

# BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## *Mary Barringer*

Studio Potter

Conducted by Sequoia Miller on November 20 and 21, 2011 at Mary Barringer's studio and home, Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts

Mary Barringer was born in 1950 and grew up near Wilmington, Delaware. She graduated from Bennington College in 1972 as a studio art/ceramics major, and within months opened Park Street Potters, a pottery studio, school and storefront in a downtown neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut. She stayed in the Hartford area working as a potter and ceramist in various studios until the late 1980s, when she moved with her partner to Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, where she currently lives.

In the 1970s, Barringer made functional pottery inspired by historical Chinese and Japanese ceramics advocated in books such as Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*. In 1979, she began handbuilding vessels inspired by pre-historic pottery. She continued to make wheel-thrown functional work for a time, but soon shifted her production to abstract, non-functional handbuilt forms.

Barringer describes this transition as connected to a deepening sense of her artistic identity as a woman and a feminist. Beginning in the late 1980s, she began to make tableware again, although in the visual language of her handbuilt work. She has since maintained a studio practice that explores both functional and non-functional objects.

Through exhibitions and teaching, Barringer has cultivated a national reputation. She exhibits at galleries and craft centers regularly, and frequently teaches short-term workshops from a few days to a few weeks. She was a community college instructor in Hartford for seven years in the 1980s, and in the 1990s held a number of short-term university positions. Since 2002, Barringer has been the editor of *Studio Potter*, a highly regarded independent ceramics journal published bi-annually.

This interview was conducted in two sessions on November 20 and 21, 2011. The first session was in Mary Barringer's studio, and the second session was in her home.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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**Sequoia Miller (SQ):** [It's] November 20, and I'm sitting here with Mary Barringer and we are going to be speaking about Mary's early days in pottery and her decisions around becoming a potter, as part of a project of the Bard Graduate Center and as funded by the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design. So, hello Mary.

**Mary Barringer (MB):** Hello, Sequoia.

**SQ:** Thank you for being here and for agreeing to have this conversation with me. I would love to start off asking you a little bit about your family, just to sketch out what your personal landscape looked like in terms of where you grew up, did you have siblings? What kinds of things were your parents involved in? What was some of your family life like?

**MB:** I was born in 1950 and I grew up in southeastern Pennsylvania. We lived there because my father worked at Dupont. He is a chemist and my mother was a homemaker in the full-blooded fifties sense of that word. And actually there's a fifties component to that and there's a part that is very particular to my parents that I have lately come to realize has something to do with my being a maker, which is that both of my parents, although they had not been raised this way—they both grew up in New York—they in their own way had the project of fashioning a hands-on life. They bought an old house that was way farther out in the country than it needed to be. They did a lot of work on the house, they had a huge garden, they had fruit trees, my mother sewed all of our clothes, and then there was the fifties thing of making Christmas decorations with golden spray-painted pinecones and things, and they cooked and canned. So they were very curious and enthusiastic about encountering the world through doing things. They chose that and they made that decision together, and it might easily have been otherwise for both of them in terms of the way that they had been brought up. I just took that for granted but I realized recently that their appreciation of doing things and learning how to do things is something that I picked up on and absorbed growing up, and in my own way made choices about what it makes sense to do with your life that connects with my being a potter as well as other things that I do.

So they lived in the place I grew up until ten years ago, when they sold their house and moved to a continuing care place. I had two siblings, an older brother, I also had an older sister who died just before I was born, and then I have a younger sister who is thirteen months younger than I am. I went to Bennington College, I graduated in 1972.

**SQ:** Can you talk about high school just for a second? Just very briefly.

**MB:** High school, hmmm [laughs.] I actually went away as a sophomore to a girl's school. I went to Dana Hall in Wellesley, Massachusetts. I have pretty much lived in New England since I was fifteen. I loved being away from home [laughs].

**SQ:** What do you think you loved about it?

**MB:** Well, now I appreciate having grown up in the country, and at the time I sort of appreciated growing up in the country. My sister and I especially had a very rich child that involved roaming around and building little things and stuff. But I also felt isolated, I sort of yearned to live in the suburbs. I yearned to live in a place where I could go see my friends without my parents having to drive me there, and so there was a kind of freedom to being in this community, that even though it had lots of rules and it's not everybody's idea of liberating environment, I liked that once you understood the rules you could sort of figure out your time and who you hung out with. So in that there was a kind of autonomy in relation to my life, as distinct from my family's life, that I liked. So I liked it! I feel as though in some ways from that point on each move involved a step outward from the path that I think I was supposed to be on, that my parents, my education, my class would have set me on, and I would take a path that was a little oblique to that and then a little bit more oblique and in the great scheme of things, of American society, these were not very big divergences from where I was supposed to be but they felt like choices to me and like steps outward. So going away to school was the beginning of that, even though you would have to have a very narrow sense of your options to consider a girls' boarding school broadening of your horizons [laughs], but it was.

**SQ:** Can you describe, when you say "they path you were supposed to take" or "the path your parents envisioned for you," what you think that was?

**MB:** This was another way that my parents actually sort of set an example. They both grew up in New York.

**SQ:** City?

**MB:** My father grew up on Long Island and they inhabited a very narrow little slice of New York early and mid-twentieth century WASP culture, in such a way that was defined by families, by where you went to school, and until pretty recently when I would have conversations like this with my mother: if I was going someplace she would actually look up who lived in that place who had gone to Vassar and encourage me to look that person up and know that I could stay with that person. The network that my parents operated in was this New York life that was kind of ingrown, I think, in some ways, and for them to move to Wilmington, they both left their families in some ways. They each had a sibling who stayed very nearby and operated in that same world so again, moving to Wilmington, Delaware—it's a train ride to New York—but in its own way it was a sort of lighting out for the territories that all of their children understood as a gesture of independence, I think, and I think they expected us to do that, too. So they couldn't have exactly anticipated how that was going to manifest itself in their children, but they expected their children to leave home, to not stay in Wilmington, and their children did leave home. My brother actually married the AFS [American Field Service] student at our high school, who was Belgian, and acquired a whole connection with Europe that was seriously shifting the axis of his life. There was a kind of dynamic there that involved moving outward that they set up and, I would say, celebrated in their children.

So my mother would have loved for me to have gone to Vassar, and there was really no way I was going to do that.

**SQ:** What did that mean to you, going to Vassar in the sense that there was no way you were going to do that. Was that just because of your mom or was there something that Vassar represented to you in addition to your mother that you felt you were not interested in?

**MB:** Well, I have to say, when I was looking at colleges I looked at all the colleges a counselor at a place like Dana Hall sends you to, and mostly they were in the northeast and they were women's colleges. I actually loved going to a girls' school and I looked at women's colleges. I remember driving around and looking at all of these places and thinking, "Hmm, probably not smart enough to get into Radcliffe, but," and when I looked at the catalog from Bennington I thought, "This is what I want to do, that is where I want to go."

**SQ:** Do you remember what it was about the catalog?

**MB:** Well, it was a weird catalog. I actually remember the design of it.

**SQ:** Interesting.

**MB:** I remember the emphasis on flexibility and people doing things across disciplines. It seemed lively, less stuffy than your average college catalog, and I already had an idea I wanted to be an artist although I had no idea what that actually meant. I liked that it seemed to be a place where the art department was a serious part of the curriculum, not a kind of frill that was added on to a liberal arts education. So I applied to other schools but I knew that was where I wanted to go and I did.

**SQ:** What do you think gave you the sense you wanted to be an artist?

**MB:** I was the one in my class who could draw and that was probably a mixed blessing. I would say I used it as a way to navigate social awkwardness and I also think that now, as a working artist, I am aware in retrospect of the pitfalls of being rewarded so much socially for being able to do something in a certain way. That doesn't really encourage you to find your own way. Nevertheless, I was like, twelve years old. Would I have found my own way when I was twelve years old? Probably not. Still, I had this idea about that as a thing to be, that was probably my earliest sense of an identity that wasn't based on my family. It was very vague, what I made that up out of was really ephemeral, although Andrew Wyeth did live in our town. He was our local artist and so that landed in me as, "hmm, so people do that." My parents didn't know any working artists. They knew people who were very talented, who painted and did nice things, but they didn't know anybody who defined themselves as an artist. But knowing that there was somebody in our area who did, although I didn't know him personally, he was there as a figure. And then probably at some point I learned about Georgia O'Keefe. So going to Bennington was a choice to investigate that aspect of the possibilities beyond being just a well-rounded and artistic person.

**SQ:** Would you say that your parent's home, before you went to Bennington, was artistic in any particular way?

**MB:** Yes.

**SQ:** Can you describe that at all? Maybe either artwork or handmade objects or objects that you recall standing out to you at all?

**MB:** [laughs] I'm laughing because J and I were talking the other day and I thought "My mother's enamel kiln." It was the fifties. Let's see. There was a lot of stuff. I think my parents have pretty traditional taste. Neither of their families had moved very far in contrast to a pretty common American narrative. It wasn't like at any point either family moved west and ditched everything they had had for ten generations. It was all still in the house—it was in somebody's house. But my

parents had some furniture that they had gotten when they moved to where I grew up. They used to go to auctions and get clapped-out old furniture and restore it, so they had some beautiful Chester County furniture that was, again, a kind of statement I think. In contrast to dark, ornate Victorian furniture that might have come down in their families, it was old furniture but it was much simpler and it was furniture that they had had their hands on, that they had claimed. There was some sense when I was growing up of the things that they really loved and that they were proud of and had chosen.

I remember pottery in our house—I mean, it was china, it wasn't pottery. I remember something about being like chin level with dishes [laughs] and the way you are sitting there [at a table] and waiting for stuff to be served and you just get to looking at the patterns on the plates, and then of course I had to wash them afterwards.

**SQ:** Did you eat off of china plates most nights?

**MB:** Yeah, we did.

**SQ:** In the furniture, do you recall, if they were going to auctions and buying furniture, were they buying ceramic objects too, like stoneware or anything?

**MB:** Not that I remember, no. The ceramics in our house were mostly china. It definitely came from the china-cabinet end of the spectrum. My grandmother, my mother's mother, had a couple of Chinese pots, but again they were the kind of Chinese pots that a New York sophisticated, haute-WASP person would have, which is Qing dynasty stuff with doo-dads on it, not simple celadon. So there were things from people's travels and from forbears that had gone someplace, but I don't remember much ceramics that was really distinctive.

**SQ:** Do you recall experiencing their choice to live out in the country and, as you say, among other things, to buy this furniture—it's interesting to me that they refinished it themselves also—you said it was a distinct choice, what were the other choices they weren't making?

**MB:** I don't think any of my parents' parents were all that interested in doing things with their hands. My grandmother crocheted and did needlepoint and stuff like that, but my father's father was an attorney, he had ten siblings, and as many of them as he could he helped put them through school. He was a very serious person. He would not have had a workshop where he messed around and did stuff. I think the alternative would have been to appreciate nice things but not to have any real hand in their care or in their reclamation. It would have been more just as

your surroundings. The part that my parents chose—and I'm sure this had to do with the war as well as with their own personalities—was in some ways a step down from the kinds of activities that were associated with their class—to be doers, in a very material sense, rather than just stewards of your surroundings and your life, where the actual jobs would be done by somebody else, or they wouldn't need to be done because of modern conveniences. They repudiated that, I would say, and really embraced much more beginning-to-end involvement with a lot of parts of their material life.

**SQ:** You mentioned an enamel kiln? Do you remember when that came in?

**MB:** Probably in the mid-fifties.

**SQ:** So pretty early. What kind of things did your mom make?

**MB:** She made jewelry, she made ashtrays—those are the only two things I remember, though I remember being really fascinated by her making these designs. The kiln was tiny. It just plugged into an outlet I think and then enamel would melt. It was kind of magical.

**SQ:** And it was just one of the things that she did?

**MB:** Yeah, but she also did a lot of different kind of things, crafty things [laughs].

**SQ:** Interesting. So, Bennington College?

**MB:** So when I went to Bennington it was a women's college. Not for long. It went co-ed at the end of my first year.

**SQ:** What year did you go again?

**MB:** I started in the fall of '68 and I thought I'd go and be an art major. I actually thought I would go and do sculpture. This is where the zeitgeist thing kind of starts to be part of my awareness, because I had actually done some summer school at Pratt the summer before. I had been working from a model and I was all hepped up about that. I was used to being "the artist" in my class—pretty much from second grade people had been making a fuss that I was the artist in my class—so of course I thought they would recognize that at Bennington [laughs].

As a freshman you had to take, not really a foundation course, but if there were six different media—painting, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, photography, and it seems to me there was

something else, too—and there were two semesters, you had to take two in each semester as a freshman, so you would get exposed to four different media. I think I must have had sculpture in my first semester. I remember telling my sculpture teacher that I wanted to work with the figure and he said—this is a true story—he said, “everything worthwhile that can be done with the figure has already been done.” That was a very important moment for me, because it sent me off in a different direction than I expected to go. But when I look back on it I also think that was almost the last possible moment that somebody could make a statement like that with a straight face. It was like the last gasp of high modernism. And Bennington—Clement Greenberg used to come and do critiques there. Needless to say he didn’t look at the ceramics. David Smith had been there, Anthony Caro, [Jules] Olitski, Ken Noland—it was like, “waaa.” So in three-dimensional stuff there was a very clear definition of what did and did not constitute valid subjects of sculpture or valid material for sculpture. Even by the time I had left Bennington that had fallen apart. But when I was there getting ready to start my sculpture career [laughs] it was still a moment where there was this very doctrinaire idea of what art was about. The fact that I got so shot down in my idea of what I could do with sculpture—if there was kind of a carrot and a stick about leading me into ceramics, that was the stick. I was so not welcome to do my thing in sculpture and at the same time, in that year, I went to the ceramics studio and I still remember the way the clay felt the first time.

**SQ:** Can you describe that?

**MB:** Well, the ceramics department was in this old chicken coop and there was this one teacher, Stanley Rosen, who was rather fabled. He was a very kind of odd person. People were hugely in awe of him but he was also odd in many ways, even by the art department standards. The first thing he did that first day was we mixed clay on a big low table and there were piles of the different kinds of clay, so there was Jordan, and some fireclay, and some ball clay, and some Redart, and some grog, and they were in separate enough piles so that you could feel the difference in the consistencies of these clays, and then we mushed all the powders together and we put water in. I probably still have sludge in my lungs from that. I remember the feeling of the difference between the feeling of the different textures of the clays and how silky commercially processed dry clay is. And then making stuff out of it! So that was it for me. That was great.

Stanley was an amazing teacher. He was really the only teacher I ever had in any formal sense because I didn’t go to graduate school. He had a very intense way of looking at pots and divining what your intentions might be. He was very important to me in the sense of giving the feeling that there was a lot there, that this material could support a life in art. I guess that’s how I’d put it, that

it wasn't something that you would do while you were figuring out what your real work was. He was a serious and mysterious person and the fact that clay was his medium added to the idea—rather than the tactile experience—that clay was this huge area of potential.

**SQ:** Were people making pots in that department then? Mostly? Exclusively?

**MB:** Well, they were making pots and sculpture. There were people exploring, you might say, architectural ideas, but in clay. Most of them were vessel based rather than being sculpture. Well, some of them were sculpture. Stanley's work itself, much of it is sculptural rather than pots, but he loves pots. I think he loved the history of ceramics. He had gone to Alfred, so he had been indoctrinated in the Alfred way, but I don't think he was actually a very skilled potter, so he agonized a lot about working on the wheel. I mean, it took me like six months to learn how to center and I don't think it needed to take that long [laughs]. But he was so—

**SQ:** How would you describe the intersection between the ceramics department and what you described as the high modernism of sculpture, or maybe sculpture and painting?

**MB:** Well, at that time, I mean we were all in the same art department. Bennington isn't a very big place. In theory we're all having these critiques together, and we're all supposed to be taking each other's work seriously, and we all did, except that when somebody important came like Greenberg the lesser arts would fall out of the conversation. I'm not sure that it's that different now, in the sense that I think that people who work in clay are very often straddlers. If you are in a department where there is a good teacher and a passionate group of students, and there's a life there that's about clay and about what you're doing in clay and what you have to learn both formally and historically—the whole vocabulary of the history and the formal language of your medium—so there's that going on and you're also part of an art department which maybe takes clay a tiny bit more seriously now than it did in 1970, but I don't think it's that different. The art world is more pluralistic than it used to be but you only have to read like, one article by Roberta Smith to see that clay is not really any closer to the center than it ever was, and so I think there is kind of a dual consciousness that develops in people who work in our medium that is the hallmark of the marginalized [laughs].

**SQ:** Can you describe that dual consciousness?

**MB:** Yeah. You know what's going on in the bigger world, or in the world that controls the narrative. You know far more about what's going on in that world than [they know about] what's going on in your world. But you choose to be doing what you're doing, so you have an

awareness—I mean, I couldn't have gotten through Bennington at that time without seeing a lot of second generation Abstract Expressionist paintings and hearing those guys talk and sitting around and talking with people who were doing them and talking to the second generation abstract steel sculptors about what they were doing. So I had a sense about that. I had a sense about what the artistic enterprise that we were all part of involved. But it really didn't include me, it didn't include functional pots. I was the thing that held those things together, rather than the discourse or the models holding it together. Does that make sense?

**SQ:** Yeah yeah, absolutely.

**MB:** And it's not the first time in my life I've been in that position [laughs]. It seems to suit me actually, but it was maybe one of the first instances of it.

**SQ:** So what was your awareness of what you might call the “craft movement” or the studio pottery world at that time?

**MB:** Well, Bennington has a non-resident term in the winter, which now is not that unusual, but for its time it was very unusual to have an idea of learning that included not being in school. My junior year, having already decided I was going to be a ceramics major, and there was some other stuff going on which we can talk about later—the political stuff that was happening—but I decided and with Stanley's encouragement decided that for the non-resident term of my junior year I would go cross-country and go see all the potters and clay departments that I could find. And I went with a friend, a fellow student. At that time you could go to the American Crafts Council in New York, and they had file drawers with—my memory is that they were alphabetized and listed by state and they were color coded by medium so if you had your itinerary you basically could just write down the names and addresses of all the people in clay who were going to be anywhere near where you thought you were going to be, and it had their phone numbers. Off I went with this list of people, which included Peter Voukos, Marguerite Wildenhain. It started with Karen Karnes, and also Dave Shaner, Ken Ferguson, Ralph Bacerra, [laughs], John Mason, and then a whole pile of people you have never heard of. So off we went in January.

**SQ:** Did your teacher know some of these people? Was he part of that community?

**MB:** Well sort of. When you talk to people who were connected to Alfred in the immediate post-war era they knew Stanley. He had been there with that cohort, with Daniel Rhodes, and Bob Turner and—but no, it wasn't like he said, “When you get to Pete's tell him Stanley sent you.” We pretty much went on our own. Betty Woodman was on our list, too, but she wasn't really anybody

at that point. So we would just drive places and call somebody up and say, “Hi, we’re students and can we come see your studio?” and they would say, “Sure!” Sometimes they would even say, “Do you need a place to stay?” We kind of crashed places and—oh, we went to [Robert] Arneson’s.

The *Objects USA* show was up at Berkeley I think. I saw it in California, I can’t remember where it was, but I saw it there. Then I went to a bunch of schools, also. The huge, big mid-western universities, I had never been in a school like that with a gigantic ceramics department with like, twenty wheels and lots going on. So it seriously fleshed out my idea of what was going on in clay and what was going on in clay education. I went to a lot of studios and saw people’s working lives and many of those people were studio potters. Some of them were the people who are now the icons of the museum-based view of ceramics at that time. People were almost uniformly kind and open to two girls who didn’t know very much. It gave me a bigger idea of what life could be like outside of school.

How much that idea was connected to pottery per se as opposed to sculpture? It’s a little hard to say. I was definitely working on the wheel then, so I was making pots. One of the people I met on the trip was Michael Frimkess and now I can’t really remember what synapse fired in my head that made me think, “That’s the person I want to go work with,” but I went out and worked with him the following summer, between my junior and my senior year, and I learned some things from him, almost by accident [laughs]. I’m not really sure why he wanted me around. He’s kind of a crazy guy. His wife was not at all happy to have this nubile young thing working for her husband.

**SQ:** Why do you think you were attracted to working for him?

**MB:** I was fascinated by his throwing. I don’t know how much you know about him but he made these classically-shaped pots that then had these goofy cartoons on them. I really wasn’t interested in the goofy cartoons part but maybe because he was definitely a thrower and in fact he had worked out this whole—in its own way it was as tortured as Stanley’s—way of throwing. He threw these incredibly thin pots almost dry. I had running sores on my hands the first couple of weeks I was working with him. So I really went to learn about throwing with him.

**SQ:** Interesting.

**MB:** Yeah, and it was like Miles Standish lands in Venice, California. I felt so much like I was from a different place. I don’t think I met anybody the entire time I was there who had a job or who did anything structured. And I was actually, like, working. I actually had this other place I would

practice because Michael didn't want me around all the time, so I'd practice and then a couple of afternoons a week I'd go have a lesson with him and I'd do some work. I'd probably be there like three or four afternoons a week, I'd work for him. I'd go to the beach and get sand and haul it back to his studio so that he could put it in the mortar for his kiln. Or I'd sweep up or I'd mix glazes. And everybody seemed to live on the beach and collect food stamps and get stoned. So I had this incredible work ethic which I don't really have, but by comparison— And it was sunny all the time and I was like, "Where am I?" [laughs].

**SQ:** It is interesting you were attracted to him as a thrower rather than as an artist.

**MB:** I know, because it was not like watching Warren Mackenzie throw where there's this incredible vitality and fluidity. It wasn't like that at all. I don't know why him. I can't get back to the place where that idea took hold. Maybe it was just the strangeness of it, the strangeness of the whole thing—Venice, him, the cartoons. Or maybe he said at a moment, "Oh, you want learn how to do this? You could come back and work with me?" And I went, "Yeah!" I don't really know. It's not as though I was thinking, "Hm, who would I like to work with, maybe?" It just kind of happened. I wouldn't say I made a lot of choices in those days in the sense of picking from your options. It was more like I did this, and I did that. Very rarely did I have a sense that I laid out what the possibilities were and then picked one of them.

**SQ:** I am interested a little more about the group of people you visited on this trip. Do you recall your sense being that there was a spectrum of making, that there were people who made straight pottery and then people like Michael Frimkess who made something else?

**MB:** Yes, there was. But I have to say that my entire early time as a potter was not characterized by an overabundance of ideas [laughs].

**SQ:** [Laughs] What does that mean?

**MB:** I mean, now when I go to schools or I listen to people who are fresh out of school, they have had to think a lot more about what pottery is, what kind of pots they want to make, what the spectrum is that you're talking about, what the ideas are, that are in both pots in general and in their pots. That's kind of a big fuzzy place in my brain that covers pretty much all of that. Probably while I was in college and the first four, five, or six years that I was making pots I had an idea about being a potter but I didn't have that many ideas about pots. That's for a couple of reason. One is that we weren't shown a huge range of idea about pots. I mean, there were two books. There's Leach—three books—Leach, Rhodes, and there was Nelson. Nelson was out on the

edge there because he's from California so he actually showed some earthenware pots, but Leach and Rhodes—we're talking stoneware, we're talking Chinese and Japanese pots. So the idea of what a good pot was, was very narrow. Where that idea stood in relation to the corresponding idea of what a good sculpture was, for instance, is like, "Hmm, is there a Venn diagram here?" Do these things overlap anywhere? Does it make sense to be interested in being a modern artist, a modernist artist, and only look at Chinese pots? How do we fit those things together? The questioning of that, really examining the places where those things really don't go together and what you would do with that or to think critically about that, was not really going on for me.

Some of that was the times, I think, but I'm not going to let myself off the hook there. Some of it might have to do with the fact of Stanley having gone to Alfred. Later on, maybe ten or twelve years later, when I started to meet people who had gone to Alfred I realized that there was a certain familiarity to some of the discourse about pots that I could recognize came from Alfred, came from the fact that my teacher had gone to Alfred. And that we were all looking at the same three books. And that some of the kinds of questions that he asked of us and of pots were questions that he had formulated as a student or that he had been presented by [Charles Fergus] Binns. There was kind of a pedagogical or critical lineage there that was completely subliminal. I think that to this day Alfred tends not to think of itself as having a particular view of things, they just have the right view. It's Harvard-like in that way. And then I go cross-country and I see people who obviously didn't come from there. And I get to California and there's something very different going on. But I don't think I processed that intellectually. I think what I was doing was looking for something that was actually a little more simple, which was ideas about a life more than the work.

In that sense, probably the person on the whole trip that had the greatest impact on me was Karen Karnes. Like the first stop—she was the first stop. And I still remember this little explosion in my head when I saw her in her studio because I hadn't actually really processed the fact that certainly my whole idea about artists was pretty much based on men. The entire art department—with only one exception, and she might as well have been a man, she was very much an exceptionalist—the entire art department at Bennington was men.

**SQ:** All the professors?

**MB:** All the professors, well and probably nine-tenths of the students were women and somehow we were going to take in the experience of being an artist through what these guys said to us, and we were somehow going to digest it and figure out how that applied to us as women. Again, so much changed while I was in college and that was one of the big ones.

I remember seeing Karen in her studio and understanding that I was seeing something that I could use. I was seeing a woman potter and the difference between a theoretical idea that a woman could do this, and that I as a woman could do this, and the evidentiary experience of seeing somebody do it was huge. It was like a door opened that I hadn't realized was closed, or was not open when I saw her in her studio. Even though I met many other women, and not all of them were married, and several of them offered me their floor to sleep on, still for some reason, and it probably has something to do with her work, with how strong her work is and was, and her self-possession in a very quiet way, that paved the way for something in my mind. Even though it seems I didn't act directly on that, I mean I didn't go to Karen and say, "Can I work with you?" So I still was flailing around, but that was a very big influence, and it was such a short encounter really. Although there were some of her pots around in the studio and Stanley talked about her pots.

**SQ:** Do you remember what she was making?

**MB:** Covered jars.

**SQ:** Covered jars?

**MB:** Yeah, I have a big one that I bought on that trip. It has a crack in it so it was thirty-five dollars [laughs]. And I remember the voluptuousness of those pots and I also remember that they weren't light, which is odd because I then went on to work with this guy who makes these neurotically light pots. There was a sense of generosity. None of this was conscious, but looking back I can see that there was something very feminine about them that was a very different style of femininity than the china cupboard, than the ceramic idea of femininity that I had brought with me from my upbringing. There was a confidence, there was a sensuousness, and there was a strength about her work that I needed to see then.

**SQ:** You have mentioned this difference when you got to California, that it felt like a very different environment of making. Can you describe that a little bit more? Either east coast, mid-west, west coast difference?

**MB:** Well, I went—I think the earthquake happened while we were on that trip also, just after we left LA. We must have gone mostly to see people that I had heard of, so I don't remember seeing a lot of potters. Well, I saw Ralph Bacerra [laughs], who was to your average brown flecked pots as I don't know what. So we saw a lot of sculptural pottery and some goofy pottery. We didn't see David Gilhooly, but that general—

**SQ:** That general Arneson thing?

**MB:** Yeah, yeah.

**SQ:** And that had the feeling of a California school or approach?

**MB:** Yes. Could I have formulated an idea about that? Probably not. I mean everything about California seemed different to me. I had not really thought very much about the east coast as a culture [laughs] because my own parents are such deep-dyed east coast people that they really have that New Yorker view, so it was really interesting to be in a place that was so different and the pots were different. It's hard to re-create how innocent that time was in a lot of ways, how little self-awareness there was about the language, the history, the constituencies. It was a small enough tribe and the pie that was being divided up was not very big, and so there wasn't a sense of people really differentiating themselves, at least not a sense I picked up on. Was that happening at some level, like in the ACC [American Craft Council]? I don't know, possibly, but it wasn't something that I was aware of.

**SQ:** So when you went to someone like Michael Frimkess did it feel like you were going to this big deal or that you were just going to this guy—

**MB:** He was a little big deal. It felt like a big deal to go to Voukos's studio, and to go to John Mason's studio.

**SQ:** Do you remember those in particular?

**MB:** I remember Mason's studio because he just had these enormous things he was working on. They were huge. And I remember Voukos's studio mainly—I remember the light in it more than I remember anything else, and he seemed really distant in a way, distant in the sense that he didn't seem like a person that I could talk to. He felt iconic. He seemed iconic and he was like, "Rrrrr, girrls." He probably just loved having two twenty year olds drop in on him. And I went to Dave Shaner's place. He had just built his studio in Big Fork. I'm trying to think who else—

**SQ:** Did you visit Warren Mackenzie?

**MB:** Nope. We didn't go to Minnesota, why not? The middle part of that trip is a little vague to me. I know we went to Colorado. We possibly sped through the middle parts. No we didn't go to Warren's. I don't really remember where we went in the middle. It seems to me that we went to

Nebraska, to the University of Nebraska, but I kind of think that there was a little bit of a feeling that the things we really wanted to see were farther on, were in the west.

**SQ:** Do you recall how you became aware of these, say before this trip, how were you aware of the work of these people?

**MB:** Well, we must have had *Craft Horizons* lying around at the studio. And I'm imagining that Stanley probably would have shown us images of work, a little bit, not a ton.

**SQ:** So sort of a sense of that being around but it's not like you had a ritual with *Craft Horizons* or something where you would look at it in a consistent way?

**MB:** No, but that would have been the only place other than from direct personal testimonial on Stanley's part that I would have found out about people.

**SQ:** Do you recall how you would have thought of going to the ACC [American Craft Council] library and going through those files? Would Stanley have suggested that to you?

**MB:** He must have, yeah. Or when I told him I wanted to do this. *Craft Horizons* was the only real national publication that was around. And it was in New York so I could go there easily.

**SQ:** You mentioned *Objects USA*. Do you recall anything about that in particular? What your impressions were? Or what it meant to you?

**MB:** It was probably the first time I had ever seen contemporary ceramics in a museum. And I remember the Richard Shaw piece that was this sofa. I remember the Voukos piece. I remember some of the individual pieces in it. And I was young enough that the people in it, those California sort of funk potters, were kind of intriguing to me in the way that when you're young and grownups seem to be getting away with doing something that's kind of goofy but is being taken seriously you kind of, "Whoa! Wow, this kind of flies in the face of what we've been talking about in school." [laughs]. I'm trying to remember if Ruth Duckworth had a piece in that show? Somewhere along the line I must have seen her work and responded to it. The work that I responded to was pretty minimal, and there was a lot of other stuff going on. My sense was of an upwelling of different ideas and of energy and of this happening in a museum, with a book. So it was really an extension of what I would have seen in *Craft Horizons*, but seeing the stuff in person was pretty cool.

**SQ:** Did you go to the American Craft Museum in New York? Do you remember that?

**MB:** Yes I did, some. It was not in the place—it must have been where the Folk Art Museum—? My memory is that it was near the Modern but it wasn't where it ended up across the street from the Modern. My memory is that it was a really skinny building.

**SQ:** It was on the same side of the street for a time.

**MB:** Is that the Folk Art Museum? I think that's where the Museum of Folk Art then.

**SQ:** I don't recall the year that it moved, into that kind of condominium space—

**MB:** With that big staircase. I must have seen a couple of shows there but I don't remember them.

**SQ:** Do you recall going to any craft fairs during your Bennington years?

**MB:** Yes, the ACC show was in Bennington, before it moved to Rhinebeck, probably the summer. When must it have been? Near the end. The summer of my senior year? I might have my years mixed up, but in the early seventies I remember going to the show and my memory of both that and I remember a field trip to Bennington Potters, and feeling a little superior, somehow above the macramé. It was seriously funky. The ACC fair in those days was about what you would picture, the early seventies you know, people in VW vans and kids and tables with stuff on them. It was really low-tech and low-concept, you might say. I remember feeling like, "This is sort of commercial" compared to the exalted conversation even in those days that you have in an art department where, as undeveloped as the dialog was about it, still we were expected to have intentions and we did critiques of our work. There was an aesthetic beam being beamed at what we were making. So compared to that, piles of planters or things with rutile glaze on them looked like a different order. But what's interesting about that is that it wasn't that long before I was basically doing the same thing. So why I wouldn't have already seen that this was something I should be investigating. I guess in some way I was investigating it, but I think I thought, well I know that I thought, I would bring my Rhodes and Leach-inflected celadon and white stoneware pure forms into that environment and not make blue pots.

**SQ:** But your sense or recollection is that at that time that environment of the ACC shows did not include the Leach/Rhodes, pure forms, understated—

**MB:** Right, yeah. And those people might very well have learned exactly the same thing I had learned but somehow they had had to make some kind of a step in order to sell their work and I wasn't going to do that [laughs].

**SQ:** So the people that you visited on your cross county trip would not have gone to craft fairs?

**MB:** Oh yeah, some of them did. I have a lot of notebooks. I have been keeping a journal ever since I was in college and I have probably close to seventy of them now, however, on that trip I lost my journal, which was quite traumatic for me. It was in California, so probably the first two-thirds of the trip, who we saw and all that kind of stuff—gone. But yes, some of them were working potters and those were not the highlights. They didn't stand out for me the way that the people who were making more artistic statements did.

**SQ:** You said that you had a clear sense that you wanted to be a potter.

**MB:** [Laughs] You wouldn't think from anything I have been saying that that's where I would have gone with that, would you?

**SQ:** Well I am curious what that meant before you embarked upon it. Do you recall what that meant to you, actually?

**MB:** Yes, I do. I would say it is really tied up with the politics of the time, which started for me with the anti-war movement but really gained traction with the women's movement. And the summer I was in California there was a women's newspaper that was published in Venice, and I can't remember the name of it but I remember picking it up and being, "Whoa, that's kind of interesting" and again, it was one of those things like visiting Karen that landed in me way below my thinking level. It wasn't like, "Wow, this is just what I have been wondering about." It was more like the fact that I was interested in it surprised me. It wasn't as though I had been looking for women's voices. So it was more as though the ground had somehow been prepared and then something was just dropped in, and not through my own efforts at all. So when I came back east my senior year a whole lot of stuff was just in turmoil and—I'm getting to being a studio potter, believe me—

**SQ:** No, this is great.

**MB:** I joined my first consciousness-raising group, so for the first time I sat around with a group of women and we talked about our lives as women—girls but women.

**SQ:** This was your senior year at Bennington?

**MB:** Yeah. And my memory of that time is that all sorts of clear hierarchies or assumptions or relationships were up for grabs, which included heterosexuality, and all kinds of ideas about what the women's sphere was and what the men's sphere was. But that also included the hierarchy of

the arts and I'm not sure that without that general fomentation that was going on in my thinking, whether I would have had a conscious sense of pottery as an anti-art option, an anti-art art option. I might have had some other idea of it, but I'm not sure that I would have seen it in quite that way, but what it seemed to be tied to in my thinking had to do with choosing a way to be an artist that was anti-elitist, both in terms of price, in terms of the form language, in terms of the power structure, and even in terms of the geographic power centers of it. So that in all those ways, by choosing to be a potter I was basically giving the finger to my entire art indoctrination up to that point! Along with some other things, like those guys! And this was really apart from the pots, and that's why I say my coming into being a potter had a lot more to do with identity and with the world in some ways, however romantic or unrealistic an idea of the world I had, than it had to do with making objects that expressed my ideas. It was almost like the pots were a by-product of a kind of ethical and political choice. Does that make sense?

**SQ:** Absolutely.

**MB:** And I don't at all think I was alone in that, but it felt as though, in the year and a half between when I went across country and when I graduated from college I started to see a path, and I can identify events and influences in that but there was so much being questioned and challenged in a way that was very exciting to me and very full of possibilities. So it seemed like the thing to do [laughs]. I have to say that the idea that the best thing to do with your college education was to go to grad school and get more education and further professionalize your educational path, that in ceramics anyway was not at all—at least at Bennington—that didn't have the weight that it does now. It didn't seem like the only serious and honorable thing to do next. And in fact there were some potters—we went up to see Jack O'Leary who was one of the New Hampshire potters. He was in one of the early, maybe the first issue of *Studio Potter*. There was a whole community of clay people in New Hampshire that had been war resisters, there was a whole radical community there and I believe that he was connected with that and Stanley somehow knew him, and he was another person I saw making a sort of intentional life out of being a potter. It didn't have the same impact on me that Karen did but he was the same general age, and again seeing somebody's studio and home, seeing their life.

So I had a few images in my head of how people might do this and I had a friend, one of my very close friends at Bennington, a woman named Rona Wilensky. All of us were involved in political stuff, anti-war, she was actually in the Marxist collective at Bennington [laughs]—those were the days. She was involved with a guy who was a few years older who lived in New York and did some kind of day job in the financial industry and went to Baldwin Pottery, he was making pots

there and somehow, I cannot retrieve this moment, the three of us cooked up the idea that we would all three go someplace and Rona and Richard would live together and Richard and I would set up a studio. Sounds great! And that's what we decided to do. I have to say that the more I talk to people who are just getting out of school now the more I see how much not having debt allowed me to have that idea. That had a huge impact on what my options were.

The three of us thought that we would go to some small city in the northeast and it could have been Providence, Albany, but Rona got a job in Hartford which is how we ended up going to Hartford. Going to Hartford was another one of those oblique steps because people at Bennington practically absorbed with the water in the dining hall the idea that the best thing for you to do after you go to Bennington is to go to New York, and if you're an art major then you go to New York and you get a waitressing job and you sleep with some guys and hope the Whitney will eventually come calling. Helen Frankenthaler, who was like our model, she went to New York. Clement Greenberg helped a lot in the way her career went. So to go to some non-place like Hartford was like deciding to be a potter. It was deciding that art could take place outside of the center. That had to do with both the form of what I was doing, the whole functional aspect which was going to pretty much put it in a whole different category, and it had to do with where I decided to do it.

**SQ:** You have touched on this, but can you describe how unusual that was within the specific Bennington context? Were other people making this decision, or was your professor Stanley like, "What are you doing moving to Hartford?" or, "Why do you insist on making functional pots?" How did this set of decisions you just described fit into your local context?

**MB:** Well, I think there were about eight of us ceramics majors and a couple did go to graduate school, a couple went and taught in private schools.

**SQ:** Private high schools?

**MB:** Yeah, or alternative high schools, hippie places that would have a ceramics program. I remember getting support from Stanley. Maybe a little bit puzzled. I'm sure he thought, "Go for it girl, but you don't have any idea what you're getting yourself into." Because the pots that I had been making, they were like my feminist version of Frimkess pots. They were thrown, many of them had decoration on them, figurative decoration. So I wasn't making functional pots, that's what is so strange.

**SQ:** You mean in your senior year at Bennington?

**MB:** Yeah, yeah, it's not like I was apprenticing myself to this idea. I mean I made big and small pots but function wasn't a big part of what I was trying to learn about. That began when I set up my studio. I feel as though in a lot of ways my education began when I set up my studio. So many things about the rhythm of working, but also about what are we doing, where, and how do we describe it to the world? And why do we think this is a good thing to do? And how is somebody who doesn't know anything about Chinese pots going to make sense of this in their own twentieth century life? I just really jumped in, and I didn't even know what I was jumping in to, but I feel as though setting up a studio, and storefront studio, so that I was encountering people all the time, that's where I started to have ideas about what pots were, and was really asked to have ideas. You have to make a case for it, from a marketing point of view if nothing else.

**SQ:** Stepping back just a teeny bit, if you were not focused on functional issues in your senior year—

**MB:** How the hell did you— ? [laughs]

**SQ:** Well that emphasizes even more the importance of your political involvement and your involvement in the women's movement, so I'd love if you talk about those a little bit more. So for example, how do you feel like your political interests led you to the idea of envisioning life as a functional potter?

**MB:** Well, I guess I would say it was a general questioning-of-authority stance, which had really started with the Vietnam War. That was the first political movement I showed up for, I would say. The civil rights movement I was aware of but I was really in high school when it was going on and pretty far removed from it and in fact if I had stayed in Wilmington I would have been closer to it because there was serious shit going down in Wilmington during the late sixties. It was really the war that was the first sort of public event that I felt I needed to take a stand about. Although, I didn't actually know anybody who was going to Vietnam. You could still get student deferments for a lot of the time I was in college, so why that touched me? I think it was more that there was stuff going on on campuses that even if you didn't think about it, you would be exposed to it. What came out of that, that was part of my college experience, had to do with the whole student upheaval with strikes. Big swaths of, I think, my sophomore year after the Kent State killings, school just stopped. I spent the last two months of that semester going to meetings and occupying the president's office and stuff like that. That was, I would say, a very generalized kind of activism that had to do with the established order being suspect. And if the established order in our political system was suspect then how could that not also leach into the established order in our field as we were beginning to define it?

**SQ:** Would you say the other art students had that same set of questions?

**MB:** Well no, not all of them. There were many who were busy getting ready to go to New York and be discovered by the Whitney.

**SQ:** Which was seen as a mainstreaming action?

**MB:** Yes, there was kind of a career track that was really based on relationships and that was part of Bennington's hands on—you have working artists in the art department and they expose you to the life of a working artist and the network of working artists, so it wasn't like that stopped everything in its tracks in the art department. Plenty of people just went right along with their plan. But for me it caused a rupture in my acceptance of the plan that was being laid out for me. How I would have actually pursued that plan as a ceramics major, I don't know. There were some things that were going to be really hard to keep stitched together in that anyway, even if I didn't want to be a functional potter. Clay? Hmm. I'm not sure where I would have gone with that. Instead, because the political analysis—political in the larger sense, not electoral politics, or even Marxist analysis of what power structures work, how things work—having that as part of what was vibrating in my head, that caused me to define pottery as an argument with or a rejection of that hierarchy rather than a minor form of it. You could make the same things but think about them in different ways, I think.

**SQ:** How was being a functional potter a feminist choice?

**MB:** It was an embrace of the marginal, like an overthrow of the whole delineation of some activities and some art forms and some media being the proper purview of art/men and others being the purview of crafts/homelife/women. So probably it would have been easy to shoot holes in my thinking about this, but to me it seemed like it all went together. Once you started questioning whether the highest and best use of your artistic ambitions was to make work that pushed the modernist agenda forward and ended up in one of ten galleries in New York and in one or two museums in New York, once you questioned whether that was the thing to do as a serious artist a lot of things—and let me say the problem of how you were going to do that as a serious female artist was not lost on me. Most of the people we were looking at and talking about were men, and where women fit into that was problematic to say the least. To just play the game somewhere else seemed like— The feminist part of it could have to do with elevating either craft or function or domesticity—not that I had a very thought-out argument about this—to a serious level.

**SQ:** Did you feel like your fellow travelers who were engaged with this—who do you feel like they were? Were they the people at the ACC shows? Were they some of the people that you visited? Were they other feminists who were upending—?

**MB:** I would say they were more other feminists. One of the things that happened when I went to Hartford was that I became a local potter, so I didn't go to an ACC show or even think about going to an ACC show for maybe four years after I set up my studio. My sense of my community was very local, very local. There were the people in my area that were making pots, some of whom were kind of an old guard. There was a whole group of people who had started making pots maybe five or ten years earlier than I had. There was Wesleyan Potters, the Brookfield Craft Center, there were institutions that were involved in the crafts but a little older and maybe I thought of them as more conventional because they didn't have this political analysis of the whole thing. And then there was a world that I was aware of from reading *Craft Horizons* and there was a world I was aware of from reading *Studio Potter*, the first issue of which came out the year that I opened my first studio.

**SQ:** 1972?

**MB:** Yeah, 1972. Where that was really happening was in Hartford. I lived in Hartford, I was involved in the Women's Center and I was involved in my studio. It was quite a while actually before I branched out to become part of the larger pottery community except in a sort of theoretical sense.

**SQ:** Can you talk more about your storefront studio [Park Street Potters] and setting yourself up?

**MB:** There it is [looking at photographs].

**SQ:** So you started with Rona and her—

**MB:** And Richard and we lived in this neighborhood that is near the capitol, kind of between Trinity College and the state capitol; it is a neighborhood called Frog Hollow which is kind of the immigrant neighborhood in Hartford. So I moved there in September of 1972 and I had a bunch of jobs, some really funky jobs but my basic agenda was to make money and scope out possible studio spaces. The idea was that Richard would quit his job at the end of the year. He came up in January I think, by which time I had discovered this building, it was an old auto parts store. Park Street was the main commercial street of this neighborhood but the neighborhood was pretty dicey still. The residential streets that went off of it had several generations of immigrants that

spoke different languages. There had been French-Canadians, there had been Polish, Irish, then there were Cubans, Puerto Ricans and then later on there were Southeast Asians. So there were three family houses that people who had gotten a foothold owned, and the ones who had done well enough had moved out to the suburbs but they rented out apartments, and then there was the commercial street, Park Street.

So we found this building, it had been empty for a while. There was a bank on the corner, so we went to the bank and they probably couldn't believe that somebody actually wanted to start a business on Park Street, which allowed them to overlook the fact that one of the people was twenty-two years old [laughs] and the other one was maybe twenty-nine. Richard actually at least had enough of a credit rating so that he could apply for a small business loan. I think it was five thousand dollars and that seemed like a lot of money to me. And they gave it to us. And with that we cleaned up this place. We got all this free shelving. Upstairs there had been all of these shelves that were this far apart for teeny little auto parts; there were miles of wooden shelving and all you had to do was unscrew it and you could make shelves out of it. So we spent like three and a half months fixing this place up, building shelves. There was a storefront, so we had a gallery in front and the back of the front area was where Richard and I worked and then behind that you could go up four steps and there were two rooms in back. There was a room where we had all the wheels because we were going to teach classes. What was I thinking? I knew more than a total beginner would know, but I had no idea what to teach. However, we taught pottery classes. There was a handbuilding room and a throwing room and if you went down there was a basement area that we built this kiln in, not very far from the ceiling, with like a forty foot chimney because it had to go all the way up through the roof. We ordered motorized kick-wheel kits from Brent Supplies, and some of [the money] we set aside for paying the rent. I think the rent was something like three hundred dollars a month. All for five thousand bucks, not bad.

We opened in the middle of April so we spent like three and a half months building this and then we opened for business—classes, selling pots.

**SQ:** Were you a supplier also?

**MB:** No.

**SQ:** So classes and gallery?

**MB:** Right. Actually we rented out space. I can't remember whether we did that from the very beginning but fairly soon after we opened we also rented out space for thirty-five dollars a month.

We had up to ten people who rented studio space and that included all of their materials and their firing. But they had to help make clay. We made clay. There was a basement underneath where Richard and I worked. It was funny, there were like split levels and in that basement we mixed the clay in a cement trough by foot.

**SQ:** Oh wow.

**MB:** Which is where the rest of the sludge that's in my lungs came from [laughs]. We had maybe four or five classes. I think we had classes every weeknight and then maybe a kids' class on Saturday. We made clay for all those people plus the people who rented studio space, without a clay mixer [laughs]. I can't even believe now that I did this. [Looking at photographs] Here's our display, some macramé plant hangers—

**SQ:** Did you have a sense that you were sort of a pioneer in your community or in pottery?

**MB:** Yes, yeah, because all the potters in the area were in the suburbs. The dieffenbachia.

**SQ:** So what did it mean then that you were in the city?

**MB:** It was important for me to be in the city.

**SQ:** In what sense?

**MB:** Because we were making pots for the people, duh [laughs]. We were not making pots for suburban housewives! Of course, it felt really important for me to be in a real place and I have taught in a lot of—I think Penland comes through most strongly—the idea of an artist community actually didn't appeal to me, even though when I go to places like that I can see how great it is to have artists around you, and to be in a place that jointly holds an idea about that way of life. But really, from the very beginning, and I don't exactly know where this came from. but I wanted to in some way make my work in the context of the real world as I understood it. And to try to make it make sense in that context. Which is a little tricky really, and maybe even quixotic or counterproductive, but I know that had a big influence on my ability to talk about and understand pots in a fairly broad range of ways. I'm sure that was tied to the whole political ideal that I started out with, and the fact that it was kind of ridiculous, or at the very least romantic if not ridiculous. I just thought, "I'll make good pots, as I learned to understand that term, from reading Bernard Leach and looking at Sung Dynasty pots [laughs], I'll make good pots and people will want them. All I have to do is put them out there." Then, of course, people come in the store and go, "What the hell is this? What am I going to use it for?" That back and forth, the bumping up against other

people's ideas of what pots are and what they're for and what makes them valuable or not or worth spending some of their household income on or finding a place for them in their house—was enormously valuable to me, more valuable than I probably knew I was signing up for. I think because I learned so much from it I have pretty much almost always tried to find ways to spend at least some of my time or put my work sometimes into environments where it is not already understood what they are about, to see what happens, to see what kind of sense they make to people, to see what people who don't have an art or ceramic vocabulary, what they see in them. I'm interested in that, I'm sort of up for that. I don't want to do it all the time anymore. I did it a lot for the first seven or eight years I was making pots. That was really where I was most of the time and I don't need to do it all the time now, but I still need to do it some of the time. I live in a small town, so part of the way I do that now is that my connection with people in town and my connection with people through my work—to try to find ways that those overlap sometimes.

**SQ:** Can you remember when you were at your Park Street studio any specific ways your pots changed in response to this? Any stylistic changes?

**MB:** Well, there's like the whole function thing, I had to learn about function.

**SQ:** So you started off with the idea of making functional pots but then had to learn what that meant?

**MB:** Well yeah, exactly. Some of that had to do with sometimes changing the pots so that they actually worked. Sometimes it had to do with learning how to think or talk about them—learning what the idea of function that I am trying to fit these pots into, is. It operated in both those ways but I had everything to learn about how to make a lid fit, how to make a knob you could grasp, how to make a casserole, how to make a cup, how to make a pouring spout that would pour. We had not really dealt with those things on the nuts and bolts level in school. So there's a disconnect there between what I was doing and then where I ended up. When I think about it, what drove me across that gap?

**SQ:** What do you think drove you across that gap?

**MB:** The idea of being a potter. Which came out of the idea of being an artist in a way that squared with my other ideas. The pots came out of that rather than building a life around the pots.

**SQ:** You've mentioned Bernard Leach and his book. Was that a significant source of stylistic information for you?

**MB:** Well, yes. My memory is that there were a couple of kinds of historical pots that were held up to be exemplary. He might have talked about English slipware but really he mostly talked about Japanese pots and Chinese pots. I would have to say I appreciated the Japanese pots, [ShÅ ji] Hamada and tea ware and the whole aesthetic of imperfection, the whole wabi-sabi thing. I liked that in a from here up [gestures to neck] way, but Chinese pots really landed in me. I think their minimalism, their refinement, the fact that they are sort of leather-hard pots rather than soft clay pots, made sense to me in a way that the sort of squishy pots—I could appreciate someone else making them but I couldn't make those kinds of pots, I'm not a loose potter. I can remember the kind of rigor of Chinese pots, especially Sung pots spoke to me, and I still love those pots. And he had plenty of examples of that in the book and Stanley would show us pieces of that, too. Not all of these pots fit that, but the relationship of the foot to the rim, the tension in the surface, the tension of the wall around the volume. Even when I was making pots that did not have any antecedent in Chinese pots, that was part of what I was working from.

**SQ:** Do you think that either Bernard Leach or Mingei more broadly, how do you think it meshed with your political ideas around upending hierarchy or the women's movement?

**MB:** I loved the idea that in another place and actually in another time somebody would be articulating the idea of a kind of folk aesthetic, a collective aesthetic that a group of makers could, out of their tradition, express something beautiful and thrilling and noble. That went with the whole collectivist, socialist idea that there could be a collective intelligence and a collective aesthetic intelligence, not only an individual intelligence. So even though the pots were, of course, Mingei and teaware—it took very sophisticated educated elite people picking out these common objects and building an entire narrative around their commonness but also around their own discernment in being able to see what's in those common objects. That's a kind of recurring piece of the craft story. The Japanese idea of folkness as it is expressed in Korean rice bowls, their appreciation of those bowls does not extend actually to Korean people, so that that sort of high/low, connoisseurship idea that is like the backstory to the elevation of a low or common art, a craft that's associated with common people, the idea of it being special though common, is a political idea but its also an art idea.

**SQ:** It doesn't sound like you found that alienating at the time?

**MB:** No, but I didn't know a lot of the history of it. I didn't really know what the relationship of Japan and Korea was, so when I found a book on Korean pots that happened to be written by somebody Japanese, I didn't know that a Korean looking at that same book might bring a whole different story about what it means to have a Japanese collector talking about your ceramic

history. That was completely outside of my awareness. It wasn't, actually, until I started teaching ceramic history that I started to understand more about that part of it. Like, the white narrative about black art is very similar, I think, because the qualities that are appreciated are specifically a little bit of otherness, so there's a kind of interplay there that we have our own version of.

**SQ:** It is interesting back at the Park Street Studio the layering of these ideas, the feminist ideas and collective aesthetic, intelligence maybe, how they fit together.

**MB:** They seemed to me to fit together [laughs]. That only might be because I am a very good welder. I'll make them fit.

[End of November 20, 2011 session]

[Start of November 21, 2011 session at Mary Barringer's home, looking at some of her older pots]

**MB:** I live with a set of function pots that are part of my kitchen, which I really didn't think of until you asked the question. It's not like I think, "What did I think about pots then that is different from what I think about now." I am glad, actually, to be able to have a couple of entries in the group of pots that I really love that other people have made. They are like place holders for me that keep my identity as a potter valid in a way, in the way that my identity as a potter is reflected back to me in this arena, in my kitchen, as opposed to the way it is reflected back to me in my studio or in public. Those are slightly different navigations. Although I think mine might be a little more complicated, similar to yours, that navigation about your identity as a potter. I kind of feel that every contemporary potter undergoes some version pretty much all the time, because what it means to be a potter is an invented thing now. It is not a trade, or even a profession, that you inherit from your family or your village, and even if you go up the ladder of it by going to school and by doing the steps that you are supposed to do, the majority of people that you are likely to encounter on any given day in this country and many other countries are not going to understand it as a profession that required a graduate degree. So it's not going to end there. Just because you have a master's degree in ceramics, not everybody will say, "Oh, okay" in the way that if you were a doctor or a lawyer or an architect or a teacher.

It is more like that professionalizes and settles some questions and raises others, like "You can get a master's degree in that?" or "You can make a living at that?" Those questions just never end and I think they are part of what is interesting about being a potter now. You're always bouncing it out, bouncing it back, and it's getting bounced back at you. Even if you live in pottery heaven, even if you live at Penland [School of Crafts], sooner or later you are going to talk to

somebody who is perplexed or curious or just clueless about what you are saying when you say you are a potter. So that alongside the concreteness of what we understand being a potter to mean, which is “I make things to use,” is part of the particular quality of being a potter now.

**SQ:** How do you think that’s different from when you started out in 1972?

**MB:** I don’t know that in the grand sweep of ceramic history that it’s changed that much in forty years. I think that the little world that is the immediate field of ceramics has changed some and the slightly larger cultural field of what a handmade thing means now, as opposed to what it meant in the eighties or the seventies, has changed in America.

**SQ:** How would you describe that change?

**MB:** Well, I think that there has almost been a coming around. There’s a kind of spiral. I’m not a historian or a scholar so these are my own thoughts, but that some of the ethical or political baggage—and I don’t mean baggage in a negative way—part of the package that was involved in being a potter when I became a potter fell away in the eighties and nineties both as a result of changes in the art world and changes in the money world, changes in the economy. Now I think that spirit has revived, actually, among young people, the DIY, anti-authoritarian spirit. But it is being revived by young people who are coming at it from a different place because they would have to be. They’re young, and they have these ideas and so in that sense it’s like, “Yeah, that’s what we did” and yet, the country is in a different place. What it means to be hopeful or what it means to be outside the mainstream—there are different tools and it’s against a different economic background.

At the same time I am really aware of the way that the commodification of every single object, identity, and idea has hugely increased since I began. I feel that young people who are making what seem to be anti-establishment, “I’m not going to kiss the ACC’s ass, I’m going to do it my own way.” I recognize that impulse and I can very clearly identify with it and at the same time very clearly see how ironic it is that the ACC would be the target of that anti-authoritarian gesture. That is one of the funny things that is happening in the craft world. The ACC is full of people who think of themselves as anti-authoritarian, it’s like, “How could you be against us? We’re you!” And they don’t maybe recognize, in the way that a lot of people in our generation don’t recognize, that we have become the establishment. “But I was on the ramparts!” So there’s a funny kind of blind spot.

The other thing is that there is a kind of savviness about the packaging and marketing of your stance, of your ideas, of your brand, that makes the flavor of this new upwelling, this new generational assertion of independence from the establishment, it gives it a very different tone and flavor and it has different tools available to it. And they are tools that I am not comfortable wielding but I can see them being wielded and it just means a different thing. I think that that affects some media more than others. It is still harder to be a DIY potter than to be a DIY fiber artist, just because of the equipment and skills you need even to make bad pots. So compared to that whole field of what you would find at a DIY show, pots are in the minority and they are not a big a part of that movement as other media are. But within ceramics, that is a definite and growing presence in our field and it is coming from a different direction in terms of what the standards are or what the aspirations are. I think it is interesting to see where that is going to go.

**SQ:** I am curious how you see these changes manifesting in the actual objects.

**MB:** This could bring on a little curmudgeonly rant here! [laughs].

**SQ:** That's great, I think we may be due for a curmudgeonly rant.

**MB:** Well, I am fascinated and all that, but I gotta say, I don't like the pots very much. I just juried the *Strictly Functional* show and that was a really interesting little exercise in what's out there. You get to really survey not the entire range but a pretty wide range of what people think functional pots are now, as opposed to what they thought they were a couple of years ago. One of the things that I notice is that I came at the whole enterprise of making pots as an artistic activity, as opposed to making pots as a philosophical activity, from a background that really stressed form—and that was not only of the prevailing critical language, if you could call it that, the exemplary pots that were talked about as I was learning and the terms in which they were talked about—but also because I came to it from sculpture. So it's all about form for me. I have lightened up a little bit about this but I still don't really believe that great decoration can redeem a bad form [laughs]. So when I read that Michael Cardew piece and he says that pots are about the majesty of form, part of me is going, "Eek, I probably wouldn't say that out loud," but I believe it! I agree [laughs].

**SQ:** And do you think recent work by young people is less about form?

**MB:** Yes, I do. And I think there are two reasons for that but they are both very much tied to another level of the influence of two-dimensional representation on our idea of three-dimensional form. That was already probably true, not in the seventies but certainly in the eighties when there

were more magazines and more galleries so you're seeing more pictures of pots. Gradually your idea of what pots are is really made up of library of pictures rather than a library of objects. So that was a danger twenty or thirty years ago but it has become accelerated by the Internet. The whole culture's idea of the line between physical reality and digital has moved somewhere, I'm not sure what direction to say it has moved, but it is in a different place than it was and that's a conundrum that comes out in a lot of different ways—in photography, in courtrooms. It is certainly not unique to pottery, but pottery's version of it has to do with even more pressure than was true twenty-five or thirty years ago to make something that presents itself well in that medium. It is a sort of "if a tree falls in the forest" question. If you make a great pot and it looks like shit on your website, is it a great pot? How is anybody going to know it's a great pot when more and more people are finding out about your work that way? The whole conversation about what great pots are is going to be taking place among people separated from each other physically, separated from the objects physically, but all looking at the same screen. It's not just the three-dimensionality of the pot but the issue of volume and the issue of the relationship of the volume to the rest of what a pot is, to the experience of volume and heft, the narrative of how a pot travels bottom to top, diagonally around, circumferentially, the relation of the parts to the whole, that all is resolved differently if you are looking at a silhouette, even if you are looking at multiple silhouettes, than it does if you are looking at an actual object. I feel as though there is a thinning out of physical, kinesthetic, tactile material life that makers are bringing to making, because you still only have the same amount of attention and you can't pay attention to everything. If you are paying attention to this, this, and this you are going to have to skip over that, that, and that.

I just don't actually believe the Internet—it has brought us more information but it has not brought us more knowledge. You can go wide or you can go deep, but you can't go both, I think. So somebody who has lived in the same place their whole life doesn't know a ton of things about the rest of the world, but they know things about where they live that we will never know. We will never even know what it is like to know those things. In our field that is true about what potters who make the same thing over and over again, what they know in their hands and in their eyes and in their bodies about those forms is a quality of knowing and of manifesting that knowing into a form, that may be extinct in another generation, at least in industrialized countries. What I notice is that the forms seem a lot dead-er. There is very often just a kind of clunkiness. It's hard—we don't really have the language for, "Where is that liveliness or lack of it in the pots?" It partly has to do with touch and partly with proportion and it might have to do with a very subtle difference between a curve that is one way or another way, or a surface that is one way or the other. What is being put on top of that, which is very often decoration or design, almost like cultural references that say, "I'm not a seventies potter, I'm not one of those brown spot potters. I am a mid-century-

modern potter.” So there will be something on the surface that leap-frogs over my generation back to the one before it by quoting or making certain visual references that tie it into that and not coincidentally also allow it to be marketed in an environment where that is a taste.

There is a style shift going on. When it first came out it was like, “Oh! That is kind of different and interesting and different and fresh.” And it is becoming more a kind of signature of an era. I don’t know how big the era is. Or maybe of a generation, or of certain locations. The first time someone did a pot and did a sort of grunge drawing on it of some raggedy figure, some deliberately awkward drawing, it was kind of interesting and now you see a lot of it and you see there is actually a range of pieces that that works on and pieces that it doesn’t work on which are nevertheless tied to that whole look. In the very same way that everybody who ever took a workshop with Michael Simon has put out some version of that black slip and that geometric division. Some people made it work and made it their own and some people still look like they took a Michael Simon workshop.

I don’t have the skills to really describe or lay out how those style things change, but I notice in a kind of informal way that they are changing and that tastes are somewhat generational. I can remember noticing at some point in Karen Karnes’ work, her Bauhaus-based training really started to come out. Not so much in pots of that era [gestures to a small jar] but actually later. Her later pots started looking more like forties’ pots than the ones she had made in the seventies. I thought, “That is so interesting.” It made me really think about the way that your eye for proportion as a potter is tied to a fairly time-specific and maybe even people-specific group of facts about your moment of learning, of seeing, of being surrounded by things that are influential to you. You carry that with you. People who come from a different moment—it’s not completely immutable and it’s not like the boundaries of it are rigid and impermeable, but in a rough kind of way those things line up. They line up for me in a way I am aware of now, that I wasn’t even aware of ten years ago. I am seeing that I am a product of the moment in which I became a potter and the things that I was shown. Even though my idea of what I would aspire to widened out and became more personal and had more choices in it—it’s not like I didn’t swallow the whole package hook, line, and sinker, but compared to somebody who started twenty years after I did I can see stylistic fingerprints that probably date me.

**SQ:** Looking at these pots in front of us here, what are those stylistic fingerprints?

**MB:** Hmm. I am sure it partially has to do with the foot and with the relationship of the rim to the foot. Because of having looked at Chinese pots, because of that having been held up as a real ideal of proportion, Chinese pots—the ones I was looking at, this is certainly not true of all

Chinese pots—but let's say mostly Yuan and Sung pots tend to have a relatively small foot. You don't see a lot of flat bottomed or pots that are chunky at the bottom so they have a kind of stasis in terms of the way that they stand. So I am sure that when I am making things, what looks like a right foot has somehow trickled down from those pots, as well as a sense of the glaze being more of a screen that has some character but also allows you to see through, rather than a paint job or makeup job, or a separate layer. My glaze repertoire was extremely narrow in my day of glazing pots. Nine-tenths of the possibilities I did not even think about but what—apart from the functional things—I wanted a glaze to do was to show the form, not detract from it, and to show the hand. I never did really get with the idea of eliminating the throwing marks so as to create a pristine surface for decoration. That interplay between the form and the surface—this has somewhat carried through into my handbuilding, but in a different way—I think the information in the surface is tied to the form in some way rather than being imposed on the form. It is either tied to the form of the form, or tied in some way to the way that the form came into being, or both. I am not sure that is really as important now for a lot of young potters as it seemed to me. It seemed like that was sort of an absolute good that had a little bit of a moral whiff to it having to do with form being the truth. If the surface did not both enhance and make visible that truth, then it had no business on the pot.

**SQ:** Where do you think that came from?

**MB:** Leach, definitely. Leach and a little bit of the Japanese love of showing material and process, not trying to make things look finished in the way that European pottery was trying to make things look finished, so the china-cabinet pots that most of us grew up with, whether they were genuine Wedgwood pots or knock offs, they came from that late nineteenth-century idea of what china was supposed to look like, what the good stuff was supposed to look like. I would say a lot of people in my generation became potters as a specific repudiation of that aesthetic, that biography, the European-ness of it but also the sort of falsity of it, the idea of a niceness that hides what went into it. Does this make any sense?

**SQ:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm thinking of you as a young maker, early seventies, active politically, making an ethical decision to make pots, active in the women's movement, and I'm thinking about the actual pots you made and about the connection between the idea of truth and not having the niceties represented physically in these objects. How was your ethical orientation manifested into a physical object?

**MB:** The playing field that I allowed myself when I was making these pots was not very big, because it had on all sides of it the words and values and example of Leach and Cardew, the

Alfred version of that as handed down through my teacher. It wasn't as though I surveyed the world of pottery and thought, "What pots are going to reflect my ethical ideas?" All other pots fell so far short of what I thought was the ethical idea of being a potter that they weren't even in the running.

**SQ:** Including the people you visited on the trip?

**MB:** Well, I didn't see anybody there that tempted me from my way [laughs]. And so, no. I did make some blue and white pots—full disclosure. We have one. I should probably bring this one out because it is going to throw the whole celadon and brown pots into a stupor. This is probably from while I was still in Park Street, I moved in late '76, we were only on Park Street for three years, so it's from before '76. I don't think I made any blue and white pots after the move. So I looked at a few Native American pots, don't you think?

When I look at this pot I am thinking about how clunky my idea of dividing up space was. I am not a decorator and I think you can tell that from this pot. It is interesting to try to remember back to what made me want to try to take this on, because it is pretty different from those. I didn't feel constrained to present a unified style. I didn't have that public sense of my aesthetic identity, which was probably a good thing. I seem to remember a book about Pueblo pots coming into my view fairly early on. And we had pots around the studio because we were teaching so there was an array of things for people to look at and the idea of trying to divide up a pot in that way, even though it is inside out. If I look at this the design was ripped off from one of those bread bowls, from some Zuni or Acoma pot, but made on an enclosed form so there is already something different happening, just playing around with it. I am guessing you have had the experience, when you make pots all day there is a rhythm to the sameness. You are actually trying to make a set of pieces that is the same and your body is creating natural scale. You take the same amount of clay, so without using a caliper your bowls are the same size. There is that sort of rhythm that comes out of your eye and your body and the project you have set up. Almost as soon as you get into that rhythm there is a part of your mind that starts going, "What if I just tweak that a little bit? What if I do this instead of this?" It is like a countervailing impulse to riff on that thing you have been doing. I would guess that was part of what was going on with this. I probably made, I don't know, a few dozen jars that had painted decoration on them. Some of them fairly precise, kind of elaborate, and it was fun to figure out how to divide it up.

It wouldn't have troubled me at all that I was taking a Native American design and doing it in cobalt on a stoneware pot, on a cookie jar. I suspect that the other thing that was going on with this was that—my pots went right out into the showroom when they came out of the kiln. It was

not as though I sat and studied them. I was getting immediate feedback from the buying public and, then as now, the buying public responds to decoration, and the buying public definitely responds to blue. Making a case for a pot like this compared to making a case for a pot like that [gesturing to a celadon bowl] was a lot easier. And I felt the need to have a variety of things in that showroom, some plain pots some decorated pots. There was a little bit of an eye toward having a range of stuff rather than saying, "This is what I do, take it or leave it."

**SQ:** Did you have a clear sense that there were forms that potters made? That you had to make a mug, say?

**MB:** Yes. Not forms that potters made, but function that potters fulfilled. And there was the standard range, of which we had cookie jars, pasta jars, casseroles lidded and unlidded, plates large and small, bowls, cups, cups and saucers, big pitcher, creamers. In some ways that's a vocabulary that's based on life as we all live it and in some ways it is an artificial form vocabulary that is based on a received idea that's quite cultural and time-bound, of what a well-equipped pantry or kitchen should have. In that way it is subject to re-thinking like, "Hmm, berry bowls, what a concept." Do potters need to make berry bowls? Do people need to have them? At some point that percolated in as an idea, so there are always some new things you could play around with. Since the sense of necessity attached to, say, cups as opposed to the sense of necessity attached to a berry bowl is really a construct. Nobody needs any of this (laughs). They don't need it to survive. They don't feel themselves to need it for a civilized life. The people who need these are responding to something much more particular and everybody else is fulfilling those needs at much less expense and much more easily by going to Wal-Mart, which didn't exist then, or by going to Crate and Barrel, however they are doing it. The difference between an everyday pot and a special pot in my own repertoire of pots I was making, was one of degree rather than of kind.

**SQ:** Thinking about the people that bought your pots, how do you think your decision to embark upon an ethical life of making pottery connected to the people who purchased them? Who were you making work for?

**MB:** That was one of the things I had never thought about until I was in a storefront. I learned a lot about that question. I thought about it in the broadest and most stirring terms, but I had not really thought about the realities and the nuances of material culture or marketing, depending on how you want to look at it. Finding a place in the world for what you make, which involves understanding who is going to use it. You develop this kind of working anthropological sense of not only who buys pots but who buys your pots. That evolved very slowly for me. It was learned a little bit—a lot—on the ground. I cringe at how naïve this sounds, although I am not sorry to have

been naïve, but I really thought if we opened up this pottery in what was a fairly marginal urban neighborhood and we made good pots, we would, just by the sheer goodness of our pots, we would somehow convert people from melmac to celadon [laughs]. The idea that somebody would spend the same amount of money on a pair of sneakers that they could spend instead on a handmade pot—swallowing that, instead of thinking, well that just means our country is full of ignorant boobs who don't know a good thing when they see it—realizing there was actually a much more interesting investigation there about what makes people attracted to things, what makes them actually want to own them, what makes them make sense to them. Where you are just taking in information and where you actually have a role to play in advocating or illuminating that, so that somebody who might not actually get it, by walking by gets interested in it because of something you do, whether it is your display, your demonstrated commitment to being in the neighborhood, your relationships with people in the neighborhood. It is both an arena to investigate and an arena to operate in that you can do something with. That was really a big learning curve for me that has very strongly influenced what I think about pots. Had I holed up in some studio and made stuff and wholesaled it so that I might actually be dealing with the audience at one remove, really dealing with the storeowners rather than dealing with users. Or had I gotten a teaching job and had I made stuff and exhibited it in galleries periodically, I would not have felt these thoughts. I am not sure I would have even been interested. In school nobody suggested that these were interesting things to think about. We were thinking about pottery with a capital P, but we weren't thinking about where pottery lives in the contemporary world and what those different places mean and what kind of choices we want to make.

I am not the only potter of my age I know who lived that for a while and came up against the unfortunate fact that the ideal of accessibility, which had to do with price maybe more than anything else, maybe runs up against the fact the we are spending more time doing this than a machine spends and we need to be paid more for it that somebody in a third-world country needs. Hmm. So what are we going to do with that? Are we going to raise our prices and just get behind the reality that we are making luxury goods? Eek. Talk about selling yourself down the river. Or are we going to have a range of pots—I know several potters who have some version of what Bob Briscoe calls “union dues,” some pots that he makes that he is essentially giving away, so that people who don't have a lot of money can still have one of his pots. And he could not afford to have all of his pots be like that, but it is important to his idea of himself as a potter—and I totally get this—that there be something there that a student or somebody who had never picked up a handmade pot before can actually afford. It's not just that they can't afford it—if they probably really really want it they could afford a more expensive one, but that in the economy they operate in it is an object they can bring into their lives.

**SQ:** When did the need to address this issue start becoming clear to you?

**MB:** Probably after about three years, four years. But the ground kept shifting underneath me. The first three years we just sold pots out of our showroom. Then I spent a couple of years doing some wholesale shows, going to Rhinebeck and to Baltimore one horrible year when it snowed. So doing a little bit more wholesaling, which is a different equation about how much you are going to charge for this thing.

**SQ:** When did that start for you?

**MB:** Probably '77. Then I had my first, what would I call it, my first crisis of making during which time all the constraints I had joyfully embraced about function and working on the wheel and glazing my pots the way I glazed them and being an ethical potter started feeling more like constrictions than like really fruitful limitations, like the path I was on. That was maybe after about seven years.

**SQ:** You did not have a storefront at that point?

**MB:** Right, I had moved out to this art center that had little studios in Avon, outside of Hartford, so I'm in the suburbs. It was a place that was devoted to the arts. I moved out of the 'hood. Richard had by then decided he was going to do other things. He actually didn't last very long as a studio potter, about four years. So I was working on my own, I don't have students or a big studio to maintain. This is a rhythm that has happened a bunch of times for me. The thing that was working really great suddenly isn't working so great and you start being annoyed with it rather than being enthralled with it. I am kind of a slow learner, so I spend more time than I probably should in the annoyed stage before it's like, "obviously something is trying to tell you it wants to change." Part of the reason that I am a slow learner is that technical and process issues—the beginning of that as a problem or imbalance, instability in my making, is not a comfortable place for me. I don't feel creatively energized by it. I know people who are energized by problem-solving but I am not one of them. I need to have the problems solved at a certain level so that I can start working without thinking so much about what I am doing. That's one of the things that affects the oscillation between knowing what I am doing and knowing too much about what I am doing and needing to not know what I am doing but not liking that. There is an oscillation there that continues. It is probably true for everybody but it is around different things or it might resolve itself in different ways or have a different rhythm in terms of how long it takes you to work through an idea or a stage in your making.

When that happened that was when I started handbuilding, and I didn't stop working on the wheel but I felt as though I needed an outlet for ideas that couldn't come through working on the wheel and they couldn't come through thinking about function. I would say in some ways the ethics of being a potter split, in that the functional pots as a body of work kept one foot in the everyday and at the same time the handbuilt pots, which took way longer to make, and were clearly art objects or objects of artistic inquiry even though they lived in a different place—sociologically they partook of the gallery rather than of the dish rack—they were, ironically, at the same time places where I explored other ideas about what pots could be, about the vessel as a carrier of ideas or information or association. That sounds contradictory and I had not thought about it this way until it was coming out of my mouth, so that might account for some oddness in the argument, but I think it would have been too scary for me to have just dumped being a functional potter. I wasn't completely done with that in terms of making things, but I also wasn't done with it as a part of my identity, as a potter who made things that people could understand, who could demonstrate her mastery of certain techniques and a certain language, who communicated with the world through functional pots in a way that I had worked out. These other pots—it was less clear what world I was communicating with or how I was communicating with those pieces. That both allowed new things to happen but I wasn't going to just cut off my other identity and take a total leap into the world of handbuilding and the other possible world that pots could tie me to.

**SQ:** Did it feel risky or dangerous in some way to not be grounded in function pots?

**MB:** Yes, yes it did. And it still does. At various times in my life, when some other investigation in terms of my work has really taken over or when some other activity in terms of the array of things that I do has taken over, like being an editor as opposed to being a potter, I still after all this time feel ambivalent and a little pained when I have to admit that I am not the potter I once was. Like, I feel that at Demarest [annual pottery show at the Art School at Old Church, Demarest, New Jersey]. I stopped showing at Demarest a couple of years ago because it is insane for me to try to get ready for that at a time that I always know in advance—it would be like you trying to go to Demarest. You know it is the end of the semester, you know you are going to have all these things due. Why would you sign up for that? I had an awareness when I took over *Studio Potter* that part of what it offered was a chance for me to re-think my relationship to the studio. If my time was going to be much more restricted, and I was going to have a job, I was going to have regular paycheck coming in, there was both the time and the money and a different outlet for who I am and what I think, that under all of those conditions it didn't make sense for me to use my time in the studio to crank out inventory. So this is a chance, I'm thinking, to use my studio time in a different way, to push something different, maybe experiment more, whatever. It has been harder

to actually hold to that than I thought it would be. Part of the reason it is hard, even though I know that and even though there are things that are quite outside the realm of the ethical potter that I really want to spend time working on, with my hands in my material, and see where they go, because I don't know where they would go and I don't want to know without working through them physically. I don't want to think about where it will go, I want to find out where they'll go.

All that being said, when I go to Demarest I feel sad not to be a potter that can be in that company as a colleague. I feel sad to not really belong in the world of people who work out their ideas on that scale. It has to do with numbers and the form language and it has to do with identity and I am a little bit oblique to that. I have been oblique to that for a while, truthfully, if I am honest with myself. Being the editor definitely makes that unmistakable, even to me [laughs]. Even in my attempts to smudge the dividing line. It feels bittersweet to me. In a middle-aged way you look at your youthful self and you know you can't go back there and you know you don't even really want to go back there, but that doesn't entirely prevent you from feeling some tenderness and regret about the self that fully inhabited that set of conditions and ideas.

**SQ:** Do you feel like when you started handbuilding in '79 that was in retrospect a key turning point in terms of opening this wider sense of your creativity?

**MB:** Yes, yes I do.

**SQ:** What do you feel like was happening for you just before that? Where were you within the wheel-thrown functional work you were making?

**MB:** I think I was coming up against my own fraught relationship with mastery. Not that I was a master, I'm not saying that I was a master by any means, but that I had gotten to a place of skill and control over the processes, over the forms, over the glazes that was either going to open out, if I knew how to do that, or it was going to back me into a corner. It was probably my first encounter with that aspect of my nature which is that I am quite cautious, I am not a big risk taker. Once I have something it is hard to let go of it, so having that grasp of how to make a pot and feeling good about the pots that I was making—there's like a bell curve. For a while you are trying to get there, and there's a little period when you are there and you are pumped about it, and then it [laughs].

**SQ:** Falls apart again [laughs]?

**MB:** Well it doesn't fall apart, but it is actually more exciting to wonder where you are going to go with this thing that you know that you are learning how to do, than it is to know how to do it and have the horizon close in a little bit. "Hmm, I think I know what I'm going to do with this." For me, I don't know if it has to do with risk aversion or a literal minded aspect of my brain—the possibility of doing something different with those same tools is not a way that I usually go. I have to set it up so that I have new tools.

**SQ:** And handbuilding was that?

**MB:** And handbuilding was. There are lots of people even then—there are way more now—but even then there were certainly people using the wheel as a tool, so instead of making straight-ahead pots they would use the wheel as a tool to make the basic forms and then make the pots. It is not rocket science to imagine the possibility and yet, I couldn't get myself there. It was like, "Okay, I know how to throw, how about if I do something different with this?" instead of feeling like I know how to throw and I am noticing that I'm making the same things. There's a kind of flat-footedness in that. So I guess I need to take myself off the wheel. It's like neural pathways almost. I have to make my forms a different way, which is going to shake up some stuff but also let in some stuff that is going to be different. The very fact that I am so well-versed in this way of making things is starting to be a problem. That's what was happening.

**SQ:** What was happening with the surfaces? Was that a point of familiarity and comfort, or was it also—?

**MB:** Of my thrown pieces or my handbuilt pieces?

**SQ:** In the same way you could switch from wheel throwing to handbuilding to open up new neural pathways in a sense, did you try changing your palette in a significant way?

**MB:** Well, I could have. I look back on that moment and see about a dozen things I could have suggested to my young self [laughs] if I were my teacher or my therapist. No, I didn't. In a way that would have felt backwards to me, and it probably still would. I don't get at form by surface, so I wouldn't have gotten at my ideas. When I say my ideas, I mean form and surface, but form was such a big part of them that the idea of changing something about my sense of what I was doing by changing the surface probably would not have even occurred to me, because the surface came out either after or outside of the form. Part of what changed by changing to handbuilding was a new way of producing surface that was different yet had the same kind of integrity that the surface does. The surface is tied to the process and reflects, talks about, and is a record of the

process. Handbuilding gives you a different surface but, especially the first handbuilt pots I made were coil built, full of marks. I think everybody who has changed from working on the wheel to handbuilding has gone through this ooh, aah thing about their thumb marks for a while, the rhythm of it, the visual record of that process. That was enough for a little while. Not for a way long time, but the first bunch of handbuilt pots I made were all about the coils.

**SQ:** What did utility mean to you in these pieces?

**MB:** Nothing. They were my anti-utilitarian pots. Although they had historical antecedents in utilitarian pots. Part of what was going on was that I was looking at a different part of ceramic history. Looking at prehistoric pots and thinking about not only how they were made but the context they were made for, which might not be a table-based context, say. It kind of thrilled me that the idea of a functional pot could include functions that opened out into very different environments, that blew a hole inside of my head almost. I thought it was sort of a big deal that I was able to carry an idea of function that came from tenth-century China into twentieth-century America without feeling that there was too much translation having to go on. That's partly because there were many translations I wasn't actually examining. The other thing was that compared to the pre-historic pots there is less difference between a Sung China eating environment and a twentieth-century eating environment than there is between either one of those and a Bronze-Age eating environment. It was like, "These are functional pots too, but they have pointy bottoms, or they lie on their side."

There was a huge world of pots that I had not really looked at even. The initial ones very explicitly were tied to that discovery and that embrace of those pots as part of—maybe it's colonialist of me—but part of my ceramic history as well as Leach, Sung China, and Japanese teaware. Those are part of my ceramic history, too, but it got bigger.

**SQ:** You have used the phrase "good pot" to talk about some of these objects. Would you say that your definition of what constituted a good pot changed at this point?

**MB:** Yes, I do. It became more personal. I became more attuned to the pots among the gigantic spectrum of historical and prehistoric clay objects, the ones that really rocked my boat. That was tied to, in some ways, allowing in the parts of my sensibility that were tied to feminism, tied to an emerging consciousness as a feminist and to women's cultures, to women's culture as distinct from the dominant culture. It went back to the figure, to something I thought I was leaving by becoming a potter rather than a sculptor. It also looped into the idea that came out of a lot of

feminist art that was being made at the time, but also an idea that appears in ceramic history throughout the whole time, of a pot as a carrier of a message.

**SQ:** You have described the decision to make Leach inspired pottery in Hartford as a feminist decision and—

**MB:** Now I'm saying the decision to not make it is also a feminist decision [laughs]. How does that work?

**SQ:** I think it does work but I am curious how.

**MB:** I think I moved the—okay, here's what I think might have been going on. If feminism started out as a kind of resistance and a bending of the prevailing order, both in real political terms and in cultural thinking terms, the resistance impulse came out in making pots as opposed to making modern art. It wasn't true in that next phase that I repudiated these pots or the ideals, but more that I turned and saw that there were things that could nurture my idea, that I could embrace. This is going to get squishy because I am not really sure how to describe it, but I would say that the feeling about pots that I had, and that I was gaining from what I was looking at and thinking about at this stage, had more to do with feeding something in me rather than saying no to something that had been imposed on me. Imposed may be too strong a word, but the system that had been handed to me as the way it works, my first assertion was to say no, I am choosing not that but this. That choice involved pots, it involved function, it involved Hartford versus New York, so this whole tangle of things.

But the second choice involved more conscious picking of what I might need and what might enlarge me, what might jibe with an idea I had that was kind of fuzzy. Looking around as my radar is circling, what is it going to land on that is going to produce a vibration that is kind of, "Wow, oh yeah," that resonates with me in some way that is visual, emotional and has an idea in it that I am interested in? The idea of vessels as something other than dishes, something bigger, something that meant something—bigger and more mysterious. The idea of vessels as carriers, as pretty much all the remains of a cultural moment, because they were so old that everything else was gone. The overlay of the vessel form and its cluster of associations and the female body, which now you can hardly say without gagging because you've read so many artist statements about women as vessels—enough already—but there was a moment when it actually seemed very energizing and empowering to make that connection. To say it about your own work and to turn it inward and say, "What does this have to do with the identification between my own bodily experiences or identity and what I make?" That was all pretty exciting and, again, could I have

done that in the context of being a Leach-inflected potter? The impulse seemed to demand a different ceramic backdrop.

**SQ:** That's really interesting. Where do you think you gained that sense of that being the cultural moment? Of making the connection between vessels and either your body or a woman's body as a different point of reference in ceramic history? Did you have peers who were involved in the same questions? Was it through publications, exhibits, other artwork?

**MB:** I remember seeing a show of JÅ mon pots. That was a little later but they were the first JÅ mon pots I had ever seen and JÅ mon pots fascinated me because they are so mysterious. They are so much more than they need to be. There is a mystery to that that you can't really make lie down. It was certainly part of stuff I was reading, poetry I was reading. In feminist literature that woman-vessel thing and reclaiming that as an active image rather than as the passive image it had been seen to be, felt like they were talking to me as a potter. That was so cool.

**SQ:** Do you remember what you were reading?

**MB:** I seem to remember a piece by Adrienne Rich, an essay by her that I probably would have read in the late seventies, or maybe heard her read. She gave a poetry reading in Hartford around that time. I don't remember what the overall topic of the essay was but I remember her talking about the vessel as an active agent. Now I can't remember how much of this was actually tied to pottery because there was beginning to be a feminist anthropology, there was beginning to be a discourse within the disciplines that examined objects either art-historically or anthropologically, that was also questioning what these things mean and what they might be about. There was language available not only in feminist literature but in the literature about pots that might examine them from a different direction.

I can't remember specifically whether this was an idea I heard Adrienne Rich put forth or whether she sketched it out and then I read something more specifically connected with pots about this, but I remember the idea that the vessel was what transformed its contents so instead of just holding the contents, a ritual vessel for instance, like rhytons or even something that liquid is poured into and out of, or that liquid is poured through, that it was the vessel that transforms that liquid, that ingredient whatever it is, from something ordinary or profane into something sacred. That's an active role rather than what would have been described as a passive role—the stuff in it is what's valuable and the vessel just holds it. To have that idea of what a vessel could be turned

just that much, it's like the landing field for that idea was already prepared, the strip was prepared so when it landed it was like, this energizes my idea of women as potters.

That's the other thing, the history of pottery. When you focus on the wheel you for the most part focus on pots that are made by men. The pottery history that surrounds that, that precedes that, and in many places in the world is simultaneous with it, is pottery made by women. So there is a gender switch in the identity of the potter when you go from handbuilding to the wheel. Which is not universal but generally true, it's like you're in a different realm in terms of gender, you're in a different realm in terms of function, you're in a different realm in terms of meaning in some ways when you step over to the handbuilding side. So I was pretty jazzed by all that and felt I could use that. I'm not a very good user of ideas in a literal way because of my brain problem, but the things that get you going, it doesn't even matter how you use them, what matters more is the spark and what it sets off in you.

**SQ:** Did you see this happening in other clay work that you were experiencing at various places?

**MB:** Probably, but I have to say that the clay work that was making the most impact on me was the historical pottery. Or I remember seeing a Nancy Spero show that felt to me as though it was operating in somewhat the same realm also it was not visually really anything, it was different stuff, huge installation, but the way it was overlaying contemporary feminist politics, ancient images and text that related to women, and creating a whole environment where the past and the present were reconfigured and presented in a new way. Seeing that work made me feel that something was possible as a potter even if I was going to be doing it in a very different medium. I would say I was looking at feminist art in all media and looking at ancient pots and reading about ancient pots, about who made them and what was going on with them. The conversation about what was going on with them was in flux at that point, was beginning to be in flux. The old British Museum archaeologist who describes "This is a very fine example of—." There was a whole generation of scholars coming into the conversation that was turning things up and questioning things, looking at them in different ways.

**SQ:** Was that happening in the craft movement or was that happening outside of it?

**MB:** Probably, but that wasn't actually what I was most concerned with, but yes I am sure it was. The trickle-out effect of the women's movement, of those ideas becoming part of people's media or discipline-specific work over the thirty years since the seventies, produced just a tidal wave of scholarship and new ideas across the board.

**SQ:** What do you think you retained from the Leach tradition in those first—

**MB:** But enough about feminist history, let's go back to Leach [laughs].

**SQ:** I know it sounds funny. You said that you didn't repudiate that, but do you feel like you did retain anything in that first chunk of exploration of what your work was in this other framework?

**MB:** I think that the idea of the goodness of pots, although the way he talked about it and the cultural frame in which he was expounding on that idea to say nothing of the actual pots he made, are things that I would critique in some ways, but there is a fundamental belief about pots as a force for good in the world. Whether it is about changing the world or about being a placeholder for a certain kind of goodness. I think that idea was really first articulated for me by Leach. The terms that he articulated now sound a little stilted and a little limited, yet what is underneath them, what drove him to organize his life around pots still moves me in both senses. It moves me when I look at him and it moves me through my life. I can't really imagine my life without that as a kind of framework. I can't imagine what my life would be because it is a very rich foundation that I can always go back to. Whether it is in my studio or a way to connect with other people, or in another culture and its cultural production, a term I hate. There are so many ways I can live it.

**SQ:** When you started making your handbuilt work, in addition to the historical pieces, what were your reference points for how this new body of work would emerge stylistically? How did you figure out what it would look like?

**MB:** I don't figure out those things in advance. I would say I rely on process as a vehicle whether it is a vehicle in terms of the evolution or the form. That is one thing that it is, but the other thing that it is, it is a vehicle in the sense of creating a place for a kind of decision making that is not pre-frontal. So the thinking is different. The figuring out that you are talking about implies a degree of cognition that is not only not what is going on, but it is very purposely not what is going on. When I am imagining what I might like to make or what I could do, that imagination that I am aware of or in charge of only gets me so far, and I really rely on both the act of making and the time and attention that are involved in making, to give me access to a better version of the idea, a bigger and more interesting version.

**SQ:** You mentioned that you have had periodic crises in your studio work. Do you feel that this framework that you are describing that started in the late 1970s as a way of thinking about your work is one that you have retained to the present, or have there been times where it has shifted fundamentally since then?

**MB:** Maybe not fundamentally but in ways that I felt, and there was a little speed bump around the vessel as a form language versus a form language that did not include an interior volume. My memory of the feeling that led up to it was the same kind of pushing against something that is too tight, that had seemed like a perfectly fitting garment for quite a while and then suddenly it is too tight. That had to do with both processing how I make things and a form thing in terms of the relationship of the form to verticality. Even a horizontal open pot has a vertical axis that you understand instinctively as your axis of form, your orientation. There's a feeling that I have some ideas that don't want to be vertical, that don't want to be vessels. So there's a little crisis of, "Am I still a potter?" And then when I moved up here there was actually a revisitation of function. I actually found after ascending gradually and, I thought, happily into the world of the white cube, that I missed function as a set of parameters, as a way to converse with the world through the things that you make, as a set of associations and experiences that you set up when you make functional things. So there was that.

**SQ:** Around what year was that?

**MB:** The late eighties. And I am probably about due for one. I think what I have been making in the last couple of years—I've been doing *Studio Potter* for almost ten years, although there are still people discovering the fact that I am the Editor of the magazine. "Oh! You're doing this now!" Yeah, I've actually been doing it for a while. When did your subscription lapse? [laughs]. As it has really settled in in terms of what the rhythms are, and maybe this is also because of my parents being older and there is a lot of back and forth about their care. My brother died two years ago. J's diagnosis [of MS] actually came right around the time that I took over *Studio Potter* from Gerry [Williams]—I had been working with him for a couple of years—came around the time that I did the first issue on my own. For quite a while it was more of a scary idea more than something that affected her life and my life. That time is over. It does affect her life now and that in turn affects my life. The pots that I have been making the last couple of years I am aware have a different rhythm to them.

Like when I talked about working in a series, I can't make a sculpture now. The sculptures that I was making and even the complex, sculptural pots I was making—I don't have enough time in the studio to really get those pieces to an interesting place. I am making things that I can make more quickly because that rhythm of working through an idea suits the way that my life is chopped up right now. I can't tell right now whether what I am looking at is the beginning of that and therefore the beginning of a more intense stage of that. That is something that I am really going to have to figure out, how to be in my studio, which I need to do for any number of reasons, in a way that

actually works in my life as my life is changing. Or whether I am at the end of a stage and it is going to change. Like I don't know how long my parents are going to live. I don't know what will be different when they have died. It feels to me as though having old parents is like a low-grade fever. It's not that I go there that much, but something is pointed in that direction and is alert to worries and phone calls in the middle of the night and things that five years ago would have been minor and are now major. Like a fall is not just a fall, it could be the beginning of something big, serious. So in the next couple of years is there going to be a big change in how things are divided up in my time and my identity? Or am I at the beginning of a period of more care, more involvement in J's days? I don't know. It is like what you are saying about your life. In the next year I imagine that I am going to know some things about what is next that I don't know right now. That would certainly affect what I would think of doing in my studio.

I remember Audrey Lorde, the poet, talking about something. She had two or three kids, and a job and she said that was when she started writing poetry because she said she didn't have the time to sustain writing longer pieces. Her days just didn't have that kind of time in them. Rather than write half-assed novels, to change the time-scale and word-scale of what she was working on so that she could get the intensity and movement that she required in the practice within the constraints of time and attention that her life imposed on her. I think about that a lot, and how that might apply to what I do in my studio.

**SQ:** Does it feel frustrating in that it is defined externally?

**MB:** Um-hm, sometimes. But I would say that when I took over doing the magazine, part of what I was realizing was that it kind of flowed, actually, out of a period just before that when I had been doing some teaching. I had had a little spell of doing sabbatical replacement teaching and I got really interested in ceramic history and those were all things that severely impinged on my studio practice, but out of feeling like there are parts of myself that the studio doesn't use. Being in my studio more is not getting them into my studio practice, it is just making me spin my wheels more. Maybe what I am supposed to figure out from this is that I need more time constraints, that being in the studio full-time is actually getting flabby in terms of what's going on there. Although I am not going to be happy doing this and I'm going to complain a lot, tightening that up a little bit is the key to concentrating and improving the quality of what happens here. Does this ring a bell?  
[laughs]

**SQ:** I'd like to change the subject a little bit. Thinking again about that period of time after 1979 when you started handbuilding and expanded your way of thinking about your sources for your work. Did you feel it was important to you to explain what you were doing?

**MB:** To?

**SQ:** Given that you were making a different kind of work, you used the reference to ascending to the white cube so to speak, it sounds like you were not making utilitarian pieces from say 1980 to the late eighties. Were you inclined to explain your work verbally or describe through words why your work looked different than it had, what was important to you, what you were going for, your rationale?

**MB:** Yes, in relation to the work that I was making but not, not in relation to what I had been making right before. I think part of that has to do with the times. It was, I would say, an unexamined assumption from the mid-eighties to the late-eighties in the craft world that utilitarian pottery was a phase that we had passed through collectively. Utility was a phase that we had all passed through collectively on our way to something better. The art world was getting with the program, but the arc that was being laid out for a lifetime studio practice with seriousness and ambition in it, would be that you would put in your time, your journeyman years.

**SQ:** Making pots?

**MB:** Making pots, and then you would start making art, pot art, or metal art, or fiber art. That didn't require a justification. It was pretty much out there in the air, of course anybody with something interesting to say would want to do that. If anything, it is the people, somebody like Warren [MacKenzie] or Clary [Illian], who stayed in their studio making their utilitarian pots were the ones who had to explain why they were not growing, why they were not going anywhere with that.

The other thing that happened to me during that time was that I got my first gallery that was not a craft gallery. We don't have the props for this conversation here, they are down at the studio. There was a general expansion of the support of the arts in the eighties. There was more money, there were more places to see it, there were more publications devoted to it, there was more talking about it, there were more versions of it. That was certainly happening on a national level, but it was also happening on a local level for me. I was still a local artist. What kind of local artist I was had changed. When I say local I mean regional, like Connecticut, some Boston, but mostly Connecticut. My identity as it was shifting and my work as it was changing, the audience for that was primarily a regional audience. I guess it probably started at the Farmington Valley Art Center where I had a studio from '77 to '83.

**SQ:** That was the one in the suburbs?

**MB:** Yeah. Then I moved my studio back into Hartford, into the Colt Building. Which you have passed on I-91. Do you know that building? It's the one with the big blue dome with the stars on it. And it had studio spaces in it that artists were living and working in. I didn't live in my space, but I moved from an art studio that was a kind of public space, public in that people could come and see the artists at work, to what felt like a different idea of an artist's studio that was more loft-like. To be a potter in that situation with people who were making big paintings, some of those people were showing in New York, some of them were associated with the Wadsworth Athenaeum, capital-A art people. That shifted the backdrop of who I was bouncing off of.

In 1984 I had my first gallery show in Hartford at a place called MS Gallery started by a guy named Michael Shortell, who had a frame shop and expanded from that. He was framing all this work and he wanted to show it. There was a whole group of young artists, when I say young I don't mean just out of school but in their thirties mostly, who were making work and he really provided a showcase for that work. For five years I showed in that gallery. I was one of the artists. It wasn't just gallery art as opposed to utilitarian art but it was pots viewed in a context of painting and sculpture that were still pots. So I'm needing to talk in an artist statement or in an interview or something like that about why these are pots, what it means that they are pots rather than sculptures, rather than very small three-dimensional works. I probably honed my idea of why they were pots somewhat from being in that environment because it wasn't sculptural pots as opposed to utilitarian pots but pots as opposed to other art forms. That is a slightly different way of defining yourself. It might be the same turf, but it is defined from a different direction.

**SQ:** It is interesting that you chose to be in that studio building and put yourself in that context. Do you remember that being an easy decision?

**MB:** I wanted to move back into Hartford. I had been reverse commuting that whole time. I kind of wanted a bigger space. I kind of was over being in a semi-public space. The artists had some control over access. Supposedly they had full control over access to their studio but part of the educational mission of the art center was to allow the public access to working artists. If you wanted a studio and you just never wanted to let anybody, you were going to work from midnight to six am, you were not a good fit. You were always going to get hassled about why you were never there. There were not rules about that, but there was an expectation and a pressure. That was a different way of encountering the public than having a storefront, because they are pre-selected. They are not just on their way to buy dinner. They have come to a place that is an art place so they are already sort of interested in art and at least nominally interested in you. It was a little bit of a different way of talking about my work than I had had at Park Street Potters and I

learned a bunch of stuff from it and then I was like, "Eeh, I don't want to be talking about my art to people. I want to do that in a teaching context rather than as an extension of my studio practice." The other thing that changed was that I started teaching at a community college right around the same time, when I moved back in to Hartford.

So I was back in the city on all fronts. I loved being in the Colt building. I had this huge space, it was 1000 square feet, completely empty space for like \$200 a month which included all the utilities, pretty great. There were interesting other people around. It was kind of gritty. There was a lot going on culturally in Hartford in those years.

**SQ:** Did you see yourself as part of the craft world at that time?

**MB:** No, I would say I was straddling, as I have for most of my life. I have straddled at least two worlds. So yes, I was part of the craft world but I was not especially interested in the craft world I would say, except in so far as teaching in a community college, that teaching pottery was a completely different undertaking than teaching painting would be. You have this whole wide range of students who fall into it sideways because they are in the nursing program and they have to take something and they have a conviction that they are not artists. But they will take pottery because they feel that they can do it in some way that they can't—artist is like a special category of person and they are not that person. It was a coming at that ideal of accessibility and democracy and cultural richness in a form that is not elitist, in a different way. I loved that teaching job. I taught there for seven years. I had cool students, they were just so hepped up about working in clay. They were just hungry to look at things, to make things, see their ideas out there on a table. It was cool. The ethos of the ethical-potter part of me got directed into teaching. I wasn't grooming the future professionals in my field. The chances that any one of them would give up a very hard-won education that was going to lead to a real job, after what they had probably been through to get there, so that they could make pots full-time? That just wasn't going to happen. There was so much energy in that room.

**SQ:** You made a reference earlier to the eighties and nineties as being when the ethical baggage in pottery or craft more broadly diminished. It is interesting in your case personally that it moved into teaching perhaps, rather than disappearing.

**MB:** Yeah, I think it was less present in the objects. People were spending money on stuff, on art. There seemed to be a fair number of people who had more money than they needed. This is the difference between an urban place and a rural place. There is a whole stratum of people in a city that make more money than they need to live on and participate vicariously in the arts by buying

it, coming to openings, that's part of the ground that supports all artists. Until probably '87, like that first crash, there was definitely a trickle-down thing happening. There were people spending hundreds of thousands of dollar on Julian Schnabels in New York, spending several thousand on a Peter Waite in Hartford, and then they were spending several hundred dollars on a Mary Barringer piece in a gallery. By the standards of what was going on in the art world this was still a real deal, but by the standards of the fifteen-dollar cup it was pretty heady.

**SQ:** Can you describe more your return to utility?

**MB:** Well, there was that little crash-let. There was a definite feeling of something shifting in terms of the financial landscape. And for me there was a move here, so a leaving behind that audience and not only the people in the audience who had supported my work—I had a very solid regional fan base I would say—but also leaving behind the whole atmosphere of urban living, and objects that make sense in urban living that do not make sense in a rural town. There are people in a town like this that make very expensive, sophisticated things and they ship them out to their galleries and collectors. There is a chosen and perfectly happy disconnect between their customers and their studio practice, but I had actually never experienced that before. All the time I had lived in Hartford I knew my customers. I didn't know all of them and most made a lot more money than I did and they lived better than I did but still, we all lived in the same place. There was a kind of reciprocity about living there.

**MB:** So we were talking about my return to function. I seem to always have a long answer to a short question. So moving up here dovetailed with—it is a little hard to tell what was the chicken and what was the egg here—a growing sense that those heady days were over, but also that I actually missed the positive aspects of making utilitarian pots, like where they go. So I don't know if there was a kind of cleansing effect or a realization that I had left some things behind and I wanted to go back and pick them up, as well as a, “How am I going to sell my work? Where am I going to sell my work?” Yes, for quite a long time I still had a gallery in Hartford but that wasn't going to be enough. I was going to have to think about other ways of generating income. Part of that had to do with being forced in a way to explore new galleries that were further afield. My shorthand for that is befriending my UPS guy, which I think is part of rural living for makers [laughs]. Don't you?

**SQ:** Absolutely.

**MB:** But it had not been part of the layout of my life as a maker in a city. If I had stayed there would I still have felt that I needed to explore a broader spectrum of places to show and sell my

work? Maybe. In retrospect it all seems like it neatly folds together. There is an economic shift, there is a location shift, there is a brain shift. You put it all into the pug mill and it poops out a different kind of pots [laughs].

**SQ:** What was your thinking behind moving to Shelburne Falls?

**MB:** My thinking? What was I thinking? My partner at the time, with whom I had been for like, fifteen years then—

**SQ:** Oh wow, so throughout all of this other time you had been in a relationship?

**MB:** She and I got involved in '74 and we were together until '94. Although when you look at these things in retrospect you realize there is that *dénouement* at the end that started a while before the actual end end. She had never loved living in Hartford and she had gone back to school in physical therapy. When she got done with PT school and it was time to look for a job she wasn't going to look for a job in Hartford. It was an opportunity to make a move which, left to my own devices, I probably wouldn't have—like everything I have weighs at least fifty pounds and I am perfectly happy teaching at the community college and being in my studio in the Colt Building. But she wanted to live both not in Hartford and in a place that was more rural. So we started looking in a radius from Hartford up to White River Junction. She got a job in Greenfield, so we narrowed the radius a little bit and started looking for places to live within thirty miles of Greenfield. We looked at houses in a lot of different towns. We saw a house here that we liked. The town seemed really special and there was a vibe.

Part of what I liked about the town was that it felt as though it had the right balance between the original population base, so it had not been taken over the way Northampton might feel like, by newbies and hipsters and city people like myself! So it still had a very strong feeling of its roots and yet it didn't have that Deliverance feeling. As a gay person you just pick up truthfully or erroneously on a vibe about a place, like, "Would I feel comfortable living here as a gay person? Or is it going to be scary? Am I going to feel isolated?" etc. Shelburne Falls felt like it had both of those things going for it simultaneously. I liked that it felt like a big enough town that you could actually live in, as I said yesterday. It is small enough that you are probably not going to live your whole life here. You are going to feel like ranging afield for some things and yet you are not going to have to do that on a daily basis, just to get a decent cup of coffee or find a book or a copy of the *New York Times*.

Actually, we had a friend in Hartford who imagined we were living in some apple orchard somewhere, and it's like, "So how much land do you have on your farmette?" And I would say, "Listen, I can walk to a cup of coffee and the *New York Times* from my house so that's how far out in the country I am." I like living in town. I actually didn't want to live out in the country. And I think both of my partners would have lived farther out in the country but for me. They both had more back-to-the-land aspirations, but I like small town life, actually. So that was how we got here, having made my one and only astute move in the real estate market. We had a two family house in Hartford and after we got through the truly horrific landlord debacle, the idea of a two family house is that your tenants pay your mortgage blah blah which presumes that you have responsible—

**SQ:** Tenants who pay the mortgage—

**MB:** Yeah, tenants who pay the rent and don't turn out to be just a horror show. We owned that house for four years and it more than doubled in value in that time. Then it tanked. The people who we sold it to, and they got a deal in terms of what we could have sold it for, within a year it was worth a lot less than what they had paid for it.

**SQ:** Because of the economic crisis?

**MB:** Yeah, and I don't know how many years it took for the value to go back up to making sense to them as an investment. Meanwhile, we moved in the right direction in that what we had made from selling that house gave us way more options up here than it would have in Hartford. We were part of the wave of people who came in the late eighties and spent what seemed locally like astronomical amounts of money for houses that only a few years ago had been worth like forty thousand dollars. So that's how it goes.

**SQ:** Was it easy to live openly as a gay person in Hartford?

**MB:** Yes. When I went to Hartford from college that was part of my public identity from very early on. I was involved with the Women's Center in Hartford, I was like the token lesbian there and I was in my twenties, and I was pretty rambunctious about being out and about making people deal with that. Even though as I spent longer there it was less the piece that I would lead with, I couldn't go back in, nor did I feel like going back into the closet from that initial position I had staked out. So I couldn't have hidden it. When I started teaching at the Community College I certainly did not proselytize as a lesbian to my severely confused—many of my students would just not have known what I was talking about at all [laughs], they might not have even known

what the word was. It didn't feel important to force them to know that about me, but I also didn't hide it.

**SQ:** Did it feel like an important aspect of your identity in other contexts?

**MB:** What would those other contexts be? Hmm. I think it was probably more than fifteen years into this narrative before I actually felt comfortable being out within the wider ceramics world.

**SQ:** That's interesting. So fifteen years from the early seventies to the mid or late eighties? Can you talk about that?

**MB:** I think it had several strands. One of them had to do with my partner at the time who was very private and who had a heightened version of that kind of lesbian division between your public life and your private life, which I think is maybe more common among lesbian than among gay men. I don't know, maybe that lesbian nest-building thing. So my work life was sort of separate from my home life in some way. My work identity was kind of separate in a way that is probably hard to imagine because it is really different with J. I would say that that just underscored or enabled something that I was a little confused about, which was the distinction between privacy and secrecy as it pertains to your sexuality and your professional identity. Even though on a sort of local level I did not have any problem with people that came to the studio or that knew me through my work knowing that I was a lesbian. As I got more identified with my work and as that identity reached out further from the place I lived and started to operate in the field, such as it existed, I wasn't so sure that that was—I could justify it by saying, "Well, that doesn't really have that much to do with the work." Or "If you choose to see that there you can see it I am not hiding it" but I think that's a little disingenuous. That negotiation around the different parts of your identity, which isn't unique to gay people certainly, or gay artists, but I think it is something that every gay artist thinks through for him or herself. I was kind of holding back, playing my cards close to the vest.

I remember going to a breakout session at NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts]. I don't remember when this was, it must have been in the early nineties. It was where I met Robbie [Lobell]. It was run by the two guys from Mendocino Art Center. I don't know if they are still there, but you know, the guys from there. It was about gay people in clay, so it was a very tiny little group. It felt like a big step to take, for me. I had not ever tried to put those two pieces of myself together in the same place and it was a lot easier to put the potter part of me with the lesbian part of me than it was to bring the lesbian part of me into my ceramics identity,

where I was operating in my work identity. So that was big for me to choose to do that instead of choose to do something else with my time at NCECA.

**SQ:** Do you remember what that conversation was like?

**MB:** That was where Robbie and I started to become friends. Robbie is like, “What is the problem?” She had lesbian identity to spare and actually not really a fully-formed ceramic identity, so she was coming at it from the other direction as well as being just an out-there person, and a Californian. Need I say more? [laughs]. I think my WASP culture makes it easy to fudge that line between privacy and secrecy because I value privacy. I am not really that much of an out-there person in general, so it is easy to say we’re not hiding, we’re just being private. So that wasn’t really the place Robbie was operating from.

**SQ:** Do you think she was influential for you in renegotiating these boundaries?

**MB:** Not so much, she was present at the creation, I would say, of the new phase. When my relationship with Peggy ended I spent a couple of years—leading up to it, before it ended, I went out to Ohio State and taught for six months. So I was on my own, but Linda Sikora and Gina Bobrowski, we were like this troika, people who were all brand-new there under different circumstances. I could be open about being gay separate from the particular relationship that I was in, which has a different kind of space in it. These people and this world isn’t actually ever going to overlap with my relationship so I can make a more individual choice rather than a half-of-a-couple choice about how open I want to be.

**SQ:** And you found that you made a different choice than you had made previously?

**MB:** Yes, I think I was more open, without having to bear the consequences within my relationship. We didn’t have to deal with having a difference of opinion of how open I was, about how open I should be, because it didn’t really affect Peggy. Not that long after that, like six months after I came back from that, the relationship really ended. So then I was really on my own for like a year, just being on my own after twenty years of being in a relationship. That felt—it was hard, but expansive. And I bopped around and did fun things.

**SQ:** Do you feel like the clay world was different than other worlds in terms of its openness to queerness, either in the seventies or the eighties, or even in the nineties?

**MB:** Hm, no, I think the clay world is different than pre-school teachers’ world or the high school coach’s world or the religious world. I mean yeah, it is different from some, but for most of the

places that I would go or groups of people that I would hang out with I would say the clay world is only slightly different in that as a field it has an idea of itself as embracing and inclusive and tolerant. Where the rubber meets the road is always one-on-one and the specific environment that you are in. The clay world might be tolerant but the school that you teach at in some rural place or in Texas might actually not want to hear so much about your sexual orientation. The clay world's ability or willingness to back you up on that, to really support you, might be meaningless. I how that plays out is a matter of much smaller scale environments.

**SQ:** It sounds like you brought your activism in the women's movement and as a feminist very much to the center of your clay work early on but less so your lesbian identity. Is that accurate?

**MB:** Well, my lesbian identity was very sparked by my involvement in the women's movement. They weren't really separate parts of my unfolding. They included each other in terms of what the issues might be, or what the audience might read into the work. I think autonomy, personal and collective, for women as a group, and the valuing, celebrating, fostering, supporting women's experiences, women's perceptions, women's choices—those are the core feminist values. That includes the honoring and fostering of choices in sexual orientation and of the experiences those come out of and what they mean, but it is not exclusive to that. The feminist value underlies that and certainly plays out in the part that pertains to sexual orientation but it plays out in everything else, too.

**SQ:** Interesting to think of that as being so embedded into your work. I had not thought of your choice to be a handbuilder, for example, as embodied in either a particular approach to feminism or in your identity as a woman or maybe as a lesbian also.

**MB:** Well, and I don't know that I was thinking—in the sense that we think of thinking—of those things either but I believe those forces were at work. Looking forward I don't see myself making choices. Looking back I see what seemed like random occurrences actually involving choice [laughs]!

**SQ:** Also known as choices [laughs].

**MB:** Hm, this happened, and then this happened, and by the time forty of those thisses happen you actually have a direction.

**SQ:** I feel like we are close to the end of this and this might be a big subject to get into and I don't know if you have the energy to talk about it, but one thing that is clear—and you mentioned this

offhand after I turned off the recorder yesterday—one thing that is very clear is the continued presence of words and of reading and a verbal way of processing your work. What you had mentioned yesterday after the recorder was off was that your family is very verbal and that you tend to talk about things a lot, you have mentioned several poets who were instrumental in your thinking about transitions in your work. Obviously, you are the editor of a magazine and that is a verbal endeavor. So this is very broad, but I am interested the role of speaking or the role of language in your artistic practice over this long span of time. What has been important about it to you? Maybe how it has changed over these years? How you see it woven into objects that are fundamentally non-verbal?

**MB:** Hm, that is a really big question and a really interesting one for me. I think my sense is that language, both as a practice, as a form of thinking and as input, written language, talk—that its relationship to what goes on in my studio is like a very big river that needs to be managed. It is very enriching. It clearly is part of what is feeding the whole enterprise and yet it also has dangers associated with it, flooding dangers and eclipsing dangers, because for me it is a default setting. I think people who become visual artists partly spurred by real struggles dealing with writing, dealing with our educational system, really having had a hard time finding a way to learn or achieve in that setting, would have a different relationship to language, not better or worse but very different, and might feel that they had found their voice by becoming artists. I don't feel that way because I feel that I already had a voice in this language. But that being a maker involves a very different language both out there in terms of the way the object emanates meaning and communicates with people, but probably more importantly in here. Something different comes out of me, or it comes out a different way because of it not being verbal. Because I have a very strong verbal facility and get rewarded for that, that's the way that it needs to be managed, that can always kick in, blah blah blah, and when it does the other pathway closes off and then I don't ever get somewhere, because I am actually not going to get there with words. I am not going to get to those ideas in me and to those experiences in me by thinking more about them or talking more about them or developing a more articulate vocabulary about them. That is not their medium. That's not only not their medium as objects it is not their medium as conduits.

I love words. I love language. I love the way that language can spark things between people and can spark your thinking, and yet I am aware that in order to get to my own best work I have to shut that off. Right about the time you shut the microphone off yesterday I think I was talking about how for me it was a good thing when I started out that nobody really required that I write an artist statement. Nobody really cared what I thought. Had I gone to graduate school that push would have come a bit sooner, but I really spent the first six or seven years as a maker hardly

ever really articulating in any formal sense what I was doing or what I thought about it. That enabled me to lay down much more solid tracks in other ways of finding out what I was thinking, that were based in process, that were based in body knowledge and that were based in zaps and sparks and beginnings and resolutions that there really are not words for, and in journeys that are from something that is really amorphous to something that has a kind of logic to it, the way it needs to be—

**SQ:** A material logic—

**MB:** Yeah, a formal logic but also it is not static but hums. That journey of making is not describable in a way. I am glad I was not put under a lot of pressure to describe it and to write about “what my work referenced,” a verbal development that I really hate—reference is still a noun in my vocabulary—to talk about my intentions. It is never a good idea for me to talk or think about my intentions too much before I begin, because I could talk a lot about my intentions. One of the things that I notice going to schools—I think this is a particular issue for me—but I notice in schools because in studio programs students are under so much pressure to talk about what they are doing, they spend way more time figuring out how to talk about it than they do doing it. My own experience as a maker and my reliance on learning through making, learning process but more importantly refining my ideas and discovering my ideas through making. That is time-based. You can’t get there fast, and you can’t take a short cut by farting around all semester and then pulling the equivalent of an all-nighter. I don’t think there is a clay-based equivalent of pulling an all-nighter for me because of the role of some degree of skill. Skill as a groove that your idea flows down. You have to carve out that groove by doing stuff, a bunch of times. I know people who are just creative all the time, everything they touch is wonderful, creative, is a discovery or a new take on something but I am not that kind of a person. Creativity is underneath rather than just in my fingertips, so I have to get at it and in order to get at it I have to shut up and make things, and I have to not be listening to NPR. I actually have a hard time listening to music in English when I am working because I am very tuned to words. Because I am and because that has been a fairly reliable reward system for me for the entire time I spent in school, and because I am in a field where lots of people are not fluent in writing, if you are somebody who can write they are all over you. I guard my studio practice a little bit from the impingement of that whole system. And at the same time over the years I off and on tried to figure out ways to let the pots carry words literally, because I am interested in what that could do. But that’s tricky, a very tricky balance.

**SQ:** What do you mean, carry words literally? Have words on a pot?

**MB:** Yeah, have words on pots. Are words that are carried on a pot different from words that are carried by a book or a poster? And if you have some words that you really want to be on a pot are you going to have to change the form decisions you are making so that the words are carried in a certain way? Or are you going to have to fit the words into the form? It is a design problem but it is also like, “Who is going to have precedence here? Which part of this is going to win out?” When I try to do that on pots it partakes of that split in me, that tension in me between those two modes of expression.

**SQ:** How do you think you communicate, or how does one communicate, that notion of ‘time-based’ activity to a student, say?

**MB:** Repeatedly and by example. I have to say I am glad I do not teach in a college now. Between the last time I taught in a college situation, which was like fifteen years ago, maybe a little more, there have been a lot of changes in terms of what students are bringing, in terms of expectations and experience. I always felt that a beginning pottery class, when you look at the whole array of students you are going to get in a beginning pottery class, that maybe the most important ones in that room are the ones who are going to learn something about learning rather than the ones who are going to go on to become makers, and who are going to take what they have learned about learning or about time into something different. I found when I was teaching at Ohio State, I taught a beginning throwing class and the students who had the least trouble getting that time-based practice thing were the jocks. They understood that you have to teach your body, that the intersection of a goal or a skill or a task and the body and time—where those three things intersect is the business at hand. But students who didn’t know that about themselves, who had never had that experience, they had been in school their whole lives, sometimes it was really hard to get that across.

I can’t even imagine what it is like now, just to get them to turn off their phones and pay attention to what you are doing now and make the case that there is a reason to only do one thing sometimes. I don’t know. I feel that the bar has really moved someplace in what constitutes attention. Not even whether it is long or short but what it is, in a way that I am probably not equipped to actually deal with. It is so different and it is social as well as experiential, it involves individual experience. I can feel myself ripening into one of those cranky old ladies!

[End of interview]