

Kate Fisher - Interviewed (by Rhonda Willers) on April 19, 2015  
Transcript  
H. Wang

KF: This interview was a turning of the tables, as Rhonda Willers changed roles from interviewee to interviewer, posing the questions to Kate Fisher on April 19, 2015. Kate received a BA in Art History and a BA in Studio Art from St. Olaf College. She was an education supervisor for a small nonprofit and an artisan on public commissions at RDG Dahlquist Art Studio before completing her MFA at the University of North Texas. Prior to her arrival in Minnesota, she worked for Anderson Ranch Art Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado.

While Kate's ceramic beginnings are deeply rooted in functional wares, she has continued to honor utilitarianism while simultaneously developing a body of sculptural forms. Her work is either for or about home, home not just as a specific place or structure but also a feeling or geographical location. Fisher's work has been exhibited locally, nationally, and internationally. She has traveled to China, Europe, and South America to enrich her artistic studies. Kate is currently the technical assistant and a visiting assistant professor for the department of Art and Art History at her alma mater, St. Olaf College. She lives with her husband and two children in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. I hope you enjoy this conversation.

RW: In your questionnaire you listed three women as role models for clay moms. You have Jan McKeachie Johnston, Eva Kwong, and Jeannie Hulen. What are some of the qualities or reasons you feel these women are role models?

KF: Well, I put all of those people down because I felt like they all had, and still do have, really rich careers. But at the same time, they seem to have found some sort of a balance in their life. And I think—and I picked all of them for different reasons. For example, Jan, I feel like I know her on a really personal level, so I probably know the most about her story. I've always remembered her telling the story about how she made slab baking dish forms. I call them the drape molds. But how she made those forms and how those forms came from finding that that was the perfect thing to do when her kids were little because she could start them in the morning and then they'd go down for a nap, and she could do this part. They'd get up again...and the whole process of her day was perfectly matched to make that one object.

And I found that to be really interesting to me, because I love that form of hers. And I guess I've always thought of baskets and all these other different forms that we think of with Jan. But you know, it makes that object more interesting to me, and so that's one reason I picked her. Here's a person who was able to find one form and really make one form for a number of years and really—and still enjoy making that form. And also to have a really great career. And for her, I picked her too because I think that when I think of Jan, I think she's somebody who really enjoys being a mom. And it's really important to her, and it's a big part of what

she does, and I think she also really enjoys being a potter and enjoys making her work.

And then Eva, I picked Eva because I know she's a mom, and I also know a lot of the things that she has said in regards to being a mom through another person in this whole interview process. And also, when I wrote to her about being in the exhibition, she was so well spoken on that subject. She had such kind, wonderful things to say, which just reinforced what I already knew about her kind of thinking. But I think she's really pro-mother, and pro- making "mother" not a four-letter word.

Jeannie, I don't really know her all that well. I know her through a mutual friend. And I really enjoy her work. And then I also know she's the chair of her department, and she just had a huge solo show at NCECA. I know she rolled up to our exhibition with her kids in tow and had it all together. And I am completely amazed by her. And I talked to her a little bit, I was really amazed by how she talked about balance in life. And so that was another reason I put her down.

RW: Do you think that these women know they're viewed as roles models, or do you think it's more that they just built a life that matched their own personal goals?

KF: I don't know. I don't think--of you asked Jan, "Do you know you're a role model?", I think she would laugh at me.

RW: [laughing] Yeah, you might be right.

KF: I don't think they do, and I think that's okay. I think you could take any other subject and poll people: Who are the role models for this field? Pick whatever field you want. And I think if you went to those "role model" folks, I bet a lot of them wouldn't even know that they're role models. And I think that's okay. And I think those women too, in particular Jan and Eva, well, we also get to look at them with that kind of retrospective lens, because both of them are mothers of children who are grown adults. And so they're completely through the phase. And Jeannie has younger schoolchildren, but she's still past the kind of baby phase. So that changes how we view people too.

RW: Something else I found kind of interesting is, when you mentioned the feeling of the studio clock ticking and missing opportunities to do good things in there, I wondered if that feeling came more from within or if it was developed by looking and comparing to what others were doing.

KF: Yeah. I think that looking/comparing thing is really hard, because a lot of times you're comparing apples to oranges. If you're looking at someone who is another woman in the field, who is single, and especially single, not married, no children, in their 40s, they have a whole different kind of flexibility than somebody

who—even just somebody who's married, let alone if you have kids or multiple kids or whatever. So I also think you got to think about that too, the apples to oranges thing. Because it's not the same.

And then also you have to think about, okay, is it somebody who's a studio potter. Somebody who's a studio potter is dependent on that studio for a living, and so therefore they are putting more time into that, versus somebody who's in academics or somebody who's working for a nonprofit, or what have you. So I'm always really conscientious if I do any sort of comparing. For one, I try not to compare because I don't really think—it doesn't make any sense. If I'm gonna do anything to think about that kind of success and opportunity, I would look more internally. What do you need to be happy internally, versus externally. That's a big one for me.

RW: It's more about your personal goals for your work.

KF: Yeah. What are your personal goals, versus what—I don't know, what the community's goals are for me?

RW: Yeah, I don't—

KF: I don't know. I take that all with a big grain of salt, anyway. I don't think we even know what our own goals are for each other. As far as that kind of feeling like you miss out on opportunities, I totally feel like I miss out on opportunities a lot of times. And it's usually my own doing, because I have a million things going on, and oop! That deadline came and went. Totally forgot about it, you know?

RW: Yes. And I'm like, aw, crap.

KF: Yep, and I do that a lot. And I don't really worry about it. I feel like as long as I maintain four shows a year, minimum, I feel fine. There's not a hole in the resume. And that's really all I'm after, at this point, is making sure I've got at least four good shows and that I don't feel like there's any big gap or hole. And if there's a year where there's more, that's great, but it's not that big of a deal.

And I also think you have to look at that kind of opportunity, in a lot of ways, because there are show opportunities, but there are other opportunities too. Like there's community engagement opportunities. There are opportunities with NCECA. There's opportunities with writing. There's opportunities of this nature, of creating a community and doing something else. So I just try and kind of think about what "opportunity" really means. I think I used to have a really narrow view: it has to be a residency or a show, or it has to fit into one of these five categories over here. But I don't really think of it that way anymore, 'cause I think "opportunity" is a much bigger word.

RW: I really liked your idea about the sabbatical from your studio and the professionalism that that phrasing really brings to the idea of a break or the maternity leave. Can you tell me more about when and why you decided to call your maternity time that instead of "maternity leave"?

KF: That's a good question. I think that we, for whatever reason, have a hard time taking breaks from our studio. And I think that something happened in this field where there's this pace that we work at when we're getting our masters, when we're getting our MFA—or probably even your BFA too. And somehow we feel that that's the pace that we should always be working at, going forward.

RW: Yes. That is so true.

KF: And it's bullshit. And there's no other way around it. It's bullshit. Because there's no way that you can possibly work at that kind of pace for the rest of your life and be healthy.

RW: Right. And have healthy relationships around you.

KF: Exactly. And I remember when I was in graduate school, one of the deans at our school, who is not a clay person or whatever but an art person, pulling me aside when we were talking one day and talking to me about the pace that I was working and doing things and that I really needed to realize that I could not work at that pace forever, and what it would do. And he was really adamant about how that would impact relationships. And I remember listening to all this and completely writing it off, in a way, at the time, but having it really ring in my head and resonate. And I think there are about five conversations or critiques I've ever had that still stick in my head, and I keep all those words in my back pocket.

And so I've taken what that person said to me to heart, and I think he was right. And I think if I had stayed at that kind of pace, I would have never had a relationship. I would have never had a marriage. I would have never had kids. I would never have found joys in riding my bike, in running, all of that. And I am really adamant that the quality of life that we have is just as important as working in the studio. And I don't think that working in your studio all the time is healthy. I think it's somehow justifiable in our field, but if that person was in finance, we'd think that they were some sort of an egomaniac and workaholic. But somehow if we do it, it's okay—

RW: Because it's in pursuit of the creative, right? [laughs]

KF: Exactly. So when I had Willow, first baby, I remember having a really difficult time not being in the studio and being really flustered by the whole process of having her. And there was no way I could have gone into that studio. We had a baby who wouldn't eat. And it is really the most horrifying thing if you have a kid who you have to wake them up every two hours to eat. And so my full-time job

was to get that kid to eat. And so that really took away from the ability to be in that studio.

And then I tried really hard, and I had made a lot of pots before she was born. So I had a good stockpile to work from for quite awhile.

RW: That's smart. That was good.

KF: That worked out really well. And then I kept trying to make pots. I kept trying to make pots with her. And I ruined everything. I mean, I ruined almost all the work I made, and I was getting really frustrated. And I just finally had to let it all go because Dan broke his collarbone. And so I had to take care of both of them. That was the game changer for me because I really had to stop and put everything aside for a little while. That was a really good thing, because I looked at my work totally from a different kind of perspective and a very reflective perspective.

RW: You wouldn't have gotten to do that, because like you just mentioned, it's hard for us in our field to stop, stop working.

KF: We don't stop working. That's the whole problem. People think, "Oh, if I just work and work and work..." You don't ever stop and kind of reflect on it and do something else.

That was kind of the first round. Second round, Fisher comes along. And I did a pretty good job, not quite as good, making work before he came. And then he came, and I knew I had this exhibition in the fall—he was born in March—that fall. I kept thinking about what I was gonna make, and I made a series of pots that I thought I would kind of—that would become that show. But again, it was like I didn't learn the first time. You can't make pots. You cannot make pots with a kid. It just doesn't work. You can't stop mid-cup and go get them. And so what I did that round was, I got a little bit smarter.

Because as Willow needed care when she was younger and Dan broke his collarbone, I started drawing more. And I've never been a big drawer, and so I approached it from a very different kind of perspective. When that show was coming then, that fall, the whole idea was that we were gonna do a series of drawings for it. And so the person who I was working with, it was 365 drawings. So one a day. She was very letter of the law, she did one drawing a day.

I'm more spirit of the law, and so I did one drawing a month, and then I cut that drawing down to the size of what each drawing was supposed to be per day. And so then I cut each drawing into 30 pieces. That was a really great thing because then I was making work every day. And then for that show I decided to make a series of sculptures that mimicked the drawings or that I worked on in the same way that I worked on those drawings. And I wanted that series and that for

myself, but I also felt like it was probably going to be an open and shut series. Like, I'm going to make it for this show, and then it's going to be over. That's it.

And I'm glad I did it, because I think I worked in a totally different way, and I really enjoyed the way I was working and the process of working, but I didn't, I think—I've had some time to reflect on it now—I think I know what I need to do next. And I don't think I would've figured out that what-I-need-to-do-next if I hadn't stopped. And so the studio sabbatical I talked about, I decided to take it to work on this project because there was no way to do my job with the school and do my studio and do my home and attend to my body and make the work. Something had to go. Something had to go to get rid of the anxiety. And so all I had to do was say, "It's a sabbatical from my studio." It's okay to take a sabbatical from teaching. Why the hell isn't it okay to take a sabbatical from your studio for a few months to reflect on what you need to do next, to do research for what needs to happen yet.

I am totally willing to tell the clay world that yes, I do stop making work from time to time, and that I feel like when I go back into my studio, I do a much better job. That's not to say I'm not making anything. I do demos at school every day. I throw pots every day. I'm still in the practice of it. It's not like I've abandoned the field or anything. But I do feel—and I do feel like, knowing that I have a large space at the college next year to exhibit—really, it's a huge wall to exhibit on, for half the year. And I know exactly what to make now. I know exactly how to do the next thing. And I would have never come to that conclusion without a break. That's why I call it that. And also the idea of studio sabbatical, it's a semantics thing, you know?

I think one of the other things we need to think about is that idea of maternity leave, because maternity leave—I'm sorry. For one, I could get on a soapbox for hours about how it's a B.S. system in this country. But also, I think that it has such a—the word "mom," the word "maternity," all that stuff, has such a negative connotation.

RW: Because people view it as an entitlement now instead of as a natural right or a necessity, to take care of children. They think it's an entitlement that women who choose to be mothers want. That drives me insane.

KF: Oh, it all drives me really crazy. [laughs] But I think there are some serious things that we need to think about, as a country, in terms of mothers' rights, of fathers' rights too, for that matter. We all know what the statistics are out there, on our pay—

RW: People even go back after six weeks, even. It's like—I cannot fathom six weeks. Like, six weeks hurts me.

KF: It breaks my heart. So one of the other things I will say about this whole idea of maternity leave and studio sabbatical: I remember when I had—pretty sure it was with Fisher. And somebody asked me, "What are you making these days? Are you making new work?" And I'm thinking, as I'm holding this little two-month-old baby...and I remember, after that conversation was over, walking to my freezer, opening the freezer, and taking a picture of the gallon of frozen milk that was currently in my freezer. And thinking to myself, oh, yeah, I'm making new work right now. Here it is. It's called liquid gold. Beautiful installation.

RW: It's so much work.

KF: But I don't—that's something that I don't think that person would understand. They don't have children. Of course they're never gonna understand it. But that's something that I think the world needs to understand is, that process alone, of feeding a newborn, is really important, and it's really difficult. And I've had two very different experiences. I've had one child who absolutely would not eat to save their life, and I had another child who was ravenous continuously.

RW: But then you also had to change your diet for the one that was super hungry.

KF: And the one that was ravenous, I had to completely change my diet for an entire year. And it was very important that he could stay breastfed that whole time. And so that, to me, was a beautiful piece that I made. I was so proud that in the summer I was home with him, that I was able to save 2 1/2 gallons of milk. I mean, that was a feat. And I don't think people realize that if you sit down to feed a child every two to three hours—my kids were two hours on the button...

RW: That's what mine are.

KF: And then when they're done with that, then you're also gonna hook yourself up to a pump for at least 15 to 20 minutes, that that's a huge amount of time. And so in that huge amount of time, then you're also asking a person who's sleep-deprived, "Are you making work? What kind of work are you making right now?" I mean, it's just—it's so unrealistic, and it's unfair, and it doesn't honor what that person just did.

RW: What would be a better conversation starter for someone to approach people who have just had a baby? What would be a better way for them to talk to you, you know what I mean? What can they say, what else?

KF: I'm gonna use Jess Parker's words to answer that question because I feel like, in the whole process of this project, she was the one person who had the best answer. And I could not say it any better myself, so I'm not gonna try. And she said that clay is like a river, and it runs through her backyard, and it's always going to be there. And that if she feels like she needs a little bit of it, she can go

out and dip her cup in and take a drink. And if she feels like she needs a lot of it, she could go out, and she could just jump in that river. And I think that's exactly the way we need to think about it. It's always going to be there. Your studio is always going to be there. It is not going anywhere. The clay community is not going anywhere. It'll always be there for you.

That baby will not always be little, and that baby will not always need you the way they do when they first come into the world. Take the time and give it to them, and your studio will be waiting for you when you're done. And I think that that is an appropriate way to talk to somebody about that whole process.

RW: And just, like, the next time someone asks, just say, "Right now my focus is on my children." And unapologetically so.

KF: And I think the reason people kind of apologize for the amount of time they put in or tiptoe around it or whatever it is, goes back to that thing that if you're not going at that pedal to the metal pace all the time, you're not worthy of any attention, or you're not working hard enough. And that's not healthy. That's the bottom line. It's not healthy for you.

I think we all need to think about that balance of life too. I think not just with kids but also with your aging parents is another big thing that I think all of us are going to encounter at some point in time too. Illnesses, in the last seven years my husband has broken his collarbone, I broke my hand. That took me out of making work for a good six months. I broke my hand. There's nothing I can do. Look at Christa Assad. She was—you know she's been taken out of work.

And things like that happen. And so I think you have to think about, you can make peace with yourself when something like that happens, and it's not the end of the world. And if you have to resort to drawing, or you have to resort to writing or collaging in a sketchbook, that's fine. That information is so helpful later on.

RW: When you think about Matisse, there's all those stories about him being on his bed, doing his paper cutouts. And he taught the nurse how to help him arrange them the pieces.

KF: Don Reitz had a period of his life, the same kind of thing. I think it's just how we approach those points in time.

RW: What kinds of opportunities do you hope to pursue in the future, when your children are a bit older? You mentioned the idea of some being out of reach for young art mothers. What can be done to change that along the way too?

KF: Okay, here's the number one thing I think people could do. A lot of places talk about—and I say this all with a grain of salt—but about being more inclusive. One of the things I would suggest too is, if you think about trying to do any sort of



a short-term residency or a workshop, it is pretty much impossible to do that when you have small kids, and especially if you have small kids and your spouse or your partner is in some other field other than clay, and they are unable to just pick up and move with you. And so I feel like that's a massive population of people who are not able to participate in those things that I don't think are recognized at all.

So one of the things that I think would be great is if—and I'm gonna throw out some examples. I don't mean to point fingers or anything. But let's say, Red Lodge Clay Center, Northern Clay Center, Philadelphia Clay Studio, has some sort of short-term residency option, and they partner with some sort of a daycare or some sort of a care provider. Because I think that if you were to offer to parents in this field the opportunity to have even a half a day of daycare, that would be more of a scholarship than anything else. I think that that would be fairly simple to make a possibility, and then at the same time you could do something for that care center or that care person that would be some sort of a payback. You know, going into a daycare and doing a small program with kids with the material to educate them about what is going on. That would be a great form of programming that would make that opportunity available to a population that is underserved. And it would also, I think, could allow for a really great civic engagement opportunity with another population that is potentially not engaged in the idea of clay and what it's about or how it could become part of what they do. So that would be one really simple example.

But I do think if places could be a little bit more inclusive to people who have younger children and thinking about how to make those opportunities—because I think a lot of those opportunities are really geared toward somebody who's young and nomadic.

RW: Absolutely.

KF: And I think because those opportunities are always geared towards some young nomad, then anybody who is not that young nomad is unable to take on that opportunity. And then I think what happens is that we've perpetuated that the only way that you can be "successful" within this community is to maintain that nomadic, single lifestyle. In which case I don't think that we are talking about a very healthy situation in terms of relationships and family and all kinds of other things that I think are really important to people.

When you're talking about opportunities, one thing I have to say—and I had no community, either, when I had kids. And so one of the other opportunities that I've been really interested in is figuring out a community. I came into clay, and I love all of my mentors greatly. But all of my mentors, all of my teachers, were all men. And they were all childless men. Many of my good friends in this field have been men.

And so when I had my kids, I didn't really think about my gender at all until I had them, and then all of a sudden, oh, my gosh, those people who I've been friends with are not gonna be any real support system to me here because they are men, and they don't understand what I'm going through. My mentors aren't gonna be of any help to me now. And so I probably felt more alone after I had kids than I ever had before because of that. And I had no idea how to do this whole thing.

RW: You reference guilt in your questionnaire. And you said guilt from time away from your studio, guilt from time away from your kids, and even guilt from your thoughts or decisions to take time away. What can you or anyone do to justify or validate that decision, those decisions, so that the guilt doesn't take away from your valuable mental space?

KF: I think guilt and motherhood go hand in hand in this country, and that's all there is to it. And if you can find a mother out there who can get through a whole description of herself and her children and her career without using that word, I would love to meet them. But I do think that guilt is a huge part of motherhood, and I don't know what the solution is for it at all. But I do acknowledge it, and to me, acknowledging something is usually a big step towards figuring it out. So that's the first thing.

Second thing is, in this whole process of this project, that became one of the biggest things that I heard over and over, was a sense of guilt. And so I've really tried to be a little bit more conscious in thinking about it. And I do think that it's important to acknowledge it. And I do feel guilty. I feel guilty when I'm in my studio because I have somebody who's caring for my children so that I can make work. And I guess what I should really be thinking is that that time in the studio is just important as my time at a college, although my time at a college comes with a guaranteed paycheck, so it's much easier to justify having a babysitter for that period of time.

RW: What advice do you have for young mothers or young artists who wish to have a career in art and a life as a mother?

KF: Ooh, good question. I'm gonna start off by saying that this is coming from a person who never planned on having kids. It was never a big thought in my head. Who was educated by really wonderful teachers but all teachers who were childless men. And so I felt like I had absolutely no sort of conversation or education about how to even make all this happen. And after I had Willow, and I realized that most of my really good friends in this field were men, I pretty much felt alone. Because I could go to a mom's group, but they had no understanding of the guilt I felt for not being in the studio. And I could go to a clay group, but there may or may not be people who can have a conversation with me. And I don't know them, so I don't know how much they want to talk about that kind of stuff anyway.

And so I guess the first thing I would say to those people is, it's totally fine. You can do it. The community will always be there for you if you take the time that you deserve to take with that child, in the beginning. It'll always be here, and you can come back to it at any time. But I would also say, find people in this community. Find people in the clay community who have done it. Find other women in this field who have done it, whether they're in the trenches, so to speak, right now, or they have children who are in middle school or high school, or they have grown children. Find those people, and let those people be a support system for you.

I also don't think it's okay to tell people that they can't do it or that you have to somehow choose between a career in clay and children. I'm not okay with that. I think that that's just a bunch of leftover baggage from the first wave of feminist artists, and I'm not really interested in entertaining any of that conversation at all. And that's fine if you want to make that personal decision for yourself, but I don't think it's something you need to perpetuate with other people.

The one thing I think women also need to hear is that fertility is not infinite. It is finite. I think we live in some strange universe where we have this image of our fertility being an infinite thing. And I don't think that that's helpful for people. And so that's the big thing. And you never know, also, how long it might take you to get pregnant, from the point at which you decide you want to have children until they become a reality.

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](http://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.