Interviewee: Jenna Vanden Brink (JVB)
Interviewer: Meredith McGriff (MM)
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Note: Jenna declined to be on camera during the interview, but kindly provided a portrait and photos of her work to accompany the audio recording.

Video File #1 (afc2018030_05080_sr01.wav)

MM 0:00
I'll start it off. Just to say I am Meredith McGriff doing the interview and it is October 15, 2018. And if you could introduce yourself so that people know who's here. Yeah.

JVB 0:13
My name is Jenna Vanden Brink. I'm a full time potter here in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

MM 0:20
And if you could just say just a few words for the record about where we are today.

JVB 0:25
We're in my home in Highland Park. It's a neighborhood in Pittsburgh. My husband and I are restoring a 1905 Victorian home. And we live here with our baby daughter and small dog, Wellington.

MM 0:44
It's beautiful.

JVB 0:45
Thank you.

MM 0:49
So, how did you first become interested in ceramics?

JVB 0:54
So my father was involved in clay. And he actually he studied, studied ceramics at Calvin College, which is where I ended up also going. And then he was making pots while my mom was counseling at the Center for Creative Studies, and he got connected with a class in automotive clay modeling and ended up choosing fields he didn't know anything about. But because he got all these free classes, he just took them. And he used to bring me along as a baby to all of his ceramics classes that he would take. He was mostly just using the studios at the community colleges.

JVB 1:47
And he got a job working for Ford modeling clay cars, so he still works for Ford. I think it's probably been about 30 years. He's a model manager. So he's working in clay. But in a very sort of alternative way. So I was exposed to ceramics from a really young age and my family was really committed to arts and community. They moved to
Detroit, my mom was really involved in theater. And my dad, yeah, he made pots. And then he started working for Ford. So our home was filled with artwork and handmade pottery, and it was sort of always surrounding me and always something that my parents promoted as something that was valuable.

MM 2:38
How did you make the decision that that's what you wanted to do?

JVB 2:42
So when I, I didn't really have access as a kid to any, any ceramics classes specifically, I took art classes, but there wasn't really that much in Detroit where we grew up. And so I didn't really get involved in ceramics until college. And in college, I mostly just pursued classes that I was interested in, so I ended up studying English and art studio art. So I got a double major in those two things. And then when I graduated, I thought I would for sure use my English degree. And I ended up getting connected with the Union Project. And very directly we used my background in ceramics, my degree in ceramics.

MM 3:32
What year did you graduate?

JVB 3:34
I graduated from Calvin in 2009. And had a really close group of friends in college and we lived together in college and then decided when it came time for graduation to move somewhere together. And then we visited a couple of different cities and chose Pittsburgh to move together. So there were 11 of us that moved from Michigan to Pittsburgh together to sort of live and work in a community. And once we made the decision about Pittsburgh, I started looking at job opportunities and ended up signing up for AmeriCorps to do year of service. And then Union Project was one of the placement opportunities through AmeriCorps. So that's how I landed there into that in the fall of 2009.

MM 4:28
That's great. So what kind of work were you doing at the project when you started?

JVB 4:38
When I started Justin Rothshank had left in the spring. So five or six months later, I came up, came on. So the ceramics program was sort of without a manager or leadership at the time. The organization was going through a big transition, and had to downsize staff really dramatically. So then they brought on a couple of AmeriCorps interns to help take on some of that load. So I sort of found myself in a technical internship, but it was very much a role where I had a lot of agency and a lot of input and a lot of opportunity to grow the program. So my, my role eventually was ceramics program manager. But at the time, when I came on, it was more broad, like arts program manager, because I oversaw this stained glass restoration program, as well as the ceramics program. So Union Project is a 100 year old church building, and one of the ongoing projects from the time it was founded in 2001, was to restore the stained glass windows. And they did that by running a program where members of the community would sign up to take classes, pay to take classes in stained glass restoration, learn the skill of stained glass restoration, and simultaneously restore the hundred year old windows at the Union Project. Yeah, it was, it was an amazing, amazing vision, amazing concept. And one of my first projects was to wrap that up, it had sort of been put on hold for a couple years when the ceramics program had grown, and then it sort of got put on hold because the organization was going through these changes. And so then one of the first things that I was tasked with was to finish the windows. Yeah. So it was it was really I mean, now I know how to restore stained glass windows, do I ever get to restoring our own? No. But it's very good that I could do that. Yeah, so that was one of the most rewarding projects, I think, of my time there. And that was right at the beginning, I ended up staying at Union Project for seven years, growing the ceramics program, mostly, but also finishing up that stained glass.
That's amazing. So coming out of college, did you have a sense of what your own ceramics work was going to be or what you, what you wanted to do with your career.

JVB  7:30
I didn't really. And I think even when I was at school, I didn't, I didn't really have a strong, like, career focus. Maybe that was just not being responsible. Or maybe it was a privilege to not worry about that. But I definitely just sort of took the approach that it was important for me to figure out like sort of what made me spark and what made me come alive. And I pursued those things, and then found myself in this role at Union Project where I was managing the arts program, the ceramics program, and I still even for a full year, if not two even, didn't even make any pots really, so much of my focus and my work was restoring the program, growing the program, making people feel included, drawing people in, asking the community what they wanted. What they wanted, it had been pared down so much. And had been focused on sort of production potters and I was shifting it to be more of a community program.

JVB  8:49
So I grew the co-op of artists from, I think there were like three or four left, to over 20 members, created a full slate of classes for adults and kids, and there had never been any classes for children, which is something I never had access to as a kid. And I thought how cool it was for people to have kids, young kids to have access to throwing classes at age four, I think that's so fun. Yeah, I sort of tried to create opportunities for people to engage with the program at whatever level they were at. So whether it was co-op members who were, you know, fully capable of making their own work, they would also have access to teaching opportunities and peer, sort of interaction just from, you know, being with other members to like novices, who were needing a beginners class to people who are hobbyists, who needed to just have access to the studio, and not really any instruction, but no, but like low commitment, so we had open studio kind of opportunities. And then I also started to do a huge amount of outreach into schools and partnerships with other nonprofits and organizations. So sort of using the ceramics program as a tool to engage other people even off site. So that was a big part of the program too.

MM  10:33
That's a lot.

JVB  10:33
It was a lot. It was a tremendous amount of, of work. And it was a really big program. And then after seven years, I, it was, it was sort of time for me to shift and do something different. The organization was changing again, and it felt like a good time to move on.

MM  10:53
So during the time that you were there, when did you start making your own work, and how did that progress?

JVB  11:01
it took a couple years, I felt like the program was my, sort of was my art. And then eventually, I realized that it was important for me to make my own work. Partially for, just as, just in the role that I was in, it was important for me to exercise my skills, but also for the co-op members, especially to see that I was also a practicing sort of potter, I think that that was really important. And not just an administrator.

JVB  11:38
And then the the first sort of, I would, I would do things like participate in wood firings, that was sort of a really natural communal sort of opportunity to put some pots in the wood firing, and I had to go out there anyways to help facilitate it. So things like that.
And then the other big sort of motivator to start making my own work was a friend of two of my friends who were part of the crew that we moved out here to Pittsburgh with, were getting married and wanted me to make them dishes. So I made them sort of a custom set of dishes. And then I liked the product so much that I kept making it so now it's one of my lines of work that I make. So that was sort of the motivator for finally starting that.

MM 12:39
That's great. Was that line, something you developed with them? Or?

JVB 12:48
Not really, it was more, they sort of gave me complete creative control. And I thought about what would be fitting for them. So they're actually, they're, they don't live here in Pittsburgh anymore, they moved back to Belding, Michigan and bought a farm and now they're vegetable farmers there. And so the pots I made for them were earthenware, so like a deep, rich, red, brown clay. And then they were both, the husband of the two was, was an artist and he sort of had this line drawn style in his own work so I adapted sort of that style. And I and I did drawings of fruits and vegetables on the, on the pots that I made for them. Yeah.

MM 13:40
So as you started producing work, where, where were you selling it? Or were you selling...?

JVB 13:47
I mostly just took advantage of the opportunities that came about just from my role at Union Project. So part of my job also was to coordinate a group booth at the Three Rivers Arts Festival, which is just a big summer arts festival, downtown Pittsburgh. So I was one of, I also participated as an artist through that. And then I started a sale, the Mother of All Pottery Sales, which is different than, it's just like, all ceramics, and it was in the Great Hall at Union project, which was the former sanctuary. So it was all ceramic artists in Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh reach, you know, broader Pittsburgh region, were invited to apply to participate. And then so I would participate in that, because that was something that I was doing, you know, just as part of my work as Program Manager. And then eventually, we started the Highland Park pottery tour, and then I participated in that as well. Yeah, it wasn't until I started making, making pots full time that I started my online shop and adding shows and those sorts of things. Mostly, I just did things that made sense with, in coordination with my work through Union Project.

MM 15:19
Did you have, so you have the one line that you developed out of your work with your friends. And then did you have other lines or other styles that you were developing before you left Union Project?

JVB 15:32
Yeah, I did. I did one other, developed another line for other friends who another, another pair that got married, that's my porcelain line. And it has sort of a green base, and then growing out of that are drop, you know, slight line drawings of like flowers and ferns. And that friend that I made those for, we did some flower farming together. And I sort of designed those just to their aesthetic, and then I also can continue to make those afterwards. So I have two main lines, the earthenware and the porcelain, and both of them came out of sort of commissions for friends.

MM 16:21
That's really nice.

JVB 16:22
Yeah.

MM 16:26
So when you were deciding to shift to full time, what, what kinds of considerations did you have in mind, then as far as, that's a, that's a big change in your work.

JVB 16:38
It was, yeah, it was really, it was really scary, not so much in the financial sense, though, it is scary to give up a regular salary, but I have a, you know, partner who also makes a regular salary, so I didn't feel as nervous about that component of it. I was really nervous to give up, or to feel like I was losing so much of the meaningfulness that was part of my job at Union Project. I had, I was investing in this place that I was, I felt like was doing really good work, just in my, in my community, in my neighborhood, it's only a couple blocks away from my house, like walk to work. I had made over the years, so many close friends, all of my studio mates now were co-op members, that were part of the co op over the years when I was managing it. And I just constantly had opportunities to teach and opportunities to connect and collaborate with people. And I felt a lot of fulfillment in the social interaction I got from the, my other, from the co-op members. And, and in all the programs that I would facilitate, I sort of had, I felt like I had access to, just like a tool that would help me, like, connect with people through the program. And I was giving that up. And I, that made me really nervous. So when I first started working on my own, I, I took on a number of teaching opportunities, and also joined up with three of my ceramic peers and we started our own small studio. And it's not a community studio, it's sort of our own private workspace. But it still was able to help me not be isolated. I think when I first decided to leave, my plan was to just work out of my home in my basement. And I didn't think very much about the reality of that until that was not the plan and I thought back on it and thought, oh my goodness, that would have been so horrible to be stuck in my basement all by myself. I think I wouldn't have thrived nearly as much as I did when I left. But yeah, it was really, it was really scary because I just I loved my work at Union Project so much that it was a really hard transition to shift away from that.

MM 19:28
So what year was it that you left there?

JVB 19:33
Two years ago, so 2016, early 2016.

MM 19:44
Is that when you established this workspace with other potters?

JVB 19:48
Yep, yep. Yeah, so I yeah, yeah. So when I decided to leave, Keith and Joe, Keith Hershberger and Joe Delphia also decided to leave the co op and we started a studio with Reiko Yamamoto is our fourth studio mate. And the space that we found is about 10 minutes away from our homes here in Highland Park, and was a ceramic studio that just happened to be, the people were, the people had grown, the business had outgrown the space, and they were moving out of it. So it came open. Reiko called me and asked if I was interested in sharing it, and Keith and Joe and I had already talked about finding a place. So the four of us sort of all got together, and it's a really affordable space. It's an old storefront in, yeah, the little borough of Sharpsburg. It's kind of an interesting little, little town.

MM 20:55
That's, that's so fortunate that that opened

JVB 20:59
It is. Yeah.

MM 21:01
So what was the process of setting that up, and deciding what to do with that space like?
We, we, I think we all just four met and talked about before we decided whether the four of us could make it work. We think we talked about sharing the space and what that would look like. We've reconfigured things since that original setup. Joe, we were going to have a packing and shipping area in the back. And that ended up getting nixed and Joe made this like back room his studio. So each of us sort of have our own private, not private, our own designated workspace. And then there's communal storage space in the basement, which is sort of a game changer to have a lot of storage space. Because we all have I think the space is about 1400 square feet. And then there's all of that, again, in storage in the basement. So the four of us each probably have, I don't know, a little 200 square foot spot in the main space. And then there's communal area for kilns, a communal glazing area and then like a central table that can be sort of multipurpose and gets used for packing, shipping, loading kilns, glazing, big projects, that kind of stuff.

MM 22:35
That sounds really nice. Do you do share equipment?

JVB 22:39
We do. Yep. So I contributed a slab roller and a kiln. And then Joe, Keith and Reiko each contributed a kiln, and they all happen to be different sizes. So depending on what project you're working on, what you need, you just sign up for the kiln that you want. So we have a shared calendar, shared Google Calendar, you just sign up for accounts. And then each kind of firing and each specific kiln has a cost associated with it, which is something I had to figure out at the beginning. So that was part of setting it up, calculating the, the cubic feet and the temperature was going to and so I have a spreadsheet and I input everyone's firings and then I handle the electric bills. Reiko handles paying rent, Joe handles paying the gas bill, we have rotating weeks of cleaning the studio. There's, there's a lot of benefit to, a lot of logistical benefit to sharing a space with other people. None of us are shouldered with the full burden of rent, we can share. I would never have been able to afford, you know, three or four kilns. We can share, you know, the burden of you know, kiln maintenance and cleaning a big space like that. And taking out the, remembering to take out the trash and little things like that is really, really helpful. We go in on like big orders of materials together, that kind of stuff.

MM 24:20
That's great. That would be really nice. So this, at the point that you started this, the Highland Park tour have been going on for a while. Tell me about starting that tour. And what that was like.

JVB 24:40
Yeah, so I, it wasn't my brainchild, Keith, I think came up with the original idea and then pulled a couple of us in. Yeah, so I'm not even, I couldn't even speak to how he came up with it, but I'm sure that he's on the record for that part. I just, it was, I think four or five guys, one of which, he has moved to Baltimore now. And then Joe, Keith, and Jeff, who's the other host, Adam, who's has moved and then I was invited in also. And I remember going over to Keith house one night to chat about it. And we sort of just came up with a plan and it must have been in 2010, because that's, I think it's in its eighth, going on its eighth year now. It's, it's such a special event, it's grown. It's my, it's my most successful sale of the year, it's my most favorite sale of the year, it's grown every year, which is really encouraging and exciting. That's been part of the challenge, I think with it is to figure out how to keep it growing when the size of our homes is sort of not getting any bigger. And that's, I mean, we have, we send out surveys every year, and that's one of the main critiques is that sometimes the houses can be really crowded. But yeah, we all, each host sort of has autonomy over who they invite, we will sometimes meet and throw around names and see if, you know, anybody wants to take some, you know, and some people who we've either connected with or heard about or doing good work in Pittsburgh or beyond. One of the ways we've tried to grow is to invite people from outside the city. So Keith is having a guest from Philadelphia this, this year, I think he and Joe are both having guests from Philadelphia this year. I sort of came up with my own personal rule to rotate guests through every two years to sort of keep things different at my house. It wasn't this exact same stop every single year. I've broken that rule. But that was what I was going for for a while. Yeah.
Yeah, that's really neat. So what kind of, I mean, you said you send out surveys, what kind of tracking do you do year to year and how, how do you get this sense of growth...

We track, we have, we have people sign in, and when they sign in, they get a little passport. And each passport has the different stops on it, and they get stamped at each passport and then you turn in the passport at the, at your last stop. And we entice people to do that by, by offering them into a drawing for free pots, we always give away some free pots every year. But we get their contact information when they sign up to get the passport and then we see where they, you know, where they start. So we can see which stop they start at and we can see where they end that we can see the average of how many stops people go to. I think that's what we get from the passports and then we send out email surveys afterward and get feedback on what worked and what didn't if people have suggestions for improvements or things they want to see in the future. And then we also ask about their purchases, if they purchase, how many stops they purchased work at. So we get that data. It's not. It's not numbers, not spending numbers, but it's something.

And then Union Project is a partner in the event also. And because they're a nonprofit, they can support the tour in sort of a unique way where they can go after sponsorships and media sponsorships and we partner. Standard Ceramic Supply is the local clay supplier, and they have sponsored it since its inception. And then most recently, in the last, I think just last year, and then this year, again, the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, which is just down the street, approached us about wanting to sponsor and participate in some way support the tour, as, as just a activity that happens in the neighborhood that they think is great. And as a fellow neighbor. They also have a little sort of archaeological ceramic museum on their campus. So they, we're pulling that in as a little point of interest, I think this year.

That's really neat. As far as how you, how you set up and plan for your house, what you do and how you work through that...

I try to keep my house looking more like a house and less like a gallery.

But that's part of the challenge, is how much, I mean that's part of the question is, and strategies, how much furniture do you move out, I like to, I leave my couches and this big coffee table in here. And I set up pots here and, because I like to have a space for people to sit down and hang out for a while. So we usually have the fire on and sometimes people just camp out for a couple hours even, they'll just hang out, which is good. That's what I sort of want to facilitate in, that sort of feels like the benefit of having it, an event in your home, is that it feels like a place where you can be comfortable and have a completely different sort of shopping experience. Or not shopping or just like experience in general just looking and talking and eating and all those kind of experiences. We have a big entryway so I, we set up shelves in the entryway. And we have this big red sort of China cabinets, I move out all of my pots that I, all of my personal collection and move in pots for sale. So we clear out like the mug rack. And we'll have a mix of people's things here. I tend to organize my house more by giving each artist an area and then we have some sort of communal spaces, whereas I think the other guys often will just mix things in and sort of set it up as one, one cohesive gallery and mine is more like areas for, for people, just sort of a different approach I think, to the layout.

Do you ever get to visit each other's houses?
JVB 32:00
We tried to, sort of before and after hours. And sometimes I think we've all sort of hired or traded for or recruited help with managing checkout, that was a piece of feedback that we got early on, from attendees, that the artists were too busy checking people out and wrapping pots to really get to talk to them. And part of, a huge part of the pitch and value of the event is that you get to meet and talk with the potters in, in our homes. And so if we're too busy, yeah putzing with checkout, then we can't, we don't get as much of that interaction. I feel really self-conscious about leaving during the tour for that same reason. So I try to visit the other people's houses before or after. It's two days, so you sort of get four when, you know...

MM 33:02
Had you attended other pottery tours before participating in this?

JVB 33:07
I think I ever had. I, I don't feel like, I mean Calvin where I went to school was just a such a small liberal arts school with not a very strong arts program. So I didn't, I didn't really feel like I was immersed in like clay culture until many years later in Pittsburgh when I really got committed to ceramics or I was, really got involved in ceramics. So I don't think I've ever been to another pottery, I ever had been to another pottery tour. But it's from what I've what I know now that this sort of urban setting for a pottery tour is pretty unique. They're often in more rural settings, and they're often in people's studios. Very rarely just in, in your house.

MM 34:08
It's the only one I know of,

MM 34:09
Really?

MM 34:10
But I'm so focused on the Midwest. I think there might be one other that's homes, but I'm not...

JVB 34:17
Yeah, I don't know. I know that there's a, an urban pottery tour in Philadelphia. And they it's branded as like the Philadelphia urban pottery tour, specifically.

JVB 34:29
But I still think that those are studios and not homes.

MM 34:33
Yeah, well, and I guess some places there seems to be, at least like in Michiana for example, there's so many, my home is here, my studio is here, and it's just kind of, less of a come into my house and buy pottery...

JVB 34:47
Right. Right.

MM 34:47
kind of situation, so. And of course, you're in December. So coming inside is a good thing.

JVB 34:55
Yeah. Yeah. The weather is such a factor always even, even for indoor things. people in Pittsburg. Don't like bad weather.
MM 35:05
Fair enough.

JVB 35:06
Yeah.

MM 35:07
Have you had challenging years due to weather?

JVB 35:10
We have had some, like, dead Sundays when it's snowing or something like that. This past year, I think was really mild the year before that was, like, 70 degrees, something horribly not right. And then I think the year before that, we had some serious snow. I think it deters people from driving. But, I find it very charming to be so cozy in here with, hunkered down with food and the fire and seeing the snow outside. We always make sure to get the Christmas tree up before the tour and we sell ornaments off of it.

MM 35:47
That's nice... So that's obviously a really big sale for you. I think you said your biggest. Now that you've shifted to doing this full time, what are some of the other big sales that you do? Or what are, what's your work schedule like?

JVB 36:12
So I, my work schedule shifted, shifted a lot when I had a baby, which was a year and a half ago. I before then would work all the time, Really long days, I'd stay at the studio from morning until really late at night and then work almost every weekend day also, just because I felt like it's, it's just, I was figuring out I was figuring out sort of my strategy and how to balance my workload, I didn't now how to say, I was too afraid to say no to anything, because I was just starting out and I felt like turning down opportunities for work felt really scary. So I said yes to everything at the beginning. I worked all the time. Then I had Rosie and had to figure out some way to, to not work so much.

JVB 37:20
I couldn't work all the time I had, I wanted to hang out with my kid. So I work four full time days, I work Tuesday through Friday, and she goes to a really, really great in-home daycare with some friends of ours. My husband dropped her off and picks her up. It's right by his school where he teaches, and I don't work on the weekends, unless it's like after she went to bed and I'm under a deadline. But I try to just relax when I'm at home. That's the other really important thing about having my studio outside of my house, is I'm able to give myself some boundaries. When you own your own business, it's really hard to feel okay about not working. I think that's probably true for everybody, no matter what you're, what you're doing or making or whatever. And so for me, it's really helpful to have my studio outside of my house. So my latest shift is I do a couple events. The pottery tour is a great one. I try to do more local things. The only things I do out of town are the Central Pennsylvania's Festival for the Arts in State College, and I do a couple events in Washington DC, usually one or two in Washington DC. It's sort of nice to grow my market, my sort of direct buyers market in other cities besides just Pittsburgh. So I do Three Rivers Arts Festival, I do another local one called Handmade Arcade. It's at the convention center in December, and that's a really big one. So mostly just Pittsburgh events, and then those two other ones. I'm trying to do more direct to consumers sales and less through galleries and wholesale. I think my prices would need to be adjusted way higher, to do more of that. Or at least that's what I learned when I was working, working, working. And now I still make the same amount. And I work a lot less. Because I tried, I've tried to focus on more online sales, more meeting people in person at sales, which is also what I really like. And then I also added a third line of ceramic, of porcelain jewelry, and that I am pursuing wholesale for. So that's, sort of, feels like a, it's still clay. But it behaves like a totally different product, it's, the markup is higher from pottery to, from, for jewelry rather than pottery, there's a lot less loss, it's quicker to make, the material cost is a lot lower, it's just a lot more manageable. So I can
supplement sort of my pottery with my jewelry sales. And then that also gives me an opportunity to do some wholesale. Yeah, so that's my, that's my latest strategy.

MM 40:42
That's really interesting. Do you have wholesale jewelry customers who also buy pottery from you?

JVB 40:47
Um, I have, I have like precious few. I sell to the Society for Contemporary Craft in Pittsburgh, that's in the Strip District in Pittsburg. So like really great, really great ones that I just can't say no to, I'll do that for. But yeah I'm trying not to do much wholesale of pottery at all. Unless they beg me.

MM 41:18
It's good that you know what works for you.

JVB 41:20
I think, I think alternatively, the option would be to increase my prices a lot. And I am so leery to do that because I want it to be accessible to people. And so this is the way to do that, is to just sell directly.

MM 41:38
That's great. As far as customer interaction, I'm always curious to hear what kind of feedback you get from customers, or what you've learned from selling directly to customers.

JVB 41:50
Yeah, that's actually one of the one of the big benefits of doing these big arts festivals for they're really exhausting things to do. And some people do a lot of them and do circuits. And I just do two. And I still feel like the two are really exhausting. But every time I do it, I every time I do it, I think why am I doing this and then afterwards, I think, okay, this is like, one of the big benefits of doing this is you get mass feedback on your, on your work. Because there's just crowds and crowds of people coming in and giving you way more feedback than you get online, there's social media, but there's something so different about people just walking by and coming in and having a conversation with you, or making comments about things right there, you know, while they see things or it catches their eye, and they say something about it. And you don't really get anything, any, you don't get much of that with online purchases. So it's, it's an opportunity to yeah, get feedback, and then also get to meet the people that, that they're buying, that are buying the work. So and that's really valuable. It does also often give me sort of a fresh perspective on things. And, when I have my head down in the studio, and I'm just producing, producing, producing, it's really hard to get perspective or even, like, realize what I'm creating, or what I'm doing often until it's finished and out there. And the nice thing about it too, is it's set up sort of in mass, and I can sort of see it all together and I can, and I can get people's reactions to it.

JVB 42:47
It helps me see things differently, too because other people are, have different perspectives on it, and so they'll say, it reminds me of a Scandinavian style, or it makes me think, of I don't know, whatever. Or they associate, one of the things I like about the earthenware pots that have all different drawings on them is that people will have their, well, they'll sort of imprint their own associations with those images on to them. And it wasn't what I thought of when I did it. But you know, they have, you know, a story of their Grandma, who always took them cherry picking, and that's why, you know, that plate is meaningful to them or whatever. So that kind of experience is really meaningful to me, too. Which is why I haven't cut out the big arts festivals, even though they're so much work, some people love them. I think Keith loves them. Right, they're, they drain me.

MM 44:07
It's a lot of work. It's really a lot of work. I used to do some art fairs. It's exhausting.
It is exhausting. It is partially why I feel like I'm just really picky about which ones I do.

Yeah. It's got to be a good experience for you, gotta be the right crowd.

Yeah.

Do you, do you find you get different kinds of feedback or tend to have different kinds of conversations when you're talking with other potters versus customers who aren't potters?

Yeah, I think so. I mean, potters will just talk technical stuff a lot. And I think my work often sort of bridges, sort of general appeal and potter appeal. I think, I think part of what makes my current work engaging to people who aren't potters is the imagery. I think it's easier for people to engage if it has, like, an image of an object on it, if that makes sense?

It does make sense. Yeah, absolutely. Do you feel like that helps your online sales to have like, this has cherries on it. And people can search for cherry? Did you feel like that helps?

I mean, I haven't noticed, my, my online shop isn't so so well honed that I have all the right tags on everything, so I probably could be better, I probably could see better results from that. I'm sure it does. I mean, part of what the bummer about selling things online is that people can't see it and touch it and feel it and experience it in person. So they can't feel the weight of it and the comfort of the handle and the thinness of the lip and the sheen of the glaze. It's all just based on what photos they, there are. But I think having images on things helps, helps sell things, just because yeah, I think it's easier for people to approach. Rather than sort of the nuanced flame path on a wood fired mug that you, it's really so much nicer to experience in person, I think.

Absolutely. Yeah. That is, it's kind of an interesting balance in ceramics that I hear people talk about how great it is to get work out online and to ship things off online. And, and yet, customers miss out on so much, or potential customers miss out on so much.

Yeah, absolutely. What kind of a turnaround time do you...

I feel a lot of responsibility when I ship things, that they be really perfect. And I mean not perfect, but they will be really high quality and my attention to detail be like extremely, extremely careful because people don't get to see every inch of it. And they're sort of trusting me to send them this, you know, my high quality standard of what I make. It's a little bit, it's a little bit of like a trust game. A big thing that's been successful for me lately is offering the earthenware pots as made-to-order, which is a little bit more pressure on me to make sure that that specific thing comes out of the kiln. So I usually make double of all of those. But they can, people can choose their color, and they can choose their drawing so they can sort of connect really personally with what they are buying, but it's, they also don't get to see a photograph of exactly what they're buying. So it's sort of a big trust exercise for that sort of order.
JVB 48:53
I usually do like three to four weeks, about a month.

MM 48:58
Tell me about your, your process. I mean, obviously, you have different lines. But if you could just talk through a little bit of what your process looks like for different things.

JVB 49:05
Yeah, I usually, I usually do cycles for each, for each sort of line. So whether it's the jewelry, or the porcelain pottery or the earthenware pottery, I'll do like a cycle of making, so I'll make a kiln, I have to sort of fill the kiln to make it efficient. So I'll make a batch of earthenware pots and make sure to get in any of the made to order things and then think about what is low in stock and what, what sales opportunities I have coming up and sort of what will sell there. I have all of my sales data from past sales over the years, so I usually just look back at what sold in the past and then make according to that. So for the earthenware I do both slab-built and wheel thrown pieces. The mugs and cups and vases are all wheel thrown and the plates are all hand-built. The timing is really tricky. The pots have to be this perfect leather hard state before I add the color on to it. If it's too dry, when I try to do the drawing it will chip it won't give me a nice, fine clean line. So I have to keep them wet in time for me to underglaze them. And then I do the drawing, let them dry, clean them up a little bit, and then I bisque fire them and then I add a clear glaze and fire them again. The porcelain pieces are also some hand-built some wheel-thrown. And then I do the carving right into the porcelain with an Exacto knife and let them dry, and then I inlay them with a technique called mishima. So I do a like, watered down colored clay. It's like a thin underglaze. And I paint it on to the whole, all the lines, and then wipe it away. So everywhere that I carved, the color stays in the line and then I wipe the surface away. And then I add the green on to the bottom. And then bisque fire it. And then I do sort of like a watercolor wash on some of the some of the flowers and leaves, and then clear glaze it and then fire it again. So that, the porcelain line is a bit more labor intensive.

MM 49:11
Seems like it.

JVB 49:59
Which is also why I just I have to say no to wholesaling it. It's just too, too much work and not, not high enough of a mark-up.

MM 51:49
Yeah.

JVB 51:50
My time is just so often the limiting factor for me. So.

MM 51:54
Yeah, yeah. Were those techniques things that you learned in school or things that you experimented with over the years?

JVB 52:04
Yeah, they were things I experimented with, I didn't really do much surface decoration stuff in college, my ceramic education was pretty, pretty, I would say pretty basic in college, just sort of like the fundamentals. And then I felt like my time at Union Project was sort of like a master's degree in both arts administration and ceramics. I was around lots of other potters who knew way more than I did. And just because I was working on certain projects I would research it and try things out. And I was working in a ceramic studio. So I just had access to constant firings and materials and, it was really being in that environment that got me to, that taught me so much.
Yeah. What kinds of resources did you turn to for researching different techniques?

Oh, there was a massive backlog of ceramics arts, of Ceramics Monthly magazine. So I would look through those lot. Ceramic Arts Daily, which is Ceramic Monthly's daily email, they have collections of glazes and videos of techniques, potters doing different techniques. That was, that's a really good one. What else? Other, just other potters online. Instagram came up partway through my time at Union Project and that was a, that's a huge resource just for seeing, just for learning about other artists. I think that's really how I learned about a lot of potters, in, and a lot of potters will share process and product sort of shots, and so... I have, I have a, I feel like a majority of my following on Instagram are clay people. And so anything that I do that talks about technical stuff, or videos of process are way more fan favorites than other things.

That's, that's always interesting to to think about sort of the in-group and the outsiders who actually...

I know, I don't know, I don't know how to get non-potter followers. But yeah.

I don't. Yeah, I don't know. I don't know. Something I need to learn more about is ceramics online is its own world.

It is its own world. And it's totally, it's been a game changer, I think for people.Yeah, you can even just like crowdsource something, if you're having a technical question about some weird cracking or crazing or something. And people will chime in with all different theories on what it could be.

That's amazing. Wow.

It's really, it's really valuable.

Yeah, that's, that's really neat. Kind of look back through my notes, and see what we've covered... So is your, is your family involved in your work now? Or is it, is it mostly something you do alone?

Well, my husband gets roped into any building projects I have. So he usually, he will build my shelves and display boards and those sorts of things. But he, him, Dave and Rosie will come with me to my shows, all my shows, which partially started because I was nursing and so she needed to come with me if I was going to keep doing those things, if I wasn't going to take... I took a, I took three months off when I had her but then I did, I did shows this past summer and.. So I'm, I don't know how it will change when she gets older and it's not as easy to, to just schlep her along to shows. But for now, all three of us go and Dave and I set up and then he'll hang out with Rosie during the day. And I'll stay at the booth during the day. The rest of my family's still in Detroit. And they always just come down for the pottery tour.

That's really nice.
Yeah, my mom handles the spread of food every year, which is so, so helpful and so sweet.

That is really nice. Does your, does your dad still make pots at all, or is he mostly just...

No. I need to invite him to be a guest at my house and then he'll be forced to make pots. He can make them, he's really really talented. He's so overwhelmed with work stuff. I think maybe in retirement, maybe in a couple years when he retires, he'll get back to making pots. I still have some of his pots that I use in the house. But yeah, he hasn't made pots in a long time.

So what's next for you? What's on the horizon? You expect...?

Oh, I don't know. I think, I think about, I don't know if I will or not, I think about buying a building in Pittsburgh, I think we're sticking around Pittsburgh for the foreseeable future. So I think it could make sense for me to buy a space, to have a space. And to provide space for other, other artists, other potters, other ceramic artists specifically. That doesn't really exist in Pittsburgh, and even Union Project, they have a co-op, but it's a shared community studio. So there's not private studio space for artists. And there's, you're sharing with, you know, all the other classes and open studio people and pumpkin carving workshops and those sorts of things. So and then otherwise, it's private studios, like people going out on their own and finding small space and just working on their own. And I feel like my background at Union Project, my time at Union Project, and now my shift to just being the four of us in the smaller studio space. And having my own space within that space has made me realize the value of having other people around I really, I think it can be really challenging and limiting to just be working in isolation all the time. So I think that there's just real value to that. I also felt really empowered when I first moved out of working at Union Project to having my own space and having my own table and my own shelves, where I could leave something in, in process and I could have enough storage space, it's just really empowering to be productive and work sort of the way you need to work and, and I want, I like making opportunities for other people. And I think down the road when I'm ready to make things more complicated for myself again, I could see myself buying a building and chopping it up into space for other people to work.

Yeah.

You know, that's really well equipped for ceramic artists, that has kiln hookups and proper ventilation and sinks and all of that and not just making do, like something that's really good. So I think that probably is like, long term, down the road. It's been really, it was really nice to shift and just think about making my own work, and only having myself to manage and deal with and that was such a nice transition that I don't really quite feel ready to shift back into a management administrative role. But, yeah, and in the meantime, scaling back on some wholesale commitments has also allowed me to do like custom projects for cafes and restaurants. So that's been sort of also a fun, supplemental addition to my just normal line of work.

That's neat. So what kinds of, what kinds of custom projects have you done?
I've done a handful of restaurants in Pittsburgh. A restaurant called The Vandal ordered custom espresso and cortado cups, and there is a restaurant called Bar Marco on the strip, and they have a wine room where they do these fancy wine dinners, and so they ordered some plates that they use in the wine room. The, there's a new cafe in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, which is like, 45 minutes away from me here. And they bought, they're a bakery and they just opened a cafe and they bought all teacups and cappuccino cups and, and espresso cups for their cafe. It's just a really special edition.

Video File #2 (afc2018030_05080_sr02.wav)

JVB  0:00
They did a really beautiful job with the space and thought about a lot of details and went out of their way to get in touch with me. And that was a very, like, very collaborative project. Whereas my friends, when I was first creating these pots, sort of gave me complete control over what they would look like. Which is, I think, why I continued to make them. The custom stuff for the restaurants, I haven't continued to make any of those because they felt very, very specific to them. And were, I would say, like a collaboration between their, like a unifying of their vision and my vision, or their vision and my style. I'm working on one right now for an organization called The Beauty Shop they're a co-working space, they create co-working like office spaces, and they're opening a new space on the south side in Pittsburgh and adding a coffee shop. So they're having custom espresso cups and cappuccino cups.

MM  0:35
That's really nice.

JVB  0:36
Yeah, and it's, it's fun to do different things. It's fun to learn. It's like trying to figure out technical, technical solutions to things. So I learn a ton in the process. They are also sometimes really tricky to figure out how to navigate what they have in mind and what's realistic, and the ceramics process, especially if people don't know a lot about the ceramic process, it can be really tricky. Because, you know, glazes are not just like paint and you can't just tweak the color a little bit without a lot of testing and a lot of firing. So it's been one of the more fun and more challenging things that I've done, are sort of collaborative things, but that's not that surprising.

MM  1:19
Yeah, well, I'm sure it was an education for them too, to find out what was possible, or not?

JVB  2:15
Right.

MM  2:16
Yeah. Are there people, are there potters who have been, whose work has influenced you? Or who have been mentors through all this, or?

JVB  2:30
Work has influenced me... I mean, I definitely think a lot of the people who have influenced me have just been my peers here in Pittsburgh and some of the co-op members who were members when I was managing the studio. I mean, anytime I have a technical question I'll just call Joe Delphia who's a ceramics professor at CCAC here, at the community college here in Pittsburgh. And Keith and I bounce ideas off of each other all the time. Reiko my other studio mate is really honest and has a really, like, good, a good eye and I trust her. So definitely my, I would say definitely my studio mates but, but also I just, I feel like I have such a rich ceramic community here because of all the work I did at Union Project and having co-op members cycle through over the years. So the, the national, the NCECA conference, the National Council on Education for Ceramic Arts. That was, it's an annual conference that was here in Pittsburgh this past year, and it was really fun to have past co-op members who have
moved away all come back. We had a pottery tour, a special NCECA version of the pottery tour, so they got to come by my house. Yeah, it was really sweet.

MM 4:05
That's really neat. I want to be conscious of the time, I know you have to go soon. I always just like to ask kind of an open ended question at the end. Is there anything I haven't asked? Or anything that's important in your work that you would want to share?

JVB 4:26
I mean, I don't think so. I think, I think we covered a lot of it. I think, it's interesting to talk about sort of my trajectory and starting with, sort of like the value of art and community for my family, and then experiencing really powerful community in college, so much so that we moved here together. And then my pots being made for those people in my community, and doing community-building work at Union Project. It just, yeah, I feel like it's really obvious to me now that I'm talking, talking, talking, that there's a very much a common thread about what's important to me. And I mean, part of what I love about making pots is the fact that they're used to share meals and often are given as gifts. That's one of my favorite things about getting orders and packing shipments and writing, writing birthday notes to people and, as their sister is sending them a mug or something like that. But yeah...

MM 5:39
I love that. That's really, well, I mean I think that's what drew me to this project, too, was to learn about people who are really driven by community. Thank you for your time.

JVB 5:48
Yeah.

MM 5:48
I appreciate it.

JVB 5:49
Of course.