

Mikey Walsh – Interviewed on November 14, 2013
Transcript
H. Wang

KF: I first met Mikey Walsh when she came to teach a workshop at Anderson Ranch Art Center. I had always enjoyed the imagery, juxtaposition of objects, and the surface quality of her work. I enjoyed having the opportunity to talk with her about her experiences as a maker and mother. I value the thoughtfulness and introspection she was willing to share with me.

Mikey received her BFA in Crafts from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and her MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. She has given numerous workshops and lectures and numerous colleges throughout the U.S. and at venues such as Haystack, Arrowmont, Anderson Ranch, and Santa Fe Clay. She is currently an Associate Professor of Art in the Ceramic Area at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Could you give just a little background on yourself, like where did you go to school, any highlights in your ceramic path prior to your current position, and then also how long have you been with LSU?

MW: Well, I guess my background—for my BFA, I went to the University of Illinois. And I finished in '92, and then I went to Alfred, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred. And I finished there in '95. So it was pretty soon after. And then I've been at LSU since 2001, so 13 years. You know, in the interim between that, grad and getting the job here, I was all over the place, like every possible sabbatical replacement, and yeah, just a lot of stuff.

KF: In your questionnaire, you also mentioned that you have a studio on campus but that you often do some work at home. And so a couple questions related to that. Is it still your current studio situation now, and do you enjoy having your main studio separate from your house, and what kind of advantages or disadvantages come with that kind of an arrangement?

MW: I fortunately have fulltime daycare now. I didn't, I think, when I started answering questions, I remember. So I felt a lot more divided with my time. But now I actually have daycare pretty much 9:00-4:30, Monday through Friday. So I do sometimes work at home, because it gives me a space where I'm not disturbed. It's a very small room. It's a laundry room, countertop. And I just make cups there. That's all I do. It's sort of meditative, and that's very nice. But it also is isolating. I don't feel like I can do that all the time. Well, not only can I not do that all the time, just the reality of my job, but for my own psyche I don't feel like it's healthy to do that. For me, right now, I'm enjoying being back around students and being really engaged with what I can be and busy with my classes. And then my studio is right there, so there's an easy flow between—I can go in my studio,

and then I can kind of come out and socialize, hang out, and get fed by the students, and then return to my studio. And that has actually been a kind of nice, permeable situation. Like I've enjoyed having that again.

But I would say, this summer, when Julian was only six months, I wasn't ready for that. I felt—whenever I was in the studio I felt like I missed him, and I just wanted to be closer, and it was much harder. The drawbacks with, I feel like, with motherhood, is that I want to be with my kids certain times of the day. And I'm fortunate that I have daytime daycare when it works, that they're happy doing other things. But I never go to the studio at night. I want to be with them. I want to be here. I want to put them to bed. And I teach a night class two nights a week, which is hard. That's a big change, 'cause I used to enjoy going back to the studio after dinner.

KF: I know you just mentioned that you have fulltime childcare now, but I know before you were kind of in a piecemeal scenario, piecing it all together. And one thing I think, in that situation or even when people do have childcare, it's hard sometimes to deal with that issue of deadline versus creativity, a lot. And so my question is, has this inconsistency of unbroken time, that I think happens to all of us with kids, changed your work at all?

MW: There are things that I just can't quite articulate. Like...there's always this sense of "should-ness" to things, that I should be doing "X" or "Y" in my work or in my home, but in neither place is it happening. And I can't quite figure out—you know, like I should be expanding and doing more research in my own work. But I can't seem to get a grip on it because I should be spending more time with my kids on the weekend when I should be in the studio. You know, it's like this kind of flipping thing, of there just never seems to be quite the right zone to get those—and "should" is the worst word, and I know that. But that's what it feels like, is that there's this constancy of when I'm with the kids, I'm enjoying it, but it can be tempered by this feeling that there are things I would like to and could be doing in terms of work or my work or my growth. And so it's—I'm really trying hard to have a 40-hour work week and to put a boundary on just physical time, so that when I am in a place, I can focus, whether it's in my studio or at home, or being creative or being at home.

But after Rae, I felt like I made some new work. But then—and you'll find this—with the second baby, it's like a whole new—you just—you think you understand what's going on, and it hasn't been bad. It's been a lot easier—but it's like a whole new animal has been born into your life, you know?

KF: I believe it, because I think you—I think of it as that you've had one kid, and you've learned its personality. And you're thinking about that baby and that personality, and then the next one comes, and it's a different personality [laughing], you know, altogether. And that's—I mean, it hasn't happened yet, but I

always tell myself too, like, this kid won't do something like Willow did, or it won't do—that it'll be their own personality.

MW: Exactly. And temperament. And then there's the dynamic of how you all become as a family, too. And your daughter is what, about a year and a half?

KF: Yeah, she's 17 months. So she'll be 22 months when he's born.

MW: Yeah. So she'll be cognizant.

And we have this enforced community. Like, we're reliant on technology that's bulky and expensive, and so we get in a community, and we love it. But if you want to step outside of that, you can't take all that stuff with you. It's very hard, or very few people do it. You're always kind of tethered to a place. Whereas painters, a painter wouldn't sit and wonder about drawing at the kitchen table with their husband who has a broken collarbone. That would feel valid. Do you know what I'm saying?

KF: Yeah. It makes total sense.

MW: Touching clay, it's the essential part. And so if you can't do it in a kitchen, you're not working. But why is that? Why do we think that way? I don't know.

KF: So one thing that you brought up, that I have to say was the number-one comment that came out from everybody, and it came out in different sections, but I think everybody said this exact same thing, that "I have clarity in the morning, when it comes to doing work, and if I try and work after dinner, after my kids go to bed, I often mess up my work." Or another comment was that "I make bad studio decisions" or "I make more work than I can finish in the upcoming days, and so I end up throwing things away." And people also freely admitted that prior to having their children, they often used their studio time very ineffectively.

MW: [laughs]

KF: It was across the board, and I totally, I'm on board with that. I used to spend a lot of time picking out tea and music...

MW: [laughing]

KF: When I started in the studio. So, you know, a good half an hour of that time.

MW: [laughing] Oh, absolutely.

KF: So one of the questions is, why do you think this is common for everybody?

MW: It's an important, valuable thing. Why I think I'm clear in the morning is because I've probably gotten the closest amount to sleep that I can get. And as I go through the day, I'm constantly thinking, "Okay, this is now my zone. It's a lot smaller," because the zones for my children are just as important, and they're kind of small too. Everyone gets their—it's not like a specific parcel, but my heart is in many places. And so I have some heart that's in the studio and some heart that's in Rae and some part that's in David and some part that's in Julian. And before, I needed all that. They needed me. There were maybe three zones instead of five. Does that—

KF: Yeah, makes sense.

MW: It's kind of an economist's way of putting it, but I think there were just fewer things to divide me. And because I value the family and that zone a lot, I'm not willing to give it up. In my class right now, we're doing "Artists interview artists" this way, via Skype or email. And one of the questions the students came up with was, "What has been your greatest sacrifice in being an artist?" And I think it's sort of—my biggest sacrifice is my art. It's kind of a paradox. It's like, because I want to have a life too, now that I have children. And not that they're inseparable, but I want to have the things that take me away from my studio, and I hope that those will feed my studio. So it's a paradox. I think my art is kind of the sacrifice in being an artist.

KF: I think the connection that you made when I was reading you talking about your own work, and then I reread your artist statement on your website, and in it you talk about your own work of the past and the connections to primates. And I think, thinking about ourselves post-partum, that really kind of sparked some intrigue for me. And I know that you mentioned the first piece you worked on after the birth of your daughter was titled Milagros. Could you talk a bit about this piece and what it's about and what did it mean to you to make work directly related to your child.

MW: The milagro is like a kind of a recursive object. Like you both give it in gratitude and you sort of take it in gratitude. It's a Catholic object, and it's meant to—like in churches, if you break your leg or something, you'll go to the altar with a milagro. It's a traditional, very old, traditional Catholic rite in Mexico. The Milagro thing was very much about fertility and wanting to get pregnant and sort of praying to have a child and have a family. So it was hearts and hands and other kinds of images, you know, just this idea of hope. And then after I had her, it was like a return to that. It wasn't closure, but it was just a way to sort of complete it.

And then the work that I just made this last year was called Kinship, and it's actually not even on my website yet, which is terrible because I made it probably over a year ago. But it's more hands. And it stemmed from seeing—I saw a little gorilla, like a monkey. I forget the name. It's a simian. But she was nursing at the

zoo. And it was while I was still nursing Rae. And she had this little baby, and I was like, that's me! You know? Look at that! It was amazing, you know, just right there. So I just thought about how close we are to other creatures, you know? I could look her in the eye, and she's a primate too, you know? That sort of spurred more work with the hands.

I think another thing too is, having a baby is so profound that why wouldn't we want to try to do something with it or mark it somehow? It's such a big, huge threshold for a person, for a human being, men and women, who have children that it almost seems crazy that we wouldn't try and want to do something. I would feel maybe less human myself if I hadn't somehow made some—here I work in a material that's permanent, and it's this beautiful metaphor for longevity and...I don't know. I just think I probably would feel kind of weird if I hadn't tried to do something.

KF: What do you think we can do in the clay community to prevent making women feel as if they have to choose between either maternity or your career, and are we creating an environment where our careers are making us infertile or choose to be such?

MW: It's a much bigger issue than ceramics. I think it's good to talk about it in this field, but I do think it's a problem within probably the arts in general. I can speak for myself, and I think this is probably true for other people, other young women, that I felt like I kept making choices that were around trying to find a secure role for myself, whether it was in academia or in some sort of institution or with my work or some combination of all those things. Looking back, I don't think it was the healthiest thing.

The time between—and I went to the best school, you know? The time between my undergrad, finishing that, and then grad school and a job was probably eight years. Which for any young woman—and I'm talking about I had a very high-stimuli time period from undergrad to getting the job at LSU. I did a lot of stuff. But that was—I was 30 when I got here. So I was just barely scraping bottom all that time, in terms of my finances. And I was considered extremely successful. But I was making \$10,000 a year. And so I think there's the financial part, which makes—making realistic decisions was very hard, the kind of decisions that my brothers and sisters were making ten years before I was because they had jobs. To have children or to get married or to "move somewhere," settle down somewhere, wherever it was. I never felt like I could do that until certain pegs in my career were in place.

KF: What advice do you have for young women working in the ceramics field as they begin to think—or not, because I think some of us don't ever think about that motherhood question—about their future as mothers and makers?

MW: If you want to have children, and you want to be a mother, don't wait. I mean, don't put it off so long—it was actually one of the guy students said he had just read a study—and he has a girlfriend—that 32 is the perfect age to start a family. And I said—I sort of looked and I said, "Well, that's probably taking into account modern fertility treatments," I said. "Because that's actually kind of late." I've heard many young women, and I think I said this too, "Oh, gosh, kids? I can't even think about that." But I think if they have it in them to be honest with themselves, if they want a family, that they should make it a part of their priorities as much as everything else, as much as them wanting to go to grad school or do a residency or...to take it to heart and have it be as valid and as valuable to them in their thinking. Not that they have to do all those when they're 22 or whatever, but I don't even think I allowed it into my thinking until I was into my 30s. It was like, are you kidding me? And I think that kind of hurt my—my life was extremely imbalanced. It sounds like how you were. I was like that. I grew out—not that I grew out of it. I was sort of forced out of it, I think. But I was pretty much a workaholic. And that imbalance was not healthy. So kind of reckoning with that attempt at balance.

And the idea of a pie—I was asked to show what percentage of the pie was taken up by work or socializing with friends or being in nature or cooking. And I had to divide this pie. It was hard, because I was like, okay, if I really look at this, it's like, okay, I spend a lot of time in a bar, you know, it seemed like. It looked like that. And I spend a lot of time at work. And not a lot of time with friends, not a lot of time with family, and maybe a little more time with my dog. But I just remember looking at this thing and like, I don't want this pie, you know?

Maybe to do that as an exercise of, if you want something, try to put it into your life, and to not feel bad about that. To not feel bad that you want more than just the studio or than just a job or than just—that it's a really complex kind of answer. I mean it's a very hard one to give. It's very hard to advise on that. But I guess that would be it, is just try to look at all the facets of your life, and how do you see those fitting. Yeah. And I think trying to really, from the inside, decide what success is...

KF: That's a good point.

MW: Not from the outside, because—like this friend of mine who shared with me her heartbrokenness about not having a family, I think she had a lot of pressure, both from her family and probably peer group and class and all this to sort of achieve a level of success that I don't think she was checking with her inner level. You know, like those people who go to Harvard or whatever. They'll sometimes get there and be like, "This isn't what I want." But they can't admit that, you know? That's an easy analogy. But I think in the arts, the same things happen. Like "Oh, well, if NCECA wants me to do demos, then I have to say yes. But I don't really want to do it, but I have to say yes." You know? That sort of thing. So

self-defining, like, you know what? Maybe this doesn't really fit for me. But then you have to be self-aware.

KF: Who are your biggest role models, or who do you think of when you think of a role model as a successful woman in clay who is also a mother? And what have you gained from these women?

MW: Andréa Keys Connell was a special student here. And she's just one of those young artists who has incredible self-awareness and presence of mind. And I feel like, again, I don't know her that well now, as a more adult artist-teacher. But I do think that she has been able to take on a very successful role at VCU, and she's been able to really maintain her career. And she also, from what little I can get from Facebook and talking to other people, seems like she's very involved with her daughter. Again, I haven't probed into her mind, and—but just what little I knew of her when she was here at LSU, she just seemed very poised and thoughtful.

And I do think maybe that's the key. And I think about you, sitting at the table, it's funny. And maybe there's something about that. You're with your family, and you're using this time to kind of sit with things to figure out what's best. I mean, I think that to me is inspiring. It's like, you know, it's important for me to do this with them. That's admirable.

KF: Thank you.

MW: You were a little, you know, probably pushed because there were some health issues. But I just would get the sense that you—what you were saying about biking and—that your family is sort of integrated into the decisions. And so you're thinking about not just your own trajectory but how that impacts and influences the people around you.

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.