# VESSELS OF CELEBRATION

Paul Soldner

Interviewed by Elaine Levin

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# INTRODUCTION

Paul Soldner (born April 24, 1921, in Summerfield, Illinois) discovered ceramics when he took an elective course as part of his masters program in art education at the University of Colorado. Clay, he says, "suddenly gave me a place where I could work with my hands . . . it fulfilled [an] inner voice to make objects, make things." (p. 47) In 1954 he resigned his position as supervisor of art education in the Wayne County, Ohio, public school system and moved to California to study ceramics with Peter Voulkos at the Otis Art Institute. Soldner earned an M.F.A. in 1956 and, since 1959, has taught at Scripps College, with time out for visiting professorships at the University of Iowa and the University of Colorado.

Elaine Levin, the interviewer in this oral history, has written of Soldner's style:

"He treats the surface with a minimum of materials, but in limitless variety. White and green slips, a strong solution of iron and copper stain and a transparent glaze produce diverse color. Calligraphic lines are applied 'like a painting -- like watercolor,' built up in thin washes. Paul uses the same stains over paper resist stencils he makes or cuts from magazine photos. Human figures, animals and birds in motion -- the processions of

silhouettes circling his vases recall the black and red images on Greek amphorae, while the shapes resemble Matisse's cutouts and dancing figures." (A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio, June 1979)

Soldner's work is evenly divided between wall and pedestal pieces. His subject matter includes abstractions, calligraphy, and stencilled figures. Soldner says, "I have also, in recent years, used as my source material figures from contemporary magazines. . . . I feel that that somehow or other puts my work in touch with my culture." (p. 161) Magazine-derived subjects include nudes from Playboy and Playgirl, Marlboro and Clairol advertising, "Black Is Beautiful" imagery, Twiggy, the Beatles, and other contemporary pop figures.

Soldner is the owner of Soldner Pottery Equipment, Inc., a manufacturer of potting wheels, kilns, and other studio equipment. He is well known for his technical innovations, particularly his development of oil-fired kilns, low-temperature salt firing, the Soldner kick and electric-powered wheels, and the variation on traditional Japanese raku, commonly called "American raku."

Soldner divides his year teaching at Scripps College, working at his studio in Aspen, Colorado, and traveling to workshops, seminars, conferences, and exhibits. He has served on the board of directors of the National Council on

Education for the Ceramic Arts, as a craftman-trustee on the American Craft Council, and in 1981, he was voted membership into the Académie Internationale de la Céramique. He has written numerous articles and reviews, and a book, Kiln Construction, published by the American Craft Council in 1966. His art work is owned by the Los Angeles County Art Museum, the Fred Marer Ceramic Collection at Scripps College, the Smithsonian Museum National Collection, the Oakland Art Museum, the Everson Museum in Syracuse, the Lowe Art Gallery in Miami, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, the Australian National Gallery in Sydney, the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto, Japan, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England.

Soldner says of his work and its context, ". . . I'm part of a movement that loves clay, thinks of it as one of the world's most unusual materials. . . . When I look at the eight, ten thousand year tradition of pottery, it's fantastic the amount of inventiveness that people have had in terms of making vessels of all kinds: vessels of use and vessels of celebration and vessels for religious reasons and for spiritual enlightenment. . . . I very much would like somehow or other to make my work have some sort of emotional enlightenment or movement for people as piece of music does for me [where] I'm carried . . . out of the

ordinary surroundings to another place, let's call it spiritual." (pp. 225-227)

## INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Elaine Levin, interviewer, Oral History Program, UCLA. B.A., Art, Grinnell College; Teaching Credential, San Fernando Valley State College; M.A., Art, California State University, Northridge.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Jeff Levin's apartment in Los Angeles, California.

Dates: Tapes I and II, September 3, 1980. Tapes III and IV, September 4, 1980.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: Both sessions took place mid-day and lasted an average of two hours. A total of four hours of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Paul Soldner; Elaine Levin; Jeff Levin, Elaine's son and friend of Soldner, was intermittently present.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

The interview was structured chronologically.

EDITING:

Constance Bullock, librarian at UCLA, edited the interview. Richard Cándida Smith, principal editor, review edited the interview transcript and wrote the introduction. D. P. Gist, assistant editor, assembled the index, table of contents, and interview history.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings and edited transcripts of the interviews are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of noncurrent records of the university.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 3, 1980

LEVIN: I'd like to start from your years in Ohio and education there, just sort of an open-ended question.

SOLDNER: What sort of age are you starting at?

LEVIN: Early, say elementary school or how did your family come to Ohio.

SOLDNER: Actually before Ohio was elementary school.

LEVIN: Oh, did your family live someplace else before?

SOLDNER: Oh, yeah, I moved around a lot. I was born in Illinois, and I moved to Pennsylvania, oh, I suppose when I was about two. Then I left Pennsylvania and moved to northern Indiana when I was in the fourth grade, and then we moved from Indiana to Ohio when I was a sophomore in high school. So I'm Midwest. [laughter]

LEVIN: Yes, all over Midwest.

SOLDNER: All over.

LEVIN: Why did you happen to move that much?

SOLDNER: My father [Grover Soldner] was a minister, and they only stayed in a church x number of years. Then they would move on to another one. So, at least early on, he was a minister. Later on he gave it up--didn't give it up, he just didn't have a church--and he worked for a college [Bluffton College] instead for a while raising funds and then finally moved off into selling mutual funds.

LEVIN: A varied career.

SOLDNER: Yeah. Very. Kind of a strange one, in a way, but one of those things that I think probably the Depression controlled and manipulated. He was asked to leave-- He was asked to join the college, a little, small church college in Ohio, as a fundraiser. That was right after the Depression [began] in the thirties, and it was time to get somebody that could go out and put some sort of good will, begin to get people supporting the school, because they really were financially strapped. They weren't necessarily trained for it. I guess a minister was as good as anybody else, but it meant giving up that career, and he never really got back to it in a full-time sense.

LEVIN: How did the moving around affect you?

SOLDNER: I don't know. I don't think it had any adverse effects on me. I have memories of all but my birthplace, because I was only two when we left there. Some of the things I can look back on. There are specific things that happened in various places that I sometimes remember happening in the various places, although I think they could have happened, perhaps, in one place as well. I don't know if moving around, other than just coincidence and fate, made these things occur.

I'm thinking of specific things like, in Pennsylvania there was a creek running nearby, we called it the Stink

Creek, or something like that. In addition to looking for tadpoles and things as boys will do, one thing that I remember doing (and I don't know how in the world we did it), we made a little bridge over the creek. We made it by nailing two boards together on each end, and then we pried them apart in the middle and stuck a stick in there to make it stronger. Two boards, thick boards just nailed on the ends, are very weak, but somewhere along the line, by trial and error or something, we made this stronger. Today I guess you would look at it and say, "Well, in effect what you did was truss it or used an element of a truss."

When I, years later, tried to design a house or studio, one of the problems was bridging across from one wall to another wall about twenty-two feet wide. And I was searching in my mind for some solution, some truss really, that would span it, and that little experiment, as a boy in Pennsylvania, popped up and it was a perfect solution. It's a crazy one; architects look at it, and other people would say, "Where did you ever learn about that?" or, "Where did that come from?" It's not a true beam, it's not a true arch, and it's not a true truss, but it has elements of all three. So that's just one example.

Other examples later in Indiana-- Again, I don't know if it has to do with moving or just that you move to a

certain place at a right time or maybe you seek out what you're looking for.

Probably one of the early influences on my art career occurred in Indiana, both positive and negative. The negative part was that an art teacher [Art Sprunger] at the eighth grade level rather made fun of my work one day, and this really did squelch further interest in the visual arts for a number of years. I don't think he meant to. I don't think it was meant as a serious put-down, but it was one of those strange days when he-- Occasionally he would come to class, and--I don't know if he was unprepared or if he just really felt like this was something that was a better way to teach--he would say, "OK, today is a free day." And that meant you could make anything you wanted to. You could paint any kind of a picture or draw or anything, without his direction. I think I was fairly romantic and sentimental--probably still am [laughs]--but I decided to paint a sunset with watercolors. And it must not have been good; it must have been horrible. So when he came around, up and down the aisle and stopping and sort of critiquing each person, he picked mine up and said, "Oh, look, Paul made a fried egg!" [laughs] So my sunset turned real sour and I kind of crawled in a shell and I wouldn't touch visual arts, well, for another six years until I was out of

high school. I didn't go close to the art department while I was in high school.

However, the positive part of that is, the very same man who was the art teacher was also the Boy Scout leader in the community and my neighbor, and I decided to join the Scouts at some point. I think we were an unusual troop with his guidance, in that having an art teacher or an artist as a Boy Scout leader is different, say, than one who's more military and militaristically inclined as sometimes they are. We never had the marching around kind of stuff. But he encouraged a lot of what I suppose would be called hobby-craft oriented pursuits: soap carving of little animals, which are rudimentary sculptures.

He made pottery, and I observed him, helped him go out and dig clay out of the river. I remember very distinctly wading out into the water, and the clay was under the water. We would take shovels and dig it up, and it was plastic and ready to use. I remember firing--helping him fire--the kilns, his kilns, using an oil burner as near as I can remember. It was very noisy, very dirty. I don't remember making any clay objects, myself, only participating indirectly.

I think that the Boy Scout experience itself, during those formative years in Indiana, in retrospect, was a very good one, particularly the merit badge program, which

encouraged you to at least try your hand in everything, from cooking to camping by yourself a certain number of nights for the summer. I remember doing taxidermy. Some electrical interest in early-- Interest in [electrical work] or radio started there, and certainly my interest in photography began as fulfilling a merit badge requirement. In fact, that then became my bridge to art.

LEVIN: How?

SOLDNER: Well, since I was intimidated by drawing and painting, I discovered that the camera didn't lie, the camera had skill, the camera could make images that were accurate. And initially I suppose that, like most people, when you buy a camera, you just take snapshots. But I think I had a funny sense of humor about these snapshots because some of them-- I quickly learned techniques by which the camera could do things that would fool the eye. For example, one photograph I have, it's a double exposure, and it's my body with my arm stretched out and my head in my hand. [laughter] Another, of course, was the old-fashioned one where a fish can be made to look five hundred pounds, a small fish can be made to look five hundred pounds, and I'm holding it up. Another one was, we super-imposed the head of a hobo on the body of a friend's father who was a county judge. We thought that was hilarious. We

blackmailing him, showing him this picture and somehow or other extracting some--some favor, I guess. [laughter]

Anyhow, the camera gave me a certain freedom to make images that I didn't feel after that one experience.

LEVIN: And you learned darkroom techniques?

SOLDNER: I taught myself darkroom techniques. In high school this interest, I think, led rather directly to being the editor of the yearbook one year, which in itself then opened up other doors because then I began to learn about design, layout, and graphic techniques of printing. I decided to apprentice myself to a photographer one summer--a commercial photographer--and learned the basic techniques of developing films and prints, retouching negatives, and things that are normally associated with commercial photography. I was his "gofor" and did a lot of legwork but also did get involved in the fundamentals of photography. I learned a lot of that also from magazines.

I think in those days our magazines were more helpful in teaching people how to do things than they are today. Photography magazines today have some technique, but that's mostly supplied from books. And magazines in photography today I think are more concerned with talking about the photographic issues or the-- Photography is now considered an art form or possibly-- So it's more a showing of individual people's work rather than how to do it.

LEVIN: Did you learn from-- Was there anyone's photography that particularly--

SOLDNER: Well, I was drawn--which is sort of interesting --towards the work of a man by the name of [William] Mortensen. What I think I reacted to was what I couldn't do. Through some technique called "paper negative" he made his subjects, particularly his figure studies, look like charcoal drawings. As a matter of fact he used a charcoal paper, that is, a pebbled-effect paper when it was all finished. In retrospect they look corny, and they look stylized, and they certainly look like copying or aping what was considered good art. Some models would be posed like statues, landscapes would be lit or you would wait for the proper lighting, or the paper negative would be manipulated to give an atmospheric quality similar to a drawing, maybe a Turner sort of painting. I think what he was trying to do was to raise, elevate photography by copying paintings, which is one way that a lot of people use even in other media. They look to another accepted art solution, and then try to reinterpret it in another media.

He was one of my favorites, and, of course, we were all aware of [Edward] Weston and [Alfred] Stieglitz. I became more aware of those later when I went to college. I had hoped after--

Well, let's see, that brings me up to high school and early college. In college I used photography as a hobby, initially, and I had started into college not really knowing what I wanted to do.

I began taking a kind of a pre-med course, that seemed like the direction, perhaps, the family wanted me to go. I really feel that I was influenced by the mother of the girl I was dating at the time. I think she encouraged me to become a doctor, and I started taking that type of course.

At the same time, I used the camera for pleasure, took pictures of friends, earned some money taking pictures of babies in the community and small children. I used the camera to photograph the campus, more in a pictorial sense, for the yearbook. I guess my inclination was to, somehow or other, use the camera as a substitute for a pencil.

Then I was drafted. The war came along and I was drafted in my senior year and was gone for about three and a half years.

At that time, of course, the camera was only a documentary, something to record concentration camps and sometimes the opposite, the beauties of German cities when they weren't-- Or French cities. After I returned from the war, I had a decision to make: did I want to go into medicine or not? I had been a medic during the army, partly because I was a conscientious objector. They said

that was acceptable if I wanted to work in the medical corps, and I said, "Fine." So I was with one of [General George S.] Patton's armored divisions, Eleventh Army Division, and I was a first sergeant in a medical detachment. But I decided, I guess after serving three and a half years as a medic, that I probably wasn't that interested in just medicine and decided, instead, to start taking some art courses in this little one-[teacher] art department.

LEVIN: This was at--

SOLDNER: This was at Bluffton, Bluffton College in Ohio. I guess I had taken a few courses before the war. Actually, I believe I took enough, sort of with my left hand while my right hand was becoming a medic, that when I came back, I really only needed to concentrate one semester and could graduate with a B.A. in art.

And this man, the man who was teaching it, was a Russian by the name of Klassen, Professor [John P.] Klassen, who himself was a sculptor in the classic sense, very good, very quiet, very supportive. Not well known, but, naturally, being the only person in the art department, had to teach everything: so-called drawing, sculpture, painting, design (we didn't have printmaking), history. His tendency, however, was to simply encourage the students to do whatever they wanted to do.

Simultaneously--and I think this was important--he worked on his own work at school. He had a little studio right off the classroom. He was always available, and he was always there, very punctual. Six days a week, he'd spend time working on his things. We, in turn, would work out on the main floor. I got rudimentary techniques from him in, say, modeling in clay and then making molds from that and using molds to cast in, although they weren't carried to a final state. For example, we never got into bronze casting or into lost-wax casting. But we did get ourselves involved in casting in clay. He knew a little bit about slip casting, and so we would slip cast.

When I say he was very encouraging, I mean it in a sense that, for example, two things come back to me about that time. One was that, since I had been using the camera as my crutch, I asked him if it would be all right to continue to do that in the art department, and it didn't faze him a bit. He said, well, he didn't know anything about it, but there was an empty closet, and if I wanted to build a darkroom in there, fine.

I don't think I made any great paintings or photographs, mostly they were rather romantic renditions of the campus or lovers' lane or something like that. Occasionally I'd talk a good-looking girl into posing for me, never in the nude but--I'd love that, if that would have been

possible--but near-nude, glamour. Remember, those were the days of Hollywood glamour, and that type of photography had a real interest for me.

The other example--which I think now, in retrospect, was even more, perhaps, insightful--I asked him if I could make a potter's wheel. And again he didn't know. And I said, "Well, I saw an article in Popular Mechanics magazine on how to make a potter's wheel." So he said, sure, go ahead and do it.

It involved using parts of a Model-A Ford. It used the crankshaft for the body with the two bearings, end bearings, set vertically in a wooden frame. It used the connecting rod--one connecting rod fastened to the crank-shaft and then the other end fastened to a foot pedal--so that when you pushed sideways, it would, through the eccentric action, make this revolve.

The problem with all that was that nobody knew how to use it, and I really didn't know what "throwing" meant. As a result, my first pots were not thrown, they were carved or turned, much as you would on a lathe. For example, if I wanted to make a six-inch-high pot, I would put six inches of clay on a wheel and I would turn out, turn, spin it, but with tools I would carve the outside shape. It always looked like a Greek-oriented shape. And then I'd hollow out the middle a little bit. But rather than really

considering that the final pot, we would make a mold, a two-piece mold, from it and then slip cast more of them. That much he knew, how to cast, how to make molds. And it was only a couple of years later, when I watched a potter by the name of Charlie Lakofsky, from Bowling Green [State University], throw a pot that I realized that throwing meant moving clay from one place to another by putting pressure on this revolving pot, and it was a big breakthrough.

LEVIN: It was really surprising to you.

SOLDNER: Yeah, really. I was very surprised. "Oh, look!" You know, "He doesn't have any waste." I had a lot of waste. [laughter] He didn't have any waste, and it was quicker. Mine was more laborious, like turning something on a lathe.

I do remember in the thirties (that's another remembrance that may tie into my later interest in clay besides the Boy Scout episode) attending the Chicago World's Fair--I think that was in 1933 [Century of Progress International Exposition, Chicago, 1933-34]--and there were three things that really fascinated me as a boy, a young boy. One was what was called a skyride across the grounds, and that really was like a ski lift going from one end to the other, and I can't remember if we took a ride on it or just watched it.

The other was the midway where a dancer would come out behind fans, Sally Rand was her name, and she would do a little "tease" and try to get customers to come in, and my father turned my head real quick and headed me in another direction. But I saw enough to interest me, I think, in women. [laughs]

And the third one was a potter, I would call him a hillbilly potter or perhaps an Appalachian potter at this time, who was throwing pots barefoot, kicking a kick wheel and just making pottery. And they were functional pots, but I was intrigued with just the mechanics of the whole thing.

LEVIN: So that you had seen somebody work the wheel, but that didn't really help you.

SOLDNER: It didn't register in terms of what he was doing or how he was moving clay, that just didn't register.

LEVIN: I wanted to ask you-- First of all, I didn't really get the members of your family.

SOLDNER: Oh. Well, besides my mother and my father, I have two sisters. Did you want their names?

LEVIN: Well, that would be fine, and their place in the family, older or younger.

SOLDNER: OK. Well, Father's name was Grover, after Grover Cleveland, I believe. Mother's name was Beulah [Geiger]. I was the oldest child, and I had a sister two years

younger [Helen Soldner Topham] and another sister five years younger [Louise Soldner Farnham]. In that sense, my father told me something recently when I visited him. He's still alive--I visit him--and he's beginning to return in his memory to a lot of the early days and wants to talk about it and tell you things.

Some of it I've known and some [things] are new, but one of the new ones was that I barely made it into this world. I was a breech baby to start with, born at home, and [it was a] very, very hard birth. I was so lifeless at birth that the doctor told them not to call anybody or send out any announcements. He wasn't sure I'd make it, but within a day or two I rallied around and began to kick and got color and yell. However, a second problem happened in about the second week, they discovered I was losing weight instead of gaining weight and I wasn't keeping anything down. All the milk kept coming back. So first my mother tried to nurse me and he thought perhaps that was not--I was allergic or something. So they tried everything else--cow's milk, goat's milk--nothing would stay down. And I guess I kept getting weaker and weaker, and they went from doctor to doctor. Finally they decided they'd take me from Illinois where I was born back to visit the grand-parents [Calvin and Sarah Geiger] at least, in Ohio--one of my mother's uncles was a doctor [Joe Steiner], and somehow

or other I guess she thought he might be of help. But at least to let the grandparents see their first grandchild. And the family doctor had the same story; he really didn't know, if none of these other sources of milk worked, what he could do.

He sent them home with definite feeling there was nothing to be done, but when they got home there was a sample [laughs] of a new baby food called Pablum in the mailbox. It suggested that it could be given to infants very young, much younger than they had thought food could be ingested. Well, they went to their family doctor, [my father] says, and showed it to him and asked him what he thought. He shook his head and he said, "Never heard of it." As far as he was concerned, if they wanted to feed that to their child, well, he would wash his hands of the whole thing. He didn't believe in it. But they decided to try it because there was nothing to lose, and I took to that like a fish to water, and I've been feisty ever since. [laughter] Started getting fat and been fighting that the rest of my life.

LEVIN: You owe your life to the postman?

SOLDNER: To Pablum. [laughter] Yeah, apparently.

LEVIN: That's great! I wanted to ask you also if, when you got involved with photography, if nature around you,

since you led a fairly rural life, had made an impression on you in terms of photo images.

SOLDNER: Yes, I think so. I was particularly moved by sunsets and lily ponds and willow trees in the water and reflections, that type of thing. I don't remember photographing small objects like butterflies and bees and birds. I collected butterflies, but possibly I couldn't photograph them, possibly I didn't have a camera with the capability of photographing that small an object.

But I did have, as well, one of my fondest memories of a book that later, I think subconsciously, images from it came out in my work. It was a German book (I can't remember the name of it) that I found in the stacks in the library. Basically, what it was, was super-close or macrophotographs of seeds and buds, so that a small bud or a small seed, perhaps only a half-inch tall, would be blown up fourteen inches tall; and this creates a whole, new, out-of-context shape. I discovered later at Otis [Art Institute] when I was doing my tall floor pots, that some of the solutions for the forms were throwbacks to those macrophotographic bud and seed pods.

I think one can search back really far very often and find that type of thing. In addition to the nature pictures around me, which I do remember trying to recreate as landscapes, I was really very interested in the figure, as

I indicated it. Probably the religious background and social restrictions in the small community made it impossible for me to actually work with the naked figure, but I remember poring through magazines to see what was being done by other photographers and also recall photographing some of my friends as nearly nude as that permitted at the time. And eventually [I] found one woman that was up for posing from the torso up, nude. I think that the interest may have been sexual and erotic, but I suspect that that's been the way it's been with men, young men, ever since Adam and Eve. There's a desire, at least, to see the female figure and, if not partake of it, to use it in some other erotic way. I suspect that sex had a real strong core--would've played a strong part of my interest in the figure.

LEVIN: You mentioned using the camera in Europe, and you used it in certain ways. Were you at all impressed by artistic things that you saw in Europe?

SOLDNER: Architecturally. Yeah, the cities and houses, the architecture, especially what I would say "quaint" today. I think, coming from the background I came from, I had a lot of love of the romantic and the quaint and the ancient rather than the modern. It took me a number of years to get past that.

You know, Elaine, this brings up a real long-range struggle that I had, and I suspect many people who come out

of the Judeo-Christian background, Protestant sort of a Western-oriented background, really have. You know, you're programmed as a child to see and think of certain things as being beautiful. I recall, for example, in our home a painting on a wall, not an original, a reproduction. It was a romantic sunset-type of thing and the figures in it would be wearing billowy, gauzy sort of clothes. Would probably be a good illustration of [Elizabeth] Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee"-type thing. That was a sentimentality that was the undercurrent. And movies being made at that time were really-- The core was this sentimental relationship with people. It was based on a Western concept of "rightness."

Architecturally our houses were all formally balanced, based on our images of-- The best examples of architecture were Greek, we went back to Greek, and perhaps before that to Egyptian. But the formality, the symmetry of both of those carried right through as we can now point to the White House today, or almost every capitol in United States at one point looked like a dome of St. Peter's. Those were important images, and that set, for us, standards.

In pottery we looked to the Greek vase and to the Egyptian vase as our standards, never heard of Oriental concepts. As a matter of fact, I recall in college in an art history course, on a few occasions, having Oriental

alluded to as barbaric. What little there was known, we just skipped over it, because it was almost like "heathen." The same thing was true in college when we were in an art history survey, when we hit the baroque and rococo of France. It was totally skipped over as decadent and therefore not worthy of study, only pointing it out.

And so, with that kind of a strong value based on European symmetry and formality, it's no wonder, I guess, that I was drawn towards that kind of composition initially, that kind of romanticism, that kind of sentimentality, and that kind of love of classic figure-posing and classic drawing and pottery. These were all tied in with that early background. And it stayed that way for many years until I finally fled Ohio as an older student and came to California.

LEVIN: Well, let's get back to Bluffton. What did you do when you graduated college?

SOLDNER: Initially, I didn't know what to do. I hadn't-- Although I'd graduated with a B.A. in art, it really was only a liberal arts beginning for something else, and I didn't have any plans. I will say this very honestly. I knew that I was not an artist. I knew that there were artists, and I was not one although I had studied it, and I think I considered myself to be involved in art as a hobby. I didn't think of it as a-- If you'd asked me at that

time if I was an artist, I certainly would have said no. Michelangelo is an artist, Rembrandt's an artist, Titian.

The first summer after graduation I needed work, and I started working by helping one of the professors, a chemistry professor, build his house. It was a simple hand-built, stone-built house, reminded me a little bit of a Cotswold English cottage in style of using local stone. My job was mostly just mix cement and haul the stones.

But in the middle of that project, towards the end of the summer, one day a car drove up, and a man by the name of Edgar [H.] Blain jumped out and asked [me] to identify myself, and I did. And he then pointed out--said, well, he was a teacher of art in Medina County, which is northern Ohio up around Cleveland. He said he was the art supervisor, in fact, of five other teachers in the county, and that they were in need of another teacher, and he couldn't find people. (This is right after the war.) So he had started just going around from college to college that had a small art department; and [when he] found anybody who had at least graduated, he said, "Could you come teach?" What teaching meant was all levels, beginning with the first grade and going right straight through the school and ending up with the high school, and that we would be circuit riders so that we would do a different school every

day. We'd fan out from the central county, and each one would have an assigned school.

At first I laughed; I was totally uninterested. I said "No. First of all, I'm not an artist. Secondly, have no art education. I don't know-- I haven't got a degree; I couldn't qualify for a certificate."

And he said, "No problem," he could arrange a temporary certificate over the weekend; and if I would show up on Monday morning, he'd pay me $2400 a year, and I would have a job.

Since I had nothing else to do I said, "Why not?" I went out and bought a little Ford V-8 and showed up.

So my art education, at that time, consisted of following him around for one week through his classes and watching him teach. And then the next week he turned me loose and I started teaching.

We were limited, in the low-budget sense, to crayons, pencils, paper, watercolors; and the assignments tended to be thematic. We would pick a theme like a still life, bring in some apples and oranges. One of my teachers once brought in poison ivy and didn't know the difference. [laughter] It was beautiful, beautiful color.

Another theme, perhaps, might be to illustrate an experience that we'd had. We would discuss experiences, you know. Maybe the first day back from summer you'd

discuss "What all did you do this summer? What was the most outstanding thing that--?" The whole thing was to illustrate it. Occasionally we would actually get into the mechanics of how to draw people so that proportionately they were correct and blah, blah, blah.

I did that for one year, and then, at the end of that year, gave it up because my father had gotten involved with a financial, real estate, scheme where a friend of his was proposing to build a bunch of little triplex apartments. In the summer they'd build them in Ohio, in the winter they'd move south and build them in Florida. And their plan was to make big--you know, use one group of complexes to make another group. They were going to have a whole lot of them. My dad had invested some money in this, and they asked me if I would be willing to work the first summer to learn the trade because they were hoping I could become the foreman. They would take work crews back and forth and build these. I was no more prepared for that than I was for teaching, so I thought, "Why not?"

Also, that summer-- I'd fallen in love the winter before with the girl up the street [Virginia ("Ginny") Geiger] and we'd gotten married, so we moved. I gave up my job and we moved to Van Wert, Ohio, where I actually started helping to construct these buildings. And it was exciting. I learned everything. Because I was supposed to

be the foreman, I would learn the plumbing, I would learn the carpentry, and I would learn the masonry and plastering and electrician. If I didn't do it, at least I watched them and knew what was going on, because that was to be my job.

Unfortunately--or fortunately--at the end of the summer the money gave out. Eventually the company went bankrupt. At one point I found I was mostly just sort of hurting myself by kicking, or picking with a pick and a shovel, the ground, doing the work. All the other workmen had quit because they weren't paid, and I was the only one that hung on out of loyalty to my father. We were really getting down to nothing to live on. We'd not been paid for, I guess, about six weeks.

I recall--now it's kind of funny, you know--that first summer of just having been married, you're very much in love and you have all kinds of long-range plans. One of my plans was to always bring a fresh flower home every day. I started immediately, and all through the summer it was easy, because I could just go take them out of the garden or out of the fields. But as winter came on, and it got colder and colder and we had less and less, I couldn't go buy them. Finally I was down to chrysanthemums. They were the only thing that were still growing, and finally those

got covered with snow, and I couldn't bring them home any more. I felt really guilty and that I'd failed someplace.

Also, I wasn't bringing home any money. We were actually down to eating horse meat which we'd bought in the pet food section, and flowers. We'd french-fry-- Not french-fry, like batter, you know, like apple fritters and so forth, you use a batter and do dandelions and-- Very brave, you know.

But finally, one day I just threw down the pick and said, "This is stupid. I don't need to do this. I'm a college graduate. I'm going back to school. I'm going to get my teaching credential and I'll go back to teaching."

I had married Ginny, my wife, when she was a junior, so that fit into her plans, too. She could also go back and could finish that last year. So we both went back and went back to college and finished. She finished her B.A. and I took a year of education courses that would entitle me to become properly certified.

LEVIN: Was this at Bluffton again?

SOLDNER: Yes.

LEVIN: And did you feel that your experience, having had a year of teaching and art education essentially, or as an art teacher, did you feel confident enough then to look back on it as having really--

SOLDNER: Yeah. One of the things that I've neglected to point out that gave that confidence, was more than just the teaching, it was this guy, Edgar Blain. He was a pretty good guy who was very involved. He was a very good watercolorist in a classic sense, in a traditional sense of watercolor. Not very creative, but he could render landscapes and clouds, like rain and all that, beautifully. But he had more of an education than I did and more technique. So we would paint together on weekends. We'd teach school separately in the week, but weekends he'd say, "Let's go out and paint the barns, the old barns;" or, "Let's go paint the trees when they turn color;" or, "Let's go do this, let's go do that."

He also introduced me to silk-screening, which I'd never heard of; and I built up my own little silk-screen press and, from books, you know, taught myself how to do that. He taught me things that I hadn't learned under Mr. Klassen that needed to be used to teach the students. I would call them "gimmicks" perhaps but they were also techniques.

So I really felt much better when the chips were down about the experience of teaching than I did the experience of being a contractor and supervisor of a building program. I probably would not have gotten into that at all had not my father been part of it. But that was my out.

I almost-- Before going into college, the one person who befriended us a lot during that time was Alec--I forget his last--Stewart, who was a Scotsman. He was a stuccoer, or a plasterer, of the old school. I used to love his skill, just his ability to make molding around the edges of rooms, to make coffered ceilings, and to make any ornate kind of thing out of plaster of paris. He'd come from the old school, he'd done big theater buildings and very elaborate interiors, residential and so forth. At one point I toyed with becoming one. He was a master plasterer, and I was pretty sure that it was going to die out. Somehow or other it appealed to me to apprentice myself to this man and learn the trade just to keep it alive. But in the end-- I don't remember if it was just discussing it with Ginny or there weren't enough jobs anymore, ornate plastering was out. Maybe it was that. I finally said, "No, I think I'll go back and become a teacher." So we did.

LEVIN: And did she get her degree also after that?

SOLDNER: She got her degree.

LEVIN: What was hers in?

SOLDNER: Let's see. She was interested in music, but a liberal arts B.A. I think she then switched to psychology as more to her ability, and it was only then--

Yeah. Then we faced the next move and the next move. I decided-- I was asked by the same teacher, Mr. Blain, to come back and teach with him, but now he had moved in the meantime to a different school system. He'd gone from Medina County down to Wayne County, which is-- The county seat is Wooster, Ohio. He wanted me to come down there and join--

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LEVIN: I wanted to ask you about Medina County and the kinds of schools that you were in. They were all elementary schools?

SOLDNER: Elementary and high school.

LEVIN: And high school, too?

SOLDNER: Yes.

LEVIN: How long did you stay at each school?

SOLDNER: One day, usually.

LEVIN: How many classes?

SOLDNER: Twelve. Well, no. The sixth, seventh, eighth grades. There would be eight there plus a high school class, so that would be nine classes a day, probably about thirty, forty minutes. And I would walk into the classroom--you know, I would go in, I was Mr. Art--and when you'd come in, the little first graders would say, "Oh, goody. Mr. Art's here." I often wondered whether the teachers felt that was a help or a hindrance, you know, having that disruption in their classroom. But it was only once a week, and the kids always sort of got a kick out of it. The hardest ones for all of us, I found, to teach, were the seventh and eighth grade kids. The beginners, the young ones were fun, and high school people had already decided who was the artist and who wasn't, and that was

voluntary. But [in] the seventh and eighth grade it was still compulsory. But at that point, what with their own bodies changing and their own perceptions changing and so forth, many were very uncomfortable with the art program as it was taught. Which eventually led me to make some changes in the program so that I discovered a few fairly important things, perhaps, about people. (Maybe not so much about art.) One of our better art educators was a man by the name of D'Amico and another one was Lowenfeld, Viktor Lowenfeld and something else D'Amico [Victor E. D'Amico]. And, you know, reading from their ideas, I recall being really shocked one day when, I believe it was Lowenfeld, began to talk about the visual- versus the haptic-minded people or students. It had never occurred to me that there was a difference though I realized, even from the first grade, that some of the students could draw trains and cars--the boys would draw trains and cars to look exactly like them with all the bolts and nuts, and the girls would draw beautiful women with the right lipstick and eyelashes and everything--and others would almost scribble. I used to think that the scribblers were, somehow or other, less intelligent, less skillful, neurotic. I didn't understand why they scribbled. Why couldn't they learn basic--? I think it was Lowenfeld that pointed out that they were only-- They were drawing to the

best of their ability, but that they perceived things emotionally rather than visually, rather than photographically. The visually oriented students really did perceive reality (things around them) in the correct proportion as a camera and would learn to draw it that way. But the others were more like a small child who maybe draws his father's head as being the most important, big symbol with very little body or no body and maybe legs or hands and a huge mouth that's always yelling at him. But that's an emotional reaction, "that's how I feel."

And when he said, "It's OK," you know, that opened up all kinds of things which, of course, later on helped me understand a painter. Like the difference between [Piet] Mondrian, who is visually oriented intellectually, and Van Gogh, who is reacting from his gut. But that was an important discovery that had to be applied in the school.

Another discovery I made was that at the seventh, eighth grade level, they were going through puberty. They were really nervous about their bodies: they were out of control, their voices would shift (the boys' voices would shift off, you know), the girls were just sprouting little buds, and everybody was so self-conscious that they hated to do art in the traditional sense of image drawing. They just were so self-critical, so uneasy with it, that they hated the whole class. Eventually I threw in the sponge,

and I decided, well, because of their insecurity and their uneasiness with themselves at this time, I should teach them, give them tools that they were comfortable with. So I started teaching things like aerial perspective, western style, using vanishing points, using rulers--they didn't have to draw it freehand--showing them almost architectural rendering. We got into printing, architectural sort of printing, where we used devices. For example, strings, dipping strings in paint, pressing it on a paper and then yanking it out from under you to give a kind of abstract, expressionistic motifs. They were gimmicks, but they gave these kids a feeling that they were OK, they could do something themselves.

I, eventually, even resorted to my interest in photography and spent a month or so teaching them photography beginning with making pinhole cameras out of cardboard. It cost nothing, and it was busywork that they could measure, they could cut, and they could paste, and they could come out with a functional tool. And this functional tool could also make images. There was a way we could even develop pictures in the classroom, we didn't have to have a darkroom, and I used that.

I also found that, in one school in particular, there was very good clay on the school ground, on the ball diamond, and so I involved them--

LEVIN: The ball diamond?

SOLDNER: Yeah. Baseball field. I involved myself with teaching them how to dig this clay and refine it and how to make small, handbuilt pots. To glaze them we had a problem, because there were no kilns and no ceramic supplies; but I finally resorted to building a real small electric kiln, again from Popular Mechanics magazine. It was only about nine inches square and used toaster elements, but it got up to the temperature. For a glaze we used Twenty Mule Team Borax as the flux and temper paint for the coloring. There was enough clay in temper paint and enough oxides that it would combine with the Twenty Mule Team Borax and make a rudimentary glaze which, you know, was kind of fun. They loved that kind of thing. They liked anything where you could use another, you know, some kind of a support system to make it.

LEVIN: Did your experience with Wayne County differ very much from--

SOLDNER: Yeah. In one way. Three days a week it didn't differ at all. Schools were similar, ideas. But two days of the week were very different, because the students I had there were Amish students; and they were in what were old-fashioned, one-room schoolhouses. The first eight grades would be in one room, and there would be one teacher. Now, the Amish, you know, are a religious sect that have

certain, very strict rules about how they live their lives; and the one thing they will not permit is a photograph of themselves or to draw another person because that is what is called making graven images, and that's forbidden in their Bible.

So I had a problem. I couldn't teach them the same way I could teach the others, and I had to search for other methods. However, I discovered something. One was that they wanted to draw. They had a wonderful sense of color, and they loved to draw whatever they could that was permissible. Well, what was permissible were animals and flowers, and things like that. We just had to shy away from illustrating stories or anything involving people.

When they became sixteen years of age, they became very difficult because their religion really discouraged them from going into high school where they would become worldly--learn too much. And so a brilliant A student up to the eighth grade suddenly would become an F student, and they would drop out. They would flunk out, and they wouldn't have to go to high school. More than that, they would become, not unruly, but passively resisting, and I couldn't get them to do anything.

So again I searched around and searched around and, finally, I lit on an idea that I tried, and it worked. I said, "I understand that you people like to make quilts."

"Oh, yeah. We make quilts at home. Mothers make quilts."

Finally, I asked, "How many of you ever made a quilt?" And eventually, all the girls' hands shot up, immediately; and then I said, "Well, what about the boys? Any of you guys ever helped?" And they were shy about it, but finally a few of them conceded they had, and, eventually, all of them had.

So I said, "Well, could we make a quilt this semester?" They kind of brightened up, and they seemed a little surprised. I said the only thing I wanted them to do was to design the quilt themselves instead of using their traditional family quilts. We eventually talked it all over and decided to do it using farm animals as our motif. We stylized them so they, a lot of them, came off like the animals used up on their weather vanes. They were very familiar with those. So they made the basic patterns. Eventually, several mothers consented to come to school and set up the quilting frame in an empty room, and once a week we'd all get there and quilt.

It was interesting because after the quilting actually got started, it became mechanical, and they became divorced from me, the art teacher, and they began talking amongst themselves, sometimes in German, but very often in English. And by just remaining quiet I got a tremendous knowledge of

their life, and how they thought, and what their interests were, and so forth, because they were just like their mothers. When they quilt, they were gossiping. So that was kind of an interesting problem that needed to be solved that didn't exist in the other county. How to handle these Amish kids.

LEVIN: These were Amish in Ohio.

SOLDNER: Yeah, in Wayne County.

LEVIN: Not associated with the Pennsylvania ones?

SOLDNER: Well, there are different groups throughout the United States. There are some in Pennsylvania, some in Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, in various places.

LEVIN: What got you from there to Colorado?

SOLDNER: Well, seven years more of teaching. Matter of fact, Mr. Blain left after the first year, and I was catapulted into his position by the county superintendent as the county supervisor of art.

So it was then up to me to hire other art teachers and to be in charge of the art program for the entire county. It meant that I was doing a little less teaching per week myself, two days administration and three days teaching. I would literally go around from school to school and observe my teachers, partly to help them and partly to maintain a standard throughout the county.

It also meant that I was thrust into the county seat almost administratively. I would return to my office which was next door to the county superintendent's office every night. Each morning I would return to check the mail, talk to the secretary, talk to him, and then leave.

LEVIN: What city was that in?

SOLDNER: Wooster. And it became convenient for him, sometimes, to even use me as a surrogate county superintendent. In other words, a parent would come in with a problem, just a work permit required or something like that, and he was too busy to deal with it, he'd ask me to see them. Or occasionally two board meetings would happen the same night throughout the county, and he couldn't attend both, he would sometimes ask me to fill in for him, at least to report back, not necessarily make decisions. There were lots of little ways, somehow or other, he expanded my job as an art supervisor to almost an assistant county superintendent, not officially, but in practice.

At some point after about seven years, eight years I believe it was--six, seven years--he suggested that I should consider getting a master's degree and prepare myself to become an administrator, probably principal first and, eventually, superintendent of schools, mostly because they were necessary (they needed them), and he was happy with my performance.

Before I go into that, because that will change a lot, there is one other thing connected with the teaching experience that I think I would like to bring up.

At the high school level in the latter years of my teaching, I became rather frustrated because it seemed to me that we only dealt with about ten percent or less of the entire high school student body, just those who elected to take art. It seemed to me that I was, in a sense, not helping or touching or affecting or influencing the rest of the student body.

So I again searched for ways to get around that. I think it took a little unique twist at that time. Perhaps it wouldn't be considered unique today. But I, in a sense, went directly to the theater department on the one hand, and said to them, "Look, can the art department be of any help to you in making your stage, your scenery, and so forth?" I had been a pretty involved thespian in college, so I knew a lot about painting the flats and rendering them so they looked like villages or whatever. And they were delighted, of course. In most cases they were delighted (not all of them, but most of them were delighted) to have the art department really participate. And it gave me a chance to show the students, to expand the art experience from just that little narrow number of people who had, obviously, more skill in rendering, to include others

who-- It wasn't "important," they weren't making "art," they were making a stage set. And I also went to the farm, to the-- What would you call it? The mechanical arts, I guess they called it.

LEVIN: Industrial arts?

SOLDNER: Industrial arts, yeah, teacher. Luckily, in one school, he was young and open to new ideas; and I said, "Is there some way that I could work with your boys?" We talked about it for a while, and, finally, I said, "Well, what are they doing?"

He says, "Mostly, they're making furniture."

And I said, "Well, what kind of plans do they work from? Where do they get their plans?"

And he said, "Well, we've got a book." And he opened his book, and, God, they were awful, real old Victorian types of ideas.

So I got an idea. I said, "Well, could I help you show your boys how to design their own furniture? And then you teach them how to make it." So that would involve visualizing it and then making plans. And I said, "Now, I know you can teach drawing, mechanical drawing, but I don't think you can teach perspective rendering and showing things in space. Let me work at that."

So once a week, then, I would go in with the boys, and, initially, I would say, "What do you want to make? A

chair or what?" And I found the best way was to have them make it out of balsa wood or cardboard, a model, prototype. And from that then, I could teach them to draw it from various angles in perspective, which they never [otherwise] got. And they would eventually end up making the thing they'd designed.

I could get them interested on [other levels]. More of an interest, say, in wood, the properties of wood rather than just, "This is oak, and this chest is going to be oak." I could involve them, say, on George Nakashima's sensitivity of "This is a walnut board with a knothole in it. Now, rather than thinking of this knothole as some-thing to throw away, is there some way that you could capitalize on it? Is there some way that we could bring up the grain instead of imitate the grain?" They were basic art concepts.

I did the same thing in a different sense with the home economics teacher. I went to her and said, "Can I help you with your girls?"

And so, once a week, she would say, "Well, next week we're going to do cosmetics," and we would divide it, and she would talk about the care of the skin and cleansing necessities and avoidance of pimples and maybe base make-up to eliminate blemishes, and so forth. But I would get involved with changing the shape of the face by high-

lighting, or by downplaying or accentuating.

Next week she said, "Well, let's do flower arrangements." And she would approach it from the point of view of perhaps of a traditional use of a flower arrangement on a table in a home.

I wouldn't know right now what she would teach, but mine would be, basically, "Well, you can arrange it in a formal style or an informal style, and what is the difference? What kind of vase would go with this, and what kind of flowers and what would be the occasion for this one, and what would be the occasion for that one?"

We'd do the same thing with settings, table settings. She'd say, "Well, I know where the forks and knives and spoons go, and all that, but you probably could tell them better what's a proper place for sterling or stainless or china or earthenware or linen or checkered tablecloth and--"

Those were the things that I did feel-- And I began to feel better about myself, you know, as an art teacher affecting the whole school than I did as an art teacher just dealing with that very limited ten percent.

Through all of this, I think I was learning more about-- There's more to art than what I've been taught. And when he suggested that I go back, when the county superintendent finally suggested that I go get a master's,

I made a probably pretty long-range important decision and that was to leave Ohio. Partly because it was too hot in the summer. I could have gone to Ohio State [University], which would have been the classic, but I decided, instead, to go west until it turned cool; and the University of Colorado at Boulder was the selection because it fit everything I was looking for. It was beautiful, it was cool, and it was a distance. My wife and I had both begun getting itchy.

That first summer we had, let's see, I guess she was pregnant so we signed up for a four-year, four-summer, program--it would take four summers.

Barely got in the program. You know, my knowledge, especially historically, was very skimpy, and I had to take both a two-hour written and a two-hour visual history exam. I think I flunked it, but as the examiner wrote as a PS, "He seems to have a facility in his field. Perhaps we should accept him on a probationary basis." So I got in, but it was very close.

And that, of course, that experience turned me in a whole new direction because, for the first time, I was confronted by an honest-to-goodness art school.

LEVIN: What year was this?

SOLDNER: That would be 1950. And the art school was composed of people who were specialists: like a print-

maker, a painter, a sculptor, art historian, and a ceramist. It was no longer a one-man department. We had to take figure drawing, which I'd never done, you see. We had to involve ourselves.

In a sense, it was a mini-University of Iowa because it was predominantly-- From the head of the department right down through the ranks, most of them had come from there. It was a very tough art school.

It was also a very good art school in the summer, because the GI bill had allowed a lot of money to bring in outside guest residents, resident artists. Some are not well-known today, but there was a guy by the name of Raulston Crawford. One summer there was Louis Schanker from New York City, abstract expressionist. There was Jimmy Ernst, who was the son of Max Ernst. I forget who some of the others were, but they were outstanding. And then we had outstanding visiting historians, so it was a very vital, alive art department.

LEVIN: But it wasn't that you realized it was that kind of art school that brought you there.

SOLDNER: No. I was headed towards art education, not being an artist. You could get both in their program. So, basically, I was working toward a master's in art education, but they were forcing me to think about being more serious as a painter, a printmaker, drawing, the whole thing.

In my third summer I had an elective, and I looked over the program to decide what it would be. I did discover that ceramics was being taught by a guest teacher that summer, a woman from the college of art, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh, Scotland. Her name was Katie Horseman. And I thought, "Well, I haven't tried ceramics other than my first experience at Bluffton. Maybe I should give it a whirl." I did. She was terrific in the sense that she was teaching right at the level that I was ready, and I just took the bit and ran with it.

LEVIN: Did she teach you wheels, throwing?

SOLDNER: Yeah. She taught me wheel-throwing, honest-to-God moving clay from one place to another. She taught glaze chemistry. She taught firing. I did an independent study of going out and identifying raw clay materials and bringing them back to the lab and testing them and getting a fundamental-- She was trained by, I believe, Bernard Leach or at least a student of Leach's (not directly Leach). She and Ruth Duckworth were together at one point. So she had a very sound background, in English ceramics.

LEVIN: Did she talk about it, too?

SOLDNER: About what?

LEVIN: About ceramics or about her feelings about clay or--

SOLDNER: Oh, yes. She had very limited-- She had the European concept of beauty. I recall copying down religiously a little rule that when you make a vase, the widest part of the curve, the fattest part, should be above the middle of the pot. And it was years later I realized that you could also make the curve lower than the middle of the pot. She had rules, but they were all very strongly grounded in [Bernard] Leach, a European philosophy or ethic.

LEVIN: How did this make you realize that art education wasn't where you wanted to go?

SOLDNER: Oh, okay. Almost simultaneously at that time, I had begun to get a little voice, I guess, inside, that like a tape recorder kept repeating, "There's something I must do. There's something I want to do." Now, that was not the first experience. I probably should have mentioned that earlier in high school, at a time when I was not-- When I was too fearful to involve myself in the art classes-- Remember?

LEVIN: Um-hm.

SOLDNER: That little voice began at that time and it really was something like some people talk to themselves. I don't think I spoke it out loud. I may have, but at least I heard it. And it said, "There's something I want to do, something I want to do." I like to invent things anyhow, have always figured out how to do things, how to

make equipment: I made my own enlarger at one time, I made my own strobe light, I made my own photoelectric cell when I was in photography. I've loved to solve inventive problems, and that seemed to go right along with it except that it was never solved by making something mechanical. The feeling was that it had to vent itself another way.

Well, I'll never forget one night, probably a senior in high school, this feeling kept getting stronger and stronger. Though I wasn't taking any art course, I was faking painting, I was painting photographs, black and white photographs. We call it tinting. In those days before color film, you would get tinted photographs to make people look somewhat real. I'd learned to do that when I was apprenticing in the photography shop so that was easy. I had my own sets of oils and would tint photographs for people.

Well anyhow, this one night it had reached a boiling point, and I, rather blindly, found a piece of cloth. (I must have stretched it. I must have known a little bit about how you stretch cloth on a frame. It wasn't sized. I didn't know how you did that.) But with these tinting oils and a picture torn out of a magazine by Victor Kempler (I think that was his name, a photographer, a Life photographer, I believe) of some, like, Bora Bora lagoon, again at sunset. I copied it all night long; I just wore myself

out that night copying this painting. And in the morning I fell exhausted into bed and refreshed, and the little voice was gone.

Well, that was the first time that, I guess, I realized that there was an inner itch or need that had to be fulfilled. And it would recur on different levels, but generally I would find the solution.

In the year that we're now talking about, when I was in Colorado, about the third summer, I recall, very specifically, discussing it with my wife, Ginny, that I wanted to do something with my hands. I just felt that need.

I mused about the possibilities, and perhaps I could become a-- I said, "Maybe we could move up here in the mountains and use these aspen trees, and I could carve wooden spoons and salad bowls for tourists." I'd seen that done in Switzerland, you know, the wood-carvers in Switzerland were very-- We'd been over there. And I guess I thought, "Well, it's a way of life that I think I would like to align myself with."

But when I took clay, you see, that did the same thing. It suddenly gave me a place where I could work with my hands. It was honorable, I could get a master's degree, we could call it art, and in any sense that I could perceive at the time, it fulfilled that inner voice to make objects, make things. However, that was in my third

summer; and the decision, I think, was cast at that point that I would become a potter.

The problem was I first had to finish the master's degree in art education in order to study further, because the GI bill was structured in such a way that you couldn't interrupt a degree and start another one. You had to complete what you'd begun.

So we returned the fourth summer, finished dutifully the written thesis, just swore all summer long, was terrible at it. The thesis, I forget the theme of the thesis, but it was an attempt to prove the importance of the theoretical artist or the pure artist by showing his effect on our everyday life. That seemed to me related to art education. And I had many, many examples. For example, say, a painting, a surrealistic painting by Dali, and I would find a window like a store like Bullock's department store where there would be the dummies, the mannequins would be set in a surrealistic way. The tie, sometimes, was amazingly close because interior decorators were constantly looking for new ideas. A [Vassily] Kandinsky painting would suddenly show up on a tie, a mural painting would suddenly become an earring, a piece of jewelry. It was easy, you know, to develop Mondrian's paintings affecting linoleum patterns on architecture, and just on

and on. It was a thesis that was really very simple once I decided on doing it.

The hardest part was just learning to write articulately and correctly with grammatically right usages. But it was good. I'm glad I did it. It forced me to think, to be correct, to be able to communicate through writing. Any articles I've ever had to write since are certainly a reflection of that experience. And I think, sometimes, my students should have it, you know. It's not part of the program at all.

After I finished it that year, I resigned my job and talked it over with Ginny, and she was very eager to leave and get outside. We'd had a taste of the West by going as far as Colorado.

The big decision then was, "Well, if I want to become a potter, where should I study?" I'd surveyed several of my friends. Jim and Nan McKinnel I had met in Boulder. They were living in a trailer there, and, in fact, they were the ones who were responsible for bringing Miss Horseman, Katie Horseman, to the University of Colorado. Though they were not employed there, they were living there, and they made the suggestion to the school and the school brought her over. So, in that one year, I'd had those two outside contacts: a woman who really knew what clay was all about and the McKinnels.

LEVIN: What were they doing in Colorado?

SOLDNER: Well, he was an engineer. He is an engineer, he's a ceramic engineer. He was working for the government, soil testing or something in geology. They carried a little trailer behind their house trailer, a little two-wheel trailer; and they had a kiln in it, a handmade kiln, a little electric kiln. And Nan had a little Denver electric kiln in her kitchen in this trailer, and they were making pottery on the side.

So they turned out to be most helpful. I wrote to a few other people. There was a woman by the name of Jane Parshall who had been winning some prizes in Ohio at the time (I have since lost track of her). I asked, "If you could go back to graduate school, where would you go?" Jane's advice was to go to Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan] with Maija Grotell, because that's where she had studied.

Other people had other places, but the McKinnels-- When I wrote to the McKinnels, my letter didn't come back from Boulder. It had been forwarded and it came back from a place called Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana. The letter said, in effect, that they had left Boulder, and they had gone to the Archie Bray Foundation for a year to learn high-fire, stoneware reduction from a potter by the name of Peter Voulkos; and that they were really enjoying

their experience. It was exciting and new, and what a wonderful opportunity for me to go back and get a master's. They had very little advice, themselves, but they said, "We've taken the liberty of asking Peter what he thinks you should do. And he says, 'It depends on what your friend really wants. For example, if he wants to get a Ph.D., he's got to go to Ohio State because that's the only school that gives a Ph.D. in ceramics. If he wants to involve himself as an artist in clay, he should probably go to Cranbrook. If he wants to teach it and perhaps get involved in, maybe, commercial, he should go to Alfred University in [Alfred] New York. If he wants a vacation, then why not the University of Hawaii. An easy degree, if he wants, is to go to Oakland School of Arts and Crafts [California College of Arts and Crafts],' where he graduated from." Apparently, when he was there, it was very easy. "'If he really wants to learn to pot, he should study with Marguerite Wildenhain.'"

And he didn't say a thing about Peter Voulkos, but they added their own PS, and they said, "By the way, though he didn't say it, Pete is leaving here this fall, and he's going to start a new program at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (or Otis Art Institute) in Los Angeles. We think they're going to offer a graduate

degree, and we recommend you consider working with Voulkos down there."

So I did a little homework. I started looking at Craft Horizons magazines in those days that showed photographs of people winning prizes and of their work. The more I saw--you know, as a matter of fact, he was winning everything, and it was good--I immediately decided that's where I want to go. I eventually wrote to the school and sent my credentials and asked if I could be accepted. I sent some photographs of some pottery that I'd done, and they said OK. Now I think, in retrospect, it was much easier getting in then than it would be today because I had such a limited background in clay, just one year with Katie Horseman.

I had continued to work on my own through the winter in the basement. I'd built a couple of wheels. I built an electric wheel with a Willys (which was an automobile). It had Willys transmission in it, so I had three speeds forward and one back.

LEVIN: Was this in Ohio?

SOLDNER: In Ohio. On my own, I had continued with what she gave me. Really, I knew what I wanted to do, and I'd gotten involved with glazing and had built the necessary equipment.

But the photographs of pots, you know, they really weren't very good pots. However, I was the only applicant that the school was considering because Mr. [Millard] Sheets, who designed the program, had decided it was going to become a four-year program, skipping the B.A. degree, taking people at the junior level and going directly --skipping the B.A. and giving only an M.F.A. after four years. It was very unusual, [but] his thinking wasn't bad. He said, "Well, we want to be an art school, but we want to be academic. So we're saying, 'Go get your academic in your freshman, sophomore [years] someplace else, we don't care where, then transfer into our program as a freshman or a first-year student.'" Not a freshman, it would be the equivalent of junior. "'And in four more years we'll give you the basics.'" The first two years you couldn't even take clay if you wanted to, you had to take drawing, painting, design--their fundamental program. Then in your junior year you could focus and become a painter, sculptor, ceramist, or printmaker. And he had brought some pretty good people there: Dick Haines and Arthur [Forbes] Ames and Pete Voulkos and Renzo Fenci and-- I can't remember all of them.

But since I had a master's, I was more of a dilemma. They certainly weren't going to stick me in their first-

year program; they decided to stick me in their senior year, meaning that I had one year that I could work.

We made the shift, we made the move, put everything in storage and piled the rest of it in a new Plymouth with a small trailer and child and came West.

LEVIN: How old was Stephanie?

SOLDNER: She was two and a half, I guess.

Came down here and the first night learned about Tortilla Pete's, which was a restaurant down on Alvarado. We'd never had Mexican food in our lives, and the first night somebody said, "Oh, you've got to go to Tortilla Pete's." It was a real exciting time.

LEVIN: That's how you knew you were in California.

SOLDNER: Yeah, really. And in terms of school, at that time it was interesting because, since it was a new school, since I was the only student that they could accept in the ceramics program because it was an advanced program for about a month or six weeks, I was the only student there, too. And I would add one other rather interesting thing, we had absolutely no facilities.

LEVIN: So how did you, as an only student, and Pete function?

SOLDNER: As the only teacher?

LEVIN: Yeah.

SOLDNER: Well, I was three years older, so I had a little clout. [laughter] He had to respect me. No. It was very simple. Pete never separated anyhow. You were never "a student." He would always introduce me just as Paul. He wouldn't say "my student," "my friend," or anything, just "Paul." He really just simply accepted me as a peer.

We would travel around the county a lot, Los Angeles County. I'd go to class, and it became almost an habitual theme. He'd say, "What do you want to do today? You want to get a cup of coffee?" And then while we were having a cup of coffee, he'd say, "Well, why don't we go over to UCLA and see what Laura Andreson is doing," or "Why don't we go over to Chouinard and see what Susan Peterson's up to," or "Why don't we go down to 'SC [University of Southern California] and visit Vivika Heino." It was fantastic. I was visiting all these other schools and seeing what their equipment was and what they were doing.

Sometimes we'd do more, we'd find equipment. We'd start looking for equipment, and he'd say, "Well, let's go talk to the Advanced Kilns company. They build crematoriums and things. Maybe we can get them to build a kiln for us." We cruised all over the place. Sometimes he'd say, "Well, let's just go look at an art exhibit. Let's go down to La Cienega Boulevard and check out the show."

Because he was getting very interested. In this time I saw and met a lot of Southern California potters and potteries.

We slowly, then, began putting together a department, meaning we located clay, premixed clay from a place called Italian Terra-Cotta Company, and it wasn't bad. It turned out to be a little coarse and a little high in silica, but we didn't have a mixer so we just used their clay to begin with.

LEVIN: Was it high-fire?

SOLDNER: Yeah. And eventually we decided we'd make our own wheel. He didn't particularly like wheels that were available at the time in Southern California.

LEVIN: What was available?

SOLDNER: Well, there was the-- [Richard] Petterson was making a wheel, and Peterson was manufacturing one. It was kind of a--

LEVIN: Susan Peterson?

SOLDNER: Susan Peterson's husband, Jack, was manufacturing one. It was a rim-drive type, sort of a modified Randall, and the Petterson was a modified Randall rim-drive.

Voulkos preferred something he'd used up in Archie Bray called the Denver Fire-Clay [Company] wheel, which was quite unique and different in that it had a variable-speed motor and a gear drive so it was a very compact unit. But it had more power than a kick wheel and it had complete

control of the speeds from zero to fast. He eventually contacted Mike Kalin who was head of the Advanced Kilns company and asked him as a manufacturer, somebody who would have sources of materials, if he would be able to locate the company that made the motor and the gear box that the Denver Fire-Clay used. And once we located the salesman, it was simple to make our own wheel. All we had to have was a head and build a frame. So that was one of the first wheels.

Pete also built one of the first kick wheels, but it turned out to be-- He built it up at the shop, at the Advanced Kilns company, using their tools and their material. And it turned out to be a typical Voulkos wheel, overbuilt. It had an eight-inch channel-iron framework and four-inch pipe legs and a three-inch maple tabletop. It was a good wheel, but it weighed four or five hundred pounds. It weighed too heavy to move around.

LEVIN: Did you ever get it out of the company?

SOLDNER: Yeah. We got it out of the company, and we had it at school, and it was his private wheel for a long time.

I was watching a-- During that time I was-- One day I was watching a person in a wheelchair across the street in front of me, and something clicked in the back of my head that said, "Hey. You don't have to make a wheel heavy to make it strong. You can use trusses or trussing." And so

I had a go at designing a wheel at the same company. I'd say, "Well, let me try my hand." And it turned out to be a lightweight-pipe construction, trussed frame using a steel flywheel with a wooden kicking top.

Pete liked it, and he liked it well enough, he said, "If I get you an order from the school, will you make eight of them for us?" and I was in business. I made those first eight, I think they're still there.

That became a part-time business for me. I was doing them in my garage because somebody like Laura Andreson would come from UCLA and say, "Hey, Pete, where did you get those wheels, they're kind of interesting?"

And he said, "Well, Paul makes them."

She said, "Oh? Well, if I get you a purchase order, can you make me four?" And that's the way I--

LEVIN: Do you know if those were the first wheels that UCLA had or did she have others before?

SOLDNER: No, she had a very interesting philosophy that they should have one of every kind of wheel available, she thought, even if they were bad. Pete and she used to, not argue, but debate that. Pete would say, "You ought to have the best equipment."

And she would say, "No. You ought to have one of everything so your students, who are going to become teachers, may have had some experience with everything and

won't be thrown if they are given something bad." So she even had at that time--[F.] Carlton Ball talks about it--sewing machine wheels. They used to take old treddle-type sewing machines; and somehow or other they'd belt it to make a very crude [wheel], almost the power of a phonograph record.

But that's just the kind of wheel that was being used in those days. There's no reason-- No wonder that Voulkos wasn't happy, wasn't satisfied. Because he trained with Frances Senska, and she had somewhere-- I don't know about her training, Alfred or Ohio State, maybe--

LEVIN: [Glen] Lukens was part of it.

SOLDNER: Lukens? Well, anyhow, she had a pretty good background and knew the difference, and they had the kick wheel, where you kick the wheel directly, not the Leach-type eccentric peddle wheel. That was Ohio State [that had that] kind of eccentric Leach-type wheel.

LEVIN: Eccentric?

SOLDNER: Eccentric. Yeah. That was one where you stood on one leg and went back and forth with the other. It was fairly popular, but Pete didn't like it. He liked the kind where you worked directly by kicking the surface of the fly wheel up to top speed, and then you'd coast and throw on the momentum. They're called momentum wheels, and that essentially is--

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SOLDNER: That's essentially the way I became a manufacturer and the way the wheels evolved, the pottery equipment [Soldner Pottery Equipment, Inc.].

LEVIN: I want to pursue that, but I want to also get to what you found in L.A. when you did all this walking around with Voulkos. What were the different labs that you went into, what were they like?

SOLDNER: Well, they were quite similar, actually. Production pottery was the basis of the investigation. There was more of a knowledge, I'd say, of Asian glazes like Chinese dynasty, Ch'ing dynasty, celadons, and there was kind of a mixture really. There was also a California style subcurrent that was low-fire, more decorative. Not so much in the university, but we'd see it around. There was somebody called Sascha Brastoff, and there were several others all over Southern California, who made ceramics in a more decorative sense, lamp bases. They were almost all low-fire.

LEVIN: Did you see a California style in that?

SOLDNER: Yeah, yeah, sure. Schools were probably not, at that time, much different from each other. Susan had an Alfred background, and Vivika had-- Where did she study? I think she went to Alfred too. I'm not sure.

LEVIN: A varied background.

SOLDNER: Laura emphasied the functional pottery, and Petterson was emphasizing functional pottery, and Uri down in Long Beach, so pretty much all of them were that way. And Pete was too, you know, at that time. He was still making pitchers, tea bowls, casseroles, and plates.

LEVIN: Did his work look any different that what you saw [other places]?

SOLDNER: Yes, first of all it was larger in scale, and it was more fluid in making, less rigid. I think we have just come through a period in California pottery where emphasis was placed, almost, on good craftsmanship being synonymous with making a handmade object appear to be machine made. There was a lot of that, a lot of emphasis on cleanliness of glaze and perfection of surface, denial of accidents and denial of crazing.

The Natzlers [Gertrud and Otto], of course, had a little different thing going. They were low-fire, what I would call vessel-oriented clay objects that were not functional, though they were vessels. But in a way they preceded, to a certain extent I think, where some of us are today. Their interest was in using clay in a vessel form, but trying to sell it--trying to make it, show it, and sell it--for its aesthetic reasons. The big thing, of course, was the chemistry and the mystery of their glazes, where

they got their colors and the textures, their crater glazes and things like that.

LEVIN: Were they open about answering questions on that?

SOLDNER: No. I can see why. They made a full business from it. They didn't teach and so they were not open. They were protective, they were trying to impress you that they could do something nobody else could do. In a way we weren't interested. That is, Pete and his students weren't really interested in it. I think other people might have been. We recognized that they had a good thing going for them financially. They were down here on Wilshire Boulevard at the Ambassador Hotel. There was a little gallery there, and there [was] another gallery or two maybe, in Hollywood. They had tied in with the movie industry to make-- You know, after they finished a picture they used to give watches away, or little gifts, to the people who were involved, and at one point they tied in where they got a Natzler pot. So they were very much entrenched in this area.

LEVIN: Were they, would you say, the best known? This is 1954.

SOLDNER: Yeah, I would think so, as a professional potter.

LEVIN: What about the Heinos and the Hoover Street shop?

SOLDNER: Well, first of all there was-- When I met Vivika, there was no "Heinos." She was single. And one

summer she went back to New England, as I recall--maybe one winter, took a year off or something--and met Otto. He was not a potter at the time, he was a woodworker, or a wood chopper. He came to the door, as I understand (I think she told me the story); he came to the door during the Christmas season with some wood for the fireplace, and she invited him in for a drink, and they became friends. Then, when she and Susan switched jobs-- You remember, you see, Susan was first at Chouinard [Art Institute] and Vivika was at 'SC; and then they switched at some point after Vivika came back. And the Heinos moved into the little Hoover Street place where Otto, well, both of them-- She was teaching and Otto started taking classes from her at 'SC. He progressed very fast, very rapidly, and began producing, and they had a nice little salesroom which basically is what they're still doing, working from their own salesroom.

She tells an interesting story, by the way, of that time, that she said, "Well, Otto's pretty good as a student but not good enough. I had to give him a C." [laughter]

LEVIN: She told you that?

SOLDNER: She told me that one time.

LEVIN: In front of Otto?

SOLDNER: Yes, I think so. He was very, very quiet at the time, very quiet. I guess he still is.

LEVIN: Do you remember what their pottery looked like?

SOLDNER: Yeah, initially she made rather small bowls, high-fire, some of them, mostly stoneware, all functional. When Otto began throwing after he picked up the technique, they started getting a little bigger; and they concentrated at one point on a glaze which I've always attributed to them. I think it's a high alumina matte, probably a high silica matte. It's almost like sandpaper matte, but it's high-temperature and has nice, soft beige colors that has proven to be pretty popular as a lamp base texture. It's not glazed. It's a glaze that hasn't quite matured because the silica is so high that it's upset the flux. Their shapes were all really round, formal wheel-thrown. They were not very experimental, and they were not asymmetrical.

That, of course, I think was, I would say, about all the schools at that time in the early fifties. Very few people had broken out, including Voulkos.

LEVIN: What about Susan Peterson, was her work any different?

SOLDNER: I don't remember too much about her work being much different. It also was small bowls of nice glazes, functional design, and bottles, but I really can't recall differences.

LEVIN: Who else was working at that time that-- Richard Petterson?

SOLDNER: Yeah, Richard Petterson and Laura Andreson at UCLA.

LEVIN: Was Laura doing her Chinese glazes at that time?

SOLDNER: Yes. And I also think porcelain. I still feel a Scandinavian influence in her work, and she was definitely doing some of those, the kind of cool stoneware, the simple Scandinavian design type. And Petterson tended to do that, though he wasn't very productive. He would make occasional pots. I think that he loved the chemistry of glazes and taught that and explored that to some extent. Or there would also be-- Wayne Long had been teaching at Otis, the Los Angeles Art Institute, prior to Pete coming, and Wayne was more of the California-style decorative design. More allied with the Sascha Brastoff type of pottery.

LEVIN: Where was he teaching at that particular time?

SOLDNER: At Otis.

LEVIN: At Otis. Was he in any conflict with Voulkos?

SOLDNER: Well, they replaced him, but he continued to teach part time, like night classes and, I think, weekends. Later he was-- After Voulkos left-- He outlasted Voulkos, but [he] didn't go back into the ceramics department. He taught design, I think, and was in charge of their gallery for a number of years, the Otis Gallery.

LEVIN: Did you hear anything about Glen Lukens or the work he had done at USC?

SOLDNER: Not enough to know. It was all hearsay, and I only knew that he had preceded Vivika and he was greatly admired.

LEVIN: Had you ever seen any of his work?

SOLDNER: No. I think, you know, in all honesty, we tended to, we students at Otis tended to admire Pete so completely, in the same way, I'm sure, as students with Lukens admired Lukens as a teacher, as a person, that we really didn't look much further in that sense. We would look at what Voulkos looked at. Like, if Voulkos would want to go see a Rosanjini show, that would interest us. If he wanted to look at Picasso's pottery, someplace on exhibit, that would interest us.

LEVIN: He took you all with him.

SOLDNER: Yeah, pretty much so. We got a little cliquish. Some were not included, but I think that that was mostly a human sifting of personalities. Not everybody meshes equally well; and some people probably align themselves politically, emotionally, and in other ways much closer with the leader. Others have a little more distance and reservation. So, not everybody who worked there was on the inside, I guess you'd call it.

LEVIN: Did Harrison McIntosh work at Otis at all?

SOLDNER: Not as a student. He taught night classes sometimes.

LEVIN: At Otis while Pete was there?

SOLDNER: I think so, as I remember. Uh-hm, I'm pretty sure I remember seeing him.

LEVIN: And were you aware of his work at that time?

SOLDNER: Yeah, and Pete respected it. You see, I'm answering again as a student. What Pete respected or Pete didn't like, we tended to like or dislike. Which in retrospect, of course, only indicates one's immaturity. But Pete respected him and felt that it was not the kind of work he would do. He could if he'd wanted, he had the ability. But for what it was it was good. For the style that McIntosh chose to work in--

Pete thought that way also about people like the MacKenzies [Warren and Alix], you know. It was small, almost insignificant work that they did. Functional, but almost insignificant in an anonymous sense, compared to Pete's. Yet he respected them, felt that the work was dignified and well crafted and had its place. I never heard him really knock it.

LEVIN: What about the atmosphere in that lab and the kinds of things that went on in terms of teaching? What the kids did.

SOLDNER: Teaching was limited to experiential learning. Pete worked there. He didn't have a studio at the time, just having come from Montana. He didn't work much through

the day. He would come in late in the morning with a cup of coffee in his hand and appeared to be rather bleary or not-with-it. I'm not sure that's the way it was, but that was the impression. And he would sit around most of the day just drinking coffee and talking informally about anything. He took lots of coffee breaks across the street as well as having a pot going in the studio. In later years I was to develop Meniere's syndrome because of all the coffee I drank during that period.

LEVIN: Heavens!

SOLDNER: But it never fazed Pete. Then there'd be the night school. He might get rolling a little bit in late afternoon, but then he'd go home to have dinner. And there was a night school that he wasn't teaching, so he wouldn't show up until about ten at night. Probably had a nap or something. Then he would come in. As soon as the night class left, then Pete would start rolling up his sleeves and getting to work, and he'd work intensively then for two, three hours. The typical night would be that we'd work [until] maybe a half hour before the bars would close, maybe an hour before, and we'd go out and have a beer.

In retrospect, we listened to some pretty good jazz, too (we probably didn't realize). Like there was a club out there nearby the school called the Tiffany Club, and another one called The Hague. And I know, like, Shelly

Manne was playing in one, and Miles Davis was blowing his horn in another and-- Who was the flautist [Herbie Mann]? We'd go across to Hollywood and catch Peggy Lee at a bar. It was great, you know.

Then we'd go eat, you know, after the bar closed, and the night club would close, and we'd end up down at Tiny Naylor's or there's a little place down there, a hot dog stand, Tommy's, I think it's called, on Third and Beverly, maybe. At two o'clock in the morning we'd be having a hot dog and just hated--really, kind of, it was interesting--hated to leave, hated to break up, hated to go to bed, hated to--

It was a difficult time in my family's sense, because I was never home, and--relatively young married with a small child--it precipitated a crisis at one point where my wife had to blow the whistle and say, "Hey, you're in love with your teacher."

We worked it out so that I spent weekends, at least Sundays, finally, saying, "OK, I'll be home Sundays." But I felt like I was missing something when he was there if I wasn't there, and I wanted to be there. I think that was-- Probably, to describe the atmosphere, the best that I can recall, that you hated to leave because you were afraid you were going to miss something. And nothing was ever scheduled, so you didn't know what was going to happen.

LEVIN: So you had to be there whenever he was there.

SOLDNER: You had to be there, yeah. It was hard on me, because I was also running the coffee shop to make some money, and I'd have to be there at eight-thirty, nine o'clock in the morning. Actually, I had to get up earlier than that to take Stephanie, our daughter, off to nursery school because Ginny had a job, and we barely saw each other. I'd take care of Stephanie and feed her and do her hair and take her to nursery school and then go back to Otis and get ready for coffee break, and Pete could sleep through all of that. Then I'd try to stay up with him the next night. I probably burned the candle a couple of years on that in that year, but it was worth it. I would not ever want it any other way.

LEVIN: So there was a lot of discussion?

SOLDNER: Uh-hm, about everything: art, mechanics, tools, women, politics. A lot of joking around. It was a very relaxed time. Pete never instructed directly. It was usually by inference or indirectly, obliquely. He never really critiqued your work either, he just encouraged you.

Do you remember I said my first teacher, Mr. Klassen, was so supportive and encouraged us to work even if he didn't know how to do it? I've had a series of that kind of teachers.

In a sense, Horseman was similar. Now, she did know how to do her own work, and she did teach it, but, more importantly, she encouraged you to do anything she didn't know. I forget exactly--oh, I guess that clay testing that I decided to do. She knew how to proceed about it, but she didn't teach it. She encouraged it. And she also worked in the classroom.

I think there's a pattern for me that's been very important with those four teachers. There was the one other I didn't mention, a painting teacher, Chuck Annan, who also worked at school the whole time in his studio. We'd hear the brushes rattling and we knew that he was busy. He would come out and critique our work and look at it, but as soon as he could he'd escape and go back to work. I think that that became a pattern, so that the time I hit Voulkos, I felt very much at home with that kind of nonstructure.

LEVIN: It didn't inhibit you?

SOLDNER: No, not at all. It gave us some-- He gave us goals without talking about it. He gave us things by which we could test our development, and sometimes it would be really subtle. I think, on one occasion, I was into throwing some real tall cylinders (for me); and when I came back the next morning, there were several others that he'd

made, taller. Not much, but just enough. He didn't say anything about it.

The only time he ever said anything directly [was] one time when we unloaded a kiln. I had tried to do some calligraphy, because he was doing such beautiful bamboo drawings. I tried it and it was clumsy, but I didn't see it. So as we unloaded the kiln, he said very gently without looking at any specific piece or picking it up, he said, "You know, you don't have to decorate pots unless you feel a real need for it." And I let that soak in and he then added, sort of under his breath, "As a matter of fact, there's more good pots ruined by bad decoration than bad pots are made good." That was sufficient critique for me to stop decorating for a couple of months. When I picked it up, I picked it up on my own terms rather than copying him.

The only other thing that I recall he taught directly were two other instances. One was, again, an accident happened in the kiln. The clay that we were using had begun to bloat and a particular pot that came out of the kiln was quite nice. I had great expectations for it except that it had these big wartlike bumps and bloats all over the surface, and I was so disgusted that I was in the process of destroying it, throwing it down. Pete grabbed my hand and said, "What are you doing?"

And I said, "Well, I can't stand this, look what happened."

And he said, "You don't like it?"

And I said, "No."

So he said, "Well, can I have it?"

It totally surprised me. I [thought], "Why would he want it?" But I said, "Sure, you can have it." He took it home and placed it, and--again, I don't know if this was conscious or unconscious--he placed it on a shelf so that every time I'd go over to visit and have a cup of coffee, I had to look at it and eventually I grew to love it. You know, I saw something in it that he saw. I think that was a teaching technique. At least, it was one that worked; and it might have been subliminal, but it's one that I've used since, myself.

He did teach glaze calculation, which surprises everybody, but he only taught it one or two days.

LEVIN: Through the whole semester?

SOLDNER: Yes, nothing was ever broken down. You see, that was another thing about our program. Most schools did divide their courses like: Throwing 101, Throwing 102, Hand Building 101, 102, Kiln Firing or Kiln Building. These were all separate courses. Pete never separated anything. He didn't believe in it, and he would say so. He said, "Well, we just do it all. Whatever has to be

done, that's what we'll do." And I don't know, I guess we didn't register for anything other than just Ceramics Beginning and Ceramics Advanced, as simple as that.

I have nice little memories of things where he was very organized. On a rainy day, I recall, when it didn't seem like we were going to go anyplace, and it wasn't going to be an interesting day to be outside, he said, "Well, let's make cone pats." And what that meant was to roll out coils of clay clear across the table and then just start with cone one, five, nine and ten and stick them in, chop it off and repeat it, one, five, nine and ten, chop it off. Finally we put those away to dry so that we had enough to last us for a couple of years, and they were always ready to go. He was very organized in that sense.

He had a routine at the end of the day where, after he'd finished trimming everything (that would be the last thing), he'd put all the trimming things together and sponge them with water, wedge it back into a pot or back in a ball and throw one more pot rather than throw the trimmings back in the trash can. Very surprising to most people, you know. They think he's so casual and nonchalant, but he was very well organized.

It would be really fun to come in. Maybe he'd stay late one night, and you'd come back the next morning and find twenty to thirty teapots, all lids and spouts and

bodies thrown, ready to be assembled the next day. So when he worked it was intense, you know, many, many pots. He always said, "You can't learn anything from one thing." So, he worked that way himself.

LEVIN: He was a production potter at Archie Bray?

SOLDNER: At Archie Bray, he made his living that way. They paid him $2,400 and took everything he made, except the best pieces he could keep for himself. But they sold everything else. Well, they provided him a chicken house to live in, too, I think it was.

LEVIN: When did Pete's work change? Or, when did conditions in the lab change?

SOLDNER: I would say that, you know, thinking back--and of course myth gets in the way of reality, but from my remembrances--the first change that occurred happened when we finally got a kiln, about Christmas, beginning in the first semester.

LEVIN: That's in the 1954 year?

SOLDNER: Yeah. You remember we'd started with no equipment? Slowly, we built some wheels, began to get clay from an Italian terra-cotta company. Eventually we got a kiln. I think it was just about Christmas time, because we were all sort of nervous about making Christmas presents and, maybe, pots to sell.

Several others had just joined us by then: Joel Edwards, a Japanese student called Aishi? Aisi? A Swiss girl. They could come as specials. You see, they weren't part of the program, but they were only going to be here for a short period of time. John Mason hadn't joined us yet. He was still a T.A. [Teaching Assistant] across the street with Susan at Chouinard, though we were familiar that he was a T.A. and he would come and visit. [Kenneth] Price hadn't come. He was a student down at 'SC at that time. Jerry Rothman was too young and [Michael] Frimkess was too young. They were in the school, but they were drawing and painting that first year. And Billy Al Bengston hadn't joined yet either. Some of these people would float in and out and begin to see what we were doing. I believe Malcolm McClain joined us the end of that first semester, too, but I'm not sure. He transferred in from Pomona College or someplace.

But mostly, by Christmas Pete had thrown a lot of bowls and plates and things he wanted to make for Christmas presents. He mixed up the same glaze formulas that he had in Helena and fired off the kiln and was obviously very disappointed. They were nothing at all like he expected and nothing like he had been making up there. My memory, if it's correct, says that he then sent back to Archie Bray Foundation to Rudy Autio, who was still there, and asked

him to ship some of the materials down here, thinking the materials might be the problem. But the same thing happened. The glazes were drier and didn't have the juicy, magic quality that he got out of that kiln.

And I think that that was the beginning of a change, because at some point he kind of looked at the new glaze and said, "It's OK. It's not bad, it's just different." I mean, maybe he didn't say that verbally, but visually. I remember him kind of rolling with it instead of fighting it. Others might have fought it. He didn't even demand to know why it was different. In retrospect it could have been the altitude. This is low altitude, that's high altitude. This was a soft-brick kiln, that was a hard-brick kiln. This was outdoors, that one was indoors. This was an updraft, that was a downdraft--lots of variables. He didn't fight it more than about twice. Once he discovered it was going to be different, he took advantage of that, and the work demanded more control in a drawing sense than reliance on the sexy glaze. So, that was a first shift.

Then, another shift that I recall was that he had been doing some slip decorating back in Montana, underglazes, kind of a raised slip; but when he started decorating here, the theme changed and they became more, I would say, Picasso-like slip decorated fences. And I think he was

looking at Picasso during that period. I don't remember the exact year, whether it was that year or not, it might have been.

An interesting thing happened one day. Arthur Ames, Millard Sheets, Pete, myself and I believe Aisi, the Japanese student--perhaps someone else was in the crowd--decided to go to lunch together in Japanese Town, Little Tokyo. And during discussion over luncheon, Mr. Sheets got in an argument with Pete about Picasso ceramics. Sheets's point of view was that he really didn't have the right to be considered a ceramist because he had no training and he didn't make the pieces. He hired a potter to make the pieces and all Picasso did was paint them. Voulkos argued with him just a little, saying, "Well, that doesn't make any difference. They're good pots." And the argument got a little heated and ended by Pete just clamming up. But when we got back to school, he went over to the library and he checked out all of the Picasso drawings that he could find of the ceramics and stuck them around the wall of the studio. Nothing was said, but that was it. It was during that time that he began decorating with a lot of Picasso-like influence.

I'm trying to remember at what stage he broke with the symmetry of the pot. I recall the afternoon, I suspect it was after Christmas, probably into the second semester.

There were two girls who came over from Chouinard, and one of them was just a gorgeous doll. In fact she was a model, just [a] beautiful woman, and we'd joked about her a few times, because every time we'd go over to see Vivika, we were aware of two people, and that was John Mason and this beautiful woman. Well, she walked in and she kind of coyly asked him if he would mind showing us how to throw a tall pot. And he said, no, "that would be all right," he'd do it.

So he really did throw a beautiful tall pot, one of the nicest cylinders I've ever seen, and brought it up with his classic neck. You know he did his thesis on necks--feet and necks, I think that was his thesis--so that explains a lot of his work. But this had this great, beautiful, long Voulkos neck, kind of Greek-like top. He just left it on the wheel when he was finished and asked the girls if they would like to have some coffee. While we were sitting there having coffee, I noticed he kept sort of being drawn to the piece that he'd just finished, he kept looking at it a lot. And after the girls left, he went over to the wheel, turned the wheel on, and with his tool, I believe, or a finger, divided it into three sections, just arbitrarily punched a real strong--more than a mark--a real depression that violated that beautiful thrown surface that he had always stuck with. And there was a period of

time when he left it there, when we went off again and had another cup of coffee or something. At some point, he went over and he cut the top off and went to another wheel and threw five or six other tops, all as nearly like that one as possible. Then he mounted those around the rim, around the top of it.

To me that was a major shift, the first time I'd seen anybody put five tops on one bottle. The remarkable thing was that he had also already changed the body of it, because most potters don't have that understanding. They'll maybe change the tops, they'll maybe add three or four tops, but they'll preserve the thrown body shape. Pete had already gone past that and then realized, having done that, that the single classic Greek top wasn't working. He had to do something else to that, so he added these five. I remember he exhibited it at Felix Landau Gallery as a major piece. It was a whole new direction, and there were a lot of people that weren't sure. And the name of it was after a movie at that time, Love is a Many-Splendored Thing.

LEVIN: He did give it a name? Because he doesn't always. Well, sometimes.

SOLDNER: Yeah, right. Well, he did.

LEVIN: What has happened to it, do you have any idea?

SOLDNER: I don't know. I don't know if it was sold, or what. But from then on he really began to manipulate the thrown pot.

LEVIN: Did he ever discuss why he was moving toward an asymmetrical--?

SOLDNER: Not that I can recall, not seriously. Now, we joked a lot during that period about-- Well, it started with Arthur Ames, I believe. Arthur was a real sharp designer and a pretty good painter and somewhere along the line began talking about zen being--the philosophy of zen and how it could affect one's art thinking and how there was a zen way of thinking about aesthetics. He talked a lot about it, and we all began to joke about this. Nobody was seriously studying zen, but we were talking a lot about it. It got so heavy that, at one point, McClain and myself decided to pull a trick. During lunch time we made a whole lot of signs and stuck them on everything in the pot shop. It was a parody. Arthur Ames would come in and say, "Boy, Pete, that's a zen pot you've got there." "Hey, Pete, that's a zen handle you made," or "Boy, look at that zen spot."

Well, we had written "zen sink," "zen lights," "zen fire extinguishers," and "zen tables," and we stuck these on everything in the class so when he came back the point

was made. And yet, you know, that was kind of a discussion.

LEVIN: How did Ames come to an understanding of zen? Was he an Orientalist?

SOLDNER: No, I don't know. It probably had something to do with-- You know, the Southern California art schools, I believe, always had some interest in Oriental art. Certainly Scripps College, where I've been associated, had. We have in our collection work that was brought over prior to my being there, many, many years of Oriental pottery and Oriental sculpture.

I think Sheets got involved. He started collecting. You know he was a California artist, and I know that he got involved with collecting T'ang horses. There was a real understanding and interest in the artistic community in Oriental art in California, and I think we sort of got caught up in it. Sheets and Ames were neighbors, they were friends, and I think that it just went from one person to the other person.

There were galleries around town that were showing and selling Oriental, Chinese figures, and figurines. Little Tokyo was here and we were drawn to it. I recall lots of trips down to Little Tokyo for lunch, but then we'd just go through the hardware store at the time, and then later gift stores, to look at the pottery, because it was different.

I even have two [Shoji] Hamada cups that I bought there at one time. They're not signed Hamada, but they're from the Hamada kiln, and I didn't know Hamada, really.

LEVIN: Well, did Leach and Hamada come-- Did they conduct workshops in Southern California while you were--?

SOLDNER: No, not while I was here. They had made a sweep through Southern California before Pete came. They had gone to see Pete, probably one of the few individuals in the country that they had made a point of visiting. They mostly visited schools like Alfred, Cranbrook.

LEVIN: They went to Archie Bray then?

SOLDNER: Yeah, but I'd never seen them at that time, directly. Many years later when I had started teaching at Scripps, Hamada did come one day and do a couple of hours' demonstration on the lawn. Later he came to 'SC for about a summer, a month I think, but not at that time.

LEVIN: But not during the Voulkos period?

SOLDNER: Rosanjin had a show on La Cienega, and we went to see that. That was a pretty exciting show. I really didn't know what was going on, and I wasn't sure I liked what I saw. Pete seemed to be impressed by it, but Pete was very open. He was really sucking it up like a sponge. Not just pottery; painting and sculpture shows were really important to Pete. One time we went to the County Museum and saw a [Conrad] Marca-Relli collage; and within a few

days, Pete had worked out some Marca-Relli-like technique using slips and blotters and things, putting slips under clay and then squishing it so it would come out the sides around the edges like Marca-Relli.

We went to a Fritz Wotruba show; and within a very short time, Pete was bashing up, throwing around pots and making them like blocks of stone like Fritz Wotruba and assembling them one on top of each other.

You could always see the influence. We'd go to a Matisse show, come back, and there would be a Matisse-like focus. Never a copy, but the influence was there. Certainly, later on the abstract expressionistic painting came right back into what he would do.

Then the same thing with looking at Rosanjin or looking at tea bowls. We'd look at them and try to figure out why they had the energy they had. He'd talk about them.

He had an interesting way of critiquing with a cigarette. Sometimes he'd say, "That's good," but you didn't have to say, "That's good or bad," you just watched the way he inhaled or exhaled his cigarette. If it was a long, long draw, that was good--you know, like a Humphrey Bogart, "Boy, that's good"--and if it was kind of an impatient forcing it out--

LEVIN: You knew. [laughter]

SOLDNER: We knew. He couldn't hide it, you know, even though he didn't say it.

LEVIN: Was that also the era of the two-minute teapot he talks about?

SOLDNER: No, I think that was much later. He wasn't into that. That's more of his later workshop performance.

LEVIN: Was that after you left?

SOLDNER: Yeah.

LEVIN: Because you left around 1956.

SOLDNER: Yes. By then, Price and Bengston and Rothman had joined us, and Frimkess was unofficially-- He was in the class, but he hadn't signed on yet. He did the next semester, I think.

LEVIN: Oh, did they all come in '57?

SOLDNER: No, I'd say they were in '56, because they were in the new building, and the new building was dedicated the year I graduated. I stayed on the half-year beyond, so it could have been in that '56, tail end of '56. I graduated in early '56 and I stayed on. Pete said because the building they'd promised me had never been there, I could stay. So I stayed on through the summer--or part of it, we went to Colorado--and into the fall, although I was ill and I didn't get to work very much. But by that time Mason had joined us, and Price had joined us. [Henry Tadaki] Takemoto came in '57, I think, or '58.

LEVIN: So, did you work at all with Ken Price?

SOLDNER: Yes.

LEVIN: So he was there while you were.

SOLDNER: One year, or one semester, I guess.

LEVIN: What was your impression of what was happening to him at the time?

SOLDNER: Well, Ken always surprised me in that I found him surprisingly-- On one hand he wanted to explore everything and he wanted to, kind of, almost copy what Pete was doing; and on the other hand, he had a certain insecurity that surprised me. That was manifested by his-- He got a B.A. from 'SC, I believe, and then I think he went for an M.A. in education. Then he came up to work with Pete for a year, and then he decided to go get an M.F.A. at Alfred.

I asked him, "Why do you want an M.F.A.?"

And he just said, "Well, you never know what you might have to teach; and if you have the degree, it would be helpful."

He and Billy Al were the closest and they palled around and joked around a lot. Billy Al in particular, I think, was the joker of the crowd and teased Pete a lot. Pete teased him back. I recall one of his favorite things was to sneak up behind Pete, look over his shoulder while he was decorating something, and say, "Ah hah, let's see what the master's doing today," and then go get a blank and

pretend to imitate it. There was a real camaraderie, but it was all horsing around and joking. There was never any intense teaching and learning. It was, "Do your thing."

LEVIN: But, on the other hand, they all did work? You all did.

SOLDNER: They all worked. Yeah, everybody worked hard and intensely. I have a plate of Price's that I still confuse sometimes with one of Pete's because of the strong influences. He drew two figures, a man and a woman, in a Pete-like brush stroke. I have a candelabra, I guess that's what it's called. You might call it a sculpture, but it was one that Billy Al Bengston made. It was a direct outgrowth, as far as I was concerned, of that Love is a Many-Splendored Thing piece, instead of it had things, it had five things sticking up on a small base. It was a little more direct and zen-like than that original pot. But I see the connection. I don't know if he did or not.

LEVIN: Going back to zen for a minute. Did the conversation about zen impel anyone to understand further what it was?

SOLDNER: Yeah. I think what it told us was we should begin looking at our pottery in terms of the unexpected and the accidental and the spontaneous as values. Cracks suddenly took on a new meaning. Instead of being a negative, it could be a positive. And blemishes, we would

joke about them being a zen blemish or a zen spot, but we also realized that that was appreciated. So, yes, it very definitely gave us a new way to think about and understand and appreciate pottery.

Now, that led to, in myself, a real conflict. My interest was in more formal control and symmetrical pots. I was making these tall floor pots. At the same time, I realized that Voulkos and these other students were beginning to work in an asymmetrical sense. But I resisted it, and if you look back at that time, my pots don't look very Voulkos-like. They got their own acceptance. I started entering them in competition and began winning prizes with them immediately. I think my work became more Voulkos-like years later, possibly because I was trying to reject it but couldn't in the end. But my real turning from the formalness of the West and the acceptance of the--

LEVIN: --acceptance?

SOLDNER: Oh, the acceptance of the Oriental concept, the organic qualities, actually, for me, occurred a couple of years later, when I was teaching at Scripps. That's kind of another whole story. I don't know when we should get into that.

LEVIN: Soon.

SOLDNER: OK.

LEVIN: Do you think you were rejecting that area?

SOLDNER: Yes, I think the seed was planted, but I think I rejected it for a couple of reasons. In a joking sense, I'm Taurus and I just didn't want to do it like everybody else. Probably in a more serious sense, I was older, three years older, and I think I had been shot at a lot where most of the other kids in there hadn't gone through some of that. So I had a little bit more of a reason to find my own way. It may also be that I was uncomfortable. I'm still-- These kids all did come out of the West, I did come out of the East, or Midwest, and I think that I was uncomfortable yet. I was reluctant to let go of what I'd believed in all these years and just totally embrace a new thing. It's always easier for a younger person, too.

Being a little older, I probably had some difficulties in opening up.

There were a lot of other things being challenged at the time, you know, even my concept about politics. I had always thought the whole world were Republicans, until I came West and met Mike Kalin, the owner of the Advanced Kilns company. Here was an intellectual, Jewish, argumentative liberal; and I was suddenly challenged to think about other than just accepting. I think that it all had something to do with my not capitulating as quickly as the rest of them. I don't know.

It could also be maybe on another tack, and that is that I've always enjoyed mechanical things and things related to sort of mechanical. And for me, to be able to throw those very tall pots required a great deal of mechanical skills, the understanding of how they would stand up and how to put the clay on the soft bottom. And I had my own interest. Whereas, the others, I think, were young enough [that] they were swept along with Pete's fast-moving interest in abstract expressionism and Oriental pottery. I eventually, probably, got around to it. But as much as anything, I think I'm just a little stubborn and I like to do it my own way.

LEVIN: It occurred to me that in looking at those pots, I thought that they were constructed in sections. Were they?

SOLDNER: No, they're thrown as one piece with additions of clay--what appear to be sections--actually starting as a doughnut shape without any form to it added to the top; and while the wheel's turning, I force the two together and then I continue to pull it up and out, or whatever. However, the sections I soon learned to take advantage of, because it made it structurally stronger; and, also, they became elements in the total design. To make a change in the line, the best time to make the change was at a section. So if I was going to come in or out, I would plan it at that joint.

They're really thrown in one piece, and I had to devise a special foot control that would run the motor when I was standing up on a stool, a long extension. As a matter of fact, one time, just to see if I could do it, made a pot, and as tall as I could make it was eight feet tall by the time I'd finished. And I was working on a step-ladder at the top of the room with this long pole going down to the foot pedal.

LEVIN: Oh, my God. Well, size is something that Pete started out with as something unusual about his own work, as I recall. I don't remember seeing many pieces that were this sort of over-sized casserole, over-sized plate. Did others work in terms of size early on?

SOLDNER: Well, Carlton Ball was the big-- You know, early on he was one that made the big pots. And then when Pete hit the scene and developed the skill, his became large. I think one of the reasons I was so phenomenally successful in my first competitions was that there weren't other people making big pots.

There was a point, in fact, you look back in Ceramics Monthly or Craft Horizons magazines, where that was severely criticized. The criticism was levelled at the West Coast potters at that time, who "unfairly" were winning the prizes. The unfairness was that they had equipment, like large kilns--which was somewhat true--larger kilns than they were using in the East and higher horsepower electric wheels, and they could make bigger pots,and this was unfair. So they wanted that stopped. But I think, with us, it was just like the five-minute mile. If Carlton Ball had made a twenty-inch tall pot, then why couldn't Pete try for twenty-four? And if somebody else, you know, if you had a record, so to speak-- I think we were aware of it, and that was just sort of a physical thing to see if you could develop the skill to go bigger.

LEVIN: Well, Pete, probably, was very aware of Carlton Ball's work, because that was--

SOLDNER: Yes, I'm sure he was. Carlton wasn't here in that year, but he did come later.

LEVIN: In the late '50s, I think he came.

SOLDNER: Pete's work in that time took a little different tack. Eventually he made bigger pieces, tall ones again. But for a while he concentrated on this heavy look, a kind of squatty look, which was more a Japanese look like Iga pots. You know, the slumping of the clay when you throw it and the sagging, later the cracking, because it's so thick. He began to capitalize on that, and there is even a beautiful joke--I don't know if you've ever heard it. Kenny Price was visiting, and apparently Vivika would tend to evaluate the pots of Kenny's and other students at 'SC by one particular standard which she called, "It had to have life and lift." I don't know if you ever heard this story.

LEVIN: No.

SOLDNER: And everything had to have "life and lift," and this was repeated over and over. So Kenny picked it up like a parrot. Every time he and Pete came together, they were teasing each other anyhow, and Kenny'd begin to look at Pete's things almost like he was looking across half-glasses like an old man and say, "Hey Pete, this piece hasn't got enough life and lift."

And he kidded him so much that one day Pete just kind of exploded and he says, "Dammit, I don't want life and lift, I want death and dump." [laughter]

Yet, seriously, he was more interested in breaking away from his Western, Greek "life and lift" ideas of beauty and was searching and turning more towards the heavier, accidental--organic is the best word I can use--asymmetric qualities that were coming out of [what] we were beginning to understand from Rosanjin and Hamada and all the rest of them, especially the Iga, the tea ceremony, I think. We all began to get a different understanding and appreciation for beauty.

LEVIN: Did he ever put up posters or photos of that kind of pottery the way he did Picasso?

SOLDNER: Yes, I think I remember those. I know that there was a real interest in it, and anytime there'd be a Japanese film we would go see it.

LEVIN: You mean a Japanese film. Just a movie?

SOLDNER: Yes, just a movie. And also any Japanese show.

There was a Japanese printmaker by the name of [Shiko] Munakata who Pete really enjoyed about that time. In fact, there was a joke happened one day. His wife arranged for a dentist appointment, and there happened to be a Nisei by the name of Munakata out in West Los Angeles. She called up Pete to tell him that Munakata had called, and Pete did a kind of a gulp because he thought she was talking about the printmaker. But Munakata strongly influenced a lot of our ideas and our work at that time.

LEVIN: Is that a contemporary?

SOLDNER: Yeah, I think he's dead now, but he was contemporary.

LEVIN: What about John Mason?

SOLDNER: Well, John was the T.A., as I said, over at Chouinard, and I think he just finally realized that there was more going on that he wanted to be part of across the street. So he came over, and he worked sort of as a special for a little bit, that is, noncredit (I don't remember how long). But at some point he decided to get on the program. The problem was, Chouinard-- He didn't have that two years of preparatory at the college academic level; and Sheets said, "Well, he'd have to go do that first, and then he'd have to start as a first year and a second year before he could do clay." Here was a guy who was already entering competition--I think he was winning a prize someplace--having to have to delay it for four years.

So instead, he and Pete decided it was time to set up the studio. So John worked around a shop maybe a year, unofficially, and we found he didn't want to go for the degree. He opened his own shop first, down on Glendale Boulevard, and Pete joined him on it, and they shared it for a number of years. He never did get a degree.

LEVIN: But by then he must have had sort of a flexible arrangement with Pete in terms of working.

SOLDNER: I think there were quite a few that came in like that for a period of time.

LEVIN: Who were the others?

SOLDNER: Well, I think Kenny did at one point, I think he worked without official-- And then certainly Frimkess worked even though he was in the school. He was not enrolled in the class, but he would be coming over whenever he could and kind of hanging around and working without any structure, just, "It's OK." Pete never--

You know one of the nice things about Pete, he seldom puts somebody down and seldom is negative in terms of if you want to work. The opposite was true, "If you want to work, fine."

LEVIN: Besides the ones we've mentioned, were there other visitors that came in to see what Pete was doing? Did he have a crowd around necessarily?

SOLDNER: Yeah, sure. I can't remember specific names, but students would drop in from time to time. Oh, Fred Marer--it's a perfect thing--Fred Marer began coming around when we were in the basement and established an interest in what we were doing and specifically what Pete was doing. [He] would come almost every weekend. He'd teach, you know, mathematics over at Culver City College during the day.

LEVIN: That was his regular job.

SOLDNER: That was his profession, yeah. Then he would come down and just kibbitz, drink coffee, and see what we'd done the week before, and sometimes argue with us about it, "Why did you do this?" because it would change on a weekly basis.

LEVIN: What led him to the basement lab at that point in time?

SOLDNER: I'm not sure. I used to think that it was through Bernie Kester who was teaching clay at City College at the time. But I spoke with Fred about it this summer and he said, no, he had a separate interest in clay, and somewhere along the line--you'll have to ask him--he heard of Voulkos or heard there was some stuff going on in clay. He had already collected some pottery, especially from--I don't know where he got it--overseas. But he had some interest in, and knowledge of, Oriental pottery himself. He eventually just found his way down and became a regular. We began going eating together and looking for him. He also would begin buying. You know, he'd come in and if Pete would say, "Oh, that's good," he'd say to Kenny or whoever, "How much do you want for it?" and he'd buy it. So that's where his collection really got started nicely.

We'd have other visitors, like a lot of-- Oh, Marguerite Wildenhain walked in one day.

One day Tony [Antonio] Prieto came in and spent a day. I'll never forget when Tony came in, he pulled me aside and he was really concerned that Pete was working too hard. He said, "You know, he's going to burn himself out. He's drinking too much coffee, he's working too hard, drinking too much and staying up too late." He says, "You've got to do something about that, Paul."

LEVIN: That shows some genuine concern. [laughter] Could you do anything about it?

SOLDNER: No, of course not. I think I said something to that effect, I said, "I wouldn't know how to--" It didn't seem like that was appropriate, or anything like that.

LEVIN: Besides a concern for his health, what was the reaction, both by Wildenhain and Prieto to what was going on?

SOLDNER: Oh, I think they genuinely admired his work.

LEVIN: This was sometime between '54 and '56, I guess?

SOLDNER: Yeah, and those memories are down in the hole in the first building.

LEVIN: We should explain that when you first came to Otis you were working in the basement.

SOLDNER: Right, the so-called pottery had been sort of held out as a finished possibility to Pete, but in fact the drawings weren't even finished when he got here. So they said, "Well, you can have this empty room downstairs." And

that was it. As I say, when I went to class the first day, there was nothing there but a table and a sink. But slowly that's where we began to make pots in 1954 and '5. The day I graduated, in the spring of '56, the new building was dedicated. And then we moved out.

An interesting dedication, too, because Millard had brought in the head of Gladding McBean [and Company], who had thrown some money into the project, to be the speaker. But after it was all over and all the dignitaries left, Pete said, "Well, now let's really dedicate this building." And he just picked up some scrap clay and started throwing it at the new walls. [laughter]

LEVIN: Different than a champagne bottle but just as effective.

SOLDNER: Very similar.

LEVIN: Wasn't there any surprise or a feeling of any kind of disturbance at the fact that Pete had stepped over this line of--he wasn't doing functional pottery at a certain point? Was there some reaction to that?

SOLDNER: Yeah, outside of the school, not within the school. Well, I take it back, yes, even within the school. Since we were all kind of going in the same direction, Mr. Sheets got very upset. He didn't approve of the direction, and he made a speech one time, got up in front of the whole student body. It was a general speech, but it was directed

at potters who had been rejected from the school exhibit because their work was inferior by his standards. The speech basically said, "Get out of your ivory tower and come down to earth."

So six or eight of us--I forget exactly, I don't remember who all was involved, I think Frimkess was one of them, myself, and some painters and some sculptors and printmakers, all who felt a kind of a kinship--rented a store front over on Sunset Boulevard, put saw dust on the floor, and made spot lights out of tin cans. We put out a sign called The Ivory Tower Gallery, and we had our own show. Once a month someone would have a one-man show. We paid, I think it was, $10 each rent per month, or $5; it was very cheap, but collectively, we could keep it going. And we kept it going for about two years. Eventually we ran a little school as well. We would hire a model and somebody would teach some drawing.

Curiously, Wilson, who was a very young writer at the time--

LEVIN: William Wilson?

SOLDNER: He's the one that's dead, or--

LEVIN: No, no, Henry Seldis.

SOLDNER: Seldis, Seldis. Seldis was kind of curious about this little gallery and would drop in and give pretty good reviews from time to time, which was for them [Otis Art

Institute administration] a slap in the face.

LEVIN: You really had recognition from an art critic at that time.

SOLDNER: I wanted also to add to that. Then, in a national sense, there was a lot of criticism and it took different levels. One was letters to the editor complaining about pots that were cracked, pots that were bottom-heavy, pots that lacked craftsmanship meaning they were rough-textured, pots that were awkward and crude, all those terms were thrown around and bantered.

I had a run-in. I won the first prize one year with a tall piece that had tilted over in the firing, kind of like a bend, but it won the first prize at Miami National Exhibit [Ceramic League of Miami membership show, Emily Lowe Museum]. But the curator refused to exhibit it, he refused to show it because he thought it was such an ugly pot.

There were other instances. I suppose it's all right to mention names, I don't know. Should I or shouldn't I, well-known people?

There was one well-known potter, a teacher in the Southland, who at one point stood up in front of the national conference at Asilomar that the ACC [American Craft Council] conducted. The very first one at Asilomar. After the whole thing was finished, he jumped up on the

stage and grabbed the microphone and called for attention and said he had something he wanted to read. Basically what it said was that he was concerned personally, and he thought that most people in the body of this organization should be concerned, about the direction that was happening in clay. He had drawn up a list of things that he felt were bad enough that the organization should adopt some standards and that these standards should be used during future shows to reject this work. There were things like, one was called, jokingly, the "pencil test." If you couldn't pass a pencil through the neck of a bottle, or bud vase, it should be rejected. It should at least hold a pencil, it should be that big. Another one had to do with-- I can't remember them exactly, but there were about six or eight points. Mostly there were things we were doing and accepting and getting by with and winning prizes on. If a piece was obviously bent, out of control, if there was any lack of control, it should be blackballed. There was a very embarrassing moment, because he asked for a second and nobody would second it. So the whole thing just ended.

The same man then was known to go around to exhibits where we were exhibiting with a little black book; and he would go up to pieces that it was obvious he disliked and would write down the maker's name. It was very strange.

He really couldn't stop anything, he never affected anything, but there were a lot of letters and a lot of speeches and a lot of bitterness.

We took it lightly. We never retorted, we never responded, we just went ahead and made something more outrageous, I suppose. [laughter] But we were amused by it, rather than upset. They were the ones who were upset.

LEVIN: Perhaps do you feel that this person was voicing, even though he didn't get acceptance when he made the speech, that there were at least a group of people that felt the same way he did.

SOLDNER: Oh yes, I think so and that's why he did it. I'm sure that he talked it over with others, and I'm sure that he felt that he had plenty of support and was probably surprised that he didn't get it.

LEVIN: That must have been the first Asilomar Conference in 1957.

SOLDNER: Yeah, that's the one where Voulkos made his famous speech. Well, he was on the program. Marguerite Wildenhain had given her speech which was a really emotional and passionate plea for the apprenticeship system. Dan [Daniel] Rhodes had given a pretty intellectual discourse on something, and somebody else had given one on firing with-- She meant to say cow chips, and she got all mixed up and said cowshit, and everybody thought it was so shocking.

But Pete was the last one on the program, and it had sort of built to this point because he was a maverick, they knew it. He was making pots that were questionable, and everyone wanted to know what he was going to say. He stood up, very uncomfortably shifted from one foot to the other in what has now become a classic, studied way of talking. But it was genuine, he was just scared. And his voice was quivering a little and he said, "Well, I, I just want to make pots, I just want to work and that's it." And they just went wild clapping because it was such a simple statement, it had overcome everything. That was at the period when we were involved, painters and sculptors and everybody else, in the abstract expressionistic movement, where you didn't want to talk about your work. The favorite retort was, if your work was being critiqued or judged or anything and you were being questioned about it, you'd throw it right back in their face, "Well there it is, you dummy, look at it. Don't ask me, it's finished." That was kind of the beginning of that type of approach. We were coming out of the Marguerite Wildenhain lecture --rousing, sort of inspiring sermon--and we were going into this new period of shrugs and "The only thing that's important is work," and that didn't sit well with a lot of people.

LEVIN: You were, in a sense, a small group.

SOLDNER: Very small.

LEVIN: Did you feel that there were others that at some point would come forward and join you, or that the group was just going to be small?

SOLDNER: I don't remember feeling the conflict. I only remember feeling the positive, affirmative side of just how great it is to be working there at that school and not someplace else, because down there there's freedom, and we're having a great time. We recognized that if you were in another school, chances are you couldn't do it. We recognized that in ways like John Mason leaving Chouinard and coming over, and Kenny Price leaving 'SC and coming over and Mac McClain-- There were people who were coming over, not by the hordes but enough so that we knew why they came over.

Then, of course, there were exhibits. There was an exhibit at the Los Angeles County art museum [Los Angeles County Museum] which, when it was back down there over at--

LEVIN: Exposition Park?

SOLDNER: --Exposition Park. It would be the American Ceramics Society, I think, that had the exhibition. The work from the County was always different, and everybody knew it. The county fair [where] Petterson put on an exhibit every year was--

I don't know what the rest of the people felt, but we

were happy. We were being invited and we were being accepted and our work was being displayed. If anything, I can only remember that part of it. I can't remember too much of the turmoil, possibly because I wasn't part of it and I didn't hear the criticism and it wasn't directed directly, only indirectly, through letters to the editor and through standards.

We put on a skit one time for the American Craftsmen's Council where we just kidded the hell out of them, and I don't think they enjoyed that particularly. We did things like open up with-- They had said they wanted us to give an evening of demonstration, so we opened up with what we called a throwing demonstration; and it was literally just picking up pots and throwing them at the wall.

Another one was-- Pete had figured out a way where he could wedge up a ball of clay and make a pocket inside and plant, in this case, a plastic bag with goldfish in water in it. But nobody knew it, see, and he took this ball of clay and threw it on the wheel and threw a good-sized pot and about half-way up pretended like there were some problems. He said, "There's something in this clay, I don't know what kind of junk it is," and he pulled out this goldfish swimming around. [laughter]

Kenny Price was not a student at the time but a friend, and we put him up as bait. Somebody, John, had

thrown a pretty nice pot, and then we asked, "Is there anybody in the audience who would like to help decorate this? The way I'm going to decorate it is by incising." And so he cut a triangle.

Kenny raised his hands and volunteered, "Can I come?" So he came down and the two of them got started cutting, and they just cut it down to nothing. One of the girls dressed up as a nurse in a white uniform, and we did a take-off on the operation, "sponge," "needle," scalpel."

LEVIN: This was all at an ACC meeting?

SOLDNER: Yeah, yeah. I was throwing one of my tall pots, putting the final stack on it, which was pretty serious, but I grabbed a big ruler to use as a rib--which I actually used anyhow--to throw, and people in the audience thought that that was important. Somebody even said in a stage-whisper, "Ah hah, now he's going to level it," thinking I had a level and I was going to check it.

We had more fun, I think, than trying to create difficulty; but what we probably did in our work, because we had all of Pete's supportiveness, was outrageous enough that it upset people. They're the ones that you should be asking about, "How was the feeling at that time?"

LEVIN: Were there any galleries in town that ever showed your work besides the Ivory Tower?

SOLDNER: Yes, [Felix] Landau [Gallery] showed Voulkos, and

Ferus--it was called the Ferus Gallery--was showing, and I think there was one other one. As a matter of fact, Elvis Presley bought two of my tall pots at a show that Jerry Rothman and myself, and I think John, had together. Elvis Presley bought two of those tall floor pots.

It was all out on La Cienega at the time, the art galleries. Then there was the Dalzell Hatfield Gallery. We were not really part of that, but it showed ceramics, it showed Natzlers and--

LEVIN: Andreson perhaps?

SOLDNER: Yeah. Then there were pre-Columbian galleries, Altman [Antiques] and-- So there was real early-on interest, which was kind of-- To think about now, it's taken twenty-five years for this article in the New Yorker to come out finally saying--they're talking about that time, it's taken twenty-five years for them to say--"There was a time when the line was being erased." You've read that article?

LEVIN: The Calvin Tomkins article in, I think it was, last month ["The Antic Muse," New Yorker, August 17, 1981].

SOLDNER: Yes, it was well-written and over-due, and it's certainly going to help everybody. Art galleries, I'm sure, are going to take a closer look now at what people are doing in clay as a result of that.

LEVIN: Let's hope so. Have I missed any part of this

particular time period? Any aspect that might be important to include?

SOLDNER: Well, perhaps not important, but, as anecdotal, to point out the kind of teaching that we were getting, which many people felt was non-teaching. I do recall the first time that I fired a kiln. I had walked through the firing a couple of times with Pete, had my pieces in it. But one day, he said, "Well, I'm going to San Francisco for the weekend. If you guys want to fire the kiln, fine, just don't put my work in it," and left us totally alone. That's the type of teaching that he gave us. He made you feel responsible. He made you feel that you could do it, and you didn't have to lean on him, to hang around and watch him.

LEVIN: How did that kiln come out?

SOLDNER: [laughter] Well, all I remember was that he kept--the words kept ringing in my ear, "Don't lose the reduction." So we kept reducing, reducing, and the kiln went through one day, into the second day, couldn't get it up to cone 010, couldn't get it out of cone 06 or 07. Mac McClain and I were firing it, and we were staying up with it day and night for two days. Into the third night we were getting pretty groggy, and early in the morning we suddenly realized we were beginning to smell like tar or asphalt burning. That led us to a suspicion to check under

the kiln because it was sitting on asphalt. Sure enough we'd been reducing so hard that the flames were coming out of the burner ports under the kiln and it was beginning to sink slowly into the asphalt. [laughter] But it was a great learning experience, because as soon as we realized that, we said, "Oh, we're overreducing." We put it back into what would be a neutral, and it just finished beautifully in no time flat. Yeah, that kind of teaching experience was very meaningful.

LEVIN: Do you find that these things relate to the way you teach at this point?

SOLDNER: Yes, very much so. I personally seem, I suppose, to leave the students alone. But it's intentional, to give them a feeling that they don't have to rely on me. I tell them very honestly, "I won't be here next year, so better get started with it right now. You can call me for emergencies. Somebody'll be there to help you, but I want you to really solve these problems and think for yourself."

It's why we don't have-- We have a technical assistant, but he's not allowed to mix their clay, not allowed to fire their kilns or clean their shelves or any of those things. They have to do it all themselves.

Sometimes I think I might have been accused of delaying them from really coming to grips with making art as a result, that I'm forcing them to go through some

needless fundamentals. But in the end I stick with it, because I know that after they leave school, they can manage without [me], whereas the schools that buy all the clay premixed and fire all kilns and so forth, the student is still going to have to learn it.

LEVIN: I want to get into that a little bit later. Let's just start with what happened to you right after graduation?

SOLDNER: Immediately, I didn't know where to go. I had sort of decided I'd like to be a production potter, but I really didn't have a place to go work. That summer of '56-- The summer before in '55, Ginny and I had made the third trip to Colorado, back to Aspen, simply because it seemed like a nice place. And on the third trip in 1955 we found five acres of land and decided to buy it with the intention of building a studio on it and becoming a production potter, selling pots to the tourists. But financially it was unreal. I didn't have the money, and I didn't know how to go about getting a loan to build a studio. So all we did in '56, the year I graduated, was to go out and camp on it and build a septic tank.

Then we came back to L.A., and Pete had told me I could continue to stay at the school and work on since I didn't have any other place to work or a job.

That was the first siege of the Hong Kong flu, or the

Asian flu. I got it, and I got it so bad that I really was quite ill. It led to a secondary sickness worse than the flu [so] that I wasn't able to do any work during that time, other than I struggled through one commission for Millard Sheets. He knew I needed money, and he asked me if I would make a mural of clay tile for a Home Savings and Loan building someplace, out of clay, and I did it.

But in December, I guess it was around Christmas, Millard called me in one day and said, "Look, Ricky Petterson, who's teaching at Scripps College has been given a job with the State Department to go teach ceramics, or do something, in Taiwan with the Chinese." Communist China had been-- You know, the people had separated, and some of the Chiang Kai-shek people had settled in Taiwan, and they were trying to set up a new China. And Ricky said he was willing and interested in doing that so he asked for a leave of absence. That created a problem in midyear, they had to find a teacher. Millard simply said, "Would you consider teaching there for the next year"--year and a half, I guess--"while he's in Taiwan?" I said OK. And so I joined in midterm, went out to Scripps College and picked up that teaching situation.

It eventually turned out to be an eight-year visiting arrangement, because the following year Petterson was so engrossed with what he was doing he asked for another

year's leave of absence, and the following year he asked for another year's leave of absence. Unfortunately, by the time he came back, the shop had changed, the personality of the shop had changed. I'd rebuilt most of the tools, I'd thrown out certain things and built bigger kilns; and the school, very honestly, was interested in having me continue. They made room for him, but not in the ceramics department, so it was a little unfortunate. I didn't mean to take his job away from him, but by being gone that long and by my own sort of being able to stir up more excitement, that's what happened.

LEVIN: So it was at least a half year in which you were both ill and couldn't really--

SOLDNER: Couldn't do much.

LEVIN: Was Ginny working at the time?

SOLDNER: Yes, she was. I think she was substitute teaching at the time. That was sort of keeping us alive. I'm a little mixed up. She substitute taught towards the end, so that means she had tried teaching full-time in Watts and it was too difficult, impossible--the only white person in three thousand. So she had given that up and just gone to that kind of teaching. She had also worked at the May Company, but I believe that was early. So as I recall, at that time she would have been substitute teaching. Then when we got to Claremont, she picked up

full-time teaching, got a nice job there, and kept on teaching until we moved to Aspen.

LEVIN: When you accepted the job at Claremont, did you think that you'd be able to work something out in terms of Aspen at that point?

SOLDNER: Yes, I was still hoping, somehow or other. I knew that, at least summers, we would go back and begin the studio. It's just that my five-year plan turned into five five-year plans. It took much--incredibly--longer to do. My initial plan was to throw up very quickly some metal buildings, kind of Quonset types, although I was not going to build them in the normal, usual fashion. I was going to tilt one end up and put it on a stone wall with windows. I was going to just use a shell alone, free-standing like an arch, and then windows on that. I had it all designed and I was going to buy these buildings. The pre-fab metal buildings to do that would only have cost me about $3,000, and I saw a way to do that. But I froze at the last minute, and it was an aesthetic freeze. I couldn't bring myself to literally go through with metal pre-fab construction, and instead decided to slow down. It looked like I was going to be able to teach the next year and Ginny had her job, and so we started this program of building a studio that was just the opposite of pre-fab. Instead of a quick, easy building, it constituted buildings

with four-feet-thick stone walls and pre-cast beams and so forth that has just taken forever. But it turned out that it was possible, even though I didn't know the solution, by virtue of the fact that Petterson was gone so long and also that the College asked me to stay on.

SECOND PART

(SEPTEMBER 4, 1981)

LEVIN: Since this is another day and we're starting a little bit again, I want to backtrack just a little bit and ask you if we left anything out in terms of your immediate family and your own background in terms of family in Illinois or wherever. You mentioned some artistic influences there, in terms of your own environment. I wondered if maybe you had uncles or aunts or someone that had perhaps some artistic inclinations that may or may not have influenced you.

SOLDNER: I don't believe they're very many and not very important. There was an uncle [surnamed Gilliam] who did a kind of a painting, landscape, but I don't believe it was professional, and another great-uncle [Jonas Soldner] who was an itinerant photographer, who just traveled. He sort of combined teaching school and photographing from his wagon and eventually ended up in California around Fresno. But I don't think we had many--

LEVIN: In what period of history did he--

SOLDNER: I suppose that would have been from early 1900s. I met him in 1940 and he was a very old man, probably eighty, ninety years of age. So, we're talking about before the automobile. He had a wagon, a horse and covered wagon, and he both taught school and was a photographer.

LEVIN: Did you know about him when you were growing up?

SOLDNER: Not very much. I knew of him, and later I made a point of meeting him. When I was stationed in Calfornia for a little bit, I made a point of going up to meet him. No, I don't think-- We really don't have an artistic background. Inventive, and people working with their hands, yes, like a great-grandfather who was a cabinet maker and made exquisite cabinets and for a hobby made pipe organs, small, room-size, of course. Rooms in those days were ten, twelve feet tall; and I believe that many people who knew him--I don't know him, never met him--but many people who knew him said that I reminded them of my great-grandfather. Perhaps that desire to do something with my hands is genetic.

SOLDNER: I was just curious if there was-- The other thing I missed was any discussion of the general art community in Los Angeles between 1954 and 1956, not the people that you knew in ceramics or clay as much as other artists in painting and sculpture. Was there much inter-

change with them?

SOLDNER: Not for me as a student, but I think Voulkos involved himself with several. Wasn't there a John Altoon or someone like that?

LEVIN: Yes.

SOLDNER: Rico Lebrun, I think, was ill, maybe died about that time. And there was a [Howard Warshaw]--Rico Lebrun and [Warshaw]--they had a school of art.* But this was really just before. I'm not sure what was or who was involved really, outside of the field, partly because, I guess, I came not knowing them in the first place and then really concentrated at [Otis] art institute except for looking at exhibits from time to time. I think Pete was immersed some more in the art scene at that point. At that point, it still hadn't occurred to me that that was going to be a direction I might be interested in.

LEVIN: Then I'd like to go on to Scripps College. You mentioned a little bit of how you became involved because Ricky Petterson was--

SOLDNER: --was gone.

LEVIN: Yes, was on a sabbatical. Could you discuss a

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* Howard Warshaw and Rico Lebrun were teachers at the Jepson Art Institute, founded and operated by Herbert Jepson. --ed.

little bit more generally about the lab at Scripps as you found it and how you got into working there?

SOLDNER: Yes, first of all, it was smaller than today. It consisted of a room about twenty feet wide and about forty-five feet long, I guess, in the cellar; rather pleasant in that at least we had windows out to the outside.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

SEPTEMBER 4, 1980

LEVIN: We were talking about the equipment at Scripps.

SOLDNER: I started to say that the equipment at Scripps was not much different from equipment all around the Southland. One of the curious things about the equipment at that time was that it was much higher than today. Potters wheels were, and tables.

LEVIN: Higher priced, you mean?

SOLDNER: No, higher in physical height. Table-height potters wheels and tables were at least, I'd say, thirty-six inches high, perhaps forty. And if there were kick wheels, very often they were a big wooden box that you had to climb down into, and you were almost surrounded by the frame. Electric wheels were stand-up wheels with rim drives, not too sensitive, but again, everything was very high.

LEVIN: Why was that?

SOLDNER: I don't know exactly. It had something to do, I believe, with maybe coming-- The only examples for wheels were industrial at one time. I recall when I first made my wheel, my personal wheel. Well, when I first made wheels, the first eight wheels that I made for the Los Angeles County were high. They were at least twenty-eight to thirty inches high. That was the accepted height for

equipment. But when I made my wheel the first time, I cut it down to, I believe, about twenty-four or twenty-five inches, and I remember Pete laughing about it because it looked so ridiculous. But, of course, now most all wheels are at that level or slightly lower. Electric wheels, to be sure, are lower. It may have been that without the power, without good electrical wheels, there was very little interest in throwing large pots; and it's necessary to make the wheel low if you're going to throw tall pots. That came after 1955, '54 and '55, when we first started making larger pots. Then the equipment went lower.

The equipment was more on a level of a hobby, also, at Scripps at the time. There was one Alpine [A. D. Alpine, Inc.] kiln which was considered very large but, in retrospect, was only about four feet, less than four feet, probably only about forty inches tall inside, and about twenty-seven inches square. Then we had in addition to that a very ancient Denver fire-clay kiln which looked monstrous on the outside but actually was very small inside and had muffles. I imagine the loading space--you had to crawl up into it. It must have been close to four feet off the ground. I really can't explain why. There was no functional reason for that.

After about the first year, I felt a real definite need for a larger kiln because my work at that time was

involved with throwing those floor pots. I talked to the school and I asked if it would be possible to tear out the Alpine and replace it with a kiln of my own partial design, at least building, and they consented. However, I didn't quite have the nerve to do it without some safeguard, so I contacted Mike Kalin again and [Eric] Norstadt at Advanced Kiln Company and made a deal with them, said that I would give them the contract if they would let the students build the kiln, myself and the students. We wanted to learn. They could do the steel work and the burners, but we wanted to do the brick work. It was a valuable experience. It was the first really solo kiln that I had built alone. I had helped Pete build one under similar circumstances at Otis so it wasn't the first time, but it was the first time that I had total responsibility.

Clay was mixed in a very, very small pug mill. It was so small it was not much bigger than a sausage grinder and took hours to make fifty or sixty pounds. I also got rid of that very soon. There were no real clay mixers made at the time, but what we found was that we could modify bread dough mixers. In this case I found a marshmallow mixer, which of course wasn't strong enough for clay, but the guts were adequate. I simply increased the motor size and the gear train so that it served very well for a number of years. I only got rid of it about ten years ago because it

was a little unsafe, and I thought it was important to have a little safer equipment. But the mixer is still being used by Johnny Fassbinder, so that's twenty-five years ago and it still works fine. Everytime I see him I check it out, and it still works.

Within about two years, I believe, we needed more space in the kiln room in particular, so I jackhammered out a wall. That allowed us to expand another about eight feet to the edge of the room in what had been a closet and allowed us to make another large kiln.

I think Scripps became known at that time by a small circle--not in a general sense around the world, but in a small circle--of being experimenters in kiln building as well as the other things connected with clay. We made, for example, a round bottle kiln about seven feet in diameter inside and about seven feet high, a very unusual design of corbelled construction, and it worked beautifully. The biggest problem we had with it was that it expanded a little bit every time you fired it, so it kept getting bigger and bigger, like gaining weight, and finally you could put your fingers between the bricks. We eventually threw a corset around it, a corset of chains and steel, and that did hold it for awhile. It was an interesting experiment.

LEVIN: Didn't that allow fire and the heat to creep out and not--

SOLDNER: Curiously, it acted in reverse. It allowed oxygen to get into the kiln. It was one of the most even-firing kilns I've ever fired and one of the easiest to fire. It started in neutral and would cruise up into reduction automatically towards the end of the firing, and we never really made any adjustments. I've always been curious as to why that occurred.

LEVIN: And this was gas-fired?

SOLDNER: This was gas-fired. In fact, we only had six burners on this large kiln. It was over one hundred cubic feet and six burners were adequate. It was one of the most efficient kilns I've ever built.

LEVIN: Is it still there?

SOLDNER: No. I don't remember exactly why we tore it down, other than the fact that it kept getting wider and wider. Oh, I believe I finally decided it was impractical for the students. For students to learn--you know, their production is very limited--most schools will just accumulate student work, and then they'll fire it all at once in a class firing; and that works all right for the large kiln. But I've always felt that students should have the experience of firing the kilns themselves, so it was necessary to develop smaller kilns that, first they could

fill, and secondly that they wouldn't be intimidated by. We tore it down, actually, and built two small ones in its place.

Speaking of strange kilns, one of the kilns at that time or very shortly thereafter-- We were short on space so I decided to build one on top of the other one. They were not in any way interconnected. The bottom one had its own downdraft fluing system and the top one was an updraft. You could fire them simultaneously or independently; but if the bottom one was firing, you had to be careful when you loaded the top one because of the heat underneath.

Eventually, and now I'm a little lost, I can't recall the dates exactly, but somewhere after these experiments, then I wanted to try one more. I wanted to build a salt kiln, and salt firing was not popular or well known, I don't believe, around the country at that time.

I had visited an Appalachian potter down in Georgia the summer before, by the name of Cheever Meadows, and Mr. Meadows fired a--called a--groundhog kiln, just traditional Appalachian-type kiln built into the ground. I was intrigued by the simplicity of it and the fact that literally you utilized the ground as the floor. It didn't have a separate brick, masonry floor, or it didn't have any piers or foundations under it as we have always thought the

kilns needed to be built. So I wanted to try something similar at Scripps and took over some more property, expanded again, just to the outside windows, and we built a--

Well, wait now. OK, thinking chronologically, there was another one before this one in the same spot, so I guess I'll have to speak about that one first. That one was also an interesting and varied, quite different-shaped, kiln. I don't know where I'd gotten the idea, but the parabola was an interesting concept. I knew from art history that there are roughly three or four different kinds of arches that man has used to build buildings. The first one was the corbelled arch, and the second was the post and lintel, like the Greeks used. Then the third was the Roman arch, or the sprung arch or stressed arch. More sophisticated would be the parabola arch which, unlike the others, was self-supporting or self-balancing. And I thought wouldn't that be fun to make a kiln in a parabolic shape, so we managed to do it. It was a large one, it was eight feet tall inside and it consisted of two chambers. The front chamber was meant for high firing and the gases would exit under the floor into the second chamber, which was an up-draft and we could bisque on that waste heat. That's not a new idea, it's done in Japan a lot with the

hill-climbing kilns, but it was unusual at that time in the United States.

Then I became interested, finally, in making a salt kiln and decided to tear down one half of this parabola and in its place put a smaller long, almost tunnel, catenary. A catenary and a parabola are very similar. The difference is that the catenary is easier to make a template. It's easier to make a template for a catenary because all that's required is to hang a chain upside down and use that pattern. It automatically describes the catenary shape, whereas the parabola is more of a mathematical shape and you have to use graphs and measurements and so forth and draw points and pull lines between the points. Also, the parabola tends to be steeper, sharper in the sides, than the catenary, and so the catenary had more appeal.

The catenary turned out to be one of my favorite kilns, mostly because it looks good, it looks like a true arch. It's simpler to build, requires less steel, and in the school sense allows us to build kilns very often as a teaching experience. It's not the strongest kiln. If you want to make a kiln that'll last forever, the best thing to do is build a Roman arch in a steel cage. But the problem with it is if you want kiln building as an experience, it won't wear out and you really feel guilty about having to have to tear it apart to rebuild it; whereas a catenary

does move around sufficiently that after a couple of years of hard firing, it's best to replace it.

OK, so this catenary salt kiln was about six feet long inside, about four feet wide and about four feet high. It had fire boxes at the mouth at the front, and the burner pit was below ground, a pit, actually a pit, below ground level with burners hanging down into the pit. This was to approximate the groundhog-type kiln, except that they fired with wood. But the wood was always in a pit below the mouth of the kiln, and the flames came up under the door at the front and exited through the kiln and out a chimney at the back. It was not really a downdraft, it was more of a crossdraft. It resulted in uneven firings because the pieces at the front of the kiln were hotter than the ones at the back. But as a salt kiln it was adequate because critical temperature changes are not as critical with a salt firing as they are with normal glaze firing. It worked very well.

A surprising problem occurred, however, in that since it was a salt kiln, the vapors exited into the second chamber where we were trying to bisque pots and they would all come out changed in a curious way. They'd go from a normal buff color to an orange, sometimes a very bright orange with spots all over them. At the time I totally

rejected that as of having any value and made a point of not using it or repeating that experiment.

Years later--I guess I will have to get into that later--searching for another direction that accident recurred, or I thought about it. There was a second recurrence we can get into later. Eventually it allowed me to spring into another direction other than the smoked raku-ware [and] into what I'm more involved with today which we simply classify as a low-fire salt, or salt, bisquing. And it's becoming very popular now around the country. But initially I rejected it. I thought we'd made a mistake and we shouldn't do that again.

LEVIN: And it occurred because of the way that particular kiln fired.

SOLDNER: Because of the salt vapor since the two kilns were connected and we were trying to bisque on the waste heat, it hadn't occurred to me that the salt vapor would do anything. You see, we'd always been taught, the books more or less always taught, that salt was only effective at high temperatures. Of course, they were talking about salt glazing. Apparently they had not tried to bisque with it so it was a total serendipitous event, one that I wasn't looking for.

LEVIN: And at that particular time you weren't open to something unusual like that.

SOLDNER: Right, at that time I hadn't even begun to do the so-called raku-ware. I had no interest until 1960 on that.

LEVIN: How did that come about?

SOLDNER: It came about, as so many things seem to come about, almost as an accident or as a serendipitous event. Scripps College had at that time a weekend event called the Lively Arts Festival. At one time it took place in a little Mexican community near Claremont at Padua Hills, and it was an enjoyable weekend when artists would get together and demonstrate how they made art to the general public. Then at some point it moved out of Padua Hills down to the campus, but it continued as an annual event. Potters normally, we normally would just throw pots, and the public enjoyed it. But of course it wasn't new to them year after year to see it. I believe it was in 1960 I toyed with the idea of trying to demonstrate some other activity that they wouldn't know about, something that would be more interesting. I do remember discussing it with a few of my students. I said, "We ought to try something new this year."

And they said, "Yeah, like what?"

And I said, "I don't know, but I've heard about raku."

What I'd heard about raku was what I'd read in Bernard Leach's book called A Potter's Book. He referred to an early experience he had in clay, on one hand which turned

out to be an event where he attended a tea ceremony. Prior to the tea a potter was in the garden with a small charcoal kiln, and he gave each of them a bisque piece and asked them to decorate it. He then glazed it, and while they were in having tea, apparently he fired the kiln up, this charcoal kiln, melted the glazes and then took them out of the kiln and let them cool in the air so that when they were finished with the tea and came out, everybody had a souvenir to take home. That's the rough description of the whole thing. (I'll have to check the facts out one of these days and see.)

It seemed to me he also said that they cooled it in water, quenched it in water. If that's the case, I'm a little puzzled because in recent years I've been in Japan a few times and discovered that the classic raku never involved sudden cooling in water. They do cool the red raku in the air. However, from his description, he also mentioned that the body for the raku required about 30 percent grog, which was twice the amount we normally would use, and this was to make the body more open so that it could withstand the thermal shock.

When we decided to demonstrate raku, it was a sudden decision and we didn't have a clay body made up specially with 30 percent grog so we just used normal stoneware bisque coffee mugs and bowls for our experiments. We did

build a very small gas kiln, it couldn't have been more than nine inches square inside, and we built it out in the courtyard so that people could watch what we were going to do. When the day arrived, we simply waded into it using a lead-base glaze, also suggested by Leach, decorating with cobalt, copper, and iron principally.

LEVIN: You didn't experiment or try this out before the day occurred?

SOLDNER: No, it was just like a housewife who invites someone to dinner and decides to spring a new meal on them she's never done before. The result was rather interesting. We had no difficulty in melting the glazes, but, naturally, every time we'd thrust the pot into this red hot kiln it would crack because of the density of the stoneware bisque. The crowd was amazed, first of all just to see a kiln with the door open and still going at its high heat, about 1500 or 1600 degrees, a good cherry-red heat. And then, more importantly, they loved it when we would open the kiln when the glazes would melt and pull it out with tongs and then run through the crowd out to the fish pond and quench the pots in the water. It was a great crowd pleaser, I can tell you.

Very frankly, I was very disappointed in the results, not only that they cracked and broke, but also because the colors were so garish. The cobalt was a really bright, raw

blue, and the iron was kind of a sickly yellow, and the copper would be a brilliant green, and the body had no character and sort of a pasty yellow.

Very frankly, I could not understand Leach's interest in it. Specifically, he did at one point talk about the subtlety of the raku bowls, and that really puzzled me. I didn't know what he was referring to because I had never seen a raku bowl, I was only going by his verbal description. It would be many years from that time before I would actually see an honest-to-goodness Japanese raku bowl.

But we continued through the day to make these almost-events, because we needed to entertain the crowd and they liked it.

But partly because of my own frustration in the effect or the result, late in the day, that first day I had a hunch that perhaps I could modify those colors a little. We were working under an old pepper tree and a lot of leaves had gathered in the gutter. So, after I pulled it out of the kiln, instead of rushing directly to the pond and dunking it in water, I decided at one point to first cover it with leaves and see what would happen, roll it around in the leaves and just pile the leaves on top, because I knew that the heat would cause the leaves to start burning and that would create smoke and I had a feeling that the smoke would alter or subdue the garishness

of it. It did, it did beautifully. It surprised me, the coppers turned to lusters and to copper reds, and, of course, the cobalt was toned down. The body in particular, the unglazed part, was really beautiful, it became a soft black-grey, and depending on how the leaves burned away, they would leave patterns, almost calligraphy, on the surface.

I was turned on sufficiently at the end of the first day to go back into the studio that night and make up a new clay body, one that contained 30 percent sand in place of grog. And we spent the next two days--I believe it was a three-day weekend--and we spent the next two days, then, making pots in the morning, fast drying them and quick bisquing them and then glazing them and found that they didn't crack. It was really very exciting, it was a very exciting time.

It turns out historically that I was not the first in the United States to do that. Many people try to give that honor, I guess, to me; but Rhodes has documented that a man had a raku tea bowl exhibit at the University of Chicago, I believe before the Second World War, some time in the late thirties.

LEVIN: You don't know the man's name?

SOLDNER: I don't know the man's name.

LEVIN: Where did Rhodes document it?

SOLDNER: I believe I read that in Ceramics Monthly one time, I even forget exactly. It might be in one of his later books.

LEVIN: I just wondered, go on.

SOLDNER: Of course, Hal [Harold] Riegger had been doing what he called raku where they made tea bowls in the Bay Area, around Mills [College]. So we really weren't doing anything new. I think the thing that was new was the smoking in the leaves for the effect, but probably more importantly in a historical sense, the difference between what Riegger did and what I did with this technique was that I quickly abandoned the tea bowl, and he never did. He always stayed with trying to make the Japanese-style tea bowl, and I abandoned it within a few weeks and began to think about using the technique or the process in other ways, in new directions.

And I wasn't sure what that would be. As it turned out, it was about as much a turnabout as I could have made, even consciously, from what I was making. In other words, I was making stoneware, tall, sophisticated floor pots, wheel-thrown, very strong and hard. When I began to make the raku with my other hand, my left hand, out of necessity because of the size of the kiln and so forth, [the raku] was small. It was very soft and fragile because it was low-fired; and because of the accidents, the uncontrolled part

of it, the smoking in particular, it was necessary for me to even change philosophically. Instead of controlling every pot in the kiln at a specific cone and giving all of them exactly the same atmospheric conditions and expecting them all to melt within a few degrees, all of a sudden I was free to make those judgements on each piece by simply taking it out of the kiln when I was ready and maybe firing only one or two at a time. So each piece, then, gave me more opportunity, more freedom to change.

This spontaneousness and this new freedom began to affect the shapes. Instead, the rigid control that I had always considered to be desirable gave way to softer forms and more experimental forms and more outrageous forms, looking for incongruity, perhaps, and really capitalizing on the accidental effects. There were a number of years, perhaps five or six years, when I continued to do both. I would do the stoneware, tall things for security and for money, and that's what I would enter in competition, but I was doing the small raku for my own interest.

Eventually--I think it must have taken several years, two or three years--eventually I screwed up my courage and decided to send a small raku bowl or pot in competition instead of the stoneware. And it took a great deal of courage because at the time, it's true, stoneware was the king, or the queen; and I had no idea whether the jury

would be receptive to a totally different size, shape, handling, or not. I sent three pieces to the Everson [Museum of Art], Syracuse [Ceramic] National [Exhibition] that year.

LEVIN: Which year, do you recall?

SOLDNER: Oh God, I guess I'll have to document that, but it must have been about '64. I only hoped to get them in the show and I ended up winning the first prize with one of them, and all of them, of course, were accepted. The Purchase Prize, I think, was another. I'll have to check all that out some day. But the point was that someone else saw value in this.

It occurred for me at a nice time, because I had pretty much exploited the tall-pot form, the stoneware form.

Also, I began to have feelings [about] some of the criticism that was being leveled in our direction through the magazines about the unfairness of being a West Coast potter, being able to win all the prizes simply because we had large kilns and big electric wheels and stoneware reduction. I began to feel like those people were really missing the point. I knew that some of the finest pots in our museums were all low-fire. The Egyptian pots and the Greek pots and the pre-Columbian pots, the American Indian pots, the ones we really revered, mostly, in the Western

sense, were all low-fired and mostly small. So at least I had that security that, historically, you didn't have to have fancy equipment to make pottery of some importance. So, when I eventually did sort of open my-- When I screwed up my courage and sent those pots off and had them accepted, that was a big move that gave me the OK to continue with that research and to stop the stoneware. And it is stopped now, the stoneware has dried up for me, even as an interest, with the exception of when I'm teaching.

I still teach it because so many students want to begin there. They want to make functional oriented pottery, and that's fine. And I do enjoy making teapots and casseroles and things like that, but the inventiveness and the--

One of the things I think I enjoyed about getting into a field where there was no teacher and there were no examples, historically, and I couldn't look in a history book to find the solutions--and no formulas and no knowledge--is that that operates like any inventive process. You simply then have to become very aware yourself and in tune with what's happening. You have to make observations, you have to try experiments, and you have to go through them. You have to work out standards for comparison and variables and constants, and it's somewhat scientific. I'm not scientific about it, but it's

a somewhat scientific approach that you have to do. But getting one's self out on a limb, in a sense, where you have no information to fall back on, though it's frustrating it can also be one of the most creative directions or places to be. Because then you can be inventive, you have to be. You have no one there to stop--

LEVIN: Some of that inventiveness I saw in the shape of some of your jars of that period in which you-- The way you formed the neck of the jar was somewhat like just hinting at the idea of a neck. It was much more abstract expressionist than the tall column pots. I never saw the tall column pots glazed, so I don't know how you did that, but the lift on that jar just seemed to be particularly expressive. Was that something you came to as you worked with the raku process?

SOLDNER: Yeah, plus one other important event. The raku process itself was really responsible for allowing me to try new solutions without worrying or feeling guilty or in any way being influenced by my past.

But--and I can't recall the exact date, this had to also be prior to 1960--I believe one other-- I had several women, I had inherited several women in my class, special noncredit students that Mr. Pettersen had encouraged. A matter of fact, there were very few students signed up, but there were, I think, four or five women who came every

morning and made pots. It was an enjoyable experience for them, but they were not terribly serious about what they were doing. It was making functional ware for the kitchen, and they involved themselves a lot with baking and cooking and bringing things for coffee breaks and just having a good time.

I enjoyed it, of course, on one hand, but on the other hand, felt like there was something more important to be done. I'd never kick them out, all I did was make them do their own firing and mix their own clay, and that weeded them out. Within about two or three years most of them had decided it was too much work.

But a few remained, and one of them was a woman by the name of Helen Andreson, and she was the sister-in-law of Laura Andreson. (Laura, of course, was teaching at UCLA.) Helen was one of my specials, and she came to class one day with a strange Japanese man in the car. She came in first and said, "Paul, I don't quite know what this is all about, but there's a potter out in the car. At least Laura said that he's a potter. He doesn't look like a potter because he's dressed in a little black suit and shirt and tie. "But," she said, "he arrived early, and maybe you could use him, because she doesn't need him for a day or two." Or something like that.

So I said, "Well, fine, bring him in." And I thought, "Now what? I don't speak Japanese, and she said he doesn't speak English." So I decided, "Well, if he's a potter, I'll just show him some clay and see what happens."

So I got out a little clay and I offered it to him and he bowed and took off his coat and his tie and rolled up his sleeves and looked around for a kind of an apron. Then he indicated that he wanted me to push two kick wheels together so that the tables would make a platform on which he could sit in front of one of the wheels. He sat cross-legged. We found a kind of a pad, a seat cushion or something from a car. So he sat up there, positioned himself up there, and we got out some tools and it was-- Without speaking we understood what he wanted to do, he wanted to throw a pot. Then he finally indicated he wanted me to sit on the other side of the wheel, on the seat, and to kick it for him, since he couldn't kick it while he was sitting crosslegged. And there was a universal language of shaking his head yes, affirmative, to kick the wheel, and no to slow it down.

When he started to throw, I thought, "What kind of a faker is this? Why did Laura send this guy out to me? He doesn't know how to throw."

First of all, the size of the things he threw was extremely small, little sake cups and little sake bottles,

and nothing bigger than a tea bowl. But, more importantly, they wobbled, and it was so irregular in his hands that I thought they weren't even centered, and I thought he didn't know how to center. I finally, in my kindness, decided that it was simply because the whole situation was so foreign to him, out of his own element, using different clay, using different wheels, even a classroom full of women--Scripps College is a women's college (there are a few men)--but he seemed traumatized, in a sense, and I thought that was the problem.

He really shook me up after lunch when it was time to trim the pots and instead of putting them back on the wheel to trim them as Voulkos and everyone else had always taught me, he first went outdoors and he looked around at the orange trees that grow in front of the campus and he finally broke off a twig, selected a twig, and came back into the pot shop and turned the vessels to be trimmed, turned them over in his hand and, using the stick, sort of crudely would dig a foot or make a mark that would take away excess clay and at the same time leave some shape to it.

LEVIN: He didn't shape the stick or anything?

SOLDNER: No, it was just a real rough stick. He would then sort of pat them on the table a little bit to sort of make them stand and then walked away from them, and we

still didn't know what he was up to or what was going on. Eventually, he left in the middle of the afternoon and he left those pieces around.

And a curious thing happened. At first I dismissed the whole experience. Then as I worked on my own work in the next week or two or three, I would find myself looking at his pieces, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, but they bothered me. The more they bothered me, the more I became curious about them; and I discovered that I was beginning to use different techniques on my own pots, that they were not being handled quite as rigidly as I'd done before. And this seemed to fit into the raku experience of spontaneity very nicely. The two were beginning to blend without any conscious overlap.

At some point, maybe a few weeks later, I called Laura and told her I was a little confused, who was this potter that she had sent. And she said, "Oh, don't you know? That's Kaneshige. He's a national treasure of the Bizen tradition." So here I had one of the finest potters in Japan for free and I didn't even know who was there.

But more importantly, I believe the way I handle clay from that point on probably is directly influenced by his, not off-handedness, but by his openness and by, certainly, the Japanese eye. It fit into what I wanted to do, I guess, and it fit into the changes that I was going

through, not only in clay but changes in lifestyle and politics and religion and everything else. It was all-- It began to make more and more sense for me to look to the East for my concepts of beauty. Certainly, the pots from that point ceased to be symmetrical and formal; they began to become more organic, more asymmetrical, still involved with trying to resolve them in a harmonious sense, but just finding harmony in a more complex, asymmetrical direction.

That's a difficult thing, I found, to let go of one's past. I firmly believe that genetically we are made to program our computers in the first--well, including college--first fifteen, twenty years. For most people after that time, that information that's computerized is what they use to decide everything else the rest of their life. To continue to grow and to feed new information into the computer seems to be very difficult for lots of people. It becomes threatening to them.

I think that explains to me, partly, the generation gap, the so-called generation gap. I grew up, for example, during the Glenn Miller era so it always sounds great. To a person who grew up during the Beatles, [Miller] doesn't sound great; they have to learn to like it and they have to force themselves to even listen to it. But people who grew up in the Beatles period, perhaps, can't stand punk music, they're very critical of it.

It's my thesis that it's simply because during that formative time we come to believe that "This is the right way," and then we spend the rest of our life defending it.

Well, an artist can't do that [or he's] in serious trouble, and an inventor really can't do it either. We constantly have to turn the computer back on again and let go of the way we first decided or trained or believed.

LEVIN: All this was going on in the 1960s.

SOLDNER: Uh-hm.

LEVIN: From what you just said, do you feel that that period of time, because of the kind of upheaval it was socially and politically-- Did your work fit into that or did it take from that or did it just happen to flow together that way?

SOLDNER: I believe the latter's more accurate, that it happened to flow together that way.

It reminds me of an experience that happened at County [Otis], one I probably should have brought up when we were speaking about it, and that was the discovery one day, by reading in Time magazine, that we were what was known as beatniks.

LEVIN: You read about it in Time magazine?

SOLDNER: Read about it. It described us perfectly: West Coast people preferring to live in cheap housing with an interest in turning towards oriental philosophy and

religion, looking--I forget the exact descriptions--growing hair longer, generally art students. We read about it one day and Pete said, "Well, hell, that sounds like us." [laughter] The interest in jazz, you know, and the life-style that they described. So I guess we were beatniks without knowing it.

But that was a flowing thing, you see. We were fitting into something very large, we didn't create it. I don't know if any one person created it. We can find people who, maybe, become exponents of it.

But it was somewhat like that, and I think that the work all fit perfectly into those periods in those years. It related to other things. It related to abstract expressionism because they were interested in the same things. And it related, perhaps, to the social changes. The Beatles, you know, were so important that I tend to date things pre-Beatle and post-Beatle. The events of those times were either frightening--and people became uptight about the changes in the life-style and the hairstyles and the philosophies and so forth--or you become part of it, and I guess we became part of it.

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LEVIN: I want to go back to the different procedures that you began to develop with raku once you started working with it.

SOLDNER: OK. I believe several things might be pointed out that I did with the raku that I didn't do with the stoneware. One I've already alluded to, and that was to change the thrown symmetry by paddling it or by rolling it around, one way or another altering it when it was soft to get away from the hard, two-dimensional quality of a round thrown pot. In other words, it became more sculptural in a very subtle way, perhaps. If one looked at the pot by turning it, it kept changing, the profile kept changing, and there was, hopefully, no one place that would look like another. That was a big change for me. It is closer to the classic sculpture, or idea of sculpture, that it's a very complex series of forms that move and shift as one either moves around the piece or the piece is rotated in front of one.

The other thing that-- Several things happened. Some accidents, again, began to occur that opened up new possibilities.

One was that I discovered that if I didn't glaze the pot and smoked it, I got some interesting matte effects and

patterns from whatever I smoked it in. If I smoked it in leaves or newspapers or rope or any material that would burn, the texture of the material would very often leave a burnt imprint in the unglazed clay which I can only describe as being a beautiful calligraphy that I didn't plan. So I started using less glazes, and that was a big shift from the fifties and early sixties.

Another thing that I changed was to capitalize on the lustering, or the conversion of copper to its reduced form which is a metallic form and began to use copper glazes to make very shiny, lustrous red effects.

This is seen in other cultures. For example, Persian reduction is a low-fire reduction on the surface of the glaze. But I don't think we were doing it at all. I can't remember anybody doing it, other than Beatrice Wood, perhaps, and maybe the Natzlers. But they were doing it in the kiln and with chemicals, whereas I was doing it outside the kiln as a post-fire smoking. And it happens in a flash, it happened in a fraction of a second, just as soon as the pot went from the kiln into the smoke, it would magically flash.

The glass people do it, only they call it something else. They call it striking. When you strike glass you have small amounts of copper in the glass. You form the glass and there is no red color or even green color, just a

very pale green, but after it's all finished, but while it's still red hot, at one point they hit it or strike it with a reducing atmosphere, and it suddenly turns ruby red. Well, I was doing the same thing but didn't realize that it was the same thing.

LEVIN: You didn't know that was a glass technique, at the time?

SOLDNER: No, it never occurred to me. It was just something we stumbled on, and it worked.

Another thing I discovered was that, with the fast cooling, thickly applied glazes would tend to craze wildly. In fact, you could force it. You could put a damp cloth on it or you could wave it around in the wind, and you could hear it tingling and cracking. We discovered we could also then put that pot that had just crackled back into the smoking chamber and the smoke would penetrate into the craze, or into the crack and amplify it and make it really a beautiful crackle effect.

These effects, today sometimes, are the way people describe raku. If I'm asked, or if I ask somebody, "What is raku?" [the answer] almost always is based on "Well, it's a crackle glaze," or "It's a luster glaze," or "By the technique of fast-firing or by cooling suddenly in water or by smoking it." These are American descriptions of what raku is, and I guess it all came from that period.

I also began, or continued, to experiment by adding--Instead of throwing a neck or instead of throwing a foot on this altered body--it didn't seem to fit right to alter the body and then to throw a neck--I then began experimenting by putting large doughnuts of clay on the pot with my fingers and rolling it around on the ground or on boards or something like that to further alter and shape it and to amalgamate it and to bring it all together. This eventually became a style that, I think, has been copied a lot.

Another thing that I was doing was to begin to play with almost incongruous tops instead of planning it. I recall one time I'd made a saucer for a tea set and I was working on a raku piece and I was trying to think, "Well, what kind of a top do I want to put on it?" And I suddenly grabbed the saucer and just inverted it, stuck it on. It looks kind of like an inverted saucer, but it also was a shift away from the classical way of solving tops.

I think that's really what was happening, that it was shifting very slowly and perceptibly away from the classic Western way of solving proportionate parts of the vessel, and [I] involved myself more with changing the shape.

It's always necessary to keep some familiarity with what you do, otherwise you lose people totally. But if you don't break a little bit, you never lead them anywhere either. So I always found that it was, for me, a kind of a

slow, gradual evolution that wouldn't leave people totally lost, but at the same time it shifts and changes. Sometimes, I think, not fast enough. But then, I can look back in slides or talk with someone who hasn't seen the work for a few years, and they see it and tell me about it.

Oh, another accident occurred that changed, had a profound effect on what we also think of as raku. One afternoon I had a beautiful big round pot. I put a white slip on it. I discovered that my white slip was more receptive to smoking black than even the raw clay. I suppose I could analyze it, but I didn't, other than just to say, "Well, it must be because it's more porous." So I began covering the pots with a white slip and then smoking them to turn them jet black. One day, I decided to decorate with a very strong mixture of iron and copper oxide, fifty-fifty. And I think that was kind of revolutionary, because in high-fire that would be way too much copper and iron in a decoration. It would turn anything to a cinder. But since I wasn't glazing it, I was free to try this strange arrangement.

I decorated the pot partly with this mixture, the copper and iron, by dipping a rope into the mixture and tying or putting it around the pot and then pulling it off. Well, it left its own calligraphy. It didn't quite please me, so I just plunged my hands into the same mixture, like

a brush, and then made imprints, also, of my hand around it, sort of a very primitive decorative technique.

I fired it, yanked it out of the kiln, it was a late afternoon, and threw it into a garbage can with newspapers to smoke it. It was dinner hour, so rather than look at it, I went home and had dinner and came back later that night.

When I opened up the can, I could not believe what had happened. It was as though wee fairies or gnomes had gotten in there and painted a little white line, a halo rather like, around all the finger prints and all the decoration. It was very dramatic, just beautiful. And I thought at the time, "Aha! Wow! Boy, I've really come on to something here."

Paul Smith visited the next day, and I just happened to have that and I showed it to him, and I remember the amazement on his face. He'd never seen anything like it either. And I was almost cocky about "Well, I know how to do it." As it turned out, it took about four or five years, certainly three, before I ever saw the same effect again even though I recreated the process. I tried to remember exactly what I did, and it was so simple. It just wouldn't happen; I wouldn't get that halo.

When it did happen, it was almost as suddenly and accidentally. It occurred in Seattle. I was demonstrating

out on the lawn, and it was the last pot of the day. I'd kind of given up everything else, and we were quitting and opened up the vessel, and here was that line again.

It really became an obsession as a result, and I learned to live with the idea that it would happen when it happened. Sometimes it would be two, three pots in a row, and then I would not see it for another year or two. It took nearly ten years of trial and error, probably more, ten to twelve years of trial and error until I finally one day even, through observation, was able to determine when it happened. Once I understood when it happened, then I could begin to figure out what was happening in a physical sense. Now I can control it somewhat, not totally, but somewhat. But that became another identifiable Soldner raku decoration. People simply referred to it as a halo.

LEVIN: Yes, wasn't one of those pots in Ceramic National?

SOLDNER: Yes, it was the very same one, the first one. I was lucky that Fred Marer bought it, so it's been in the collection ever since. It worries me sometimes. It still travels around the country and it is soft. It currently is in the Hundred Years collection ["A Century of Ceramics in the United States: 1878-1978"], wherever that is. It hasn't come back yet. It's been to Australia. It gets around.

LEVIN: It is very special, obviously.

SOLDNER: In a similar way, and years later, another accident occurred that has become a mark of a raku quality that I think some people identify. That was that I began to put some copper in my slip. At first I used just a white slip. Then one day I decided to try and color the slip. I discovered that the slip, then, under equally precarious environmental or atmospheric changes, would, instead of being green as one would expect or even a pale off-green, will turn a very strong yellow. I've used it pretty effectively in the past, decorating, stenciling figures on the pot with this, so that when it's finished, the figures are jet black and the background is a brilliant yellow. It's very difficult to control, just like the halo, but it's a result of not knowing what I was doing but simply experimenting, I guess.

The thing is, once you find that, then there's a couple of levels of this I have to function on. One is, you can discover, you can stumble onto, a new process or a new technique, but capitalizing on it and using it is the more difficult. Once you understand how to do it, then it remains as to whether you can use it in a valuable sense or not.

It reminds me of one of my students who has discovered a kind of process by accident, but it involves more control. I jokingly told him the other day, I said, "Well,

now you've got a great new technique you can go places with it, but you're going to have to learn to draw." In other words, he's going to have to learn to use what he's discovered, and if he can't somebody else will pick up on it.

LEVIN: You mentioned stencils. How did that become part of your work?

SOLDNER: I think that occurred, well, maybe I should go back to-- We've been talking about the early sixties, and during that time, I was rehired every year as a visiting instructor, just one year at a time, at Scripps.

LEVIN: For a full year?

SOLDNER: For a full year.

In 1965, our building program in Aspen had progressed far enough, finally, that we no longer were living in the tent. We'd live in a tent every summer, but it had progressed to the point that one building was closed in. Now, heating pipes still were not installed, but we had plumbing.

I'd been at Scripps, I guess, about seven years at that point, and I decided to take a leave of absence (if there is such a thing from a visiting status), but at least I asked if I could hold the door open and maybe come back in a year to the visiting status, but I wasn't sure. I just felt that I should leave. I felt that, first of all, thinking of one's career as a teacher, I always felt it was

wiser to move to a new school and start all over every seven years, and then take a sabbatical. It's just a philosophical idea about what I think is important. As a result, incidentally, I've never had a sabbatical, twenty-five years of teaching.

But I left Scripps to see, to test myself in Aspen, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do there. As it turned out, it was a very difficult year from a number of points of view. Physically, we were cold, because we didn't have a central heater. We thought we could get by on the fireplace, but it was not a very efficient one, and it was a big room, and we ran out of wood by the first of January.

Someone finally solved the problem. The problem was intense enough that water froze in the room. It was warmer inside our refrigerator. It literally was.

One morning our daughter opened the refrigerator and said, "It's not working."

And I said, "Why isn't it working?"

And she said, "It's warm." But it was working, it was just colder in the room. [laughter]

And someone solved the problem for me by salvaging a gas heater that had been thrown away at the dump and brought it past, and then I would have a propane-gas man bring me a tank every three days, a hundred pound tank. We got through it.

Also, our well dried up in November of that year, and we had to redrill, which was a very expensive item. The only positive part of that was that I also received, I believe it was, a [Louis Comfort] Tiffany [Foundation] grant that year, and it paid for the well as far as I was concerned.

The other thing, of course, was that both my wife and I had given up our jobs, so, financially, we weren't making any money. I hadn't developed a line or a production or anything that would do it. I didn't even have a kiln. I was making a few pieces and trying to fire them in the fireplace, which was the nearest thing to a raku firing, I guess, that I could approximate.

Then I developed, not a disease, but something called Meniere's syndrome from, it turned out, from drinking too much coffee with Voulkos, that affected my balance and my hearing somewhat. I was nauseous for about three months during that whole time.

LEVIN: This was all 1965?

SOLDNER: Yeah. Needless to say, when spring came, I began to worry a bit about the future. But as spring and summer so often do, you tend to forget the worst part of it. It was a lovely spring and a lovely summer, and things began to fall into place for me, and I decided to continue in Aspen.

I resigned from Scripps, told them they should get a replacement. It was at that time that they hired Henry Takemoto, and he was then to be there for the next four years.

At the end of the summer, in the fall before things got worse, and I wasn't really, at the point, unhappy (we had been able to come through all of that and we were happy in a different sense), the University of Colorado in the fall called one day and wanted to know if I would be available to teach one semester as a part of the humanities program. They had a special chair, honorary chair--I forget what it was called--and normally it was someone else, a writer or a poet or somebody, in residence; but this year they asked if I would come over and be resident potter. They were just setting up their department. They had a teacher, Tom Potter, but they wanted somebody with a little more experience to kind of help him get the ball rolling. They were going to pay me, for that one semester, as much or more than I got teaching all year at Scripps, so I said, "Sure."

We made the move, and that was a very, very successful year. It was also, for me, a turning point in some of my work. I'm not just sure why. It may have been because I'd changed my physical working area, going from Scripps College to the crudeness of Aspen, the lack of facilities,

and then back into an art department at the University of Colorado which was a strong art department. It could also have been the almost inactivity, the period of thinking about my work on a subconscious level instead of consciously. It could also have been just being thrust back into a real strong art department and feeling some--not competition--but some expectations: "As the resident artist this year, you should do something special." However it was, it could also be the salary. That amount of money gives one a certain freedom.

That's where I recall first starting my wall pieces and stenciling figures or imprinting in clay through either stencils or templates, and it was a very intense learning experience as these things very often are.

When one makes a breakthrough, it's a quick, sudden, involved flooding of the senses in trying lots of things. Later, you can spend years becoming more articulate and more refined. But the initial breakthroughs, I call them, that's where the fun is and the excitement.

It was an exciting year. I don't know exactly where it all came from, perhaps from-- I'm trying to think if there's any particular reason why I would start to involve myself with the wall pieces; because I hadn't done it, other than thrown wall pieces, and I can't recall the reason.

LEVIN: Thrown wall pieces?

SOLDNER: Plaques, pardon me. Yes, thanks for correcting me. Thrown large plaques, or platters, but when they ceased to be thrown and they ceased to sit on the table, they'd go from a platter to a plaque. But I worked out the basic technique that year.

The next year, after that sabbatical, I was invited to come fill in for Jimmy McKinnel who was leaving the University of Iowa for a year to teach. I think they were going to Japan that year or else to teach in Alfred. Anyhow, he needed a year sabbatical, and they asked me to come and take his place.

That was a great thing because it was one more year at a very strong art school with supporting faculty like Mauricio Lasansky, Byron Burford, and several others, all encouraging me in the ceramics department to use clay in a more creative sense than it had been used before.

Also at that time--and this led directly into the use of the figurines--I was invited by the faculty to sit in with about half a dozen every Sunday morning and draw the model. It was just a kind of a discipline that they had amongst themselves. We would share the model costs and get one of the students to model for us.

I decided that, after the first day I was drawing on paper, I thought, "Well, I'm a clay person, why am I

drawing on paper? Just because we've always done it. The next week I'll bring some clay into the studio and I'll draw on the clay." I tried several times to work directly on the clay, either in its graffito sense through a slip or with oxides on a bisque pot, or something like that. I discovered every time I drew from the model directly, I tended to make it a realistic rendering and a rendering that utilized the techniques that I had learned, in an academic sense, drawing on paper. I was dissatisfied with the whole thing and pondered it and at some point decided that the abstraction of the pot or the shape of the pot and the real-life drawing on the pot were in conflict. I don't know that I can say why, except that it worked on paper, but not in the round.

I decided I would search for a device that would place an in-between, indirect method of putting the figure on the pot and solved it somehow or other, initially, by cutting out paper, cutting the figurines out that I drew and then brushing stains or slips over them onto the pot. That eliminated the drawing quality. It eliminated the middle values and the detail and ended up in a, strictly, very strong silhouette which felt right and, curiously, reminds people very much of Greek figures. Though [the Greek figures] are predominantly silhouetted, they also have details drawn inside: eyes, nose, and features; and I was

not doing that. But the fact that they were strong silhouettes in black, smoked black, made many people--reminded them of Greek pottery. And I'm sure that my history, having studied Greek art history, said, "It's OK, there's a rightness about it."

I then went one step farther. Instead of using a paper stencil, I cut the stencil in a thicker material like plywood or masonite and began pressing those sometimes into the soft surface of the clay, which gives a low bas relief, and have continued to use that device now since that time with many variations. I gave up using the model as my source (not entirely, I still do that).

Right now I have a kind of a theme that I keep coming back to, I guess I call it loosely "The Family." I haven't done a lot of work along that line, but there's something there that interests me.

And I do use a camera. I use my friends as the models and then work out the templates and stencils from that.

I have also, in recent years, used as my source material figures from contemporary magazines, and I feel real good about that. I feel that that somehow or other puts my work in touch with my culture rather than just drawing a naked lady. For example, I may be using what appears to be a naked lady, but she's out of Playboy or he's out of Playgirl. Or the Marlboro man has been a

recurring theme. I'm not trying to say I approve or disapprove of smoking. It's just that that's an image that's so constant and so pervasive [that] it's part of our culture, that I feel good about using it.

I like to think it's not a particularly different feeling than any other culture that recorded, well, like the Greeks that would record how they raced their chariots or how they made love or war. There are even pots that show how they made pots, showing a potter at work, and how they cooked and things like that. It's a kind of little connection with the past without repeating the past, I hope.

I've got the Clairol ladies; it's a silhouette that is straight off the magazine, I've used it.

At one point I used the "Black is Beautiful" theme, because we went through a period in the early seventies, a conscious raising appreciation of black people, where in one month the three major magazines, Look, Vogue, and [Harper's] Bazaar, I believe, had fantastic black women profiled, and I latched onto those.

I used at one time an image of Twiggy. And Twiggy--Many people will have forgotten Twiggy one of these days, but Twiggy, I think, symbolized the beginning of women's independence. It was around the time of the Beatles, a little after, but when she was photographed with a mini-

skirt when we'd been accustomed to seeing below-the-knee-length skirts, first of all it was a strong visual image, an erotic image for a man, but more importantly, I think, it was setting-- Looking back on it, I think it was a symbol of women taking another look at their life and not being happy with it, and they were going to do something about it. This is my own post-Twiggy analysis.

I used the Beatles at one point, at least I used John Lennon, because a photograph of him appeared on Look magazine. It was a solarized print, very strong, and I used it. I'm glad because I think they also, in a sociological sense, will turn out to have been a real turning point in life-style, music, all kinds of choices and individual freedom and personal changes.

I mentioned the other day, briefly, the Beatles as being an important thing. In a teaching sense, the pre-Beatle student was like the Heidelberg student that loved to party together and go drink beer together and have a great time together.

In the post-Beatle period we went into a totally different thing, partly because of the introduction of marijuana, where people didn't need a party any more, in fact they needed privacy. It was illegal, and it did more than that. Whereas beer rather stirs you up, marijuana puts you to sleep, and the students became-- I think this

led into what we now call the "Me Generation" where you were not part of a group.

It was a totally different type of student to teach, one who didn't need the support of the group and, in fact, resented it and became very private and wanted his own studio instead of a group studio. A lot of changes happened during that time. I hope some of these changes are reflected in the pottery.

Another one, one of my favorites, occurred about ten years ago now, I think. It was a nude photograph of a popular model by the name of Veruschka, and she appeared to be fondling her breast. In fact, she was examining her breast for cancer. It was one of the very first times that there was public attention called to this. And again I must confess that I cut it out, not because of the importance of the moment, but again from a male sort of interest, for its erotic appeal and its visual impact. I have used it for years, but I have noticed in the last couple of years I've started changing titles, so that it now very often is just "Self" or "Self-Examination" or "Examination," because it's proven to be a very vital part of our life and culture.

So, kind of, that's an abbreviated picture of where the figures started, why and where they came from.

LEVIN: You were mentioning the differences in students from one period of time to another. Did you note a difference of student population when you went--you went Scripps-Colorado-Iowa--but was there, giving some credit for the time period involved in which a lot of things were happening anyway, was there much difference in teaching in Iowa than at Scripps?

SOLDNER: No. Surprisingly, the big difference was a little more powerful faculty and more graduate students. They had more space. We must have had about a dozen, whereas at Scripps I probably had more like six. And those graduate students at Iowa did have private working spaces, whereas the ones at Scripps still didn't have enough room. They all used, at that time, a central room. That was to change in later years.

I had some outstanding students at Iowa, two who are still-- In fact, two of them are now teaching together at San Jose, Linda Rosenus and David Middlebrook. David was a graduate student and Linda was not in clay, but she got her feet wet that year. She came and visited the studio. She and her husband bought a piece from me at one point, and he was there studying poetry or writing. She eventually started taking clay and then years later picked it up at Claremont and continued. There were some other people, Dan Lowery who's still teaching it and working with it, [and]

Vokalek, I believe was his name; I don't know--he's up in the Seattle area--exactly what's happened to him. I've lost track, I guess, of the others.

But Iowa was even more encouraging, the tone of the faculty towards making art, than I'd had anywhere previously, so it was really a reinforcement of just what I wanted to do. They gave me a one-man show at the end of the year that was, I think, a milestone.

LEVIN: How did you get back to Scripps from there?

SOLDNER: Well, there was another place that I taught for a summer in that time. This was in Seattle at a place called Pottery Northwest. Pottery Northwest was a cooperative, it was newly formed, and one of my former students, Ken Hendry, was managing it and they needed some kilns built so he arranged for me to come and do about a six-week kiln-building workshop.

That would have been the summer before going to Iowa, I guess, between Boulder and then up there and then to Iowa.

Considering those years and also the two years that I was by myself, there were a total of four years that I left Scripps. In 1970, or '69 I suspect it would be, I began to realize that I missed the continuity, particularly with the graduate students, that I'd had at Scripps, and I discovered it principally with David Middlebrook. Here was a

young, formative student who got turned on in that first semester, the first year, but then I left, and it was a traumatic experience for him, and somewhat unfulfilling for me to not see it come to [fruition]. He had to make all kinds of new adjustments to a new teacher. He was forced to change firing techniques and just a lot of things, so he was very unhappy about it. I became aware that I missed that sort of responsibility of seeing them through from beginning to end, and I started toying with going back to college.

I looked around and I thought, well, where would I go next? It hadn't occurred to me to go back to Scripps. Henry Takemoto was still there.

Tony Prieto, who had been teaching at Mills College, died that year--I guess it was that year--so I thought rather, somewhat seriously, of taking his place, because Mills College, in a sense, was another Scripps College, about the same size and emphasis on a women's college at that time, and the art department was about the same. Tony had a very strong department. I did send them a feeler, but I discovered the job was not open, that Mrs. Prieto was going to be teaching it, and so I really had no further thoughts about it until 1969.

After I finished at Iowa, I was contacted by Jean Ames, who was head of the department at the time at Scripps

College, and I had known her previously. She said, basically, they were a little unhappy with the program and they were wondering if I would come back and teach at Scripps. Well, that was rather intriguing and I felt that maybe I could go back without going against my philosophy of changing jobs. I felt that I had satisfied that, so I said, "Well, let's talk about it," and I flew out, discussed it with them.

I discovered some problem areas that had to be solved if I was going to teach there. Partly, they revolved around-- In the interim that I had been gone and starting in the early sixties, I was asked to do a lot of demonstrations and a lot of workshops and a lot of lectures around the country, and I found that I enjoyed doing that. There was a certain mobility about it that I enjoyed.

Another problem was that--and that created a problem because it meant that I might not be able to be full-time, or that I was going to need time off to continue that activity--another problem was that when we'd moved to Aspen from Claremont, I had taken with me the tools and the jigs and templates and things that I was using to build pottery wheels. Although that had been a one-man operation where I had done all the work myself, by the time I went to Boulder initially and then on to Iowa, it became apparent that it was a growing business and I had to hire people to do the

work for me. So we had set up a little factory, and in the interim the factory had grown twice. So it meant that I had a factory to deal with if I was going to come back to Claremont and teach. Either I was going to have to move the factory out of the state back to [California], or I was going to keep it there, because it was already well established and there was some advantage to being centrally located in the United States as far as shipping goes.

Another problem was that my work had become more desired in the sense that I was having more and more one-man show requests and group shows every year, so that to go back to Scripps on a full-time basis really did create a problem. Yet that's exactly what they asked. They said, "We don't want you to come back as a visiting professor, we want you to come back as a full professor." Incidentally, that's a fast way to become a full professor. Just leave for four years. [laughter]

LEVIN: That's fast?

SOLDNER: Well, I was a visitor at the beginning, and in the interim I came back and they said, "What was your rank at the last school?"

I said, "I was a full professor."

And they said, "Oh well, I guess that's what you are here."

So I didn't go through the years of track. It was a little annoying to some of the other professors, but it was [the college's] choice.

Anyhow, I thought about this and I finally made several proposals. Basically, I said, "Can I satisfy your requirement of being a full-time professor by changing it a little, modifying that and saying I will accept full professorial responsibility for the quality and the content of the program, but I would like an annual leave of absence the first semester with the opportunity to select a person, a visitor, that changes on a yearly basis to replace me. I will return several times during that semester for continuity's sake. The other teacher, then, will simply have to deal with the classroom and not the day-to-day problems of ordering and maintenance and repair and registration and advancement of graduate students and so forth. They can really concentrate on being a visitor. And then I will come back with the swallows in residence in the spring."

Well, there were some that thought it was too risky and others that thought it was worth the chance to try, and eventually they agreed to try it. It now is ten years old, very successful. They're extremely proud of the tradition. Other teachers have envied that arrangement and say they hope their own school some day can realize the value of it.

I do think that it has done something I was unable to do when I was hired full-time. When I was hired full-time as the sole teacher, I had a lot of Soldner copies even though I didn't give them assignments or projects or say, "Do it my way," just my influence, seeing my pots around the shop. So everybody tended to look like they came from there. Now that is not true. As a matter of fact, very few of my students even make what they call "raku." We have everything happening, and each year they're challenged to think about some other person's point of view.

This was a little embarrassing. Three years ago I was talking with Gerry [Gerald] Williams, the editor of Studio Potter, and he was saying at the time that he wanted to do an article in the near future or distant future on the styles of schools. I seemed a little puzzled, and he said, "Well, for example, if I say 'funk style,' one thinks immediately of artists in the University of California at Davis; or if I say, 'A school with an emphasis on art at that time,'" he said, "You'd think of [Richard] DeVore over at Cranbrook. That's the big emphasis, everybody has to become an artist. Or if you think about [Kenneth] Ferguson, you think immediately of the style of production work that goes on at Ohio State," and so forth and so on. Finally, he turned to me and he said, "Well, what's Scripps?"

At first I gulped and said, "Oh, my God, I guess we don't have a style." But our style, if we have it, is more catholic and it doesn't represent any one person or any one teacher, so we have people who are content to work in funk styles and some in porcelain and some in high-fire salt, low-fire salt, some are slip casting and some are using the wheel and some are making functional things and some are making sculpture and some are into conceptual work. We simply try to challenge them. So, what I'm saying is I'm happy that the system works and I think that I'm going to probably work out my teaching career under that system.

I did test myself last year. It was the eighth year, and it was time to leave again in a theoretical sense. I was invited to go to another school and take over a program but decided against it, mostly because it was going to be impossible to have as much freedom and have as much academic support as I experience at Scripps.

The other thing I've discovered about myself is that I'm at a point in my life that to focus back into a school would distract from the other possibility, and that's to expand through exhibits and lectures in an even larger sense than I am.

As a result, I'm definitely planning next year to do a European tour with exhibits and things that happen along the way. That kind of invitation comes more and more. The

one in Japan, two years, was an expansion of the United States. So, you couldn't do that. I felt I couldn't do that, and it was necessary to open the funnel instead of closing it.

LEVIN: Well, let's see, let's end with some of your definitions of raku, because I know you had different ones at different times.

SOLDNER: Yeah, right. To define raku initially, I looked at Leach, and he seemed to define raku as-- Though he did use the word raku and said, "it means something pleasurable, rather enjoyable," he didn't really go very deeply into how he felt that a tea vessel--

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LEVIN: We were discussing a definition of raku and talking a little bit about the tea vessel and Leach's definition.

SOLDNER: Right, talking about how other people consider the word "raku," and Leach described it as a tea vessel. There are a lot of different tea vessels in use in Japan in the tea ceremony, some of them are porcelain, some of them are refined, and some are Bizen or Shigaraki. Lots of different directions, ways that they're made. The one that referred to raku traditionally means a soft tea bowl, either red or black, and called raku today simply because about fourteen generations ago the word raku was designated as a family name to a family that was hired by the emperor to make a tea bowl in this style.

The technique that they used--I can now say--is unlike the technique we use. It's related to it, and that, perhaps, is where Leach got his information. And, perhaps, that's the best we can end up, referring to American-style raku. But basically, it grew from a word describing the feeling of the piece, not the way it was made, and it felt--as I said--comfortable.

The Japanese tend to describe things by feelings, very often. We tend to almost always describe things by

process, or how it is made, or some other category, scientifically, usually.

The red raku in Japan is a handmade pinch pot. It's painted with ochre and then it's bisqued in a special charcoal kiln. The charcoal is a very dense charcoal and during the bisquing, it flashes black spots of carbon into the bisque. Then, after it's cool, it's glazed with a simple glaze, it's undecorated. The glaze is a low-fired, lead-base type glaze and it's refired very quickly, and again in a charcoal kiln. As soon as the glaze melts, the pot is pulled out of the kiln, placed on the ground and allowed to cool. Any color and any pattern that is left over began in the bisquing; the charcoal-mottled effect and the orange from the ochre started in the bisque and simply was trapped under the glaze.

The black raku is different. Black raku is essentially a high temperature, maybe even about a cone eight or nine. Very often there is a kiln where more than one are fired at one time up to a high temperature. The black comes from a high concentration of iron made from a certain rock.

Although there are some photographs in Japanese books [and] American books on Japanese pottery showing other objects such as incense caddies and maybe a water bucket or something and they're called raku, Mr. Raku, the current practitioner, the current great-great-great-grandson of the

original family, maintains that they are not raku. By his definition, anything raku can only be made by his family because the emperor gave them the sole right, rather like a patent. And we Americans, he'd say--has said--actually use the word erroneously. When asked what we should call our work, he simply said, "Well, since my name is Raku and I make raku, if Soldner makes raku, whatever Soldner makes should be called Soldner-ware, or Hirsch-ware or Leach-ware or Hamada-ware."

So, in a sense there's an impasse in trying to make a comparison between the two. The only thing that I see that connects us with the Japanese is a reinterpretation of the word raku. If one elects to use the word "comfortable," for example, as a definition of raku, then I think that I could say we have a potential of making raku, some people have a potential of making raku in this country. In other words, if you can make it so that it feels comfortable, then that's like saying it feels raku. I've in recent years attempted to explain that idea, and I find a lot of people rejecting it because they prefer to think about it as a technique. They prefer to say, "Well, it has to do with crazing, or it has to do with lustering, or it has to do with fast firing or fast cooling, or it has to do with the tea bowl, or it has to do with a celebration."

In a way, I suppose I should stop trying to change what everybody agrees on, and just say OK. But I find in my own work a need to change from what has been accepted as a definition of raku, in other words: smoked or crackle-glazed or something like that. I found a desire to change it, specifically, on one occasion to only bisque my work with a white slip with no glaze and no smoking and only a single firing, and so it was questionable whether I could call it raku. The other instance is the work I'm doing now. Much of it is only bisqued and it's very often unglazed, undecorated. It's simply bisqued in the presence of some salt vapor that I add by adding salt to the kiln. So, is that raku?

And, you know, I have a show opening tomorrow night that's billed as a raku. No, it isn't. It's not, as a matter of fact. It's simply billed as "Paul Soldner," which is nice, although initially the theme was raku and its influences, or my raku and its influence on other people. So they've altered it for one reason or another, partly because, I suspect, I am not making raku according to the style that they originally anticipated.

I guess, for the record, I would like to emphasize a little more the interpretation of the word "free" or "freedom" and how that applies to, can apply to work. It's much broader than my work when I use the word, and it's

much broader than just ceramics. I like to extend it to other fields, any field where skill, demonstrable skill, is finally performed so effortlessly that the performance appears to be--or the result appears to be--comfortable and rather relaxed and free. I heard David Oistrakh--driving in on the freeway--and he reached that point, you see, where all of his skill, all of his experience, and all of his discipline serves but one need, and that's to perform the concerto with such ease that we are fooled, actually, literally, by the problem of playing the violin.

I think painters, sculptors, anybody involved with that type of artistic skill, goes through the struggle, first mastering the techniques and disciplines, and then finally trying to transcend it. And if they do, I like to think that we can call that a raku feeling or a raku performance or a raku painting or a raku sculpture.

Sandy [Alexander] Calder is one of my favorite examples in this because, although he was very disciplined and knew all the technical aspects of making his sculpture, he also could play. He could decorate a Braniff airplane and not worry about whether it was big "A" because he simply had the-- He had arrived at that point in his life where he was free.

LEVIN: I think that clarifies a lot of aspects of raku. I'd like to talk about the workshops that you mentioned and

the places you go and what you see, how you handle it.

SOLDNER: I was going to say something earlier, and it wasn't appropriate at the time, but one of the amazing things of having done workshops is what takes hold or not, in retrospect. What took hold very quickly was the demonstration I used to give of smoking pots, crackling them, lustering them. That really grabbed fast. But I've been amazed at how few people have done anything with the figure or anything with the stencil, and yet I freely show that as I show it to everybody else, or as I show the other techniques.

The workshops grew, I think, from a real interest on the part of schools and individuals, who had, perhaps, seen in an article or maybe a magazine or a brochure, a show that I had or maybe a pot that was entered in competition or was photographed. They saw it, and it was described as raku.

I'm always surprised how many people feel they have to be taught, that somebody out there has the information, and so they arrange for you to come and do it. In our field, demonstrating doesn't seem to bother us. We have demonstrated techniques in clay freely for many, many years. It's different from painters and sculptors--printmakers, maybe, would be more open to showing some of their techniques. But it's always been a thing with clay people to

very honestly and freely just get up in front of somebody and say, "Well, watch me and ask questions."

It's taken me places I never expected. Becoming a potter I never expected would take me places that I've been able to go, like Australia, New Zealand on one trip. I've been to Japan twice, I've been in Turkey, and I have invitations next year to go to France and Switzerland and Germany, and I don't know where it will end. We've been able to go exotic places like Puerto Rico and worked for a while with the Peace Corps, not a long time, about two weeks, before the raku experience, but growing out of my experience with firing kilns or building kilns. I was invited to help them learn to build kilns to teach people in forming countries that didn't have that experience.

LEVIN: Was that in Puerto Rico?

SOLDNER: Yes, up in the mountains outside of Arecibo.

LEVIN: Oh, this was just the Peace Corps auspices?

SOLDNER: Uh-hm, it was. I guess they were trainees or something until they became accepted. The particular emphasis was on art, this particular group, and they had requests from governments to send people down to help their artists make better-- Well, in the clay field, it was to make it harder so it could be transported to market and to make it healthier so it wouldn't be a health problem.

LEVIN: Did they have a ceramic industry at that time?

SOLDNER: No, usually it was the-- I guess you'd call it an industry, but it was a home industry, the cottage-type thing, where each person would make them way up in the village with a bonfire, and they'd haul them by donkeys down to the market place. But the quality was bad. It broke a lot in shipment, and they also came to realize that the low-fire lead glaze that barely melted in their bonfires was very injurious. So, even though it was considered to be a backward country, they were aware that they had a problem and they were asking for help.

Mostly, what we came up with was trying to show them alternative fuels. I found that kerosene was available in every little hamlet, because the government provided it for cooking. Even though it was brought in by donkeys, it was available, so we took that approach.

The other thing that I needed to teach them was the understanding of the importance of draft in making a kiln get hotter. That required chimneys or dampers, and once you got it hotter, then we had to locate bricks that could withstand the higher temperatures. In most of the countries we were able to find that in old hospitals, sterilizing plants, in rum industry boilers for the distillation. There are always places that you can find a need for fire brick. Even places like Puerto Rico where there's no clay to speak of, in a fire brick sense, there are lots of fire

bricks because at one point they were brought as ballast in the ships. They'd bring the empty ships over to pick up the rum, and to keep them from flopping around in the ocean, they'd fill them with fire brick. Then they'd use fire brick, later, to build other things. So it was interesting, it was possible.

LEVIN: Was that around the 1950s?

SOLDNER: No, that was probably in the early sixties. Stephanie was about twelve at the time.

LEVIN: You were only there for two weeks?

SOLDNER: Um-hm. Well, I was just teaching them. They were there, like in the army. It was very much like if the army had decided that they needed a specialist in something, they'd bring them in for two weeks to the boot camp. They went on about their other activities at the same time. They were constantly having lectures on everything else, but certain hours every day were set aside for kiln construction and theory. It was very interesting.

LEVIN: Do you know what happened to--?

SOLDNER: Well, I followed through with a few of them, and, yes, some of them went on down into those countries and would write back that they indeed accomplished what they had set out to do, and they had left behind a knowledge of higher firing and so forth and so on. One or two of them came back to this country and went back into clay seri-

ously. One of them taught one year at Mills [College], sort of temporary, Edward Snowden. I don't know where he is today, or what he's doing, but he did get his M.F.A. And at least one other one, I've forgotten her name. So that they received a little bit more, some of them, than just the information that they were going to give to the developing countries.

LEVIN: And Australia you've been to? On a workshop?

SOLDNER: Yes. That was a funny one. I mentioned earlier my interest in kilns, and the problem in the early days that there were no books on building kilns. Word got out, partly from-- I published one or two articles in Craft Horizons on building kilns like that funny salt kiln. That was published and later some articles on building oil burners and firing with oil. Anyhow, I guess, at some point enough people became interested that I started getting a lot of letters, "How do you build a kiln?" And initially I would write it all down, a whole new letter every time. I'd compose a new letter, new diagrams. Eventually, I started making a few standard handouts; and then at one point in the ACC [American Craft Council], Lois Moran asked me if I-- She said they had so many requests for building kilns, would I help them and would I do a little booklet on kiln building. So we did put together a very small pamphlet on kiln building, and it's long been

out of print [Kiln Construction, 1965].

In the pamphlet I tried to begin at the beginning and then progress upwards towards more advanced technology. In the beginning would be a very simple corbeled arch-type kiln.

I made references and comparisons to how architecture had evolved through these various arches beginning with the earliest. I think it was called the Treasury of Atreus or someplace like that, which is a funky-looking pile of stones, but in fact it's the first evidence we have of a roof bridging two walls, and it was done in what's called a corbeled arch.

Then the Greeks discovered that if you had enough mass you could make post and lintels--or the Egyptians really, post and lintels--two walls with a heavy mass across the top. We'd make some kilns that way and I would illustrate the various types of kilns there, just a slab on top of two walls.

Then I progressed up to the Romans and their discovery of the Roman arch and how we use that information today to make sprung-arch kilns and Roman arch kilns and sort of ended the little pamphlet with a discussion of the catenary and the parabola as being a more recent invention. It differed in that it was free standing and didn't require a lot of structural support.

Well, for some reason or other, just that chronological order in this little pamphlet led most people to believe that I was putting a value judgement on the kilns and that the catenary was superior to everything else. I never said it, but just the chronological order led them--and they began saying, "Well, Soldner likes the catenary kiln," and they began calling it the Soldner catenary.

I didn't realize that as much until I got to Australia, and I started looking around and asking people what kind of kilns did they use. They said, "Oh, we have a Soldner catinerary." I didn't even know what a "catinerary" was, and I asked to see one and there was a catenary, and they were all over the place. They were very popular and they were all referred to as the "Soldner catinerary."

I had another interesting experience in that respect when I went to Japan following the Australian trip. I had visited Hamada, and I asked Hamada, I said, "You know I have an interest in building kilns back in the States and here I am at Mecca. Do you know of any kilns being built that I could observe?"

He thought a little bit, and finally he said yes, there was one that a young potter was building close by. He directed us over to see it, and I found him, and I introduced myself and told him my reasons, and my interest

in kiln building, and could I see what he was doing. And he started to giggle. (You know how the Japanese giggle when they're a little embarrassed.) He reached up on a shelf, and he pulled my pamphlet off the shelf and said, "I'm so glad you're here, I have a question I want to ask."

LEVIN: So you are worldwide.

SOLDNER: Well, at that point I decided that I couldn't get any more information from them.

LEVIN: That pamphlet must have been written early in the sixties?

SOLDNER: Yes, I think so.

LEVIN: Because since then--

SOLDNER: Since then, Rhodes wrote a book and [Frederick L.] Olsen and [Frank] Colson all wrote books.

LEVIN: Yes, but yours obviously was--

SOLDNER: Oh, I still have people requesting copies of it, and on one occasion we considered reprinting it, and I thought at the time, well, maybe I don't need to, since I knew about these other books being written, even though they weren't out. I thought, well, I'll just wait and see how they turn out. I guess they're adequate for most people. We may be approaching a time now, again, where I would consider rewriting it. I have, in fact, expanded it from time to time and have thought seriously of doing it.

There was a period after the books were written that I

definitely backed off--and that was a period of high-tech information--over the desirability. You know, the pendulum swings a lot, in that when I started building these kilns, we had only high-tech kilns. They were built by industry. For me to understand how to build a kiln and teach other people, I felt it was very necessary to go back to the low-tech beginnings and in fact approached it from that point of view. Some of them didn't even look like kilns, they looked like rubble piles, but they worked. I was after the theory, what makes it work, the concept rather than the superficial exterior.

Then, just as we have swung, say, at one period, away from a really macho, masculine kind of thrust in work to a more--I'll use the word "effeminate," but I hope I don't hurt anyone's feelings--a softer, gentler, timid kind of look in clay; so we went from wanting to build kilns from a primitive point of view to wanting to build them again from a very complex, refrigerator style, so they all look like machines, you know. And during that period, I thought, this is useless for me to want to teach or to write a book on kiln building, because there isn't that kind of interest. They want charts and they want diagrams and they want, you know--

Now the pendulum is swinging again, possibly because the kilns became so complex they became expensive. People

began to get so involved with controls to watch controls to watch controls that it became complicated, and I think I see some evidence now of an appreciation again of the gut-level understanding of the concept.

If I do do a book, it'll be called The Low-Tech Book of Kiln Building, and it will be approached basically from things that they haven't wanted to hear for a few years. Things like, I strongly feel putting cement under a kiln is a waste of money and could cause grief, because cement hardens with water and becomes soft when you fire it. Yet, you see, that's diametrically opposed to what's going to happen when you put a foundation under a kiln.

I've come to the conclusion that the foundations aren't necessary, partly because a kiln, unlike a house, is small. You don't have massive walls to worry about settling, and you already have-- It's full of cracks, every joint becomes a crack, and you don't have to worry about the cosmetic stucco splitting. You cannot prevent a kiln from expanding and contracting. People try and it's foolish. So, I think now we're ready to go back and say, "Well, maybe we shouldn't put cement under kilns. Maybe the common sense is to build it on the ground." And maybe common sense is what they're going to be interested in, so I may get around to it again.

LEVIN: Did you enjoy Australia? Is there a different ambience?

SOLDNER: I never saw it.

LEVIN: You didn't?

SOLDNER: No, that's one of the problems of doing workshops. Unless you set time ahead or behind your schedule aside, you won't see it. I saw the airports, and interviewed in motel rooms, and TV cameras all over the place. When you come into town, you get on the six o'clock news.

I found that at that time--this is almost ten years ago--they were just struggling to break out of their traditional concept of what clay should be. It was coming out of that period where it should be functional. They had always looked to Japan for their inspiration and their ideas, and Leach, of course, and people in that [Michael] Cardew-[Bernard] Leach group pretty much pervaded the thinking of the country.

But at that time, a few things had begun to change. There was a woman by the name of Joan Campbell in Perth who was doing raku. I had met her. We had corresponded by tape recording when I was at Iowa, and she was very interested in doing raku. She had begun to start it and get interest going in other areas.

Also, I think the idea that clay could be made into an object of aesthetic value beyond its decorative value,

because they were mostly just in a decorative-- They might think it was sculpture, but it wasn't sculpture you could ever send to a sculpture exhibit. It was decorative sculpture.

You know, these terms are something that, really, we're still struggling with. I read one last night that bothers me. Do you know Betty Sheinbaum, or who she is? She, at one time--they are editors or publishers, something, of Ramparts. It's a liberal [magazine].

LEVIN: Yes.

SOLDNER: She and her husband [Stanley K. Sheinbaum] make money from it. Anyhow, at one point they had enough money to play with that they devoted ten years, as I believe, to a tax write-off, and they started two stores, one in Santa Barbara called Gare du Sol, and one in New York City called the Fair Tree. It was expected that these stores could operate at a loss if necessary, but they would operate for ten years as a tax write-off. Then at the end of that time, they would either quit if it was not making it on its own, or they would let it go on its own. They quit.

I understand now that she's here in L.A. and she's involved with a new Bunker Hill contemporary museum [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art], and she's fighting a rather singular fight to have clay and wood and glass included as a wing. Great! I love it! What I feel bad

about is that she was asking Fred Marer--I read the letter from Fred--to make a statement about the importance of clay being added. But all through it she refers to it as "fine crafts."

I know what she's struggling with, and I don't know what to tell her other than maybe one should forget all of the, like, even "fine art," just refer to it as the "painting gallery" or the "sculpture gallery" or the "clay gallery" or the "photography gallery" or the--you know, by the media. If it's art, it's art, regardless of what you call it or what it's made from, and maybe that would help.

I hope someone gave her that article in the New Yorker, because that should be ammunition too. She's trying to prove that museums around the country and galleries around the country that we have come to accept as our fine arts galleries are including clay, and I hate to see her subdivide it now into: "They ought to include fine crafts." Though I understand the problem.

LEVIN: What else about workshops would be particularly important? Workshops in this country, say?

SOLDNER: Well, I don't know. Workshops are interesting. Somebody pointed out to me the difference between people like Voulkos and Don [Donald] Reitz and some of the oldies, when they do workshops, and the new graduates. A new graduate probably has a very specific, like a, thesis he's

just completed or a process that he's involved with, that he can demonstrate. He can just about do the whole thing in an hour or two, and then he doesn't have much more to draw from of new information or information that's of help. Whereas with somebody like Voulkos, you know, he can go for three, four, five days on end, if necessary, and never say the same thing, or demonstrate and give you a whole different thing. Or they'll say like, with mine, "Well, one day maybe you just can show us how you make things on a potter's wheel and off the wheel like wall pieces. The next day you can show us about glazing and firing them and decorating, a whole different subject. And the next day, if we still have you, we can have you talk about kiln construction, and the next day we could get into building the wheels or you can get into--"

Finally, I'd even get into how to make wine or I can teach jewelry as well. I understand Toshiko Takaezu on the third day starts doing gourmet cooking. I don't know exactly what that means in regard to your question, but it's sort of interesting.

I wonder very often why they're out there. I wonder what they expect and what they want to get from the workshop. More and more--

In the beginning it was easy to do a workshop because there wasn't that much information about everything. Like

if I was working in high-fire stoneware, many people were only working in castware or slipware or low-fire and didn't know anything about stoneware, so I could spend hours just showing them how to trim a foot, put on a spout, a handle, pull the handles and so forth.

Nowadays everybody knows that, and very often when I go into a place, I'll say, "Hey, I don't know why you want me to demonstrate firing raku or smoking. You all know how to do it. You even have a kiln here, I saw it when I came in. You've got tongs and gloves, so what do you expect?"

More importantly for me, it's difficult to demonstrate technique because the longer you work with technique the more you need to simplify it, and I now have reduced the technical to where it works for me without any big deal. "I can show you how to make a slab in five minutes, and how to make a wall piece in ten minutes, so what's left? I can pull up a cylinder. Do you want me to just stand here and keep pulling up cylinders? It only takes ten minutes, and you all know how to do that anyhow." We have slab rollers all over the country who make slabs.

One of the things that I find almost negative, it has a negative impact on the field, is that everybody knows what everybody else is doing through workshops and through magazines and through tape recordings and so forth, and almost everybody's work is beginning to look exactly alike

because they seem to use each other as information. They draw from it either verbally or from magazines, and we use practically the same equipment and the same clays and formulas. Somebody publishes all the formulas, you know.

How to get individuality into this kind of situation, I don't know. It almost takes a stubbornness on the part of the individual not to look, not to ask.

When you were out of the room, Jeff [Levin] asked me how the library was at Claremont, and I said, "I don't know."

He laughed and he said, "You mean you don't go there, you don't use it?"

And I said, "No, I don't."

So, after the laughing was over I said, "Well, I'm going to at least halfway seriously say it's important to me not to go to the library because I'm very easily influenced. What is important is for me to somehow or other divorce myself from what my peers are doing, if that's possible" (it's not possible) "but, basically, find my own way, follow my own nose. How else can you find individuality? Not by following other people." And so, literally, one of these days I want to go to the library and see how close I've come to solving my problems as other cultures may have solved [them]. But not yet.

LEVIN: You know a lot about that already, really.

SOLDNER: More than I need to, right. I was forced to study it, you know, in art history, and forced to--not forced--but we had such a rich background, and travelling and everything, of course. But I'm very concerned with the larger issue of trying to, if possible somehow or other, invent a pot that's never been seen before and to leave behind as part of the continuum of pots that I appreciate in the past and those to be made in the future. I hope to add, have some accepted that are on the same level, kind of continuing that thread, but I'm not interested in making Japanese pots or Greek pots or--

In fact, right now there's a big interest in wood firing, possibly because of the fuel shortage, but I think it's also romantic. There are almost as many wood-firing kilns now in the United States as there are in Japan. Wood has become such a scarce item there that they're phasing them out. And because of pollution, they're phasing them out of certain cities like Kyoto.

Let's see, what was the point I was going to make?

LEVIN: In terms of other peoples' cultures, other pots that might influence you.

SOLDNER: Oh, right. OK, with the wood-firing kiln, now there's a lot of people wanting to do wood-firing kilns, and Pete Voulkos, of all people, has begun wood firing his pieces, and it's beautiful. It enhances what he's been

doing anyhow. He's had a kind of a phony ash glaze. This is a true ash glaze, and it really is working well. I have no problem with Pete.

What I have my problems with are the kids who go to Japan. They apprentice themselves for a number of years to a master, and then they come back to the United States, and they try to set up and recreate the exact kind of tools, kilns, and pots.

Whereas, I think what they should do is go to Japan, observe how Japanese culture has evolved to a point where Shigaraki bowls are Shigaraki bowls and look like it because of the clay or the tools or the product or the function or something. And Bizen differs from Shigaraki because its clay is different and its product is on another level, or whatever. Try to get the concept, not the exterior, not just the rule. There are too many imitation Japanese pots being made in kilns today, and there's nothing new as a result.

I encourage wood-firing kilns, therefore, only from the position that it's an alternative fuel, which is important, and if it's used in a creative sense for the qualities inherent in wood firing. To make a new twentieth-century American-style object it makes sense, but to make it look like a tea bowl that you'd expect to find in a tea ceremony room is very difficult.

At some point, maybe part of your whole thing, we ought to chat a little bit, if you need other questions, about the changing role of clay as I perceive it, or the direction it's going from where it's come. We've mostly talked about the past, and though we're not really speaking of the future, I think the future's here.

LEVIN: Yes.

SOLDNER: Clay has now outgrown its past as a craft object and as a utilitarian object and as an object of little value in this country. It's now being courted by collectors, sought after as investment. Prices are beginning to soar. Gallery people are trying to tie down some of the artists in an exclusive stable arrangement. Young potters, young people who are working in clay, are hoping to make it big in a financial sense the same way that painters have always done.

I think we may be approaching a point in time where there will be a subdivision where some people will only use clay in an aesthetic sense and will sell, display, and have it accepted that way; and the rest of them will be more happy and content with using clay as a life-style to make more of the motley--what do they call it in Japan?--the mingei.

LEVIN: Folk art?

SOLDNER: The folk art. You see, I think that still is an

undercurrent, but a lot of people have left the folk art, and I really believe that we may have to end up with a subdivision here one of these days that doesn't make both groups feel the other one is right or wrong.

LEVIN: What about the large number of colleges and universities that now have departments, the number of graduates coming out of them? What's going to happen to all of these people?

SOLDNER: Well, I don't know, but I suspect it will be a lot like piano playing. How many millions of pianos are there? How many thouands of youngsters are forced to learn to play the piano and how many concerts are given and how many people are teaching it, and so forth? I think the same thing will happen. We will have large numbers, but there still always are going to be--

One of the things I think distinguishes art from everything else is the recognition by the culture of the few people who in some way or another are their artists. You know, you can define it any way that you want to.

At its most elemental level I think it worked in a backward village that, say, all the women in the village had to make their own dishes. (This is a thesis that I like to consider sometimes.) It was necessary for eating that each woman made [her] own dishes. But it doesn't take long before you realize, everybody in the village realizes,

that Rosa makes more beautiful, more special-- Maybe after a while she's the one that is called on to make their ceremonial dishes, and she ceases to have to make her own dishes because she can trade her ceremonial for those. I guess I would call her their local artist, and I think every culture eventually has their pianist, or their painter, or their whatever artist that gains recognition from their own uniqueness, and from their own skills to rise above the ordinary. That's really what a tea bowl is all about. You see, there are thousands of tea bowls, but the one that you pay $50,000 for, there's a reason. It rises above, it goes beyond. I think that I read that in that New Yorker article. It just suddenly flashed. I think [Walter] Gropius said, "The difference between craft and art is the one that rises above--" something, I'll have to reread that. It goes beyond. How else can you define art? [tape recorder turned off]

LEVIN: Another subject I wanted to cover was the fact that you make tools that are for specific things for yourself, and they're unusual in terms of the way ceramists use tools.

SOLDNER: Oh, I suppose you're referring to things like my skunk-hair brush?

LEVIN: Yes.

SOLDNER: OK. Well, let's start with that one, and then

I'll get around to the other tools. Tools to me are very important. If I'm building something out of wood, I've discovered that the tool needs to be good quality, it needs to be sharp, and it needs to be well designed. A cheap one just, finally, doesn't do the job. But I recognize a pitfall, that happens to a lot of people where they let the tool become the most important part of their effort.

I'm reminded of: If one has enough money, very often a person says, "I want to get into photography," so they go to a photographic store and say, "Give me the best camera, the best enlarger, the best flash meters, the best whatever. I'm going to make art, I'm going to make great photography."

Well, that's not where the magic is. It's not in the greatness of the tool, so that's the opposite side of it. [You] can lose yourself and just try and get the best equipment. And of course the answer to that one, or the example I would give to that, is that somebody like Ansel Adams could use a camera made out of a shoe box with a pin hole punched in a piece of aluminum foil on the end and make a great picture out of it.

This has been one of the premises that I liked about raku, that it can be done without any special equipment. There's no need to make an investment.

I have seen potters who spent years getting ready to make a pot, getting their kiln built just correctly. They've researched it from one end to the other and built it with levels and plumb lines and transits and with the latest materials. They never get around to making anything to put in it. That's the over example, again.

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LEVIN: So tools really don't make the art?

SOLDNER: No, that's the point I was trying to make. But in some ways, you simply can't make the art without the right tool. And with the brush I discovered that I could not make the quality of calligraphy that I had in my mind with any of the brushes that I could buy, even the Japanese brushes that I could buy in Japanese Town. They are designed for writing or they're designed for calligraphy Japanese style.

I was unaware that I had evolved my own personal calligraphy, until it was pointed out to me by a Japanese person. In order to get to that point, I needed a brush that would come to a finer point, that had more resilience but at the same time more control than the more stubborn brush that everybody else was using. So I experimented. I heard that Hamada had made brushes from a dog, so I began experimenting with other animals and found that skunks and deer and rabbit, angora rabbit, and some dogs make very fine brushes.

I also like to simplify. I really don't like a lot of tools, but what I have I want to be all-purpose if possible. We use a rib, for example, in clay. You can buy ribs from manufacturers. Unfortunately, they want to sell

you as many ribs as they can, so you have to have one rib that makes a straight line and then another one [that] makes a certain kind of curve. You buy another rib to make another kind of curve, and finally you end up with a box full of ribs.

Well, it seemed to me that I could make a rib that would incorporate all of those shapes in one rib, rather like an architect uses a French curve to make an endless variety of curves. So I evolved finally, simplified. I think that's what I like to do, I like to simplify. I like to go back to the core, back to the beginning, back to the most essential. (I do that with my teaching I'm told: Get it out, find out what really is important and not all of the stuff around it.) So instead of trapping myself with a box full of ribs and having to spend all that time worrying about where they are, I've come up with one.

Some of the things I use-- Like one of the tools I use is a bamboo cut off stick. That evolved from working with Voulkos because he used it and very often that's where you-- Whatever you begin with, that seems most comfortable.

But I tend to not accept everybody else's solution, and I don't know why everybody else doesn't feel the same way. It must be some stubborn streak on my part or something.

For example again, in a tool, say, a cut-off wire. To cut off a pot we need a wire, and you see in Japan--it's kind of interesting--in Japan, or in a tradition, your teacher would show you how to make a wire for cutting off, or he would tell you where you get it, and you would use just that wire. That is the gospel truth. And you would teach your student to do the same thing.

One of the things about being an American, I think, is we don't need to. We have more information about it, a lot of other things. And we can have a lot of interest in a lot of things outside your own field.

So, on a cut-off wire, even though I recognize that Leach, for example, talks about a certain shape making a certain thing made from a certain material, I could say, "Gee, I could do the same thing by going to a hobby store where they have model airplanes, and I recognize that there's a stainless steel braided wire there that is used to control the model airplane that would be better, in that a stainless steel one lasts longer." Or I could say, "The G-string on a guitar is wound with platinum or something like that--silver. That certainly is going to be a thing to look into and investigate."

I really have done that a lot in my life, just find alternatives, tools, use them for a purpose other than what they were designed, because it's more efficient. I think

that's the whole point. The tool, simply, whatever I decide on has to be more efficient than something else.

LEVIN: Speaking of efficient, the way salt-vapor bisquing evolved was, in a sense, an attempt to be more efficient with your firing.

SOLDNER: Um-hm. Well, I referred to it previously as the first time happening as a total accident, when I was not expecting it, and the second time the same thing happened several years after that first experience. Jim [James] Melchert and I were going to have an exhibit together, I believe at San Bernadino, and we hadn't discussed what each of us was going to make. As it turned out, I decided for some reason, psychic or something else, that I wasn't going to do my usual smoked raku. I made the objects very similar, but I covered them with white [slip] and just bisqued them, and he turned out to have a completely black show, which was interesting. We were in opposite rooms, black and white.

At that time, I bisqued the pots first because that was the-- See, we get in these traps of doing things the way it's always been done before. Even though I had planned eventually just to have a white-matte-slip, low-fire effect, I first thought I should bisque the pot, literally put the slip on it and refire it.

Well, when I bisqued it, I couldn't find a kiln to bisque it in. We sign up for kilns at the college, and they're always full. The only kiln that was available was a salt kiln, and I thought to myself--I'd forgotten about that incident where the clay had turned orange--and I thought, "Well, I guess since I'm only going to be bisquing in the salt-glaze kiln, it won't affect it. I can go ahead and bisque in there."

LEVIN: You sign up for a kiln too? Not just the students.

SOLDNER: Yeah, oh no, why should I have any--? I use the facilities as equally as I possibly can. I try not to pull rank.

So, anyhow, I signed up for the kiln, and I put the pieces in, and when they came out of the bisque, they were orange again. This time, I realized you didn't even have to put salt into the kiln, new salt. If there's already a residual salt in the walls, it would do it too. Well, I also denied that by covering it up with white slip and refiring it.

Several years later, after having exploited and investigated the smoking process almost as far as I felt it could go, I began to search abstractly in the back of my mind, I believe, for a new direction, rather than, you know--

Like, I'd never involved myself with funk art for a simple reason: somebody else did it first. And I never involved myself with photographic images on pots, simply because other people do it. For me, whenever I do want to make a shift, I try to find something that I don't know anything about.

And lo and behold, this popped out of the back reaches of my mind, the idea that when you bisque those pieces with a little salt, they turn colors. And where they've touched each other they've flashed. Maybe that could be thought of as a new direction or [to] have creative, aesthetic implications, just like smoking the pots were at one time. So I then, purposely, the first time, started bisquing the work to see what would happen with salt.

LEVIN: When, about, was this?

SOLDNER: Oh, I guess, now about ten years ago. About 1970, shortly thereafter, anyhow. Again, it was my right hand doing one thing while the left hand was trying the other for a number of years.

I'm only now at the point where I've had my first total salt-bisque show where nothing in it was taken beyond that point. That was a show I had in Mendocino last spring ["Gallery Fair"]. I'm still not that totally in control of the technique or the process to do it every time. Some

pieces I have in the show opening tomorrow are still smoked. I just wasn't able to control the entire thing.

LEVIN: Well then, you mean if they were salt-vapor bisqued, you also--

SOLDNER: Refired them.

LEVIN: --refired them and smoked--

SOLDNER: I'm learning that in the refiring, the salt has played a part of the second firing, so this is another direction I'm exploring. This is a new one.

Some of it even reminds me of when you photograph a negative in a camera, and you take that film out of the camera, and you examine it in a safe light in the dark room, you can't see the pictures. It's there, it's called a latent image, but in order to see it, it needs to be put in a proper developing solution for an amount of time, and then it will come up.

Well, I've discovered that the salt affects the clay and the decoration, the slips and stains that I use in the bisquing, so that when I'm finished bisquing, I have to make a decision. It's either finished or it goes to the next stage which would be like developing, because I've learned to recognize that the salt has already permeated various areas in slips and stains, and when I would refire and smoke it, that's the developing agent. And this is

opening up another new direction: what happens with that, you see?

The salt bisquing, unlike the smoking, has a kind of a sensual quality to it. The colors are beige and orange and yellows and gray, and they're far softer and perhaps not more sexy, but certainly more sensual and in some ways less masculine.

I think, you know, artists work in pendulums themselves, and sometimes I want my work to be very colorful and somewhat garish. When it reaches that point, I find a real need for it to become subtle, and I have that freedom to go back to that again. Currently, I guess I'm looking for more color.

LEVIN: By salt bisquing, then, you're just bringing it up to a bisque fire and not firing it up.

SOLDNER: Um-hm. About cone 010.

One of the things that happens in the kiln that I use to salt in at Scripps College that's quite different from my kilns in Aspen, unfortunately, is that anything with a white slip tends to turn pink from traces of copper left in the firebox or decorated on another pot. They leap across from one pot and flash the other side. People think I'm air brushing my soft pinks, but they're all just flashes from that kiln. The kiln in Colorado doesn't do it, and

I'm puzzled. This is going to be another investigation to figure out what really is happening.

LEVIN: You have a goal.

SOLDNER: Yeah, I have a problem. [laughter] I make the problem my goal.

LEVIN: You also, don't you still use some mixtures of iron and copper and brush them across?

SOLDNER: Uh-huh, and that's probably what's flashing. It's the copper that becomes volatile in the salt fire and leaps across with the flames.

LEVIN: But it's applied to the pot with a brush?

SOLDNER: Yeah.

LEVIN: And it doesn't come out--what you see on the surface that you've applied doesn't come out that way, then, after it's bisque fired?

SOLDNER: Well, no. Of course, that's true with all ceramics. One of the problems is that we put on a black material. That black material could be cobalt oxide, or it could be manganese, or it could be a form of copper. They all look black at one point. When you put it on, you have to think ahead; "Now, this might turn out to be green or blue or yellow or red," so it does change and the salt adds one more variable.

LEVIN: Something we haven't discussed is your appointment as trustee with the American Craft Council. Was it for a year or longer?

SOLDNER: Three years.

LEVIN: How has the Council functioned, and how have you felt about it?

SOLDNER: First of all, I don't think that I was very effective, but I would say the reason for that was not my fault. It's the nature of being a trustee. In the first place, it's alien. It was an alien position. That's something that board-of-directors and board-of-trustee people in business know all about, and they can look at a fiscal report, for example, and go right down through it easily understanding everything on it, get to the bottom line and go on. But to me it's all gibberish, or was when I first saw a financial statement. I had no idea why I was even asked to look at it.

LEVIN: I should ask you between what years?

SOLDNER: Oh, gee, let's see. I've been off now about four years, this is 1980, so it must have been about 1973 to '76. It must have been about then.

The other thing that I think is a problem, or was a problem with being a trustee is that there were two levels of trustee. There were what we call the craftsman-trustee and that's what I was, and then there were the full-time

trustees or executive trustees. They were the ones that really made the decisions. They met more times per year.

We were only brought in to New York three times a year, and, unfortunately, out of the two days that we would be there, generally the first day was spent sitting in the office of the chairman listening to his report about the activities of the craft ACC in our absence. It sounded like he wanted to bring us up to date, but, basically, he was avoiding our asking questions and talking about the present or the future, so that was a frustrating experience.

We really didn't get to say anything or ask questions until the end of the day, and then it was too late, then you'd have cocktails. When we'd go to the main board meeting the next day, it was so formal, because Sam [Samuel Curtis] Johnson from Johnson Wax and all these other guys flying in in their jets, we were, I think, intimidated. We'd sit very quietly in our seats. We were, after all, just craftsmen. They were the businessmen, and we'd sit in awe of what was going on. The whole agenda was prepared ahead of time and it was very cut and dried, and you'd find yourself saying, "Aye, aye, aye." If there was a discussion, you really didn't know what intelligent questions to ask. It takes me two years before you get to the point where you even know the questions you should ask and the

nerve to ask, and your third year is too late. You can't do anything about it other than postpone working on it.

So I think it was a token; it was tokenism. It was interesting; I enjoyed it because I got insight into how boards and trustee councils do function and also I got to go to New York City three times a year and see shows and things like that, but I don't think I was of any direct help.

They, at the worst, expected us to become fundraisers, and I refused on that ground. I said, "No. If you want some advice, I'll give it to you."

I found out they didn't like the advice anyhow. You know, the questions that I tended to ask were questions along the line of saying, "Why is it necessary to have the Council headquarters administration in New York City? Why can't it be Colorado? Why couldn't it be in Phoenix, or why couldn't we--?" You know, money was such a problem, I'd say, "Why don't we sell this building for the million dollars that we know we can get and go buy a $100,000 ranch some place and use the rest of the money in a better way? The mails will arrive at the same time." I could see having the museum there, but I really still can't see why the headquarters has to be in New York. But I never got good answers to that.

I raised some other questions that I don't think they liked. One which I've been asking more and more recently of myself, and it is, "Why do we have to have a separate Craft Council? Why couldn't the Museum of Modern Art take us under their wing as they have photography? Wouldn't it serve us better to not have a subdivision?"

I asked the question and the answer came back, "It's a good question, but--" At that time there were two Rockefellers on each board. One was with the Museum of Modern Art and one was with the American [Craft] Council, and they had a feud going. So it was the right question at the wrong time. Now I think it's too late; I think the die is cast. The Museum of Modern Art has torn down the building and is building their own wing.

The Museum of Modern Art really is not the same museum that it was, anyhow, twenty-five or thirty years ago. They now are freezing, as I understand it, and not collecting in a contemporary sense. They are now a museum of a movement called "modern art," which has passed.

LEVIN: So that there still isn't a place?

SOLDNER: I don't think so, for contemporary. The Whitney [Museum of American Art] occasionally has a show, a survey of contemporary, about every two years but not a specific place.

LEVIN: So the American Craft Council is not the road to a broader understanding of clay, fiber, wood, being part of American art on a general basis with no divisions?

SOLDNER: You know, very honestly, Elaine, I think that it's like having the tiger by the tail. When Mrs. [Aileen O.] Webb started the Council, she had a whole different idea in mind. Her idea was--and it came out of the Depression--that she wanted to help the craftsmen who were making functional objects for a living. She wanted to develop better market places and an awareness of the beauty of them and to use them. Then, in spite of her--I think because it was taught in art departments--the emphasis shifted from a utilitarian to the aesthetic, inventive, artistic value. She, of course, never would have stopped that. She always encouraged that. The people she selected, like Rose Slivka for the magazine and so forth, were encouraged as well to promote that part of it.

At the same time, a lot of people felt it was there to help them with their sale of their goods. The ACC even started the Rhinebeck Fair [Northeast Craft Fair in Rhinebeck, New York] as an attempt to help that side of the ACC. But when the work itself got elevated to a point where it was of interest to other art galleries, those people tend to drop out of--and don't need the support of--the craft movement anymore.

In fact, people like John Mason have said, "I don't want to be associated with the craft movement."

And Kenny Price has never belonged to it. He did do one stint at the Super Mud/NCECA [National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts] Conference and said, "I'll never be involved with those people again."

They feel, and perhaps rightly so, that it holds them back in their acceptance by the larger art community.

So I raised the question, "Here we are, struggling to make our work of higher caliber, hoping to get more recognition, trying to raise the prices, and trying to raise the consciousness in an artistic sense. So why don't we just exhibit in painting galleries and compete with sculptors, and why don't we stop having a subdivision?"

And I come back-- As I said earlier at some point, I think we may be approaching a point in time where there will be a division, and the craftsmen, if they want to continue to work on the level of craftsmen being defined as a functional object, may find that it's honorable as it is in Japan with the Mingei Society, but there has to be something else for the rest of them, some other direction to go. There's a lot of confusion.

One of the unfortunate things is that a lot of work, I think, today is being done under the name of art, but they don't exhibit. They're afraid to exhibit their art in

painting galleries and in sculpture galleries. They always want to do it in a craft-oriented gallery, and that's because, unfortunately, the evaluation criteria are different, and you can get away with more. That's kind of strong talk, but it's a question that bothers me.

I'm still very much part of the craft world in that I have not made a conscious effort to remove myself from it. I have questioned--and I currently have a little difficulty with--the gallery that's been very good to me. They've sold all of my work, they've given me excellent shows, they've given me write-ups. Yet it's not a true gallery, it's a store that sets this one small side apart occasionally, cleans out the quantities and goes back to a bare wall, and they'll have a person like myself have an exhibit for a month. They don't really know themselves. I've asked them, I said, "Are you a store, or are you a gallery? I would like to know because it may affect my future with you." They don't want me to leave, because when I do have a strict one-person show, it looks to the outside like it's a pretty good gallery. But in the interim when it goes back to shelves again and ash trays, that gets confused.

LEVIN: Perhaps that's the residual of all the confusion that just continues.

SOLDNER: Yes, it does. That's why I question why we bother using the separation, the words.

LEVIN: I want to catch up with--since we're leaving ourselves in a dilemma here that we may not solve, I wanted to catch up with--you mentioned that during the war when you were, was it, in the army--

SOLDNER: Yeah.

LEVIN: --that you had come to California for a short time. I wondered if that brief stay gave you any feeling about coming back here that perhaps influenced, or was another point, in your working with Voulkos in Los Angeles?

SOLDNER: Well, some of it coincides, and some of it's accidental, and some of it was probably planned. Certainly coming to California as a GI had a broadening, widening effect on my future. I think I knew right then I never wanted to settle back in Ohio if for no other reason than physical beauty. Ohio has its beauty, but the part I'm from is all flat, and if you like a forest, that's fine, but you can't really see farther much beyond the forest.

California has a shore, the coastline, it has the mountains, and it has the deserts. It's gorgeous. The flowers grow here in such abundance. The sun is easy. It's easy to work in the sun; it's very difficult to work in the gloom, difficult to work in the snow constantly. Even if you're inside, there's just something that keeps you from going directly to work. Whereas here in California when I step out of my house on my way to the studio,

nothing really gets in the way even in the rainy season. Maybe only collecting mushrooms. I mean, I might spot some mushrooms on somebody's lawn, and I have to stop and pick it up. [laughter] But I think that what it did was plant a seed that some day I would like to be in a similar place, and I didn't know when it would be or exactly how.

LEVIN: Where were you in California when this--?

SOLDNER: I was stationed at what is now called Vandenberg [Air Force Base]. It was at that time called Camp Cook, and it was not an air force, it was an armored outfit.

LEVIN: Vandenberg's in Southern California?

SOLDNER: It's north of Santa Barbara, it's up at Santa Maria. When it came time in my life to put down roots as a family and I began searching, my search led me from considering places in Colorado which I had learned to love by attending a graduate school at Boulder, to remembering the beautiful valley, the Lompoc Valley near Vandenberg. Beautiful in the sense that it was Burpee's Flower seed-flower center and from the air it looks like a crazy quilt. Also remembering that the climate was probably the most temperate I'd ever seen, that was in the back of my mind in a physical sense.

Now, there's another sense that became apparent to us and is of very much importance to me now to live here and perhaps was part of-- I was just overwhelmed with joy to

find out that Voulkos was going to teach in California. Had he taught in Iowa or Ohio or one of those back states at that time, I might have been sore pressed to go there, I don't know. I certainly had opportunities to study at Alfred and at Cranbrook and so forth, but it was coincidental and one of those beautiful things that does happen occasionally in your life that when I was ready to get serious, he was moving to California.

But what I started to really say was that I discovered when I went to the University of Colorado from Ohio, a peculiar-- We experienced--both my wife and I have talked about it--we experienced a change in the environment different from what we knew in Ohio. I guess I would have to say that, whereas Ohio was rather confining--rather like the forests, you know, you couldn't really see beyond them--so were the social mores far more morally judged and socially controlled. Some of the phrases that keep recurring in my mind were ways that were used by parents and school teachers to shape you, to train you. It would be like, "Well, what will people say?" "What will people think?" "What will the neighbors--?" You know, it was always that concern about your behavior, your ideas, your life being regulated to conform to the standards of the community.

Once you hit the mountains, it opens up just like the mountains open up and the air gets dry and thin. It's a physical thing, but it's also emotional and psychic, and you suddenly find yourself less tense, less worried about what people think and more able to decide for yourself what really is going to be the best thing. I think this is important to an artist.

I sometimes say, although Los Angeles has its smog and it has its problems and its noise and so forth, on the other hand it's probably one of the most exciting cities to live in in the United States because so much happens here ahead of time. In a way it's a kind of barometer. I think, having traveled around the country a lot, I tend to say, "Yes, things happen first in L.A. and in California."

There's more of a permissiveness, there's more of an openness, there's more of a live-and-let-live attitude out here than I've experienced anyplace else. It's part of the sun; it's part of the atmosphere. Life-styles, you know. We laugh and say we've got more cults, religious cults, probably, in Southern California than there are in the rest of the country, and I think it's simply because it's permitted. (I don't know if minority people would agree that it's also easier for them living here than in some of the cities back there, but it must [be], because they

certainly do live here, I think, in large numbers.) But that affects one's work.

LEVIN: Do you think it affected it in terms of imagery in any way?

SOLDNER: Well, it doesn't change that much when I go from here to anyplace else. However, people have pointed out that my work tends to have the jagged edges of the mountains, and it does tend to have the sensualness of the Southern California colors, the desert colors. Whether that's subconscious, I don't know. It's not conscious. I find as I move around the country from one place to another, I don't really change a lot because of the move. The changes might have been at one time caused by some of that.

LEVIN: So that your four years away, you don't feel made that much difference between Colorado and Iowa?

SOLDNER: No. In that case, I really think that the most valuable part was simply being connected with real strong art departments. We didn't participate really or partake of being an Iowan or being a Coloradan in that sense. I didn't feel that.

One thing about being an artist that is of very real value to me is the possibility of not atrophying, not settling into any one mold, anyhow. Artists are free to continue to evolve and experiment with new materials and

new techniques all their life and new subject matter. We don't really retire. We might wear out, but we don't really retire. The physical environment as well as the psychic environment of a place like Southern California encourages more ongoing, I think, for more years, that type of thing. It's more gentle.

LEVIN: Well, do you think, then, that the fact that Voulkos came here and the change in clay occurred in L.A. is significant?

SOLDNER: I don't think it was so much just California, but it was part of it. You also have to keep in mind that he was salaried, so he was free from making things to sell. And keep in mind that he was now part of an art school, not a cooperative. Archie Bray was very limited in there was no other faculty. Although he might have done painting and sculpture, he and Rudy, nobody else was there to do it. It was a brickyard, not conducive like an art school. Here he had museums to visit on the lunch hour. Here he had peers to talk to. He had market places, more people who were more interested, I think, in new ideas than back in Montana.

Then there were the physical things we've talked about where the atmosphere and the sea levelness and the outdoor kilns changed directions and so forth.

We all take paths, and we all have forks, and what fork you take I don't think is an accident. I think one makes those selections, and his fork was to leave Montana when he could and come to California, and I had a fork to make and that was to choose to study with Voulkos in California instead of Maija Grotell at Cranbrook or some other place. It's these choices, I guess, that we make that probably have as much to do with everything as just the circumstances. I'm in California, I think, because I want to be. [tape recorder turned off]

LEVIN: As a sort of summation, let's talk about what your goals are for today or tomorrow, and we'll conclude with that.

SOLDNER: Well, that's probably the hardest question, because we can't predict, really, what happens in the future. But I suppose-- If people ask me sometimes in workshops just what I'm doing and why I stick with clay and so forth, I think I would say, well, first of all, I think I'm part of a movement that loves clay, thinks of it as one of the world's most unusual materials, and would like to be part of a movement to elevate its acceptance to a higher--to an aesthetic level that connects somehow or other to the same level where other cultures have been with their acceptance of clay.

For example, you know, in Japan the cult of the tea bowl. That acceptance is about as high as our acceptance of a [Robert] Rauschenberg. It's kind of in the same price range, and people will mortgage a property and buy one.

Then, on another level, I guess I want to be a teacher as long as I can, because in a way it seems that part of being a human being is the ability and the need to communicate from one person to another ideas, techniques and to help each person go from a zero blotter--you know, when the tape recorder was off--to whatever they are at the end of their life. We still can't grind up a person's wisdom or their experience, put it in a test tube, and inoculate somebody else. We use books and we use tape recorders and we leave evidence behind, but everybody's born at the same helpless point. And teaching, to me, is really a continuation, I suppose, of parenting, but on another level. It's nurturing, and it's helping somebody else who still is toddling and still not sure where they want to go. It's simply giving them help and aids and devices and encouragement.

Now, for myself, I think--stated very simply--I would like to make a pot that the world has never seen before. When I look at the eight, ten thousand year tradition of pottery, it's fantastic the amount of inventiveness that people have had in terms of making vessels of all kinds:

vessels of use and vessels of celebration and vessels for religious reasons and for spiritual enlightenment. I really want to be part of that. I would like to be, but I realize that the problem of trying to invent something new is very difficult. I think it's done, I don't say that it's impossible. A lot of people think it's impossible; I don't think so. I think right now it's possible to look into the history books and not find examples of, like a Voulkos piece. It's very possible. So that's kind of a carrot, my own carrot, to elevate the work to the point--to invent new objects and then to raise its level.

You know, there's one thing connected to it. I don't even know if it's possible in the visual world. I very much would like somehow or other to make my work have some sort of emotional enlightenment or movement for people as a piece of music does for me. If I listen to a Bach chorale, you know, I'm carried away from the streets and out of the ordinary surroundings to another place, let's call it spiritual. It's one that connects me with an inner core that is strictly emotional, and that might manifest itself in just choking up and maybe crying or something like that. That's a real powerful response, and I don't know if it's possible in the visual world to turn somebody on like that. You can move them in other ways: you can be outrageous and you can make them disgusted and you can make them laugh and

you can make them sometimes think a little. But there's that other emotional stirring that-- I know it works for some ceramic vessels. I've stood in front of some pre-Columbian vessels, and I've felt--and been in the presence of some tea bowls that made me feel--moved emotionally and connected with the best things there are. I've felt that myself in other people's work, so that's a goal to try to get my own, I guess.

LEVIN: I thank you very much for losing your voice and for cooperating so beautifully. Thanks.

SOLDNER: Well, it's an interesting experiment.

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