encouraging and learned a lot about keeping the work alive and interesting—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and a part of which was making mistakes—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —accepting those mistakes, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, you graduated with a BFA in '81, and I can't tell from the CV if it's ceramics or a general craft—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Both.

MIJA RIEDEL: Both. Okay. So, it was a double major.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And then did you go on for masters work as well?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, here's what happened.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I was—Viola was just coming out of—Viola was getting very pressed to get work out and around and she really needed help and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Busy time for her.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —there wasn't anyone else near her that I saw or, I don't think that Charles saw, that could jump in there and—first of all figure her out, what she wanted—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and what she needed, and how to help maximize her output safely, and still maintain their own sense and wits about them compounded by the extreme physical demands.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I stuck with it. I was going to go to graduate school and she said, "Well, you can work for me." And, of course, she'd make deals, you know, "I'll pay you so much a month whether you work or not." And then she would reneg on them, and then she would make them again, and then she would—depending on how nervous she was about sales or what else was going on and—I think she felt that it was one of those things she didn't want to lock herself into. I don't know, like, as far as, "Oh, my gosh, I'm going to be on a schedule now, then, and I have to maintain this." And then she would—I don't know if she really wanted the responsibility of anyone else.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But at the same time, she certainly relied on and—I know she appreciated my help.

MIJA RIEDEL: So [. . . –MR] when you finished your BFA, did you work there five days a week? Three days a week?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Whatever it took.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So varied.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Go there all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then I would work—try and work on my own or have energy to do my own work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she was very encouraging, but she—her quip was "Eventually, you can go back and get your masters, and I can send you anywhere in the country for graduate school on my recommendation." But, the other rub about that was my—it's not a rub, it was a good thing. My work was being shown and sold through Dorothy Weiss at the same time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And Rena was being very encouraging too, so I thought, "Okay, I'll just go with it for a while."

MIJA RIEDEL: I actually had a question about that, too. I thought, from your C.V. that you had a couple solo shows with Dorothy in—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —'83 and '85.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so that's accurate.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I thought you had said otherwise yesterday, but okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Well, and then after that, there was a couple other shows in Sacramento and then—but not—I need to update that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. At Elliot Fouts?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Fouts—

MIJA RIEDEL: Fouts. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but in between there was just a—I just—I was never motivated to pursue the solo shows. I don't know why. I always thought, "Well, if somebody likes my work enough and wants to—it's a nice fit, then I'll go with it." But I was happy. There were people helping along the line. I mean, Betty Asher was wonderful, of course, the matriarch of west coast art, and Rena kept an eye on me and was always very generous and very helpful, especially if I needed to reach out and, "Rena, I have a few new pieces I would like to be able to get some more materials," and she would buy them and resell them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, it wasn't even consignment? She would buy them outright.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extremely unusual, I think.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Very generous.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Extremely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. But that's why—

MIJA RIEDEL: [. . . –MR] When I talked to [Rena –MR], she said she would often—if she felt that that was important to an artist—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] She did.

MIJA RIEDEL: —buy a piece or two.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well Stephane Janssen did the same thing, too for—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, there are a few out there. They're one in a million, in the arts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Since we're talking about Rena and Dorothy Weiss, why don't we answer these questions about exhibitions, and your relationships with dealers over the years? The good, the bad, and the ugly. [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I haven't had a lot of ugly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, I've been really lucky.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But there's different—certainly different levels of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: There are some that are out to try—just to try and survive in the creative field like artists are.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, with limited resources and they might be in it for the right reasons, but there's only so much they're able to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's galleries that are rare and unique and have majesty to them. Like, certainly Betty Asher—Asher Faure and then in L.A, and then Rena.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And those are the ones that were—just those golden experiences because they were—they completed the circle of experience for an artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Otherwise we're isolated, lonely, horrific souls—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but they were so – always nervous about public aspect of it, if you're—I think an artist individual, and you're not really prone to drawing attention to yourself. But those two especially made me feel very comfortable—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and very appreciated, and it really helped to validate that I was on the right track with my work. Dorothy Weiss was very generous, she gave me my first show and she was wonderful. She would sell what I gave her—everything I gave her and she would pay on time. There was no issue there, and she—was a very good person, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: She had a wonderful reputation. She showed great work.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, I always—I mean, she was brave. She tried to fill an area that nobody else was filling, and she did it well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Other dealers were okay to deal with. I—some of them you don't even meet.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you did many, many group shows [. . . –MR], cup or teapot shows—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —When I look at the list of different galleries you've been affiliated with over 20 or 30 years, there are many galleries, [that included your work –MR] in a group show here or a group show there.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, lots of that.

Mija Williams: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There was—some of the—backing up—some of the good about the galleries, when something would sell through certain galleries, like Betty Asher or Rena, they would tell you who it sold to and—but Dorothy, I think at the time, Weiss was being a little insecure, so she wouldn't tell me for the longest time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she started to eventually, but she thought, "Oh my gosh, they're going to go around me and sell," and so it was ironic because, 20-something years later, I would meet somebody like Sandy Besser in Santa Fe, who donated the work to the de Young Museum, or someone would say, " Oh gosh, I've been buying your work for 26 years." Well, it's like, "Nobody told me. Thanks for the heads up." But no, it was worth it. Dorothy was wonderful. She was very active, and I really was grateful for what she did for me. Arlene LewAllen in Santa Fe was just a brief little group show through Stephan [ph] that was a memorial show to Michael Johns, after Michael passed. And Ralph Bacerra was there because he was Michael's instructor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And Arlene LewAllen was the best. She was just fantastic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why so?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because she was—she sold like crazy, and everyone liked her. She was really comfortable and fun to be around. She was like one of us. She wasn't—she was really good but she wasn't like a gallery dealer—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —she was very different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then she unfortunately passed away pretty young, years ago. But, the LewAllen gallery is still very successful in Santa Fe and Scottsdale and. So, some of the other galleries were—I mean, they were okay to deal with. I—at a certain point, I just accepted the fact that I am going to have to do that accept of it all, in order to survive. And if someone else wanted to pick up and—at their end, and if they wanted 50 percent of

what I do, then they, it would have to be right. So, I have just been surviving since on some commercial production line, and however else and whatever else—some teaching and whatever else I need to do in order to make—keep making the work. So, I don't really think about, like, proper gallery representation or anything like that anymore. And it doesn't bother me. That's why I haven't had the solo shows in so long.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It just doesn't—I mean, it's not a priority. I mean, it would have been great, but it's not important to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Is there any relationship between your production work and your one-of-a-kind pieces?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Certainly the color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Approaching them as a painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Seems that you work has, over decades, been about theme and variation, and always with a focus on color and form—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —and, in particular, it seems the vase form, the teapot form, and the cup have been almost canvases that you have worked—you've constructed and deconstructed over decades. Does that feel accurate to you, and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —if not, how would you characterize it?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes, because I could play with—I could give a point of context or departure, so that no matter what you did, you cut it apart, put it back together, paint it bright colors, take it to any culture, theoretically they would have a common understanding, "Oh, that's a vase, a teapot, a cup and saucer."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, there is a—there was comfort in the image—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —as a grounding or point of departure, of context. And at the same time there was—I think my ability to work on any scale fluidly helped to reinforce—I mean, not that they're comfortable, they're work. But, it was an area that I just felt I was strong in.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it—we talked about it—the *élan vital*, the vital energy—I was getting that back from the pieces. And I remember the first few years I was saying, "All right, I just want them to seem alive and interesting. To have a certain energy." And, I'm still stuck in that, that mode. I want them to have energy, maybe a little figure reference, maybe some structural reference. And the exploration of the color and volume and color expansion over a soft curvilinear form.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. They're nothing if not curvilinear. [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I try and keep them—well the first few years they were a straight line, and—but I try and keep them recognizable. But at the same time, I try and push it a little bit each time so that they—I mean, I'm going to obliterate the image completely but, like I said, it has to stay alive and interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I heard, 40 years ago, so you got to find something to do in life that you're not going to get bored with. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Where did you hear that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I can't remember if Viola said it or it was said at a lecture. Somewhere at the first day of Arts and Crafts, or the first week of Arts and Crafts. And they said, "Ah, I've decided I'm going to be a painter." That was their—that's how they're going to keep from getting bored—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —for the rest of their life. Because once boredom sets in, or once you, you know, you talk—you see so many artists or crafts people who go one automatic pilot, and the work loses its' soul, and it shows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I never wanted to get to that point. I mean, I've had some struggles having to do some production works sometimes, like on multiples but—

MIJA RIEDEL: The two pieces that were sitting here yesterday, they're recent? 2013, 2014 or something like that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: The degree to which the cup and the teapot were deconstructed in the life and the energy, the sheer sort of whirling dervish quality they had was extraordinary.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It took me a while to—some of the little feather—not to sound cliché or simplistic—some of the little feathering on them, I realized came from growing up around here, with all the amazing bird life I see.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean it's spectacular. Pheasants, and, hawks, and turkeys, and eagles, and owls, and – hummingbirds, and all kinds of varieties of birds. Auburn in a bird sanctuary, after all. But they—I mean, be able to sit out here in the evenings and occasionally see a peregrine falcon fly by at 150 miles an hour or an eagle. It's just—some of the feathering and some of the movement, I think, comes from that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And hopefully it works on a couple other levels, too. But not to be too simplistic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it's evolved slowly. I've stuck with a theme for a long time. Like I said, it took five years to get the frontal side to look reasonably composed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Another five years, the back. And I've spent the last 25 years on the intermediate side, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's—I don't know if I'm stubborn or fool hearty or whatever it is, but it's staying alive and interesting to me—or for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: What is it that has kept your interest for so long?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I don't know. Fear of failure. I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] I don't know. It—fear of boredom. No, it's really like, how do we celebrate our lives? And, like with Viola, it was color and form and the figure—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and attempting to tell stories.

MIJA RIEDEL: There is something about the vessel form that is so rich because it goes back and forth between figurative and abstract as well, interior and exterior—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I spend the time trying to figure that out and try to apply the whole psychotherapy aspect of it but—and I realized that it was—it became somewhat redundant to try and figure it out. It was very liberating accepting that putting myself into a period or a point that it's, like good art should ask more questions than it answers.

MIJA RIEDEL: There are a couple of columns, vase columns that we looked at that were, what, 12 feet tall—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —from the late '90's. They felt, they seemed like a variation, quite a variation from—were they a commission or where they—

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, they were not commissions. Not—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —I try not to do commissions.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Artists always get into trouble or lose out on them unless they're special.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. We'll talk about that later—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I had been doing pairs of columns since, actually at Arts and Crafts—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —since '80.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: In fact, one of the earlier pairs, they were showing—Dorothy Weiss had shown—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and she got them in there. And they're the pair—one of the pairs of several that she gave to the Smithsonian.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So they're in the—they're already in the collection there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I wish I never knew, we were just—Cheri was just perusing the thing, the inventory, and she said, "Do you know you're in the Smithsonian collection?" I don't know if through the Renwick or whatever it—I said, "You're kidding? I had no idea." She said, "Yes, you're in box number so-and-so and so-and-so and crate number so-and-so and so." I said, "You're kidding me." "No." And then it came up and I said, "Oh, those are from Dorothy."

MIJA RIEDEL: Dorothy. Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the same thing happened with the Oakland Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: They feel very different than the other pieces because the ones I've seen are not deconstructed at all, and, the palette was quite different too. They almost had more of a—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —Pueblo feeling to them.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. They were work, but it was the idea of making a column that was—had a little figurative feel to it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and a pair because of, you know, the connotations of pairing, and hopefully the intimacy that—and the negative shape between the two was really important.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, there was a friend who had gotten several pairs and she called them "The Keys of Life," and my concept was in the painted—the straight line painted ones—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —which you have a photo of. The idea that whatever ailed you one side, if you were to pass through there in thought—in a way, on the other side, you would come out refreshed and rejuvenated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So there is a key, there is a keyhole shape between them, especially in the black that was real important. So, again, I think they were in the column reference to give a point of context so they weren't just completely, purely abstracted non-objective shapes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they were always done in pairs—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and intended to be a kind of threshold?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And all relatively close to 12 feet tall or varying heights?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Varying heights. I did some children size—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —some teenagers and some adults.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's great.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Children and adults.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So, what's the scale on these, roughly, from what to what?

NEIL WILLIAMS: From that to that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. That's helpful. So, two and half feet tall, perhaps.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Two to six.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. And, also, I've spent a lot of time, a long time doing plates.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, cut and carved, three feet or so in diameter.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was the proverbial eye image—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —on the inside.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —and again, those, I think, come from—well, who knows where they come from.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who or what would you describe as the significant influences on your work? Other than Viola, of course.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, first, my high school art teacher, Mario [Ferrante].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Certainly, getting to art school and studying art history and going to galleries and museums and seeing the incredible—what had come—had already come—

MIJA RIEDEL: What was significant about Mario? And then we'll move onto the other.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Completely positive, radiant. He had a really good background from—in painting. An amazing colorist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Spent some time even with Thiebaud on some workshops. Just a brilliant guy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And completely supportive, 110 percent. And had a really good eye, and was able to—even though it was a high school setting, talk and articulate advanced concepts of composition, color, and imagery.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, great foundations.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, some of the people who have come out of that program are—it's just silly. I mean, Jason Rhoades came out of that, another really important artist that you should look into.

MIJA RIEDEL: All right. We talked about him a little yesterday.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And many, many of them, some really talented people came out of that program. And then, their influence, because Viola, and being around her, looking at art history, falling in love with everyone from Kandinsky to Gorky to Rothko.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Even Velazquez and all of those amazing—Vermeer and all those incredible painters.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can really see Gorky, in particular. That [sense of –MR] abstraction that really feels like your work.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. I've always had a fondness for him.

MIJA RIEDEL: You mentioned Kandinsky, and because of the conversation we had, I can't help but wonder if you think about your work in any kind of spiritual context, or if spirituality has any effect on the work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's something I—I mean, not intentionally.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I think it goes back to, is it a fuel for life or not? For continued life, and exploration, and questioning, and celebration. That's where I see more of those things—spirituality is—if it's—you know, makes any contribution, if somebody sees it, and they get a charge out of it, or if they see it and it stimulates something in them, spiritually, or in thoughts, or physically, which color and form can do, then it can have a profound—like Charles Fiske would say, "Profound physiological effect on a person."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's mind and body. If my work can do that, that's all I could hope for. Doesn't aspire to be spiritually didactic or spiritually motivated, but all I can say is it fills the bill for me on occasion. And it's like, Wayne Thiebaud said, in one of his great lectures, he says, "All right, it's never going to turn out like you pictured, and you're never going to be completely satisfied. But if you can accept that and put yourself in a real healthy working space, you can do some good work, you can make some nice stuff." And that made sense to me. It's all pretty simple. It's like Ken Ferguson at Kansas City Art Institute was talking about—one of his lectures was—he said, "I always encourage my students to find your"—I'm paraphrasing – "find your level of skill, go to that level of skill, and then back off about 10 percent, and work in that area because you get the maximum amount in a healthy space without imploding," so to speak.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And that makes sense to me, too. And you see so many wonderful amazing artists, like my friend Jason Rhoades trying to—he would always come back from—off doing an instillation in some major museum in the world, and he would come back to Auburn for, I think to get grounded again, but always pushing the envelope.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Way, way far, pushing the envelope. And those kinds of things, if you want to live a long time and look back at 80 about a lifetime and body of work, it's just different. You're going to pace yourself or do you want to give it all at once?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's choices. But the spiritual part of it—I don't really—

MIJA RIEDEL: Just the description of the columns as keyholes or thresholds.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh. Oh, that. Yeah. Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.] That.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah. So, that could be—a metaphor for such. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's if—so if they weren't just a pair of banal—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —things standing there with some splashes of color on them. Yeah, hopefully—I mean, we all hope that our lives and our efforts mean something a little bit more, but not to the point where we get—that they're debilitating to us, that we get obsessed with trying to say something and then not being able to say it, because we're obsessed with trying to say something. So there's a certain—also, which clay, I think, brings about—there's a certain naturalness, and there's a certain human quality that it's a natural conductor for. A certain honesty and sincerity that it demands. And, then the whole time thing. It's like Noguchi would say, "It's an interesting phenomenon. It could work with you or you could work against it. Take your pick."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And in that great quote, he said he would start out carving on stone in the morning, and he would look up, and if he got into that zone, you know 14, 16 hours had gone by, and he wasn't thirsty, he wasn't hungry, he wasn't tired. So, if that gets into a spiritual phenomenon, then that makes sense to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you ever have that kind of experience?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yes. I like working hard. I love the feeling at the end of a day. Was it Peter Voulkos' mom who kept telling him, "Just work hard and you'll be fine. Whatever you do, just work hard. You'll have a good life."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I like that feeling of accomplishment at the end of the day, of exhaustion that you've given, and you've been able to—especially working with clay, you manifest something out of nothing but a ball of mud. And Squeak said it really well, too. She said, "You know, it's all about the magic that happens in the studio, and everything else is secondary, and either manageable or tolerable."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then Viola would say, "The hardest part is the first hour in the studio, getting there and getting it generated, and warming up and getting to work. That's the hardest part."

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it's an intoxicant, like we had talked about it. Duchamp was right, it can be a drug for a lot of people throughout history. But thank God it is. Cultures, it's cultural identity and it's human history. So, thank God somebody is trying to document it all. Otherwise we would have—what would we have? Nothing. It's like Viola would say, "Look down the street, it's just if you took away all the trees there would be no harmony."

[Laughs.] She'd say these little naive little—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —"there would just be nothing." I would say, "Yeah, all right Viola. We're in Oakland, there is no there there without those trees." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's right, and particularly in Oakland. Have your sources of inspiration changed over time—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —or have they stayed fairly constant? Okay. How have they changed?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I'm more inspired by just knowing that what I'm doing is right and okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And there's not the stress of having to try and figure it out, or trying to push in an area that "Oh my gosh, I'm not going to survive unless I go after this." Or I go—there's a certain health and comfort and a revitalization of my energy knowing that—I'm doing the right thing for myself and my work and everything's going to okay, as long as I don't stress too much about it. So it makes the diversions or distractions much more digestible and tolerable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it makes the—there's a certain way it – it makes the work cleaner in a way. The approach to it or the action of it, there's a cleaner feel to it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not the work, especially like itself, but the—there's not a lot of angst anymore in making the work. And I hope it doesn't lose its edge because of that, but I mean, it could—always seek something out, some kind of—bring up the saboteur again, and get it edgy and screw up some things, and—but—so the inspiration, I think, has not so much been external, but it's getting to be more of an internal, peaceful feeling about my life and it's making more sense. In that way. And the tragedies are—we all have tragedies. But the tragedies that—they're not—I don't feel the PTSD that I used to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Let's put it that way. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I mean, we all have them but, multiple death, suicides, whatever. Finding your best friend paralyzed for life now in his room. Your childhood friend, finding him face down in his living room. I'm part-time caregiver to him now. He's still an amazing guy, same sense of humor. Those kinds of things you want to—you know—who do you turn to say, "This is not fair." He didn't deserve it. Mothers with Alzheimer's and his grandmothers with Alzheimer's. Who do you complain to?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You don't. It's just, you say, "All right, let's make it workable or manageable," and you find those small golden moments in the course of a day or an experience with someone that—it's like my brother, one of my brothers was a real talented guy. But he says, "Find that one small thing to look forward to every day." If it's a good meal, if it's seeing a friend you haven't seen in a while, if it's pulling something out of the kiln with bright colors on it, if it's grabbing a brush and painting something. It's that small thing, and it helps the larger things mollify and—there have been a lot of large things. You know, you lose a house, you lose a dear friend young, multiple friends young, unexpectedly. You part with friendships of 30 years because there's no other options, whatever.

There's a lot of different—so I think the big influence and motivation, inspiration, is feeling my life being simpler, and the work being, like I said, cleaner in a way. And I hope it doesn't lose any edge it may have. And I also think it's getting better and better, little small, like I said it's been five years. I'm just stubborn, I just get on, I just get on a bone. And Viola was the same way. I mean, you get on it, and you know it's right, and it's not satisfying like Thiebaud said, but you're still pushing on it and chewing on it. And eventually, one day, you look back and it's like, "Wow, okay, there's an improvement there," and it's getting closer to the feeling like, "Oh my God," sometimes, which is nice although fleeting. It's like, "Wow, I can't believe I made that."

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, they have – personally, I have—you know there's an empowering thing there and hopefully if they ask some questions, or if they challenge the viewer, or—I remember, what was it, Elmer Bishchoff Studio once with Lee Fatherree for the photographing, and it was in his later years. And Elmer was a fantastic painter but he—it was real interesting because I was really young and didn't know a lot, but I knew he was an important painter, professor at U.C. Berkeley, and I knew his figure work from around the Diebenkorn years and all.

And we sat with him—because Lee forgot some equipment, had to run off. So we sat for a moment, and it was like, I didn't know what to say, and then he just looked at me and—he was very peaceful man. I noticed he was very accomplished and peaceful. Just like, "I'm in my studio and life is good." And I was talking about being young and feeling the pressure of having to—my work should say something more politically and socially significant and I was a little frustrated by that. He just looked at me and said, "I don't know." He said, "Cezanne's apples on the table have always done that for me."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And it's like, and I never forgot that. It's like, "Ah, okay."

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NEIL WILLIAMS: And there also reached the point where Lee was saying, "You know, Elmer, these new paintings are—as long as Elmer loves them." And ultimately, that's what Violet had touched on earlier. She said, "You got to be making things you love to look at. You got to be making work you love to look at because—and surround yourself with because you may have to." You may have to keep them.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, in other words, you got to be making things you want to keep.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And the great irony of that and the torment can be for so many artists—I mean, look in human history, or art history, how it's driven them off the deep end. You have to be in complete embrace with it. You have to give it all, and then you have to immediately let go of it. There's a great one. Mario Ferrante spent time on a one-summer workshop with Wayne Thiebaud up in Lake Tahoe. He relates a really great story that exemplifies this. He was up there. He was like the only painter from an art background. Everyone else was these little old ladies, still life flower painters who wanted to just take this little workshop with this painter, and he said Thiebaud had worked him to death. He said it was so bad.

He was giving assignments to these little ladies. He says—it was so bad, Mario was literally in his tent with a flashlight on his head so he could draw in the middle of the night to finish these assignments. Come to the final critique, he made these little old ladies pick their best work out, frame it, present it like it's a museum quality show. He went through and he critiqued everything and he said, "Now, tear it up." He said they were crying and hanging on each other and weeping. And he said, "The point was I want you to realize you have already grown beyond this point. You do not stay attached to it." So that's what—you know, you stay in complete embrace with it, you make something, paint something, you spill your soul to it, whatever it takes, and then you have to let go.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because you want to take that experience into the next one, and you don't want to be hung up by it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And I thought that that was a great example of what could drive an artist to greatness and to madness.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But he said it was great.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: He thought it was beautiful, the little old ladies hanging up. And it changed their lives.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet it did.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It changed their lives, and they probably still talked about it and thought about that every time they picked up a brush.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, it was a great testament to what an amazing educator Thiebaud was, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've taught at many different places over many different years. What is important to you to try and bring to the classes or workshops that you teach?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I always—certainly positive energy. And I never thought of myself as a teacher, as more of a vehicle. The whole idea of teaching is pretty didactic, I think, and like Charles used to say, "Nothing can be taught. The burden lies on the student to learn." And so I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you agree with that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I do. I always thought it was a resource, but I—had a lot of private students. There was a group of wonderful retired professional ladies from all kinds of backgrounds, educated ladies, and they asked me—they were all doing ceramics. It was maybe a dozen or 15 of them. And I had a larger studio, and they said, "Do you do any workshops?" I said, "Okay, I'll do one." Do a four-week summer workshop. So they all came, and at the end of four weeks, they said, "Do you mind continuing"—well, they stayed for five years. Two times a week for five years, they were there every week. And it was great, because I kept having—finding things to talk about. And they were doing wonderful work, advanced work, even though they didn't have art backgrounds, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: All sculptural?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, such a variety, yeah, conceptual.

MIJA RIEDEL: No functional, though.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Some functional, sculptural.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So wheels? [. . . –MR].

NEIL WILLIAMS: Very little wheel.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Hand-built, but some great conceptual work, I mean just really enlightened, brilliant ladies. So it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: And what would you bring to those classes? Was there a syllabus of any sort?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not in those informal ones, but because I dealt with—I always try and deal with them as individuals. Any student I talk to, I want to know more, as much about their story as about what they want to make. That's really important to me. So, bringing positive energy and being a resource, because technically I know that in ceramics and ceramics history, I can, I mean, I can reproduce any piece I wanted to. I've got that level of skill, and it seems like I've always had it. But that wasn't my interest. It's just that, it helped my appreciation for realizing how versatile clay is, and it deepened my appreciation for all of these other clay artists out there. But in an education environment, I always tried to find out what their stories were, encouraged them to tell their story in some way, find images or experiences that were personal to them and share them. And clay was a great conductor, medium for that, because like I said, you touch it, it demands a certain sincerity and honesty to it. It's primordial, it's playful. It's all of these—

MIJA RIEDEL: Why do you say it demands sincerity and honesty?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It—maybe demands might be a little bit too critical. It naturally evokes those, because it's so hands-on, it's so tactile. You touch it, you've got a drawing without without a brush or without a pencil. You work with it, it's a direct immediate response to your energy, your strengths, your fingerprint. It's like another great thing I learned that I certainly borrowed from biology, talked about clay and mark making, and how making marks in clay, you're starting to develop your own vocabulary by doing that. And vocabulary and marks that are important to you, not necessarily another language, but things that you'll start repeating, and then there's the journey in finding out why they're important to you. So that's just one aspect of why clay is so responsive. And, it just seems different, and you're laboring away at a sculpture or a painting. There's a directness, a quickness to it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —a fluidity. There's a natural, I think, instinctive connection most people have with it. Either they were told not to play in the mud, or they realize that quite possibly we came from the mud. So, there's a – technically, it has its demands, which can be very frustrating. When you deal with Earth, fire and water in their most extreme elements or their most extreme ways, then, once you learn that, you can realize you can get clay to look like anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not to digress, but a quick question: when I look at your work, I'm shocked that it doesn't crack in the firing process.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Into pieces?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: That's because I'm not going to give up. I'm not going to crack. I almost have many times in life, but I'm not going to. There might be an analogy for that, that—

MIJA RIEDEL: But, I mean for the clay to hold those kind of curves and that kind of thinness. It's all low fire, yeah?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it a particular kind of clay body that you've—

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, I'm just—good at that.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's extraordinary.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And part of that also is that—I don't know if it's intentional, but I don't see a lot of knock-offs or copying, because, and it can't be molded. I constantly check occasionally for amusement, self-amusement. I'll run through the periodicals and check the magazines or check the books and see what everyone else is doing. And nobody's tried to—because they're such a royal pain in the ass to make.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I would imagine.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But, at the same time, I don't want to get hung up in technical virtuosity—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: —because it's kind of a sterile—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —place to be. But I like them. I like the challenges, and they don't fall apart because—again, art's about experience, and they're based on all of the many, many, many pieces that have fallen apart.

[They laugh.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, there's always – hopefully, it gives the work depth and some character, that it's not just a haphazard, it has some validity to it and it's based on pieces that haven't worked, which have been many, many, many. But technically, I like pushing that to the point where it just looks like it's ready to collapse.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's a certain—not that I want to take anybody's breath away—but there's a certain—when you're making it even, there's a certain gasp or a certain vibrancy I think there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Real architectural quality, too.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: They make me think of Gehry and that sense of flight, almost.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I like that connection. I do. That's what—it originally started out, as a straight-line structural approach, the color, being the volume, to expand or contract that form. Because you can literally erase or enhance a form with color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And so that's been an interesting dance throughout. I've tried to keep it simple so that I don't

implode or get too far out there, but I've also tried to keep it logical so that it has some progression, not to an endpoint, because we don't want to do that. You end up—why would we resolve it, tied all up in a neat little bow? There'd be no more reason or motivation to keep working. It's just like their studies. So many great artists have considered their work studies, the variations.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Themes and series.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And yours feels like that to you as well?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: It feels like that to me, too.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. There's no need to wrap it all up in a nice little bow and put it to bed just yet. I'm not dead yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I'm feeling much better, thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] I love that scene, "Bring out your dead." "But I'm not dead yet."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] "Yes, you are." "No, I'm not. I'm feeling much better."

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you see as the similarities and the differences between your earliest work and your current work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Similarities are consistent vessel and volume study. Similarities are—interior and exterior relations, balances, or unbalances. Similarities are—like when Charles would say, "I don't know how you artists do it. All this stuff can be going on around you in the world, and things falling apart or celebrating. You just go on doing what you're doing." So there's a certain similarity and consistency, and there's a certain comfort in that. Similarity in that it stays—I stay engaged with it, and I'm not losing interest.

Differences in early work to later to now is that it's gotten, I think, noticeably better, and it's improved in small steps, usually in five-year increments. And it'll jump up, a little bit. You know, every five-year period, the work, there's this little jump. There's a certain clarity that happens, or a certain subtle little discovery that seems to make a difference. Certainly the painting's gotten more confident on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's a certain knowingness, I think, about it now, that there wasn't before. There's—I've always had intention and the whole intent-content argument, how to evaluate, the one Garth Clark borrowed from Henry Moore on how to evaluate work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Intent, is it intention, materials, technique, tradition equals content. You know—is the intention of the artist clear in this piece? Is the material the most appropriate used to articulate that intent? Is there respect for it? Is there any tradition involved in bolstering the success of that intent? Is the proper technique used to exemplify that intent to its maximum effectiveness? And then the content would be the sum of the above. That's what—paraphrasing is probably not completely accurate, but that's what I got out of that. But he admitted he borrowed it from Henry Moore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So my intention, I've always had in my work, but there's a certain acceptance of it now, as frustrating as they can be to make. I know that they're getting good, and that's a great feeling. And not that they're paying off,in terms of popularity or sales or any of that stuff. I know they're getting good, you know, for

myself. And I've been really fortunate. I've had some wonderful people connect with the work, and support the work and encourage the work. And, like I said, the exposure and the whole role of gallery and public places, it completes the circle of experience for an artist.

Then they can be wonderful and enriching and motivational experiences, or they can be – make you want to crawl back into your studio and be left alone experiences [Laughs.]. So you got to be thick-skinned in the middle of all that. And you're taking criticisms, like the great Woody Allen quote about when he didn't show up to receive the Oscar for Annie Hall, and they found him outside of a club. He was playing music with some friends, and "How could you not show up to such a prestigious honor?" And he says, "Hey, I never believed them when they told me how bad I was. Why should I believe them when they told me how good I am?" So there's a—somewhere in there there's a healthy spot for an artist to be working in. You don't get too wrapped up in what the neighbors say or think.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And you also have to find a spot where you know what you're doing is right. Pretty simple. I mean there's—I never was—I've left all of the heavy softcore and hardcore conceptual work for the big boys and girls. [Laughs.] You know, they can do all of the mental masturbation or mental gymnastics on that one. And thank God we have critics and writers to fill in the gaps for us.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are there any critics or writers that have been significant to you, you've learned from or appreciated or—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, writers, you know, all kinds of writers, yeah. I don't do a lot of reading now, but—oh, yeah, a lot of writers. I remember, I used to read all kinds of stuff. We had to read everything from Van Gogh's letters to Theo to *Shōgun* to *Invisible Man* from Emerson [Ralph Ellison] to—I mean there was a wonderful poetry series that Michael McClure at Arts and Crafts sponsored one of the Beat Generation guys. And he would get some just fantastic readers to come in. And those were very inspirational.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Art critic writers, I don't know, they didn't really—they lose me after a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, because they're—we all perceive the same object differently, and you can put a stone in the center of a dozen people, like Native Americans talk about and they will all see that stone differently. And they will all attach different words to try and describe their experiences with that stone. And I always thought a good writer, just like a good painting or sculpture, should take you on a journey. They should pick you up and transport you elsewhere. And you should be changed by it.

I never liked work that just picked you up and left you there. Not that I needed to be satisfied from a good book or a good viewing of a painting or a sculpture. But it should have something more than just being a painting or a sculpture. And—writers, there are so many of them, there are so many good ones. Talking about Marquez and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Anybody particularly significant to the work?

NEIL WILLIAMS: I remember being young and reading the Tao and how that—and that was an East Indian prophet, Gibran, Kahlil Gibran, reading those kind of things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Then I ended up more so reading more recently in the last ten years, I don't know—fascinations with otherworldly things, unexplained things, unexplained phenomenons, UFOs or undiscovered species or missing people, missing time, interesting mysteries. I was reading one recently, *Missing 411*, and that's about all of the people who go missing in our national parks over the last 100 years, and how they vanish mysteriously, either never to be found or found and not recall what happened or—you know, from children to adults and—this writer was tipped off by a national park ranger anonymously, that, "You should look into this, because they keep it quiet." And you can keep records on it. But, certainly the FBI and everyone else keeps records on it, but they won't release the records of—the full records of why people disappeared, so many. Many around Yosemite, too, over the years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, those kinds of things, and mysteries, you know, I like mysteries. But not so much art books.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I like the visuals but I don't necessarily like reading art critics' takes on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I know you said you don't normally do commissions, and you don't like them, and there are multiple reasons for that, but you did do one in 1986 for the LA County Museum?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, they wanted a limited edition. They wanted a number of the—they saw the little cups and saucers that Betty Asher was showing, and they wanted to do a few dozen of those for some resale to raise funds to buy for their permanent collection.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I have no idea how it went.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Was that interesting for you in any way?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It was very flattering.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Interesting? Oh sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking about the difference between going to the studio to make your own work and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I've done a lot of work on the class—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but as far as, some of them—

MIJA RIEDEL: How does that affect the process? Does it bring—have their been unexpected—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Anxiety into the picture.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Is that what you're getting at?

MIJA RIEDEL: Actually, I wasn't getting at anxiety, I was getting at benefits, but I'd like the whole picture.

NEIL WILLIAMS: They bring a, "Oh my God, what have I done?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: "What am I doing?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sometimes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or a challenge, because it brings the work into a different perspective. You approach it from a different way than you might otherwise.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sure. D, all of the above.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It can.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It depends. Unless you have a collector or someone who is a friend that says, look—I mean, like Stéphane Janssen, what he did just floored me. You know, called out of the blue. He was opening a gallery, I love your work, I'd like to get some pieces. "How are you doing?" I said, "I'm sitting over here doing all this work I can't afford to finish right now." "Well here, let me send you something." And he Fed Exes a check for 10 grand overnight to me and scribbles on the back of the envelope, "Make me something beautiful when you get time." I mean those kinds of things for an artist who's struggling to make ends meet and/or to finish the series of work, those kinds of things are very profound. And smart, because you get the best out of an artist that way. If he would have called and said, "Where's my work, where's my work," he wouldn't have gotten the best out of an

artist that way. But he knew that. That's why he was able to amass such an amazing collection and important collection, and have such a profound impact in a positive way on so many artists. So—I mean, I remember him saying, they were talking about Basquiat, you know, buying his early works and telling those guys, "Just leave him alone, he's a good painter. You should just leave him alone, he's a good painter." But the pressure on those, I can't imagine some of them. I can't imagine what my friend, Jason Rhoades, was going through. I mean, the tremendous output he had. Every time I'd call or he'd call, I'd say, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going on the plane to go to Rio." And he said, "A museum down there wants an installation." Well, okay, call, "What are you doing?" "I'm sitting here in Barcelona Modern Museum fighting, arguing with the curators about what I want to do. They're fighting it." I call and he says, "I've got to get on a plane. Tel Aviv Museum wants an installation." So he was like all over the—"What are you doing now?" "I just finished up a Nuremberg installation. It was the largest sculpture I think ever that year in Europe," or something like that. I said, "You're kidding me?" He says, "No, I'll show you when I get back." And—I mean I can't imagine—I saw it—the stress of having to come up with newness and having the eyes on you, and you do something and they'd write a book on you. It's like, "Oh, my God, what about the next book?" So, those kinds of pressures to produce, pressures to create, they're a double-edged sword.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: If you like the attention, if you like the advantages, great, but if it's at the cost of your life, or if it's at the cost of your work going soft or losing its edge, I mean all artists have ebbs and flows, right? But, no need to die off young for—you can give your all for your work and still live to tell about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Can't you? [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Good news.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I would hope so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Has travel affected your work at all?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not so much. I enjoy going out. You know, I love going up the coast. I love the ocean connections, but then I love desert connections, so—and mountain connections. So I travel locally, and we're really fortunate here. Two hours, I'd be in the ocean, two hours I'd be in the mountains, in the Redwoods, and two hours in being in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, in San Francisco. So, I mean, I can go five minutes down here and be in beautiful nature surroundings.

MIJA RIEDEL: You don't have to go anywhere to view beautiful nature surroundings. You're surrounded by it.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Travel—yeah, so I love to go to museums, I love to do that. But having a direct—do I go and use it as a resource for my work, like a lot of painters do? Uh-uh. [Negative.] It's not that kind of work I do. But, inspirational, sure. Used to get overwhelmed by it. Go to a museum show and say, "Oh, my God. How can you ever live up to doing anything to honor all this past great art history? How could I make any kind of an image or a contribution to that?" And then I realized—let go of that and just realized by turning inside and making nice work, making good work, in a very, very small way, can do that. And I want to make a contribution.

MIJA RIEDEL: Apples on a table.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, there you go. Yeah, thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think of yourself as part of an American tradition?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Absolutely, American artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, with a great deep love of art history throughout every culture. Yeah, and I have a special connection with some, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Such as?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, some Pre-Columbian work. My God, certainly it's the chromatic abstractions in Rothko and—God, there's so many great periods in history. But, no, I always considered, I'm proud to be an American artist, yeah, or working—or the ability to work as an artist in relative safety.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And with lots of options.

MIJA RIEDEL: You haven't talked—go ahead.

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, certainly seeing the great European work. It's overwhelming. It's very, very humbling, extremely humbling.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you say great European work, what do you mean?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Well, to see what was done and then you look at the dates on some of those things. It's like, "Oh, my God, I can't believe that there was human beings even thinking this way back then." And we're so full of ourselves now, like we've invented shit. I mean, come on. We have in some ways,,there's a lot of things that are new and there's a great acceleration of information systems and possibilities of technology. But, as far as thinking about deep, life-altering subjects, questions about the universe and how we fit into it or not, I mean, there was some heavy hitters back then. I mean, some of the stuff, I mean way back, in every culture.

MIJA RIEDEL: You never talked at all about your working process, and I think that would be helpful. How it's changed over time, how it started. Maybe if you would walk me through how the work comes about.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I've always been really—one of my strong skills when I was immediately very young was the throwing on the wheel, just a tool like so many other tools, the brush.

MIJA RIEDEL: You had an immediate facility with that, from the time you first touched it at 14, it sounds.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Apparently so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, I can throw very well. And it's—I don't run around feeling proud of it, but I guess I am. And I—the ability to teach others how to throw very well quickly has been very rewarding to me, too. I mean, I get students that spend time with other people for two years and can't do a thing, and then in a matter of couple of quick sessions, they just blossom, and I love that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What's the trick?

NEIL WILLIAMS: A whip and a chair.

MIJA RIEDEL: A whip and a chair?

[They laugh.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Just humiliate them, ridicule them until they get it.

MIJA RIEDEL: I have to leave that for a heartbeat.

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, no. Just simple little techniques, pressure, consistent squeezing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: But it's at the right time and slowing down, enjoying the experience. Throwing on the wheel can be a wonderful sensation on many levels and it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's captivating, completely engrossing.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Just show it, just slow down and to enjoy the experience, consistent squeezing, and—having some intent. So throwing was a very strong—so I used it as a base tool to explore other things on, so process of pieces are usually thrown. When they set up a little, they're cut to draw reference to a canvas. They are altered, deconstructed, or shifted into different sections and reattached—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —at their critical points so they maintain the original, or at least the echo of the original form.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: They are carved. They are sanded to eliminate throwing lines on the exterior, so there's the contour lines and the surface is homogenized. It reads as one form. It's not broken up by vertical throwing lines. It's water-polished to reseal the surface so that it's like gessoing or priming a canvas.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is not when it's green, right, though, this is after it's been bisqued?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Still green.

MIJA RIEDEL: Still green?

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then it's lightly water-polished with a damp sponge—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: —after it's sanded, which is the excruciating part, because you're sanding these little fine, fine tines or fine, fine feathers without breaking them. So, there's a meditative, you have to be—I have to be in the right—you know, and being a big guy with club hands is—I like that. Like fooling people in that way, deceptively deft. And water-polished bisqued, then—wipe down again with a damp sponge, so there's no dust on it. And then multiple layers of color. Usually based on a strong black-and-white pattern, or black, gray and white, with larger color planes enhancing, or playing off of that established black-and-white pattern. So, visually they're fragmented—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah,

NEIL WILLIAMS: —but they're also put back together physically in the process of making that, and also with color, hopefully they have that structural integrity with the color, too. But they make sense. Even though they might seem—shocking or disturbing as an approach to a vessel, a traditional form. So stayed consistent as far as that approach for a long time. It's just the cuts, they've gone from straight-line horizontal-vertical planes to diagonal and to curvilinear shapes. So—hopefully there's a certain sensuality that's evolving, and getting much more—I want them to feel elegant. I don't know, floral or feathering. I don't want that to be too decorative. Some people here say, when they see them, "Oh, it's a little mad hatter's teapot." I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, I blame it on Dr. Seuss, that's who I blame it on."

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So there is some childhood playfulness aspect of it, which I think is okay, as long as it's not too light, and as long as it doesn't diminish, I think the effort, or that it's been a life-long body of work. But the processes are pretty simple, and rooted in the vessel. And, like I say, thrown, but I get them off the wheel as soon as possible to reshape and rework them. And I love the idea of taking an asymmetrical, or symmetrical shape, and making it asymmetrical. But Viola and I used to banter back and forth a little bit. It's like, "Yeah, but then the trick is to make an asymmetrical shape using an"—no, "make a symmetrical shape using an asymmetrical approach."

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's like, "Now, you're just being silly. You're just mocking me, Viola."

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes total sense.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I thought so, too. I think about that still when I work, little things. I think about little quotes and stuff all the time about, you know, some from Charles or some from other artists or—they stick with me. They're almost like not markers. They're—you know what we do in life to reassure ourselves as creatures of habit or creatures? I mean, we're stuck in these ephemeral bodies, and we're just renting them, and people need to have comfort zones, or they need to have zones of, "Okay, this is where I belong. This is what I'm supposed to be doing." And, hearing quotes echo in my mind, or replaying experiences help bolster my feeling of solidity, and it helps—ironically it helps control the working process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Because if I get frustrated working, or if I get—it's not going right, that piece isn't going to happen, especially at critical points. Cutting can disintegrate. And cutting and supporting it properly, cutting it as it dries and then having it unfold or restructuring it as it dries, because the carving is a process, a multistage process, where I just don't cut it and carve it. I have to carve away certain layers as it dries, so it holds its shape and its form, and doesn't collapse. Those kinds of points, like I say about quotes. I remember, was it Rodin talking about taking the cube of marble and liberating the sphere inside of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So that kind of thing. So I—where I'm trying to think about Noguchi, talking about his time element and carving away, and how it—the all-consuming and meditative. So yeah, there's hours and hours and hours of carving, sanding and painting on each piece. But it's labor. But it's, again, trying to embrace that 10

percent magic. It's like—what was that Dali said, not that these are masterpieces in any way, I would never try and equate myself with any great artists like that, but "No masterpiece was ever made by a lazy artist." And someone else said, "It's 90 percent labor and 10 percent magic." And so few people realize, oh, that's easy. I can do that painting. Well, here's a brush, do it. It's work, and artists always consider their stuff work. "I'm going to the studio to work, not to play." It's serious life-force work, and if it's good it's all-consuming and it works on multiple levels.

I never worried about it working on a spiritual level, because if it does that for somebody else, like we talked about the apples on a table, that's great. If it doesn't, then, for me, it's still stayed alive and interesting. That might fit into some selfish aspect of it too, which maybe Cheri was touching on last night with Viola, but good artists have to be—I don't—maybe I'm not selfish enough to be a great artist, I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Listening to [. . . –MR] all these different quotes from all these different artists over time and different places, is there a community that's been significant to your development as an artist?

NEIL WILLIAMS: You mean, besides all the wonderful crazy friends I grew up with?

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, no. We haven't really talked about that.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I have artists that I stay in touch with, the ones that I grew up with. The ones—I'm still in touch in with the high school art teacher.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mario Ferrante?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, and a few that have gone through his program that have gone on to study at Davis or,Berkeley or elsewhere—that yeah, I still stay in touch with them. I mean they're—

MIJA RIEDEL: Anybody you care to mention? Does it matter that they go back that far, to childhood?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Toby Covich and I see each other all the time. Larry Alberts, Mario Ferrante, all great painters. Toby was a student of Arneson's, and went on to teach ceramics for—just retiring, 37 years at the local high school. Mario's retired, but they—the thing about them is they remind—and that's why Jason Rhoades kept coming back—they remind everyone what it is to stay a human being in all of that. And Jason, I don't think, got enough of it. He tried to get him to come back more, and I'm sure it contributed to him getting further out there, and eventually—you know his tragedy.

Viola, I know, really missed it in her life, I think, because she didn't have those connections with many people, or certainly no childhood long friends that she was close to. She nixed those, because she didn't have time for them. They weren't directly involved with contributing to the production of her work. They were on the outs. They were on the back burner or no burner at all. So, that's a lot of the reason why her and I dropped off, too, after I left working for her. A little bit of contact there. But, she wasn't—unless you were working for her, there was no—it wasn't like a good, you know, it wasn't like a good, close friendship.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I stay in touch with people who I know give a damn, and for the right reasons. And, luckily, some of them are good artists and good painters, have known me for a long time. And it helps keep me grounded, of course, and it—I know what I can count on with them. Then there's a series of, like in all of life, a series of people that pass through, and either have an impact or not. But those guys still have impacts. And then certainly now working, knowing people like Sam Tubiolo more, working with his project, this Los Alamos mural project with him, it's—I mean, I'm loving that. He's a magnificent friend, and he's an interesting guy. He's got an incredible history, and he certainly deserves more attention for his work and for being a great professor of ceramics.

He's got great stories, too, about—funny stories, too. I was telling him about Maria Martinez the other day. It was just cracking me up. It was like he went to some mud fest in Philadelphia, God, long time ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, it would have to be.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And she was in her wheel—you know Maria Martinez.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: She was in a wheelchair at the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Old and whole family, she's going to come out and she's going to talk on stage. And they wheel her out there. And, first, the granddaughter does a little blessing and a saying, and then the mother comes out or someone does a little blessing and a saying. And, there's this big ritual behind it, and there's maybe 200 or 300 people captivated there and listening. And now, Grandma Maria is going to give a blessing before the—and then Sam said she sat there a little, and she yelled out, "No!" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: "No!" And they like—then there was this huddle. They surrounded her, and there was this big huddle, and then I guess they got her calmed down, and then she said a little something like "Okay, I'll," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: He said it was hysterical. She was just sitting in the wheelchair, "No, I'm not going to."

[They laugh.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I like stories like that, because you never know what to expect.

MIJA RIEDEL: That actually leads beautifully to this next question, which is, do you think there's a difference between artists that are trained in a university and artists that learn another way?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Depends on the instructor. Depends on the instructor. There can be—they can get really good quality if you get connected with the right person. Community college, high school, university. I've heard of some horror stories in university and community college professors. I've known them first-hand. They can be—but then you can get guys in high school that can send kids, artists, students well off into significant careers. It's all very personal, it's all about the instructor. University systems, they certainly have their place. I think anytime you can give a student who doesn't have any connection or any experience with the arts, you can give them some small experience. It can help to enrich their lives no matter what their major is. I think they should have it. But then again, I've heard there's some real idiots who have landed those positions, and have hung onto them. Viola used to call them the "dead wood." "It just takes a while to clean some of the dead wood out of those programs."

They're still around. I know some of them first-hand, which is a shame, because there are still some younger, great, vital artists or some, even some older established ones that have a lot to say and make really good, important contributions, because it fits into what we talked about earlier, about continuity, consistency, cultural identity, and, in a sense, it keeps the certain, whatever medium, alive, and it's the whole idea of immortality. It's how you want to be remembered, children in artwork, so—some of the—I can see the university and art school things certainly are very, very important. But, I don't know, what were the statistics when I was in school? They were saying, of the 35,000 art students that graduate from art-related colleges in institutions in America every year, within two years, 77 percent aren't even doing anything with their work.

Another five years go by, and the mortality rate gets down to less than one percent over a 20-year period. And that's really a shame, and that's probably two-fold. How do they survive and make a living? How do you survive as a creative energy and keep growing? And then,what kind of support systems are out there for you? What kinds of connections in order to keep you fueled up and keep you resourcing? So, it's a terrible burden, I think, in a way, to bear. That's why a lot of those people end up with those—I mean, it's work, it's hard, I know, but the comfort zones of teaching. But for the—I mean those, I don't even consider it anymore, because those positions are all—actually, who was it that was talking about, a few years back, when Rudy Turk was retiring from ASU.

A woman said there was a box, there were 300 applications in them, and there were a dozen of them with Ph.Ds., and there was 12 in-house masters waiting for someone to roll over so that they could—you know, it's so political, even in these community college systems. You get these old guard who won't retire who—they get a course cut back in their metal arts program, and they end up teaching ceramics and they're terrible, but they have seniority. And then they'll bump somebody out and it's like, what happened to that person? They were really good. The students loved them and they're getting results and—

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds as if you're saying that the system itself is not well-suited to keeping vital dynamic instructors there on a regular basis.

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, uh-uh. [Negative.] No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There was a local community college here that we stopped sending students to because there—

they weren't doing anything. They would just kill off their enthusiasm and their energy. So we just said, enough. We can send them to wherever school. You have to go back and pick individuals. We need to—you should go and spend time with this individual, no matter where they are.

But if you get someone who can talk about—like I talk about my student survival and celebration, you know putting yourself in a space, what do you need to identify, what do you need to survive, physically and make ends meet, pay the bills, keep the utilities on. What's your diet? What do you need to eat? Basic survival stuff. How do you make that and buy yourself time and energy to do your work, your exploratory work, the celebration aspect of it? You know, making art and celebrate safely. Again, put yourself in a healthy working space, establish your maximum level of skill, or your maximum, and then work at 98, 95 percent of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And then pace yourself, and realize the relativity of it all. So, survival and celebration, it might sound banal or, you know—hope it doesn't sound flippant, but it's—I think it's pretty simple. And at the same time, we look at so many great artists, and they were—it was—their big contribution was absolutely they were on the edge. So I don't know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We'll pause there, because this card's about to end.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Okay.

[END OF TRACK william14_2of3_sd_track02.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Neil Williams in the artist's home and studio in Auburn, California on June 6, 2014 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number three. We were going to continue the conversation about community with a couple other friends—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL:—you'd mentioned, or were going to mention.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Oh, we were talking about support systems and it fits in, I think, how—seems like this day and age artists don't survive without angels?

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And we all have our angels but, you know, Viola had hers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who were hers?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, she had—I mean she had Charles and Rena and Art [Nelson] and Squeak and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not that I'm an angel, but I was there for a while. Sam [Perry] definitely was an angel.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, it's a system of support and friends that are in it for the right reason [Laughs.]. You know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Love, they care, and they get what you're doing and want to do with your life, and they make a contribution however they can.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I mentioned some artists that I was still in touch with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Toby and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: But that's who—my childhood friend Noel Loughlin who I mentioned was the—unfortunate accident is.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was his name, sorry?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Loughlin, Noel. N-O-E-L, L-O-U-G-H-L-I-N.

FS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's been 40, 40-plus-year friendship.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And he's always been really—he's always been there. I mean he's my best friend; what can you say?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: He has to be.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You were mentioning a younger friend who has been a significant part—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh, in the last ten years that I was a student, who's apparently just took a liking to me and wanted to stay in touch and he calls me all the time to check in, and he said, "I pray for you every day, Neil." He likes doing ceramics, just simple little things on the wheel. But his name is Tex Heinz. His real name is Foster Heinz, but everyone calls him Tex. Amazing early 70s—he's African-American and Creek Indian, so he's a Buffalo Soldier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: He was—he's got the body of Schwarzenegger, still in his seventies, and is strong, and the face and voice of Morgan Freeman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my goodness.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And he was a battlefield medic in Vietnam, and he's got this amazing aura about him. And I realized—he just told me recently why he pesters me sometimes, and he's like "Neil, I got to see you. You got to come and help me. I got to see you. I want to make something"—because if he gets anxieties or, if he starts getting PTSD or whatever he's—"sitting and making," he says that does it for him immediately. "You get here and we make a few things and I'm completely smoothed out." So he just says, "Thank you, I love you, I pray for you every day," and he's just an amazing human being. He's been really a wonderful, positive impact in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I know—this guy's like "I'll do anything. I needed anything." So, that's nice to have, especially from anyone. But he's got a—there's something special about this guy. He said he knew that he would survive going to Vietnam, he had no doubt. He knew what he had to do. Said he knew he had no problem at all diving into somebody's chest who was wounded, to try and save him, when they were trying to shoot him, too. He said, "I knew what I supposed to be doing." And so I don't know where it came from—his Buffalo Soldier, you know, his Native American, Indian, or just his spirituality of knowing that he was there for a higher calling or—but really unique guy, real interesting. Amazing little quotes, you never know what's going to come out of his mouth [Laughs.]. Yeah, so, but that's just another recent friendship that's been real important. But those kinds of things—talk about being surrounded by angels—

Mia Riedel: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: We're really lucky. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, I think we've—please, go ahead.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And of course Cheri [Williams], of course Cheri.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, and—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you like to say anything else?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh my God, right here—that's a whole other disc I think. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were married 10 years ago roughly?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Seven years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And were together for some years before that.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Been 16, 15 now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And, she's got a great level of appreciation for arts, and she's been really, really good, really—she's tough though, too. She's not a – there's no excuses not to be successful, not to do your work. She's good, she's been a really good, positive influence on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: And yeah, she's a good partner.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Very good partner and a beautiful girl. Fun, she loves celebrating life, and always likes to have fun and pushes me to do things and get out of my comfort zone that I wouldn't normally do. And they always seem to have their rewards. So, it's a good fit so far.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. Absolutely, really grateful for that one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, we've done a good job of covering these questions. I just have a couple final questions in summary, and then any final thoughts you might have are more than welcome.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, when you look back now, as we've been talking, on these decades of work, certainly there's a thread of continuity that goes through the work to be sure. We've talked about the five year—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL:—steps forward, or focus on front, or backs—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL:—sides, but are there—do you also see it in any kind of terms, episodes, or periods that were distinct? Or does it feel like a continuous line mostly?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Episodes not like—as in seizures?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Okay [Laughs.].

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, they could be. They might have been.

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] Blackouts, are you referring to?

MIJA RIEDEL: It could—

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.] Where I come to and I've made something, I had no idea how I made it? That kind of thing?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, we'll deal with that story [later –MR].

NEIL WILLIAMS: There have been lulls, but I've always known it's okay to just keep working through them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I never doubted that. At certain times I question, "Oh my gosh. This is not an easy path."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, trying to be an independent artist is not for the squeamish.

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Trying to include somebody in that equation and—it's hard on them, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a point worth making, because you haven't had a regular teaching job, you haven't had a regular—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It doesn't seem like there's a regular production pottery practice either, so—

NEIL WILLIAMS: I've always made pots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: I've always been able to make and sell good pots.

MIJA RIEDEL: So there is some level of functional work that has helped fuel the—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you sell that [work –MR] regularly through a shop or fairs?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Used to do fairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, at the—

MIJA RIEDEL: The ACC fairs, something like that?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not ACC. I did things like Rosen [ph], I did Lincoln Center. I used to love the little Scottsdale Museum Fair—that was nice for me, made it into a vacation. Lots of private, local patrons and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So would you make dinner sets?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Not if I can help it anymore. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: But in the past would that be something that would—

NEIL WILLIAMS: Oh sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Sure, functional stuff, bowls and platters; trying to keep them interesting for myself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Someone was calling me the—they said, "We're going to get you a moniker, we're going to call you 'the bowl guy' from now on." [Laughs.] He says, "It's going to work."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: "We're going to market you under 'the bowl guy,'" he says.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I made lots and lots of bowls, but I still like to—there's something just universally enriching about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So there was a functional aspect to production pottery that certainly helped. Like Viola said early on when I was in school, "You could go out right now and make a living off of your throwing skills alone." She said, "It might not be very self-respectable after a few years, but"—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: So, I do a variety of other things. I have no qualms or inhibitions about doing whatever you have to.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, I paint houses, whatever it takes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Whatever it takes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yeah. It's getting harder and harder to find the energy, when you have the time, to make quality work. But it's still there and it's still really – highly motivational so—I'm sorry, what was the original question?

MIJA RIEDEL: We were talking about episodes or periods of work.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Were there profound changes or memorable—

MIJA RIEDEL: Or did they even exist? Or does [. . . –MR] the work feel like a long thread of continuity, a long series of theme and variation?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I would think, yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There are no profound "Oh my God, I need to do a 90-degree or a 180 on something."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's been moments of frustration. Like even when I do production work, or picturing other pieces I'd like to explore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: So hopefully it's more complimentary and more an essential aspect than it is interruptions or profound experiences that change, evolve or de-evolve the work, or the intent and quality of the work, so—if that answers that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Finally, where do you see your work fitting into contemporary art?

NEIL WILLIAMS: Boy, I don't know. That scares me. I try not to.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: I think that's probably one of the reasons I've kind of like retreated. I knew I had to get away from Viola and that environment at a certain point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why is that scary?

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's not—trying to figure out where I fit in, or how I see it fitting in, I—you got to leave that to the dealers and the critics and the museums, and all of that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You can drive yourself nuts and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS:—off the deep end, if I—you know I used to—there was a period it was like I'd look and I'd see what other people were doing and the attention and the accolades and the—some other people—and the

independence and the ability that they had to explore because they could afford to then. And I look at the work and I just shake my head, because I know what went into that work. And some of those things I could—I mean I could reproduce when I was 16 years old and there was—there was something easy about it and it didn't—I don't know. Or I'll say why—I don't understand what all the fuss was about; certain artists and certain aspects of work, so—I realized I could drive myself crazy off of thinking about that.

And so, I detached from trying to identify how I fit in that. And it's been very liberating, it's been very freeing. I'm certainly not immune to it. I'd love to have more commercial success, because it would buy me the ability and the security to make better and more beautiful work, I think. But I don't obsess over it and I'm not—it doesn't mean I'm completely content and satisfied, I'm not. But I'm not—I don't know.

I've met some artists that are pretty bitter over that stuff. I'm not, because I know my work is good. I've always known it's good. And if somebody connects with it, that's great. And if they don't, then that's okay, too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: You know, like I said, we all perceive the same object differently, so. How I see myself fit in all of that? I would hope that I would make some contribution, in that—other artists' work who I like, which they have, and it's been really rewarding and fulfilling that they make a connection, they appreciate it, and they say, "Hey," you know, "Good work," or "Nice show," or "I love that piece," that kind of a thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: And that happened on occasion. That has happened. There's been somewhat of those golden moments where you kind of go on into a collection and seeing my work next to some other painters, it was just like, "Oh my God, I can't believe," you know. I remember going into *Stéphane Janssen*'s collection in LA for the first time and he had a piece sitting next to a Dubuffet and, "Holy crap, that's"—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's pretty great.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Wow, that was really—said, "Yeah, I really liked that piece there, it's brilliant." And so, I mean, not that they're in the same realm whatsoever but—

MIJA RIEDEL: I can see that though.

NEIL WILLIAMS: There's—it's like, and then one of my brother says, "Hey, I saw your piece in a show in the de Young Museum." I'm like "What?" I had no idea, so I raced down there and, "Yeah it's in a book, too." And, "Well that was nice, but"—and those are those little moments that—they're very humbling and they're ver,fulfilling, and they have nothing to do with numbers or—success in a way. But, so as far as fitting into the bigger picture of the art world, the American art market, American art world, I just—it's pretty simple. I just hope they say I've made nice stuff, and it holds up over time. It's like if you can get someone to stop, look at your work for more than 30 seconds, it's going to be successful.

And if someone goes home and they're thinking about the work that night, then it's even more successful. So, there is something that's stimulating and it's not something that I want to obsess over or completely give a lot of energy to. I just hope that when all is said and done that it's, "He made some beautiful things, some nice pieces. He didn't,change the"—"He didn't"—you know, that simple, pretty simple. I'm—

MIJA RIEDEL: Great.

NEIL WILLIAMS:—I'm not out there to rile anybody up or anything. It would be nice to be included more in some of these things but I don't—it's my fault, I don't make the effort, and I don't have the energy for it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS: It's not that I'm not good in that area. I am, and I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NEIL WILLIAMS:—like, get along really well with anyone. I'm really easy to deal with in that aspect. I understand and respect how hard it is for good dealers to do what they do, and I've always been a real piece of cake to deal with for any of them, but I don't know, maybe I'm just not pushy enough. I'm not egocentric enough. Maybe I should be. I don't know, I just—somewhere, I'll get connected with somebody who will help in that area eventually, again. But, in the meantime, I'm content and I'm still making, I think good work for me. So—what else?

MIJA RIEDEL: That's it.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Okay. Afterthoughts? Gosh. I regret nothing. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: No, it's been nice. Thank you for the opportunity. It's been very nice to be able to look back—and I was telling Cheri, "I realize that"—"being able to look back, I've done more and I've experience more than I may be aware of right now." So, it's been good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Great.

NEIL WILLIAMS: But I'm not dead yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NEIL WILLIAMS: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you.

NEIL WILLIAMS: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]