



Collection Focus: Mara Superior

August 18, 2021 – January 15, 2022

A Conversation with Mara Superior and Bruce W. Pepich, Unabridged

Bruce W. Pepich: Can you speak about your education and background? What first drew you to porcelain as a medium for personal expression? Why has the medium held your interest through your career?

Mara Superior: I am a second-generation Italian American. I come from a very large extended family, with 21 first cousins and we enjoyed huge Sunday dinners and holiday celebrations at Grandma's house in Eastchester, New York. They had a large yard and gardens, so at the time I viewed that as "in the country." It was a long drive over several bridges and highways and through exotic neighborhoods, and I was glued to the window taking it all in. It was a classic "are we there yet?" journey.

My childhood was culturally rich and visually stimulating. I grew up in the Brooklyn borough of New York City on Glenwood Road and Flatbush Avenue, a few blocks away from Brooklyn College and Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Flatbush Avenue was a bustling street filled with shops, cafés, bakeries, and ice cream parlors. Architecturally, it was an Edward Hopper type of neighborhood with four-story red brick and brownstone buildings lined up next to each other, some with green painted trim, and businesses on the street level. One of these buildings belonged to my grandfather, who owned an Italian delicatessen and butcher shop. My parents and I lived upstairs from the shop. I loved to hang out in the shop, meet and greet customers, and sit on a tall stool at the big wrapping table and make drawings on huge sheets of brown wrapping paper. Grandpa kept me fortified with slices of American cheese off the slicing machine.

Traveling around the city was like traveling around the world. The sights, sounds, smells, and food of ethnic neighborhoods were very exciting and exotic. Chinatown was a particular favorite of mine. My first memory of drawing is having come home from one of our excursions and doing fantasy drawings with thick, soft, red and black pencils on the wrapping table at Grandpa's. I drew geishas with kimonos and big black hair shapes decorated with dangling ornaments, set in a landscape with exotic trees.

I enjoyed iconic city excitements and visiting Manhattan landmarks by bus and train—department stores, window shopping, museums, the Brooklyn Public Library, the Bronx Zoo, Times Square, the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, Rockefeller Center's Christmas tree, lights, and skating rink, and the Radio City Music Hall Christmas and Easter shows.

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My first career choice was to be a Radio City Music Hall Rockette. That didn't work out, although my parents tried to send me to ballet and modern dance classes. I didn't succeed at that. One of my teachers told my parents that "this child has no rhythm," making me fear dancing forever after that experience. I was very curious and interested in everything.

For first grade we moved to our own house at the far end of Brooklyn in Sheepshead Bay. I was not happy with the move, and I missed the lively Flatbush Avenue. The perks were living near Coney Island, Brighton Beach, and Lundy's Restaurant, and I had my own bedroom! My education began at PS 286.

My parents achieved the "American Dream." It took three generations to be able to produce an artist—a person with the privilege and luxury to be able to concentrate their focus on the impractical and beautiful aspects of life, a life in the arts.

My art school education began in Shellbank Junior High School, whose other graduates include Terry Gross of "Fresh Air" on NPR and the musician and songwriter Carole King. I was appointed Art Director of our class yearbook by my beloved art teachers Ms. Schwartz and Ms. Lieberman. These two women set me on my path. They sent me to Saturday art classes for talented children at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and they encouraged me to apply to the special art high schools in Manhattan.

I went to the High School of Art and Design in the heart of the city, 57th St. and 2nd Ave. We moved to 86th St. and 2nd Ave, and my father lived on 23rd St. and 2nd Ave, so for four years, my life was spent going up and down 2nd Ave. I spent my weekends exploring museums. I lived a few blocks away from the Met, and it was my favorite. It was my cathedral. I visited very frequently and was never in a rush because I could always return. I looked at things carefully, and it was here that I knew that I wanted to make beautiful things. Because it is an encyclopedic museum, there was no differentiation in my mind between fine and decorative arts, although I was beginning to be taught the hierarchy in the system in my art history classes at Art and Design.

I remember walking up 83rd St. and seeing the majestic building with awe-inspiring architecture and grand steps that set things up for entering into another realm. The grand entrance hall had gigantic urns filled with magnificent flower arrangements, which served as an exhilarating start to a day of discovery and leaving drunk on beauty. I felt like the luckiest person alive to have been born in the city with so much art and opportunity. I was a diehard New Yorker, and I wanted to be there for the rest of my life. I felt it was the best place in America to be. I felt as if I could be an artist and live my dreams if I put my heart and mind to it. Anything was possible. I felt lucky by my birth and privileged to have found my obsession very early on in life.

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In addition to family summer vacations to the Catskills, Adirondacks, Long Island, Lake George, and the usual New York City escapes, during my 14th summer I took a road trip across America with my mother on the northern route to southern California. It was five days of flat cornfields. During my 15th summer, she and I took another road trip to southern California via the southern route, passing through the dramatic red landscape of Arizona and the desert in New Mexico. We stopped in Las Vegas and then went on to lush southern California and the Pacific Ocean. During my 16th summer, my father's family took me on a roots trip to Italy. My eyes were wide open. We spent five weeks traveling with 15 relatives and our own bus driver from Milan to Naples and the Amalfi Coast. We took a small aircraft to Sicily, where we went to my grandmother's hometown and visited relatives. It was a surreal experience to go to a quintessential hill town with views to the sea. It was straight out of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* film. I became a Europhile on day one. These trips helped me understand my place in America and in the world.

The High School of Art and Design required four academic courses and four art classes each day. I studied 2D and 3D design, illustration, lettering, drafting, photography, and some of the practical basics in graphic design before computer times. We were expected to have a professional portfolio upon graduation and to be ready either for graphic jobs in New York or to go on to college.

I was formally trained to be a visual artist at the Hartford Art School at the University of Hartford in Connecticut, three hours north of New York City. There, I was taught about attuned seeing, critical thinking, analytical thinking, and the formal elements of art. Drawing provided lessons in keen observational skills. Mr. Roy Superior was my drawing professor. After freshman foundation year, theoretical lectures began. Each generation of students gets their "strong messages" from the contemporary art intellectuals at a cutting-edge art school, and in the 1970s, I was getting mine. The hot concept at that time was "conceptual art theory," which is art in which the idea or concept presented by the artist is considered more important than its appearance or execution. Duchamp was the king. Only the basic two survey courses in art history were required. One day my professor Christopher Horton gave us the "anti-beauty" lecture, showing us with his slide presentation that beauty was way too easy and dumb from his position as an intellectual. Here was the hierarchy—no live and let live, but high and low. Uh oh—I wasn't going to be making beautiful objects here. My artistic vision at the time was a little trampled on.

I took the prerequisite ceramics class at Hartford Art School, but nothing drew me into the material. Everyone was throwing stoneware on the wheel, and I had no interest in that. The professor was making conceptual ceramic art by slip casting potatoes, digging trenches, burying them, photographing the activity, and showing the photographs in the gallery. I learned a lot of formal art theory during that time, which has served me to this day. It is embedded in my thinking.

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After a few years, I transferred to the University of Connecticut Art School in Storrs, Connecticut. They accepted some of my credits. It was a four- or five-year program—I can't remember at this time—but I loved every minute of it. It was a more traditional hands-on art school experience, with a large painting department, a renowned printmaking department, and vast offerings in art history. There I thrived studying painting, etching, and art history. Egyptology captured my attention and imagination. Egyptian painting was a combination of many of the elements of art that I enjoyed most—line, shape, pattern, composition, scale changes, text, symbolism, and ancient mythology narratives. I internalized it. The history of Asian art, the history of decorative arts, the history of photography, and the history of American art were just a few of the lavish offerings in the art history department. Upon graduation and in my final BFA portfolio, I felt as if I had begun to find my own voice as an artist.

Education is a very good thing. I could have been a perpetual student, still learning every day. My education will never end. I was in art school for 12 years, counting my high school days. I was married to the artist Roy Superior, a Renaissance man and professor of art for 43 years. I consider myself to have earned an honorary PhD in art and the life of an artist.

There were five years between undergraduate and graduate school, with the reality of having to begin to think about earning a living. There were very few art-related jobs in the Hartford area, but I tried my hand at anything that sounded interesting. My first job was painting needlepoint canvases for a fancy shop in Farmington, Connecticut. During this time, I experimented with many materials and took classes in stained glass, sewing, and soft sculpture. As a newlywed, I learned to cook with Julia Child's book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. I started entertaining on the weekends, having small dinner parties with friends who were interested in cooking, good food, and learning about wine. I went antiquing at flea markets, fairs, and thrift shops to decorate our apartment in a nineteenth century three-story brownstone building on Main Street in Collinsville, Connecticut. Roy's enormous painting studio occupied the entire third floor, which was one large open space that used to be a town meeting hall. We adopted our first pet, Marshmallow, an orange and white cocker-setter mix that Roy brought home from school one day.

Eventually, I landed a job in the Display Department at G. Fox, a grand old department store in downtown Hartford, Connecticut, with Fifth Avenue-type street level windows that were like large scale dioramas ready for storytelling. I designed themes, sewed props, and—with the help of the carpentry shop—built window displays promoting the sales of merchandise. It was a combination of art and commerce.

As a lifelong foodie, I have followed the American culinary trajectory from Swanson TV dinners to our current status as having some of the world's finest restaurants, food quality, and chefs. I have always seen food as a window into culture, class, and history.

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I was always admiring the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age still life paintings that celebrate the pleasures of life with food and the beauty of flowers, displaying opulence, wealth, and power with delectable foods displayed in Ming Dynasty blue and white Kraak porcelains, blown glassware, silver, linens, and fine cutlery for the “Art of the Table,” metaphorically reminding us of life’s impermanence and eventual decay. Memento Mori—enjoy today! With this in mind, I have incorporated food and flowers in themes of my objects d’art over time.

In the mid-1970s, Roy accepted a teaching position at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. We bought an 1828 old white clapboard house with a barn in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, and began its renovation.

I had always admired the hand-painted porcelain and Italian majolica ceramics at the Met for their beauty and painted surfaces, but I never imagined that I would come across the technical know-how to work with such a material in the 1970s. Fine porcelain and pottery were the domain of factories in Europe, and in my mind, that’s where ceramics happened. I had never heard of a course offered for working with porcelain or majolica ceramics. I would have taken it.

When we moved up to western Massachusetts, I discovered porcelain by chance. While perusing our local newspaper, I saw that the potter Jane Hillman, a fellow New Yorker and a graduate of the ceramics program at Alfred University, was offering a six-week class in handbuilding with porcelain. This was the beginning of a new chapter. I wanted to learn more about this material, so I attended the University of Massachusetts ceramics department for a two-year graduate program. I studied with Susan Parks and Paul Beribe.

In 1978, red earthenware and low fire ceramics were the hot material of the day, but when I first saw reduction-fired porcelain, it was love at first sight! This would be it—no substitutes. All of the experts recommended that I try another lower temperature midrange porcelain and use the electric kiln to get more consistent results, but no, I have a rebellious spirit and I was going to do it my way—the impractical artist me. The French say, “il faut souffrir pour être belle.” Yes, I know, “one must suffer to be beautiful.”

I had found my material, my life’s work. I viewed porcelain as a magical three-dimensional canvas that could do so much more than paper. It offered limitless potential and possibilities for creating anything and everything, from the utilitarian to the sculptural. It could easily occupy several lifetimes. Porcelain’s exquisite beauty and history was intoxicating to me. I was off and running.

Pepich: How does your undergraduate background in painting impact your sculptural ceramic work and what necessitated your change in media for your work in graduate school?

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Superior: At 26 years old, I came to porcelain and brought to this new material all of the tools and accumulated knowledge from my background, education, and experiences to date. My undergraduate background in painting shaped who I am as an artist—the way I see and think visually and conceptually. I approached ceramics from a two-dimensional point of view, with platters being canvases.

I was attracted to porcelain as a painting surface. My preference for slab building, akin to three-dimensional construction paper, is because it is a flat, smooth painting surface. I came with content and imagery in mind. I explored strong shapes and construction methods, and I settled on a boxy construction format which could accommodate curves. I explored flattening iconic ceramic vase and teapot forms. Form and surface were coming together for me, and then I had a new element to work with—texture! Stamping sprigs and modeling were incorporated into the designs.

First, I always make sketches of ideas in sketchbooks. I begin by drawing shapes on paper of objects that I wanted to try to build in porcelain. When the shape is perfected, my sewing skills come into play with pattern making for porcelain constructions. I make vellum patterns and trace them onto leather-hard slabs of clay, cut out the parts, and assemble the sculpture.

I went back to school specifically to study ceramics after a five-year interim period. It was a tiny department of two professors, but since my roots were already in place, I wasn't able to take off and select the best ceramic program in the nation. I had to make do. It all worked out in the end.

Pepich: What do you see as the main aesthetic message in your work? Has this changed over time? What subjects have inspired you over the years?

Superior: My work is autobiographical. Whatever is at the top of my mind can find its way into my work. It's a visual diary of my "One Life Story." Ultimately, my work is about humanity and about being alive as a human being in my time. It's the life story of my voice in porcelain.

Upon encountering the American minimalist artist Robert Ryman, best known for his monochromatic white canvas paintings made during the mid-1970s and early 80s, art critics of the day wrote in *Art Forum* magazine that "Painting is Dead." I thought that this could not possibly be true! There would always have to be room for what I termed as "personalism," as a human artistic expression. I think that this closely relates to the currently popular "identity-based" painting.

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During this time, the fine art world was quite hostile towards object makers, and the craft world was all embracing. It was a kinder, gentler community of individuals (though of course, less intellectually brilliant in the hierarchical order of things in the art world). Many artists crossed over at this time, and the craft world inherited “object makers” because they were celebrated.

My work has always been celebratory, commemorative, idealistic, uplifting, and beautiful. That hasn’t changed over the years, whether I’m working with romantic or controversial political subject matter. From the start, I set out to make beautiful objects with their “messages” to send out to the world, and I’ve done that. They are precious objects, meant for the joy of observation and calling out for ceremonial placement in the environment. They were never really intended to be utilitarian, although, of course, I use my pieces. I have great esteem for functional potters, who must use very practical considerations—ergonomics, how objects work and feel in the hand and on the lips, the weight and balance of things—as well as good design.

A few of the subjects that have inspired me over the years are the history of porcelain and ceramics; history, art history, and mythology; mates for life, romance, big love, and pairs; house, garden, and all things domestic; botanicals and still life; feminism, female icons, and the domestic goddess; food and the history of food; farm animals, pets, and wildlife; love letters to New England architecture, landscape, and sense of place; the sea, fantasy, and aqua vitae (“water of life”); travels, souvenirs, Europe, and museums; music and books; political commentary; the environment; and collections. Now that Biden is in office, I feel that I can get back to my own artistic content—for two years, anyway. There are endless topics of inspiration. I have seven sketchbooks filled with ideas for things that I haven’t made yet. At this point I don’t think about it—I just do it.

Addendum

Below is a review of Mara’s work written by Angela Fina for *American Ceramics* magazine. Mara feels as if Fina completely understood what her work was about (self-referential art about ceramics) and explained it better than Mara could herself.

Mara Superior’s pieces are vessels of memory, powerful forms filled with a remembrance of things past. They are commemorative icons expressing a hieratic spiritual quality that calls for ceremonial placement in the environment. The content of the drawings is contemplative and complex, and the use of words gives clues to the paradox being explored.

Superior has chosen to flatten certain historically evocative pot forms to give the kind of boundaries that spherical shapes do not have, creating a shaped canvas for drawings. The forms are instantly recognizable, but they are exaggerated. Curves sometimes

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become angles, lids are miniature repetitions of the same pot form, lids often have lids, and the foot can become a separate pedestal. The pieces have a trophy-like presence that comes from their frontal, pedestaled presentation and from the content of the narratives drawn and written on the surface. The optical quality of the reduction-fired, clear-glazed, white porcelain is an important sensual part of Superior's work. She explores and exploits many self-referential ceramic themes, including that of the permanence of fired clay. The formal, deliberate, and over-sized pieces are made to last centuries. She also deals graphically with the traditional relationship of pottery form to human body parts. There are animal references, such as swan-neck teapot spouts with beak openings. She uses the shapes of historically evolved pots and, despite the flattened and monumental size of her pieces, each is carefully made to be functional. Vases can hold a bouquet, and their function is celebrated and explained in the drawings on their surfaces. Superior's work is firmly grounded in ceramic tradition; the ancient Greeks, too, decorate their ceremonial pots with narrative drawings. The fascinating physical beauty of glazed porcelain, with its copper-red blushes and floating cobalt blues, is of central value in these pieces. They could not exist with the same impact in any other material. They are about ceramic art. The quality and content of the drawing conjures memories of illuminated manuscripts, with their house portraits, pastoral scenes, textile patterns, and small botanical studies. The drawings, mostly inspired by Superior's New England environment, also have the graphic quality of an embroidered sampler, with an earnest, deliberate pace that precludes cuteness. There is a very personal and idiosyncratic quality in Superior's work that co-exists with a great strength and dignity. The work appears not to be influenced by current fashions in drawing and painting or by such hot trends as brightly colored, low-fire clay art. A unique freshness emerges from the artist's almost cloistered, confident, personal vision.

Pepich: How do you develop your ideas? Have the potential complications of working with porcelain ever influenced what you make?

Superior: An idea might come to me in a mental flash. I make a rough sketch in a sketchbook, and I continue to think about it over time. I come back to it to refine the drawing and think about the details. I make a plan, make a pattern, scale it up to size, and start to roll out slabs of porcelain and carry it through the process of handbuilding. Porcelain likes very slow drying under light plastic sheets. I then do bisque firing, drawing designs in pencil, painting with underglazes and ceramic oxides, glazing with a ground Cornwall stone glaze, and high firing in a gas-fired reduced oxygen atmospheric kiln.

I have thought about where ideas come from, and I have actually made a piece called, *Land of the Idea*. The text on the piece reads, "Imaginings, Invention, Interpretation," and, "The Artist, a Reflector," with the brain as the concentration center or the "sensor." It's about looking, seeing, thinking, and making at times elusive, fleeting ideas pass through. The piece was a Kohler Foundation gift to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

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Yes, the complications of working with porcelain have definitely influenced what I make. Porcelain is a challenging material and has many limitations, and there is a lot of loss for the studio artist. You have to learn to work with it. One must be resilient, stubborn, hopeful, and knowledgeable about what is or might be possible. I'm after the perfect firing, and I keep working toward what is in my mind's eye. When dealing with a difficult material and the vicissitudes of the kiln firing, the work is always on the edge of unpredictability. It's a high-risk business. Most people cannot see the difference between any white clays that are often mislabeled as porcelain. Perhaps, because of my visual training and attuned looking, I could clearly see the difference and had to go with what I felt was the most beautiful of all and had historical underpinnings.

Pepich: You mention spending a great deal of time in New York's art museums as a young person. How do you see the museum experience and the impact these kinds of institutions have had on your work?

Superior: Museums have had a profound impact on my work. I already spoke in an earlier question about my relationship to the Met growing up and my experiences of a place that represents 5,000 years of mankind's art history. Going to museums is my favorite city activity (although shopping is also a guilty pleasure). I feel a deep appreciation for all that man has been able to create and to leave behind for future generations to see. Museums are repositories of the world's treasures.

Other than the food and just breathing in the air, our European trips always followed a museum-based itinerary. I planned a five-week northern Renaissance trip, and we went through the Netherlands and northern France to Paris. Roy wanted to see the *Ghent Altarpiece* and Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, and we saw the *Bayeux Tapestry*. We made pilgrimages to many museums and cities. There is nothing like experiencing an object that you've seen and thought about for years and heard lectures about—to see them live, to feel the scale of the architecture, and to feel surprises. When I saw Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and the *Mona Lisa*, they were much smaller than I imagined, especially the Botticelli. To see the *Bayeux Tapestry* and *Ghent Altarpiece* in person was astounding.

Whenever I'm in a country, I go out of my way to visit the ceramic museums that are in that country. We went up north to Friesland province in the Netherlands to see the Prinsenhof Museum, because that is the national ceramics museum. In Italy, we visited the ceramics centers Faenza and Deruta in addition to Florence and Rome, and in France, we went to Quimper, a pottery center in Brittany, as well as Paris and Normandy.

We also always visited artists' homes and home museums wherever we went. We went to the Frans Hals museum in the Netherlands, Delacroix's house in Paris, Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam, and Leonardo da Vinci's birthplace in Vinci.

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My husband Roy Superior coined the phrase “death by museum.” In New York, I leisurely went to museums because I knew that I could get back to them, but on our European trips, the pressure was on to see as much as possible. I just want to take in as much as I possibly can, and I get kind of fanatical about it, because I’m feeling the pressure of not being able to come back to a place like Bayeux. I have extreme museum endurance. Roy would say, “Mara is trying to kill me. We are doing death by museum.”

There’s still more to do. We never got to the Prado. I haven’t got to Portugal yet, and I want to feel the scale of those blue and white tile buildings. So there are a few bucket list adventures still to take. I have had the extraordinary privilege to be able to explore my passion and take risks in part because my dear husband Roy was a professor and had a predictable income to cover basic bills.

Pepich: In working with porcelain, you have engaged with a material that has a complex history with associations to industry, trade, luxury, social conventions, and most recently, art. How do you see your work in relation to this history?

Superior: With porcelain, the material comes with a world of historical context of its own. I’m interested in working with a clay body with a history attached to it—either porcelain or terracotta. When I’m holding porcelain in my hand, I feel like I have a 1,600-year-old continuing link to the original Chinese porcelains that were developed around 400 AD. The material and firing method that I have selected—high-fired porcelain in a reduction-fired kiln—refer back to this ancient history and are comparable to what was produced in 400 AD. I am on that continuing timeline, and that’s part of the thrill and excitement of working with porcelain.

As I’ve said, there are lots of problems with this material, but I knew from the start that this is what I wanted. I got stuck on this particular material and firing method because I saw it from its historical vantage point and because maybe my visual acuity is more discriminating than most. Other people might not be able to distinguish between a lower fire soft paste porcelain, which I see as warm and pasty, and the depth of this glassy porcelain that I use. This material excites me to this day.

I don’t know anyone that has done what I have done with these exact materials. It’s not because I’m stupid—it’s because I’m stubborn. I do know what is possible and I’m always after what is in my mind’s eye. When I’m working, I’m seeing the best firing. I’m seeing the copper doing its thing. Sometimes I’m disappointed, because that’s a whole other world of things, working on something for months and then putting it in a kiln with unexpected results. Even though you’re trying your best to control the atmosphere, unexpected things might happen during the kiln firing. It’s a tremendously high-risk material, and I guess I have the patience for it. Creative energy is creative energy, and it can be channeled into anything, any material.

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When I was younger, I experimented with many materials, and sometimes I would work with a few materials at the same time. But I came to recognize that I had to choose one, and it seemed to come down to what I had the patience for. I discovered this porcelain by chance, and that was it. I just loved it at first sight, and I was sticking with it.

Pepich: You state that aspects of your work have been associated with ideas of the “feminine” but you have not seen that as a hindrance. Can you talk more about that—both what those associations are and your perspective on it?

Superior: I feel that there were many pioneering women that came before me who fought that fight. It was never my battle to take on. I have never felt professionally that my gender was any kind of a hindrance. I have always had a female art dealer, which maybe has something to do with it, but in my career, I’ve never felt my gender was a problem. With my choice of materials, my content is sometimes connected to the domestic, but I can also do political, I can do environmental, I can do other things. On a scale from masculine to feminine, I would describe my work as feeling feminine, but that’s just a fact. It’s not a political statement. It’s kind of a non-issue for me.

Pepich: Much of the format of your work references objects traditionally associated with the domestic side of life—teapots, platters, serving bowls—items for serving food and celebration that have often been associated with the tradition of “women’s work.” Do you see your work as a descendant of these traditions or as a more subversive act on your part?

Superior: My work is more celebratory than subversive. It’s more commemorative and ritualistic. I think of myself akin to artists like Grayson Perry, Stephen Bird from Australia, and Anne Agee, in relation to artists taking on iconic ceramic forms as part of their content, just because it makes sense in terms of self-reference. It’s a logical step for an artist to use the iconic forms, because it connects the dots back to the historical references in the material. Some artists do that, some don’t. When I painted on platters and teapots and so forth, they weren’t intended for utilitarianism. It was more of a conceptual idea to use those forms that are self-referential to the material.

Note: For this question (as well as with question 3, as mentioned before), Mara suggests that you refer to Angela Fina’s review as she has a very clear description of what Mara is trying to get at.

Pepich: RAM’s collection also includes a collaborative work made with your late husband and fellow artist, Roy Superior. You and Roy worked in close proximity to each other.

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How did your two studio practices intersect and how did they operate separately?
Can you talk more about what it was like to collaborate with your husband?
Did your work parallel his in theme at other points in your career?

Superior: We didn't really work in close proximity. Roy's studio is at our home, and I have my own ceramic studio in Hadley, about 20 minutes away from where I live. So our studios were separated, but we were obviously each other's closest confidant, critic, and advisor. I enjoyed talking to him about my work more than he needed or enjoyed talking to me about his. He kind of liked keeping things to himself. The idea of us doing a collaboration came from the fact that he had already made furniture and cabinets for us, and it seemed like a natural evolution for him to help me expand a theme and enlarge an idea by creating an environment for a sculpture that I would make. I would make the sculpture, and I would talk to him about it and try to get him excited about the idea, though he might have preferred to be working on one of his sculptures. But since I'm such a good cook and have such powers of persuasion, I would get him on board with this idea of creating an environment for a sculpture, and we'd get together on a theme, like the underwater theme. That was always a very good theme for Roy because he was a fanatical fly fisherman and he loved all water—streams, rivers, and the ocean. If it had to do with fish, he was usually on board, so most of our collaborative cabinets were about the sea. Our collaborations were true "Labors of Love" on Roy's part.

Pepich: The archive of your work at RAM spans the years 1982 through 2018. With more than 30 works, it charts your artistic development over more than three decades. As an artist, what kinds of benefits do you see this type of documentation provides for the featured artist, the field, and the public?

Superior: A survey or retrospective offers the viewer an overview and an opportunity to experience an artist's work over time and how things change and develop. It shows "One Life Story," or one human being's experience exploring art and thinking. People are interested in the lives and work of other people.

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Upon final review of her interview with Bruce W. Pepich, Mara Superior was compelled to add the following:

Historically speaking, high-fired, true porcelain has been a very formal, elegant and sophisticated material. I handle it in a very informal and casual manner which is unexpected, taking the material into another direction.

My work is not easily artistically categorizable. I make art with porcelain. I am not a decorative artist because of my educational training as a painter. I came to porcelain 40 years ago.

Today ceramics is the "Darling" material of "The Art World."

Yes, it is a perfect material for artists one can explore all of the elements of art and perfect for abstraction!

I found it a long time ago!

My goal has been to create timeless, precious, beautiful art objects, that hold up over time. Conveying universal messages of the human condition by way of "Personalism." (My own Artistic Category)

Fini

Mara Superior

June 17, 2021

Note: An edited, abridged version of this conversation along with an essay about Superior's work, written by RAM Curator of Exhibitions Lena Vigna, appears in the 2021 publication, *Collection Focus: Mara Superior at RAM*, which may be purchased at the RAM Museum Store or online at racineartmuseumstore.org.