

Transcript – Wendy Edwards, Class of Faculty

Narrator: Wendy Edwards, Professor of Visual Art

Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

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Length: 52:34

Amanda Knox: All right, good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist. It is Friday, February 7, I believe. It is 9:30am. And I am in the Bell Gallery here at Brown University with Wendy Edwards, who has been with Brown since 1980 and is just coming up on retirement now. But before we get to that part of your story, if you're willing to share, I'd like to know a little bit briefly about your childhood, where you grew up, what kind of education your parents had, things like that.

Wendy Edwards: I grew up on a farm in Northern Virginia in Falls Church right outside of Washington, DC. And my parents were educated. My father went to Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He was a wrestler.

AK: Oh, really?

WE: And my mother went to Mount Holyoke, [1:00] but she only stayed a couple of years because of the war. And my parents, my father went into the Navy. He was a Navy pilot during World War Two, and they got married in Miami while he was on leave. And ultimately they had four children and I was number three. So I have two older sisters and a younger brother.

AK: Okay.

WE: And growing up in Virginia, I definitely had, you know, the several wonderful worlds to access. It was a really rural area, but it was right outside of Washington, DC, a very politically active environment, obviously. Lots of kids that I went to public school with, their parents were either in the military, or they worked for the government, or they were some diplomats. [2:00] And in the summers, I was really fortunate to go visit my grandmother in New York City, who

was single and worked at Doctors Hospital. And so she had a very big impact on me because she was a very creative, independent person. And it gave me access to New York at a very young age, and Washington, DC, and the farm, so it was it was a pretty good combination of exposures back then.

And, you know, my parents were interesting people, they had a diverse sort of interest in the creative arts, although they weren't artists themselves. They were part of Little Theatre in Vienna, Virginia. And they always supported all of us in anything we wanted to do, whether it was, [3:00] you know, a sister in theater, or a sister who was involved with writing, or me in the arts.

AK: Yeah, a very creative family.

WE: Yeah, pretty creative. And I went to the Corcoran School of Art in high school, so I took our classes there and that was really important because I worked with an African American artist named Sam Gilliam, and he was part of the Washington Color School artists. And now happily in 2020, he is a much older paint, active painter. But he's reached a lot of recognition, which, you know, he was due for sure.

AK: At what point, in high school did you know that you wanted to be a painter for the rest of your life or do were you just interested in art?

WE: I think I was just always interested. And I think I had you know, you know, a fairly [4:00] okay art teacher in high school. I was fortunate also because there was a student who was a year or two older than I was, and she had made the decision to go to art school in Philadelphia. And so I ended up applying to art school in Philadelphia. I mean, I felt comfortable going to an art school because I'd already been to the Corcoran in Washington. And I did do a summer in 1967 and that's when I worked with Ruth Fine who ended up writing the essay for the catalogue for for my Luscious show here at the Bell Gallery. But, you know, I had some kind of dorky councilors in high school. They just thought that art school isn't really –

AK: It's not real school.

WE: “You should go to a regular college or test it out with a community college before you think you’re really going to go to an art school.” And I think [5:00] it was just that they didn’t understand what an art school was and how, you know, focused I, I really wanted to be. So it worked out pretty well because when I was at, it’s now called the University of the Arts, but back then it was PCA, the Philadelphia College of Art, it was a good time to be there. I was lucky to –

AK: In what, what year did you enter?

WE: I entered in 1968 and I finished in 1972.

AK: Okay.

WE: But because Bethlehem, Pennsylvania wasn’t that far away from Philadelphia, and that’s where my parents had met, there was this Pennsylvania sort of connection.

AK: What was it like being an art school in the ’60s and ’70s?

WE: Well!

AK: Is that a dumb question?

WE: No! It’s a good question. I was a hippie. I was sort of a rebel. I think we all were at that time. We were all highly motivated with what was going on politically and you know. There were marches, it was the Vietnam War. [6:00] It was a critical time. You know, we were all smoking dope and some drugs, doing some drugs. But, you know, an art school was, they’re good places because you still get a lot of work done.

AK: Right.

WE: Because you love what you’re doing.

AK: Right.

WE: So I think that as a very young person at that time, you know, I was, I was completely impacted as we, most people were in the late '60s by what was going on in the war. But I was still able to focus on what I wanted to do. So. You know, there were really only several women who I worked with. They were all for the most part men.

AK: On the faculty?

WE: On the faculty.

AK: What was the student composition like?

WE: It wasn't [7:00] so diverse. I mean, generally speaking, schools back then produced more female students in the arts, in art departments, throughout colleges, universities, and art schools. But more male students continued with graduate school then became famous artists or whatever.

AK: Yeah, okay.

WE: Those were sort of typical.

AK: Why do you think that was?

WE: Well, it was, we didn't have a whole lot of role models. They were just beginning to kind of appear. I worked with a woman in my first year named Cynthia Carlson, who ultimately really did have a big impact on, on my work. Although I was in a design class, 2D design class with her, it wasn't a painting class. She's still working today and exhibiting work and she was somebody who really got involved with the Pattern and Decoration Movement – the P and D Movement. [8:00] And so I kind of inherited a lot of that groups' ideas. And some of my work went into those same collections that the Pattern and Decoration Movement artists went into. So most of us women and some men in that group were, you know, maybe 10 or 15 or so years older

than I was. But there is a wonderful show right now at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art based on the P and D Movement.

AK: Oh, cool.

WE: Yeah.

AK: Very cool. Were you politically active at that time?

WE: I was. I don't think I really knew what I was doing. I think the CIA was probably after me, after all of us. I had a roommate who had grown up outside of Philadelphia, and she wanted to go back to her high school and talk to the principal and talk to the kids, [9:00] and I went with her. So I think that in some ways, I'm not sure whether we understood boundaries. I think we were just learning about activism and how to move thoughts in, you know, real productive ways.

AK: Do you think that that kind of moment in history was influencing the kind of art you were producing at that time?

WE: Not really. I, I, I can't point to a specific piece or series of paintings, because I often work in a series of paintings, that's kind of what artists do, and, and say that this was really a direct reaction to the Vietnam War or the fact that I was working with all these male painters instead of female painters or something like that. [10:00] I think, you know, a more feminist approach moved into the work. It became more saturated in my work after almost I left graduate school.

AK: Oh, really?

WE: Yeah.

AK: Okay. What was, you grad, you went to graduate school in the early '70s?

WE: I went straight from Philadelphia Art School to the University of New Mexico in

Albuquerque.

AK: And what made you pick that university?

WE: Well, it was the only place I applied. And I just wanted to get off the east coast. I just felt like, I don't know. I think I thought it was now conservative, certainly not conservative, but it was compressed. I felt compressed and I needed to see another part of the world, or I needed to see another part [11:00] of the country. New Mexico offered me the Southwest, beautiful light, phenomenal landscape. And I had gotten involved with working with the landscape as an undergraduate in Philadelphia because I'd had a scholarship to go to something called Artists for Environment around the water, the Delaware water gap. And it was a summer where a group of young painters from art schools lived in a big house and worked directly from nature and the landscape. And so that really stuck with me. And there's an interesting article in *The New York Times* about that program that Ruth and I dug up and included in the, in the catalog, the Luscious catalog.

But, I think you know, [12:00] getting to New Mexico for me was just this big, wide open world that was fantastic. I'd also gone between my first and second year in Philadelphia to something called the Aspen School of Contemporary Art. And that was, you know, right in the mountains and we worked directly from the landscape down. So when, while I was in Albuquerque, I really worked. I'd go up into the mountains, I did a lot of hiking, both in the mountains and the deserts, and took a lot of photographs and did a lot of drawings. I just found a portfolio that I haven't looked at in over 40 years, last week, and it was wonderful to rediscover some of these early drawings. Yeah, that was, New Mexico was just fantastic. It was, it was a long history of other painters, obviously, who had worked [13:00] in New Mexico, John Marin, and Marsden Hartley, George O'Keefe, and Agnes Martin. I mean, these were all sort of heroes, heroines, for me to, to look up to.

AK: Were you, did you find yourself any more or less politically active at that point?

WE: I don't think I was very politically active. I was sort of out in the middle of, I don't want to say I was out in the middle of nowhere, but I was off the coast.

AK: You weren't near DC anymore, right.

WE: I was off the east coast. It wasn't right in the middle of DC. So I will say that that was during the Watergate Trials and it was the first time I was ever glued to a television.

AK: Really?

WE: That summer was really intense. And I, and it was the first time I understood the power of the media as well. So –

AK: Tell me a little bit more about that. [14:00] What do you remember of the trials or you being in that moment?

WE: I remember, you know, a lot of the, a lot of guys – and I remember Howard Dean and remember these men who were both in some ways, protecting Nixon and collaborating with him, or hiding information, or finally exposing information.

AK: What different times, huh? [laughter]

WE: It's pretty unfortunate, right now that we're seeing that. I mean, I feel, I feel that it's much worse right now, actually.

AK: Do you?

WE: I feel like it's much worse.

AK: Interesting.

WE: Because I think Trump is a horrific human being and he's mean and nasty. At least Nixon was intelligent. You know, he made ridiculous mistakes, but he [15:00] also had a background in politics. So, I thought I would never say that, but when we compare our current president with

past presidents, almost everybody is better than he is. That's the reality.

But that's, I remember watching those Watergate investigations did have a big impact on me. I just remember hours and hours and hours. And there was, there was really no other time when, you know, I was watching television. I mean, I do remember watching television when JFK was shot. And there were other very specific moments from, I think my generation where we all have something very sad or traumatic stuck, stuck in our brains for sure.

AK: So you graduate with your graduate program, from your graduate program, [16:00] and there, there's a period of time between that and ending up at Brown, right?

WE: Yes.

AK: You were doing some traveling at that point? Is that –

WE: Well, I did, I lived in Taos, Ranchos de Taos, for one year after I finished my graduate degree in Albuquerque, and I was living with, I had a partner who had followed me from the east coast. And he was teaching in a local school, he'd gotten a master's in education at UNM. But then I got a call from one of my former professors who had moved to the University of Texas at San Antonio, which was a brand new institution. He said, "Are you interested in teaching, you know, just part time?" And I said, "Of course," and I was like, ready to get in the car and drive. And so I did. And I moved to San Antonio, by myself, and I lived there for three years, [17:00] and I taught in three different places. I taught at San Antonio Community College, which was a really rich, primarily Hispanic community of students. There was the brand new University of Texas in San Antonio, it was sort of outside of San Antonio in the beginnings of the hill country, and then the McNay Art Institute, which was a significant museum. So I sort of put three different part time jobs together and lived there for three years. And I found San Antonio to be a very supportive community –

AK: Really?

WE: For the arts. Absolutely. I was young, people were interested in my work, included me in



museum shows. I loved being here. It was really, you know, fun, fun time and it was when I left New Mexico, I thought woo. [18:00] We didn't really think fondly, when living in New Mexico, of Texas because Texans would come to New Mexico, buy up land and go skiing. And, you know, living in Taos was pretty entrenched in some phenomenal history. I lived just above the Ranchos Church which was the church where Georgia, that Georgia O'Keeffe had painted.

AK: Oh, wow.

WE: So I remember going down, there was a farmer named Mr. Trujillo and I went down. I heard a shot early in the morning and I went down all bundled up. It was very cold in the winter in Taos, and he had just shot, he had just killed a cow and was slaughtering it. And I took my camera down and that was a pretty important moment for me [19:00] Because I saw this you know, bloody but sort of gorgeous internal organ filled cow that normally you would just be horrified by, but my brain was able to translate it into a completely visual color experience. So yeah, that, that was pretty important for me. It wasn't like I wasn't eating meat, or eating meat, or anything like that. But that was a part of that community that was pretty significant.

Anyway going, going to Texas was really different. Wasn't, wasn't, the Indian/ Native American population wasn't in San Antonio, it was, it was in New Mexico. [20:00] So I was sort of letting go of that. And I was lucky because when I was at UNM I had taken courses in Native American art history, and so I think I became – getting, ultimately getting off the east coast was pretty important education for me and having exposure to a much more diverse population.

AK: I know that now there is a joint military base in San Antonio. I imagine it would have existed then, but did you notice a military presence there? Did that kind of impact your experience?

WE: No.

AK: No.

WE: That wasn't, I mean, I knew that my father had worked for the Atomic Energy Commission.

And so he had visited New Mexico. And so he had gone to Alma Gordo, and he was involved with licensing, and he didn't travel a lot. He did make some trips [21:00] out of Washington DC. So I remember him coming back and he brought me a little pin, silver pin with a piece of turquoise in it.

Yeah, but I think my focus was doing a lot of backpacking and hiking in the mountains and really getting to know every National Park in that state. And I love that land. It was the land of enchantment. It was pretty special.

AK: How long were you there for?

WE: So I was there for three years and then when I went to Texas I was there for three years also.

AK: Okay.

WE: And then I was offered a job at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I had spent the winter of '78 at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. So I had taken my VW bus and driven from Texas all the way up to New Hampshire. And that was a wonderful experience. [22:00] I produced a lot of paintings. And then I ended up driving the back to Texas. On the way back, I stopped in New York for the College Art Association meeting and I was interviewed by a number of schools. And so I was offered my first tenure track job in Madison. So I moved away from San Antonio, drove up to Madison. It was a great place. I only stayed for two years. I was the first woman hired in a tenure track position in painting there. And –

AK: What was that like?

WE: It was pretty good.

AK: Was it noticeable?

WE: Yeah.

AK: Were you aware of that?

WE: They hired two other women, one in sculpture, and another woman to teach sort of survey courses. And so there were three young blonde women all hired at the same time. So we were stuck together. The good thing about it was that it was a huge graduate program. And it was Also a very radical campus, [23:00] politically active. And I ended up only staying two years because I thought well, maybe I'll apply for some jobs. So I applied for a job at Brown University, and, you know, got an interview and came to Providence and –

AK: What I mailed to you about Brown?

WE: Honestly, back then not a whole lot. The real draw, and I've said this over and over again, was that the RISD museum, and RISD the art school, was a block away.

AK: Was right there. Right.

WE: I mean, it just I felt safe. I felt comfortable. I never sort of thought of myself coming back to teach in an Ivy League institution. And I think it was just because I had an attitude of oh, this is sort of a white, wealthy, academic institution. [24:00] I didn't know if I would feel comfortable. But I did take the job and I moved here in the fall of 1980.

AK: What was that interview experience like? Was it –

WE: Oh, well –

AK: Oh no. [laughter]

WE: Well –

AK: Do tell.

WE: I stayed at the Holiday Inn downtown. And I walked up the hill. Nobody came to pick me up. Nobody greeted me at the airport. In all my other job interviews throughout the United States, I was always greeted at the airport, taken out to dinner, wined and dined – well, not wined, but –

AK: Right. Dined.

WE: There was a real sense of hospitality. And actually, none of that existed at Brown. I thought, “wow, these people are kind of cold.” It was the truth!

AK: Yeah.

WE: I mean, it was weird. So I walked up the hill and as I was walking up the hill, on College Street, I knew that this was, the List building was where I needed to get to, [25:00] but it was early. And there was a woman going into a building, which is just a couple blocks away. It’s like the craft, Providence Craft Club or something.

AK: Oh, the Handicraft Club.

WE: She invited me in and I came, I sat down and I had a cup of tea with a group of women. And then I was there for just a short period of time, but I, you know, walked a few more feet up the hill and came here.

You know, I guess, down deep inside, I wasn’t really sure if I wanted this position, because Madison was a great place. And there were lots of graduate students. I was almost, I was only 28 and there were more graduate students there who were actually, actually my age or older so it was a fun kind of community.

AK: So what made you start applying for other positions at that point? [26:00]

WE: I was just in the mode.

AK: Yeah.

WE: You know, I was –

AK: Time for the next thing.

WE: I wanted, I wanted to move my career forward. I was afraid that I would get stuck in the Midwest. It wasn't a bad place to be stuck because Chicago is nearby and I had a gallery, a great in Chicago, [inaudible] gallery, and people were pretty darn friendly. So, the interview –

AK: Did you interview with any women?

WE: Oh, no, there were no women there.

AK: There were just not –

WE: In this department?

AK: Yeah. There were none.

WE: No. Our department was at that time combined with art history.

AK: Okay.

WE: So it was a, but the art historians didn't interview me. It's just the [inaudible] people and they were all guys. And I was sort of, I went out to dinner with students to the Blue Point Oyster Bar.

AK: Okay. [27:00]

WE: There was no effort. There was no reaching out by the faculty to sort of go beyond a very,

you know, straightforward formal interview. So that struck me as being different than all of the other interviews I'd had. Not that all the other interviews I had had were entirely appropriate, necessarily, you know. The College Art Association Meetings every January for years would have people interviewing in hotel rooms, you know, on beds.

AK: Really?

WE: I mean, I had plenty of interviews with, you know, a group of eight men interviewing me in a bedroom. Sure.

AK: Really?

WE: Yeah, that's the way things were done.

AK: How did that make you feel?

WE: Well –

AK: Did that seem inappropriate at the time or did that just kind of seem the way it was?

WE: Well, it seemed like that's the way it was done. It also seemed inappropriate. It wasn't something that people really talked about until later [28:00] and everybody realized this is crazy.

AK: That almost gives me goosebumps. I just, I don't really know what to ask next.

WE: Well, now, I know. I mean, we had a, we interviewed someone, you know, only maybe less than 10 years ago and we were supposed to be in a different room and we ended up in my hotel room and I just thought, "this is absurd. How did this ever happen again?" But at least the candidates were all, they weren't women with all men interviewing. At least!

AK: Right.

WE: That's all I can say.

AK: It's a little step forward.

WE: A little bit. But that doesn't happen anymore.

AK: So you decided to take the job. This is shortly after the Lamphere Case has kind of wrapped up.

WE: Yup.

AK: Was that something that was still being talked about on campus or something that you were aware of when you came?

WE: I wasn't entirely aware of it when I interviewed. I definitely became aware of it [29:00] when I got here. I, it was pretty nice because there were some women who invited me to give talks. There were some women who took me under their wing. Anne Fausto-Sterling, there was the Sarah Doyle gallery, Sarah Doyle Center, which was on the other side of campus from where it is now. And I felt really good about being there. I served on the board.

AK: Oh, did you? I didn't know that.

WE: Of the gallery, gallery board. So I helped, you know, get involved with exhibitions over there back then. But Anne Fausto-Sterling was very clear to me. She sort of gave me the rundown of what was going on at Brown and what had happened with the Lamphere Case. And I mean, I told her about some incidents that I'd had in the department, and she said, "Keep notes." She said, "Keep notes, Wendy. Keep notes, keep notes." I kept notes for years.

AK: Really? Do you feel comfortable discussing any of that? You don't have to. [30:00]

WE: No. I think, you know, at this point, it's ancient history. And I went through a lot of tough,

tough, difficult times. I think of times when, you know, some of the faculty were really supportive and great. And there were times when some of the individuals were just terrible. And I think I'm, I was a very sensitive young assistant professor. I crawled my way through the experience.

AK: How long did you keep your notes for? Do you still keep notes?

WE: No, I don't keep notes. I think I held on to them until I became a full professor.

AK: Oh, interesting.

WE: But I never shared them with anyone. But just knowing [31:00] that I needed to do that helped keep me centered. I think, or aware of how I was being perceived or treated, and that sort of thing. I think the administration at Brown, I always depended on either the president, whoever the president was, I always had fairly good relationships with the presidents, or the Dean of the Faculty. I felt somebody was keeping an eye on me, which was nice –

AK: Good.

WE: To know that.

AK: Yeah. Do you remember kind of your first impressions of being on campus, being a part of the Brown faculty?

WE: I remember I wore cowboy boots. I wore cowboy boots to my interview.

AK: Did you?

WE: I think that really stuck.

AK: Okay.



WE: Well, I, there were some students who are on the search committee who were [32:00] part of the interview. And so I, I'm still in touch with them. I mean, they have come back to Brown, or I've invited them back to ground to give talks and, you know, they're all wonderfully you know, sweet, close adults now, and I feel you know grateful to them that I have that sort of connection with them.

AK: Do you have any kind of like Polaroid memories of the last 40 years? Something, some really great moments, some really not so great moments, of being at Brown that you'd like to share?

WE: Well, there's so many. I think just with students I have great memories. I mean I was, I keep saying I was lucky because I am lucky to have taught at such a great place, [33:00] and to have friends in other departments, you know, was pretty, pretty special. And so many friends down at RISD close by.

But the painting studio on the fifth floor is, I've always said the best undergraduate painting studio in the United States. So I like to really brag about it and I love for people to come visit. And I love teaching in there. It's great light. And in the middle of the winter when it's grey and miserable, seasonal affective disorder affects people, I'm not working in a basement. I'm working in a really grand, beautiful space. And I mean, I always tell students how lucky they are to have those spaces and students come back and they go, "Oh my god. That was the best place in the world." So all my great memories, I think, are primarily in that teaching environment. Some of the saddest moments were coming in to teach After 9/11 and, [34:00] you know –

AK: Tell me about that. Because I was just mentioning, we don't have a lot of people, I think, September 11, 2001 is still kind of so much in our recent memory that people don't bring it up as part of their story. So if you'd like to talk a little bit about that, I'd like to hear it.

WE: Well, you know, I was actually living on campus. My husband and I were faculty fellows living on campus. So we were over at 48 Charlesfield Street. And that's, when the planes hit I was ready to come to Brown. And he had driven to New York for the day and I said, "Turn around, come back." And I met with my students, everybody was in shock. And we just sat

around and sort of cried and you know, tried to give them support, talked about what a huge event this was. [35:00] I talked about, you know, other events that had been big in my life, and we just shared information, but it did bring us pretty close and it was a very painful time.

AK: So classes were still held that day and following?

WE: I, I, I believe so.

AK: Okay.

WE: I believe so. And, and then the next more tragic – not more tragic – the next traumatic morning that I came in to teach was after Hillary did not win the election.

AK: Yeah, that's a good way of writing it.

WE: There were, there were a few other times, but we sat around in a circle and talked because at the beginning of every class, we usually sit and talk for a while, I give a slide lecture, we have critiques or something and then students move through the studio to get some work done, based on an assignment. And I just [36:00] said, "Let's let's go over to Thayer Street and get some ice cream." So we all went to get some ice cream.

AK: Yeah.

WE: But after, you know, you have, I think having deep, long, meaningful conversations with young people is important. We have a very different generation of students right now. Brown is made up of a much more diverse population. It's a different, different place altogether.

AK: Than when you first got here?

WE: Than when I first got here. The faculty has changed, which is wonderful.

AK: In part, due to your efforts from what I hear.

WE: Well, yeah. I mean, I came here and I said, “We’re going to hire a lot of women.”

AK: Yeah, yeah.

WE: That’s what my goal was. I mean, I thought we needed people of color too, but I was like, adamant about getting some women.

AK: Right.

WE: And so yeah, it was, I focused on that and I made that my goal.

AK: How, how, how was it doing that kind of work? Did you get a lot of support for that [37:00] kind of thing?

WE: I don’t know. I think, you know, I, I was pretty assertive in some places. And I rubbed a couple of my colleagues the wrong way a lot. But I think, I think somehow or another, we all ended up having enough respect for one another to do the right thing. And now, I mean after 40 years, the department has better balance of women and men and people of color. So I feel like it’s a better time for me to leave now than it would have been a year or two after I got to Brown, for sure.

But I think also knowing that although I haven’t been involved on a regular basis at all with Pembroke or the Pembroke seminar, I’ve always known that’s there, and I knew Sarah Doyle was there. And I knew if I really needed to go [38:00] talk to, to people for help, that there were resources here that I could tap into.

AK: How, did you find those resources on your own or did people say, “Oh, by the way, you should check out the Sarah Doyle Center sometime?” Or did you kind of have to find these resources?

WE: I didn't have to find it too much. I think, you know, there were other women professors in departments who shared information.

AK: Do you think the connection –

WE: They were cool women.

AK: Yeah.

WE: Really great women at Brown.

AK: Yeah.

WE: Really, really great women.

AK: Do you think the connection among women professors across departments is as strong now as it was then? Or do you think there's kind of a perceived less of a need for that? Do you, do you think that in that moment, that was kind of out of a need for all of the women to be connected?

WE: I'm sure it was. Yeah, I think so. I think so. I don't know. Ruth asked me in one of these videos that we've done here [39:00] in the gallery, you know, "Do you think you were hired because you're a woman? Because of the Lamphere Case?" I said, "Absolutely. Thankfully." And Louise Lamphere fought a battle and she changed Brown.

AK: So I know, stepping back a little bit, from your conversation with Ruth Fine that you had your daughter in 1985 and you were working at Brown, but you were living in New York. So I don't want the, "How did you juggle it all?" But –

WE: Oh boy, did I ever! [laughter]

AK: But, why were you based in New York? And what was it like in – in 1985 are you still the only woman faculty member with the department?

WE: Yes, I'm pretty sure I was. We hired Leslie Bostrom in a tenure track position. She was the next person, but I don't think it was quite then. It was later. [40:00]

AK: So what was it like being pregnant in that environment and also commuting from New York?

WE: Okay, so I'll tell you the story. I had a junior sabbatical in 1984. They would give, the fourth year in a tenure track position they would give you a junior sabbatical, which was just a half year, it was a semester off, but I decided to take the whole year. And my partner, Jerry Mischak, and I –

AK: Is he a professor here, if I may interrupt?

WE: No. He's, he teaches at RISD.

AK: Okay.

WE: And URI.

AK: Okay.

WE: So he has part time positions. And that's another long story.

AK: Sure.

WE: I mean, he's a great husband. I love him dearly.

AK: But this is your story. [laughter]

WE: So we moved to New York, and we lived for a few weeks, for a couple months on Christopher Street in the Village, and I had wanted to go to China. So I'd had some funding to go [41:00] to China, went with a group of academics from somewhere in the Midwest. And some of the paintings in this show – Luscious show – came out of that month long visit to China. And that was 1984, so it's a really different time in China.

And then Jerry and I moved into a studio loft on Mercer Street, just, you know, a block away from Canal Street. And Georgia was born in on April 5, 1985. So I did have to return to Brown that fall. So it was pretty tough. I just, I, I stopped nursing in late August, and I started commuting back and forth. I had some friends who taught at RISD and we would drive up together or take the train and I'd come up on a Sunday night. I would leave Georgia with Jerry. [42:00] And then I would come back on Wednesday night.

AK: Oh, wow.

WE: So it was really crazy.

AK: Yeah.

WE: But I was with her the whole time all day Thursday, all day Friday, all day Saturday, all day Sunday.

AK: Right, right. So maybe it was okay to come up for a little.

W: You know, I think I was out of my mind. I just didn't have any idea what I was doing. I mean, I just thought, well, I've got this job, and we weren't really ready to leave New York. And I still didn't have tenure. So we did that for a year. And Jerry was bartending making a whole lot of money bartending, actually. And he had a studio in Brooklyn, in Dumbo, so he moved back here after a year, I think it was a year, year and a half. And we, he commuted back and forth to New York.

AK: Oh, wow.

WE: He didn't want to give up his studio and he still had this great bartending job. So we didn't have a very conventional early parenting.

AK: Yeah, right.

WE: But [43:00] you know, I don't think a lot of artists, or maybe at that time we just really wanted to keep our work going in our studios. And that was the way it was going to work. That's the way it kind of turned out. So at some point a few years, a year or two later, he just, this commuting didn't make any sense for him. So he ended up back in Providence full time.

But having Georgia was like the light of my life, the greatest thing that ever happened to me basically. And so I did incorporate a lot of images of her into my paintings back then. And they were paint – there were people who would come to the studio, and they would see these paintings with babies in them and they would say, “Why are you doing paintings with babies in them?” And Marcia Tucker didn't question it. She just said, “Wendy, nobody else is making paintings with babies in them.” And I said, “Well, because she's so precious and I love her so much and that's what I really care about now.” [44:00] So I had to sort of put her in the paintings. And Marcia Tucker, I was lucky while I was in New York, there was a baby group. And Marcia had, was, founded the museum. So this group of mothers with new babies would get together once a month. So they were mostly artists. And I think that's what really got me through that experience and the commuting as well. So it was really serious bonding for women who were managing to keep their work going and mothering at the same time. But Jerry and I never had, like a full time Au Pair or a full time babysitter. We would just pass Georgia back and forth. You know, she was either with me or she was with him.

AK: Did she ever have to come up to Brown?

WE: Oh, god, yes. I brought her to Brown a few times. And there's some photographs. [45:00] I, William Jordy was an art history, architectural art historian.

AK: He's a professor who comes up in a lot of our interviews. People, students really loved him.

WE: I loved him too. And he was a good guy. And I think, I think he just was, was a genuinely kind human being. And you know, when a young person comes into a department, we were still a department with art history then, and he managed to take me under his wing in in a really kind hearted way. So he was retiring. And so I was invited to his retirement party so I brought Georgia along. It was ridiculous. There are some photographs over in the Faculty Club of me holding Georgia. She must have only been a couple months old, she was tiny. But I was introducing her to the Brown community And then [46:00] when I, when I did start teaching, I think I was still living, I mean I, I hadn't returned to Brown to teach that was still shortly after she had bron, been born, but that first year I did bring her up a few times. And I had students babysit for her in my studio office.

AK: Did she attend Brown?

WE: No.

AK: No.

WE: She wasn't interested in going to school on the east coast.

AK: Oh, okay.

WE: She had it up to here with Brown.

AK: Okay.

WE: So she ended up going to Occidental College in California. So that's where she's living now. She decided not to come back to the east coast.

AK: Interesting. Are you glad you landed on the East Coast again?

WE: Well, yeah, because my parents were in Northern Virginia still. And, you know, I felt like I



wanted to be near my family, at least on the east coast. And, you know, New York was really important to go [47:00] back and forth to. It's easy. I mean, Jerry and I have always gone back and forth to New York more frequently than even going to Boston, which is –

AK: Really?

WE: Next door. Yeah.

AK: Do you have any other points about Brown you want to touch upon before we, we move on?

WE: Oh, gosh. There's so much I think it's a good place. I think it's, I think Brown is reaching out to students more now than they ever have before they have to, they have to. Many students are more needy now. [48:00] I love this institution, you know. I've had, I've certainly had some bumps and hard times. I think what was good for me was that once, once I did get tenure, I didn't want to be chair of the department until I got tenure. I didn't feel secure about getting stuck in that administrative position. But then I did sort of become head of the Visual Art area and we ended up separating the two departments and that took a little while. I think I had a number of interviews and job offers because I wasn't really sure if I wanted to stay at Brown and I had some thoughts about seriously leaving. And so I was [49:00] promoted to full professor very quickly. I didn't have to wait another seven years. So once I became a full professor, I felt that I had a level of security that you know, nobody was going to take that away from me.

AK: Right, right.

WE: And I was flattered to have had people come to me and ask me to apply for jobs in other places. That was, that was great, so. and the reason I ended up staying was because there was one Dean of the Faculty who just said, "Wendy, you're not, you really aren't ready to leave. It would be a loss to Brown if you left." And that was very sweet of her to say, and so I thought, well, maybe, maybe I should stick around. Maybe I still have a lot more work to do in terms of changing the department and, you know, broadening Browns, awareness of women and minorities basically.

AK: Right. So you're retiring in June. What do you see for life after Brown? [50:00]

WE: Wow. Well, I see being in my studio a lot more. My husband and I bought a fire station in Rumford almost 15 years ago. And so our studios are on the first floor and we live on the second floor. It's a really cool building.

AK: That's amazing.

WE: It's really cool building and I just love my space, I love the light. And I just want to be working basically in there. And I know that I'll miss students. I know that I'll miss teaching. But, you know, on and off over the years, I was chair for so much that, that just drained me. And there were times when I was just burned out. There were, there were burned out periods that I thought I am not going to get through this next step. But, you know, my head's in a really different place now. And my father is 101 years old.

AK: Yes, I did, I did hear that.

WE: So I would really like to be able to spend more time with him.

AK: Sure. [51:00] Is he in Virginia still?

WE: Yep.

AK: Really?

WE: He's in Virginia, yeah. He's in his own apartment in a retirement community.

AK: Wow. Good for him.

WE: So he's pretty strong. And if he's lasting this long, then I might have, I could also –

AK: You're going to win the retirement game!

WE: I can do a lot more painting for the next 30 years.

AK: Yeah, right. So I think this is kind of a good stopping point. If, is there anything else you'd like to add that maybe we didn't touch upon that you would really like to have written into the historical record?

WE: I don't think so. I think, you know, I'm leaving at a good time. I want to make space for other young faculty and just really looking forward to [52:00] not going to so many meetings!

AK: Right!

WE: It was the meetings that was getting to me after a little while.

AK: I believe it.

WE: But thank you. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to talk. I mean I, once I start talking I could keep talking forever.

AK: Right. Well, I'm so glad that you did. Thank you so much for doing this interview for us. It will join a corpus of over 230 other interviews that are used around the world. So thank you so much for adding your story.

WE: That's great. Thank you.

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