

**Interviewees:** Paul Eshelman (PE) and Laurel Eshelman (LE)

**Interviewer:** Meredith McGriff (MM)

**AFC Collection Number:** AFC 2018/030

**Interview ID:** 5121

**Date:** November 18, 2018

**City/State:** Elizabeth, Illinois

**Venue:** Eshelman Pottery

**Language(s):** English

**Video File #1 (afc2018030\_05121\_mv01.mp4)**

Meredith McGriff 0:00

I'll start us off. I am Meredith McGriff conducting the interview. Today is November 18, 2018, just for the record. If the two of you would each introduce yourselves, and then maybe say a couple words about where we are right now.

PE 0:16

Okay. Go first?

LE 0:19

Laurel Eshelman, and we're at our pottery in Elizabeth, Illinois.

PE 0:25

Paul Eshelman. And we've been here about 30 years... just right now. In town, in business for 30 years.

Meredith McGriff 0:34

That's really great. Exciting. So, maybe we can kind of try to start at the beginning, wherever that is. How did you come to have a clay business? What got you interested in clay? Or, how did that, how did that originate?

PE 0:53

Yeah. So I took clay in high school, actually, and was interested in, in pottery, but also in broad, more broadly, I like to make things. But I was in a family that was more into science, engineering, my mom was a home ec teacher, so more practical, pragmatic concerns. So I started in college down that road, without really too much knowledge about where I was going. And eventually, after my junior year, I just stopped and said I'm going to give this a try. So I went back to school in art, well ceramics art for an undergraduate in Tacoma, Washington. And then... graduate school... So that was '79, graduated from undergrad, in '81, graduate school. But I had, we'd gotten married in '77. So that was another kind of thing that was happening in our, our lives.

LE 2:14

Right. We met the second year college... by some mutual friends. So I finished my degree in biology, and then we got married. And then Paul went out to... Tacoma, and I worked for the Geological Survey there and in Providence, Water Resources, while he was finishing his degrees.

Meredith McGriff 2:42

So how did you end up going from there to here?

PE 2:46

A... kind of circuitous route, we landed after graduate school, we landed back in Chicago suburbs where Laurel's folks were, and I was working days at a warehouse, and just to make ends meet. And then teaching adjunct at night. So we did that for...

LE 3:14

Five years. I was working for the water department. And we had three kids during that period. And Paul was trying to set up a studio in the basement of our duplex where we lived. You did set up a studio there.

PE 3:29

But it was a tough area to, well, for a couple reasons, high rents, studio spaces at a premium. And we didn't know anything about pottery at all. So that last year, it was in Glen Ellyn, that last year when we were living there, we did a couple of good art shows, which for me was a complete unknown. I had't heard anything positive about, all the way through school, nothing positive about doing art shows at all, and I kind of dismissed them. Except we did try a couple and they were okay. But I had, in that time period also, gotten an interest in industrial design. So, thinking that was the way to go with interest in functional work and design. I had done, started casting my work. So we went to Ohio State and that was, I got into a master's program at Ohio State in product design. And immediately felt like a fish out of water, just, I just knew, I knew this is not the world that I could... I just felt, felt so foreign to me that during that year, we kind of transitioned, and decided we'd just make, try to make a go of it. Because we had a little experience in art shows. We thought, okay, let's, let's try to make this work. And that's when we came here, to try to find a place that was affordable, studio space. So that was 30 years ago.

LE 5:23

So we were in Ohio for about one year only, one semester at Ohio State. But in, my parents were in the suburbs and Paul's parents had moved into south western Wisconsin... and we had been in this area previously and loved it.

PE 5:42

Yeah. We knew it was a beautiful area, so. And that's as much as we knew about it, when we came.

Meredith McGriff 5:50

Did you know any other potters in the area or no?

PE 5:53

No, no we didn't.

LE 5:55

Originally, were looking in Galena. I guess we met a few... one or two potters... that are no longer there.

PE 6:11

Yeah, we didn't move here because of other potters. We really didn't. And I know... You know, looking back, at things that you, decisions you made, and we made, it worked out, okay. But maybe were not made for smart reasons. So.

LE 6:31

Yeah. Real estate was too high in Galena so then we just started looking further abroad and... This was a great community. People talked about the schools instead of the football team and things like that.

Meredith McGriff 6:44

That's important when you're bringing a family.

PE 6:46

Yeah, it's ended up being a stable community. But it is a farming community, so they're not real interested in, most of the people are not real interested in what we do, except they're really happy that we're part of this community. And they support us in other ways. Not as, as patrons, but more it's just emotional and community support, which is good.

Meredith McGriff 6:46

That's great.

LE 7:18

They understand being self employed, having to buy your own health insurance. So

PE 7:24

For us, it feels much more natural fit than when we were in the suburbs, and we were commuting to work, to Chicago on the train, and coming home, and that just was...

Meredith McGriff 7:38

Very different lifestyle then. So you mentioned that, when you were, I think you said when you were heading to Ohio State your work was, you were casting your work. Was that something that you started early on? Or did you start doing other types of building?

PE 7:59

We, yeah, I don't remember exactly the year but, after grad school, I knew the process, my hand building processes way too slow for production. And I tried throwing for a while, and I could recognize that wasn't a good thrower. I just knew, I'd seen good thrown pots. And then I just took a course in, from a designer who Lenox China, his name was

LE 8:34

Tim Carder.

PE 8:34

Tim Carder. Yeah, he was one of the head designers for Lenox. He was trained in England, so more in the industrial production kind of approach. So I took this little course, a week long course. And that got me interested in that area. And then from that interest, I started looking at people that were, had done that in the past. Industrial designers like Eva Zeisel, particularly, and Russel Wright, those two especially, kind of mid-century people who had done great work, but I didn't know anything about coming from a handcrafted pottery approach. So, and, worked out a clay body that was workable, and some glazes. And then, and that's I guess, what led me to my real interested in industrial design, product design. Now product design, it was, it was a bad fit for me, but it was also really helpful doing, going through that, because I learned an awful lot about tidying up my concepts, ergonomics, thinking through the piece as carefully as I could, before I jumped into the material. Potters tend to just start working, and then it comes, and you can change the shape or you can alter pieces. If one doesn't work out, the next one, you can make a little bit different. It's much harder to do that with my process.

Meredith McGriff 10:16

Yeah. I can see that. You'd end up with a lot of molds, that way.

PE 10:21

Yeah, a lot of wasted time, right, and nothing to show. So I try to think and, and yet, leave it open to, the process to be slightly plastic so that I can make changes during the process, if it doesn't seem like it's working out. Or go back. Having, being willing to go back and redo a piece that you're not happy with. To make it right.

Meredith McGriff 10:50

That's really interesting. And I made a note earlier, I just wanted to ask, where were you adjuncting? You mentioned you were adjuncting.

PE 11:00

Oh, North Central College in Naperville. I taught their night classes, and primarily my students were continuing ed people who needed an art credit and took a night course in pottery.

Meredith McGriff 11:17

And then thinking about when you started doing art shows, and when you were selling, how else were you selling your work? How many art shows were you doing? Did you stick with that very long?

PE 11:31

We did actually, that was the only, pretty much the only way we did at first. I did make contact with a few galleries. But it came slower. So like, Lilltreet was one place we had work in Chicago. And for me, the galleries have developed kind of as, they have approached me I haven't pursued galleries for the most part. Because we can stay busy enough. And, so for us, it was all art shows in the beginning. And then a gallery person would come by a show I was doing, and approach me, ask about my work. And we'd develop a relationship and start selling there. And almost all of them were that way.

Meredith McGriff 12:24

Is that usually a, like a wholesale arrangement, or?

PE 12:28

It's a mix. So some, like Lill in Chicago is a really good consignment place. I guess the three big consignment ones we do are Lillstreet, Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, and Philadelphia Clay Studio, Philadelphia. Those three. And they're really excellent kind of organizations that do education and have a gallery and promote clay in their city.

Meredith McGriff 13:03

So you were working art fairs together and traveling together, for the most part?

LE 13:09

We did together. We did some of them together. We would go to Florida for a couple and we'd take our kids with us, we'd take them out of school...

PE 13:12

We had three kids. So that was always... a challenge.

Meredith McGriff 13:24

Did they help us they got older or were they? Yeah.

PE 13:27

When they got, when they got old enough to be helpful. They... so about middle school, they would start coming to the shop and working a little bit. And then all through high school, they all worked here.

LE 13:40

And all of them after college, at least one summer. And then, some of them liked that... And then as they got older Paul would take them, like one at a time to a show, and so I would stay home. But our parents would watch the children if we went to the Smithsonian or something like that, we would both go.

Meredith McGriff 14:05

About how many shows per year were you doing? Or have you been doing?

PE 14:11

We have done as many as 18, I think. But more typically, it's 12. So as things have shifted, recently. More gallery work, and especially more internet sales. So we've got plenty of shows.

Meredith McGriff 14:32

When did you get started with internet sales?

LE 14:36

...look that up. I don't remember exactly. Been at least 10 years, I'd say.

PE 14:46

So that would be 2002...

LE 14:49

It's probably, no, it was later than that... 2008... Yeah, it's probably 2005 maybe. I don't know, can't remember. There's been iterations of the website. So.

Meredith McGriff 15:04

Sure

LE 15:05

As the internet has developed, technology has developed and so on.

PE 15:12

Our oldest son is, he was a computer science major. And now works in computers. So he was helpful at first when things were not quite as easy to use, as far as setting up website.

LE 15:14

It probably was then about 2002, he was in college when we first did that.

PE 15:22

And, and from the start, I wasn't very interested in having just a website to show my work. I wanted it to work for me. So I wasn't too interested in websites until I, we knew that we could sell our work online.

LE 15:52

And a lot of people that initially purchased online were people we'd seen at a show.... majority.

PE 15:58

Almost, I'd say almost 100%...

LE 16:01

Now it's expanded. And we have sales at the studio here, too. That's been increasing. It's just taken a long time.

Meredith McGriff 16:12

Sure. Well that's, that's it's nice to have the space for a retail shop.

PE 16:17

It is, yeah.

LE 16:18

It's great.

Meredith McGriff 16:20

How do you, how do you manage the balance of work here as far as being able to have a retail shop open and also be working?

PE 16:31

That's really easy. I'm just working and our traffic is light enough that most days, I can spend most of my time working. When someone comes into the shop, I'll greet them, introduce them, show them around the studio if they want. And then I'll, they can look.

Meredith McGriff 16:51

Do you feel like it's mostly local traffic? Or is it tourists?

PE 16:56

I'd say, probably 90, 80, 90% are tourists, or at least people that aren't from this area. On their way to Gallena, or maybe they're possibly coming here as a destination, but... things...

LE 17:16

Or people that grew up here coming back.

Meredith McGriff 17:26

So I mean, this is obviously a partnership for the two of you and something you work on together. How do you divide up the work between you? Or has that changed over the years?

LE 17:38

I mean, from the beginning, it was something we both wanted to do, we sort of, it was our dream to come to the country and have a pottery. Of course that dream has shifted from what the dream was, but. I've pretty much always done the business side of things. When the kids were little I did not work, at the studio at all, I just did that. But that has increased as they grew up. Now I'm here everyday, all day, pretty much. So I do, Paul does the photography, but I work with all the images online, do the website, all that fun stuff. Do the applications... But I also work on pots, and work on glazes, and do glaze testing, whatever needs to be done, yeah.

PE 18:35

So, crudely put, I do the clay and plaster, mostly, and Laurel does the, everything else. So she applies to shows, puts images on the web, handles our online sales, keeps things organized that way.

Meredith McGriff 18:59

That's great.

LE 19:00

Yeah

Meredith McGriff 19:02

Do you mix your own clay and glaze?

PE 19:05

Uh huh.

Meredith McGriff 19:06

How, how did that develop over time figuring out what clay to use, what glaze to use, that type of thing?

PE 19:12

Well, when I started, so it would have been probably '83, '84 maybe, doing clay. I, there weren't, there wasn't very much being done with casting slips, that I could find. So it was a combination of finding what little information I could, calling people that I knew were knowledgeable about clay and it was just a lot of testing. Clay, clay was much harder for me than glaze because I, I'd actually taught glaze in grad school. So I was up on those materials, you know. For me, a casting slip was a whole unknown realm. And, but, within a year during, during that time when I was teaching and working in the warehouse, so there wasn't a lot of time, but that's when I developed that first clay body. And as I've gotten more experience, and there's more written about that aspect of clay. I've tweaked it and got, and got some good information from ceramic engineers, so, they've been really helpful.

Meredith McGriff 20:33

That's great. So, who were the resources that you were turning to, was it people you knew or people you were looking up, or?

PE 20:42

A big one at the first, his name was Tom Spleth. And he, he's a person that was casting back in, probably '80, 1980, which was pretty unusual, in that era, when I was in school, all the industrial techniques were kind of scorned, I guess. It was the end of the Leach, Hamada, Arts and Crafts movement, 70s pottery, you think of gray stoneware, and so it had to be made, handmade and the... aesthetic. So Tom Spleth came to grad school did a demo. I wasn't interested in it too much, but I found he was someone that spoke like a potter and I latched on to that, kind of in the back of my mind, not necessarily wanting to do that but, interested. And I think that's what actually, that interest, was what led me to take the workshop from Tim Carder. Other resources... I'm forgetting her name. Karen, from Texas, ceramic engineer. People that work for R.T. Vanderbilt, which is one of the companies that makes my deflocculant. Or is the company that makes my deflocculant. So, Konrad Rieger was really helpful to me. And in speaking with, to engineers, you're, it's two different languages we're talking, but they're always curious and interested and not, they're not dismissive, which I found really surprisingly nice that they were interested in helping out someone on a very low production scale, so.

Meredith McGriff 22:45

That's interesting. It, actually just for the benefit of future audiences, would you describe what your process is, how you make molds and how you make pots and how you glaze them and those sorts of things?

PE 23:00

Yeah, so I'm using what I think is a version of a standard approach, because I was taught by a ceramic, ceramic designer from Lenox China, his approach was to make a plaster model of the piece with a variety of tools, but including woodworking tools and some plaster sculpting tools. So making a very carefully crafted model. From that you make a mold and it can be as simple as a one-piece mold. So, if a piece will come out of the top, like for instance this bowl will come right out of the mold, a one-piece mold is sufficient. So make, from the original plaster model, a plaster mold. And then the clay is liquid with an additional, it's clay that has an additional ingredient of deflocculant which lets it flow as a liquid with no added water or not much added water. No additional added water. So it has water, but not more than a plastic clay. And then the slip is poured into the molds, allowed to cast to a certain thickness. The extra stuff is dumped out of the mold and I'm left with a hollow shell in the mold, which then stiffens up. Take it out, clean it up, add the handles... finish it.

Meredith McGriff 24:40

With a piece like this that has sort of the handle cut out. Yeah, the spaces like that. Is that something you cut out afterwards?

PE 24:48

Yeah. Yeah, so this is, this piece was cast in the mold without the handles. And then when it's taken out of the mold it's still, it's called leather hard, still firm but slightly flexible. And they're just drilled in.... key hole drill.

Have a little template that fits over so we get it aimed right. And then that leaves kind of a crude hole that can be finished up later when the piece is completely dry.

Meredith McGriff 25:17

So there is, I mean. I'm just looking at sort of how smooth your edges are and how you know, clean things are. It looks to me like there's a decent amount of still, hands, hands on clean up there and care.

PE 25:31

A lot of hand work. So the, the original pot that comes out of the mold is just kind of a, it's like a blank, you have to finish all the rims, round them. All these areas have to be sponged. Any, any mold marks have to be fettled off. And then all the pieces that, all the parts of the pot that are unglazed are polished, while it's still damp so it tightens up the surface and gives it a more finished look.

Meredith McGriff 26:01

Do you bisque before you glaze?

PE 26:04

Yes, I do. So bisque fire, low fire, cone 05, and then my glaze is cone four so it's kind of a lower version of that mid-range area... electric kiln... So.

Meredith McGriff 26:22

What about the glazing process? How does that work?

PE 26:27

So glaze, all, all the parts of the pot that are not going to be glazed are waxed with a wax resist. So, either brushed on so this piece again, brush the wax on with a brush and get that really clean line delineated. And then the whole piece is dipped in glaze so I dip like this. And then a lot of clean up, dribbles and you know tidying up. So that's, that's the brush pieces. And so, you know, a lot of these are brushed. These pots if I can, often if there's just a layer of unglazed clay at the bottom, I can dip them in hot wax, so melted paraffin in a hot plate and I dip it in and it'll give me a nice clean line. Something like this bottle would have to be brushed on. It just varies depending on the piece. And that's not unique to me, I think that would be kind of a normal pottery technique.

Meredith McGriff 27:37

How do you, how do you decide what shows to apply to? Or where to try to sell your work? I mean, it sounds like most of that decision is shows, unless somebody approaches you. But how do you make those decisions?

PE 27:51

...do shows...

LE 27:51

We do discuss it. Sometimes it's very easy to apply to too many shows, you have to apply six months or more ahead of time. At the beginning it was, we had a few lists, it wasn't even anything online, that we went from and talking to other artists to figure out which ones were the best. The most tightly juried shows are definitely the best.

PE 28:18

So in the beginning, yeah, there were, was it, Rhoads list? Some, things, lists you purchase, ranked show. So that was kind of a crude version, but useful for us. And then there was more, Art Fair Source Book, which is, come along later. It's more expensive but helpful, at least at the beginning so that we had some idea where to go and what to do. We had a, when we started out, at the very beginning we had a misguided notion that if it takes place

in a wealthy town then it would be a good show and that's definitely not the case. We did one of our very poorest shows in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, which is a very wealthy suburb, but it was horrible. It was horrible.

Meredith McGriff 29:05

That's too bad.

PE 29:06

I think we sold two pots to a friend. That was it.

LE 29:10

Yeah, to friends. It depends more on the management of the show and the show director, and how the advertisement of the show.

PE 29:20

And they really have to draw an audience that's interested in the kind of work that you're doing. In this area there's a really well-attended show, Country Fair Craft Show and it's, it's just not our audience. It's all kinds of country craft things. So it doesn't work for this.

Meredith McGriff 29:45

We're going to run out of film, so I'm going to swap that out.

#### **Video File #2 (afc2018030\_05121\_mv02.mp4)**

Meredith McGriff 0:02

So it sounds like finding shows is kind of a process of learning.

PE 0:07

At the beginning. After you've done it for two or three years and you start hearing about shows. And, artists in general are happy to share information. Even though they, in a sense, they can see it as, us as competition, that's not the spirit of usually they're pretty free, if they had a bad experience at a show or had a good experience they'll let us know. And that's helpful.

LE 0:39

...camraderie, people that do art shows.

Meredith McGriff 0:42

Good. So as far as additional kinds of promotion, you did online for a while, but were there other things you were doing to promote your work? Mailings or anything like that? Or was it just mostly generated through shows?

PE 1:04

In the beginning? Or,

Meredith McGriff 1:06

Or how has that changed? Yeah.

PE 1:11

So shows are, shows are self-promoting. When we apply to a show, they promote themselves. And if they do a good job then they get a good audience. We, one of the main things we've done recently, probably 10 years ago, is, so in the, in the cycle, yearly cycle of an artist selling their work, from after Christmas, from say January through April, is a really lean part of the year. And so we tried Florida shows for a while, which, with mixed

results, they were okay, it was a nice trip. But recently, what we've done is do an online sale, so to our whole audience, whether they're, we're sending postcards or emails, let them know we're having a sale, and then they can buy things online. And that has replaced all the Florida shows and all the... So, so we start that in January, and usually get enough sales to keep us busy through until April. So that's and that's really been real helpful. And so that's one promotion we do. And then the other, really the other only thing we do promote is our tour, our pottery tour in fall, so that's October, mid-October.

Meredith McGriff 2:46

I want to ask you a lot more about the tour. But I, just to kind of get through some of the process questions, too. And you were talking about sort of your yearly cycle, what's, what's more of the daily or the weekly cycle of work like? What's your schedule?

PE 3:04

I'll tell mine and then you can talk about yours. So my cycle varies a lot, but um, I don't have like a strict schedule, so many days glazing and then do a firing. But I'll work up to a firing. So about two days of glazing will get enough glazed for a... Since about 2006 maybe, Joel, I have an employee, Joel Thomason's worked for us. So he does a fair chunk of the raw work like casting and finishing. So because of that I'm not in that area much. So I'm doing more of the... loading the firings, glazing and that sort of thing. So daily schedule. It varies an awful lot. I don't have a strict schedule. But the bulk of my time is spent glazing.

LE 4:20

I'm the business person I do a lot of talking to people, answering emails, tax work, payroll, those kinds of things, the website... applying to shows. And it's amazing how much time that takes and had no idea we'd be doing that... but doing that, I'm happy to be here, it's good. What else? I'll mix up glazes, work on pots a little bit, not so much lately. I'm a writer, too, so I've been trying to dedicate time in the mornings for that. But our schedule varies widely with being out of town, like we were just in Philadelphia and that's a week being out of town. So it's not a nine to five job, let's just say that. You're here a lot of nights, and sometimes I'm here too, so. There's a lot of deadlines, shows, and gallery shows.

PE 5:24

And before a show we'll have to spend about two days, a day or two packing up the work and getting stuff organized for that. all the pots in boxes. And then the same when we come back, we have to unpack and figure out where we're at here. Get organized again, so.

Meredith McGriff 5:46

As far as employees, you've got someone helping you making things, do you have other employees? Or have you had others over the years?

PE 5:55

Yeah, and a number of ways. Our first, our kids helped us and they were paid. They were our first employees.

LE 6:02

Some our friends' kids, kids' friends.

PE 6:04

Right.

LE 6:04

For a few years.

PE 6:08

And then also, a big thing has been summer interns from colleges, so I've had about, probably 10 maybe, from various colleges. And they'll come in with a variety of experience or levels of experience, I guess. So some are, need very little training, some need a lot of training. That's okay, because there are a lot of different jobs that have different levels of complexity. So a lot of those employees or interns have done mold making for me. So I'll have the model ready to go, and they will make my production molds for me. And all they need to know is they have to be careful what they do. So attention to detail, and you know, how to mix up plaster. And they're good to go. So that's worked out really well.

Meredith McGriff 7:04

That's great. Are they usually interested in a, some sort of ceramics career, then, or?

PE 7:09

Usually, and my, my philosophy is that I'm giving them a taste of what it's like to be in a production studio. So I'm not so much interested in them extending their, their work, or... they all do make a, I require that they make a piece using my techniques so that they get an experience in how that goes. But I'm mostly interested in them getting a taste of what we do here. So they all know when they graduate, is this what I want to continue? So I've had a few that have been more interested, some not so much I guess, after the summer... One interesting case was one of my interns decided his he didn't want this life because it was too uncertain, unsettled, unpredictable. And so he got, got into a program modeling automobile, like full size, mockups for Ford Motor. So that's his job, that's kind of interesting. Clay, but in a whole different world.

Meredith McGriff 8:29

Wow. Do they, do they take on any of the business side of things? Or is it mostly production?

LE 8:35

Really lightly, they sometimes just help with postcards...

PE 8:39

They go to a show.

LE 8:40

Yeah, you take them

PE 8:40

We take them to a show so they get to see the sales and talk to customers...

LE 8:44

...talk to people...

PE 8:45

...talk to other artists. That's...

LE 8:48

And one thing about going to shows that we haven't really talked about, for them too if they're working here, is meeting people that are using the work. And that's very wonderful to have someone, come up and say, "Love your cup, I use it every day, I drink coffee." It's very rewarding.

Meredith McGriff 9:07

Do you, do you feel like you've incorporated any customer input over the years, have they influenced the work?

PE 9:13

Oh sure. Yeah. A lot of times they'll, they will help me decide what kind of piece I'm going to make next. So I've had requests for... For instance, now, I don't have a pour-over coffee setup. A lot of people have asked about that. So it's something I'm interested in tackling.

Meredith McGriff 9:47

What kinds of feedback you get from people? Is it all verbal? Or is it, does it have to do with how they interact with pieces or

PE 10:00

Verbal meaning?

Meredith McGriff 10:01

Do they, do they just tell you things? Are you watching them, too? I'm just curious about this? Because I've had some other people give very different answers to this.

PE 10:10

I would say mostly verbal, for the most part.

LE 10:14

Occasionally people will send us an email after they get a piece

PE 10:17

Yeah.

LE 10:18

saying how much they enjoy using it, so we've had that, which is surprising.

PE 10:21

Or, or, for instance, they'll post something on Instagram with an image of them with their coffee cup or a really beautiful bowl of soup or something like that. So they are more than verbal.

Meredith McGriff 10:35

That's great. Do you have a, do you have a big Instagram following? Is that something you've been trying to cultivate?

PE 10:41

We have a modest Instagram, I think we have about 1000 followers

LE 10:44

Lightly cultivated, really.

PE 10:47

It's probably my fault. I don't spend a lot of energy on that area, but it's fun to play with.

Meredith McGriff 10:57

Well, if you don't need it...

PE 11:00

It's especially fun if someone else has a nice image that, of the pot in the use, or the pot in their, in their daily life, serving them. And that's kind of what's interesting to me. How it fits into their life, in a practical way.

Meredith McGriff 11:23

Do you use your own work at home?

PE 11:25

We do.

LE 11:26

Yes we do.

PE 11:27

Not exclusively because there are a lot of other really beautiful pots we own. We've traded or bought over the years. But we have a lot that we use...

Meredith McGriff 11:38

Does that help you think about what you want to make, or how you're using things?

PE 11:43

Um, what do you think?

LE 11:45

I think it does, lightly. I feel like that little flat back tray, this little guy here. I've just recently took one of these home and had been using it and I found it very useful. So just for a piece of toast, or a little breakfast. So I've enjoyed that. Yeah, possibly. Thinking about making third sizes of pitchers because we don't have that...

Meredith McGriff 12:15

How often do you add new, new designs?

PE 12:21

Yeah. So a couple of years, I guess. And it's mostly in those cold winter months, those bleak, when sales are slow. And honestly, that's, that's a challenge for us. Because we're so busy in production, trying to make ends meet, that it's a balance between... I think I've described it as the production work, which pays the rent, and new work, which keeps us moving forward. So and that's a real hard balance to achieve. And for me, I've probably, if anything I've erred on the production side versus, um, extending my work... But a couple pieces a year, maybe this year, we had three pieces. So that's probably kind of typical.

Meredith McGriff 13:20

Have your colors changed? Do you add new colors very often or retire things?

PE 13:30

We have added new colors, it becomes complicated a little bit. Because I like to be able to still replicate the old pieces. So I'm reluctant to retire glazes completely. But if I keep adding then it gets kind of complicated. So I have a dozen colors now. There's some other colors I'd like to try. But maybe that'll mean I have to sort of semi-retire, or...

LE 14:05

Keep a bucket in the back.

PE 14:07

They'll go on emeritus status. So, so they're not, but so that's the tricky thing. I'd like, in this satin glaze palette I'd like to add some more colors probably...

Meredith McGriff 14:24

Are there, I should ask the same question about forms, are there forms that you've... not retired. But perhaps put on hiatus or?

PE 14:35

Again, it's a case where I stop making stuff, I get rid of all the molds, all the models, and then sure as anything, someone will ask me, "Can you make me one of those?" And they'll describe a piece and I can't quite remember it, and they show me a picture. Oh yeah. "No, I can't. I'd forgotten about that, it was too..." But

LE 14:55

Sometimes you've gone and searched through all the molds to see if you can find it.

PE 14:58

Yeah, I have, and sometimes I do, but often it's gone. I mean, that's the nature of what we do. It's, just it is. I have retired pieces and sometimes wished I hadn't because I can go back, and... If someone has a set of six cups and they break one, it's nice to be able to fill in that empty spot.

Meredith McGriff 15:34

Absolutely. So we started, we kind of briefly talked about the tour, but I'd really love to hear more about that. When did the tour get started? And how, how did that idea come about?

PE 15:49

So you looked it up?

LE 15:50

Yeah, it was in 2001 was the first year.

PE 15:55

It was kind of a brainchild of Delores Fortuna, she was a real instigator in the art tour, who had started working out, she was from Oak Park. And then Bill Ferrell taught at the Art Institute of Chicago. And so they kind of got a group together of the potters they knew in the area. In the beginning days there was wood fire kiln west of us, almost to Iowa in Menominee. And so that was where a lot of potters met and fired their pots together. So there was maybe half a dozen in that group. Some from Iowa, some from Illinois. So they were they added. I was added. And a couple of other potters that were in the area. So we had, I think 10 potters the first year, so twenty dirty hands, which is where the name came from.

Meredith McGriff 17:03

You mentioned that when you moved here, you didn't really know of any other potters. And now that there's a whole tour, so how is that... have people been moving here? Do you feel people are coming because of that? Or has it just been more of an organic process of turning into a bit of clay community?

PE 17:21

Don't think people have moved here because of the tour. Some of it is just, people... a portion of the tour, people that are on the tour, have other incomes. I would say probably a good chunk of them. For them the tour is a, is a way to sell their work, meet an audience, and to kind of keep their pottery interest going. And, but your question was have more people come in because of that? I don't know actually if they have honestly.

LE 18:12

Trying to think of what potters... Adrian was here, she was

PE 18:19

Some people...

LE 18:20

...pottery when we moved here... just painting...

PE 18:25

So one of the tour people, I think she was, Adrienne Seagraves, one of the tour people who's retired from the tour, actually retired. But she had a small interest in clay. She worked in my shop for four or five years, part time I think, mostly, and then got her own shop. So that sort of developed. And she was a painter, so she had good painting, good imagery skills, you know, imagery. But lacking in clay knowledge. So that was maybe part of her learning curve. She had worked with another pottery person, Stephanie O'Shaughnessy, so got her kind of a basics in clay and then a little more here and then went on her own.

PE 19:21

I think, I think the tour mostly is a way for us to kind of, lightly keep in touch with each other. We don't, we don't have like weekly potlucks or anything like that. We have get togethers, but mostly it's around organizing this tour or discussing how things went, and so that, and then inspiring people that are only lightly connected with clay, but have a real interest or it's not, it's not their vocation, it's not their livelihood. So keeps them motivated. One of the people Larry Priske is a retired John Deere employee, and he got interested in clay after he retired, so for him the tour is something that really is, helps him a lot, kind of focus his work.

Meredith McGriff 20:22

How, how is the work of the tour divided up? You have some meetings or some gatherings, but who takes care of which aspects of it? And has that changed over the years since it started?

PE 20:37

Um, so part of that is Delores is kind of the, um, untitled

LE 20:50

Director.

PE 20:50

director, I guess, she'd be director. It's almost, it works by consensus. So we all have to agree on things. But in, a lot of it's divided up where we live. So I'm kind of on the eastern edge of things, so I take care of things in this area promotions in Elizabeth and this area. People that live in Galena are more knowledgeable about the newspaper there or where to put the posters and things, so that's, and then people in Dubuque do that area, and so. It's kind of by locality, I guess, for a lot. There's a few people that have connections with designers, so they pitch in that way for design work.

Meredith McGriff 21:39

How do you promote the tour?

PE 21:44

Brochures, print brochures...

LE 21:48

Emails.

PE 21:49

Emails, Laurel always puts together an image and a write up, well, what is it?

LE 21:56

Yeah. Just an email that people can email to their list about the tour, information.

PE 22:04

So they can email to their own audience. Yeah, we advertise a little bit on NPR, like a couple weeks before the tour.

LE 22:17

Yeah, those of us that are doing shows will take brochures to shows like to Madison, or Cedar Rapids... nearby. Chicago.

PE 22:27

Send them to the colleges in the area. Well, probably about a, maybe a hundred mile radius of... art market, art programs.

LE 22:36

Yeah, we get college students coming through and some of the high school kids come with their teachers, on the tour.

Meredith McGriff 22:43

That's great. How far do you feel like customers are coming from? Is it mainly that range, that hundred mile range? Or do you get people coming further?

LE 22:53

There are a few. I feel like we've had some come from...

PE 22:56

A few. But not very many.

LE 22:58

Minneapolis.

PE 22:59

I would say, if we do a 100 hundred mile radius, that would probably be most of our audience.

Meredith McGriff 23:11

Seems like there's a lot of regional appeal to tours like that, that people are interested in particular area.

PE 23:17

Yeah, there are other tours in other parts of the country. So we're not the only tour going on. So I guess in some ways that makes sense.

Meredith McGriff 23:28

Well, and I met the two of you in Machina. So how did how did that happen? How did that come about that you were there?

PE 23:37

Well, I met Justin at a craft show, Smithsonian craft show in Washington, and didn't know him real well, but we've had a few meals back and forth. And I was invited. And worked out this year with the scheduling, so I gave it a shot.

Meredith McGriff 24:01

Do you have visiting artists on this tour?

PE 24:04

I do. Yeah. So this year, I had Mia Ishiguro who's a potter from Chicago. And she again was, had another career in design, retired, and she's been doing mostly wood fired work, although she's, she's changing now to more, she's using some new channels, so she's changing. But she does, and so she does just this one event. She doesn't need it, she doesn't need the income. But she was fun, and she's been our guest for maybe five years.

LE 24:43

Maybe five years, yeah.

PE 24:45

She's, maybe eighties?

LE 24:47

Yeah, she's a lot of energy.

PE 24:49

She's... And then and then my other guest artist is Jeff Rottman from Michigan, he came, I think, mostly because he's a friend and wanted to visit. But had a chance to bring his pottery with him and his family came with him so it was a nice visit. But I've had people from Iowa, I had Clary Illian who's a really well known potter from Iowa who doesn't do very many sales outside of her studio, but she came to this one. Uh, Rick Hintze, Doug Reynolds, and other pottery tour member who doesn't, who lives in Iowa, so he didn't, people couldn't come to his studio. So he came to my studio. So those were my main guests.

Meredith McGriff 25:40

That's really interesting. And I think you mentioned earlier maybe is, Rick is one who participates in a tour of his own. Is that right?

PE 25:46

Right. He has his own tour.

Meredith McGriff 25:48

It's interesting to see that there's kind of this rotation or these connections.

PE 25:53

Yeah. And, again, we're not, it's good to get to know other potters. It's, this is kind of solitary existence. So it's a little nice to spend a weekend together and talk.

Meredith McGriff 26:09

Do you find that you talk about like technical details, or like business things? Or, what's, what's the benefit of a potter friend versus somebody who isn't in pottery?

LE 26:21

You got any EPK?

PE 26:25

EPK?

LE 26:29

Whatever materials, we have called on people, sometimes we're mixing up a glaze and run out...

PE 26:34  
Right, right.

LE 26:36  
That kind of thing for sure.

PE 26:38  
But as far as the tour and what we we enjoy talking about...

LE 26:42  
Oh on the tour.

PE 26:43  
I would say, meeting other potters. For me, it's mostly not technical, because there aren't so many slip casters but there have been people that helped me with glazes. So that was, that was nice. People that have experienced or have run into some difficulty that I'm dealing with, have found a solution, so that was, but mostly it's mostly it's, I guess, just the lifestyle, how they have the studio set up or what challenges they're running into. Maybe a little on sales. What shows they tried last year.

LE 27:31  
Then and just our personal lives, yeah. How everybody's doing.

**Video File #3 (afc2018030\_05121\_mv03.mp4)**