Interviewee: Delores Fortuna (DF)
Interviewer: Meredith McGriff (MM)
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Note: This interview was recorded in both audio and video formats. Timestamps in the transcript are keyed to the audio file. We were seated directly next to the wood stove that heats the studio, so there is some noise interference in some parts of the interview.

Audio File #1 (afc2018030_05160_sr01.wav)

MM 0:04
I'll get us started for the record.

DF 0:06
Okay.

MM 0:07
I'm Meredith McGriff behind the camera, and it is November 19, 2018. If you could introduce yourself and maybe just say a few words about where we are right now.

DF 0:17
Okay, I'm Delores Fortuna. And we're in the rural countryside of Galena, which is in the north western corner of Illinois. I'm a studio potter, retired from teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. And I've lived in the Galena area for maybe about 20 years.

MM 0:41
Thank you. And this is your studio.

DF 0:45
This is my studio.

MM 0:48
So I would love to hear, I think, a great place to begin would be how you got interested in clay, and how that turned into a career for you.

DF 0:59
Well, it's a long journey, like most people. I went to college, I grew up in northern Wisconsin, a small, a small rural high school, kind of like Galena. I got a scholarship to the University of Chicago, and was interested in math. And so after about two years in the math program, I thought, this just really isn't who I am. And I had to take some electives. And I thought, well, in high school, I always really enjoyed art. And I took a ceramics class. And fortunately, the teacher was Ruth Duckworth. And it was just an instant, like, yeah, this is what I should really be doing. And so it's really been a love and a passion. And I think what I like about clay is it has that scientific part. There's an air of discovery. And I think at the time when I was first studying, it was late '60s, early
'70s, and just clay, was just so exciting. There were so many really dynamic people like Peter Voulkos, Don Reitz, doing clay. It was just an incredible explosion of creativity in the field at that time. So I was hooked.

MM 2:19
Great. That's great. So did you end up doing a degree in ceramics?

DF 2:23
I did. I had my undergraduate degree, my BFA, then I got my MFA at the art, at the University of Chicago also.

MM 2:32
And so after you finished that, what was your next step?

DF 2:36
I moved to the DC area, it was my first teaching job. And I stayed in DC, for maybe about, maybe to the early '80s. And I've always been kind of interested in kind of art and community. I was part of a group that started a gallery and workshop space, at a place called the Torpedo Factory, which was in, they renovated, and in the late '70s, in Alexandria, Virginia. And so we had a gallery of work space, offered classes, etc. I was part of that core group that did that.

MM 3:16
What, what level were you teaching, was that college?

DF 3:19
Well, I was teaching college I was teaching in, at Antioch had a branch campus in the DC area. And then I was also teaching at art centers. So I was teaching at, like, Echo Park, I think. I'm trying to remember, this is like 30 or 40 years ago, but it was, again, a really exciting time to, you know, be involved in clay, especially, as, you know people were establishing galleries and DC at that time had a couple of really good galleries in the in the area, and Baltimore Clay Works was there. So there was just a lot of energy in the whole, in the community.

MM 4:08
Were you selling your own work to at that time?

DF 4:11
You know, slowly I was. I think part of the issue for a lot of clay people is, to just set up a studio, and to buy a wheel and to buy a kiln, and to buy a car. So and you know, a lot of students now have the same challenge with the cost of education. You know, I was very lucky that I had, you know, scholarships and the National Defense student loan, which I think, what was it like? A couple percent. So you didn't graduate from college with an incredible amount of debt. But the challenge is always just putting everything together. And that's why, you know, cooperative spaces for clay people are really, you know, almost a necessity. Where you can kind of slowly build yourself up into where you can really have your own equipment.

MM 5:01
Yeah, that's great. What kind of work were you making in grad school or your early career?

DF 5:09
In grad school, my work was very sculptural, non-functional. And, actually my first teaching job, when I got the job, the program said, Well, you know, you're going to be teaching beginning wheel. And I said, well, you know, I've never thrown. And, so over the summer, I would go in and work with him, and basically learned how to throw that summer. And it was a real shift for me, because I actually really enjoyed it. And, in there was more of a directness about this hands on forming process with the potter's wheel that was just so incredibly enticing and pleasurable, that I really kind of just skipped into making functional work very naturally. And I think actually, my
first order was making planters for a plant shop. So you know, we all have to start somewhere. In fact, when I did this show, last year, I was at the Smithsonian. And a lady came up to me, and she said, "I don't know if you remember me. But I was probably one of the first people that purchased your work." And she owned that plant shop. And so that was really cool.

MM  6:33
That's wonderful. What a nice connection.

DF  6:35
That was a great connection, you know, so you kind of, there's something about clay and people buying your work, that I think the bond is really strong. And it's really funny. Sometimes when I'm in a show people will have something that is really important to them, like a mug or a bowl, and they broke it. And they'll bring a fragment that has a signature on it and they'll say, "Do you know whose work this is? I want to get in touch with this artist." And I know my signature is really, to me, it's my signature, but it's for someone to say, okay, that's blah, blah, I have to kind of know them personally. So I, you know, so there is that strong connection that you make through your work with the people that enjoy your work?

MM  7:20
Yeah, that's wonderful. So you, you stayed in the DC area, you said until the early '80s. Where did you go after that?

DF  7:28
Well, I moved to Tulsa.

MM  7:30
Okay.

DF  7:33
And I, and I was teaching at St. Xavier's, which is a college on the south side of Chicago. And then I was part of something called the Fire Arts Complex. So there were a group of us, and we built a kiln yard and a glass studio, and had a community kiln. And, and then I had a studio there. And so I kind of transitioned. Up until that point, I was mainly either firing in other people's firings, or just firing oxidation, cone 6 oxidation. So it was a transition back to, you know, to a high fire, to gas, that I did. So I was there in the Pilsen area. And that's where I was part of the group that started the Pilsen Artists Tour.

MM  8:23
Yeah, could you describe that...

DF  8:24
Well, that was, again, it happened in the fall. And it was, Pilsen was a community around 18th and Halsted [Street], south side, and there was a man named John Podmajersky that was from that area. At that time, when he lived there, it was... bohemian community. And he was kind of a real estate developer. And he would buy two flats, three flats for five or $6,000, and renovate them. And because it was kind of an at-risk ethnic area, he had a connection to the Art Institute, and he started to rent them to artists. And so as this kept expanding, and part of my connection to that community was, as Ruth Duckworth was my teacher, she would go back to England in the summertime. And she had dogs. And England has very strict laws about rabies. And she could not bring her dogs back with her because they would have to be quarantined. And so I watched her dogs. And in exchange, I got to use her studio. And so, what John Podmajersky did was he would buy all the buildings on a block. And he would make, take the interior parts that would have been like an alley and trash bins and stuff like that and turn it into courtyards. And so she had her studio in the initial courtyard. And so I just loved it. I loved the area. And so when
I came back there as an artists, I lived in another courtyard area, and got involved with, you know, planning and developing the tour for that area.

MM 10:18
And so was that tour, just a variety of artists, or?

DF 10:23
Right, right. It was and,

MM 10:25
All local?

DF 10:26
...and it, a lot of people that had studios there taught at the Art Institute, or they taught at the University of Illinois, at Circle Campus, or they taught at Columbia. So there were more faculty type people than there were, let's say, just art students, or artists. So it was some, it was just really a wonderful opportunity to go into people's studios. And, as I said, most of them were, at some level in their work, where they were showing galleries and stuff like that. So it wasn't really a craft-based tour at all, it was more of a fine art tour.

MM 11:08
And was this scenario where people were living near their studios, or studios were parts of homes?

DF 11:14
Yeah, most of the time what people did is, some of the buildings that he renovated were just studios. And then people would have apartments, because he also owned some apartment buildings. And when I moved back there, I lived in a two-flat, and the ground level was my studio, and then the second floor, was where I lived.

MM 11:35
Okay.

DF 11:36
And I think I paid $175 a month.

MM 11:40
What a dream.

DF 11:41
And what he did, the buildings were really neat, he had an architect that he worked with named Jerry Brown. And he did a lot of salvage and scrounging and just opened up the spaces, took out floors, cantilevered everything, the spaces were just really imaginative. And, and he would, you know, some of the buildings, he would get cockpits from like fighter jets. And he had no compulsion to tear out this and tear out that. So the buildings were very eclectic, really, really wonderful in terms of the openness of the space. So you know, just, you know, and and he would just redo them, you'd live there for five or six years. And, you know, he didn't put a lot of money into it. And so when you moved out, he would just reimagine the space and redo it.

MM 12:29
Oh, wow. Interesting.

DF 12:30
Yeah. So they were, they were wonderful, wonderful spaces.
MM 12:33
That sounds like it. So were there other, in addition to the tour, were there other places you were selling your work at that time?

DF 12:42
At that time I was. I was selling my work in galleries, I was teaching at St. Xaviers. And then in about 2000, no. 1980, '82, I moved to Oak Park. And I bought, there was a couple that had started a pottery business. And they were selling it. And so I bought their business. And so I had, you know, so I moved out of the Pilsen area and moved to Oak Park. And then I lived in Oak Park til, maybe about 25 years, got married, raised my family. And eventually, I just had a lot, I was kind of physically active, I was on a couple of the Business Council, on the Arts Councils. And I just got really interested in developing an art center for Oak Park, but a lot of the buildings that we looked at, they were, the city, the village government wanted to convert them into things that, like condo spaces, etc, that would increase the tax rolls, where if we developed an art center, it would be non tax producing, you know, not income producing property. So I had done that, and so in 1990, I purchased a building, a banquet hall, that had gone out of business. And, because I had gotten really frustrated with having all these great spaces. And having everything snatched away from us, and I thought, well, I'm just going to do my own art center. So I developed this building, it was about 6000 square feet. And because it has been a restaurant, or a banquet hall, I took the restaurant part of it and made it into a kiln room. And then I took the front part of it and had a gallery go across the space. And then I divided it into three, kind of areas. And there was, I had a printmaking group that joined me and a fiber group. And then I took back part of the building and developed it for ceramics. So we, you know, did the gallery cooperatively, we had workshops, it was, you know, just really a wonderful space.

DF 15:10
And it's still going on today. And I sold it when I moved out here in 2000. And at that time, I kind of had to, I got a teaching position at the Art Institute. And I kind of did the typical woman thing, I'm doing too much, I had children, I had this business I was running, and then I was teaching. And after doing this for about two years, I decided that I had to make some choices. And I thought, you know, I'm really enjoying teaching at the Art Institute, it's a level... because I was teaching at my, you know, my art center. It was really more project based. And I really, really liked teaching with a more critical conversation. And not necessarily a how-to-do-it kind of conversations. And so I, as I said, I really, you know, found that I really enjoyed that. And then I had someone who wanted to buy my business. And there, and I thought god, this is like, so lucky, because how many people start a business and then are able to sell it, because most of the time, your business kind of dies with you. And, and the thing that is just gives me a lot of satisfaction is that it became a really meaningful part of that community and still continues on today. So, because I think I sold it about 10 years ago, and yeah, so that was really just, you know, again, just I felt really good that I had done... because that was my whole point of starting it was to do something that I thought would be very fulfilling for that community.

MM 16:56
Yeah, absolutely. What's the name of it?

DF 16:58
Well, I called it Artworks in Oak Park and now it's called Terra Incognito.

MM 17:03
Oh okay.

DF 17:03
So you can look it up. Yeah. And the current, the person who bought it for me is Dave Toan.

MM 17:10
Okay. Thank you. So you were, you were teaching full time? In addition to all this or?
Well, no, I was teaching part time.

Okay.

Yeah, I wasn't teaching full time.

That would be a lot.

That would be a little bit too much. It was too much as it was, that would even be more too much.

Right. And so were you also selling your work and making quite a lot?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And so and but I, actually, when I moved out here, and was just teaching, because running a business is a full time job in and of itself. And planning the classes and doing the workshops, all that kind of management stuff, running the gallery, putting shows together. So I really just sold my work mainly through that gallery, and a couple of other studios. And when I moved out here in about 2000, 1999, is when I really started to do my own work, and to kind of push my own ceramics. And so I just taught at the Art Institute, and then I gave me the opportunity too, to apply to more competitive shows, and to kind of, you know, do like the Philadelphia Museum show or the Smithsonian show, and also just be more focused on kind of pushing my own ideas. And, and one of the things was about teaching at the Art Institute, which made it possible to live out here, and to live, teach in Chicago was that I had a condo in Oak Park, and the classes at the Art Institute, the studio program, they only meet once a week. So my classes went from like, nine o'clock to four o'clock, and I could schedule my classes back to back. So I would drive into Chicago, teach, and then I would drive out here and work in the studio.

Oh, great, nice.

Yeah, so that was, so to me, it was a great structure. And at first I was like, when I first started to teach, I was like, "Oh, my God, what am I going to do with people for six hours a day," and after awhile I really, really liked that format. Because you can really work with people in the class, you can go on field trips with them, the Art Institute was great just to take an hour after lunch and go look at a couple exhibits and talk about the work. It didn't necessarily have to be ceramic focused. And I got to know the curators in a couple of the collections, and they would, you know, allow my students or the students in general, to go into the, into the private collections. So we were able to, you know, go into the Asian collection, especially, but a lot of like the, you know, the art of the Americas. So it was great, to African art to go back into the store rooms. It was wonderful. So it was it was just an incredible resource, the museum.

That's fantastic. How did you first make that connection?
Um, I think one of the people took one of my classes. And then I thought oh, this is pretty cool. And when I found out who he was, and I thought oh, well, great. And then he said, you know, very generously offered to have the students come down, he would open up the store rooms for them, and they could look at things. And so then I just kind of took advantage of it with other, you know, as I got to, you know, kind of be able to navigate the staff a little bit more.

MM 20:59
Absolutely. That's great. So what drew you to this region?

DF  21:05
Um, I started to know some of the people that were living here. My children had grown up. And I grew up on a farm. And I like rural living. And I think it was just, I just wanted to transition, I was interested in wood firing. And I liked this, the strong kind of community sense to clay. And so I think a lot of things fell into place. I had a buyer, you know, for my business and my building, it was just kind of, you know, it was just this kind of serendipitous kind of moment where, you know, every, all the pieces of the puzzle kind of fit together. So, yeah, so I, and I enjoy living here very much. You know, I like, what I like about Galena, it's a strong cultural community. And there's a lot of theater and music and art activity, besides ceramics. There's a lot of people from, it's a three hour drive from Chicago. So there's a number of people that are art people that have a Chicago connection, the Art Institute, or Columbia, that live out here. So, in all these little back roads, there's, you know, photographers, and, you know, graphics people, and so it's kind of tucked away and all these little recesses.

MM 22:24
Yeah. So was there, was there very much of a clay community here, specifically, when you came out?

DF  22:32
There were people that worked in clay, but and, they all knew each other, but we, the, and as I came out here and started to meet more of them. I think I'm kind of more of a catalyst kind of person. And so I just said, you know, you know, I started to kind of feel like I could do this. And, and, and I felt there was enough of a core, plus the quality of the work was really good, there were some people doing really good work. And I just kind of felt that if we did something together as an event, we would be much stronger than all of us individually just promoting ourselves. And so yeah, and it did work out, it has worked out that way. And I think socially, we would get together a lot, maybe we don't see each other as much as we used to. But, you know, we go for coffee and come over for dinner, you know, have lunch together and stuff like that. So I think people also have like, a social connection to each other. Some of the people play music they're in bands, we go here then. So it's more than just about clay, but it's also just about having community and knowing each other.

MM 23:49
Let me just check this real quick. I have a recording limit, it cuts off at a certain time... So we were talking about coming out here, and the clay community here. How has that grown or changed since you've been here?

DF  24:21
I think it's kind of just a natural kind of evolution, people have stopped working in clay. And they, you know, pulled out of the group. Our motto is once a dirt, always a dirt. And so, and some people go through life changes. And, you know, kind of, you know, so they'll be part of the tour for this, and then something happens in their life, and they're out for a year or two and then they're back. So we're pretty inclusive, or generous. In and, and I think there's a lot of camaraderie and kind of cooperation between people. People help each other out. In terms of if you're having a problem with this, or you are missing a chemical, and you need a couple pounds of Gersley Borate. And so there's a lot of people, there's, you know, fire together, so a lot of the wood kilns people kind of all cooperate in those firings, or raku. So I think, you know, we all kind of have our own spaces that we work in. So we don't have, let's say, a building that we all work out of. But I think there's just mainly fellowship, friendship and cooperation.
That's wonderful. You talked a little bit earlier, and I'd love for you to kind of get back into it again about some of the inspiration that you had for this tour and some of the other tours you might have been looking at.

Well, I in, I think, maybe in 1999, I was in Kansas City at the Plaza Street fair, and I was really close to Bob Briscoe, his booth was set up just a couple of booths down from mine. And he's like, a big, generous kind of bear of a man. And so I came... so he came into my booth and started to talk to me. And, you know, I just kind of got to know him over that weekend. And he kept telling me more and more about the Minnesota potters tour. And I said, well you know, I think I could do that. Because Galena has enough traffic, it's kind of a visited, tourist kind of area. And so besides clay, people with have a desire to come to Galena for the weekend. And I thought, you know, there's enough people here I've got, you know, X number of people I know that are working in clay. So I came back and you know, had people over for dinner, and we started talking about it. So when I lived in Pilsen--

and this wasn't unfamiliar ground to me, because I had been involved in other tours, when I lived in Oak Park, I started something called the Holiday Lights Tour. And that's actually still going on. And we did trolleys that went along, round to all the various studios and did kind of a real festive kind of, light kind of, themed kind of event. And then the Pilsen tour is still going on. So I think but, I think that Bob kind of galvanized my idea into the possibility of just having it ceramic focused. And because lot of the tours are a broader spectrum of the arts. And I also liked the idea of the tour being having a lot of artists, but not having a real extensive geographical area. So that it would be easy to, you know, in one day, just see all the sights and I like the idea, also here, that people were really having different conversations, you know, some people were doing this technique or that raku firing or wood firing, it wasn't like we were all doing the same kind of work. We were really addressing ceramics with, like strong individual voices, which is what I really also liked about the group here.

What kinds of philosophies or, or things were you hearing from Bob, as far as what's happening in Minnesota? What kinds of approaches to this, did you learn from him?

Bob's theory is, he's a little in the Warren McKenzie school, very anti-gallery. Or I shouldn't say totally anti-gallery, but he wants, it's almost like, you know, like the urban, like the rural food movement, or shopping at a farmers' market. So he wants to have a more direct connection between the people that make art and the people that buy art. And so his idea is that with studio tours, if they become successful enough, artists will do X number of less shows, or they won't have to sell in galleries, and they can kind of eliminate the middleman from the buying process. So, and his idea with the studio tour up in Minnesota, I think they sell maybe $500,000 worth of ceramics over the weekend. So that, and a lot of the artists there make 30 or $40,000. So his idea is that it could replace X amount of other things that artists have to do to make a living. Now, I don't know, I don't think we've ever come close to those numbers. But I think... and I think for a lot of the people here, several people on the tour like Paul and I, have a broader way in which we sell our work, you know, galleries, shows and stuff like that. For some of the people on this on our tour, this show is their only show they do during the year. And it's real significant to them, because you know, they make work all year long. They're not maybe, they don't make as much work as I do, or Paul does. But the amount that they make, it's really important for them to interact with an audience to get feedback, to show their friends and family. So I think no matter what level you're working, a tour still satisfies a certain need that an artist has to find audience.

I think you mentioned earlier visiting, up in Minnesota. Could you talk a little bit about the visiting artist structure at tours, and how that plays out?
Well, a lot of these tours, especially the Minnesota tour have become very desirable to be part of. And I was part of it for about six years at Guillermo Cuellar's studio. And I, I totally loved it. It was just a wonderful, wonderful weekend of just really hanging out with other ceramic artists, you know, just meeting people etc. So it just has a, and they have a great artists' dinner, where everyone, you know, you kind of get to meet people that you may have just heard of, but never really got to know. And so I think that because of the success of that tour, they've had to limit the length of time that someone can be an individual artist. Now, a lot of the studio sites have somewhat of a, autonomy, they can kind of make these decisions themselves. So, some of the studios when they invite you, it's only a two year invitation. Some places it's four years, some times it's five years. Part of it is to be able to disengage from being an invited artist without having any hard feelings, because you know that you had a two year invitation. So, so I think it's actually... and more and more tours have started to institute that policy. Where you know, it's kind of up front, you know, that I'm on the tour for two years or three years, whatever. Usually, it's no less than two years, because what they want to do is have you develop a little bit of an audience and a following. And that enhances your sales, but it also enhances the, the developing the identity of the tour.

MM 32:41
Yeah absolutely. Is that something you've instituted here as far as...?

DF 32:46
We haven't. And it's something that comes up in our discussions, but we haven't really formalized it. So some people have this, I've had the same artist for quite a while. But I dearly love them. So I would, I would be hard pressed not to have them join me because we look forward to, you know, our kind of our weekend together. So I yeah, so it's kind of up front, you know, that I'm on the tour for two years or three years, whatever. Usually, it's no less than two years, because what they want to do is have you develop a little bit of an audience and a following. And that enhances your sales, but it also enhances the, the developing the identity of the tour.

MM 34:08
Okay, well, you talked earlier a little bit about only having a certain number of stops on this tour. Does that end up meaning that local artists go to another place as a visitor, or?

DF 34:23
It can be either/or. Yeah, either/or. What we do is when someone drops out, we will kind of jury in a new member. And our ranks of kind of swelled because some of the people who moved away or weren't showing have re-joined the group. So now we're more than 20 dirty hands! But that's okay. So I think there's kind of an ebb and a flow to the membership. Most of the time, the invited guests are people that don't live in the area. And part of it is to mix the tour up a little bit and show work that we like, but is not being done by any other member of the group. So, so most of the time, the invited guests bring in just another viewpoint, another discussion that is just really good to have for this...

MM 35:19
I'm curious, others who are, I guess maybe hosts on the tours, or longtime members of your group, are many of them working full time in ceramics, or are some of them just more of a hobbiest?

DF 35:34
Most the time, I would say, a lot of them are retired. And they do clay more as an avocation. And then some of the people have other jobs. And so I would say of the people on the group, Paul and I are probably the only ones that would basically, you could say are full time studio artist, working studio artists.
Okay.

Yeah, yeah.

It's interesting how that sort of time of life aspect comes into it, where, you know, maybe retirement is the time when some people can really get into clay.

Well, I think like, I'm 70. And so you kind of all think about this, you know. So I've been doing this since, what, 1972? That's a long time. And, and then you start to have kind of health, not issues or concerns, but, I had polio as a baby. And so certain things are just harder for me to do. And I just don't have, because I have post-polio syndrome, I just don't have the energy or the strength that I used to have. And so you know, you do factor in like, and some of the things, it's really strange, it's like making the work is not hard for me. And, but what's really becoming more of a thing that I have to solve is, let's say, doing the setup for an art fair. I, it's just become, it's becoming more and more challenging for me to do that by myself. So, you know, so I have to kind of investigate, do I want to sell more in galleries? Do I want to do more internet marketing? You know, there are a lot of options out there. And so I think, you know, there's always that kind of flexibility of, as I said for, is, that's one of the reasons my studio tours have gotten so popular and have such viability is, it's, it has the directness of that contact or that meeting point that an art fair has. So let's say I sell my work in maybe eight galleries or 10 galleries. I really don't know who buys my work. You know, I just know that I sold this and I sold that and I kind of get an idea of... and sometimes they'll share with me kind of a response. Lots of times I'll get special orders. So I would have to say part of the hook for me, for art fairs, is just really that one-to-one moment where someone likes something. It's something that maybe just came out the kiln and I really like it too. So there's that kind of exchange that happens. The other thing I like about art fairs, which the tours also have, is in a lot of the fields, I think ceramics especially, there's such a strong community and sense of camaraderie, and again fellowship, that when I'm at an art fair, I just really enjoy the people that I meet. It's just a great community to be part of. And I just have friends now all over the country that are just totally dear to me, that I would have never met except being next to them at our art fair. And spending those moments, you know, talking to them, or dealing with the challenge of an art fair, or just going out and sharing a meal with them. And just finding that, you know, you really like them, just have a great conversation and they become, you know, life-long friends. So I think those are probably the aspects of a tour or art fair that I really, I think, just very enticing. And just really wonderful.

I really am fascinated to hear you talk about interacting with customers in person, because I think that's an important sort of method of feedback for a lot of potters. Could you talk more about, like the kinds of feedback that you've gotten, or the kinds of ways maybe that's changed your work?

Yeah, you know, and it's, it almost goes back into my history. As a child having polio, I didn't walk until I was 16. And I had, every summer I would have an operation. And so I had to learn how to walk. And so I would just watch people, how people walk. Because it wasn't obvious to me how you did it, you know. And so I think art fairs, it's the same way. So I grew up just watching people and their body language and the way they do this, how they interact with people they're with. And so art fairs are really kind of that watching experience. I usually tend not to read, or read a book or anything like that, I just really enjoy watching people. So when people come into my booth, and everyone has a different way, I really just like people to start responding to the work, and then you know, initiate a conversation with me or you know, I'll initiate a conversation kind of based on things that they're picking up and give them some, you know, kind of something I was thinking about, or something about it, that's kind of maybe a little bit different. But I really, I think my most favorite times are when people are kind of not
paying attention to me, but they're with somebody else, and they're just sharing, and they'll go like, "Oh, I really like to handle on this mug," or, "Wow, this is neat." And then. So I think it's, you learn so much about your work from having people just kind of very casually talk about things, you know just kind of share their feelings in their discussion, you know, in discussion with another person. But, so I think I'm probably more of a, I'm a more of an observer kind of seller than a really aggressive marketer.

MM 42:00
Sure.

DF 42:00
Does that make sense, what I'm saying?

MM 42:02
Yes, I think so, yeah. Are there, like, are there ways that people interact with the work that affects the way that you think about it?

DF 42:11
People give me a lot of clues. So if a potter comes up, and I don't have anything here, they immediately turn it over and look at the foot. And so I go "Oh, this person's had some experience with clay," you know, and I think the foot you don't have to sign your work, I think it's a signature. And so, the other thing is a lot of people that are students, because I do a fair amount of like, investigation into materials and clays and glazes and stuff like that. People are always wanting to, oh like find my glaze recipes, and all this kind of stuff. So then people kind of pump me for information, like how do you do this? Or how do you do that? And, you know, I think it's all about sharing information, right? And so, you know, I usually will kind of go through like how I did this, or what I did this, or you know, some of the kind of the materiality or process related kind of topics. And then some people are just really almost more spiritual in how they relate to you. And I, when I was in Cherry Creek last year, there was a woman came up to my booth, and she didn't talk to me for the longest time. And then she picked something up, I think it was one of my plates, and she said, "You know, you're really wasting your time as a potter." And I said, "Really?" Because no one had ever said that to me. She said, "No, you should be a painter." She said, "Your mark making is really what your work is about. And you should be painting." And I thought, wow. That is really cool. I, because when I was in high school, in grade school, I did a lot of painting. And I thought, wow, that's really neat, that someone picked up on that, you know, kind of gestural quality to the mark making. So, as I said, some of these, some of this feedback is really unanticipated, you know, someone will say something, you'll go like, wow I never had anybody tell me that before.

MM 44:18
Really interesting. You mentioned the challenges of doing an art fair alone. Did you typically do your art fairs by yourself? Or did you have family or friends that would come you? Because that's a big job.

DF 44:31
Yeah, my daughter helps me but she moved away. So that's, like, really sad. And, and, you know, I have had people kind of help me, if I stay with someone a lot of times they will help me set up and take down. So I totally appreciate that. But, yeah, so I think more and more, I'm always trying to find someone to help me, especially with setting up the tent and kind of tearing it down. But invariably, you end up with a situation where none of those things work out. And then you just do it yourself. And it just takes a little bit longer, but it works out.

MM 45:10
Well, that's good. How do you select the art fairs that you try to get into?

DF 45:18
Well, I try and get into the best. So, what I do is I try and, usually I get into maybe the top, you know, rankings of art fairs. And, and I think that there are ways to do it, where you can, you know, there are sites where people rank art fairs, art fair review sites, etc, etc. There's Sunshine Artists that rank shows. So, you know, over the period of time, you know, the shows that I've been doing are more competitive. My sales are usually much better, or stronger, maybe to say it that way. And the other thing I like is, again, it's not just about making money. But that a lot of times when you do a more high end show, you often find a kind of, more educated buyer. They may collect clay for a long time. They look at clay, they love clay. And so you have a more informed discussion often about your work. But not always, you know, I mean, I've, I do a number of local shows, too. So I think it's, it's hard to really generalize too much about it. But if there's especially a strong academic community, let's say if you do a show up in Minnesota, the University of Minnesota has had a strong clay program, there's River Falls is nearby, Macalester, and St. Olaf's, and St. Catherine's, there are many schools that have had strong clay programs. So you have people that in those communities that just really love clay. They've been buying clay for years, and they really like, you know, it's, it's part of a, of their living experience to, you know, drink out of a hand made cup. And, and so I think those are the kind of shows where you just really enjoy the people that come into your booth and look at your work. And not to say, you know, it doesn't happen other places. But I usually find if there's a strong academic program in the area, like Appleton, Wisconsin, is that way, where Lawrence University is there, you know, so I tend to find those are stronger shows. Kansas City is that way, there's a Kansas City Art Institute, which has got one of the strongest undergrad clay programs in the country. So I think they tend to have a residual effect and really help create that community for clay.

Sure, yeah. That's really interesting to think about... Keep track of time here... We talked a little bit about your style, mark making and making functional work, but would you talk more about how your personal style and the things that you've made over the years have changed or evolved?

I think a lot of times, usually my work kind of shifts out of necessity, usually I just feel that I can't say anything more about either the, in the glaze palette or the forms that I've been using. And I really find that if I'm bored, that you're probably bored. And so that's why for me taking off a couple of months, so I don't usually do any, what I would call production from like December to, I usually, January and February. So I travel, I read. I come in here and I just play and I have a sketchbook and I just accumulate drawings and ideas. And as I said, it's usually, I have to make something like three or four times, usually about three times, before I kind of really create the way of making it. A lot of my work kind of has a process factor to it, where I try and make the process really Flow. Let's say like the way music would flow, and I want to take some of the hiccups out of it. And really, so I think to me, the process of making something, it has to kind of be embedded in that seamless visual quality that the work, the form of the work has with the surface. So, and so, as I, usually too, I investigate like I eat sushi over the year, kind of think of, like, I now I've got another glaze I want to develop. So I'll start testing now. And I've got two, actually two glazes I want to develop. So most of my work also responds to surface. So if I think, in my mind, I create my work in my mind before I physically create it. And a lot of times the new forms come from the fact that they're really responding to a surface idea. So to me, my surfaces and my forms are really interconnected.

Yeah, that's interesting. So once you have kind of worked through the process for a new idea, how long does that piece, do you make a big long run of it or do you...

I don't know. As long as I feel I'm saying something fresh, and there's a little bit invested in it, I feel like if I'm kind of mindlessly repeating myself, then it's time to stop doing that. And I've tried to keep that as part of my discipline. So if you were a musician, and you were singing, and you had a song that you'd kind of lost... you weren't putting any narrative or meaning into the lyrics, then it's probably time to stop performing it. And I think that about my work, too. I mean, there's some work that I think is totally valid, it was really strong and wonderful,
but I just don't have a much of a passion, or I don't feel like saying anything new about it. And so sometimes I'd flip my work pretty remarkably, I mean, I have people who go like, "Oh, why don't you do those anymore?" I go, "I'm sorry." And so I think, you know, I mean, and again, you know, I just kind of feel like, I have to kind of respond to those voices inside myself, and it gives, keeps giving, you know, and I feel like it gives my work integrity. And, and, you know, I, I probably use over like a ton of clay a year, and this is all that I have left. So, you know, so I feel that, that the people that buy my work, kind of understand who I am, and what I'm trying to say in my work and things like that. And so I feel like there's a really good kind of connection there between, you know, myself and the people who like my work. Yeah, and, and I think they kind of look forward to the fact that I'm also a seeker of ideas. And, you know, if I... and I kind of like that little energy you get from that curiosity that's, always runs through things. I mean, I think it's like a kid, I mean, what you enjoy about children are the fact that they're curious. And I kind of really, I want to keep you know, for me, I think as much as any one object is important, that spirit of how you make things is also just really important. And for me, curiosity is one of them.

MM 53:27
For someone who's not maybe familiar with the process, could you give a brief overview of what your process looks like?

DF 53:34
Well, I basically throw with a modified porcelain body. And I'm kind of looking when I throw for there to be kind of a gestural statement in, from the inside to the outside in terms of the wall. So I'm looking for the gesture of my inside hand and my outside hand to both be revealed. So I'm not looking for, like forms that are static. And I do a lot of kind of tool surface marking. And then with the line marking I, I use in the, when the work is dry, in the green ware stage I put on my marks with like a black engobe, a black slip and then I bisque fire, and then I spray my glazes. So, I tend to not work too far ahead. Because I want to be able to kind of remember all of that for each piece that I've made. So when I'm throwing I'm usually thinking about the surface that I'm gonna put on it. And so some people, again, people have a different work process, but some people you know, they work for three months and make X amount of bisque. And then they glaze it. I just can't do that because I, in three months I will have totally forgotten what I was thinking about. So it's important for me to have a more, a smaller feedback loop between when I make the work and when I put the surfaces on it.

MM 55:17
I see. Okay. And so are you working with a lot of different colors? Or has your color scheme changed?

DF 55:27
No, my palate, yeah, my palate is, it's like about four glazes, five glazes. And I kind of like, like Joseph Albert's color theory idea of how in the layering of glazes you get different surface responses and different harmonies between colors. So if x is next and y it's different than y being next to z. And so I, yeah, so my palate is somewhat limited. But I kind of like that, because I'm looking for that conversation between those surfaces. And those, you know, different glazes. I do have a lot of glazes over the years, but right, but generally as I said I actively use about maybe five glazes.

MM 56:25
So as far as like a daily routine or weekly routine, what does your cycle look like?

DF 56:33
I get up early. I usually in, the summertime, I'm in the studio by 7:30, 8 o'clock. And I usually work till 7 o'clock at night. And my kiln is a 60 cubic foot updraft. And I in the summertime like to fill that every other week. And so I'll... and yeah, so I just basically work maybe like 60, 80 hour week, days, you know, hours in a week. And then, you know, it's garden here, sometimes, but you know, what I'll do is garden early in the morning, come in the studio, work, and then garden in the evening. So, you know, trying to keep that cycle going. So, yeah, it's, you know... And I think that a lot of people are surprised the amount of time that art people work. And when I was
teaching, I said, you know, I said to students that one of the big things is don't work just when you feel inspired. And I have found the studio to be a great refuge from me when there are things in my personal life that I know, sometimes you just have to pass time for things to take care of. But what I really like, try and do is just, you know, when I walk into studio door, I just leave all that outside. And I just come in here and work, and this is my refuge. And I think, you know, the most laborious part of my process is, are my glazes. So my glazing takes, you know, sometimes I only glaze four things an hour. So that's one thing that I am thinking about, in my winter, kind of problem solving research part, is maybe making that process less cumbersome, you know, and seeing if I can't streamline it, you know, maybe it'll have a different outcome, which might be okay, too.

And there's all kinds of different pieces of it that can play together.

Yeah, yeah. And, you know, as you make things, you know, I'm always kind of, again, looking for that kind of simplicity. So things that I used to do that would be really multi-stage, now I can do them, like in one step. So, part of it, too, is just kind of, as I said, eliminating some of the things and going like, can, do I really have to do that? if I did this and this, it would have, be the same form, but I would eliminate some of the work of doing the form.

Yeah. Efficiency I'm sure...

Yeah, well, I think, also, sometimes the forms are stronger, they're less fussed over.

Ok, yeah.

You know, they look less, you know, manipulate, you know, like manufactured, you know, they look a little bit fresher.

You talked a little bit about wood firing, too.

Yeah. Yes, yeah, we did that my partner Bill Farrell built a kiln. And I think we fired it maybe up till about four years ago. And it needs to be repaired. He also has cancer and just physically can't, we can't, you know, we physically can't do that. So we put our work down in some other people's wood kilns. And still kind of satisfies that itch because I love with firing. But physically, we can't fire that kiln, it was a great kiln. We got beautiful results from it.

That's great. So is he a potter as well then?

Yes, yeah. He is, or he was. He is. Yeah.

How many wood kilns are in this area?
I'm gonna say maybe three. There's this kiln. There's one at Menominee and then up in Cassville. Ken Bichell built a wood kiln. But there may be some also as you go more towards Iowa City. Yeah, So Cassville is up in Wisconsin. It's maybe about an hour from here. So that's not really near. There's a couple wood kilns in the Cambridge area, Mark Skudlarek and Michael Schael, Joe Cole. So there's a cluster of, kind of around the Madison, that area.

Who do you fire with?

Ken Bichell, I put things in Mark Skudlarek's kilns. And in Adamah, there's a wood kiln in Adamah which is in Dodgeville. I put a bunch of work in there. So just kind of various people. One great thing is that people tend to build wood kilns too large. And so they always need, you know, they're always, you know, asking for work. Now, when you were working on the Michiana Tour, did, what's his name, Jon Hook. Did you meet him, Jon Hook?

I don't think so, no.

He's in La Porte.

Okay, I know who you're talking about.

Yeah, but he's maybe not part of the Michiana tour.

I mean, I think he's in that region, but he really hasn't been involved in the tour?

in the tour?

In that tour, no.

Okay. Yeah, cuz he's, and then I taught at Oxbow. He would come up to Oxbow and be really generous and there's a wood kiln Oxbow. But yeah, he would...

...a good person to interview. But he's not really part of, I didn't know if he is part... You know, another really interesting guy is near Saugatuck, Grand Haven is Mark Williams. And he is, been a working artist, I would say really just a working studio potter for probably 30 years. So, and again, and a little bit more of a kind of hermit type, but just in the woods doing his own things, and as I said 30, 40 years, you know, making, working with clients selling his work. But interesting, a very interesting guy.
I'll make note of that. Definitely. That's good to know. So I'm curious with your kiln here, did you have people come and visit? And did you have help firing it?

When we wood fired, we did. And we had students from the Art Institute here, we had friends, and so, similar to... Yeah, and our kiln is maybe about 100 cubic feet. So it wasn't as ginormous a task to fill as a large anagama. But yeah, and it had great firings. And, yeah, thoroughly enjoyed it, it's one thing I really miss is not wood firing, we did maybe about three wood firings a year. And the ones, and well we would just cut down our own trees, and, you know, chunk them up, and then split them and everything else. So it was a good way to kind of keep our woods clean.

Oh, yeah.

And we would get a lot of people that had their woods... you know, loggers comes through that we would go get the tops. And, you know, like cherry, or, you know, I think we got some black locust one time. So we got some really, you know, interesting wood. Yeah. But as I said, you know, it's something that we really enjoyed, but it's it's just, you know, between having to rebuild part of the arch. And the other difficulties, it just hasn't happened.

I'm sure. It's lot of labor to...

Yeah, it is, it is. But wood firing is its own kind of camaraderie, just hang out around the kiln. And our kiln, we usually fired about 30 hours. So we didn't do really long, like four or five day firings. And we usually did it pretty much the first day and a half by ourselves, and then towards the end would have people come in. Because a lot of times, we'd have x amount of wood split, and then we'd go through that, and we go like, "Oh, we'd like to fire for another six hours." And then we'd have to split wood and fire. And so by that time, you're really getting tired. So when you have a friend or two come in and help you, it really makes a huge difference. And then when we first started, we had the students from the Art Institute come in, and they were just, at that time, wood firing was much more of a novelty than it is now. And they would come and camp and just have a great time.

So were you, I assume with 30 hours, were you rotating shifts?

Yeah, rotating shifts, things like that.

How did those effects from wood firing kind of play with the other work that you do? ...not all of your work is wood fired...

Sometimes there's a synergy. And sometimes they're just their own objects...

So it's the same kind of darting and altering. And what's great about what firing is, it really is, embraces the form with less intention than a glazed form does. So, and you get a directionality that you don't get in, let's say in the gas kilns. So this was facing the firebox and has a lot of ash on it. This was away from the firebox in has flashing
on it. And so, and so in a wood kiln, loading the kiln is probably as important as, as important an aspect of what
your work will look like, as anything else that you do. And then, I really like, because a lot of this marking and
things like that this gestural marking, just kind of is, seems less stated, then if you, like I would put a black mark
there or something like that. So I like the fact that, you know, you really feel like you're, you know, kind of like,
you know, part of more of an orchestra than an individual when you wood fire with your work. So whereas let's
say a more traditional cup...

DF 5:22
...where, you know, my intention is more stated, you know, so in part of this is, you know, some of this stuff, you
can anticipate it happening, but it's much easier to predict when you do something, that you'll get this and this and
this. So it, so my intent, I think is more clear. The role of the kiln in this is mainly just to reach temperature. It's
not to really impart, again, a unique statement onto the piece. So this piece, from one firing to another firing is
probably more predictable.

MM 6:04
Okay.

DF 6:04
Where wood firing has those real highs and lows. You're like, "Wow this is great." And you go like, "Oh, my
God, I'll have to re-fire this one."

MM 6:14
Sure.

DF 6:21
But I never really was able to make enough work to.... I never sold my wood fired work at art fairs.

MM 6:35
Okay

DF 6:36
because it was always I just couldn't work that hard.

MM 6:42
Yeah.

DF 6:42
Okay. So this is, like one of my plates... with the gestural markings. Now this is actually, this is really interesting
how... One of the things that I enjoy doing in my off season is making dinnerware. And I think it's so interesting
that people still want dinnerware, and make dinnerware. And sometimes it's a challenge for me to, you know, like,
let's say you would be talking to me and say, "Well, I really like this. And I really like this, but I don't like that."
And so I was making these, and then she wanted a larger plate. And I kind of thought, Well, how can I pick a
better idea? So I really, so this has been fun. Now I really liked this. And I can see, again, kind of rotating it. And
all these different color areas. I could put the lines here. And this down there. I mean, so it was kind of fun to kind
of go like, "Oh, wow." So this, again, came from a customer telling me what she likes. I would have never
thought of this on my own. And then I'm thinking, I'm looking and going like, this is gonna be some new work.
So I think you know, that's where, you know, if you just sell in galleries, it's kind of, it doesn't have as much of a
residual effect as having that interaction with the people who like your work. And they see something that you
may have not seen yourself, and then you, and so then I can, you know, I get excited, I go like, oh, wow, I can
come up with something. So I really liked, and I actually liked the way they stand. What do you think?
Yeah, yeah. I think they're lovely.

...the way they kind of separate out. And so, so anyway, I'm excited to send these to her and see what she thinks

Absolutely. There's, there's such a nice cohesion, I think.

Yeah, without being like, kind of, an ad nauseum kind of statement of the same idea. And, so, I kind of like that open-endedness, it's like, if you are a writer, you can't write the same novel every time. But if you have a different voice and everything that you write, then if you.. you don't kind of again have that kind of identity. And so I think, you know, in the creative fields, no matter if you're a musician or a writer or a visual artist, there's again, that whole thing about really first identifying your own voice. And, and again, like maybe curiosity or something like that, but a) being able to kind of continue to create within an idiom. And, but if you don't have any focus, then I think actually, it's hard to really keep developing kind of a depth to your work.

Yeah.

Anyway... they just came out of the kiln.

Oh, wonderful.

Isn't that fun?

That's great to see.

So hidden around here are all these little things...

Anyway... that's why we keep doing it after all these years, right?

Yes, absolutely.

So I think that's probably about it, right? Any more questions?

I don't think so. I think we've covered quite a lot. I would love, if you don't mind, to take just maybe a few photos around the studio.
Oh, please. And I’m sorry, I packed everything up. But after you leave, I have to take work to one of the galleries downtown. And then tomorrow, I'm driving up to Minneapolis, so I just kind of had to get this stuff all packed up.