Jen Allen – Interviewed on November 17, 2013
Transcript
H. Wang

KF: I first interviewed Jennifer Allen on November 17, 2013. I did not know her personally, prior to the interview, but we share a number of mutual friends. As a ceramic artist and web surfer, I've enjoyed Jennifer's blog and in particular her Potter of the Month feature. I deeply appreciate her commitment to function and the table in her studio work. Her handles are comfortable, and her surfaces are full of subtle depth.

She earned her BFA at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, and her MFA from Indiana University in Bloomington. She currently lives and works in Morgantown, West Virginia, where she also teaches at West Virginia University. I invite you to learn more about Jennifer by visiting her website, www.jenniferallenceramics.com. Thank you, and I hope you enjoy our conversation.

So first off, can you give us a little background on yourself, where did you go to school, any highlights in your ceramic path prior to your current position, how long have you been with West Virginia?

JA: Let's see. I did my undergraduate at University of Alaska, Anchorage. And it took me about, well, six years to graduate from that program. And then after that, I worked for a potter full-time for a year, and then I did post-bac studies for a year at Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts. And after that I went to Archie Bray Foundation for a summer, and then I went to graduate school at Indiana University. Then I went back to the Archie Bray Foundation for two years, for a residency for two years, and then I came to West Virginia University. So that span of time was from '95 to 2008. In 2008, I finally got to West Virginia University. So I started undergrad in '95, wound up in West Virginia in 2008.

And I've been teaching part-time in West Virginia, and I started teaching drawing classes, not ceramics classes, and just two—well, actually just one class a semester, and then they bumped me up to two a semester. And now I'm teaching two ceramics classes a semester.

KF: If I'm correct, both you and your husband work in clay and also work for West Virginia.

JA: Yes. My husband is the head of ceramics at West Virginia University.

KF: Okay. Do you feel that having a spouse that works in ceramics makes it easier or more difficult, as a mother trying to balance studio life, parenting, and teaching?

JA: Oh, my gosh. Gosh, that's so tough. I guess in some ways they're understanding because they know the process and what it takes to work with clay. But he's really supportive. And I think it's because he does know the process. Like I've got friends who—you know, one of them is in some other position that's not creative at all. They've got different struggles. And one of them, they say, "They just don't understand what it takes to make things, the timing involved and all that stuff." I guess in some ways, it's easier, if I was gonna answer that plainly, only because of the process and him understanding what it takes.

KF: In your questionnaire, you mentioned that your studio is at home. Can you talk a bit about this setup and the advantages or disadvantages that come with this arrangement, and how does the studio location impact your relations to family life and children?

JA: You know, I haven't had a lot of time to work in the studio, but my arrangement is that I have a basement studio that has wheels, a kiln—a small electric kiln, and it's about 300 square feet total. So the space is adequate, but it is cold in the basement, and wet, and all of those things, and there's not a lot of light in the studio, which is sometimes difficult, especially in the winter. It being close to the living space, though, is great. Because especially as far as timing is concerned, I can get to a certain point and then be, okay, well, I need to run up and make dinner really quick. And I can go make dinner, and then I can come back down and cover up the piece, or you know, it's time to put a handle on, then, on a mug. So in that way, I guess the timing's easier instead of having to drive back and forth to a studio.

The other thing that is really advantageous for us is that our daycare is right next door. We have a woman next door who runs daycare out of her home. So it's easy. If I need a day in the studio, I can take her over there, and just kind of work all day in the studio. And if I miss her, or if I'm worried about her or anything, 'cause she's my first kid, I can run over and visit and say hello. Or if I wanted to nurse or something like that. That's really convenient. But I think I only answered part of that question. What was the second part?

KF: How does the studio location impact your relations to family life and children, which I think is kind of interwoven into the advantages/disadvantages.

JA: Yes. Yeah. You know, part of it is—you know, sometimes I worry. Like, I'm kind of a safety nut. And I worry about things like silicosis and stuff like that, having a studio in the home environment. And so my kid does not come down into my studio at all. I do keep it really clean, but not only is it dusty, but it's also cold and damp, and I just don't think it's a good place for her to be yet. You know, certainly I want her to play around on the wheel and play with clay and stuff like that, but I'm waiting a little bit longer before that happens.

It's nice because of the timing issue; it's also bad because I feel like I'm always attached to work. Like, my work is always right there. And so in that way, it's bad. There's not really a separation so much from work and home life. Like, I feel like even if I had a studio in the backyard, you know, in a detached garage or something like that, then that would be different because there would be some kind of—I mean, of course, physical or literal separation, but also just the feeling of it being, "That's where I work. That's the work environment, and that's the home environment." Where right now, it's under one roof.

KF: Do you have any hopes for changing that?

JA: I do. We do. We've talked a lot about—we bought a starter home 'cause we just kind of wanted to get someplace and settled. And we didn't anticipate being here for the rest of our lives. But we do have a nice piece of land, so we could stay and expand the house, build onto the house. We could—we've been talking about building a detached kind of garage thing in the backyard that would be a studio. We live a little bit outside of the city, not far, like a mile, and so we have a considerable amount of land than if we were to live in the city of Morgantown. I mean, ideally, I would like to have a separate space—and he would too, that's like a—even just a one-car garage kind of…

KF: Yeah. In your questionnaire, you talked about being able to work in the studio when your spouse could watch your child or after she goes to bed, and that you have that occasional childcare next door. Is this still your current arrangement, or has it changed at all?

JA: It's still the same.

KF: Okay. So going back to those first few days/months/years after the birth of your child, and then in your podcast interview I listened to with Brian Jones—

JA: Oh, geez.

KF: I know. Did my research. You mentioned going back to teaching after two weeks. How difficult was this, and why did you choose to go back so quickly, and how did it work with such a young baby?

JA: Yeah, well, it wasn't very smart, in retrospect. But I'm just hired on as adjunct, so I don't get any kind of maternity leave. And I had grad students watching my classes. I felt guilty. I wanted to be there to give them the education that I wanted to give them. Not that the grad students weren't doing a good job. I don't want to say that, 'cause they were. They did fine. But I guess I'm a little bit of a control freak, my husband says, so relinquishing that control and not being there to teach my students was hard. So I did go back after two weeks. With Annelise, luckily my husband was around to watch her, and my classes that I taught were

both the same day. So it was Monday and Wednesday, and one was a morning class, and one was a night class. So it wasn't like I was gone for a six-hour chunk at a time. It was just three hours in the morning, three hours at night. So my nursing wasn't interrupted that much. I think if my classes were back-to-back, it would've been a lot harder. I mean, guess we just did it. We had to make it work.

We knew—before the schedule for the spring semester was set, 'cause I'm semester-to-semester hired—we knew, of course, that I was pregnant. But because of our finances, I need to work too. I can't make enough on just my work. So we knew that it was gonna happen. We knew that I wasn't gonna get maternity leave but that I needed to have those classes so that I could afford to live, paying back my student loans and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, we just made it work.

KF: And so when was she born?

JA: She was born the 26 of January.

KF: Okay.

JA: She was born on—I guess it was a Friday night, I think. It might have been a Saturday. I can't really remember. It was all a blur. I think it was a Friday. Friday night my water broke, and Saturday she came. That was convenient because it was a weekend, so I could teach my classes the week before. But she did come two weeks early, which was a shock. 'Cause the day before the night that my water broke, I was in my studio busily trying to make as much bisque ware as I could, you know, as much greenware. So there I am, got all this clay wedged, ready for the next day of throwing. And I had made all these mugs, which is probably why she came early, 'cause I was, like, way overdoing it. But it also happened to be a full moon that night, so…

I was trying to get everything set so that when she came, I could just concentrate on glazing work, which requires a lot less timing, right. So that was the plan. And I did get a lot made ahead of time.

But when we did come home, my mom came, like, two days after. She lives in Portland, OR. So she flew in I think when my daughter was three days old, and I was, like, Mom, I need to get just a couple hours in the studio, finish the work that I've started, 'cause I don’t want it to go bad. So here I am, totally sleep-deprived, right, in the first two weeks of the kid being born, down there working in my studio, putting handles on mugs.

KF: So back in those first few days or months after the birth of your child, can your reflect on your feelings toward your studio practice at that point in time?

JA: I think even before my kid came, I felt like my work needed to change, but now, because I've had that time to really reflect on my work and what it is now—or what it was then, rather, and wanting something different out of it—I mean, it's just, like, the kid's here now. It feels like a new chapter in my life. I feel like my work also needs to reflect that a little bit, and it needs to change too. I don't know if I really answered that, but…

KF: No, it makes complete sense. So there are two common responses that women made in relation to their studio practices in the questions I gave out, and it was pretty much across the board, everybody made one or both of these statements. And the first one was, "I often make bad decisions when working after the kids have gone to bed, or I make more work than I can finish the following day, or I mess up the work I made earlier in the day." And the second one was that "I am much more efficient or effective with my time that I do have, when I go to the studio." These two, both of being more effective with what time I do have, and "I make bad decisions late at night." Why do you think these are such common statements from all of us?

JA: I feel like now, all of our time—like, our day is scheduled, right. And it's all scheduled around the kid. And so there's these small windows of opportunity for you to be able to work on your own stuff. That late at night, after the kid goes to bed, you're exhausted already, right, and so yeah, bad decisions can happen. And I think for me, I'm such a planner, and I want to make sure that everything's kind of accounted for before I even step in the studio door, so my one hour, one day of studio time would be to set up the studio for the next day of work. So I would just go down there and wedge clay, clean the throwing bucket, clean the wheel, so that the next day when I went down, I could be productive. It's because anymore you don't have that on-a-whim being able to go to the studio or just kind of let the creative thing and the creative mind and the creative process take its course. Instead you are forced into a very specific time where you have to make all that happen. If you're not in a creative zone, and you're going into your studio, then bad decisions could happen, right? So that makes complete sense. And also, the whole efficiency thing, I mean, that's just how I responded, 'cause that's how I work.

KF: It was something that I hadn't really taken into my whole thinking until we had that conversation. But I do find it kind of intriguing that everybody feels like "my studio time is much more precious and important and valued."

JA: Yes.

KF: When you were talking about your work with Brian Jones in the podcast, you stated that there was less time to work, and that thus it made it a little bit more difficult to see changes in your artwork. And you talked about feeling like you ought to make bigger changes in the work in order to see growth happen on the timeframe you were thinking. And in your questionnaire, you mentioned

experimenting with forms and a more monochromatic palate. Can you talk a bit about where you are currently in your studio in relation to these two ideas?

JA: The biggest changes I've made is, I've started making pots that have no decoration on them, that just have texture that relates to kind of these ideas of sewing that I like to deal with, with my work. So that's one major change. And those are monochromatic. And then the other thing is that I've been doing—instead of applying all of the decoration at the glazing stage, I have been doing a lot of carving into the pieces now. And it's not as complicated as doing all the drawing at the glaze stage. And with those pieces, too, they're more just white and celadon glazes, so none of this very bright, vivid color. And so that's kind of where I'm at. I haven't experimented too much with different forms; I guess just the surface qualities of the forms, and the color. So whether it's more texture or less color, I guess. Does that make sense?

KF: That makes complete sense, yes. That's exciting.

JA: Yeah.

KF: I think it's always exciting when something new happens in your studio.

JA: I do too.

KF: Even if it's not totally resolved, it's still exciting to get a spark.

JA: Yeah. You know, I find—a lot of the stuff, my stuff in the past, one of the things that really triggered me wanting to make a change is hearing feedback from a lot of people about how they would never use my plates, for instance, because of all the decoration on the surface of the plate. And thinking about it, and reflecting, like, in my own home, which ones I use all the time for my meals, and I do have a couple of my plates that I use, but I typically only use those plates for either cheese and crackers or dessert. I wouldn't use them to serve a steak dinner or something more complex like that. And it has a lot to do with the influence of not only the pattern, but the color, mainly the color, and it not complementing the food as much. And a lot of the pieces that I eat off of are Tara Wilson plates, very simple, wood-fired pieces, or all-celadon or all-white, or—yes. So it's just interesting. And I have a very few patterned plates. And I want my work to be used, and so that's kind of the driving force behind the change that I want to make too.

KF: That's really interesting. I mean, I was thinking, gosh, your plates need to come up here to, like, a lefse dinner, where it's, like, the all-white meal.

JA: Right, right, yes.

KF: Your people are here in MN. I've been to a couple of those dinners because I work for a Norwegian Lutheran college. And so it cracks me up because I always think, God, can't you guys serve this off of something other than a white plate?

JA: Yes, Yeah, right, yeah.

KF: I think that's a really good point, 'cause now it makes me think, what are the ones that get used the most in our house? And it's funny because I think some of them are color-based, but some of them are also—it's size. You know, it's the perfect size for this or for that. But I think lately—well, Randy Johnston plates in our house are a big use. And then I've got a great little plate from Deb Schwarzkopf, which is the perfect kind of sandwich size. That's a good point to think about with that, because I do have one of Sarah Jaeger's plates, and yeah. But it's also kind of more like a dessert plate, or—

JA: So it's a smaller one.

KF: Yeah, scone-size.

JA: I have a couple of hers too. I've got some small ones and some big ones. And the small one is, like, her black with the green decoration on it. And that one I use for desserts—yeah, I don't use it for a lot of stuff. But the big ones I do. However, you know her palate that's yellow and blue? I have a big dinner plate of hers of that, and I hardly ever use it. But the tenmoku and green dinner plate of hers I use all the time.

KF: See, and the one we've got is blue, green, red, white—pizzazz, you know. But it's kind of an interesting thing to think about. I'm trying to think if there are any others. We have a really nice Linda Christiansen plate, and that one gets a lot of play.

JA: Yeah. We have got a lot of her pots. I love her pots, and we use them all the time.

KF: So in your questionnaire, you mentioned two things that stuck out. You mentioned that your studio practice seems a lot less important and that you commit to a lot less. And this is also coming from that podcast. And that ability to say "no" is much easier. Can you talk about this newfound kind of confidence and that ability to prioritize?

JA: You know, I feel like now my baby is the most important thing in my life, right, so I guess it's not—so my career has taken a little bit of a backseat. Let's see. Can you ask me that question one more time?

KF: Sure. In the questionnaire, you mentioned two things that stuck out. You mentioned that your studio practice seems a lot less important and that you

commit to a lot less. In the podcast, you also talk about the ability to say "no" being much easier.

JA: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I feel like—again, 'cause my—honey, baby girl. Can you go hang out with Dada? She's getting so tired. Sorry, Kate.

KF: You're okay.

JA: Let me hand her off to the dad. Go see Dada. I think she needs her diaper changed.

So I guess as far as saying no to more things, I think that I get asked to do a lot of small shows, and before, I wanted to do all of them because I really wanted my work to be visible. I was worried about pushing my career, and the more visible I was, I felt like I was more successful. And now that's not as important, so now it's choosing the ones that I feel I can manage. Like if somebody comes to me with something three months away, I'll probably say no. But if somebody says, "I've got something that's six months out or a year out," then I could say yes to something like that. And that's because I don't have as much studio time, so I need to give myself enough of a window to be able to make even those three to five pieces that I want to put—you know, three to five really quality pieces that I want to put in a show.

I'm not in a lot of galleries anymore, and my work's not gonna be in the Northern Clay Center anymore. And I think that all of those things are gonna be really good for me, because then I can focus on these changes that I want to make with my work too and not feel like the whole world is seeing the changes as they happen. So I can come up with another body of work that I'm really happy with and start saying "yes" again to things.

KF: That makes complete sense. I think that's really smart.

JA: Yeah. Well, it's hard. I've done it the other way too. I was really dumb when I was in graduate school, and I showed my work in galleries in graduate school 'cause galleries wanted it. And then my work changed so fast, you know, 'cause I'm in graduate school, and it's changing, like, daily. By the end of grad school, some of the galleries were, like, "Whoa. We don't know what's going on. We don't want your work anymore." And so I've kind of done it that way. So experience tells me that maybe it would be smart to do it this way now. Take a step back. I mean, the choice not to be in Northern Clay Center anymore wasn't really mine, but I also couldn't fill the demands anymore, either. I couldn't keep sending them a ton of work at the holiday show. And they had a bunch—they have a bunch of work that's really old of mine, that I'm glad they sent some of it back.

Yeah, and it's easy, if I get an invitation to be in a cup show and to put one cup in, it's easy for me to say, you know what, I don't think I can do this cup show this time. Whereas before, I would've been really into it. But I think about the time it takes—not making the cup so much, but the time and the cost of shipping one cup to a show and what kind of money I get back out of that cup—I mean, it's just not cost-effective. And if I was still trying to build my career a little bit more, then I would keep saying yes. But I feel like I'm at an okay spot right now that I don't need to do that anymore. Does that make sense?

KF: That does make sense, yes.

JA: I know I kind of went all around that question.

KF: That's okay. Sometimes a circle answers it perfectly too.

JA: Yeah. [laughs]

KF: So this brings us to kind of a big question about ceramics career paths and family. What do you think that we can do in the clay community to prevent making women feel that they must choose between maternity and a career?

JA: Oh, that is a big question. Gosh, you know, it's so interesting, because I still remember one of my former professors saying—she's somebody who's got this crazy, dynamite career in ceramics. And she told me once, she had a fellow classmate in grad school who wound up having kids right out of grad school. And she didn't. And she said—and this guy contacted her and said how impressed and how envious he was at her career and how much recognition she's gotten and all this stuff. And she said, "Yeah, but you have a family," and how she was so envious of that. And so it is interesting that there is kind of this divide and this choice that you have to make.

And I feel—one of my really good friends from undergraduate school is Deborah Schwarzkopf. And she's, like, dynamite all over the scene, but she has no kids yet. And so she has that time to commit to marketing and doing all these things, and so she does them all really well. And I often think about what would happen if I was in her shoes. And I don't know. It is—it's interesting that there is kind of this choice that has to be made, 'cause the moms that I know don't have as much time to make work, but they're making really good work, you know. I don't know what we can do to—I don't think that…I don't know. That's a tough question. I do not have an answer for it.

KF: That's okay too. I don't know that anybody has the answer. But I think even just posing the question and asking people to think about even kind of the way we've set up our programming with schools or with residencies or what have you, that sometimes if we are just aware of the fact that a lot of those opportunities are really awesome, and they're a lot easier to take, 'cause it's just a lot easier to

pick up and go someplace when you don't have a family than it is if you wanted to pick up and go someplace for a year. It's really difficult if you have a mortgage and a child. And then even bigger is if they're in school and all of that. And so even just kind of posing the question to people of how can we still make opportunities available in ways, or how can we change the way we look at opportunities, or even, for some of us, how do you change the way that you look at success or what career is? 'Cause sometimes it's not the kind of path, but just changing the way you look at that path that makes it all kind of make sense too.

JA: I never really thought about it, 'cause I never was on this side of things like I am now. And maybe that's part of the discussion that needs to happen, you know.

KF: What advice do you have for young women working in the ceramics field as they begin to think, or not, about their futures as mothers and makers?

JA: I think the piece of advice that was offered to me that was really helpful—I guess it's more technical than anything, but just in order to be prepared for when that kid comes, just make as much work as you can before it arrives so that you can do all the finishing afterwards. So like how I've said I was trying to get as much bisque ware together as I possibly could so that I could finish it later.

But having a kid, there's never the right time to have a kid, you know. So I don't think that I would—I wouldn't recommend somebody putting off having a kid until their career is somewhere where they want it to be, because they always can chip away at that after the kid comes. And sometimes kids are a surprise. You don't know that they're gonna happen, and then they do.

But I don't know. I guess I would just say to just take one day at a time, and to think about that future but to really live in the present, you know, and to really be present for things. That's a tough one.

KF: Who are the biggest role models for you when it comes to successful women in clay who are also mothers, and what have you gained from these women?

JA: Well, I think Kari Radasch, Erin Furimsky, Beth Robinson, Lisa Orr.

Jess Parker is somebody that—she doesn’t have that much of a career in clay anymore, I don't think. She might still be on the board for the Archie Bray Foundation. But her career has changed, and it's not so much about making work anymore as it is advocating for ceramics. And for her, I just remember, she had twins. And when I had my daughter, and thinking about the time that it took me to do things, and thinking about her with twins, I was just, like, I don't know how the heck she did anything. How she was alive, you know? So I have all the respect in the world for that woman. I don't know.

I think that they all—and Kari, and even Erin, their work has changed a lot since they've had kids, I feel, maybe not really fast, but you definitely can see changes, subtle changes in their work. I'm just really impressed that they can make as much as they make, how visible they still are with their work and their career and all those kinds of things. So that's pretty impressive.

And also how visible some of them are, like Kari, how active she is in social media and how she's kind of staying on top of marketing, being able to market her brand.

KF: Yeah.

JA: Oh, and Linda Christiansen—there's another one. I don't know. There's just so many.

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.