

Alicia Mack – Interviewed on October 2, 2013
Transcript
H. Wang

KF: I interviewed Alicia Mack on October 2, 2013. I first met Alicia at Anderson Ranch Art Center, where I was working and she was taking a workshop. I enjoyed getting to know her, and a shared mutual friend helped us stay in contact. She earned her BFA at the University of Florida and an MFA at the University of Miami. Alicia's work has a unique softness and femininity. Her pillowy, voluminous forms are inviting and soft. She currently lives and works in Hampton Bays, New York. For more information on Alicia, I invite you to visit her website at www.aliciamack.com. Thank you, and I hope you enjoy our conversation.

My first question for you, I know that you recently moved, a big, life-changing event. Can you talk about how this has changed, or not, your employment, which I know you had kind of mentioned before, you did some online classes and then you taught two other courses, how that's either changed, or not, your employment and studio practice.

AM: Well, currently I'm still working for the University of South Carolina. They allowed me to stay on as an online instructor for another semester, through the end of fall semester. They have never had a long-distance, distance-learning professor before, so they needed to replace me, but they wanted me to work through the end of fall first.

I currently have 70 students online, at the moment. I was originally going to have over 100, but they shuffled around some classes at the last minute. So I've got two online classes currently in art appreciation, and then I applied for a position—well, it's not exactly a position, but I'm testing the waters to see if there's any positions available at Suffolk County Community College. There's also Stonybrook, has an arts campus out here and apparently has a pretty nice ceramics program there that I'd love to kind of check out further.

But as far as my studio practice goes, I had been transporting pots to a local supply store to fire my work and then take it home, glaze it, and bring it back and fire it there again. So I was concerned when I moved here that I wouldn't have any connections. And then I found a ceramic guild here called The Ceramic Guild of the Hamptons, which has an amazing website, has a community cone 10 reduction kiln, full ceramic gallery—ceramic-only gallery, which had a Chris Gustin show that knocked my socks off. And they have workshops. They have lectures on ceramics. They have get-togethers for the potters in the area. So it's really incredible. And it's based in Sag Harbor, which is about 45 minutes from me. I made connections with them, joined the guild, and now I'm transporting pots out to one of the potter's houses to bisque-fire, and then we're gonna load the cone 10 reduction on Friday.

KF: All right!

AM: I'm so excited.

KF: That's great.

AM: That's great. So I couldn't really transport a whole lot of bisque ware up here. I put my studio very carefully onto a pod container and then cried as it left [laughs]. I didn't know if my equipment was going to be okay.

And so it did arrive relatively unscathed, a few knocked-out walls in my kiln, but everything pretty much turned up okay, and I've set up my studio in my garage here. And it's been great. I'm not sure what's gonna happen in the wintertime, though, because I have no idea what to expect for Long Island winters. So we'll see.

But it's convenient, because now my studio is in the garage, I can put a monitor on the kids while they're sleeping, run down, throw a few pots, or throw at night and work in the studio then. So that's been—

KF: That was one of my questions too, is, what's the advantage for you of having a studio at home versus having a studio either at someplace like that guild or in a cooperative space or at school.

AM: I originally thought that having a studio in a cooperative space was gonna work for me. And I did have a studio with a few other potters in an old building in the downtown area while we were still living in South Carolina. And it was in the basement of this big old building. And I thought, oh, I'll just bring a pack-n-play and keep them busy. And it just didn't work. It was too hard to get everybody unloaded, everybody down to the studio, and keep everybody safe, if I was going to bring them with me. Otherwise it meant that I had to work very late at night in the downtown area by myself in this deep, dark, dungeon basement. And it just didn't work out,

I thought it sounded wonderful, at the beginning, but for me, convenience is huge. To be able to put somebody down for a nap, run downstairs and check to see if my pots are ready to trim or not, and then run back in the house, is really, really, really so convenient that I am gonna try and do that forever, if I can, because that is the best for me.

I find, though, as far as studio practice goes, my best time to work is in the morning. And I don't have the advantage of that, with having such small kids. Amelia's 3 1/2, and he's 1 1/2. So having work time in the morning is tricky business. I usually don't have it. So I end up having to work at night, which means I really have to tune in, because I tend to ruin stuff at night. I'll throw pots if I can get a chance during a naptime, if they nap at the same time, and then

destroy them all at night by accident, you know. So I have to be very careful about, if I'm working late at night in order to get stuff done, just not killing everything I had just made.

KF: Can you talk a little bit about what I like to call "naptime art"? Does naptime or the time itself dictate the work you make or how you work, more so than the time you want to have? Does that make sense to you?

AM: Yeah. When I was in school, or when I had a studio somewhere, before kids, I was able to think in the studio a little more. I was able to stand at my table and sketch, or make maquettes, or really kind of process what I was looking at longer. And now I find that I've had to change my studio practice so that I keep a sketchbook by the bed and maybe one on the main floor of the house or something like that, so that if I come up with an idea, I can sketch it into my sketchbook quickly. And then I try and—there's a technique that actually Suze Lindsay did once in a workshop, where she said, "Draw the pot. Draw it ten times, ten different ways, and work through your designs that way" so that when you do hit that studio during naptime, and you only may have 30 or 40 minutes, maybe an hour if you're lucky, or longer, you just shoot it out of a gun. Like, you go, you know exactly what to do, you get it done, and you wrap it up, and you're out. And so you can at least do it in a really productive chunk at once.

And I find if I'm on my phone, if they're up, and I don't have a chance to sketch, I will go on the internet and, like, search some things or forms or history on the item that I'm working on and then take screenshots with my iPhone of it quickly to kind of create a database for myself to look back through later. It's the fastest research method for me right now, 'cause I can check my email, take a couple pictures of some screenshots of things I see on the internet, and then save it till later so that when I do walk in there, I've got a game plan. That helps me quite a bit.

KF: That's great, 'cause I had just written down a question about asking you about sketching, because I had noticed in your responses it came up a couple of times, this idea of sketching and drawing and using it. I like the way—I'm listening to you talking about collecting it, but I'm also wondering if at some points in time if sketching sometimes replaces those times you can't get to the studio. Does that make sense? For you, is it somewhat of a replacement, from time to time?

AM: It is, because often, when you have a newborn, or when you have two little ones in the house, or when you don't have any studio set-up, it can be almost as valuable as having your hands in the clay. Because I have sketchbooks of ideas, and sometimes I farm them. Sometimes I'll go back and pull a sketchbook from ten years ago and kind of see where my mind was at. Because sometimes you've written down something that, at that moment, doesn't fit you then but might fit you now.

I find that I can work through a lot of problems before ever approaching the clay in person. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, when it comes to actually creating that object. But I've kind of worked out the bugs so that I'm not spending so much time in the studio. It's more of a—you know, when I get in there, "I'm gonna try these five ideas and get those done."

And making maquettes for pots, I had never thought of that before. That was recommended to me once. I think Helen Otterson actually recommended making maquettes for pots. And that was brilliant for me, because if you want to create something like a sugar/creamer on a tray with a handle, you could sketch that all day, but you might not get to make that for a while. So if you just get clay and quickly throw it together, just so you have something in the round that you can set on the back of your worktable, so when you can get to it, you're kind of looking at it and thinking about it at that point. So that's helpful for me too.

KF: That's great. Do you ever have any sort of childcare that allows you to get into your studio when you would want to be there most?

AM: I've thought about that, and there's actually a couple of younger kids on the block, I mean, 10, 11-year-olds that I was thinking about maybe having them just be in the house with the kids in a cordoned-off area with toys so that they could monitor and just holler to me if something goes on. And I thought something like that would be nice. I could get a full-on babysitter, but I'm gonna be right here. For me, it would just be another pair of eyes that could recognize danger, even just a kid in the neighborhood who could be there while I'm working, just so that there's someone visually available to them at all times. It might be nice, while they're here.

Occasionally, my husband will say, "Go, go work," and he'll watch them while I work. But I have not yet hired a babysitter to completely watch them while I work, yet. Hopefully one day in the future, that will be the case. But right now it's hit or miss, what times I will be able to work in the studio.

KF: In your initial questionnaire you talked a little bit about this idea of longing to be in the studio after having children. And so I kind of want to ask you to go back in time to those first days, weeks, months, hours, whatever—they all kind of blur together after having children—and to elaborate a little bit on the experience of becoming a mother and, whether by choice or by force, having to take time away from a regular studio practice. And about how much time was that, and how do you feel about that now because you're reflecting on it?

AM: Well, I had to boil it all down to the fact that kids are only this little for such a short amount of time that this loss of studio time is such a drop in the bucket of time, that we beat ourselves up and beat ourselves up about it—you know, "Oh, my gosh, I've got this degree, and I haven't even done anything at all. And I know I'm taking care of this beautiful child that I want to spend every minute with, but I

also need to be this producing artist, because if I don't, I'm gonna lose ground in this business, and I will fail!" It's so easy to beat yourself up all day about it. But really, in the end—I mean, my goodness, there's celebrities that disappear for a couple of years. Then suddenly they're back, and they've had kids, and you're, like, "Oh, yeah, I didn't even really realize they were gone." So most of the time, those people aren't monitoring you in the same way that you feel that they are.

It was months before I got back in the studio after having each baby, and during each time, I really wrestled with it, not being able to get into the studio. Even now, I still, like, "Oh, my goodness. I need to be on it. I need to be making this much work. I need to be participating in these shows. I need to be firing this kind of kiln. I need to be having this kind of results and be in these galleries. And what is wrong with me?" You know?

And then, I think, they're small for such a short time. And if right now all I'm doing is just processing information, then when I come out the other side of this, my work will have changed for the better because I will still be thinking about it, and I still will be sketching it, and I still will be processing it. And in the end, I will make it. But for right now, I'm not gonna beat myself up about it because I'm not producing what I think I should be.

But that's a hard one. I have a few other friends that have little, little ones, and we have the same conversation over and over again, like, "Okay, you're doing all right. Hang in there. If all you made this week was four mugs, then hey, you made four mugs. That's fantastic." Or maybe all you did was sketch, or maybe all you did was collect inspiration from somewhere. But you're still working towards it in your mind. You're not losing ground. You're just busy at the moment.

KF: I kind of want to keep going off that same question and those answers. I kind of want to ask, you where do you think this feeling of self-deprecation after children that so many women seem to kind of have, or women also seem to have expressed, comes from? And also, with that, how can the clay community in particular embrace a more holistic, or kind of a healthy family/career/life approach? Or can we not? Have we set up a system where it's really not possible?

AM: I think it's changed. I know, like you, I'm sure, after having so many female teachers, professors that have no family, or they might have a spouse but no children because it wasn't considered—I don't know. It was almost like you were failing at this business if you were getting distracted by having kids. And now it seems to have changed. It has become so much more family-oriented. You see so many powerful women artists that are having their families now and enjoying having this time and being a mother. We shouldn't miss out on that.

I just feel like, you know, there were many years where I was, like, I am not having kids, not for a long time. I've got too much I need to travel. I need to do

residencies. I need to do this and that. And really, you can do those things with kids, you know. You might have to be more mobile. It is possible. But I feel like the ceramics community has opened up wonderfully to the idea of families for these female artists after having not been such a family-friendly environment for so long.

I've had a lot of female professors—Linda Arbuckle, Nan Smith, Bonnie Seeman, Christine Federighi—and a lot of them didn't approach that style of life, really, or maybe by their choice—or maybe not. I'm not sure. But they were my role models. They were my role models, and I was, like, wow, they really did it all. That's amazing. And then I realized that they didn't have families. I mean, they had husbands and things but didn't really have families. And it wasn't until Christine passed away that—the graduate students were with her when she passed away, and we were it. We were her family. And that's when it really hit home, like, okay. This is really important, and we shouldn't allow ourselves to miss out on this opportunity, because it is so important.

And I'm really glad, now, after the fact, that I did it, you know? I can't imagine not having babies now. Before then, it seemed like it was gonna—not damper it, but take away from my seriousness in this business. So it's definitely changed my whole viewpoint. Christine changed my whole viewpoint. She was great, but I watched that happen, and that was really sad. It was because we all cared about her and for her, and for her not to have anybody with her—I mean, she had friends, but...

KF: Another question, I think a lot of times, women feel that they have to make a choice between one or the other. And I think even historically, if you just kind of look at the origins of the feminist movement, it was really all about career, and children really were not a part of the equation at all. And I don't think that this something unique to the clay community. I think if you just look at the world in general, there are a lot of conversations that are going on right now about that kind of feeling, like you need to choose, or that you need to go back to work right away, as fast as possible, either for financial reasons or for career reasons. What are some of the things that we could do as a clay community to prevent those feelings in one another? Anything you can think of that would be a good kind of message for the clay community to prevent women from feeling that kind of need to be one or the other.

AM: I think a sense of community, like what you're doing with these interviews, is huge. Because I think you feel so alone at it, often, that having a community or a group of friends or group of people who are going through exactly what you're going through is such a good support system. When you have a newborn, you feel like a boat without oars, you know? And then you meet some other moms that have new babies, and suddenly you're laughing and crying together, and you understand. You have this sense of community.

Or just having some sort of reference with other people to kind of look at, okay, yeah. These people are feeling just as guilty as I am about not being in the studio, and that's okay. Or, these people feel like they should be producing more work, and they're not, just like I'm not, and that's all right, right now.

Yeah, I think a sense of community is huge for female artists. I think just having some reference to know that everybody else is going through the same thing you are. You might read that somebody has two kids, and they're still producing a huge amount of work. And you think, you must just be—you must just suck at this—

KF: Your carpet must be so dirty!

AM: Yeah, exactly! Wow, is their house just as dirty as mine, or do they have—how are they managing to pull this off? And when you read about them in *Ceramics Monthly*, and you think, gosh, that's amazing, how are they making that work? It's hard for them too. They're just barely making it, just like the rest of us. And it's nice to at least know about that part of it, you know, because we try and idolize everybody. Like, wow, they've got it all. They've got their house organized, I'm sure, and they've got their pots made, I'm sure, and they're in all these shows, and I'm not. And just being able to talk to them and find out that they're doing exactly what we're doing, that their house is a disaster, that they've got 17 loads of laundry to finish, and they've got two kids to feed, and however-many pots to make on top of that in order to keep in the business. So it's—that sense of community really helps, being able to get down to the nitty-gritty with people that are doing what you do, is really helpful and supportive.

KF: You mentioned this in the questionnaire, and—you weren't alone. There were a lot of people who came up with this same sort of phrase. And it's that idea that "if I have children, I'm gonna miss a window for my career." Or the kind of opposite, that "I should wait until I make it"—whatever "make it" means—"before I have children." And I kind of wanted to ask you, how do you deal with or view this whole concept? And also, where do you think all of it comes from? Is it internal? Is it external? Is it coming from the clay community? Is it just that we have seen a pattern of people who preceded us, and so we feel that that's the pattern to making it, whatever that means, and so we want to follow it? And just kind of talk about what that window is and how you feel about it.

AM: Thinking about making it, you know, this is probably bad to say, but when you go to NCECA, and you see somebody that's "made it," and you're standing in the elevator next to them, and you think, "Oh, my gosh, that's so-and-so. They are so well known." And you look over at them, and they're wearing jeans and t-shirts just like you are, and they're wearing sneakers, just like you are, and they're paying their bills and busting their butt and trying to make ends meet. And you realize that, wait a second, they're just like everybody else, just like I am, that

we're all lumped in the same thing. The only difference is that there's more pictures of their work out there, and people recognize it a little more.

And I think that—that kind of strikes me as, gosh, you know, everybody's just in the same boat. They just might have more pictures in more publications. And that's great for them! You know, how are they managing to do that? And a lot of that is really good, you know, office skills, sending out all of their images and having that under their belt. And that part of it, you know, is something that I've had to wrap my head around recently, is, we're all putting our pants on one leg at a time kind of thing.

As far as making it before having kids, there are so many of us out there, and I think if you can get your work out there by sending out images to things or images to shows or pots to shows, the best you can, you know, it's perseverance, a lot of it. You just got to be on it and try and do it. But as far as trying to make it before you have kids, you just never know. You got to take the opportunity when you can to have those babies. I mean, I'm 38. I had my first one when I was 35. And they were, like, "You're an older mother."

KF: "You're in a high-risk category."

AM: "Advanced maternal age." And then I was, like, man! Crap! Man, well, I was busy all these years. I had a lot of stuff to get done. You got to seize it when you have the opportunity and just not worry about the making-it part, I think, 'cause there's a whole host of things that can go wrong when you're an older mother, you know—not older mother but older pregnant person—that I had a few of myself, you know, that if you can have a chance to do it when you're younger, go for it. You've got the rest of your life to get into that magazine or be in those shows. And it is a drop in the bucket of time, really, being pregnant and having those babies. And then they're a part of you, and then you just make it work. You just make it work.

KF: That was kind of my final question, too, and I think you're summing it up. But what do we tell the younger generation of women, those women who are in college right now. I know a lot of times when you're in a BA, BFA program, it's hard to even envision yourself as—I know for myself, anyway, it was hard to even envision myself a married mother-type person. It wasn't something that I saw for myself, maybe. What kind of a message do you want to pass on to them?

AM: I would say, travel, travel, travel for your work. Do your residencies while you're in school. Do Penland. Do Anderson Ranch. Go out and have those experiences while you're in school or soon after, like before you get into a masters program, because once you're out of that masters program, you might need to go straight into a job somewhere. You might not get a chance to go into a residency program after that. Or maybe you might be married and working on a family after that. So I think between bachelors and masters, if you can go, travel,

travel, if you can. Try and get funding with the school that you're at, to make that happen. Do some workshops in some places so that if you do get to the point where you're starting a family or have met somebody you want to stick around for—some people have these wonderful spouses that will follow them everywhere for their residencies after they're older and married and things like that. But it's much easier while you're in school, or between a bachelors and a masters program, to do those sorts of things. And do as much of it as you can so that when you do find yourself with a family, you're not looking back and thinking, "Oh, I missed my opportunity," 'cause you don't want to do that to yourself either.

I wish that Penland and Arrowmont and all those places had family housing, though, sometimes.

KF: So this is something that came up in one person's interview. Is there a way for residency programs to make themselves more accessible to people who aren't in that situation of being the in-betweener? And is that something that those art centers should start to look at?

AM: I think so. I think even if they offered you an opportunity to stay in an apartment that your family could live in with you, or consider making them a little more short-term, in some cases—I know some you have to commit to two years. And that's—you know, committing to a two-year is hard when you have a family. So even if they had shorter residencies available or shorter courses available for people that do have small children to be able to still to participate in, would be great because I think they would open up quite a lot of doors to people that would want to participate in their programs.

And they would bring in a lot of very talented people that way. I think a lot of people are unable to do those residencies or participate in, you know, flying overseas for a month, because they have small children. Or any children, for that matter. They would definitely benefit, and everybody else would benefit, I think, if they would consider that.

And things like the arts schools like Penland and Anderson Ranch and Arrowmont and Haystack consider having maybe an offsite family housing arrangement so that—I have a spouse that teaches, so he would be off in the summer. If we could travel up and stay in some living arrangement for a week so that I could participate, or he could participate at Penland, would be amazing, rather than me having to leave everybody behind. That's another option. But I think it would be a great thing if they would consider it.

KF: So my last question for you is, if you could name a couple people out there that you view as role models for women in our field that are positive role models as mothers and as artists, who would those people be?

AM: Let's see. You. Elizabeth Robinson's out there doing a great job, getting herself visibility out there. Oh, my goodness, there's a whole bunch of them. Eva Kwong, yes! And you know, I have to say, Eva was the one that talked me into having my family. I mean, really, I was wanting to have a family, but she was the one that said, "You can make this happen." Because I was really mulling over it. I was considering getting married to my husband. We had met in graduate school, and we were just about at the point of getting married, and Eva was my foster professor because Christina passed away. And Eva came down, and she sat with me. And I just let it all out. I was, like, I want to have a family, but how am I gonna make this work in this business and not lose ground what I want to do and the work that I want to create and becoming relevant in this field, if I've got little kids? And she was, like, "You can make this work." I mean, she's got two kids, and she made it work. And she really talked me into it. And that was such a gift. I think about that all the time, that that was such a gift she gave me, that kind of sense of community, with somebody saying, "You can do this. You can make this work. You can have this family, and everything will be all right." She was just great that way. Good support system there.

KF: Excellent. Well, Alicia, it's been great talking with you. Thanks for being willing to participate in this.

AM: Thank you! It's great to catch up, and I enjoyed talking to you. I'm so glad everything's going so well. And just being able to talk to another clay person lately—I don't have any friends here in New York yet. So this has been really great to have a sense of clay community, even via Skype.

KF: Exactly.

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.