

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Neal Rosenblum

Jeweler, Goldsmith, Metalsmith, Founder and co-owner of Neal Rosenblum Goldsmiths Gallery

Conducted by Ariel Rosenblum on November 6, 2014 via Skype and November 29, 2014 at Neal Rosenblum Goldsmith Studios, Worcester, Massachusetts

Neal Rosenblum, b. 1951, is a goldsmith, jeweler, and metalsmith based in Worcester, Massachusetts. At the age of nineteen, Neal was introduced to metalwork in a class at the Worcester Center for Crafts, and he has continuously worked in the medium since then. Largely self-taught, his early career began with producing small editions of jewelry designs for craft shows, small galleries, and gift shops around the country. In 1980, he established a retail studio space, Neal Rosenblum Goldsmiths Gallery, and his brother Charles began managing sales and evaluate gemstones. Since then, the brothers have been business partners; Neal focuses on one of a kind and custom-made jewelry, and Charles manages the business and buys and sells diamonds and gemstones. Their gallery in Worcester is where Neal has his workshop, and where they sell collections of jewelry made by designers from around the country.

In the first interview, Neal talks about his introduction to metal at the Worcester Center for Crafts, becoming enamored with the process of transforming metal, and his very first experiments in the material. He discusses learning technically from the material, and commercially from the public at craft shows and galleries during the first decade of his practice. In the second interview conducted in Neal's shop in Worcester, Massachusetts, he focuses more on individual jewelry pieces and his signature improvisational approach to making where he creates a visual story of sorts by making and assembling individual parts. He resists categorizing his work and practice, seeing himself akin to maker of things throughout history who have manipulated materials to a desired end.

Approximately 2 hours, 30 min. Transcript length: 20 pp.

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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November 6, 2014, Interview Part I

AR: I'd like to start by asking you to introduce yourself and your profession.

NR: My name is Neal Rosenblum, my profession is a jewelry maker, metalsmith primarily, a maker of objects, and have been in business since approximately 1970. I live in Central Massachusetts, in the city of Worcester, and I moved here around 1970 from Hartford Connecticut.

AR: If you don't mind moving chronologically, maybe let's begin at the beginning and how you came to work with metal and jewelry.

NR: Ok, well, I'll start out by saying that a great deal of my life has been moved along in a somewhat of a random fashion and serendipitously. It was suggested to me by somebody who lived in the Worcester area that I might like to take a jewelry metalsmithing class in the summertime. It was an interim studies program for local colleges; some of their students took these classes. I can't remember exactly when it was but it could have been in the month of May, but I'm not really sure. When I say interim the semester would end at a certain point for colleges and there would be a gap period and there would be classes available to take for students until they took their finals, I think. But anyway, it was suggested that there was a course available in jewelry making and metalsmithing at a place called the Worcester Center for Crafts, and I took the opportunity to do it. It was something that I had no idea that people even made things out of metal with their hands; I had no clue about it as a craft of any sort. But, I did it, and I was partially motivated because I wanted to leave Connecticut—I had a hard time in school and got into some trouble in the senior year.

AR: Mmhhmm.

NR: I'm being as honest as I possibly can because these were some of the factors that moved my decision making at the time, how I ended up here.

AR: Well, so you didn't really have an awareness of jewelry making and craft but were there any other mediums or art pursuits that you had?

NR: Yeah, the things that I did when I was in high school that occupied my time were things like drawing and painting and photography. And it was primarily two-dimensional work, I had never done anything three-dimensionally, using my hands with tools, or making objects of any kind. But I had a great deal of interest in that kind of creativity in those other mediums.

AR: So do you recall, you said it was about 1970 when you moved to Worcester—about how old were you at that time when you took this class?

NR: I think I was nineteen.

AR: You were nineteen—

NR: Nineteen years old, because I had graduated from high school, and went to college the following September in Hartford at the University of Hartford for nine days. And then I decided I didn't want to be there anymore—

AR: [Laughs] So, you immediately took your life in another direction.

NR: [Laughs] There were two motivating factors. Maybe there were more but one of them was that I was borrowing my mother's car and I had gotten three parking tickets—

[Both laugh]

NR: And the other was, I was asked to do something in an English class and everybody was asked to do this particular assignment, and I wrote something, which I believed was sincere and I think it was pretty creative but it was like absolutely the wrong thing to write. And, it was used as an example by the teacher as something that was so inappropriate, and it was very embarrassing to me. I mean this was within the first two days of school, and you know, there were maybe three classes a week of English or something like that. So those two things just said very strongly to me, I shouldn't be there, and it just didn't feel right to me to be in college, even though that's what I thought I should be doing based on my family's aspirations of their oldest son. So I left, and that same day I decided, I was looking in the newspaper and I saw in an ad, a job for an apprentice silkscreen printer, and I saw that and I decided, you know what, this is something I think I could like, I'm going to give it a try. It looked like it was interesting and I didn't know much about it but, I thought, well, maybe I'll do this. And I went home and I said I was dropping out of school and, I think I got the job and started maybe the next Monday or something like that at the silkscreen printing job.

AR: And that was in Hartford?

NR: That was in—I think it was Wethersfield, one of the suburbs of Hartford. Yeah, so that was my college, post college experience [laughs].

AR: Well, looking back to 1970 as being the starting point with your relationship to metal, this is now what forty-five years?

NR: Yeah, about forty-five years.

AR: About forty-five years, and was there kind of, did you have a moment of—

NR: Epiphany?

AR: Yeah of epiphany, or can you explain how your relationship to metal formed and what the attraction was? Why did you keep doing it?

NR: Well, there were a few things. I think when I took this class, I was primed in a way that my life was somewhat like a vacuum [pause] there was an empty space, with uncertainty. And when I took this class, I was not in my home environment and I knew it was just a two week period of time and when I took it I didn't really think about it, I just did it and I listened and I tried things and I liked the tactility of using tools and somebody was showing me how to use a tool to affect change on material, and it's not like I learned a lot of complicated technical maneuvers with tools but I learned enough so that I could conceive of a few projects that I could make out of metal. And what really hooked me I believe, the ability to conceive of an idea, create a paper pattern, which is what my first exercise was, transfer the paper pattern to metal, use tooling in the metal to form the metal into an object into completion, and it was almost magical to me. I mean I don't know why, it just really grabbed

me in a way that painting didn't, or drawing, I liked the tactility and the three-dimensionality of working with the metal, and it was also absorbing because you have to concentrate so much on smallness, on hardness of the material, and carefulness to some degree, unlike maybe pottery where you can get your hands dirty and be more free flowing, but for those things it just became enjoyable. And I pretty much lost myself by doing those things, I was completely absorbed and so that's the kind of initial attraction and absorption in the process.

AR: So it sounds like the process was really what hooked you, how were you thinking about the product of your hand, and what kinds of things were you making?

NR: I never really thought of the object at the outset in terms of design or aesthetic, I had no intention. I had my first major project that I did, well, I can think of two things that I made. One was a ring, it was a band, which I made it out of paper first, and cut it with a saw out of sheet metal and then bent it in a manner that could be formed in a pattern, and bent around into a ring shape, so I learned how to solder, cut metal, polish metal, bend metal in making this ring, and I think that was really the first project I did because the instructor had said, here's an idea to start with, use a pair of scissors and paper, you have sheet metal, you have different gauges, you know let's try to make something, not specifically a ring, but you know, use your imagination and try to do something. And that's what I came up with, a ring, pretty simple. That was my first project, and I felt pretty good about being able to complete something that looked pretty decent and I must have had people there who, we were sharing what we were working on, people said "Oh that's really nice," I got some positive feedback on it, so it was somewhat affirming. But I think more than that it was just making something, feeling like I accomplished something. So that was the first thing, and then from there I didn't have it in mind to make jewelry at all, because I really didn't have a frame of reference for jewelry, my family wasn't into jewelry in any way, so I didn't have any of these ideas and aspirations of making a piece of jewelry to wear, I don't even know if I wore this ring, I just made it.

AR: Do you still have it?

NR: I don't even know it might be kicking around somewhere, it really might be. I could try to find it. Then the next thing that I did was I made what I thought to be a Buddhist prayer rattle. I had seen these objects, which were kind of like shakers or rattles that Tibetan Buddhists would use to twirl around, and they're prayer rattles. So I had it in mind to make something like that, and it didn't come out quite like even what I thought it was going to, but the intention was to make a religious object. And I made the rattle out of silver and cut it from sheet and wire and actually had someone help me make a handle, a wooden handle, from the woodworking department. And I engineered a cylindrical object, it was probably like an inch and a half in diameter by maybe two and a half inches high or so, and it had kind of a rough treatment on the exterior kind of an organic surface treatment, and then there were holes drilled in it with pieces of wire that would make like a rattle sound. So instead of having an internal rattle, the rattle sound was from the wires that jingled around on the outside. So I made it, and I remember a lot of people commenting, like it was really something to look at, and I was kind of surprised, I wasn't even paying attention to whether it was nice or not nice, I just pursued my idea, and this has been my experience, you never know really what the thing is going to look like. Now that I'm very skilled I can control my technique and materials, my intentions of how something is going to turn out, but in some cases I do something I've never done before, and almost discover how it looks when it's completed. So anyway, there were people coming over and inspecting what I was doing, and I wasn't really paying attention to what anyone else was making, but people were paying attention to what I was doing and looking at the result of what I was making. And then, I got it to a point to where it

was finished, and I just decided, you know, I need some materials, and I have no money, and I spent all my money on whatever silver I had, and now I want to make something else, so I dismantled the rattle and used the materials, and it basically got destroyed. So I put all this time and attention into it, and ended up with a final product, but I also had this very Buddhist sensibility about the temporariness of life—I just made the association that it was an object that existed and then it didn't exist.

AR: Interesting.

NR: And so, it felt pretty natural to me to make something and not fall in love with it, you know put it on a pedestal and make it so precious. But then there were, people questioning me, like “What happened to the thing you made?” And I explained why it was melted. And they questioned me, “Well, why would you do that? It was really a special thing.” So it gave me a different perspective on my own internal workings, from the way the outside world, and other people looked at the manifestation of my work.

AR: In a sense, it showed you that people valued what you were doing.

NR: Mmhhmm. Yeah. I got that sense, that people valued it. Then again, the other part of it was that even though I didn't have the object, it was affirming that others appreciated it and there was joy in making the object. And so, this introduction was really just a two-week class that ran from nine in the morning, until three or four in the afternoon, five days a week, I just looked at it as a lot of fun. But, I wanted to continue doing it. So, the first opportunity I had, I put together a few tools that I could buy at a junk shop on Water Street. That was really a hot, thriving commercial business area, which had a number of Jewish bakeries, delicatessens, used surplus sporting equipment, things like that but it was very busy commercial area that we would go to on Sunday mornings. So I went to a junk shop and I bought a hammer, and I bought a toolbox, and maybe a couple of little pieces of steel or something like that, and with that, after taking this class, I remember kind of fooling around with coat hangers, and just hammering coat hangers on a rock in the back of the apartment I lived in with a number of other people. And maybe this goes along with the object not being the focus, but the practice being the attractive thing for me, it was very primal, very primitive to bang something on a rock and have it transformed from one thing to another, and so I thought that was pretty special—that I was the implementer of change. I wanted to do more and use other tools, so I found my way to Boston, which was the only place I knew I could buy the kinds of tools that I learned how to use at the Worcester Craft Center. And I learned about a small little company in the jewelers building, which was called Boston Findings Company, which sold tools, silver wire, silver sheet, findings which are things that you might use to put together jewelry—ear wires, pin backs, things like that, as well as gemstones, settings. And, there was an older man who ran it, the size of this little kiosk was probably half the size of my studio now, and it's about two hundred or three hundred square feet, and it had huge peg boards with silver coils of wire on the wall, and tools, hammers, and little bench blocks, torches, things like that. So, I bought a few things with some of the money that I had, but, this older man, he must have seen something in my desire to have more than what I bought, I probably looked like this little kid who wanted to get the puppy in the window or something like that, and so he generously, said “Why don't you take these other things and pay me later?” And I was like totally astounded that somebody would extend credit. And now looking back maybe it would have been seventy-five dollars worth of stuff—

AR: What did that allow you to get?

NR: Tools and metal. Silver wire, silver sheet, and so I was extended credit and played around with things, and made a couple more objects. I can't even tell you what I was making

exactly, but there were people who were hanging around the student apartment where I was living, who would buy things from me, it's kind of how I began selling work, in a very minimal fashion. And at the same time I had part time jobs, I was able to support myself by working at other jobs but also living in student apartments where the rent was very low, and some of the students had the ability to get what was called "welfare food" at the time, where every month and get a number of things- canned vegetables, a block of cheese, peanut butter, oil, rice, some basic staples—so, I lived with a number of people and lived pretty cheaply. My workshop was just a set up of my tools in a pantry, and I got completely lost in using the tools that I had, and metal that I purchased.

AR: What were some of your sources for inspiration? Were you looking up to any individuals, mentors, or artists?

NR: Well, at the time, you know this was in 1970, my teacher, he was really a highly proficient silversmith and goldsmith, he had recently returned from Germany in a graduate program in Pforzheim, Germany, which was really the jewelry manufacturing and education region, it's known for metalsmithing and silversmithing. And he had previously gone to Indiana University, which was one of the universities that had a craft program in metalsmithing and silversmithing along with University Kansas, Rochester Institute of Technology, RISD, there were a number of schools around the country, universities that people started going to post WWII, in the 1950s and 60s. So he went to one of those schools, and encouraged me. There wasn't as much visual material and books as there are now. One of the aesthetics influence was Scandinavian—Danish modern, Danish modern everything—furniture, silverware, jewelry, Georg Jensen was really a well-known company at the time, and a prolific design aesthetic catalog. And in the emergence of the craft world, I think specifically with jewelry, the Scandinavian influence was pretty big, because there was a thriving tradition of Scandinavian hand working, in jewelry-smithing and metalworking. So that was an important influence for me at the time.

AR: For your aesthetic as well?

NR: Yeah, somewhat in surface treatment, somewhat in the form of the objects, scale. So I think that was a pretty strong influence at the outset. But, I didn't really think of it at the time, and really consciously look at "Well what are my influences? How will I fit into this continuum of design/aesthetics?" I really didn't look at it that way. It was sort of a natural absorption of environment, whatever that was. So that was one thing, and the other was the teacher that I had showed me a book of Pre-Columbian metal objects, things like masks and torques, and figurative pieces and some wire work, a lot of it figurative, Pre-Columbian silver and gold. I think I found that book at the Worcester Public Library and would look at it for a long period of time and then make objects that definitely were derivative of those Pre-Columbian objects, not copies but somewhat derivative in their tone. And technically some of them were pretty basic, you could tell that they weren't made with a high degree of tooling, or sophisticated tooling but they had just a great feel to the way the metal expressed the artist's work. And it was consistent also; there was a certain style that Pre-Columbian work has that made it comfortable for me to do things with similar techniques.

AR: Did you have any other formal or informal educational training after that first two-week course?

NR: Nothing formal, I did find at the time a few books at the Worcester Public Library, one of them was a book on how to repair jewelry, and the other book was something about jewelry-making. But these were books that were done in the 1940s with some illustrations, like I was saying the Pre-Columbian book, that was more or less what I used for my own guidance.

And I really didn't take any other classes for a long period of time, and when I did have the opportunity to take a class it was generally a one day workshop to learn a particular technique, not a one or two week class, but more like a one or two day seminar or demonstration of a technique. But many of the things I learned how to do were primarily self-taught or experimented to achieve a result, and making mistakes along the way.

AR: What was the turning point from working with metal on the side and having other part time jobs to an acceleration of this being your primary means of making a living?

NR: Well, there were two things. One was, here again, the suggestion to try to sell some jewelry. In 1971 or 72 I learned about a craft show which was taking place in Bennington, Vermont, and I think it was in 1971 we went to see the craft show, 1972 I showed my work in the craft show, this was the American Crafts Council show that preceded the Rhinebeck ACC shows. And that was my first one, there were, there were about seventy exhibitors, all kinds of crafts- jewelry, pottery, leatherworking, fabric, a whole lot of things. It was at a small elementary school, where the people who were more accomplished had space inside, in the cafeteria, and then you had some people in the hallways, and you had the people who were beginners, like myself, outside in tents, or not, just having their work on tables. So that was one direction that I thought I'd be able to make my work commercially viable, and the other was, it may have been around the same time, a sales trip that I took, also from the suggestion of friends. And so, with that in mind, before going on the trip, which was about ten days later, or so, I decided, well I'll try to make something that's somewhat commercially viable, that maybe I can reproduce over and over. And I bought silver wire, and made ten or twelve styles of earrings, because I didn't have any money I made a half a pair of earrings to show the styles. So I couldn't show a full pair of earrings, but I showed a half a pair of earrings and that's where I walked into a store and got a sales order to make, about a hundred dollars worth of earrings at the time, and they were probably ten dollars a pair, I don't remember much about the money part, but my thought after I got the sales order was they either liked them, or they [laughing] they felt sorry for me and gave me a sales order. And so that was the start of having a small wholesale business, selling to stores, and the experience at Bennington craft show was one where I learned that what I was making, not the wire jewelry but other things, were so commercially unviable [laughs], that I had to make some changes. But the things that I made, and I do think I have some pictures of those early, early carved pieces of jewelry, would have been best to make by casting them, or either fabricate them in wax or metal, and make molds and reproduce them, or you know, take another direction all together. But, I was so naïve, about how to make money, and even about the craft, I didn't even know what I was doing with that. I was just making things and showing them, sometimes people responded to, sometimes they didn't, but I just kept doing it, and certain things resonated with people and some things were attractive enough to buy, and that's sort of the genesis of the commercial aspect of the work that I was doing.

AR: So it was really the customer who helped affirm what you were doing, and shape what you were doing.

NR: Exactly. That was the only thing that affirmed that I was going in any direction that seemed viable because I really didn't have any formal education, I had no criticism from having an art school background or any guidance from a mentor, or anybody. So in some ways it was just a really organic process of growing in a very serendipitous and random fashion of influences.

AR: Can you talk a little bit more about going to craft shows, the craft shows you went to, and the environment that you found there?

NR: Well, it is a very attractive thing to be involved with a bunch of people who were making things—it was a community, people who had somewhat of a common interest even if you didn't have the same craft, and the lifestyle was one in which you didn't have to work at a nine to five job, and you were your own boss, and the craft shows that you would go to, if you were successful you would sell some things and it would allow you to continue doing your craft, experimenting and trying to make new things [pause] pursue whatever creative interests you might have, or thought you have about making a certain thing, creating. It was also attractive just to, well, at the time you'd travel to one craft show to another and in many cases you would just camp out on the grounds, you'd set up a tent, or sometimes you'd sleep in your vehicle, and hang out with other people, meet other people. And then, after a few days of being there you either made money and were successful and went home or you weren't, but it was over. So, you'd move on, and go back to doing your work again, until the next time. And, it was also unpredictable as to whether you would even go to a show, or where it would be, some places were better commercially than others. It turned out after the first few years the best shows to go to were the ones where there was a jury selecting the craftspeople, and the ones that did select the craftspeople were generally thought of as shows with better buyers, and the other artists were more accomplished so I was personally striving to make things more interesting, better, and refine my craft, which helped me to get into shows that were juried and there again, I had some affirmation from both the jurors and the buying public that my work was viable.

AR: You were traveling quite a bit all over the country to go to shows, is that right? Where did you go?

NR: It first started out in the Northeast, and so there were shows in Vermont, you had Bennington, that show lasted a few years in Bennington and then it moved to Rhinebeck, New York, after Rhinebeck it went to West Springfield, in Massachusetts, there were also a few other shows in Massachusetts as well as some that I went to in Connecticut, on the Connecticut shore, Boston, and then shows in New Jersey, and Philadelphia, a few years I went to Florida, Maryland, mid-Atlantic area, Washington, so primarily on the East coast. And, along with that, when you went to these shows you were selling your work retail, but at the same time, there were a number of shows that had a wholesale component, where craft galleries and gift shop owners would come and buy your work and give you wholesale orders. And those were the kinds of things that would sustain you from one show to another, because when you'd leave, and if you had orders to make things you would send them off to the stores supporting you during income gaps. Sometimes the shops wouldn't pay very well, but for the most part it helped you to fill in gaps in your income. But it was really a seat-of-the-pants kind of business where I was never certain what my income was or what shows I would get into, a highly unpredictable way of life. You had other factors like weather, sometimes the economy, style trends, just all kinds of factors that could work for you or against you by going to a craft show.

AR: At what point did you get to the next step of having a shop and a store?

NR: Well, let's see. I think a pivotal year for me was 1978, so that's already seven or eight years into doing my craft while having a few part time jobs, although I really didn't have many part-time jobs, it was mostly getting by on cheap living and a little wholesale work and selling things to the public, and sometimes to friends and referrals to other people. But in 1978, it was a pivotal year in a number of respects, but one was for some reason, whatever I was making at the time, seemed to be successful where I got a respectable amount of orders that added up to several thousand dollars, and at the time it was a lot of money, along with selling retail, both those things. But that was also the year my father died, and he had been disabled

for five years, and he actually died while I was at a craft show, it was the Rhinebeck craft show. The show was in two parts and I had just completed the wholesale part of the show, I came home to visit him, because he had just returned from the hospital and I stayed overnight and I had dinner with him and my mother. One of the things that we did was sit at the kitchen table and we were adding up some of the orders that I had, and the total sales, what I needed to fulfill and how many pieces I had to make, and I got a sense from him that, "Oh, this is really good." Without him verbalizing it, but, I had a sense that he saw some degree of success in my life and that felt affirming, because there was never any encouragement by my parents to do craft work. So, it appeared like my father came to the conclusion that, here's my kid and he's doing okay, and he has this little business, he's able to make a living. So that was an important year, and at the same time, the craft shows, which were very unpredictable to get into- and maybe 1977-78 I got into great craft shows and made pretty good sales, selling my work to the public, and then the following year, I think 1979, I made applications to all the same shows with new work and I didn't get into four craft shows that I had previously got into and that were very successful events. I was stunned, and I thought, "I know my work is better, why didn't I get into these other shows?" That's when I really felt the arbitrariness of the choices that jurors could make, my work was good, other people's work was good, but other people came along, and they thought: "I'd rather see something else." Well, anyway, that had a big impact on me and I felt like I had to do something, because I wanted a stable income. I still had wholesale work to do. I was selling work in Worcester at a small little gallery and they were going to be moving to another location. And they suggested: "There's a space upstairs on the second floor, and the landlord wants to rent it. Would you be interested, you should check it out." So, I checked into it and had the thought at the time that maybe if I have a little studio in Worcester- I already had people coming to my house to commission me to make things—maybe I could increase that kind of business, more locally based. And I did. And I rented this empty place, and built it out myself, I didn't know what I was doing in terms of framing the walls, but I put it together. It was very cheap rent, maybe only \$150 a month for my space. But it was in a commercial district, and I was able to have people come to the studio, I could display my work in some of the cases that I had made up for craft shows, so if someone wanted to buy something they could, and that's more or less what gave me local presence, and from that local presence, it seemed to grow more to the point where I didn't go to craft shows anymore, it was just too much of a distraction to pick up everything and go to a show. And the other part of it was that I was still doing wholesale manufacturing and selling to other stores, but even that started to diminish as I had more custom and and commission work. So that's more or less how it evolved in a different commercial direction, the work that I was doing, and the work that I made a living from.

AR: Do you want to talk a little bit about the commission process, and working with a client as collaborator?

NR: Well, in a lot of ways it was something that I really enjoyed doing, collaborating with a customer, and it was and has been enjoyable in many cases, because it is sort of like having a dance partner. I had the skills and the know how to implement a piece of material into a piece of jewelry specifically, but the client would come with certain ideas that they wanted and it was always interesting to find out what they had in mind, and it's a very personal process, but also considering the intention of the client, what is their intention, what they want it to represent, and why they want it to be made. In many cases there are occasions for something to be made, something that needs to be made that's symbolic, for particular purpose, things like wedding bands and engagement rings which are symbolic, which bring people together, and possibly acknowledge some status. But there are other kinds of

commissions that were interesting. And the dance that does take place is one in which the client has the idea, and I am the vehicle to produce that idea in some manner, and also [pause] urge the client to my point of view and my aesthetic choices.

AR: Right.

NR: And make a pretty diplomatic and subtle argument about the way it should be and why my idea is better than theirs, for the final product. And I always thought that was a kind of interesting challenge to persuade a person along my vision of how things should look.

AR: So in that sense, it's not just a passive role of you simply making what someone wants and you just make it, you have really actively tried to put your own signature stamp on-

NR: Yeah, always. And that's pretty elastic, because sometimes some of the things people bring to you are pretty simple symbols, there's always the personal touch that can be done with those symbols that has your signature, and then there are people that have a very broad general idea of design, and in some cases just say "I like what you're doing, why don't you decide how it should be done." Whether they say, "I want a ring with a certain kind of stone, and these are the materials I want it made of, why don't you just do something that's interesting?" And so that's where it becomes elastic in terms of the relationship with certain people, as far as commissions go. And sometimes the influence comes from things that I have done outside of being commissioned where I just had ideas, done them the way I wanted to and then people would see them and then say "you know, I like what you're doing but instead of having a bracelet, I want to have earrings made, but I like the feel and the tone, so make it like that." So that's another part of the commission process.

AR: And, over time you have used materials of greater value, as well?

NR: Yeah, that's something that evolved over time where more expensive materials, gemstones, metals, time and labor, have gone into making pieces. Those are all value added onto the final product. And I refer to it as a product, I don't really think of it in terms—I'm not very pretentious about saying well; it's artwork or anything like that—it's something that has been designed and made by a maker.

AR: How would you define craft and design, and art?

NR: Well, I have followed some of the discussions in books and magazines that are art-oriented, I follow the argument, but I have no conviction about what art is, what craft is, design, you know, because I don't have a formal education in art or craft. Because I don't have that, I just break it down to a very primitive pre-historic level uncategorized in terms of a person that has materials, tools and makes something, of either utility or aesthetic value. I just think of people that were making things because they had to make a bowl, they had to make a tool, and I'm really in that tradition of somebody who uses his hands, and engineering skills, and has somewhat of an aesthetic point of view, in a creative way and has imagination to transform a material from one thing to another. So, I don't know how to define myself other than in those terms, which doesn't have labels.

AR: Okay, maybe we'll do one more question?

NR: Sure.

AR: Well I was thinking about how you've had a number of apprentices over the years, is that correct?

NR: Mmhhmm.

AR: And students and other jewelers have worked in your space and with you. So just thinking about your shop and studio as kind of a hub for people, and whether that has been intentional or not—what significance do you place on having a communal workspace for others to learn from?

NR: Well, I'll tell you I have never really sought out anybody to work with me but there have always been some needs that I've had for people to help out, especially when I had a viable wholesale business where I had to make things in multiples. And somehow people came my way, and introduced themselves, asked if I had any interest in hiring them or working with me for a period of time, and some relationship was established with certain people who had varying degrees of skill and creativity, and so it was an exchange where they had certain skills that helped me out. I think I had a degree of influence on them for various things, and throughout these forty plus years there have been people drifting in and out of my workspace. And some people have become very successful as artists and jewelers. I can think of a few people who are successful metalsmiths, and another person who became a successful textile artist, and there have been some really highly skilled people that have worked with me, some people that have worked with me for various periods of time. So that's always been kind of interesting, some of the people that have moved through my life professionally.

AR: Hmm.

NR: In close proximity to the workspace, sharing the same workspace.

AR: You also have done some teaching and I was wondering if with the people that have worked with you as apprentices, or assistants, or in teaching classes and having students, if there is a certain kind of influence you try to impress upon people who are learning from you?

NR: Yeah, I was asked to teach a couple of classes on a weekly basis by the head of the department at the Worcester Craft Center, and so I did, and they were beginner classes, or sometimes I did a stone setting class, or a casting class. I tried to convey the best of my knowledge technically how to get things done implementing a person's design and creativity, and help students who were interested to learn how to do those things, and guide them individually. Usually there were only ten or twelve people per class, so I'd give a lesson about a particular technique, do a demonstration, and then as people were working on their projects, I'd look in on them and ask if they want guidance, and suggestions, and help them. I wasn't too concerned about being critical of their aesthetic choices or creative intentions, because it was all over the map, these were not the kind of students who had applied to get into an art school, they were people who had other jobs, and they liked making jewelry, doing a craft, and so therefore, I was just trying to guide them to follow their creative intentions. There were some student who were more skilled than others, some people were more confident than others [laughing] some people wanted to have a professional jeweler there to make the things that they wanted to make, they had aspirations of making really involved pieces of work and had expectations that I would basically make it for them. There are people who really just listened to what the lesson was and watched the technique, tried it, and they were off on their own, doing their own thing. So, it was always fun to see how different people approached work, and what they wanted to make. So that was a period of time over eight or nine years that I taught in the evening, they were usually three hour classes, and I really enjoyed the classes, and I enjoyed teaching and meeting different people. But it was also exhausting because in order to keep my business going, my own craft, it just took so much time, in some cases sixty or seventy hours a week just to be able

to make a living doing this craft and business. And then on top of it teaching, so it took a great deal of energy to sustain this kind of career at various points.

AR: I said that was going to be the last question, but we didn't get into your business partnership with your brother yet, do you want to stop here, and continue next time?

NR: Yeah, why don't we do that?

AR: Well, I will just say thank you for sharing, and the story is to be continued.

NR: Thanks for listening.

November 29, 2014, Interview Part II

AR: It is November 29, 2014. I am with Neal Rosenblum in his shop and studio in Worcester, Massachusetts. Good morning, Dad.

NR: Good morning, Ariel.

AR: What are you doing this morning?

NR: I am putting out jewelry boxes from the vault onto the cases [in the gallery], that when Nancy and Chuck come in either one of them, or both of them, will put the jewelry out representing about 80% of the value, as per our insurance company's policy requirement.

AR: Your insurance mandates that you have 80% of your value—

NR: In the vault.

AR: Interesting, I thought you meant on display.

NR: No, no. So, a lot of the gold jewelry, diamond jewelry, expensive wedding bands, platinum—precious metals, work in progress and customer's jewelry go into the vault every night. And what's left behind are some of the gold jewelry pieces, and silver, primarily silver, and other metals that just stay out. So, this is a daily ritual, and what I do is, I am generally here first and I open up the vaults, put the jewelry on the counters for them to put out, and then I usually go back and start looking at the computer. So that's the beginning of my daily work ritual in most cases.

AR: Taking out the jewelry from the vault?

NR: Right. Opening up the vault, putting on the equipment- I have steaming equipment, ultrasonic equipment, I open up the safes, the back door security. More or less, just get things started, and part of that is the security issue.

AR: Right. Do you want to describe your work area a little bit?

NR: Sure. The work area is the main workspace for me, which has two fully working jewelers benches with torches, pliers, flexible shafts in each bench, with a center area having a rolling mill, vice, a tool table, anvil, ring stretcher, compressor, with shelves surrounding the room with books, some jewelry supplies, and I would call them odds and ends of various things that are used in jewelry making or just in some cases things I don't want to throw away—because I don't know what to do with them [laughs]. The space also has a long counter which is used for packaging jewelry as things are being sold, gift wrapping with either various kinds of boxes and wrapping paper, labels, and then there's an area on that same counter to the right of the packing area with a desktop computer that I generally sit at, so between the

work bench and this computer station, these are the two places I work at in this particular room. On the back counter there is a large window, which when we built the space I insisted on having a large window to look out—it helps my eyes to adjust because I am looking at things close-up, and I can take a break and look at a far distance frequently, and see what's going on outside. There are horizontal bars on the back window, which are security bars and there are a few plants, a dead bonsai tree that I like because it reminds me that life is short and I enjoyed this tree while it was alive. There's a plant called an air plant, which my neighbor gave me, [running water] and he said just run it under water occasionally, and he also gave me this hollowed out branch with a hole in it that it gets stuck in, and that's on the shelf as well. Along the back wall there's a steamer, an ultrasonic cleaner, coffeemaker, vulcanizer for making molds, wax pot, electroplater, and right now I have several boxes, stacks of photographs from pre-digital times that I need to go through and sort out, find images, and have the intention of getting these digitized, and reprinted in another format. Occasionally, I come in and I'm the first one here for about an hour, which I really like, it's quiet, I listen to music or the news, and sometimes I light incense just to clear the air. And certainly make a cup of coffee.

[Both laugh]

AR: Most importantly.

NR: Most importantly make a cup of coffee [laughing].

[The interview breaks for twenty minutes while Neal continues opening the shop]

AR: Okay, so let's settle and look at some of the photos you gathered for me.

NR: Yeah. These are things that have been, let's say [pause] put in the digital age, so there are a few things from pre-digital, which have been put in here, but for the most part this is digital photography. I picked out a number of things that I like, different kinds of things. So in the top corner there are these column pieces, and—I have a friend who is somewhat unusual, in that we make things occasionally that are very non-traditional, and he gives me a lot of leeway to make creative pieces. They are somewhat functional objects and this happens to be—I would call them sculptures of a certain type, that have a functionality or specific purpose—and the specific purpose is to be the end cap of a twenty-nine cent, plastic Bic pen [laughs]. And, it's an interesting juxtaposition by taking a common object and making it very special, very different, unique and one of a kind, with something that is so ubiquitous. These are three examples of, we'll call them the pen cap sculptures, and they're made in silver with some gold highlights, in three different styles, one is an open style made out of wire, another is sheet and wire, more of a solid looking piece, and the other is also a solid tubular form with gold elements. The next object is a pair of earrings, a customer brought an assortment of rough diamonds—rough diamonds meaning really found in the earth pre-cut, natural diamonds of various sizes and various colors—and, I was asked to make something with them. So it was my choice to take these eight diamonds of varying sizes and try to make something that would work together. I made a pair of earrings, they are round earrings, with an interior curvature frame separating in each case four diamonds, which move around, and on the top there is a mineral crystal lens that holds everything in place, but as they are worn each diamond can move.

AR: Oh! You can't even see that there is a lens on top.

NR: Yeah, there is a lens—Hey Chuck.

[Chuck enters the workshop]

AR: Good morning.

NR: You can stop me or go back if you want.

AR: Why don't we look at the whole selection, and instead of going one by one, maybe you could talk about pendants and brooches, and then move onto the breastplate commission?

NR: Alright. Well there are a number of brooches made from different materials. I do like brooches because they are very singular statements. This one has a very large central gemstone, which is a boulder opal, another one with black material, which is basalt, a non-precious material, and then there is a linear brooch that has an unusual piece of tourmaline, green tourmaline which has varied shading.

AR: Can I ask you a question?

NR: Sure.

AR: When I see all these pieces together, you seem to have a distinct way of working—

NR: Framing?

AR: Yeah, framing the stones. Do you have an opinion about it?

NR: Yeah, I do. Well, in each case, in these pieces you're looking at, they are symmetrical in many ways, but the framing detail is asymmetrical which has a number of parts around the border in different widths, different shapes of round balls, square pieces, curved pieces to create the frame, as well as gemstone elements, but overall they are asymmetric and I think to a degree they are inspired by the work of Louise Nevelson, whose work I really like, and her approach to collecting objects of various types, various shapes and sizes, and reconstructing those shapes. And my tendency is to work in a more asymmetric fashion since it takes a much greater effort for me to do things that are symmetrical. I would attribute that aesthetic sensibility to my interest in her work, and that's prevalent in a number of my works—

AR: That definitely runs throughout your work. Working with simple forms, asymmetry—I'm wondering how you think of ornament? Do you think of those details around the frame as ornament?

NR: I'm not really sure how I would classify them. Ornament- You know for me, when I do it, I am more or less trying to tell a story of sorts, a visual story by making parts—they are not found objects- that's sort of the difference, I actually make these things [parts] one at a time, and then place them for example around a border, and then look at the piece and consider what my next choice would be to keep that irregular detail going around a border or in a particular piece, so, I sort of make the decisions along the way, as I go. I may have a general concept of creating a border, but the detail is enhanced along the way, in process.

AR: Well, also, I guess the border develops because its function is to hold the stone; you need something to hold the stone, right?

NR: Well, yes. Generally speaking on all of these there is a bezel, that holds the stone, so— if you wanted to just show the stone you could have the bezel with nothing around it. But what I have done is extended beyond the bezel outward to have a greater frame—let's call it a picture frame for the gemstone. The frames, as many frames are, are carved with some form of detail, wide frames, narrow frames, minimal, but in this case they are frames that become a statement. And, maybe even in my point of view primary, where the gemstone

becomes secondary, even though the gemstone is very beautiful because of its natural beauty.

AR: Mmm.

NR: This shows a human element.

AR: So there's that back and forth balance between the natural and the manmade.

NR: Yeah. [Pause] So here are several examples, here is a pair of earrings with a similar kind of thing- with a form on the top, and [pointing to the gemstones] this actually dangles, they move mechanically.

AR: What kind of stone is that?

NR: These are opals as well, boulder opals. So there are a couple of brooches, earrings, here is a ring that was done with a bezel set sapphire cabochon, and an asymmetric form detail. There is another ring that is carved, and the carving is asymmetrical, and both sides of the ring are different.

AR: So with the asymmetrical concept are you thinking about the different angles that people are looking at the piece from?

NR: Well, I don't think about how other people look at it. I'm just looking at how I see it, so in other words, as it's developing I'm putting the pieces together to see where I want them to be and when it gets to a certain point of completion and I feel good about it, that's when I stop. But I really don't consider how—I suppose another person would look at it the same way I would, by looking around the detail of the piece, and enjoying the different sides and shapes. We've looked at a number of examples and I think there is carry over with several objects here and other ones—

AR: Yes, the main elements being asymmetry—

NR: Well okay, those are pieces that have a central object, okay where as this is an asymmetrical piece, which is a bracelet, where every single link is different and formed to connect to another link which is different, and is made of gold, it has a few gemstones places within the metal. And I really do like these kinds of objects where I make one link, think about how I would connect it to another, then make the next one, and carry on, I have a general sense of how I want the links to look but each one is fabricated from wire to make a whole piece.

AR: So it's a process of improvisation, where you make one and then you make another one and see how they work together, and what kind of form should come next.

NR: Right. A discovery along the way.

AR: You have a general vision but also allow—

NR: There's a lot of flexibility. I have one very small section of a piece [looking at a close up photograph of a bracelet detail] that I did in a similar manor. The first bracelet was hand fabricated, this one each link is carved in wax and cast, you don't have the remainder of the material being wire because each piece is carved from a block, and in some cases you have gemstones incorporated into each link, but this is just a small section. I do have a handmade mechanical clasp, which is very difficult to make, but I really like this form. Anyway, do you want to move onto a few other kinds of pins or brooches? There are other examples here that are somewhat different like this one [pointing], and this one [pointing]. So there are three

other brooches—We'll start with this one. There was a period of time when I was really working a lot with 24 karat gold, which is very soft in sheet form, I like the color and I like some of the shapes that can be made from it, so I would take a piece of 24 karat gold, softened, and manipulate it with my fingers to create an irregular pattern which is almost looks to be a desert sand-scape of sorts.

AR: Yeah definitely. It's topographical—

NR: Yeah, topographical, there are high and low areas. And, I wanted to make a brooch with this but you can't just use this without having some kind of exterior frame, so I contrasted it with white gold on the exterior, a border that would maintain its shape, and on the outside border there are small rubies, I wanted to incorporate another color into this brooch, so small cabochon rubies are set around the border in an asymmetric pattern, where some of them are close together and some of them are far apart, and they are seen more clearly from an angle rather than straight on—but in the center of the 24 karat gold which is modeled and softened, not bright, there are a number of very small diamonds that are set into the surface, and in order to set those into the surface a small frame has to be built for each one of them behind the brooch, so they tend to look like they're floating in the surface of the material.

AR: They kind of look like a constellation.

NR: Yeah, it does. There is a certain asymmetry to it, but it does look like a constellation, without it being a constellation.

AR: I feel like a lot of the pieces have slight allusions to something, but it's not so literal that you can then interpret or see different things in them.

NR: Yeah. This is another 24 karat piece which has been manipulated and folded and looks like a piece of crumpled paper, and a frame was built out of silver which is a fairly large border and was then blackened—so it's a very minimal looking piece with a fold-over crumpled paper looking piece of gold in the middle.

AR: Was that a commission?

NR: No it was something I wanted to make.

AR: I think it's beautiful. I really like it.

NR: This one?

AR: Yeah.

NR: This was a commission, sometimes people give me gemstones and ask me to do something with them—this was a number of small square diamonds, and this person said they would like a pendant, and I made an exterior frame with wires crisscrossing in a somewhat asymmetric manner to make almost like a cats-cradle looking wire structure, and each wire has a square bezel holding one of the diamonds to make this very airy looking pendant.

AR: Mmm.

NR: And that was made out of platinum. This piece here was a piece of 24 karat gold strips of metal that I made, and I was somewhat inspired by a few things, but certainly weaving, and this is gold that has been woven together, and then a frame was built out of silver to hold the gold in the middle, and then the frame was blackened. One of the advantages of 24 karat gold is that you can make things with silver, blacken the silver and it won't blacken the gold.

AR: So by blackened, is that oxidized?

NR: It's oxidized, where I'm using a chemical process to advance the tarnishing.

AR: And that's a pendant?

NR: No it's a brooch, it has a pin back. I actually have that piece still.

AR: From these pendants, I would say there is an aesthetic link to this breast plate that you were commissioned to do for a Temple. Can you talk about that commission process?

NR: Well—

AR: Also, what the breastplate is?

NR: I was commissioned to make a breastplate for a Torah, and it was commissioned by and sponsored by a group of women who had gotten their B'nai Mitzvah at a later age in their lives, and I think there may have been ten or twelve of them who financed the piece. And the theme of the Torah breastplate is unusual in that it honors women of the Bible. It says: These are the names of the children of Israel, that's in English, and then we have Hebrew script—

AR: And English script—

NR: And English, with the names of the daughters of Israel- Miriam, Rebecca, Rachel, Hagar, Leah, I'm reading it upside down, but there is Hebrew and English. The request of the commission was to honor the women of the Bible, so—which I think is unusual because I don't think that is really a theme for other Torah breast plates at all—but anyway—

AR: And just to say the breastplate is a kind of a shield that hangs and adorns the Torah when it is not being read-

NR: That's right.

AR: And the breastplate goes over a textile cover, so those are the dressings—

NR: It is a dressing and it also has another purpose, in many cases these are made out of silver and precious metals, and they also act in a peculiar way of being protection for the Torah, because if someone were to steal something of value, the breastplate and the Torah crowns that go on the Torah would be the things that would be stolen, and that's important because the most precious object is the Torah. So these become a form of protection, a reverse camouflage, but the real value is the Torah, protected by the value of the breastplate.

AR: That's interesting. I have never heard that before.

NR: Yeah, That's something I learned making this. I made the form round representing a breast. It is round, it is dome shaped, it is silver and along the exterior it is held together with a number of rivets that hold it to another back-plate. From what I can remember, let me count them [counts] yeah that's right, there are eighteen rivets to hold the dome shaped piece to its backing, and they're made out of gold studs, and I made eighteen because eighteen is a significant number in the Jewish Hebrew alphabet, and it's represented by the letter Chai, which is the letter symbol for life—

AR: That's right—

NR: So that's an important symbol. I started the text in a way to spiral around the circular form toward the center where there is a gold dome, which you could consider symbolically to be a nipple, which as a whole looking breast-like—circular, feminine, I wanted it to represent the women of Israel nurturing a people. So that's the effect I wanted to have in a very simple manner. There are a number of other small rivets, and those are specially carved and they're made in the form of small trees, they're kind of a rounded square, and the trees represent the tree of life. So, I tried to incorporate various symbols of Judaism. I was free to make this breastplate in whatever way I wanted.

AR: That was for Temple Sinai?

NR: That's right. I think it was commissioned about twenty years ago. That was 1994 or somewhere around there? And it's the only Torah breastplate I ever made.

AR: Did you have a sense of the reception of the piece?

NR: Well, I think it was appreciated. I don't know how well it was understood. Sometimes you make something to your own satisfaction and you're not sure if it's appreciated . . . I think sometimes you have to look a little deeper at something to understand it. I did get compliments on it, but I was very satisfied with making it and the way it turned out. I think it was totally appropriate for what its purpose was to honor the women of the Bible.

AR: Is there any other piece you want to talk about?

NR: Well, a few of these are along the same lines—I kind of like this piece [points], somebody brought a gemstone to me that they brought back from Africa, and so a lot of times people want pretty formal looking pieces, but they let me do what I wanted. So what I did was I carved a piece, and made it using my sense of an African woodcarving as a shield, so it has a very large border incorporated bale for a chain with beads around the exterior, and it kind of almost looks like a turtle with some stars carved around it, and I think you could say it looks somewhat crude but I think it becomes a really strong form, and it's made out of fine silver, it's a casting, but it's something I really like. These are a set of cufflinks I made, and these are also carved directly into the metal—they are asymmetric using a variety of tooling—

AR: So these aren't cast?

NR: No, they're carved directly into thick pieces of metal. You can see the findings behind here. And they have a very coarse texture on the outside surface with a few small, polished highlights—that's the kind of thing I like to do. Let's see, so this is a commission [Riverview Pendant], actually it was something I made as a pendant to donate to a school for an auction, and it's their logo and I reinterpreted their logo by using yellow gold, white gold, and diamonds. Here's another thing, these were all rubies that were collected in Burma by a professor and brought them to me and asked if I could do something with them. I made the suggestion of using them in ring form—this looks huge right now—all these rings are independent and can be independently stacked together in different ways.

AR: That's cool—

NR: Yeah. Here again, there's asymmetry and somewhat irregularity—there's not a preciseness about even when you have somewhat of a regular pattern of these things, like these oval rubies going around the ring, that's also not precise and machine like which some people aspire to.

AR: Do you want to say more about that—your view of maintaining your hand in each piece?

NR: Yeah. I'm always asked to do things that are really precise, things that are considered to be very jewelry looking [laughs] and I can do that. But the things that I like to make, there is always an individuality in both the carving, the non-preciseness. I don't really like to have highly polished, technically polished surfaces, a lot of times I like to treat the surface so it's natural, sandblasted, contrast with softer areas and for example this piece here has [counts] five gold bands that are very, very narrow within a frame, we can call this tube the frame, and looking at these strips they all have an irregular surface, and I think in this case they are all moveable, in other words in this contained area they could move around, but what I've done to create these irregular patterns is I've made certain hammers that have extremely modeled surfaces so that when I hit the metal the metal takes on the form of the hammer, and each time you have a hammer blow on the metal at various places there's nothing that's ever repeated, it's highly individualized.

AR: Can I ask you a question that I've asked you before, I think twice. When we recorded last time, I asked you about defining yourself as a designer, a craftsperson, an artist, how you see those different identities and you said, I think you were kind of dismissive about labeling yourself. But before I had asked you that question and you said you saw those different roles in different parts of your work, whether as a craftsperson technically being able to repair things, knowing how to manipulate material, as a designer working with people on commissions, working with a client, and as an artist working on something that was your own vision. Do you remember that?

NR: Well, I would start out saying that, essentially I consider myself a maker of things in the tradition of anyone throughout history who has used tools or not even tools but just taking materials and refashioning them into either a practical or decorative object, but in terms of the definition overall, I think I have taken on various roles, and maybe I could be defined, or some of my objects could be defined as art, other things are designed for a particular purpose, some things are repaired- overall, I don't really define myself as one thing singularly, and my approach is very practical. I do whatever I can, but I am a person who makes things and makes objects, and the material that I work with is mostly metal, precious metal, sometimes I work with wood, gemstones, or even plastic or other materials, but I believe there is a certain creative impulse I have within me, I have more or less cherished it and is supported by people buying my work, however, I don't have any formal training in art, design, jewelry making, repairing jewelry, a historical sensibility of jewelry—I am completely devoid of those kinds of formal sensibilities—

AR: But you've been your own teacher—

NR: I have been my own teacher and taught myself along the way, what I've been curious about, what I felt like I needed to learn, and that's more or less how my career has evolved in its own organic weed like fashion, and I say weed, because it is somewhat wild in terms of not being channeled in a particular direction. I have somewhat resisted that channeling [pause] to do things a certain way, and so the body of my work and the things that I've made, things I've been commissioned to do, or made on my own, have been things- certain things that are derivative, and some things are creative and original, but that's who I am, I suppose.

[Both laugh]

NR: If you think of other things you want me to embellish on think about it, I'll send you a recording.

AR: Thanks for talking again today, there is always next time.

[website link: <http://www.goldsmithsgallery.com/>]

