

Erin Furimsky – Interviewed on January 28, 2014
Transcript
H. Wang

KF: I first interviewed Erin on January 28, 2014. I am a fan of her swollen and strangely familiar forms. I was first drawn to her work because of her confident use of both shape and color. The layering of ornamentation she applies to her forms adds depth, and it requests longer contemplation of each sculpture from the viewer. Erin and I met for the first time in our Skype interview. I enjoyed her input into this conversation and was delighted to find another clay artist who shared a passion for athletics.

Erin Furimsky received a BFA from Penn State University and an MFA from Ohio State University. She has exhibited her work both nationally and internationally. As well, reproductions of her ceramic work have been featured in numerous books and catalogs. In 2006, she was an NCECA Emerging Artist. Erin has completed artist residencies at the Archie Bray Foundation, Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts, and the Oregon College of Art and Design. She is featured in a DVD called "Layered Surfaces with Erin Furimsky. She lives with her family in Normal, Illinois, where she teaches at Illinois State University and Heartland Community College. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Can you give us a little background on yourself? So where did you go to school, any highlights in your ceramic path prior to your current position, and finally, where and how long have you been in your current location?

EF: I'm originally from Pennsylvania, and I knew I wanted to study art. I'm from a very, very, very small town called Rockwood, Pennsylvania. So I went to Penn State. First year was at a branch campus, and then most people who are in art and at a branch campus then go to the main campus after one year because of the lack of facilities at branch campuses and the extensive facilities at the main campus. So then I went to main campus. And my very first semester there I took a clay class with Chris Staley. So I was immediately in the studio all the time.

So I studied with Chris Staley, Liz Quackenbush, and Chuck Aydlett a little bit too. And then there were some other faculty that came in while—Liz, actually, Liz Quackenbush had a baby while I was there. So I was around somebody who was my professor and somebody who was a real mentor and having a baby at that time. I actually was her babysitter, and then I really worked—I worked in her studio after I graduated. So as for this topic, me really becoming a maker, deciding that's what I wanted to do as I'm finishing up undergrad, I was around somebody who was a mother, a professor, and a maker at the same time.

So she was a great role model, but I saw firsthand the struggles and the hard work it took and the frustration that everybody encounters. She was doing it, and she did a great job, and she's still is. But like everybody—since I was in her

studio, I could see how hard it was sometimes, like the desire to be in the studio more and then also, at the same point, the desire to know that your kid is growing up, and you are having to be in the studio and all of that.

So anyway, Penn State, then went to University of Florida for a post-baccalaureate. And then I moved to Alfred with my then-boyfriend, now husband. And I rented a studio there and was an assistant for John Gill for awhile, and I just worked at restaurants. And we know now that we are one of the very, very few couples that actually go through Alfred. I can hardly think of any—there are couples that go there, and if one of the people is in school and the other is not, it's, like, the end of the relationship almost always. So we went there, and then I went to Ohio State, finished graduate school, two-year program there.

He went with me, and we really lucked out and he got a tech position at Ohio State and then also got teaching. So he was the sculpture and glass tech. Then he applied for a—they were doing a job search. Somebody had retired at Illinois State in Bloomington, Illinois. You know, nine months, you're just finishing grad school, a little bit of experience. You're like, okay, this is what we're gonna do. We're gonna bounce around, then residencies and keep throwing your hat in the ring for jobs. So we moved here thinking it was for nine months. And he ended up applying for that job and getting it. And now it's 11 years later [laughs] and we're still here in Bloomington, IL.

KF: In your questionnaire, you mentioned that your studio is in your home. You also touch on the fact that without this arrangement, it would be difficult to get in the studio. Can you talk a bit about the advantages and disadvantages of having this arrangement, and how does this studio location impact relations to family life and children?

EF: For us, it's been essential to have our studio in our house. I can't imagine not having it, because I wouldn't have gotten nearly as much time in the studio if I had to go someplace else. But it also makes it really difficult, cause I go down there when the kids are napping. Especially after sleep and then—depending on what process you're doing, you can just baby things more. So my husband, for him, he sometimes is doing a lot of casting. He can be kind of on the kids. Maybe I'm not even home. And he can go and he'll pour the molds maybe before I leave. He'll set a timer. He'll be with the kids. And he can run down and empty the molds, and they can watch a video for 15, 20 minutes. He empties the molds. And he can get a round of casting in because it's there in the house. And the hard part is saying—getting that separation.

I say, oh, I'm going to the studio at 10:00. And before I know it, I am finishing answering school emails, and I'm throwing in the laundry, and I'm like, gosh, I should've—tonight's gonna be really busy with swim lessons. I should put together a crock pot meal 'cause it's gonna be so hectic later on. And all of a sudden, an hour and a half of my studio time is gone. And it's not that I'm wasting

it, but it's hard to physically remove myself from the demanding expectations of running a household, and children, and other things, and get down there.

KF: How does daycare work for your family? I know you have daycare for the time that you're teaching, and you've touched on it a little bit, but how do you and your husband juggle the time you need for your studio practice, and how has this juggling and childcare changed over time?

EF: Well, this is currently the first time I'm to have a whole day, school day, 9:00 to 3:00 on Tuesdays, for being in the studio. My husband works, and both my kids are going to be at school. We switched my daughter's daycare, and she was going to go three days a week to a new school. And right now it's Tuesday, and we have another snow day. So I'm kind of cursing [laughing] the situation because it's something I've been waiting for for eight years, and it's the second Tuesday in a row. I've gotten my six hours once. So really we have only had childcare for when we are at work. One year we had a little bit more, but it was—actually I've had a little bit more a few times. Like I had a routine where I had four hours one day, and my daughter was going to a preschool two days a week, which was 2 1/2 hours when I wasn't at work. But 2 1/2 hours is nothing. It just evaporates. So any sort of sustained time has been a real struggle.

Really, we will sometimes set up a schedule, and I think that that works. There's been a few summer months where we set up a true schedule, and we honored that. We gave each other two workdays a week and stuck to that the entire summer. You could not step into that person's designated time.

We discuss things on sort of a weekend basis, and what's our schedule, who has a birthday party, who has this, what do we have going on, and negotiate from there. But it's really just a couple hours here and there, and then going at night, now that naptimes are really kind of disappearing from our routine also, because of kids growing up. It's just a constant negotiation.

KF: Going back to those first few days, months, and I guess years after the birth of your son, which was your first child, correct?

EF: Correct.

KF: Can you reflect on your feelings towards your studio practice at that time, and also, were your feelings the same after the birth of your second child, or were they different at that point?

EF: They were definitely different. With my son, I was so excited, and I accepted the fact that I was going to give myself up to this mothering mode for some time. And I knew that it was gonna be a lot of work. People often say, "Oh, I was so caught off-guard with the demands." I really wasn't that much. I knew it was gonna be really intense. I didn't know what that process of intensity was going to

feel like, but I anticipated the demands to be quite high, which they were. So I let myself not go to the studio for two months, and then I had an opportunity come up that I didn't get a lot of notice for, and I couldn't pass it up, to participate with the Dubhe Carreño Gallery at SOFA. And then I had to shuffle, to scramble and push it.

I remember that summer when he was just a couple months old, and it was really hard. And I think it was a little harder for my husband sometimes. I had to ask more from him than he was prepared to give, and it's hard, because when they're that little, they want mom, you know. They want mom. And so there was many times when I was in the studio, and neither of the kids would take a bottle, even though we tried really hard. And I would be in the basement, and he couldn't even hear my voice, my son.

I would have to call my husband on the phone and be like, I'm really thirsty and really hungry. Could you please put some water and some pretzels at the top of the stairs? And I would have to go up and get them. I would fake leaving—this was when he was a toddler. I'd fake leaving. And he'd go in another room, and then I'd come back and go to the studio.

How it was different for my daughter was, I actually had a lot of expectations right after she was born too. I had a show coming up, and I was trying not to glaze when I was pregnant. So I made all this work, and as soon as she was born, I knew I had to do all this glazing to finish it. And I had about a month, but a month goes really fast with a newborn and trying to do all the glazing and the surface work that I did. And it was really, really hard, and I think I resented my work a little bit more that time. I was like, why am I doing this? This is so hard. This time goes so fast. Because I had had one child. I knew how fast the time went. And with the second one, and I knew I missing out on a lot of things, I was a little bit more resentful of my work. And I was like, I just want this to be done. I just want to check this off the list.

And then with my son, I think that push right after he was born was good. I felt like I was holding onto my identity as a maker. And I was like, okay, I can do it all. And then with the second one, I knew well enough that sometimes you really can't do it all, and it's not worth killing yourself to try to do it all. So that was what was different between the two of them.

KF: I know you mentioned a sentiment that has been echoed throughout various questionnaires that I've looked through, and it's this kind of love/hate that we end up having with the studio, or the studio feeling a little bit less important when those children come along, and this kind of feeling of being pulled into two worlds or having a hard time focusing in the studio. Can you talk about how you worked through this type of phase, and when did the feeling recede, or hasn't it?

EF: It hasn't. I'd say the hardest part about that is getting myself into the studio and the struggles of actually arranging for it or walking away from other obligations or saying no to things, whether it be my children or deciding I can't do things that I want to do, for example, plant a garden. I used to plant a garden. I'm like, you know what? I don't have time for it. I can either plant a garden or build this clubhouse or do this or actually get to the studio. So there's things that I have to say no to and walk away, and I have a real hard time saying no to those things. So it's those decisions leading up to actually physically get me into the studio.

When I'm in the studio, it usually feels really great. And I have to consistently remind myself that I really enjoy being in there, that it's hard getting there, but when I'm in there, even if it's for a couple hours, I leave feeling usually more whole and better. So that's why I make myself go. And sometimes it has to be deadlines and obligations to make myself get there, but the balance is a really hard struggle.

I make decisions, and then I will stick to them. There was a time when I was looking at the month, and I was like, you know, it's really busy. I don't have many deadlines, and Tyler has a few more. And rather than trying to be that turtle and consistently peck away at things at a slow pace—which is usually how I operate. That's how I get anything done—I've just said, you know what, I'm just not gonna do anything. I'm just gonna say that's okay right now, and I'm going to back off for a month, and I have all these other things going on, and I'm going to really enjoy them. And then other times I'll just say, okay. I'm going to have to say no to those other things, and you need to now really prioritize. So it's making decisions and sticking to them, helps me. And being okay with that.

KF: When you talked about the aesthetics of your work and your studio practice post-children in the questionnaire, you mentioned a few things that stood out to me. And I was wondering if you'd be willing to elaborate on them a bit. You talked first about making less risky pieces. You also talked about working in both the collage format, as far as the physical work, and in a repetitive process, and also making work in shorter bursts. So could you kind of expand a little bit on your studio practice and the work you're making now, perhaps even versus the work you were making before those kids.

EF: Okay. I have visions sometimes of making some larger, more extensive pieces that just are physically going to take more time. And I've taken on a few of those, and if it's all in one object, if I am constructing one large form and something goes wrong, I've been seriously crushed at all of the time that was lost in that piece and lost with my family and lost money, because if I was paying for childcare for doing it. It just was too daunting.

So I backed off and was making some smaller things that I could work through faster, more low-fire. So a lot of my risks involved cracks, so switching my

material so I would have a higher success rate, because just personally, I wasn't dealing with the loss well. It made me very—it made me bitter about making, and I didn't want to feel that way.

As for the collage, which is more of a recent thing, I was just working with some paper and some drawings and arranging them and having a lot of fun with it, nothing that I felt like was a piece. These were just, like, exercises for me with ideas. And I also was just making some small clay pieces that at first felt like doodles, which I usually plan things out a lot more. And it was really just felt fun and freeing, and I could make these small pieces. And then working with tiles, and the tiles actually could go up. I wanted a lot of negative space. So then all of a sudden they were small pieces, but because of the negative space they were physically taking up more of an area on the wall, how I was arranging them. That felt good, to make something a little bit larger, but yet it wasn't as time-intensive. And I liked what was going on in the work too. It wasn't just that one-to-one, "how can I make something big and make it fast?" 'Cause my work is very small.

So the doodles that were just a looser way of working, 'cause I'm very precise and plan things out, and a lot of it is such small scale—that felt really enjoyable. So making those things—and sometimes I wouldn't even use them. I'm just making these parts and kind of piling them up and then taking them and starting to rearrange. And then there's more of a dialogue between the piece and me, because I can rearrange things and take something out, add something, sometimes add another material, deciding to add wood into it. And that's just been able to free me up with time.

I feel more of a sense of completion because I can make these smaller pieces, not stress about them, and then see what kind of arrangement and piece starts to happen, and then have a vision and then make that happen with some other constructions and follow through. But there's a lot more play involved, which is enjoyable.

KF: Can you talk about the challenges you touch on in your answers, related to the difficulty of tackling new tasks? You give the example of learning computer programming. Or shifts in your work, or not reading enough, which I think a lot of people have echoed. How do we attack the things we long to do in our creative practices?

EF: Carving out time for them and making them a higher priority. And I say this to my students, that they don't look enough, or they don't read enough, or they don't nurture that side of themselves that is going to inform their work, but I need to listen to my own self at the same time, because the most engaging part of making art for me is actually being in the studio and working. And since I want to enjoy what I'm doing as much as possible, I am prioritizing getting in there.

And usually it's that one-to-one ratio, like okay, I need a piece for this show, so I need to just get in there and make this happen. But I just don't set aside the time to do that reading that I would like to do. And I really don't enjoy being on the computer even though I know it's an important thing. And maybe it's a little bit of selfishness and just wanting to be a happy person, and I think those two things are okay, so if I only have a certain amount of time in a day, I want to do things that I would like to enjoy. So I know I should sit there and learn that computer program, but there's just not that time for it. And I prioritize other things ahead of it.

Because at the end of the day I want to feel not-frustrated. And you can hire people to do those things, if you need to.

KF: That's a good point.

EF: You have to decide, okay, am I going to pay for childcare so I can go to the studio but then spend two hours of that time cleaning the house? Or should you pay somebody to clean your house so you can go to the park with your kid and go to the studio? It's like, artists don't think, "I'm gonna get a maid." That sounds so frivolous. But—not that I've done that more than, like, two times.

KF: Can you talk a bit about how you have worked through the new challenges you face with your son and schooling, and how do you and your husband make time for homework help and juggling your house, studio, etc?

EF: It has been more challenging than I thought. He doesn't want to do the homework. He comes home from school exhausted, and I never know what kind of behavior I'm going to get. He can be a little bit more challenging. And so sometimes something happens, and it's such a battle, that I'm trying to be nurturing and positive about it and get something accomplished at the same time, get his work accomplished and get dinner made, that it's just utterly exhausting.

Because it's different than having an infant, because with an infant there's a lot more acceptance, and you know that they're not being a jerk when they're crying. There's a reason. And then when you have an 8-year-old boy who's kind of giving you backtalk because they're tired and they're frustrated, and they had a bad day at school, but it doesn't mean that it's okay to treat you like a jerk.

You get—it takes a different mindset, because you start to get really irritated with your kid. And how do you keep your cool takes a lot of patience. Because you don't get irritated with a baby. You get rundown with them, but you don't get kind of mad at them. So that is different. And trying to say, "This is important." And try to get through the homework and battles—it just feels like a lot more battles. It's more work than I thought.

And I think doing activities such as sports, swim lessons, and things like that, are important. We don't over-schedule. We certainly don't do that. But you have one activity and you have two kids, and they each do one to two things, and it's almost every night.

What we've learned to do is, we try to make one night really busy. And that sounds crazy, but we'll have both the kids doing something, and we divide and conquer. And we will plan for that night to be leftovers or maybe go out to eat, and then it's like, okay, a lot of that is done.

And we try to make the homework fun too, different ways. It's more fun with a friend, so sometimes we've done that with neighbor kids who are in the same classes. If they have to do reading, I have a kid come over. Or if they have to do math, sometimes my kid will do it with them so he's doing it with a buddy, 'cause things are always a little easier. You don't feel so much like oh, my parents are being mean to me, and I'm the only one that has to do this. You recognize, no, everybody's having to do this. And I'm doing this with my friend because he has to do this too. It's hard for everybody.

KF: You mentioned feeling tapped at the end of the day, and you mentioned your son feeling kind of exhausted. And you also mentioned having a hard time getting that initial start in the studio. You also mention time being a huge challenge facing moms that work in clay. This is something that came up a lot in this whole process. And there seemed to be two sentiments that were connected to this that were echoed throughout the responses. The first one being that we often make bad decisions working after kids have gone to bed or working in our studios at night, or that people tended to mess up their work a lot. And also, the other thing was that people really said that they were much more efficient or effective with the time they do have in the studio. So my question is, why do you feel that both of these sentiments were so common for everyone?

EF: The labor part I can pull off at night. The decision-making is a lot harder. So I will try to arrange my studio practice so I'm doing different things at different times of the day so I don't make that mess-up-my-work thing late at night.

And what was the other thing?

KF: Being more effective with your time, or efficient.

EF: Yes. You just have to be. You just have to be super at time management. You have to let other things go in the studio. Like it's a little more messy in there than I'd like so I can work just a little longer. I'm pretty good at time management, and I tend to get quite a bit done during the day. So I've gotten better at that, and when I don't, it makes me really frustrated. So I try to make sure I am doing okay with it.

I mean nobody's gonna keep making and being a parent and working if you aren't good at time management and you can't push on through even when you don't feel like it. That's the gist of it. So you need to just step up, or you need to just stop.

KF: Who are the biggest role models for you when it comes to successful women in clay who are also mothers, and what have you gained from these women?

EF: Well, I mentioned Liz Quackenbush before, and I think since she was around from a very early time for me and as I started making when I was 20 years old as an undergrad at Penn State. I'd also say Denise Pelletier. And I always found her amazingly inspirational because she went about it in a different way. Most people, you know, now, they keep pushing off their children, and they want to make sure their careers are rolling. And she had her children very young and went to graduate school at Alfred with school-age children. And she—she did all of it with children. So that was always inspirational to me, because many of the things that most people are doing, she did with children, even grad school.

Andrea Gill and John Gill are amazing parents, and they have two very successful—when I was around them, they were younger, but now they're very successful women. They were kind of brought up in the town of Alfred and everybody knew them and loved them, and it was a real community. I mean, they have great parents, but the community really helped raise them. So I think where you live makes a difference too.

KF: I hope you enjoyed this conversation. For more information or to listen to additional interviews like the one you just heard, please visit www.bothartistandmother.com. Funding for this project was made possible by St Olaf College's Academic Innovation Fund. Special thanks to Caleb Genheimer for his audio editing, the Eriksons for their music, Heather Wang for her transcription skills, Rachel Elizabeth Murphy for her web expertise, and to all of the artist mothers, thank you.