

Richard Bresnahan Interview Transcript

September 2020

When do you feel most alive in the artistic process?

When you're working with this particular medium of the earth, there is layers and layers of patterns that you evolve and develop over a long period of time. And there's these very brief moments where that, as you're moving into a new pattern or a new idea, something really clicks -- whether it's in the shaping and making or in the firing. There's some sort of resolution that comes from the thought idea to the three-dimensional form and then the piece as it has been completed especially in the wood firing with 45 other people. And then this result comes and you say, "Oh that's very exciting." I think it's the discovery of what the emotion of the interior can expand on the exterior; the exterior of the hand creating from the emotion into the form.

Because I had admired as a very young person seeing very, very old potters ... a young person like Daniel who is an apprentice in the studio ... they have a youthful strength. But when I was watching the older potters as a very young person, it seemed like they were like a Pablo Casals as a cellist. It was just a subtle movement of the hands and the form would shape. I always found that to be extremely exciting. They didn't have the muscles and the strength but the finesse and the gentleness by which they formed and shaped it was really quite beautiful.

So those are very alive moments. When you're working with them you become alive when you see that translate into an apprentice too, when you see, all of a sudden, a form takes off that they make and then you can see the joy that they're seeing similar things. So that I find also very rewarding, that there's the translation of that lived pattern coming alive.

What's the hardest part of your work, that other people might not know of?

I think the hardest part is that right now at this time period is that there are so many ideas that are inside you that you want to come out. And so it's kind of a dialogue, a continuous dialogue, because when I talk with other artists that are at my age, they're looking at the idea of trying to complete works before they physically can't complete them. That was something I had never thought of ten years ago, 15, 20 years ago. So I think that one of the things is that when you're in a place, a sense of place for 42 years and making, there is this expectation. And so sometimes it's pretty frightening to try and come out of those expectations and make things that people are like, "Whoa, that's really off the wall," when you're in that dialogue. So I think that's a very hard part right now.

Why local clay?

First of all, American has been foundation formed by industrial revolution. That's our history. We have through genocide destroyed the previous cultures that had an indigenous relationship to the earth, so that translation didn't transfer. So my total upbringing until leaving this part of the planet and going to another part of the planet was an industrial review of everything until the 60s, when the idea of freedom of expression ... those people coming out of World War II and the Korean war getting educated.

They no longer wanted to follow any of those previous paths because of the horrific experiences they had in those particular conflicts. That followed into Vietnam, so there was this period of time, brief period of time in America, where you could choose to be what you wanted to be. It wasn't that pressure that you experience to become a doctor or engineer. So by going to another part of the planet that had a pre-industrial history, a deep one, that particular relationship to the material became very important.

So the experience of an apprentice going out with an elder, with a whole group of us with wheel barrels and shovels and stuff like that to go along a rice paddy field with wheel barrels and stuff to dig clay for the first time, hand dig it, was a totally new experience. So you got your shovel ready to go and "just a moment" – that was Matsumoto-San. He goes and folds his spiritual talismans and then takes a reed and puts that in the side of the clay bank and then goes through a small ritual throwing a little bit of rice grains and sake and stuff and ask permission from the earth to take something from the earth, to extract something from the earth, to make human beings whole. That I think was a very powerful moment as a young person in their 20s that had a fairly big impact.

And then came the layers and layers of how they translated the taste of clay – that you tasted the clay and it became this metaphor that you take and internalize the taste of clay into your soul and identity. So that became something that was totally devoid of what you had learned of industrial production, where the material was already dead and God's will said you could harvest it at will, but the earth was a dead resource and it was just made for human beings to extract, not giving anything back. Here was a totally different spiritual perspective that you did. You weren't introduced to it.

So in that regard then, it layered and layered with the symbiotic kind of echo-mutualism of relationship to all the materials and everyday living. That the rice straw was woven into straw mats and straw sandals, and then the rice halls would burn very slowly to make the ashes, to make the glazes, and the wood ashes out of the adored were used to wash, to make, because it was a very slow burn there. You got really good quality ashes. Those are used to make glazes and every part of their live system had an interrelationship with the creative system.

It wasn't that you're going off to school to become creative. Every pattern of the live system had an interlocking form for human expression. That was also something that I had not experienced before. That all the gardens were always in a row. Everything was always somehow in a manufacturing sense. Any kind of agrarian experience would become outside the industrial format. It was always part of the industrial format.

So the reason for digging local clay here and starting out that foundation was an ecological environmental framework. I made the decision that I will never buy any materials as best I can. Some of the industrial materials we use like kiln shelves and wadding clay and those kinds of things that help us to get to that point of relationship with the natural materials, we still depend on those.

So that's a slow process to unlearn the processes you've been given prior to this. Japan was also industrialized severely but the area in Kyushu because of World War I and World War II had interrupted the industrial revolution going through Japan. There are still these beautiful remnants of indigenous systems that have been going for two to three hundred years systematically. Everything was still intact

from their handmade paper making to the way they process their foods and the way they worked on all their natural materials.

So when Fr. Michael Blecker asked me to come to Saint John's as an artist-in-residence, he realized in the letters that I was writing him from Japan that there was a direct connection to the previous Benedictine lives that he had the experience of as a novice coming into the monastery, and the young man still seeing the remnants of their agrarian life and how that agrarian life was slowly being cast aside to take on the educational mission.

And so he kind of understood that in order to ground the monastery and the communities again, it was going to be impossible to go back to the agrarianism in the way that Virgil Michel and Eugene McCarthy talked about the "back to the earth" movement. That was not happening in Saint John's. They had been full in on corporate education. They're not coming out of it. But they wanted something that would connect a new translation of energy into reminding the community that there are patterns of indigenous systems that can be incorporated into an education and creative environment. So that's why he asked me to come to Saint John's.

The clay deposit that we're using is 144 million years old. One of the hardest things is that that's a number that's impossible to get your mind around. You just can't imagine 144 million years even though you listen to Stephen Hawking on the universe and all, you just try to get your head around it but it's pretty difficult.

But I try to explain that that clay deposit of being here now for 144 million years in shaping and forming its plasticity, its pressure, it's now being pushed up by the glaciers to ready for a human being to touch. Having access to that clay for shaping and firing and making is like a little laser light of time, just one fraction or one 25th of a second of time that the human interacts with the material and changes it forever. It's changed forever. It's no longer clay. We've changed it forever. So I take that responsibility very seriously. If you're going to take something from the earth and you're going to change it forever, that's serious responsibility.

So the clay when it speaks to you, speaks to you in different ways, but in order to have the best communication is that the clay then finds space for others. That what you're making, then there's a little bell that goes off inside a human being that says this particular form and shape becomes a pattern way of living and a pattern way of living is a ritual way of living. That you get up in the morning and you make tea out of your favorite cup or favorite cups, maybe rotate. You have these when guests come, that you think of how you're going to bring a platter out so someday when we can all have guests again that the platters are filled with something you've created of food. So there's a certain functionality that I feel is important to communicate. It's overused now but it's very true in the sense of the Rule of Saint Benedict, that you should treat your everyday tools as instruments of the altar. I translate that as saying every tool or material that you use, if it's been shaped by a human hand, that has been cared for, that is a sacred object, sacred path, and a sacred form and treated that way.

That keeps those forms from going into garage sales or to be tossed out into a landfill as many of our industrial products because we don't know the type of tremendous work that other people on the other

side of the planet are doing in abhorrent conditions making those things for us. I think that the clay is then very carefully cared for, very carefully aged. It's incredibly important material for the life of the potter and for the life of human beings. Industrialization is for one thing and that's to make money for a narrow group of human beings that figured out how to extract things quickly and get them into the hands of other people quickly so that their resources are then quickly extracted as well. Makers of earthen materials pre-industrial revolution never thought that way. They were making because they were trying to endue and imbue a spiritual quality to what they were making so that they could be generationally handed down. So they were looking at generational transformation.

I can't think of buying clay. I don't know how you could do it. And we don't sell the clay here. We give the clay away to other artists because they that's really a tipping scale. You just can't do that.

How have you changed as a potter on account of using this particular clay?

Everyday I change something. The material is not static at all. There is an old, old painter I knew, and I used to take my students to see him. He was this very, very exacting watercolor painter, world-renowned. His claim to fame in this particular region was he was the person who painted Betty Crocker. He took all these different images of this beautiful woman, beautiful women, and combined them to create this one woman, Betty Crocker. There's a big, beautiful portrait at the entrance to General Mills. He taught for many years at the University of Morris as the painting instructor. He did some of the most beautiful, beautiful still lives that created power. So similar to like Kandinsky doing abstract still lives to create an internal emotion, his were so exacting that they were just ... And he stood at his kitchen and all the students were down at the bottom of the stairs in his studio, and he looked at them and he says, "The moment I step my foot across the threshold, I begin to do battle with reality and vision and dreams." And then he says, "This will take me the rest of my life to do." And then he started showing people how many times he had scraped off this painting, 50 times, 20 times, off the paper to finally get to the emotion that this still life was bringing to him, and the right type of light and the right type of vision, so that that piece of rope ... because he was talking about how his mother had to go to a sanitarium because she got multiple sclerosis or tuberculosis, I think it was, so the whole family had to move to the Arizona desert, to one of these areas for tuberculosis, and this dry wooden table ... he tried to create the driest feeling of what the desert felt like in this piece of rope hanging from this old baylor twine that was hanging down and this kind of still life to create the emotion of what he went through as a child in this desert, and what the feeling of his mother was trying to do to keep her children alive in the sanitarium. When he explained that to the students, peoples' mouths got really tacky and it got dry, and just ... he was able to pull them into that space that no one could do.

In order to be able to do that, you have to be present and you have to create a pattern of presence on a daily basis. You cannot go into the studio ... you have to create at that very moment of what you're doing as if your life depended upon it. And that's whether it's stacking the firewood or digging the clay or burning the ashes. Your presence is critical. So an awareness, so that some sort of gesture, some sort of, "Oh, this detail ... Oh we've got to make sure we're burning this straw," that we've got to do this and this and then we're going to bring this ... So you have to be present. If you're not, you're going to not feel like you've done your complete work.

What is the scariest part about the firing process?

The first match. So there's three or four hundred people that come for the lighting ceremony, which you're very familiar with, and it's been years of preparation and there's a certain excitement that everyone's coming because it's going to be ... the firing's going to start and it's very celebratory. And people have brought many gifts for that firing to be successful. When you light that first match there is no going back, and that means when the first match is lit and that small little flame begins, you as a human being have lost all control. You have offered now all of your time for something you have no control over in a sense.

So then it becomes how to nurture, how to feed the fire. I think the scariest part is people say, how was the firing? How did the fire go? after it's all over. And my answer I now use all the time is that as long as no one gets hurt and everyone is well fed, then it's a great firing. Because the moment you have expectations of what it's going to look like on the other end, it's time to get a different career. The moment you think: I know this is going to come out just like this, time to get a different career. One of the things – you can try and explain it as best as possible and the apprentices have heard this dozens of times – it's one-third the artist being able to speak. It's one-third the material being able to speak .. the taste of the clay, that the clay actually has a chance to say something that we often just dismiss. And then it's the firing as the other third, how the firing also decides. So if you keep that one third hole and allow the other two-thirds to live, then it's a lot easier not to have any expectations.

For your particular convocation, you're doing the best you can to give the best presentations, the best metaphors, the best wholisms, but the other two-third you don't have any control over, how the information gets taken back to the communities, how people take that information. Your expectations are different.

So then the firing ... you have to really listen to Mother Earth very carefully and that is so hard. We do not educate and it's still so hard for me. We do not educate young people to listen to the earth. So like when I'm at the kiln shed, I'm walking around ... everybody's watching the fire, doing the stoking. I'm watching around, looking where the wind is blowing. I'm listening to the sounds and the firing and listening to how at night time the barometric pressure is pushing down. You have to listen to all of those environmental cues. That's why we don't use parameters or electronics or some sort of idea of a schedule. We have an idea of a schedule because we kind of know that we absolutely run out of energy in ten days – human energy. I've been to longer firings but that's as a young person. And an older person was worrying continuously.

Then the end chamber, the Tanegashima, can be pretty frightening because you're really looking into the flame and you're putting with a leather glove into the flame in 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. And for those individuals for their first experiences, that's something most people don't experience.

I try to remind people about the fact that I have not yet met a ceramic artist, potter, who's done wood firing that isn't antinuclear. There's a point in , and it's usually in the second chamber, where the firebox gets so hot that you can toss a piece of wood in and by the time it reaches the other side, it's already

charcoal. And that's about two-thirds the heat of a nuclear weapon going off. We're at 2,560 degrees Fahrenheit. Nuclear weapons go off at 3,263 degrees Fahrenheit.

There's a certain kind of nausea I feel when you reach that threshold where the pots are starting to waver. You can see them just ready to collapse into the fire to be pulled into the firings. You can see it up on top. You can see the glaze is moving. You can see all this, and there's white heat in there. There's this internal system that says you can't go further. It's impressed in us, and we've taken that out of human beings, that ability to judge when you've gone too far.

What do you hope will happen for people who use your pottery?

The hope is

that they enjoy them; that they reach for them and feel comfort; that they know the person who created them.

I can remember when a number of years ago an elderly woman came in the studio and she so wanted to purchase a small vase that was so beautiful. She said it's so beautiful, I don't think I can ever use it. And I said to her, you know if you don't use it and make it part of your everyday life, then when you pass away and all those earthly belongings have been left behind and you are now on a different pilgrim's walk, grandchildren when they come to collect the things that create the memories ... when you served your grandchildren with strawberry jam on the Mickey Mouse plate, you got a plastic Micky Mouse plate at Disneyland or the little Tupperware cup with orange juice in it on Saturday morning for cartoons ... they're going to fight like hell for that Mickey Mouse plate and that little Tupperware cup because it was handed to them by you. So whether it's a cup or a plate or anything, it's the memory that's translated that then becomes generational.

We hold on to those so we can hold onto the memory of those who've gone before us. So I said you need to use that every day. Put flowers in it and then hand it to your favorite grandson or granddaughter and say, "This is my favorite vase." And they will put flowers in it for you to remember you.

So in the sense of pattern and ritual ... we've developed all over planet earth religions of ritual that provide us with a ritual of practice. We do this and we do this and somehow the practice gets us to this. All the ritual patterns became a structure. Then thousands of years ago people decided that these ritual structures that were set up for us ... that we had to participate in this pattern. We as human beings need to have our own personal experiential experience with the soul. We need the different practices because we are not the same human beings. Every human being has a pattern inside.

I've watched people come through here for 40 years and I've watched them touch a piece and put it down and touch a piece and put it down, and they're there for ... time is irrelevant to them, and they find that piece that speaks to them. That's not me speaking. That's the clay speaking. That's the firing speaking. Once someone finds that emotion into that structure, they've now moved out into the experiential and they're going to set up their own pattern of living that interfaces with probably some sort of structure, but it's going to create a foundation of their own culture and their own identity. That's what the industrial revolution wants to take out of the human being. They don't want to have the

individual pulling out of the structure and developing their own identity. And for a very simple copper plate or a bowl that has that type of impact, then that's a good mission. That's good work.

I think one of the things is that years and year ago, it started with when our own children were born, we started pressing their feet into the plates when they're babies. You know a baby is fearless between six and nine months. They'll do anything. You can sit there and squeeze their feet into the plates and they think it's the greatest thing in the world. At 14-15 months, they'll just grab on to their mother and you know it's just horrendously terrible, but there's this period of unforgiving trust, just absolute trust, just fabulous ... So we would press our children's feet in there and then give them the platters.

When I started doing it for my godchildren and then for students that I knew who knew the studio very well and pressing their feet for a number of people, then I made enough of them to go to the grandparents, the parents, and to the little child. So I've got five generations that are going to be carrying for my work. It'll be the only work that I'll probably be remembered for because it'll have the name of the child and its birth date and baptismal date or significant dates inlaid in porcelain. But when those grandparents ... and I've been in homes where they're right above their beds, you know the most important part of the house are their grandchildren's ... They can't remember what the potter's name is, can't even pronounce his name, but man those plates are so important. So when they die, it's going to go to their children, and when those children die, it's going to go to the little baby who's now in her 30s or 40s and then she's going to be passing them on to her children or his children. One of the hopes for all creative people is that their works last longer than their human mortality.

I have one story for you and that'll be it then. When my teacher's father became national living treasurer of Japan in 1976, the state department sent John Pope. He was the director emeritus of the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC, and he came on behalf of the state department to congratulate Nagasato Muon on becoming the national living treasurer of Japan. So we're in this formal ceremony, 500-600 people, and John Pope and I are the only foreigners in the room besides some journalists. So he goes up there and gives this speech in beautiful English with a translator, honoring the Nagasatos for what they contributed and what they went through as a family to get to this point in their lives, because they suffered terribly during World War II.

Later on in the ceremony I visit with John and introduce myself as an apprentice to the Nagasatos. I said John, how did you learn about karatsu pottery?" He said, "Oh, there's this Benedictine nun up in Saint Joe, Minnesota who I took some major convocation or some kind of seminar classes or lectures from her about the ancient karatsu ceramics." I said, "You mean Sr. Johanna Becker?" He says, "Yeah, that's it, Sr. Johanna Becker." "This is my teacher as well." He says, "really!"

Then we got to know each other, and I said, "How did you get into the study of art and art history, especially ceramics?" He said my dad was secretary of state in the late 1920s under that administration, and I was a freshman at Harvard, and my dad calls me up and says, "John, have you got a summer job?" And he says, "No dad, I don't have a summer job yet." He says, "How would you like to drive a Red Cross truck?" So John thought he was going to drive Red Cross truck in the states. Well, he got shipped to China through the Red Cross and the Japanese were invading northern Manchuria. Mao Zington the communist was fighting Chiang Kai-Shek, the kumitangs and the nationalists. And what happened was is

that when you have terrible division between people, the brutality is the poor will suffer. So there was this, north of the yellow river, this massive famine going on where that food was not coming down from the north because the Japanese are in the north, northern Manchuria, the communists and kumitangs were fighting and so no food was getting into this area. Four and a half million people starved to death in a matter of six months. Terrible famine unrecorded in history, you don't read about it at all.

John was delivering food supplies from a port, driving with a convoy of American Red Cross trucks delivering food to villages. So they had gotten into this village and he unloaded all the food and everything like that. He turned around and drove out and he parked his truck outside the village, just a couple hundred yards away, waiting for the rest of the trucks because he's one of the first or second. And this elderly man appears out of nowhere and says, "Sir, my family is starving and I want to know if you'd like to buy some pottery. It's been in our family for 13 generations." And John, he's going to wait an hour, so he says, "Yeah, I'll take a look at it." So the guy waves and two men come up with a wooden crate. They open up this wooden crate and in it is Ming dynasty white eggshell porcelains. And John looked at him and looked at these porcelains and then the elderly man said in very good English, "We knew the family who made these. They've been in our family and cared for for 13 generations, and for \$100 American dollars, we'll sell these to you so I can buy food for my family."

John looked and he says, "Where's your family?" He says, "They're down behind those trees in this ditch." He says, "Okay, I'll buy the pottery." He hands the man \$100 American dollars and then he says, "Get your whole family in the truck, and I'll drive you to the port." So the old man waves. Nine other children and women, plus the two guys, about 13-14 people. They get to the port. He pays for every one of their tickets to get to Taiwan.

If you go to the Freer Gallery in Washington DC and look at those eggshell white porcelains, that's not part of our American heritage. He said at that very moment, he realized how important culture was, beyond anything else. So then he changed his major to art history and became the director of the Freer Gallery in Washington DC for 30-40 years. He died in 1982. He was a dear friend. We communicated and ... unbelievable story.

That's why generational transformation is important.