

FACE TO FACE

Volume II



Artist Interviews by CCA Students
2010

FACE TO FACE

In Face to Face Volume II, as in Volume I, 2009, the interviews collected are the completion of an academic assignment by the students enrolled in Introduction to Ceramics: Innovation and Experimentation in Clay.

Each student selected a professional, practicing artist to interview. After the questions were reviewed the students set out on their own to talk with the artists face to face.

I am most grateful to the participating artists for the gift of their time and thoughtfulness.

ENJOY!

Nancy Selvin, Instructor

2010 Participating Artists

Sharon Siskin

Arthur Gonzalez

Robert Brady

Jen Jennings

Todd Laby

Mildred Howard

John Toki

Curtis Arima

Face To Face

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Making the Invisible Visible

A Conversation with Mildred Howard

By Jenny Rosen

Mildred Howard is an artist who is internationally recognized for her mixed media assemblage, installation work, and public art. Her works speak to both intimate personal and larger social issues simultaneously. She combines made objects with found objects and personal memorabilia to create works that evoke our collective cultural consciousness, but also elicit individualized responses independent of communal references. Howard has always lived close to her childhood home in Berkeley, and her work can be found in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the De Young Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the Wadsworth Atheneum, the International Museum of Glass and Contemporary Art, Tacoma, the Museum of the African Diaspora, Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, the Crocker Museum of Art, and the San Jose Museum of Art.

JR: Did you always know that you wanted to be an artist?

MH: I knew I was an artist at age three. Well, of course you see things in retrospect after you're older. I was always intrigued and interested in making things from a very, very young age. I would see patterns within the cracks of the sidewalk or the cracks on the wall, and the patterns within wallpaper, ripped pieces of paper or pieces of furniture or fruit. I just loved all of that and making things. I remember one of my favorite places on a map to color with a crayon was South America, and it was something about the shape of it that I loved. Later that led me to realize how much I loved geography and how people move around in this world that we live in and share.

JR: That reminds me of your piece *Crossings*.

MH: Yes, it's moving isn't it? That piece and the Soweto piece which talks about the children in South Africa who were murdered because they wanted to learn English as opposed to Afrikaans. In my work there are a few pieces that moved me emotionally—*Crossings*, the Soweto piece (*Ten Little Children Standing in a line [one got shot, and then there were nine]*), and *Tap: Investigation of Memory*. Those are some of the pieces that impacted me in a very deep way emotionally. My first bottle house not only impacted me emotionally but also physically. The size and weight of the house with each bottle weighing about a pound and a quarter and being lifted three times set me back physically. I developed tennis elbow from the repetition of moving four thousand bottles several times.

JR: I read that you were a dancer for many years. Can you tell me about your background in dance?

MH: I have spoken about this in many interviews and this question seems to intrigue others. It was an important part of my life. When I graduated from high school I had a dance teacher, Betsy Jens, who came up to me a month or two before I was to graduate and she said "Well, where are you going to college?" At the time there was a junior college on MLK called Oakland City College, which became what is part of the Peralta college district. I told her that I was going there; that's where all

of the other African-American kids went to school. She said "Well, you can get a scholarship," and I said "I can?" She asked "Where do you want to go? UC Berkeley? Mills?" She started naming all of these schools that I didn't even know were possibilities because racism and sexism were there, alive in Berkeley and no one told me. No one told me that that was even a possibility. I didn't know to ask. She said write up something, and so I wrote up why I wanted a scholarship and I got it and so I studied dance with Ruth Beckford, which was one of the best things I could have done because I think that working with her instilled in me the kind of discipline it takes to be successful in any field and how you have to be determined no matter what and put in hard work. Hard work. I was still making art while I was dancing. I was sewing. I was doing all of those kinds of creative things mixed with the fine art in domesticity, which is all a part of it. We're brought up to say that this is that and that is this. All of it is a part of the making of art or the creative process. It is about the journey. It took me a long time to realize that I can define myself and my discipline in the way I want to because this is my life. This is my life and my journey so I feel it's important for me to keep pushing and to explore the possibilities or the "what ifs."

JR: Did any of your siblings become artists as well?

MH: I have sisters who are writers. I have a sister who could design and make anything. I have a brother who was an excellent draftsman. It was something he did, but not as a profession. In fact one of my sisters took many of the photographs that I used in my own early works. It goes to show you how certain groups are pigeon-holed into certain situations and when there's talent it is not tapped; it is pushed to the side because of classist and racist ways. The United States is one of the most racist places in the world. Unfortunately, racism, and sexism and classism and all of those "isms" are ingrained in the fabric of the United States of America. You have to see how this country has acquired its wealth; until that unravels and is rewoven it is going to remain that way. What I see happening is scary. I hope that young people don't fall victim to the Tea Party movement and its way of permeating through the media; I just hope that they don't fall victim to that bullshit. It's scary. We are so accustomed to having the wool pulled over our eyes. My parents worked hard to make this country a better place for me and I just see it all disappearing.

JR: I had hoped that things would change with the election of Barack Obama.

MH: I did too, because there was so much hope. I think we all thought that, but in a way that was naïve because we didn't really know how bad a shape this country was in. Just what has been done with the housing market, the banking system, the Bernie Madoffs; it's unbelievable. We have managed to elect the first African-American President, Barack Obama, who is brilliant, articulate and sincere, but there are those who really do not want to see him succeed. In fact, it is as if the extremist right wing racists never wanted him to do well. Here we have one of the most educated and articulate presidents ever, and many of us in this country are stuck in the antebellum ways. While other countries are moving forward we are moving backward, stuck in ways of thinking that are not beneficial to the success of this country and the world.

JR: Can you tell me something about how you work? Do you have a daily routine?

MH: It depends. Right now I'm on the business side of making art. I spend my time negotiating contracts, reviewing architectural drawings, preparing and reworking drawings and budgets, and

going to meetings for public art. Every day I'm working on something that is related to the practice of making art. As an artist, I am faced with all of that and the various other aspects of art. Art is a business, you know.

JR: What comes first with public art, the idea or the opportunity? Can you describe the public art process?

MH: Ideas are easy. I've been doing this all of my life – ideas are always there. I enjoy most the physicality of making art. I think what I do is to work through and sort through things in my head and rework those kinds of ideas and sometimes I'll do maquettes. I am fortunate enough to work with others who have skills I don't have. I've come to learn that one is always making up for what one can't do with what one can do. The first thing you have to do is submit your concept and your approach to thinking. How do you think as an artist? What has your work been about? Then usually work is reviewed by a panel. It could be a panel of peers or a combination of peers, curators, and art administrators. Then if you are selected, you are asked to submit a proposal. For example, for *125 Mason*, housing for the formerly homeless and their families, I was invited to submit a proposal. I wasn't going to do it because public art is very difficult; it requires so much negotiating between various government and other political entities. At that time it was 2007 and I was on my way to Bellagio, Italy as a Rockefeller fellow. I decided to write the proposal and submit it anyway and I was interviewed in Bellagio over the phone. I ended up getting it and what interested me about that particular proposal was that I was moved by something that was both familiar and not so familiar at the same time.

JR: Can you tell me more about that experience and about the work at 125 Mason?

MH: The piece has a poem that weaves in and out of the surface of the building through imported ceramic tile and brass letters so that when light is cast on it different parts are revealed at different times and you can read the poem in any direction as you're walking by. It rained a lot the summer I was in Bellagio. The idea was formed by the sound of the rain drops hitting different surfaces and how patterns were created by the drops. If you look at a raindrop and you look at a letter through that raindrop, it is magnified. All of those kinds of things really intrigued me. This is a result of working at The Exploratorium where I taught the integration of art and science for 11 years and helped to develop curriculum. So I talked about these ideas over the phone during my interview and it was very quiet. I'm thinking to myself "What have I gotten myself into?" and "I probably didn't get the commission." Two days later, I got a call from one of the panelists and the commission was mine.

I worked with Janice Mirikitani, who was at the time the Poet Laureate of San Francisco. Her poem is moving. It's *moving*. She has the ability to bring the voice of the people she works with into the text. She crosses all cultural, racial and economic barriers through the work she does. I worked with Janice, a group of constituents, and Paula Collins, founder and Chief Executive Officer of WDG Ventures Inc. (a real estate development and consulting firm) to talk about what defines home. Janice and Paula are great collaborators. Paula knows about art and the creative process; she is a collector of art and knows the field. She gives the artist the respect she or he deserves. Both Janice

and Paula have been about social change before those words were coined. That is a rare thing. With that said it brings me back to the question at hand and my exploration of what constitutes home. That comes out of my interest in this country and the world. When you say "What is America?" people automatically think The United States, but then there is all of North America (including Mexico), Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. They are all part of the Americas. That interest led to this whole investigation of home.

JR: Which goes back to your interest in geography as well.

MH: Exactly. The world is big, but it is very small and America is not just the United States. Each piece is different, but it is related.

JR: Is there an essential theme or aspect that runs through all of your work? Something that you can identify in your early works that you still see in today's work?

MH: I think my interest is social, political and cultural views about the invisible, or things that are not talked about and sometimes overlooked. I think that that runs through all of my work, whether it is a conceptual piece, the public work or my 2-D work. That notion or concept permeates through all of my work. The thing about my work is that I do what I want to do. My work is not dictated by what sells.

JR: So after the work is finished, do you learn something about yourself?

MH: It's the making — how you are caught up in the moment of making work — that really interests me. I don't say "Oh, I'm going to make this political thing." I make what I make. It just ends up being that way. My last show at Gallery Paule Anglim all dealt with the globe. Paule Anglim has a deep appreciation for the artist and the artistic process. She does not care about what is in fashion; her interest in art is more profound. She is committed to the journey that an artist takes and in showing the work that comes out of that journey. She is not afraid of showing work that is controversial or not in vogue. That show reflected my interest in the world and how we look at it and how we divide up spaces and territories and who gets what. I am who I am. I say that because my upbringing, my environment, what I read, who I hang out with, all of that feeds into it. All of it. All of it feeds into this creative process. I pull from what I know. Artists create chronicles of history and at the same time they talk about the future and what is possible.

You have to be good at what you're doing. I strive to become better and make every piece count. I approach each piece with excitement and enthusiasm as if I've never made art before, because I just want it to mean something. It has to mean something to me, first of all. I've always been that way. Either do it really right the first time, or don't do it. I'm never really satisfied either. That's not to say you won't make mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable. It is what you learn from a mistake and how you use it in continuing through that creative journey. Some of the most astounding pieces are from so called "mistakes."

I always wanted something to be different. Back in high school, when I had to take homemaking, I made the menus special or I would set the tables with something that would stand out from the rest

of the students. When I had to write reports I would always include some kind of artistic aspect to make it different.

JR: If you weren't an artist, what would you be?

MH: A kept woman.

JR: Do you think you've sacrificed anything in your life to be an artist?

MH: Yeah, I think that everything comes with a sacrifice. If I had had a regular job, I think that I'd be a whole lot better off financially. Finances are the hardest. Then at certain points if you weren't tenured in a teaching job then you were not considered a "high art" person. What is that? The definition of high art and the criteria that are set up by those who control the art world are not always valid. There was a time when various movements in art were not even supported or valued. What is important is remaining true to oneself first. There is so much bullshit in art and bull shit is only chewed-up grass.

JR: What's the most rewarding part of being an artist?

MH: Making art. Not showing it. It's making it. I think also a certain amount of pleasure comes out of seeing how it impacts others and how it makes others think. How people have an emotional reaction to your work and how it provides multiple ways of thinking and doing. That for me is rewarding. Art is often contradictory. When I said that showing is not as important as making it, that is only partially true.

JR: Do you have any advice for new artists or art school students?

MH: Document your work and keep really good track of not only how you put it together but also if it sells, who it sold to, and have an image and a record of every single thing you did that went into making the piece. That's really important. And, if you think you are working hard, you'd better work harder. Also, we're not separate from what happens in life. There are always going to be issues that come up. Being an artist does not exclude you from what happens in life. I often hear stories from other artists about not having time because of kids, money, no room to work or whatever. There will always be issues. That is a part of it. The wonderful thing is that you have the ability to be creative and make art. That is truly a gift. Yes it will be hard at times and yes you may feel like quitting, but your hand has been dealt, so deal with it.

JR: I am intrigued by a statement you make on the website for the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. You said "Who I am influences what I do, and what I see influences what I do. And that goes back to me identifying myself, as opposed to other people doing that for me." Can you please share with me how you identify yourself at this point in your life? And, has that changed over the years?

MH: Early on I don't know if I even thought about how I defined myself. I was always being defined and questioning that. They didn't talk about my art within the context of other art. They first defined me by race and ethnicity. I hate that. I see myself first of all as a human, an artist. I see myself in so many different ways. First of all I am a citizen of the world. I am a citizen of the United States of

America, but I also see myself as a citizen of the world. I never saw myself as a minority. People of color make up more of the world. I never saw that because I didn't like that phrase. Look at this whole thing about the borders. Mexico owned half of this country. It pisses me off. What about the Native Americans and how they're being treated? It's cruel what's happening. As much as I love and hate what is happening in this country at the same time, it's unfortunately the big payback. James Brown said that a long time ago. I am a human being; I'm a person. I have the same feelings and emotions as many others do. Because I am an artist it doesn't make me any more or less important than any other people who are in different fields. I like to see myself as someone who might make a difference. That might help to make people think differently about how they see the world and how similar we are, even in our differences, how similar we are as human beings. And no matter whether it's a garbage person, a street sweeper, a person who cleans my house, or my doctor – I'm no more important than they are. I'm just doing something different than they are.

I had the good fortune of spending over two hours with Mildred Howard at her studio in Berkeley. Because she is such a well known and highly regarded artist and I am in my first year of art study, I had been so nervous to meet her that I didn't sleep the night before the interview. She immediately put me at ease with her warmth and honesty. She was so interesting to talk with that I had a hard time sticking to my set of pre-prepared questions. Our conversation covered a wide range of topics from the mundane (such as a good salve to soothe dry hands), to the topical (the current political climate in The United States), to the personal (the notion of identity and race as well as grace). What struck me was that she was as comfortable speaking from her heart candidly about personal feelings as she was discussing the intellectually nuanced meaning inherent in her conceptual pieces, and she switched back and forth effortlessly. She seemed to me to be serious without taking herself too seriously. I loved that about her. It was a pleasure to meet her.