

Interview with Rudy Autio in Missoula, Montana

July 16, 2007 / Peter Held, Interviewer

Interview begins with a discussion of undergraduate study with Frances Senska at Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana, 1946-1950.

Rudy Autio: The program was very basic. We had to go out and dig clays, for example, we had to build kilns, we had to build wheels, so it was really an education from the beginning in its resourceful needs and everything like that. We found clays all over the valley around Bozeman. One of the good clays that we found was an earthenware around the ski area, and that's one we used. But Frances had found a clay around Lewiston, which was a stoneware clay, and that's the way she continued to use all her life, but, you know, the supply and that was difficult. So we used the earthenware clays. But the interesting thing there was that we did everything from scratch, including how to build kilns, and we built some of the first electric kilns with the new soft bricks that they had and resources of that kind. Her program was basic. She taught us how to make clays and she taught us how to fire, she taught us how to think.

Peter Held: So I know she studied in Chicago with sort of the new Bauhaus, and I'm assuming that philosophy carried over (speaking over each other).

RA: That's very true. She was with Maholy-Nagy, and I believe also with Maija Grotel some – much later, a short workshop experience. And Edith Heath of the Bay area of the famous Heath Ceramics and Marguerite Wildenhain and so I believe there were other influences there, too, that I'm hazy on myself.

PH: So you know both Grotel and Wildenhain and were fairly regimented in their approach to ceramics?

RA: I think so, yes.

PH: But Frances was fairly open-minded about what the students were doing and...

RA: She was very open. I think she was with us, she was almost our age, perhaps maybe a few years older, but we had a good rapport with Frances, as we did with other teachers in our small college.

PH: I know your parents were born in Finland and, you know, you've traveled to Finland several times. What aspects of Finnish culture, whether artistic or social or political, do you feel has influenced your work, you know, that had a long history of modern design, but what other aspects do you think of Finnish culture that was instilled by your parents that –

RA: That – my parents had really very little knowledge of the arts, except that I should say my dad was a violinist, and he was a pretty good one, sort of in that realm between a fiddler and violinist. But he was good enough to be appreciated by a musical audience in eastside Butte, Montana and, of course, he played in our little churches and that kind of thing. He was accomplished and (inaudible) were kind of basic and interesting. As a matter of fact, he and his brother built a violin when they were young people in Finland, so that's how he learned. Mother was not that interested in the arts; that was sort of a mystery. When they finally had some contact with me at the Archie Bray Foundation, they thought that was pretty good. Dad was a little amazed at it that I should become an artist, and he didn't see anything wrong with it but my parents being religiously inclined would much have preferred my being a Lutheran minister so I disappointed them in that.

PH: Were there other aspects, other than (inaudible) –

RA: The Finnish experience was great for me because I got to know some real good professionals over there, and I was amazed – I don't know why I should have been – but they were very sophisticated in ceramics. They knew a lot about American ceramics. For example, Kyllikki Salmenhaara, who had been a visiting artist at both Alfred and Los Angeles schools, was familiar with American culture, and so she also knew many of the potters over here, or the ceramists, and she was quite an influence on the direction that some of the designers at the Arabia Porcelain factory, for example, were involved with. There was also, I think, a mixture of people who had been at the Helsinki art schools, for example, the people who were behind the Marimekko designs in textiles and there was also the Finnish Handicraft Society, the weaving of Ryas, and things like that, so that kind of a culture was sort of a mix amongst all of these professionals.

PH: And I know, I think it was in Luanna's book, you mentioned a particular Finnish artist that had a Russian name.

RA: Oh, Anna Maria Osipow.

PH: Yeah.

RA: Yeah, she was a very accomplished potter lady and a very interesting personality, and we did the café society culture there, because mostly drinking, and the intellectuals used to gather at a restaurant called the Kosmos, the writers, the newspaper cartoonists, people of that kind, artists, and we'd go in there and drink with both hands until they closed the place up. So there was that. The interesting thing was that practically all of the creative people in Finland knew each other, small country, small intense group of

artists, sculptures, painters, especially in Helsinki, and so we got to know each other quite well, and I was right in the middle of that. That was a lot of fun.

PH: How much time did you spend there?

RA: Well, the first time was about two months, and I went to work at the Arabia factory, and he gave me a studio, all the equipment I needed, all the materials and clays that I could use. Some were difficult but the firing was all handled by people who would help you. So all you had to do is sit in your studio and make stuff, and it was an experience I had never had before.

PH: Right. This is right after you retired from teaching?

RA: This was right after I retired, yeah. Actually, my first visit was when I was on the verge of retiring, but the following year I did retire permanently.

PH: Just getting back to Finnish culture, I mean, is there anything in the Finnish social fabric that you feel wasn't imparted by your parents, you know, a certain attitude or an approach to life or, you know, something that has stayed with you because of your heritage?

RA: I can't really think of anything. I think if you look at the Finnish character, it's somewhat reserved, and stoic because of the long harsh winters, and so it takes a certain amount of persistence to survive in that culture just physically. They have what they call the Kaamos aika, which means the long dreaded gloomy winter, and I experienced that a little bit. And it is very dark and, of course, you know, the nights are long. There is that side of it.

PH: Right. So the impacts there, psychological or emotional in character, I guess?

RA: Yeah. Right.

PH: You know, so it's curious because, you know, immigration is such a big political issue now so, you know, this country was comprised of immigrants, your parents came over, my grandparents came over from Eastern Europe. Do you have any thoughts about the current issue compared to, you know, what –

RA: Yeah, I have a rather strong feelings about it now that I've – I'm an American citizen, of course, because of the fact that I was born here. I had a brother who was born in Finland, however. My brother was killed in car accident so his experience was quite limited. Yes, I feel very strongly people should learn English, for example. I don't see why we should have to turn our entire educational system around just to

accommodate different languages. That would be an impossible task anyway. I have no objection to Spanish being taught on a level that it's being taught, and I think that may even be a good thing. But it still should be recognized English is our universal language, it's being appreciated in China and India and God knows everywhere around the world.

PH: And, you know, you grew up in Butte that was comprised almost entirely of immigrants from all over the world and –

RA: Right. It was a society of ethnic mixes that was very interesting. We got to know the Irish and the Yugoslavians and the Italians quite well, and we had no problems with that. I think maybe in the early days they did, labor problems, because the Irish didn't want to hire the Finns at certain points because they were Wobblies and many of them, like my aunt, was a socialist. So there was that kind of a, you know –

PH: Tension that the labor –

RA: Political minds.

PH: So I mean they sort of assimilated it but they sort of stayed within their own culture –

RA: They did. For example, I grew up on East Broadway, which was Finn Town, and I knew how to speak the language, and it was spoken on the streets. I worked in the grocery store, partly because I was fluent in the language, and so that was – it was its own community. The Irish lived across the street. They had their own community. The Italians were further east in Meaderville and they had their very near mafia societies there. Teddy Treparrish was probably a gangster, and he had a huge limousine and drove around town on East Broadway where he parked his car. Things like that. So it was a very rich culture in a lot of ways.

PH: It's almost globalization before the word was invented.

RA: That's right. And in living Butte, an experience in itself, was like living in Brooklyn. There were people on the streets, street cars, people crowded, running around, rushing at each other and stores were busy, and there was so many ethnic groups there that it was just a lot of fun.

PH: It was fairly rich culturally, too. I mean, there was performing arts, theatre.

RA: Well, that was the interesting part of it. Butte, Montana was – they had opera, they had theatre, they had art shows. When I was a kid, they had the Works Progress Administration, where they had artists

coming into the schools teaching the kids. That was my first experience in art. And then later they had art exhibitions at the Simons big department store. They had just leveled a certain area, brought in a whole bunch of paintings from New York, or God knows where they were from. That was the first time I had ever seen paintings like that. They were impressionistic globs of paint and I thought, well, after Charlie Russell, this was something.

PH: Big stuff.

RA: Yeah, big stuff. Very different. I never liked the stuff, and I noticed things that everybody does. Like if you get a distance, it looks like something.

PH: So the WPA artists were also doing public projects (speaking over each other) –

RA: Yes. For example, Hank Meloy was doing murals down in Hamilton and in post offices, and artists of the day – I can't quite remember them all now – in Butte. Elizabeth Lochrie, for one, was quite a well known painter and she did murals and that kind of thing.

PH: Did you take any art classes or was it mostly –

RA: Well, they were taught in our schools. The teachers – WPA artists would come down to the Grant Elementary School when I was about nine, and they came in and they took over the classrooms there in the evenings. They'd teach us how to draw from magazines and things like that. They'd take a magazine and say, copy that. So they taught us elements of copying. And then they would move to three-dimensional things like a vase of flowers or something. They'd say, copy that, but you'd use those same rules of line and that kind of thing to cross section it and see it. So I got to be a pretty good copyist. And some of those tricks were things that I retained.

PH: Did you ever work with clay back at that period?

RA: No, not at all. Ceramics wasn't part of it.

PH: You know, I know when you were at Bozeman, you did one semester. You started out as an architecture student, so I'm just curious how that interest in architecture was started.

RA: Well, that was simple. I was not very good at doing drafting. I'd spill coffee on my drawings and things like that. The big move was the pretty girls over in the art department so I moved over there where I met Lela, and so it was a happy experience.

PH: So you don't feel like, whatever it is, the short time you were an architect, you didn't really –

RA: Well, let me put it this way: I valued the people there like, for example, Hugo Eck was one of my teachers, and he was a little bothered by the fact that I had left the architecture department. I knew I wasn't suited to be all the stuff you had to do. It was an engineering oriented architectural program at the time. I much preferred drawing and design.

PH: So did any of that short experience with the architecture school, did that impact anything later on when you started doing more public art or –

RA: I'm sure it did. At least my exposure to the engineering mathematics courses, which were difficult for me. I think that helped. That helped in the design of murals and, you know, just simple math involved in enlarging something. It was very useful.

PH: You know, when you first started your professional career back in the '50s and '60s, you know, the intersection between art, craft, design, you know, what was called the applied arts back then, you know, it seemed like there was more collaborative efforts with industrial designers and studio people, architects, and that's changed quite a bit over the years where those disciplines have sort of separated again. So can you talk a little bit about that environment when you started your career and maybe some of the different people you worked with?

RA: Yeah, well, there's two things involved here. You have to think about Montana being a culturally isolated state. Most of the architecture was very practical. I suppose today it's still the same. Had to be the most economical kind of construction. And where did art fit into that? Well, in those days, it was more of a, 'okay, I've got a space here on this wall I want you to adorn, do something with it.' So it was usually a niche that I filled with some kind of sculpture relief of some kind. I think we were just thinking about how to make a better connection between architectural – not embellishment – but kind of a union between what the artists could do and what the architect could do. And at the same time, the Bauhaus influence was so great that it was a cleanup time. Get rid of all of this ornamental stuff. So there was that influence. All the terra cotta companies that used to do this rich gingerbread were going broke. They weren't doing that anymore. And that's when I started doing the carved brick stuff. I was invited by the Denver Terra Cotta Company to come down there and help them out. I was a dumb kid, I didn't know what half of this was about, but I went and met these wonderful craftsmen who were doing sculpture and entrances to public buildings which were ornate and beautifully done. And I was amazed at their skills, and just by looking at it, I learned a lot. I learned how they pressed molds and all kinds of things.

PH: Was this like after graduate school or –

RA: Oh, yes, this was by the time I was –

PH: You were done with school?

RA: Yeah, I was done with school, and I had been at Bray's maybe a year or two. And so I had the chance to go down there. They wanted me to join them but I had my family back in Helena, the loyalty to the place or something. I couldn't have done much about it anyway down in Denver. So I stayed in Missoula – I mean in Helena – and then eventually got a job teaching at Missoula.

PH: Yeah, so, the approach then was more embellishment or ornamentation where, you know, now the architects or building designers or the owners of the building are more open-minded, they try to involve the artists –

RA: That's true. But as far as Montana and architectural embellishment is concerned, I still think it's backward. I'm not sure of how that is, but I see some of the terrific work being done by Jun Kaneko, for example, where there was a real fit between what he does and the spaces that he deals with. Of course, we weren't ready for that in our time. It's only after it started to happen with guys like Jun where it became, I think, a significant and a brand new breakthrough into what can happen to architecture today.

PH: Right. So was there any other designers, you know, like Edith Heath was in California, there probably wasn't that many, or maybe none, designers of that type in Montana or the Northwest, or was there –

RA: Well, that's quite true. There were some good people – they don't come to mind right now – there were some very good people who knew how to handle clay who had done this. They were mostly in ceramic centers, Columbus, Ohio and back east. I wish these names would come to me right now but I can't think of them.

PH: Yeah, maybe later.

RA: Yeah.

PH: So what are your thoughts about sort of where that – because so many art students studying in college now are looking at things more interdisciplinary, you know, they might be ceramic majors but they

are experimenting a lot more with other materials. So a lot of the boundaries for a younger generation, either students or ceramists, sort of have a different approach –

RA: I think that's true.

PH: And, you know, it's challenging for the academic institutions because they were formed very segmented and very – so do you have any thoughts about sort of the new approaches –

RA: I think it's a helpful thing that if a person gets a start in a ceramics program should some day decide to be a painter or would go that way, and I think that's great. So what happens is that ceramic programs generally, to me, are more vital if they are generalists and have a general program. It's good to know how to make clay. It's good to know how to make clays. It's good to know how to fire. Things like that. But it's also more important to be an artist than it is to do any one of those specific things. And that's what I like about what's happening now.

PH: The one problem I see with that is that the students are moving around so much and there's more fluidity that they don't have the patience or the interest to learn the technical skills first so they might have great ideas but they are unable to execute because they are not disciplined enough in the technical aspects.

RA: Well, you know, I'm – there's two things that I question about that. I think that people will find a way to do things if they are motivated enough. I always had the feeling that the idea was the important thing and how you got there was something that you learned. If you were motivated enough, you'd learn about it.

PH: You know, I know when you were at The Bray in your early years, both you and Voulkos played guitars at The Bray, and I'm just curious how much music has influenced your artistic approach or has that had any impact in your ceramic work at all?

RA: Well, I think so. I think music is, somehow it reinforces the expressive nature of what we try to do. There is – in our day, it was – I had first heard the guitar being played by Andres Segovia and Almeida – Peter Meloy had some records – and some of the Spanish guitarists, the flamenco guitarists, they were beautiful. I didn't know a guitar could be that – I mean I listened to cowboy music. So we picked up on guitars. Pete was very good at it. When he went to Los Angeles, he studied with Teddy Norman, an outstanding musician, well known, and he picked up on the Flamenco. This was a passionate kind of gypsy music from Spain that fit into the whole passion of abstract expressionists. And Pete became quite good at it, and he studied it and he brought some of that back to me. I was trying to learn it but my fingers were

like bananas. I didn't go through that discipline. Even listening to Pete today, he's pretty good. But he was so passionate he damn near tore the strings off the guitar.

PH: Did he ever perform professionally or –

RA: Well, yes and no. I doubt that he was that good. I mean he certainly wasn't in a class with some of the best articulate Flamenco guys who could hit those notes without any problem at all, but he made it up for in passion. And so he even was so serious that he said, I think I'm going to give up clay and go to Spain and learn how to do this. And Ted Norman said, well, you've got to decide one way or another. And so Pete says, well, maybe you're right, and he stuck with clay.

PH: How about jazz music, was that of interest?

RA: Yeah, we were interested in jazz. I remember visiting the Blackhawk in San Francisco and listening to those great jazz musicians there. The guy who played the piano, I can't think of their names again. They were great. It was fun to listen to them because they were bantering amongst themselves. It was real people. I never became a jazz fanatic but I know people who did. Some of my college classmates, like Harlan Goudy (sp?), practically made a career out of it, and he still in his 80s plays the trumpet and sits in with groups. So there was music, and it was part of our interests.

PH: What kind of music do you like to listen to now?

RA: Mostly classical. I'm a classical guy. But I like choral music and I like percussion. I think percussion, like the African percussion, is great, passionate stuff.

PH: I'm not going to talk too much about The Bray because that's been talked about a lot. I'm just curious, you know, after you left The Bray, you worked briefly at the Montana Historical Society, and I know K. Ross Toole was instrumental in hiring you for that position. Can you just talk a little bit about your relationship, because he also helped you get your job here, I believe?

RA: Yes, he did.

PH: Do you have any personal anecdotes, because he was such an important Missoula figure and one of the preeminent Montana historians?

RA: Yes. Ross Toole and I were – had a unique relationship, he was sort of like a big brother, and I was like the kid down the block who worked for him. When he was the director of the Historical Society in

Helena, he was very influential for being guy in his early 30s. And he was a wonderful speaker. He could talk the shirt off your back. That's a style. I accompanied him on fundraising things like going back to talking with the oil people back in Billings and those areas to raise funds for making dioramas for the museum. So I got to know him in that capacity, and he was a lot of fun. He gave me a job after I had gone to California trying to find some way to make a living. And I went broke down there. My kids were freezing and starving in Helena. And I said, Ross, can you give me a job? And he said, yeah, here's a hundred bucks, come on back, I'll put you on. So I worked at the museum with Morgan and Jack Weaver, the sculptor. I was doing a lot of things. I eventually did the diorama of the Lewis & Clark exhibition.

PH: So this was when the Historical Museum was just setting up some of their permanent exhibitions? So it was sort of a newer operation.

RA: It was a new operation and it was a lot of fun with Ross. He had his two-hour lunches, you know, martini lunches and come back with great ideas of how he was going to bring Picassos and Matisses into the state. That kind of enthusiasm was hard to come by. But Ross was at the center of this. I really appreciated this. Everybody loved it.

PH: What did he think about your work that – I mean, I'm sure he was familiar with what was going on at The Bray but, you know, how appreciative was he of studio ceramics –

RA: I think he liked – he was interested in it in a peripheral way. He was kind of surprised that it was getting as much attention as it was maybe. I'm not sure. Gardell Christianson, who was a hired professional out of Washington or somewhere, to do dioramas, used to come out to The Bray and visit with us, as did both Wolfgang Pogzeba, who was an artist who cleaned Russell paintings. He's a professional –

PH: Conservator.

RA: Conservator.

PH: And an artist as well.

RA: Yeah. And so there were people like that who were under Ross who came out to visit with us. And – but as far as working at the dioramas, they had a bunch of guys that I would call the more craftsman-type who knew how to make a little models and things like that. Bob Morgan hadn't developed his abilities yet to a point where he could be totally conversant with that – neither had I for that matter – but they wanted some figures made. And they wanted to know if I could do it, so I did. I made, you know, pretty good figures and they got better, and eventually I made that diorama. Ross was very pleased. I think the

best person there was Gardell Christianson. He did the buffalo jump. Very dramatic stuff. He had a lot of girlfriends around town, too.

PH: Is there a special occasion or any special memory about K. Ross Toole or incident or anything that sticks in your mind?

RA: Oh, yeah, well, there's so many instances. He was – I'd see him downtown in Missoula every once in a while, and I still respected him, you know, a guy who helped me out a lot, so I was a little shy of him, but I'd see him down in the bars once in a while, and I'd shyly go up and talk to him, but he was so – he had such a presence about him that I was a little shy. But when I ran the graduate program up here, I began to realize there were some great personalities on this campus that my students should know about. Ross Toole was certainly one of them. And I asked him to come over and lecture to my students, have a visit. He gave a great lecture about Charlie Russell and all the other artists that he was aware of. The same thing with Dick Hugo. I was amazed at how much Dick Hugo knew about painting. When he had been in Italy, he had studied painting a lot, and he wrote great poetry about painted images. So I had him come over. And so in that way, I – we collaborated with these guys, and they were great on campus. Ross Toole was a guy who lectured to thousands and they'd give him a standing ovation after his lectures, he was that good.

PH: Was there anyone else on campus besides Toole and Hugo that was held in high regard at the time?

RA: Well, there were. Earlier than that I was familiar with – names aren't coming to me.

PH: Well, I'm curious just for my own selfish reasons, you know, I know Rudy Turk was here, so I'm just curious about when Rudy was on campus because I suspect, you know, his relationship with you here is what got the ceramic collection started at ASU, to a certain degree.

RA: We had a good relationship. Rudy Turk and I shared an office. We were both freshman teachers here arriving at the same time and there was limited space and so we shared an office. Rudy was very entertaining, very interested in everything. And a good speaker. But he had to head the humanities program as far as the – it was Leslie Fiedler (sp?) I was trying to think about – he ran the history of civilizations, and Rudy's job was to do the art portion of it. He used to get so nervous with Leslie Fiedler sitting in the audience looking at him. Now, Leslie Fiedler was an imposing, brilliant, powerful guy. He used to get so nervous he'd go out in the streets and throw up before he had to give his lecture. I felt so sorry for poor Rudy, because it was a nerve-racking experience for him and I appreciate that. Well, for some reason, Rudy Turk didn't stay with us and there may have been some differences between him and

Walter Hook, who was chair, and so it turn out to be a tenured thing for him so he went down to the Bay area and that's where we lost contact. But Rudy used to come over to the ceramics program and I welcomed him to come over and he'd play with the clay and did some pretty interesting things. He was very open-minded and very willing to try different things, and he did. That's how we got to like each other quite a lot. He was a hell of a gossip, though.

PH: Let's talk a little bit about your career as a teacher, because you taught for so many years. Maybe let's just start out about what was your philosophy and approach, and I realize that might have changed over the years from the beginning to the time you retired but what did you want to impart to students both – and maybe we can leave the technical stuff out and just deal with aesthetics or creating your own vision.

RA: The simplest thing for me to do was set up a program where I would do the how do it thing. I wasn't there to present any kind of a philosophy. I had just as much respect for people who threw as hand builders, but I was never a throwing artist. So that was a dilemma for me but I did build wheels. I had some local machinist help me make some kick wheels and gang wheels. I was able to purchase a wheel or two. I was able to get a kiln from Mike Kalen (sp?), of the Advanced Kiln Company, because I had worked for him in Los Angeles briefly before I came to the Holter. He was a great guy. The only Communist I had ever met in my life. But he was the most generous-spirited guy I ever knew. And he sent a kiln that was somewhat experimental, a great big kiln, gas kiln, with (inaudible) door, and we fired all our stuff. So I had the basics. I had a kiln, I had wheels, I had a clay mixer. It was one of those rotary paddle wheels that you use in a bakery.

PH: So at this time, was it just an undergraduate program or was it –

RA: It was an undergraduate program but the next year there were graduates.

PH: Oh, okay, so that started early on.

RA: Started very early. And it was tough getting that going but, you know, there was so much enthusiasm. I would get an enrollment till there were 30 kids in a little warming shack, and we would practically be standing like on a bus. But somehow it worked. There was a lot of enthusiasm. Some of my best students just took to it like ducks to water.

PH: Were you actively recruiting students (speaking over each other) –

RA: No, not – they just kind of came, fell through the door. And I had an open studio policy and I said, come on in, work anytime you want. Whereas, a lot of places on campus lock their keys at six o'clock and that was another reason they came over.

PH: So in your teaching career – well, let's start with this question first: You know, that took a lot of your time so you had to set aside your own personal work in teaching, that's just the nature of how things work, so how did you balance those two earlier on in your career?

RA: Well, you know, I think most of the time I was still an artist fresh out of The Bray, fresh out of Holter where I had done some dioramas, and I just continued to do my own work in front of the students. I didn't have a studio, I just worked, they watched. I said this is what I'd do, and I went over to the wheel, I showed them the rudiments of going on the wheel. A lot of them just took to the wheel like crazy and they taught themselves. But if I had some real pros on the wheel, I'd say, 'go study with Shaner,' and some of them did. They got very good over there. But, you know, pottery is its own thing that takes many, many years. And so the few of them that got really good, like Mike Jensen up at Bigfork, had to study with Shaner on the very personal level – that's why he knows so much, you get the feeling in your heart as to what good pottery is. And you don't learn that, you learn a few exercises and some kids could very quickly make a vase with nice handles and things like that. But I had good glazes and I had a lot of stuff that I could impart to the kids. Some of whom became very, very well known in the field and did great things, and I'm really proud of them.

PH: Maybe you could just talk about two or three of the students that –

RA: Well, like David Dontigney, I was off at a job in Penn State, and I said, 'I don't want to leave Montana,' and so I said, 'Dave, why don't you apply for this, I'll recommend you.' He went there. And he was then later joined by Jim Stevenson. Two of my graduates, and both good people, and so they started the program at Penn State, which is now, you know, big, it's huge with their own buildings and everything, a very important contribution. So people like that. And Doug Baldwin who went and set up the Maryland Institute ceramics program. It's huge now. But you see that's in a place where there is a lot of public support but it took that kind of a youngster to go out there and set it up.

PH: You know, we talked briefly about your travel to Finland. You know travel affects artists in a lot of different ways, usually not immediately but those experiences sort of percolate through the work over time and years. What other travel experiences do you feel – like I know you went to Italy early on with your family.

RA: Oh, Italy was very important. The surprising thing to me was when we got into Tuscany and I visited a potter there, just dropped in. It was a very nice gentleman who – my pidgin Italian, I said, I'm a teacher, and he showed me his operation. He was so personable. He took me all over. He showed me how they stack kilns and bisques –

PH: This was a production?

RA: Production pottery in – just outside of Florence, between Florence and Pisa, and I looked around and all the stuff they had for sale. They even had what we called (bent ware) in our country, stuff, just kind of abstract expressionism. I looked at that stuff and started laugh and said, 'Jesus, this is stuff that's gotten around.' But most of it was classical, Italian pottery they had put outside, but the thing that impressed me was the skill, those people were so skilled. I walked on the streets, I'd seen architectural projects that I was trying to learn how to do over here, and it was stuff I liked to find out about. They were so skilled at it. It kind of loosened me up for using low fire color, because the Italians were doing that back in the thirteenth century, majolica.

PH: And that's where you – did you first see Marini's sculpture there or did –

RA: I didn't see any Marinis over there but I saw other Italian sculptures that were quite good. They were very fluid with their bronzes. You know, Marini was fundamentally an Oriental cubist I thought, because they had a lot of Orient in them, Chinese, but they were still tightly organized. I love Marini, still do.

PH: That leads perfectly into my next question. Can you talk a little bit about the impact of Asian ceramics in your work and, you know, I know possibly that got started with Leach-Hamada-Yanagi but I know you also appreciated the work of Kawai but, you know, what is it – then Henry Meloy was also influenced by Asian ceramics. What is it of the aesthetic or the approach of that rich tradition –

RA: Well, the Japanese design, I think, is probably the world's best, if you are going to do it on pottery or painting. I was – you think of our painters like Matisse and our American painters who were also influenced by the beautiful design of Japan that, they saw that. Yeah, I think that was great. As far as sculpture is concerned, I think I like the Italians best.

PH: From like the '50s, '60s time period?

RA: Right. Especially Marini, whom I still appreciate a lot.

PH: What exactly specific with Asian design that appeals to you? I mean –

RA: Oh, I think Munakato, the print maker. I like the spontaneity of his wood cuts. He did wood cuts in a way that nobody had ever done before. And the interesting thing was that he was so myopic with those thick glasses that he had to be inches away from them to carve these things that it was amazing to me how the wholeness of it came together. And even the calligraphy fit in. I saw a big show of Munakato's at the Art Institute of Chicago and I was overwhelmed at the size, at the fluidity, spontaneity of it all.

PH: What time period was that?

RA: It was – it seems to me it was in the late '60s when I saw a big show –

PH: So pretty early in your career?

RA: Yeah. I taught at the Art Institute of Chicago for one summer. I worked – I took Leah Balsham's place there for a while and later was joined by Pete Voulkos who did his workshop in sculpture, but he was bored by what was going on over there so he came over to ceramics, so the two of us were winging it there for a while and had a great time. That was during the Democratic Convention when everybody had their heads bashed in after we left but it was that summer.

PH: So what other influences do you feel have impacted your work, and maybe we could start with figuration and, you know, there's already been documentation about the influence of Henry Meloy, and I know you didn't know him that well, the time period you knew him was fairly short, but were you aware of looking at the Bay area figurative artists like (inaudible)–

RA: Yeah, of course I liked some of that but mostly the Mexican muralists like Siqueiros, and mainly Rivera. We had the history of the late '30s, early '40s and Rivera had done those big murals in Detroit. And his way of working was the only way I could interpret what a mural might be like. I hadn't seen Hank Meloy's murals in Hamilton – I guess he had done some elsewhere –

PH: A post office, I think.

RA: Yeah, but, you know, there was a mural in Bozeman done by a very good mural painter – I can't think of his name right now, he later taught painting at Nevada – it was another kind of mural. It was a painted mural.

PH: Was it like a WPA period?

RA: I think it was in that period. Beautiful. Still there in the old Student Union building over the fireplace. And so those were the first clues that I had of making murals, and so I started to carve brick and things based on some knowledge of that kind of thing.

PH: So what attracted you to it? Was it a mix of like the history and sort of –

RA: Oh, of course, history –

PH: -- raising the elevation of the common man or –

RA: Right. I even got hate letters after I did that mural for Helena Bank.

PH: Oh, is that right?

RA: Oh, yeah, this was Communist-type stuff.

PH: Too much social realism or –

RA: Yeah, miners with axes and shovels and things like that marching in a group. I got hate mail from Hamilton from the Burchers, I suspect, unsigned. They told me that if I didn't repudiate my interest in Communism they would get me fired from the University. I didn't know what to think. I just designed something and made it.

PH: So maybe to clear up the rumor, did you put Peter Voulkos in that mural?

RA: I didn't put him in that one. I put him in my first brick mural that was in Great Falls. He and I are standing shoulder to shoulder. He's standing behind me with his big blonde haircut. Since I had control, I put him behind me.

PH: You notice how I'm assuming sort of that approach to the murals, I mean, probably was instilled by growing up in Butte and just dealing with all the labors and the whole social political –

RA: It might be a bit of a stretch. I wasn't too concerned about political matters then. I didn't vote for Henry Wallace, who was a socialist. But that was in my college days, he would have been a disaster if we got him in. Truman was some guy I admired. Then later, Eisenhower I admired so what the hell, you know, I'm very ambivalent in some ways that way.

PH: But, you know –

RA: The political issues, the political art –

PH: Doesn't appeal to you? Not overtly anyway.

RA: No. I love the cartoons of – the wonderful cartoon artists. And I do a little bit of that myself. I'm not very good at issues. I can draw well but I can't do issues very well.

PH: All right. Let's focus back a little bit on ceramics. You know, I'm just curious when you're at The Bray for a short amount of time you were working with sculpture other than the figure, you know, birds – sometimes they were figural, but that stayed throughout most of your career and then your interests, you know, the subject matter of most of your brick murals were figurative in nature as well. What is about the figure that you find so appealing?

RA: Well, I think I was always pretty good at drawing the figure, and so in a way when I started to paint pots, the vessel, they had this long, long tradition of figures on pots, and horses and animals, and so it almost became a shorthand, because with the point of a trowel I could pretty much establish the placement of figures and that kind of thing. It's fifty-percent skill and maybe fifty-percent thought.

PH: And I'm curious too because you've used the vessel format extensively, I mean, did you ever consider closing a hole and making – for lack of a better word – pure sculpture that had nothing to do with the vessel format?

RA: Well, I could do sculpture, I had every confidence that I could. But it hasn't interested me, partly because human limitations. I had, you know, like when I was doing those figures for the Historical Society, I found I became quite fluid in my – I enjoyed that very much. When they got better, I thought that I could do a Charlie Russell if I had to. I did work for – I made some horses and things like that. Didn't have enough time to get very good at it. Or wildlife sculpture. I did the bear for the campus, but you know it could have been so much better in the hands of a good wildlife artist.

PH: Well, you did that as a special favor, right? A lot of your motifs are figures and animal life, I mean, what's your viewpoint on sort of the interaction of the manmade, the human, and the natural world, I mean, you're not making any overt statements, per se—

RA: No.

PH: It was just more of a –

RA: There was a time when I was involved with narratives, a little bit in the early '80s. I was very much immersed into the Finland experience, and I became interested in the tales of the Kalabala, which is the Finnish epic poems, and they are descriptive fanciful fairytale-type of things that happen in the Tales of Kalabala, the search for happiness and the magic instruments of the people in the far north and the witches and the rain gear, so I started to play around with kind of narrative ideas from that period. And I did some pots that were later purchased in Iowa by some collector, narrative themes. I never sustained with that but it's an interesting avenue. If you wanted to pursue narrative, it could be very interesting.

PH: Right.

RA: But most of the time it then became just decorative painting.

PH: Just design, formal elements –

RA: Formal –

PH: Shape and color –

RA: Shape, color, and design. There's no story attached to it. The story comes afterwards. You know, I think it's far more interesting to do the title of the piece after you make it. Things that occur to you, like this is a beach, or this is made in St. Pete's, so there's birds and, you know, all kind of sea birds, get a theme that way. I think theme is enriching for a piece. Far more enriching than if you call it 'Number 492 in the Fall of '66.'

PH: Well, I think it leaves – it engages the viewer's imagination when they are looking at it.

RA: That's true. Right.

PH: It gives them maybe a specific geography, but after that, it's –

RA: Then they're on their own, yeah.

PH: Okay. The next set of questions are more about sort of how your career progressed and what people were involved with that. So the first question is: In retrospect and looking back 50 plus years,

overview of your career, can you just talk a little bit about how it developed, how it was managed, what your thoughts were, because you know the marketplace changed so radically during your career, you know, there were very few commercial galleries that an interest in ceramics early on, there were very few museum curators interested in studio art, you know, very few – it was a lot smaller world, so maybe you could just think back about when you were starting, you know, how you got your work outside the studio and then how things progressed after that.

RA: The first gallery people that approached me, a very nice lady from New York. It was about 1960. And we had all been launched on bentware. She wanted to have a show. A very, very nice lady. I don't even recall her name, I'm sad to say, but she was impressed by that period, and she invited me to send a whole bunch of pieces, which she returned, every one of them. But she did show them, she was trying to show them – start a gallery in New York but it was far too early.

PH: So this was a private gallery?

RA: Private gallery, right. And I met her during a clay conference in Seattle. She was there with Mrs. Vanderbilt in one of the –

PH: That wasn't the America House you're talking about?

RA: America House was just America House. It was just a feeble effort that tried to introduce ceramics but The Bray sent some pieces. I don't remember if I had a piece in it or not. I don't think I did; Pete did and maybe Bernice Boone. I don't know. But that was that. Then it seemed that during the '60s when we were all very busy doing all kinds of stuff and it was very exciting and making a lot of stuff. Some of it good, some of it terrible. I wasn't getting anything for it. I wasn't selling anything. I sold a few pieces at the Crossroads Galley in Seattle. And I had a show at the Henry Gallery. And so I would sell them a few pieces for about \$35 a piece.

PH: Were you actively trying to or –

RA: Yes, of course, trying to sell what I could. But there wasn't any money with it. Used to try to sustain to make that stuff. This continued on through the '70s, until people like Bob Arneson suddenly caught on, and that would have been in the mid-'70s somewhere. He actually started to work in the early '60s doing those typewriters and Coke bottles and everything, but he caught on with the galleries and his prices started to just go up like crazy. Even Pete was, 'I can't let anybody get ahead of me,' selling those platters for \$200 a piece, so he raised his prices and he started – so a few potters – Kenneth Price was another one – Kenneth Price was phenomenal, some gallery in New York picked him up. He was selling

for 15, 17,000. Somewhere along the line, years later, maybe in the mid-'80s, I made some porcelain pieces that were pretty good, and they fetched something like 35,000 in an auction. So that sets your price range. And I – it's very hard to fall back after you get up there. You don't want to go back. So there were some lean years when I was selling with Garth Clark, but Garth was a good salesman. We had our philosophical differences. So as far as that catching on, it took a long while, not until I quit teaching and gave up all the internecine wars you have in the art faculty was I able to give full energy and focus to making clay. And that's when it started. I retired, of course, officially, and traveled to Finland, had all kinds of great experiences, still had the energy.

PH: And gave your career a whole new life after your return?

RA: Oh yeah

PH: Were there any collectors or curators or writers that you felt helped your career?

RA: Oh, sure. I think Dorothy Wise, my dealer in San Francisco, was just great. I miss her terribly. She was so wonderful and supportive. And Alice Westphal, she was good for a while. And, you know, I'm grateful to these people. I'm even grateful to Garth Clark for a little bit. He's a very smart, bright guy. And – but I didn't like his ownership thing. He owns your career, exclusive. So I said, "I've had enough of that," especially when I didn't get paid and things like that. So those were reasons that – I found that there were some dealers would keep your stuff and never paid. And they were outright crooks. They hurt, especially when you're a young artist just starting.

PH: How about – again, back in the '50s and '60s, there were very few museums that took an interest in craft or studio ceramics.

RA: That's true. Rudy Turk was one of the first. I think he was important to the movement, and he brought a recognition to it, he brought a certain intellectual ability that analyzed it. He kind of looked at it from a different perspective. This was beginning to start but I – Rudy Turk was the first one I knew of.

PH: And, you know, Everson was involved with ceramics early on with their national stand and their collections. I mean, it's both historical and –

RA: That's true. I forgot about the Everson. They were very central to bringing an importance to the arts.

PH: Any writers or critics that you've interacted with that you feel like –

RA: I can't think of – who's the gal that works for ArtNews now? – you brought her over.

PH: Oh, Janet Koplos?

RA: Janet was the first perceptive writer that I thought really had a look of understanding. And Rose (inaudible); of course, Rose was a head of the pack.

PH: Did you ever have any personal interaction with Rose?

RA: Yes, I did. I liked Rose a lot. She was very smart. She was a bright gal. The problem – her problem was she was so stricken and in love with Voulkos that there wasn't any room for anybody else. That was true of Alice Westphal, too.

PH: Oh, is that right?

RA: Yeah, he had more women in love with him.

PH: The Greek Adonis?

RA: Yeah... And so... what can I say? I don't blame them.

PH: So were there any important exhibits, whether they were survey, craft exhibitions, like Poetry of the Physical, or any special expeditions that you went to see that – or looked at catalogs --

RA: Poetry of the Physical, that's going back a ways. I almost forgot about that. That was –

PH: Late '70s, maybe.

RA: Late '60s. He worked for –

PH: Paul Smith.

RA: Johnson.

PH: Johnson Wax. Lee (inaudible).

RA: Lee (inaudible). I think he was the first one that came out with a book that I was aware of that brought attention to a lot of the leading potters of the time. And his contribution was very valid. There was no money in it but it brought it to the attention of the people that this was – and then the professional organizations NCECA and Super Mud, Super Mud was the first on that had significance. It was the first one that had 2,000 potters attend with students. Did you go to any of those?

PH: I went to one in 1973. I remember Howard Cobble was there. That was the only one.

RA: Don Tigny and Stevenson knew who the players were, and they tried to get at least three or four guys to come to each thing, and it turned out to be a snowball rolling down a hill. Finally, back in about '78 or so, they had to quit because it was too big to handle, and so they handed the reins over to NCECA.

PH: So, you know, speaking about organizations, because I had a question about that. Earlier on the Montana Institute of the Arts was probably the singlemost –

RA: That was the only thing in Montana.

PH: So can you talk just a little bit about what their role played and whether it had any impact or assisted you in any way?

RA: Joseph Kinsey Howard and — who is the great English teacher here on campus at the time started with M.

PH: Was Margaret Kingsland, was she involved in that?

RA: This was before her time. He taught English here. Anyway, he started the Montana Institute of Art, and the writer's group was Joseph Kinsey Howard. We went to one of their first meetings in Virginia City. Voulkos and myself and Lela – we were young art students and we were asked to go along and demonstrate and do something. I don't remember what we did. Probably wound up at the bale of hay more than anything else—which was a saloon. And so – but it was exciting. Hey, we're going to have some kind of art organization. And every little town had its little (inaudible) people who were interested in the arts. And so that's what happened. It was a good organization but it was so unprofessional that it couldn't survive

PH: Did you get anything out of it you felt?

RA: Not too much. We had exhibitions. I think we made some things for the exhibition. It might have been watercolor paintings or something. I can't even recall. The other big thing that we had in the '40s was the Montana State Fair in Great Falls, which was organized by Branson Stevenson.

PH: That was like – it was a big state fair, art section –

RA: The art section was really pretty good and it was big and people went to it.

PH: So who were some of the artists that showed up at that time?

RA: Myself and Lela.

PH: The DeWeeses?

RA: I suppose the DeWeeses. I can't even remember. Pete and I took a big show up from Montana State College to the fair. On the morning when the Mann Gulch Fire happened, and we stopped in and had coffee at the Weiss Café and we heard the terrible news of these firefighters being burned up in that fire. Very early in the morning.

PH: So at the state fair, I mean, was it just an exhibition or were there –

RA: It was an exhibition that lasted for the duration of the fair. And they had prizes. And that's the only recognition that a painter could ever get, or an artist, and they had several divisions, but I don't recall what they were. They were professional and amateur and, you know, so on down the line; maybe some photography. Branson Stevenson did a very good job on organizing that.

PH: With the state fair and the Montana Institute of the Arts, I mean that was a way to bring everybody in the state that was pretty much isolated (inaudible) geography to come together at least once a year, periodically.

RA: That's right.

PH: So, I mean, at that time, I'm imagining you had a chance to meet like Isabelle Johnson and other people from different parts of the state?

RA: Yes, I think so. Isabelle Johnson. I don't think – I don't recall meeting her but I think I did.

PH: Bill Stockton had been part of that?

RA: Bill Stockton might – I don't remember meeting him. I met him through the DeWeeses. That would have been years later. I would think even in the '70s, maybe, I met Bill Stockton.

PH: What role do you feel the American Craft Council played maybe in general in the field and if it any special impact with your career?

RA: Oh, I think it has. I think that they tend – at one time they were quite broad in their interest, that is their interest didn't end in New Jersey. They actually made an effort to reach out to all the craftsmen in the country, and that was when Campbell was in charge. He was a young architect guy who worked for, help set it up for Vanderbilt Web. And he was an energetic guy who was willing to go everywhere and talk to people. He organized the talk in Seattle in that event where I met Mrs. Vanderbilt Web and this collector, who wanted to show some of my work in New York. Let's see, where was I? The craft council – well, I felt that they were okay but I didn't ever know whether it was going to go anywhere. I never had that confidence. And I still don't. I think it's gotten so diluted with so many different programs, woodcarving, jewelry making and knickknack making. It's all got a veneer of real pretty stuff. But it isn't art anymore. Some of it is but very little – you take some guy like Paley, he's enormous,

PH: Wendell Castle?

RA: Wendell Castle, those guys are great. When they are showing new lampshades with little glittery gold things and crystal, polished wood on the bottom, you know, you're wondering what the hell is going on here.

Interview continues while viewing artwork in Autio's home gallery:

PH: What's the title of the piece?

RA: I call this piece *The Memorial of Peace* because it was made in Bowling Green University in Ohio. And it was one that I was doing as part of a demonstration. This is the occasion where Pete had a heart attack and passed away. It was all very sad and it was very hard to finish his piece. John Balestreri was the host who took care of us and took care of the arrangements. Pete was stricken with a heart attack and when he was taken to the hospital he died in the ambulance so we followed him to the infirmary, and there was nothing more that could be done. But, anyway, the kids, the students, during this very somber morning when he had passed away, we were all very quiet and sad and yet we had to finish up the work.

Jun Kaneko was finishing up his work, working furiously, and I was working on it with the students, and everybody else was part of the company there was working. I had the kids sign the piece on the bottom here, and it goes around the perimeter of this piece, and over here like I said, To Pete, 1924 to 2002. John Balestreri fired it with salt glaze and borax glaze. And he sent it to me. It was exhibited in Columbus, Ohio. But it has been anywhere else, to my knowledge. It has just been here.

PH: Let's talk about the form because it's [typical] of your pieces, but it's unusual as well.

RA: I'm starting to, you know, these appendages are starting to take different shapes. Like, for example, here, these appendages are part of the format, as you can see here in this piece as well over here. And it gives me a little more interesting surface to paint on. So, increasingly, I'm starting to make a few like these too, vocabulary of my glaze, or my forms. So that's what that's about.

PH: And is it reminiscent of the ancient Chinese?

RA: It may have. I have to say this that I think it was at the Palace of Knossos that I saw two hands blown up like this, nothing in the middle. And so there were a form like this. And it occurred to me that would be an interesting shape in clay. I don't recall the (inaudible), but that became more and more a part of it. There's a piece over here, if you can get your camera, that just came back. This is – I made a few of these (inaudible) pieces. You know, going back to old forms, there's nothing like the surface of the old form that is so natural, and I like that as a decorating surface.

PH: In part because –

RA: It's old, yeah. This piece was broken some place in France but it has been so expertly mended that it's like a new piece. It's been fun making, with John (inaudible) and a number of exhibitions in Portland and elsewhere, and it came back and (inaudible). Someone along the line – I don't know – looks pretty good. Probably better than it was when it was original.

PH: Anything else in the gallery that you want to comment about, maybe the wood fired piece or ...

RA: Not much to say about these. This is a wood fired piece here. There's a couple of plates on the wall over here that are fairly new. They are kind of highly structured pieces, they're not very loose. I must be getting insecure in my old age, they are kind of typed, but they look okay. I've been having trouble with clay bodies lately. And so I rarely have one come up without cracking.

PH: There seems to be more contrast, and as you say more definition with this design?

RA: Yeah, a little bit of Cubism sneaking in here again. If you have a lot of typings done and make them, you know, tight again, you get into a little Cubism that puts it back into place.

PH: Well, call that good because it's so damn cold in here.

RA: Yeah, I'd say call it good.

PH: Unless you wanted to spend a brief moment in our studio.

RA: It's up to you.

Interview continues about roles and influences of other artists

PH: Well, we could start with this one, maybe if I throw out a few names of people that you've been associated with over the years, maybe just throw out a sentence or two so let's start out with Peter Voulkos.

RA: Oh, my God, well, Pete was certainly so elemental, so forceful and so charismatic that the first time I met him as a student we became fast friends early on. But Pete had his own life in Bozeman and I had mine. I'd been recently married and he had a hamburger job, running that restaurant, and always full of friends. I think his presence made it happen because even as a young college student, he was a returned veteran, like myself. Pete had been a B-24 nose gunner. I had been a mechanic on airplanes in the Navy.

PH: Did you go out of the country?

RA: No, I didn't. I was in the training – I was in what they call a cashew outfit, which was a group that would have gone on to a carrier, and trained pilots in Nevada. That's practically my whole experience. But I did fix airplanes in Alameda Naval Air Station, and they had lots of airplanes to fix over there. I learned my trade pretty well but pretty much lost it when they sent us to Nevada. It's a long story in itself. But, anyway – where was I?

[I] met Voulkos when we took classes together. He was very skilled. He was going to be a sign writer, do commercial art, because according to the test they gave us what would you be good at in your career, and so they said commercial art, and he thought he would take commercial art. But it was pretty clear that Pete had a lot of originality in his personal makeup. And he would do advertising projects in class, and I remember him making a Good Year tire that he did with an airbrush. Airbrushes were fairly new and we

just admired his talent to no end, all gathered around. And so we all started to use airbrushes. It was one of those things in a small art school, it had to be checked out of the chairman's office each time you used it so none of us got to be as good as Pete. But as a painter, you know, he was damn good. I like those paintings today. They were right on the mark. He did paintings of grain elevators and gas stations at night. I guess he'd looked at Ryder, looked at Van Gogh, and Rouault, they all bore marks of those influences. But on up through classes, art history and drama classes, everything like that, I remember once I designed a set for – the name of the play was called Gabriel or something like that – I designed the set for a play called Gabriel or something like that I designed a very loose, open set and Pete in the next class had to build it. It was one of those things that, you know, a set that you moved around, backwards it was one thing and upside down was another thing, and it had minarets you'd put it on there, he cussed me out left and right for having designed something that complicated. I thought it was pretty good myself. So, as students, we had a lot of fun together. But when Frances came to teach ceramics, up to this time, he had been painting and people would be in his room watching. He just was like a magnet even then. Nothing abrasive about him, just a kind of quiet guy, he just seemed to be a magnet. He'd be painting with a pallet knife and people would be watching him. I'd be in another room, I'd go in and watch him, and then we'd go in the smoking room and we'd smoke, just this kind of thing that went on there. Classes were interesting. He was a strong painter. Except the only time he wasn't very good was in life drawing, because he couldn't draw in the academic sense like most of us could. And if he'd draw a figure, it was all kind of a scrub thing, you know, trying to get the line right, you know. But they were strong. It's just when you started naming the muscles. We got along real well. And then someplace in the middle of it all he decided he was going to go to Oregon and work for a while and he got on his motorcycle. I got some good cartoons on this subject if you want to see those. He got on his Indian or whatever it was, Harley Davidson, drove off and went to Portland and stated working in a (inaudible) foundry, and I guess he worked there for a couple of months and got to know a girl, almost got married, and then in order to escape the marriage, he came back to school and then finished up. So that was our school experience.

But then he went off to grad school at Hayward, and that summer after I worked in the cement plant for a while and tried, I went off to Pullman. I had several choices. I could have gone to the University of Washington, University of Oregon. I chose Pullman because they paid the best.

PH: And you had no interest in leaving the Northwest, you wanted to stay fairly close?

RA: Yeah, that's where I went. I'm sorry afterward because I should have gone to Oregon or to the University of Washington. Those would have been better places to go. Pullman was full of faculty strife and I was uncomfortable in that, and they worked my ass off. I was the only grad student teaching assistant. This was the first time they were given the MFA. So I did that for a couple of years.

One bright spot was the art history teacher. After he quit, he went to Davis and set up that great school at Davis. The name is not coming to me right now.

PH: Now, I know that Pete decided to go to California – I mean you – you went out there for several months and worked a little bit but came back here and, you know, I know there had be some certain limitations of staying in Montana just because it's more isolated.

RA: The Bray Foundation, I was leaving it, I was kind of halfway working at the Historical Society. The Bray Foundation was not rewarding. We had a deal with Archie, Jr., who was a good guy, don't fault him a bit, but there was a guy there that was cheating us. It was the bookkeeper. And so we could never show a profit and he would always say we'd (inaudible) or something, taking all the profit (inaudible). Richardson. And he was discovered later and fired, along with his secretary, who was Aggie the Axe we called her, alienating all the contractors and everything, and Archie had to fire her, too. Young Archie was a heavy burden for a brand new kiln costing him big bucks, and clay that went bad. Terrible time. So the handwriting was on the wall. I didn't think it was going to last. And then came the bonus thing, and found out that all the money had been gone, and so I says, well, I'd better start looking around, there's no future. That was my reason for leaving. But Archie said I could continue to work there. He let me work there. I built the Anaconda Lutheran Church wall, things like that. That was just before I came to the University.

By this time, Pete was kind of lonely for the Bray. After he left, he came up a couple of summers at the Bray and worked there, made pots for us. And they were some real treasures, little, you know, threw off the (inaudible). And he loved being there. He wasn't quite separated from Montana. When I went over to the University, he came here a couple of times in '57, '58 and '59 and, I think, '60. He did about four workshops. Always coming up here in the summers.

PH: So I mean, in retrospect, and when we talked earlier about career development, do you – I think I know the answer to this – but do you have any regrets staying in Montana at all or...

RA: I had a couple of chances to leave. Jan Zach, the great sculptor in Oregon, wanted me to come out and do take over the sculpture program. I mean the ceramics, and to work with him in sculpture. I liked him a lot. I never could understand what he said he – he spoke broken English but I could sense his spirit, and he had a lot of innovative ideas, worked in stainless steel and aluminum casting. God, this stuff was impressive. And I kind of wanted to go but I don't know what stopped me. Then I had an offer to go to Scripps. They offered me the job because I would have had to bump Henry Takamoto off the job. I didn't want to do that. Henry was a good guy. I liked him. He was a good artist and I saw no reason to stay there and bump him off. As a matter of fact, they did get rid of him and so the job was open and I don't know who they gave it to. Paul decided to stay there. So I didn't go to Scripps. So those were my two

opportunities to go elsewhere that I didn't follow up on. I preferred Montana by this time because the Scripps offer was exactly the same money as I was making here, and I had this place running as it was. It was okay.

PH: Let's talk about an issue that was discussed a lot in the '70s and '80s, and has more or less died down, but I mean the field when you started was so entrenched in the craft world and, you know, you had broader interests, as did a number of other artists in the greater art world, so maybe you could speak a little bit about, you know, how those worlds were divided and how they've come together a little closer but, I mean, do you consider yourself a ceramic artist, an artist, a craft person?

RA: I know the saw. Do you know, it's a funny thing that I've always considered myself an artist with special knowledge of ceramics, let's say. I always felt that I could, you know, go start painting and do sculpture or whatever, but having been at The Bray and having had that unique experience of working with clay, I always felt more at home with it. When I was in graduate school, I wanted to be a bronze caster. I wanted to work in sculpture. I was well on my way doing 3-D stuff, equestrians, and things like that, horses and people and that kind of subject. But it never came to fruition at Pullman. I had heard that they did bronze casting there but not well enough. As it happened, they didn't do bronze at all. George was doing something else, George Laisner, the sculpture teacher. He's a good guy but he didn't do that. And so it was frustrating for me because I wanted to do sculpture, I didn't want to do clay. I did start to do clay in spite of the ceramics teacher who didn't like me very much. And so then when Pete got through earlier than me, he said, 'let's go to The Bray,' so he brought me along and Archie hired us, and so that's where we started at Bray, and clay was available. And I learned so damn much about clay there, because there was nothing else to do, and –

PH: Well, you had the knowledge of Archie and the industrial setting and –

RA: The industrial setting down in Denver, and the history of the place revealed that there had been a lot going on at Bray's that I didn't know about, architectural embellishment stuff.

PH: You know, in some ways when you put ceramics artists' work in the craft field, it sort of makes that world smaller and somewhat incestuous, and I know, you know, there has been break through. I mean there have been gallery owners, other than strictly craft galleries, there are fine art galleries that, you know, have selected a number of pieces or represent some ceramic artists. So I was just curious about --

RA: How I felt about all of that?

PH: Yeah.

RA: Maybe I'm not answering you very well yet, and I can't tell you – if I look at something like what's in *Ceramics Monthly*, and –

Interview interrupted and resumed:

PH: All right. Let's get to the last question. Let's talk about maybe some other artists. Now, I know Bob Sperry came to the Bray when you were there.

RA: Yeah, Bob came to The Bray from the Art Institute of Chicago. I can't recall what the reason was. I think he had studied with Leah Balsham for a little bit. And maybe she recommended The Bray, and he came on. He was a good guy. He learned fast and he was very supportive of us and helped us and helped glaze pots and he arrived shortly after the Leach/Hamada crowd left, and he glazed their pots. And he put the wrong glaze on them. And they ran all over the shelves, but some of them were pretty good but there were, you know, potentially thousands of dollars worth of pots that were ruined. He was very sad about that but it might have been bad glaze to begin with.

PH: How about Tony Prieto?

RA: Tony Prieto was a wonderful guy, came to visit one summer and he was, you know, a professional teacher and professional potter. I think he had visited Spain a lot, with the famous artists over there who did the UM mural (inaudible) and had a lot of enthusiasm. We loved him. He was a good guy.

PH: How about –

RA: Manuel Neri was there also, young guy. Very good stuff in clay, very promising stuff. I think those people had a lot to do with our interest in making art, not just, you know, pots. We didn't – none of us were very attracted to the making of pots. I think in our heads it was still gewgaws and little cups and saucers that you could find at a dime store if you really wanted to. Well, you still can. But the event where Pete started to break up the low fire cast where we were making – one day Archie walked in on him while he was busting it up with a hammer; that kind of changed the direction. It didn't make sense to make that stuff. It took a lot of time. I had gone (inaudible) making those planters. We were selling them and losing money.

PH: And it wasn't your interest.

RA: It wasn't interesting. And Pete was making wonderful pots. And as soon as the kiln was cool enough, there were people standing around willing to pay \$35 to \$75 for each of those things like the Banker Ford of Great Falls bought a great collection of – [the wax resist], that kind of changed that. And then Pete who was winning prizes all over the country was invited to go to Black Mountain, and there he met, I think, Leach, again, and several others –

PH: Merce Cunningham, John Cage –

RA: Yeah, all those guys. So when he came back from that, he's already reinforced that he was going to do something else, not making little pottery. That's where it started, and some of his earlier pieces weren't very good yet but they were on the way. And that's the kind of motion he had when he went to California. He was on a roll. And that's where he met Matt McCloud and Paul Soldner for students, and –

PH: Henry Takamoto and –

RA: Henry Takamoto and Billy Al Bengston, people like that. Yeah. Pretty good students. John Mason was also there, who was a professional – he was probably the most professional of all of those people down there because he had been working for (inaudible) and really knew his stuff. Today, he's still one of those top guys.

PH: And you had some affinity towards him because he was working larger scale with (talking over each other) –

RA: I don't know when he started to do that. That was much later. But John Mason came up to The Bray to visit when I was doing a piece – I can't remember which piece it was – I think it may have been the one I did for Anaconda – and he helped keep those pieces wet while Lela and I had to go somewhere for several days. So that's where I first met John.

PH: I didn't realize he came to The Bray for a visit.

RA: So did Paul Soldner.

PH: They didn't work there, they were –

RA: No, he just came to visit. He had a young family there. It just kind of came through.

PH: How about working with Jun Kaneko?

RA: Jun Kaneko, I kind of missed him, because he came through here in the late '60s, and he'd been doing graduate work with Paul Soldner at Scripps, and he drove up in his little Volkswagon out here and he had a plate, looked like a flying saucer, tied to the top of his Volkswagon, and he was just a nice young man, but I had heard of him. The collector down there –

PH: Fred Maher.

RA: -- Fred Maher had asked me, what do I think of this young guy. I didn't know much about him. But then he started to make pots at Bray's and some of them were very interesting, those funny crossed-legged things. It showed he had a hell of an imagination. And he was brief about his visits, and I didn't go over there, unfortunately, often enough. I should have. That's where I first go to know him.

PH: When did you reconnect with him?

RA: I reconnected with Jun when I did a workshop at RISD. And so I got to see the work he had done. God, he was an ambitious guy. He had built a couple of gas kilns in those crowded spaces at RISD, and his workshop was just humming with activity. He was making huge platters with those spiral designs on them. I was very impressed by it. He was married to another gal at that time. Then the second time I connected with Jun was at Cranbrook. He invited me to go to a workshop there so I did. I had known one of the students there, and Mike Hall, the sculptor, was there, and Mike had been one of my students in Seattle at one point, a brief summer student, but he was in charge of the sculpture program. But Jun's work there was very ambitious. He had built a couple of salt kilns downstairs and he had a whole room full of stuff. My God, it was just stacked up to the ceiling. He had a guys working for him and the students working for him. The students were complaining they had to work so damn hard for Jun, they were leaving.

PH: What about your thoughts with Jim Leedy, because he was in Missoula for a while?

RA: Jim Leedy was in Missoula doing painting like this. This is one of his better students. Jim was a very interesting good painter, good artist, and he wandered over to clay and ceramics because that's where the action was, and started to do pots over here. And he was pretty elementary on the wheel there for a while but he liked (inaudible), was right down his alley so he started doing – he did some pretty good pieces.

PH: Anyone else in particular working within ceramics that you felt –

RA: Oh, Jay Rummel, Fred Wolfschlager, one of the more very talented guys from California, been in the Bay area now for many years. I still think the world of Fred but he's been ill with cancer and only now is starting to do a little more work. He worked for Edith (inaudible) as a technician and glazer for many years.

PH: And she just passed away this last year.

RA: Yeah, she did.

PH: Well, I'm left with two big questions. Sort of retrospective, or reflective over the course of your career, you know, the first one – I mean, just what are some of your thoughts about the ceramic deal at large? Where it's going? How it's moved or changed in the positive or negative way?

RA: Well, the thing that impresses me about the ceramic art movement, it's gotten to be so international and important. It makes us aware of all of these terrific artists all over the world who are doing pretty interesting work. I just met (inaudible), for example, over in Helena when we had that symposium. I was impressed by this guy. He is so inventive and so good at what he does. A lot of energy there. And, of course, there's a gal from Thailand and, you know, the gal from Australia.

PH: Yeah, Gail Nichols, who did the salt glaze work?

RA: I'm thinking of Janet Mans, who is so prolific in the world, writing and actually a fine potter. Does some very nice things, and she is so engaging. And whenever you get into meetings, she's so constructive. I'm really impressed by her. And – there was this African artist doing energetic African stuff. And the gals from Ecuador who were doing their indigenous Indian art from way in the bowels of Central America, South America, and you could tell, unspoiled, untouched. It was just pure stuff. The Frenchmen. Oh, God, I had a great time.

PH: Yeah, that's a great group of artists.

RA: My impression of the world of ceramics it's so big now. China is starting to wake up. It's like a giant --

PH: Dragon.

RA: Oh, my God, wait until they get full steam, you know, they are going to dwarf everything, even in ceramic art. I know that. It's just great to see it happen. Microcosm of all of this was my experience at

The Bray. Going back there to work after 50 years, and it was so fun, those kids are great and smart, inventive. I feel like I got to go to school again to catch up with them. I have no idea what they're doing. And watching Josh work is such a pleasure, such a great pleasure. He's making those great big jars, and they look so easy. They're huge. But now there's nobody like Josh who deals with the surface like he does. That surface reads like a painting, and it's so full of firing knowledge and so full of glaze knowledge, high temperatures, special knowledge. There's nobody like that, that he's conversant with.

PH: Do you feel like his surface decoration has been influenced by his parents?

RA: Oh, of course, he grew up with an art family. And he didn't have to go to school. (inaudible), which he does superbly well, but here he had a mixed all of this, continued to work as an artist, but has proved to be a superb administrator, and he's so easy with people. He's raised all of this money for endowments and he's put that studio together. He's an amazing guy. And was so much fun, you know, to go there this summer – I got turned on. I did some of my best work for a long time.

PH: How about David Shaner?

RA: David Shaner, hey I love that guy. He was all by himself up in Northern Montana but he did well. And he had a feeling for nature and artwork, or his kind of work in relation to all of that. It came out in his work. The special glazes he developed; the plum reds and the wood fire. There was no one more basic than him, and to have been there isolated, but to have found that rich source of work within himself, he was an amazing guy. But on top of all of that, as an administrator and a leader of the Bray, he saw to it that The Bray survived, and it took a lot of political acumen and energy to stick with it for 25 years, 20 years, whatever it was as chair of the trustees. His contribution was vast. I really liked him.

PH: Okay. Last question and then maybe we'll go into the studio. Again, sort of a reflection question with your career, with your work, with interaction with other artists, when your name comes up, the quick label that's put on there is the Matisse of Ceramics, how would you like your legacy written or how would you like –

RA: Well, that's not a bad one, but it's preceded – I thought Matisse's work was a lot like mine, you know, but I've never seen – I've seen very few bad Matisses so that's not a bad label, if you want to look at it that way. The fact that he was interested in the figure, as I am, is a remarkable coincidence.

PH: Colorists?

RA: Colorist, yeah. That kind of thing. I don't know, I feel very fortunate doing what I've done, but then I can't think of what else I would have been doing. It would have been a grim thing to become a copper miner and get my lungs filled with copper dust or whatever.

PH: Any other thoughts about your career or the body of work you've produced over the years or anything?

RA: I don't know, I think if I had time I'd do better work.

PH: Better in which way?

RA: I would really like – there's so much (inaudible) there, and, you know, you do clay work, a lot of it isn't all that great. I know that, and I'm sorry for a lot of stuff that got out there but that's the way it is, and I have to live with the few good pieces that I have made.

PH: So what pieces in particular might –

RA: Oh, I think of the *Lady at Kicking Horse Reservoir*, that was a piece that I think wound up in the Mori Museum in Hokkaido. I liked that piece called *Flesh Pot* that's in the Aichi Museum in Japan. I like some of my murals. I like the fire station mural. I like the mural in the Union Bank, the original Union Bank. I like the carved brick piece on the Methodist Church, as old as they are they still have significance. And I like this thing that's in the business building on campus and I like the relief that's on the wall. Those are outstanding, in my mind, but there are many, many pieces out in the world that I don't remember anymore. I'd remember them if I'd chance across them.

PH: What is it that makes those pieces that you just mentioned more significant or special that you just felt like they were coalesced as far as –

RA: When I seen them, you mean?

PH: Yeah. I mean what is –

RA: Well, I'm surprised that some of them are pretty good.

PH: What do you mean by that, though?

RA: Well, it seems to me when I look at some of those that have survived well, the things work on them, aesthetically, the placement of figures, the union of color and decoration all around. I've had pieces where I've had great one side but the other side is not so good, so, you know, they're deficient, they weren't born again right. And so those bother me. I wish I had done better.

PH: Don't we all.

Interview continues about Autio's work in progress:

RA: Well, these pieces are pieces along the way yet, they're not finished, they've been through one firing, and at this point, they are a little bit complicated. I want to simplify them, which is one reason I'm fixing these low fire kilns, electric kilns. I usually put them in an electric kiln with some more color on them, more – something to knock them down if they're too bright or to reorganize them. Sometimes you can't see what you've done until you get them out of the first firing. These have been once fired to about cone three, and so the color is quite bright and nice. I don't mind that. The surface is still a little rough. I will probably do some organizing with some low fire color, put some more black in there or something to define the shape. And then, hopefully, after the second firing, I'll have it under control. Now, this one here is pretty good the way it is. My best critic isn't too happy with it. She doesn't like the flower but I like the flower, they're kind of decorative and makes it look like a pot, a flower pot. The figures are pretty good I think, at this point. So you might get a little dizzy on this side over here. I think I will probably knock that down a little bit, lighten the white colors and so on. Not too sure exactly where it's going to go.

PH: And once you have the forms built, I mean, how do you start the process of applying and designing? I mean, you don't sketch out the work –

RA: No, I don't. I usually just start painting. There are two different approaches that I have. One is I take the white slip and I'll kind of block it out, then I'll get back and define it, you know, the line and the figure. There are two stages that are kind of fun, because there's nothing as forgiving as soft clay when you're drawing on it, and you can block it off and then draw and change and draw and change, and it still looks fresh. If you put it on paper, you usually throw the paper away because it's too much erasing going on but clay is fun. Then the other way is to just draw the line first and then fill in afterward. So both approaches work.

PH: And as far as the glazing, do you work mostly with (inaudible).

RA: I worked a lot with amacol underglazes but any underglazes are fine.

PH: So if you're do fire it once and you're not happy with the results, you go over it?

RA: That's generally – you see the reds here are supposed to be bright. I will put more bright red, for example. It doesn't take much. You see this is brick red, but if you just put a little bit of bright red in there, maybe a line, makes that whole shade into a bright red. And so things like that are little painterly things –

PH: How might that differ than some of your earlier work, you know, some of it had more transparency or the glaze wasn't quite opaque and it created a different kind of –

RA: That's true, and I sometimes miss that, and, you know, because I kind of like the fluidity, the watercolor quality that it has. But then there are other times when I want something to be flat, that means I have to go back in there. You can have all kinds of control if you do it right. But that also gets tedious. You can easily go over the threshold where it becomes very stiff. That's the problem I find all the time. So there you have it.

PH: Great. Anything else I might have missed that you want to comment about or ...

RA: I can't think of anything. I wish my studio was bigger. I need more tables. I've cleaned up everything else.

PH: You know, I read somewhere that Voulkos gave you a Munakato print, is that accessible or ...

RA: Yeah.

PH: I would like to see that.

RA: Sure. I also have a Picasso print. I got that from Bunse.

Interview interrupted and resumed:

RA: Here's the Munakato print.

PH: Oh, yeah, that's a beauty.

RA: It's one of the minor prints but it's probably worth about – well, today, I think about \$15,000 to \$17,000 or something. I'm not sure of that.

This is the Picasso.

PH: Was that from Bunse's estate as well?

RA: Yeah. Right.

PH: So is that a lithograph?

RA: Yeah. I mean it's signed but who knows what all that means.

PH: Right.

RA: Here is the one that's excellent. This is a very good print by Harlan Goudy. That's Stanford, Montana. It's an aquatint. He's a good artist. He was one of our colleagues at Montana State. He's the jazz guy, still plays it. Trumpet.

PH: So while we're at Munakato, Akio Takamori is also a big fan of Munakato's work. What do you think of Akio?

RA: Oh, Akio is terrific. He's one of the bright lights in ceramics. I hope he doesn't let the rain ruin him in Seattle to get too rained on and introspective and too comfortable in those kind of things, because he is good at anything he does.

PH: Very fast (inaudible), creative.

RA: Yeah.

PH: You enjoy his older envelope pieces more than the (inaudible)?

RA: I think in some ways I do. I was very taken by those figures but I hope he doesn't (inaudible) because he can do anything.

PH: He's a hard worker, too, very disciplined. Spends a lot of time in the studio.

RA: Oh, he's just amazing. I just love the guy's work and the growth in his work since his Bray days, very early Bray days, has been phenomenal.

PH: Yeah, I mean, that was really the start, his first Bray residency, he developed those envelope pieces.

RA: That's right. He's very good. So is this guy, Bunse, those prints are (inaudible). Today they hold up still so well. I see them every day.

PH: And he taught printmaking at the university?

RA: Yeah. Didn't make too many, but the few that he did – he was terribly alcoholic.

PH: What about Jim Todd's work?

RA: Jim is good. He's a pro, a tough-minded pro.

PH: Is he retired?

RA: Oh, sure. Yeah, he's retired. He's a little tight but it's professional, has to be for that engraving kind of thing that he does so well.

- end of interview -



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