Summer Zickefoose – Interviewed on
Transcript
H. Wang

KF: I first interviewed Summer on January 11, 2014. We met in 2006, when I took my first post-graduate school appointment at the same institution where her husband was teaching. I'm very thankful for their continued kindness and friendship throughout the years. I was and still am very fascinated by the objects and performances that make up Summer's creative practice. I value and enjoy the conversations we have had over the years about art, work, life, kids, and of course, Iowa. Summer received a BA in Art History and a BFA in Ceramics from the University of Iowa. She completed her MFA at the University of Florida. Summer currently teaches at Westminster College and resides with her family in Ohio. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

Can you give us a little background on yourself, for example, where are you from originally, where did you go to school, any highlights in your ceramic path that you feel we should know, and also how long have you lived in your current location.

SZ: Sure. I grew up on a farm, north central Iowa, in a very small town. Sheffield, Iowa, is the name of the town. You probably haven't heard of it. But I went to undergrad at University of Iowa, and I did art history initially there and then ceramics. And then I went to graduate school for ceramics at the University of Florida, and that's when I started to do more sculpture and performance as well. So I've never really considered myself exclusively a ceramic artist, just sort of everything. So I don't know that a lot of my experience relates specifically to ceramics, but that is my background, and I always—I kind of place myself as an artist, and my identity, having come from that background.

I live in northeast Ohio now, maybe five years. So that's where I live now, and I teach at a small college right over the border in Pennsylvania, Westminster College. And I'm a full-time professor there, and I've taught there for—this is my fourth year that I'm in that position.

One of the things that might come up in these questions at some point is sort of having to do with the point in our lives when we have children, when we decide to have children. And although I thought about it quite seriously for most of my 30s, I waited quite a long time. And part of it was, there were things I really wanted to do. I really wanted to do residencies and do some things internationally, and I did do those things. But I felt like as I was getting later on into my 30s, the pull for having children was getting stronger, and that started to outweigh my desire to do some of these things as an artist. And I thought, I better do this now. I'm glad I did, and I think I probably could've even maybe done it a bit sooner. But I'm happy I did those things. And so I think some of those—the residencies that I did made me feel like, this is great, and I can return to this part of my career again

later. So I'm glad I did them, and I'm glad that I had that experience, and I know that I can return to that point again.

KF: In your questionnaire you mentioned that your son was six months old, and that was a while ago now. So is he now about one?

SZ: Yep, he's just 13 months now. So we passed our year mark.

KF: I know your husband also teaches. Do you teach, first of all, at the same institution, and also, what advantages or disadvantages come from a household where both partners are in art and academia?

SZ: That's a good question. We teach at different institutions, and we moved here because he got a position at the school where he's at, and then I ended up getting the position I have at the school where I'm at, about a year later. And his position is tenure track, so he now has tenure, but mine is not although it's full time. And I would say one of the advantages that we have to both teaching is the teaching schedule. And anyone who teaches knows that there are perks to that. You have your summertime. You decide to teach summer class or not. But after we had our son, my school did not offer any parental leave, any maternity leave. His school did. So he got three weeks of parental leave, which he was able to utilize in the semester after our son was born. But we didn't have him in daycare until he got a little bit older, so he was born at the end of the fall semester, and then when the spring semester started, I started teaching again. And we were able to coordinate our teaching days so we each taught two days of the week, and we alternated days so on the days we didn't teach, we would stay with him, and we didn’t have to take him to daycare until he was about 8 months old.

So that was one benefit, although the idea that that would work in theory seemed better than in practice. In practice, it was really, really difficult. And we ran into many challenges that semester and certainly had never had to coordinate our schedules the way we did, and there were many times where we didn't do a good job and realized we both had something scheduled and no one to care of him, and he wasn't in daycare, and we don't have family here. So it just—it was very challenging. But that was an advantage that we had, so we were able to stay with him for eight months before daycare, so that was really great.

KF: Going back to that point in time, to those first few days and months after the birth of your son, can you reflect on your feelings towards your studio practice at that point in time? Did you miss it, or did you even know it was there?

SZ: No. I didn't have any thoughts about my studio practice at all. I would say maybe when he was a few months old, I started to think about am I ever gonna be able to do this again? But certainly I was just so absorbed in being a mother and just enjoying it. But like I said, because I started teaching right away, any spare time that I had, because he wasn't in daycare, any time he napped or

anything, I was usually doing something for my classes. So that kind of took up any extra time that I had. And so I really just didn't even have time to think about it at all.

But initially it just—it's so absorbing, and you sleep so little. I can't imagine being able to accomplish—certainly for those first three months, it's just all-consuming, or at least it was for me. But I enjoyed being consumed by that. I really wish I didn't have to go back to work so soon because I would've loved to just stay with him, even if it was for three months or four months and just—just be a mom, just only think and worry about and just really be absorbed in that and not have to think about anything else. I would've really loved that.

KF: You did mention in your response that you did start back to work six weeks after the birth of your son. And can you talk a bit more about your decision to go back at that time, now, in retrospect, looking back on it all? And how did it go?

SZ: There were a number of women having babies around the time that I did at my school, and so some of the women that are older faculty members at my school got together and said, "This has to change. We have no maternity leave policy at this school, and it's ridiculous." So every time a woman was gonna have a baby at my school, they had to meet with the dean and sort of cut a deal. Like, the dean would sort of make a deal with this woman, and it would be different for everybody. It depends on when the birth fell in the semester, it depended on, probably, their rank. I'm not sure. I just know that women were given all sorts of different considerations. There was nothing consistent about it.

In my case, he was due at Thanksgiving. So we made a deal that I would not come back to teach for the following two weeks of class and one week of finals because I would've just had a baby. I still had to come back after the semester ended to do my grading. I was teaching ceramics, and that couldn't be brought home.

He ended up coming ten days late, so I finished teaching at Thanksgiving. I arranged—and I did all the arranging. I arranged for someone to sub my classes for the remaining two weeks. I accelerated one of my classes so that it ended at Thanksgiving. So I held extra sessions in the early part of the semester to end it sooner. And I was also running a gallery at that time. So when he was two weeks old, I brought him to school to finish my grading, take down the last exhibition of the semester, pack it out, and ship it off. But I had to start teaching again in the spring semester.

And one, I was worried about finances. I didn't feel like we could afford for me to take a leave without pay, which was my other option. Under the Family Medical Leave Act, I could have taken a leave without pay. The dean and I made a deal that I would teach a reduced load, so I taught two courses instead of three. But I still ran a gallery, so I taught two courses and ran a gallery, which didn't really

feel like a reduced load, that spring semester after he was born. However, at the latter half of the semester I taught a seven-week course to make up the difference of the reduced load. So it really didn't feel like a reduced load at all.

In retrospect, I wish that we would've been poor and eaten crackers, and I would've just taken the leave, because it was—I hated feeling pulled away from him. I hated going back at six weeks. It was heartbreaking. I didn't want to do it. I missed him. It was just really hard. I didn't want to be there. Sorry. It's just—I wish—I just wish I would've taken more time. I think that it's—all of that seems like, okay, we can do this—on paper. Great. I'll teach a reduced load. Joe will be with him when I'm gone. But when I taught the seven-week course, that was a night course. And Joe had to put him to bed, and that was awful. He would be screaming, and it would often be crying for hours until I got home. It was just awful. And I didn't like that I had to worry about putting together syllabi when he was five weeks old and being stressed about getting my work done for school when—hoping I could get it done when he took a nap, if he took a nap, if he stayed asleep. I mean, it just was—it just felt like too much. And I just wanted to enjoy that time, and so I felt a little cheated out of that time.

But I know lots of women's circumstances are much harder than that, and so I try to keep that in mind. A lot of maternity leaves are only six weeks anyway. I'm glad I had those six weeks with him.

KF: You've got a story that a lot of people have in some way, that it does look good on paper, it sounds do-able, and then you meet the personality that you brought into the world and you realize that their schedule and your schedule, on paper, it's not at all what you think it's gonna be. I think that's why I've asked that question of people too, because I think that that retrospect thing—I think every single woman has said, "I wish I had just not taught the class, or I hadn't gone back, or that I'd taken more time, because…" But the same thing, everybody did it because of either money or not wanting to lose their job, which is unfortunately a huge reality.

How does childcare work for your family? How did it work, how does it work now, has it allowed you more time or your partner more time than the care share plan, and is it more or less difficult, and in what ways?

[baby crying]

SZ: That's a nice background sound for this conversation. [laughing]

KF: Perfect. [laughs]

SZ: I don't know, it's just different challenges. The care share thing—I don't know if that was hard or easier. That probably was more challenging because we really didn't have a minute at all. It was—you're with him 100% of the time, or you're at

work. There's only two things. Now when he's in daycare, it's certainly more challenging to get to work. Because of our schedules this past fall, I was the one dropping him off most of the time. And the challenge of getting myself ready for work, him ready for daycare, us both out the door, both having had breakfast, and I commute about 50 minutes to work. So yeah, it was very challenging. I don't know that one's more or less, just different challenges, I guess.

And like I was telling you, the idea was that there'd be one day a week while he's in daycare; I could use that for studio time. It didn't work. It ended up where most of the Fridays he was in daycare, I either still had to go to work that day, or there was something else going on that I had to do. And then I decided to take him out of daycare on those days to be with him. [laughing]

So I think that what it does is, it relieves you to do the job that you need to do at work and just get your work done, and you know that he's taken care of and everything's fine. But what comes with that is the challenge of leaving your child at daycare, just the emotional part of that. I guess there's guilt with every part of parenting, but leaving him at daycare has been hard. And so I don't know. I don't know if that even answers your question.

KF: No, it does. So the next kind of question is—I'm gonna roll a couple of these questions together. I know you talked in your answers about feeling like your time was really precious. I would say from speaking with you too and from reading this, not only in relation to your studio but also in relation to spending time with your child, your family, all of it, that time really is precious. Reading through every mother's set of answers, one thing that became a really interesting theme is that everybody really talked to the fact that prior to having their children, they often used their studio time ineffectively. And that since having children, when there are things that they need to do in their studio or for work, that they're very efficient with their time, and that time does feel really precious. And then a lot of people also, as part of that, also mentioned the fact that they work better in the mornings, they tend to mess things up at night. And there's a whole laundry list of moms who say, "I get up an hour before my kids do so I can get one hour of work done because I can do it then. And if I do it at night, I'll just screw up any of the work I've made all day."

SZ: Yeah, I could see that.

KF: So my question to everybody has been, why is this so common for all of us? What's your theory on it?

SZ: I've never been great with time management. So I could certainly agree with the women who said that they used their time ineffectively before. But even my time at work now, I just feel like…you know, I'm gonna get done as much as I can when I'm there, and what I can't get done probably doesn't matter all that much. And I never really felt that way before. I always felt like, well, I'll do the rest at

home. Or, I'll figure out a way to get that other stuff done. But really if I didn't get it done, does it matter all that much that I didn't get it done? Probably not. So I'm probably more willing to let some stuff go that I didn't before.

I've always been a night person, and my best studio time was the night. I loved working at night. I could focus, there just wasn't any distractions, it's dark out. Just loved it. So the fact that I'm really tired by 8:30 or 9:00 is pretty frustrating, 'cause that's when I would normally want to go get work done in the studio. So yeah, your whole clock, your whole daytime work clock is flipped.

So now he doesn't get up all that early, but he gets up 7:00 or 7:30, and occasionally I might get a little extra sleep while Joe takes them. But usually I just want to get up, even if I haven't had enough sleep. I'm like, awake now. I might as well get up, 'cause I better use this time. I mean, this is really good time. And I'm gonna be tired at 8:30 tonight, so I might as well.

I guess one of the things that has happened is that things are so fragmented, my time is so fragmented, that I don't really have hours in the studio, but I have maybe an hour, and I have to complete the one thing that I have to complete. So getting one piece done might take me two or three months, but it will be accomplished in really small bits where I was able to do this part of the piece at this time for 30 minutes and this part—so it's really fragmented and slow to sort of complete something, but those 30 minutes of time—like you said, you're just gonna get that thing done. You're just gonna get it done. You're not even gonna think about if the piece is working or not working or—who the hell cares. Like you just want to get the damn thing done, and I have 30 minutes to do this part of it right now, so I'm gonna do it. So I would say my studio practice is fragmented into very small slivers of time, yeah.

KF: You echoed a sentiment that many mothers have woven into their answers in this project. When I asked you about the greatest challenge or challenges to you as a mother, you mentioned, and I'm gonna quote you here, "letting go of guilt or control, that you can't do everything and that you have to let others help with the care, etc., so that you can attend to other aspects of your life." Has this process of letting go become easier or harder as your son grows?

SZ: It's become easier. To say that doesn't mean that I have reached a point where I'm always letting it happen and it's all functioning beautifully, but it's been easier. I mean, I've had to come to the realization so much more often that I just—I just can't do it. And I can't do it all perfectly. And it's fine, and if my husband does something differently than the way I would do it for our son, and I don't necessarily like the way—it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. I have to constantly remind myself of that. It's a lesson that is sort of always being learned. It's not a lesson that I have learned and now it's all great. It's just, I have to always learn it, I think.

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

SZ: I think there's so many things that are institutional that could change. And I don't just mean academics, because certainly not everyone is working in academics. But I also mean amongst residency programs. I know, for example, the Vermont Studio Center does have a special residency just for parents. But that means that you have to be parent to apply for it, but it still doesn't mean you're getting full support, and it still doesn't mean you can bring your family. It just means because you're a parent, you can apply for this special program. That's all great, but it still means that most residency programs are completely out of reach for parents, certainly parents with young children.

You know, the fact that most openings happen in the evenings. It's really difficult to put a baby to bed and be anywhere else. So if there were more art events that could even happen during the day, would be helpful. So I think that it's museums, galleries, residency centers, colleges, universities, all of those places could make more accommodation for mothers, parents, families, to make integrating the life of a parent and the life of an artist a little bit easier. And just more accessible. I think there's a lot about galleries and art events that are really sort of adult-only. And that could change pretty easily. It wouldn't take much for institutions to make small changes like that. So I think a lot of that would help.

But I think as a culture, there are certainly—a good friend of mine lives in the UK. And she had come to visit when we were both pregnant. And she was basically teaching adjunct at that time. But she still had a six-month leave of absence after she had her child. And that was fine. Her job was gonna be there when she got back from that six months. And keeping that in mind, that our cultural ideas about pregnancy, childbirth, having a family, are not worldwide, sometimes helps. It's perfectly normal for women in other cultures to take six months or a year or two years after the birth of their child to adjust to this new life. And keeping that in mind is helpful because here, where the standard is probably six weeks to three months and that's it, then you go back to your life working, I think the contrast is pretty stark.

And some of the artists that I really admire are artists that are American artists but artists that fully admit, "I took two years, I took four years, I took eight years off of being an artist. And then I came back to it." They came back to it full force, and they're very active artists, and there was just a time when they were a mother. And I think that that's a really beautiful example as well. I don't think I could take eight years off, but I don't feel all that bad that I've taken a year off. I think that's perfectly reasonable. I think the shift in your life is immense, and I never wanted to feel like I wasn't fully present in this new part of my life. So that was a little bit of a tangent, but…

KF: No, that was awesome. What advice do you have for young women working in the ceramics field as they begin to think—or not, about their future as mothers and makers?

SZ: I would just say to really take full advantage of whatever stage you are at in your career. If you are at a stage where you think maybe you want to be a mom someday but you're not ready for that, then take full advantage of where you're at. And if that means doing a lot of traveling or doing exhibitions and traveling and doing things in places where maybe you won't be able to later, just do as much of that as you can when you're free to do that, and you'll never feel like you missed out on something if your life changes pretty dramatically at some point.

I mean babies are more flexible than a lot of people give them credit for, so there's probably more—I mean I felt like there was more anxiety on my part about what I wouldn't be able to do than what the reality is. I think there is a lot more that I can still do that I can do with him than I thought there would be. A lot will still be possible. And it's not something—I guess not to consider it as an all or nothing choice where you have to choose one or the other. You'll be able to do both, and you'll be able to make it work.

Whatever support system you have, if that's family where you live or that's friends, take advantage of that network of people. And if someone offers to help—we don't have family here, but we have really good friends. And we have a very good friend who had offered to help take care of our child in the semester when we were both teaching and alternating days, and we said yes to that person. And as a result, they have become a bigger part in his life, and he has this other person who totally loves him. And those people can be friends. They can be whoever.

But we have a girl who worked at the first daycare he was at who just really made a good connection with him and offered to be a sitter for him whenever we needed it. And so having relationships like that, where people really care for your child, and they want to be a part of their life, take advantage of that and say yes to those people if they offer so that you will have more than just yourselves, and it won't always be just the two of you having to do everything. And that relieves the burden a little bit and allows you to realize that it isn't just—it isn't just you that has to maintain every aspect of their life and your life and…yeah.

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

SZ: I think one of the names I had given you when we had been emailing back and forth was Tsehai Johnson. And she—well, the show that I curated that you were a part of, it was a while back now. But I had brought her in to do an

installation for that show. And I didn't know her that well, so I didn't really realize at the time that she had two children. But she has maintained a really active studio practice during this time, and I always really admired that. And I just remember her talking a bit about how she balanced that a little bit and how she utilized her studio time. But she had also mentioned that she had a really great network of other artist friends that she kept in touch with, and they sort of kept tabs on each other and that having that group of friends really helped her know that there was someone she could check in with and say, yeah, I'm still doing this work, and here's what I've been doing lately. So yeah, I guess that's one example that I could talk about.

And I went to grad school, and my two professors in grad school were both women. and they both did not have children. And I remember at that time kind of looking around at my program, and not just those two professors but other professors throughout the art college didn't have children. There weren't very many examples of that at my school, anyway. And so I started kind of looking elsewhere, even if they were artists that I didn't know personally, but just kind of looking into the careers of artists that were mothers as well and just kind of mentally making a note of that name of that person and watching how they've done it. So I sort of have this ongoing list of people that I really admire for what they've done as an artist and as a mother. And sometimes even when their work, the work of being a mother, has kind of come into their work as an artist and kind of looking at how they've done that and they've incorporated that somehow. They haven't all been clay artists, I guess, in my case. But there've been some really good examples of that.

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.