

Jess Parker – Interviewed on December 11, 2013

Transcript

H. Wang

KF: I first interviewed Jess Parker on December 11, 2013. While we had a number of mutual friends, I had never met her until our conversation. When I began the Both Artist and Mother project, Jess was one of the first names that came up repeatedly when I started to seek out women to interview. When I read her thoughts on the Mom show statement, I knew I had found a woman who had important and real statements about ceramics and maternity. Jess has a BA in psychology from Pomona College and a BFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. She also completed a two-year residency at the Archie Bray Foundation and has served on the board of directors for the Bray. She is currently a fulltime mom, studio potter, and teacher at the Berkeley Potters Studio. Jess lives with her family in Berkeley, CA. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

In your questionnaire you also mentioned that your studio—and you just talked about this—is in a converted garage at home. So could you talk a bit about this setup and the advantages or disadvantages that come with the arrangement of having your studio at home and how the studio location impacts your relations to family life and children?

JP: I think it's isolating, in a sense. But I think that's why I was kind of excited about the teaching job, is that now I get to go to this community studio that, when I look around there, frankly, I wouldn't want to make my own work in that studio. That just wouldn't function for me. So I'm really happy I have this space where I don't have to write my name on my tools anymore. And it's this blessing that you can make dinner and run out there. I do find myself doing stuff later at night that I wouldn't do if a studio was 20 minutes way, or bringing pots into the kitchen to glaze them because it's just easier to be with the family and do that.

I think there are disadvantages. I think it's almost harder to focus because you can continue doing your family obligations and not get yourself to the studio. You get caught up in this other life that's spinning around. And I do remember when the kids were younger, it was hard to be in there. 'Cause I never had a lot of nanny help or anything like that, so the moments I got were very small. And then they'd kind of wander in and be so cute, and you'd have a bunch of cups that you just threw, and I remember my son stuck his finger in every single pot. And I was like, okay, I can't get mad.

I think that was the hardest part. I didn't want the studio to be a place where I said "no" to them. And yet, when you're making serious work, there's a certain amount of "no" that you have to say. And I never wanted to have this bad association with what was joyful and creative. It's not as hard now, but when the kids were little, it was like, I never want this place to be somewhere where I'm

telling them no or to get out. And so that—I found that was a struggle. There's pros and cons. There's probably pros and cons for a studio that's 20 minutes away too.

I think that's what hard about creativity. This might be another question, but I think what I miss most about being a mom and not just the pure artist is that I don't—there isn't this unlimited time or focus of attention just for your work. You can't go into your studio and forget.

KF: You have twins, right, so this is my next question for you. Can you talk a bit about how it changes the needs and expectations within the first few years of their life, I mean how having two versus one really...

JP: Oh, boy.

KF: I mean, I'm sure it's endless.

JP: I don't know what having one is like. I really wanted to be with my kids. And I also knew I wasn't gonna do it again. So I think that's what I'm trying to say is, I wasn't gonna get to do the baby stage again. I wasn't gonna do any of it again. It was like one shot. And I really didn't want to miss that. So I think I've sacrificed my clay career to be a mom and spend this time with them and really get to be present. Mom to mom, the first years are really boring. And...

KF: I know. I used to always say that the days and hours were so long...

JP: They were.

KF: And the months went by really—the weeks and months were really fast. But there were some days where I just thought, my god, how can—it's only been two hours, and I've got to—you know, my husband won't be home for another six. You've got to be kidding me.

JP: Yeah, exactly. I've tried to be really present for them. And I think it's great that you're doing this. I mean, I don't always think about my own angst about being a mom and a potter and am I doing it well or should I be doing it better. And then evaluating who am I in this whole world of potter-moms. I think I wrote this in the questionnaire. Everybody's situation depends on your spouse, you know...

KF: Oh, yeah.

JP: And where they can help out or not help out. And I think—I would have never said this about myself before I got married or had kids, but I think we've really fallen into these bizarrely traditional roles. I'm doing it, like, June Cleaver-style, pretty much. [laughs] And the pots come in when I have time and energy for

them, but I don't feel like I'm getting a lot of outside help. It felt very intense, like, I'm not doing this again. And I get one shot of seeing them grow. And I really wanted to be present for that.

KF: Going back to those first few days and months and years after the birth of your children, can you reflect upon your feelings toward your studio practice at that point in time?

JP: That was a long time ago. I think I really held onto it more strongly than I do—now I'm kind of like, yeah, it's what I am. But I think I was more challenged by my identity then. You know, am I a mom? Am I an artist? I think I have less identity crises now than I did. I know I was making pots because I think I was fighting so much that identity crisis of "I have to hold onto the pots because this is who I am, and I'm not gonna give this up. And I don't know what this mother thing is."

KF: Right.

JP: And then you get more confidence in both. I think the mom thing starts gelling, and then you realize that you're still an artist. My theory on the whole thing is that clay is this river...

KF: I love this description, by the way, so go ahead with it.

JP: It's this river that's flowing. And you can step in, and you can step out. And I think as a mom, that sense of what they clay world is and that I can always engage in it, I can always be there. And again, going back to that idea that the kids are gone in—18 years, they're out of this house. I think it's that sense of time. You know, it will be there. And I think being able to take a deep breath and realize that the clay world will be there. I will be there.

But I think—you know what you were saying about your friend whose kids are in college, and now they realize that they have their career now. And that was an example I had with my friends, growing up. There were a lot of moms who had sort of a second life when the kids went off to college. And I sort of see that there's a moment for that too.

But getting back to the first—I got totally off-track. Sorry.

KF: That's all right.

JP: Yeah, but I think that was—the beginning of having kids was, it was very scary, I think, to your identity. Plus you're doing something you have no training to do.

[laughter]

JP: I mean, I wasn't even a nanny or anything like that. You're like, oh, they just gave me two of these things?

KF: Okay, so in your questionnaire you talk about your time away from your studio and your feeling towards—after the birth of your children, you mentioned a couple things that I thought were really interesting, that kind of stood out to me. The feeling of being torn between being a mom and player—I think we've kind of touched on that too. And that you didn't want to make the studio a place of "no," which I heard you say before. And I thought this was a really, really kind of great way to be thinking. So can you talk a bit more about this real conscious choice to be a mom first, and how you really got to that point of not wanting the studio to have a negative feel or have the "no" in it?

JP: I think part of my being able to take a deep breath and become two things, artist and mom, I needed to be less serious about the studio. And so I think the idea of "no" meant that it was serious, and that if I could take a step back from my work and say, "It's okay that my son puts his fingers in all my pots," or "We just come in there and make a big mess instead of getting anything done today." And I think this is in my artist statement too—it goes to what we were talking about, being much more efficient when you are in the studio but also more playful in this way that decisions aren't labored and angst over. They're just either done or they're not done. And I think that idea of getting rid of the "no" released a bunch of things, both in my own work and sort of making the studio less serious so that I could be a mom.

I think we all have this experience as moms. We aren't moms! We're artists, and that's what we do. We're serious about it, and we're good at it, and damn it, that's what we're gonna do. And then, fine, okay, you spend nine months being pregnant, but that doesn't prepare for anything. [laughs] What does that do? What does that do, right? And then all of a sudden, you're a mom. That's the big thing you have to deal with first, and not being the artist. Or still being the artist but maybe not being an artist the way you were before.

I think the learning how not to have it be a place of "no," not taking it so seriously, not having rules, was important for me as a person or me as an artist. And that really was the approach that I think allows me to balance it a little bit more.

KF: I also kind of interpreted it as you not wanting your studio to have a negative connotation to it.

JP: Absolutely.

KF: And I think that that—it would be really easy, kind of the "don't touch" attitude, "don't touch." And it also, to me, kind of came across as not wanting to be hypocritical, like, "It's okay for me to play and experience, but not for you."

I know from your answers too that your studio practice has completely changed since the birth of your children. We've kind of gone over this, but many women experience what you talk about in your answers, the fact that this kind of balancing act is in constant flux. How do we—I know you mentioned also that it changes even every three months. I found one of the things kind of interesting when I was going through your answers that you seemed really confident in the ability to embrace that flux. I think a lot of people really feel resistant, giving in. So can you talk a little bit about being okay with where things are at the moment.

JP: I had a formative life experience. And my husband has work in Europe. And so it was partly work, but we were able to be in this little Austrian town and ski. And then I tore my ACL two weeks into this three-month ski trip. And I think what was interesting thing about it is that I had already put clay on hold. Obviously I wasn't making pots during these three months. But I was laid up, and I couldn't ski anymore, and part of the ability to ski when we were in Austria is that we had to put the kids, who were three, into this daycare that wanted them to be potty-trained, but they weren't. So we were sort of lying to the daycare, and we put diapers on them, and they'd spend like six hours in there, and they'd come—you know, daycare wouldn't change them, so they had these really full diapers. It was just this—anyways, I just had to stop, and I became mom. That was this moment where I was like, we're here. I can't do anything except hobble around on crutches. And my husband can go ski. And we're in Europe. Some people were like, "Well, are you gonna come home? You tore your ACL." I had surgery slope-side a day later. But it was this moment that I was like, I'm mom. And I gave everything else up. And I think—I struggled with the balance a lot before that, and I struggled with it when we came back. But I think that was this real transition of sort of going back to that river analogy, like, it's still there. I can be a mom, and I can also make pots.

This is interesting too, I think, the idea of what do you tell younger women who are in the profession or building their careers.

KF: Yeah, go straight to that question. That's a good one.

JP: I think I had build up enough of a name in the clay world before I had kids. And that makes me feel great about being a mom and also still having this artist identity.

I remember there was one other thing I wanted to say when we were talking before about—I don't know whether this is related to anything. And I have a friend who writes poetry. She lives in Wyoming, and she's a mom. But she started writing very short poems. I don't know if they have a particular name to them. And about very small things, like household items like a thimble or a paper towel, or whatever. I remember her telling me this, and I came home, and I started making little pinch pots, like salt cellars and just totally off the wheel. And

I started calling those my Mommy Pots because they didn't demand anything of me, and I think also they weren't my real work, so they didn't matter as much. But they were also something that you could do in five or ten minutes and put them down and walk away. And so I think having a Mommy Pot, whatever that is, that you—it still feels good. It feels creative because it's probably something you wouldn't make if you weren't a mom, but you make it because it fills that void of being creative but not spend a lot of time.

KF: Yeah, it gives you that sense of accomplishment.

JP: Oh, yeah. It's like immediate gratification.

KF: I asked you about the biggest challenges for you as a mother. I enjoyed reading the words you wrote, and you stated that you just flat-out—"I love being a mom." I think you gracefully express the feelings of doubt that we all kind of label ourselves or feel as ceramic artists, and that you really choose to embrace your children. You also mention not wanting to be a resentful mom. And I think this a really important point for all of us to hear. Can you elaborate on what it took to clarify this idea and to arrive at that statement, and maybe even why resentment is such a big part of that mother-thinking and how you deal with it.

JP: I think I'm really beyond the resentment now, so it might be hard to go back and remember why there was resentment. In my family life, we've ended up in these very traditional roles. And so my resentment of being a mother was more directed towards my husband sometimes, and maybe not towards my kids. Or they would—I'd be angry at my situation, and I'd take it out on them, where I'd realize it's not about them. It's more about what he and I are figuring out. And I think the whole motherhood thing is a huge partnership challenge, and there's new experiences in that relationship too. I mean not only are you having a new relationship with yourself, as a mother, and this child that's your kid, and then you're having this new relationship with your spouse or your significant other, who is having his own freak-out. We're all trying to figure it out.

And I think—I truly believe that we are nurturers. And there is something very hardwired in me, I think, to nurture. My husband said he saw how I was with my first dog, when he first met me, and he was like, "Oh, my gosh. She's gonna be a great mom." I mean, I didn't overindulge the dog, but he just really saw me taking good care of the dog. And he was right. I don't know how he had that ability to see that, but he did.

And so I think getting over the resentment took having some other really good friends who are moms around me and not even necessarily having this conversation. You know, not artist-moms but just other moms. Being able to talk about stuff. And knowing that everybody's struggling with it. It's not just because we all decided that we were gonna be ceramic artists that we're having a hard time being a mom. It's common. And then watching how other moms do it well or

don't do it well, and having some really strong moms who are really good friends of mine. We all struggle with it, making sure that they're good little people, growing up.

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.