

**Oral History Interview of
John Chinn**

**Interviewed by: Leslie Dutton
April 18, 2001
Lubbock, Texas**

Part of the:
Leslie Dutton Fine Arts Interview Series

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features John Chinn as he talks about his artworks. In this interview, Chinn describes how he got interested in art and what his preferred medium is. Chinn provides further insight into his influences in art, and the people who really helped him through his journey.

Length of Interview: 00:46:13

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Leslie Dutton (LD):

This interview is with John Chinn to Leslie Dutton on April 18, 2001. John Chinn is a local artist and has some wonderful works, and you deal mainly with airbrushing at this time?

John Chinn (JC):

Uh-huh.

LD:

And that's your medium. And what I'd like to do is start out with your early history, where you grew up and what those artistic influences were on you and how you wound up in this Lubbock area.

JC:

Well I grew up in Colorado City. My parents moved there when I was four. And my father was a doctor there and was—we were there in the city I guess until I was eighteen and then I went off to college. And I went to A&I for a year and then moved to Tech to take art, and got my degree in Tech about '76. And then I've just been working on and off at art since then and doing whatever I had to do in order to make a living during that time. Let's see, I was married in '72 and divorced in about '86. I've got one son who is twenty-three now and my ex-wife just died last year. And Angela and I have been together since—since about '92?

Angela (A):

Yep, '92.

LD:

Now I know from several other artists I know tidbits about you, I think because I couldn't find anything that was actually published about you. But in talking with Jean Badger discovered—and I always thought this as well—that you were of oriental descent.

JC:

No. [Laughter]

LD:

And she said that you were asked that a lot, or that people assumed that because of "Chinn." And will you tell me about your name, and I understand it's from German descent? Can you tell me about that?

JC:

Actually I have no real clear idea of where it is. It could be more—according to a genealogist who had some stuff it's more likely to be of Welsh or of Scottish origin. And I really don't know

too much about it. I got one of those midnight phone calls once from a guy who had married a Chinn, said that Arkansas is overrun with them.

LD:

Really.

JC:

As far as I know my family history goes back in Texas to about 1850 sometime. There was a George Kerfoot Chinn who was a Texas Ranger in Uvalde, that's where my dad's family is from. And they were great, they were a big old Victorian style group. Very, very intelligent, very smart, very Southern. So the family history sounds a bit gothic when I've heard it. But I think originally the family was from Tennessee that moved to Uvalde. And like I said I got a late night call one time from a guy who traced down the name, said there was a C-h-y-n that got off the boat in sixteen, or seventeenth century in Virginia and somewhere, and that they all just kind of migrated from that point. I've noticed that there are similar names like "Shinn," S-h-i-n-n, there's a lot of those I think in the Midwest and I think there's a Shinn teaching at the music department at Tech.

LD:

Yes.

JC:

And I don't know if that's a different branch of the family or a different group altogether. And I don't think it's German, but it could be any number of things and—

LD:

But I mean your family's been in the states long enough that it could be anything.

JC:

Yeah, it could be—

LD:

Except for oriental, and I—I don't think with your coloring.

JC:

Yeah, the oriental part don't quite—I used to get a lot of statements, you know I don't look too oriental, people would look at me and then go, "Oh, you're named Chinn, your dad must be Chinese." And I'd say, "Oh no, my mom was." And that was kind of my retort. And every now and then I'd get somebody who'd go, "Oh, that explains it." And then they'd have to think a moment, so—

A:

Did you show Leslie your stamp?

JC:

Oh, no.

A:

Your signature stamp?

JC:

It's in there in the kitchen. A friend of mine, Ben Sung, who's a great painter—he would be great one to do an article on sometime too because, god his paintings are beautiful. He does great stuff and he teaches down in Snyder. But he goes to Hong Kong every year and he got me an artist's stamp that I can—or a chop I think is what it's called. And basically it says "Chinn Juon" [?] [00:05:17] is the name on that, so. So now I've got my own little Chinese stamp.

LD:

Oh that's funny.

A:

To further confuse people.

JC:

Yeah.

LD:

Oh, that's great.

JC:

Yeah, I think that name's always kind of made me more interested in oriental things and design and art and stuff. It's been fun to play with.

LD:

Now tell me about your early influences in art. Did you have parents who—I mean your dad was a doctor—were you interested in—

JC:

Yeah, my mom was—they, there wasn't a whole lot of artistic influence in the family. As a matter a fact, I think we were kind of colorblind and design disoriented if anything. But the family, you're always free to pursue what you wanted to pursue. I always like to draw. I

remember as a kid seeing somebody drawing rocket ships on a blackboard at school. And after that I always thought that was just the coolest thing in the world so I just got real involved in drawing for a while because of that. Through high school and into college. And—

LD:

And so you drew those kind of things or—

JC:

Oh yeah, yeah. I was always in trouble for drawing in school. I'd be daydreaming and drawing and you know, not doing too much what I was supposed to do as far as classwork.

LD:

Any other subjects, I mean besides—you said rocket ships and those kind of things?

JC:

Rocket ships, airplanes, tanks, kind of the boy kid stuff, you know. Just the usual pretty bad taste things. I always liked to draw and draw as realistically as I could you know, and just kind of kept at it, and then in the sixties when psychedelics were big I got into the psychedelic art thing and op art and playing with all of those things. And then went off to college and it was mostly abstraction at that time that was the main focus of what art was being done, and most of my work in school up to a certain point I was trying to get a degree in advertising art until about '71 or '70—I think it was '71 when I finally had messed up enough academically to the point that I was going to be flunking out of advertising art and at point I went to studio art and ceramics. I gave up on drawing for a while and just did clay work for probably for probably about five or six years.

LD:

Now what was the reason for going into advertising art? Just an interest, or—

JC:

Oh it was—at the time I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and the main thrust of what seemed to be good about ad art was the idea that you could get a job with it.

LD:

Oh yeah.

JC:

Make a living. So it was just, you know, and I think I would not have stood too much chance of doing that either with a lot of my ideas. I wasn't a very mature student. Nor was I a very good one—I enjoyed making art and making things but I was never very disciplined about it until I got

older, so I was probably—I feel like I was social passed through college actually. Which [laughs] I was just too nice a guy to flunk. Except in ad art.

LD:

Hm. Well tell me about the studio art and what it was like to be in school at that time, and if you studied with—

JC:

I worked a lot—the two artists that influenced me the most at Tech were Steve Reynolds, who was the ceramic teacher. He had a real kind of free, happy, crazy sort of anarchic, I'd say, spirit to him. And was in a way a very rebellious person, who always had fun tweaking everybody intellectually. He liked intellectual things, he also liked doing real funky art. And so he'd combine those and do things that seemed ridiculous until you heard him talking about them.

LD:

Well can you give me an example?

JC:

Hm. Yeah, let's see. Well when his father died, I remember Steve made a series a works that were kind of sculptural. He was a teacher who taught ceramics, and yet the things that he did was he made a series of sculptures that were like open doors. That—a door into the next world. And then he made what he called "Big dumb domes with ties." His father had many, many ties and apparently Steve got those ties, and Steve never had much use for a tie in his life. He usually wore dashikis and had a beard and long hair and—a great big guy. And he made this big dumb ceramic piece with all these ties kind of sprouting out of it. And that was just his homage to his father. And the thing about Steve was he was kind of the Rauschenberg idea that if you go looking around for just garbage you can find enough stuff to make art out of for a long, long time. For a while he got a fetish about broken boots. He'd go walking through, you know, looking through dumpsters and stuff and alleys for old leather boots or shoes that people had, you know where they'd get broken. And then the seam separates from the sole, he'd say every now and then you'd find these shoes that were kind of broken like that, and it's like they had these smiles on them.

LD:

Oh yeah.

JC:

So he'd collected those and he would hang them up, and it was that idea that you would just find objects and hang them up and turn them into something that had to do with art. So, real free spirited person and real creative imaginatively and, you know just basically it was, "Do your

own stuff and then I'll take a look at it and we'll see what you've got going."

LD:

Really?

JC:

Yeah, he really worked against the grain of a lot of stuff that happened at Tech. And then another one—the one who got me back into doing two-dimensional work was Hugh Gibbons.

LD:

Oh really.

JC:

Yeah. I tried graduate school for a while and then dropped out in the late seventies. And Hugh was just a real strong, intelligent, you know he had a real strong willed, great intelligence, goofy sense of humor too. He and Steve Reynolds were good friends. And I was always intimidated by him until I started taking his courses, and then—his ideas were always the kind of ideas that really got your imagination going. And I liked that. He would do things like put a model in a chair, and he'd say, "Okay, I want you to draw one half the model," say like your looking at the model, said, "I want you to draw this side of the model and put it on this side of the paper and I want you to draw this side of the model and put it on the other edge of the paper."

LD:

Oh gosh.

JC:

Said, "Then I want you to do something with the space in between." And so he always got us thinking about things that you wouldn't normally think about, and find a way—he was very creative about finding ways to do stuff that were unique and thoughtful. And I really did enjoy—he had a very playful sense of humor, and his ideas, but at the same time just real deep intelligence.

LD:

How did that affect you in your works?

JC:

Well I think it helped in terms of my humor. And I try to do things, or I used to try to do things that had kind of a—I always thought it was kind of fun to do high art that was about low humor.

LD:

[Laughs] Yeah.

JC:

And like the—oh that one picture, let's see. There is—when I really got into doing the black and white realistic works a while back. This piece is *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. If you've ever seen any of the—there's a genre called the Temptation of Saint Anthony and a lot of artists did it, and Saint Anthony was this guy that was out in the wilderness and you'd see him being beaten up by little demons or devils. Some pretty horrendous paintings too, I mean some of them were really scary. And I've seen a number of different artists that dealt with it. And so this was just kind of—I was having fun with this as an idea of—its technique's very realistic. I always liked the idea of—you could do low humor, but if you do it in a really well executed way technically in terms of drawing—which I like to draw, I like to draw realistically. But yet the subject matter is not what you would call standard, you know the cookie cutter idea of a house or people or a portrait. So it could be thought provoking, it could also be stupid, you know. Deliberately stupid art but so well done that it can't be ignored. And I've always liked that kind of—it's a paradox of ideas. The good and the bad, or well done versus really stupid, or goofy—goofy is a word I've used more than once. Is he bothering you?

LD:

Unh-uh.

JC:

That's old Jeb. He likes to sit on paper especially if he thinks you're using it. And Hugh could do things like that. He would do things like a very formal-looking pen and ink drawing of a three layer cake, and then show the cake crumbling and having to have all these braces put against it to keep it from collapsing.

LD:

Oh yeah.

JC:

And again you know formal drawing but done about something very humorous. I really like that. There are other artists that I think—I don't know if they influenced them but it's kind of led me to a few. There's one out in California whose name I can never remember, but who did very jokky things about—he would do self-portraits where he would be splattered, these would be giant ceramic busts that would be about eight feet tall on pedestals, and he would be poking himself in the eye or something. And he, you know in reading about him he would talk about how he was influenced by a sculptor named Franz Messerschmidt who was certifiably insane and went nuts back in, I think the nineteenth century, but who did these beautiful gorgeous sculptures, but of

himself. And what he would do is he believed there were demons after him, and he believed the only way to drive them out of his body was to cause so much pain that they'd leave him. So he'd do things like grab a fold of skin and just pinch until the pain was intense—he would watch his expressions and then sculpt his face in that position. And so it was kind of like one of those Chinese gods that would ward off evil spirits by giving an evil face.

LD:

Yeah. And the black face. Um-hm, the anger.

JC:

Yeah. So Franz Messerschmidt, when I read about him I thought it was just incredible stuff, and stuff that you don't normally see in art. So I like the uniqueness of it, I like the—I don't know about Messerschmidt's work being humorous, but on first glance it is and then you start reading about it and it's a much more serious thing than that. Lately there's been—there's a place called the Museum of Jurassic Technology that's out in Venice, California. And that's a real odd place, it deals a lot with the idea of paradox. Or it starts out with an idea that seems really crazy or stupid, and then the more you get into it the more you find out that the reality of it is a lot more fascinating than the front. And so it kind of—it's things that provoke thinking. And at the same time they're very whimsical. You know they're not really—it's not really useful information, it's just stuff that is I think intellectually entertaining, and it kind of opens the mind up to the possibility that we all travel in a straight line but there are all these little side things that are really—have their own unique kind of bizarreness to them. And so I like that when it comes along in my art. A lot of what I've been doing lately though has been very, oh, very tame. I don't do that much anymore of the—I don't want to call it wild stuff but of the more personal work. A lot of what I'm doing nowadays deals with, oh, a kind of regionalism. The landscape around here and then pictures of things and occasionally I'll make a statement or something in art, but it doesn't feel as comfortable as it used to, to make those kinds of statements now.

LD:

Really?

JC:

No. Yeah, don't have—a lot of what I had to say I think I said a while back. And for a while I was into doing a kind of religious—I don't know how I would say, religious satires, or things that were combinations of religion and politics. Another drawing that I had stolen from me was a takeoff on the last supper in which—it was during the '92 election, when George Bush was up for reelection. And it was basically George Bush throwing up at the last supper. And then I just—it was kind of a satire, I'm heavily Democratic in my politics, and so I was just trying to do my part. I got some great reactions out of that. People would just get a good laugh. And the fun

thing about doing things like that is I had to first go and find a picture of the last supper, you know, and it was—

LD:

Who's did you use?

JC:

I used—oh, I just, you know it was Da Vinci's Last Supper but I—

LD:

Okay.

JC:

Went to the library and looked up any image I could find on it, and found out that the thing is so dilapidated, at that time you really couldn't get an awful lot of good information from it. And so I was just looking around for any information I could find. And then I had to basically make up the rest of it as I went to long. But I cobbled that thing together in about two weeks of work. And it was a big show in Houston, got a lot of good response to it—got a lot of laughs out of it. And then it disappeared along with a couple of other pieces.

LD:

Really.

JC:

Yeah. One of the others from that group that's gone is called *Coffee Break* and it was a picture of Jesus at the foot of the cross having a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Because basically my whole joke on that was that's his job to be up there. You know, we require that he spend that time up there, as a symbol that's how we see him. So if it's his job, then every job you get—

LD:

A break.

JC:

At least two breaks, yeah, and a lunchbreak. So to me that was just kind of like, okay, this is his job, I'm just giving him a break. And that got me in more trouble than anything I ever did in my life.

LD:

Oh, jeez.

JC:

It actually got a guard at an art school fired down in Houston. It was at the Glassell School, they put together a show of artists whose works dealt with icons, religious and political icons, and so mine—I had three or four down there. And *Coffee Break* was the one that—there was a lot of really pretty shocking stuff in there. It was a great art show. They had one where it was—a confessional was set up and inside they had two videos of guys dressed up as priests telling dirty jokes. And I had *Coffee Break* and I think one or two others in that series that were there.

LD:

But what happened to the guard?

JC:

Well the guard apparently was a member of a pretty religious group, and there were a lot of other pieces in there that I thought were much more shocking than mine, but apparently she went nuts and started screaming blasphemy in front of mine, and she was told that if she couldn't handle it then she'd have to leave, and they ended up firing the guard, so.

LD:

Hm. Well I would think that that would be a, you know, pretty risky topic for the Deep South, and all the religious conservatism that they don't see the humor in it.

JC:

Yeah, oh yeah. Well, the first time I got that work in, *Coffee Break* into a show was in Dallas. And it was a group there and I just wanted to try out an art group in Dallas, see if I could get amongst some artists there and see what the water was like in a big city. And I got the work into the show, and then there were so many objections to it that they asked me to replace it with something else. So I had another piece that I had done—at that time I only had about three or four pieces that I could show around.

LD:

And well where was that show? What part of town?

JC:

That show was at City Place, the Thompson Brothers, who used to own Seven Eleven had built these places, and it was a Texas Visual Arts Association, which is a local art group in Dallas, was having a show. I found out about them and joined the group and then took my work up there to be judged. And two of the three jurors said they'd put it in the show, so it made it in. And then I had to take it out and replace it with something else for the run of the show. And then—which was, it was odd but I thought, Okay, I'll go through that. And then the—well the end result was that after that I entered another show with another one of the Jesus drawings that they did their

spring national show, and I won second place in that. And so then everybody in that group was kind of getting revved up with the idea that you could do kind of crazy work or risky work or fun work and see where it led. And so they made me the chairman of the membership group the next year, which led to an even bigger dustup that made the local paper over censorship. Because then after what they dealt with my stuff the year before, the next year they were out hunting heads. And they pulled about eight pieces from the next show that we did there. And I was the chair for that show, and so it was my turn to turn around and say, "Well, I don't know how we're going to deal with this." So we ended up—it gets more crazy—we ended up then saying, "Well, you know we been involve this deal, we let them censor our work, so what are we going to do." We thought Well, the only way we can make it up for it is let's just do a show downtown at a local gallery that deals with the idea of censorship and arts. And that's when I did the last supper piece. And before it went down to Houston I put it in the show downtown that gallery. But the guy there said that he couldn't stand it, it drove him crazy so he wouldn't allow me to put it up in a show about censorship. So I took it down the street and hung it in a bar during the opening, and we'd just tell people that wanted to see it okay, when you get through here just go down the street, have a drink and you can see the other piece.

LD:
Oh jeez.

JC:
So I basically had a work of art thrown out of a show about censorship. So that was—as somebody said it was a really dumb thing, but I got the best story out of the whole deal.

LD:
Well when you had the censorship problem, you said there was something in the paper about it?

JC:
Yeah.

LD:
So was it?

JC:
Well Dallas morning news, somebody objected to the fact that they came up—what happened was that in order to have the show there we had to agree to let them have some oversight if there were objections. And my thinking at the time was, Well I'm not going to do anything this year. The only thing that I had to enter in that show was a landscape. So I thought, Well, this should be pretty safe. But then there were some other people that did what I thought were very innocuous pieces dealing with the human form and—or nudity. It was like one lady did a montage of nude

figures, they're very small, cut out of snapshots. Nothing that was shocking about them at all. And they decided that anything that dealt with nudity was a risk. And so the organization caught hell because we basically signed over the permission to them to basically oversee the work and make sure that if they objected to anything they could just yank it out. And we thought, since I didn't have anything that was risky that they would leave it alone. But they went out and looked for anything. And so one of the artists who wasn't censored got really upset about the fact that that was going on. And at that time, back in the early nineties it was a real big deal, there was a lot of politics about art and about censorship. So it was a real volatile issue, especially in Dallas. It was like some groups were looking to censor, other groups were looking to fight them over censorship. I mean there were yelling arguments between—there was a local art group that took on Dick Army for a while. When they had a public forum where he came to address them and basically just insulted every artist inside, said they didn't deserve funding, they didn't deserve a right to show their work.

LD:

When was that, do you remember the year?

JC:

It would have been about 1991 or '92.

LD:

Um-hm.

JC:

It was a real big time for those guys. And, you know Dick Army has never been anything but an obnoxious man, so he just—it was just making hay for him. He could attack a lot of liberal people doing art and just make his constituents, you know, real happy. And so, it seems like I—for some reason, I didn't think my work was that shocking but it was at that time a deal where there were so many people doing things that were provocative. And I was kind of on the fringe of that, and so everybody was—anybody who was doing anything was getting a little bit of trouble out of it. And it just went on. And it's happened to a lot of other artists too, that just—it doesn't take much to get people upset about things. I had a work in a show in I think it was about '94 down in Nacogdoches. And this was kind of funny—it was a New York juror, and he chose the most eclectic art show I've ever seen. Just chose a million of everything from Texas. There was stuff there that was like a historical artist that had a picture of a line of Confederate soldiers done in pen and ink, then a lot of contemporary art. And he chose—the piece that he chose of mine was a portrait of a guy that I'd worked with who was basically making obscene gestures. And that was a portrait of him that it was the kind of thing that he did. It was—I did a whole group of portraits and I called them *Secular Saints*. Good examples of not very good behavior. And that was his way of saying hello to people, just flipping them off. So I had this portrait of

him, and I entered the show and Gold [?] [00:29:30] I guess decided for fun that he'd put it in the show. And they had a deal where—

[Pause in recording]

JC:

How did it go. Basically people going through the show could pick their favorite work. And there were a lot of high school students that went through, and so as a joke they all voted for my work. And I won a five hundred dollar critic's choice award.

LD:

Oh, that's great.

JC:

But then they tried to write an article about it in the paper, and nobody—and I think they said they were going to write it but then I believe they decided, Well we can't print a photo so we're not going to do that.

LD:

Now with all of these topics that it seems like some of them were kind of outrageous—how do you come up with these ideas? Except for taking that realistic and then putting the paradox with it. Any other ideas, are you trying to shock people, or—?

JC:

I was entertaining myself. And a lot of it I think came about—I was raised Catholic, and I was raised a True Catholic. And I don't know, it almost sounds cliché now, I've said it so many times, but it was always this—with Catholicism the idea of a sin is not something you do but it's also something you think. If you think in your heart a certain way. So if you have—I thought like Jesus doing something that an average person would do that sounds ridiculous or absurd, then it's in a way it's like a thought crime. And I think a lot of that was I started doing things that I thought were absurd. I liked Monty Python, I liked a lot of that kind of—Dada is an art style that uses absurdity, uses things that are almost stupid but are also calculated to either offend or to create a paradox where you don't know, you're confused in looking at them. And I think with religious art it was real easy to do that kind of stuff because religion, at least the way I looked at it, was everything is locked down. The meaning of the image and the symbolism of it is, it's in concrete. So if you start playing with images that people are secure with, that they think are holy or sacred, that are untouchable, and if you start doing things with those that even if they're humorous are going against what people think and believe, then they start getting very uncomfortable with it, and sometimes very angry. You know I've been there next to my art when somebody's walked by, looked at it, said, "That's blasphemous," and walked away. And part of

the paradox to is the idea that if you got Jesus on the cross and you give him a cup of coffee and a cigarette, how is that being blasphemous? It's almost a kind thing to do. And so people are so locked into an idea or a symbol, and I was as a kid, that to them that's a shocking thing or it's a terrible thing to do. So I find it's really stimulating to kind of break those rules. And for me it was always what made me laugh, or what was so ridiculous that it made me laugh. And if I can get an idea like that then I would see how far I could take it. I've got—one of the last of the Jesus images that I did was Jesus getting a tattoo of a laughing Buddha, which I thought was kind of a great contrast. Now you see—

LD:

Yeah.

JC:

In my family which were all raised—they all went to Catholic school up through high school in Dallas, and I would tell them these things, and the first reaction would be kind of a surprised laugh. And then kind of an “Oh, man, I shouldn't be laughing about that.” So it all kind of works that way. It's something that goes on in those of us that have been conditioned to think a certain way. When you start doing things that are stupid or inane or kind of goofily humorous that challenge those symbols a little bit. Or loosen—I don't even know that it challenges them but it loosens them up. I think it makes the ideas more accessible and less sacred and more something you can actually think about. And I would have to say, god it almost sounds like proselytizing but I kind of like Jesus a lot more after making fun of him, or using him in my works. I think that he's much more of an approachable character now for me.

LD:

Yeah. More humanistic and—

JC:

Yeah. And the fun thing about it is too, I spent a lot of time when I was real committed to doing these works, or what would be the word—obsessed with doing these works. I spent a lot of time thinking about them and it kind of was a form of an education for me about what I think religion is or isn't. Not that I'm any kind of committed Christian or anything, but I feel a lot closer to it now than I did then, which was—I would have thought that it would have gone the other way. But I also feel that religion needs to be much more of an open-ended thing—whatever you find, wherever you find it. If you can put two good ideas together and come up with one better idea then do it. And then it's all a very personal thing, so.

LD:

Um-hm, uh-hm.

JC:

But it was a real stimulating time for me. Got me reading a lot, got me doing a lot, got me talking a lot and got me into a lot of trouble.

LD:

What sort of things did you read, or have you read?

JC:

Friends were telling me to read stuff like Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, which is just a wonderful book.

LD:

Yes, it is.

JC:

And I tried to read Buber's *I and Thou*. I tried to read Nietzsche, and I've got *Man and His Symbols* by Jung, and—but all I've done is really skim it. I really would like to find some day a good teacher that could explain it to me. But I think all those things—I really love the idea of—Jung's idea that there's kind of a universal mind that we all share. And that all of these primitive symbols that are so important to us are in there, and that we can bring them up and use them. And especially there—he wants to go out where she's watering—that all those, Jung's work especially really does—is really good for visual artists because there's—an image is just an image, but if you can do an image that has some connection to either that subconscious or that, you know, just under the surface emotional well that we all walk around with, that I think that that's making art that has real meaning, and that that other people can connect with. And I think that all work, all artwork that's good works on people in more than one level. You know there's the visual pleasure of seeing a work of art, but there's also that stimulation that you get if there's meaning to the work that, you know, affects you either directly or subconsciously. And I think there's a lot of stuff like that out there. And I wish I were doing more of it. So that's my approach, I don't know, you know, what the success of it is.

LD:

Well I think that's fascinating. And sorry, I'm just kind of lost in thought over that, I really like those ideas.

JC:

Yeah, just remember I'm blathering. [Laughs] I make up a lot as I go along. But it's just—this is kind of, you know. This is stuff I got through thinking about when I'm trying to do artwork.

LD:

Um-hm. I want to go back for just a little bit and talk about the clay.

JC:

Yeah.

LD:

And, now Cecily said that you had a secret to making handles? Is that correct?

JC:

Handles?

LD:

For cups? Or I'm not quite sure of which things she said that—

JC:

Boy I saw her this morning, I'd have to ask her.

LD:

And said that you were really her mentor through all that time for her at Tech.

JC:

Well I taught Cecily how to throw, and she was I think a history major who had to take a humanities course and chose clay. And so I ended up teaching her but god, she did an awful lot more than I ever did in clay.

LD:

Maybe that's what she—it's been a while.

JC:

I've enjoyed teaching her how to throw, I always thought Cecily—I still think Cecily is a unique and wonderful individual.

LD:

Um-hm, yes she is.

JC:

And one of the more unique backgrounds too in terms of how she's done what she's done in her family background, you know, where the father worked for the government.

LD:

Yes.

JC:

And going to travel around the world.

LD:

Lived in all different places, was born in Japan.

JC:

Yeah, yeah and then chooses to settle down in Lubbock and lead a very quiet life here and after all of that. I think she's fascinating. But I really like clay. You know, part of it was the hippie thing in the seventies.

LD:

Oh yeah.

JC:

And Steve Reynolds was kind of this guiding light for a lot of us that just wanted to go and have a good time and party. He was a great teacher in the idea of just loosening up and doing crazy things. And that art was not just one media but it was any media that had anything that you decided to put together as an object. Yeah, yeah.

LD:

Hm. Now what sort of things did you—well we talked about some of that, but—did you really enjoyed in throwing clay, and what kind of things did you make and enjoy the most?

JC:

I liked making kind of sculptural pots and James Watkins was, when he started up the Mackenzie Terrace Pottery Center I'd gotten out of clay at that time, and had gone to graduate school for a while and then dropped out. And so I got back into clay when James started the pottery center. There and that would have been about '79 or '78 I'm guessing. Hey cat, go eat. He's our wild outdoors cat. Ah, are you going to go hide somewhere, aren't you? And so James was in a very much into technical stuff and—but that was before that time. Yeah, I'm trying to recall. I think my senior year I got into the idea of taking—somebody had done a workshop in which he threw a cylinder, threw another cylinder that was the same width, and then joined the two together. And I could only throw as tall as my elbow. And so I wanted to do some really big pieces, and I started sticking them together. And there'd been another artist at Tech before that time named Jim Romburg how did really sculptural works. And I think I was kind of copying a lot of what he had done. And then I would throw a top, I would put two throne works together, all right,

through one piece with a tall spout and then a lower piece and then I would just sculpturally stick them together and make these clay pots. Brutus!

A:

Left his bone outside. Come on! Let's find your bone.

JC:

We've got a giant—I think she got an elephant leg bone that he's been carrying around. Weighs about twenty pounds. And you have to be careful because he'll drop it on your foot.

A:

Come on.

JC:

You're so proud.

Angela:

Let's take it outside.

JC:

But it was just kind of manipulating thrown pieces into sculptural objects.

LD:

Uh-huh. And so you liked those large objects?

JC:

Yeah, things that, well there was that my limits were here but then if you combined things then your limits were just however tall you could make it and however wide so it wouldn't fall over. And that was a lot of fun. I liked throwing on the wheel, I liked—at the time I was into a lot of athletic things so throwing and moving clay around was a very physical act, and I enjoyed that a bunch. And then just seeing what kind of strange little things that could be done with that for decoration. That was a lot of Steve Reynolds, that thing about being wide open to the ideas of what's on the surface, or how you work with clay in a loose way that's funky, you know. Very—almost throwaway gestures, spontaneous gestures. And Bromberg was a very painterly potter. He would do these big square pieces, or throw round pieces then flatten them out, then do a lot of very beautiful abstract paintings in glaze on those.

LD:

Yeah.

JC:

And also very oriental, and I think that appealed to me.

LD:

Oh yeah. So what kind of glazes did you use? Were you into doing different things?

JC:

A lot of what I did was Raku, and that was a firing process that again was very physical, and I liked I think the heat and the sound and the noise and that idea that you're making something with all these—almost an industrial thing I think.

LD:

Uh-huh.

A:

It's ten until three.

JC:

Oh, okay.

Angela:

Don't forget about Ginger.

JC:

Yeah, I'm going to have to go to work in a little bit. How are you doing time-wise?

LD:

Well we have gone nearly an hour. And it could be that if we need to stop and do this another time then we can continue. I mean I'm fascinated, so.

JC:

Well, okay. Jeez, well everything I'm getting is just kind of piecemeal remembering.

LD:

And that's okay. S if you remember other things then we—I'd love to do a series of interviews and so we might think about that.

JC:

Okay, sure.

LD:

So back to the Raku—and you were in sports?

JC:

Ah, yeah. I was—I got into karate for about four or five years.

LD:

Oh, yeah.

JC:

And so I was doing a lot of that until I got hurt pretty good in a tournament and quit, thank god. But it was always fun when I started doing the athletics and then got into throwing pottery, it was so much fun to have the physical strength to really do things, to muscle the clay around and then be able to carry heavy loads, stuff like that. And now, that lasted for about five or six years and then I got out of the karate, got out of the clay, out at graduate school, dropped out of graduate school and then when James started the place out at Mackenzie Terrace then I got back into clay and he had me teaching beginning classes out there for a while. And that was a lot of fun, got me into clay in a technical way. And also into working again sculpturally large objects and just having a good time. And that really saved me, because I think I would have quit art if it hadn't been for James Watkins.

LD:

Really.

JC:

Yeah. Yeah, he really got me thinking about art again. And the main result was that I got back into clay, got to feeling good about it, and then when I ran through all the things that I was doing in clay, the end result was I was still going back to things that dealt a lot with painting and drawing. So I started drawing again, and once I started doing the drawing I really felt like that was where I needed to be. And I dropped clay again.

LD:

Oh.

JC:

And every now and then, a couple of years down the road somebody will say, "I've got a wheel and I've got some clay," and I'll stop and throw things for an hour or two. I enjoy it but I just don't have the connection anymore. Also I have the sense to realize that when I'm working on a drawing I can get real involved in it, take a long time, but it's all right there in front of me. With

clay you have to go through the firing and the glazing. And it really takes an awful lot of support materials to make that work, and it's a very expensive process.

LD:

Yes.

JC:

And also knowing me and as bit a slob as I am I'd burn the house down sooner or later, I guarantee it. I'd burn it down or there'd be a gas explosion, it'd be like the girl killed in the kiln explosion in *Animal House*, I would do it. [LD laughs] So. So that's why I don't do clay anymore.

LD:

Well if you feel pressured for time I say that we stop this now.

JC:

Okay, sure.

LD:

And then I'll tell you some of the other things.

End of Recording

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