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Interview with Heather Alexander

Heather Alexander

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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Heather Alexander
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We're here at the Portland Public Library at Makers @ PPL. This is Catherine Fisher and it's the 25th of April, year 2015. I'm here with Heather Alexander, who lives on Munjoy Hill here in Portland. Heather, you shared with me that you have been a graphic designer, right? Would you say that that's your area of making?

HA: Actually, no. I started out when I was about 19, and I'd gotten married. We didn't have any money. I saw this John Lewis jewelry on Newbury Street in Boston, and I thought, "I could make that." For Christmas, my husband gave me jewelry-making tools, and I started making. And I sewed before that. I sewed all my clothes in high school. I think, basically, my philosophy was that, if somebody else could make it, I could make it. I don't have money to go buy these extravagant things, so I started just making everything. When I was a little older, in my late 20s, I went back to college at Mass College of Art. I took 3D Fine Arts, so I got to try everything. Except glassblowing, because the shed had burned down.

CF: [Laughing] Or you would have tried that too?

HA: I would have. I have since. I just wanted to be able to make everything, at least a little bit. I've never become this master of any one craft, but I can do almost anything a little bit. If I decide, well, I've found this stone, I want to make a silver pendant, I can do that. And I have the equipment. I have a lot of tools now, for just about anything. Except glassblowing. [Both laugh] But I have friends who do that.

CF: There's a bit of a difference, then, in terms of what you do to make a living and then what you make?

HA: Right. Well, it was ironic because I got into graphic design. I've been a freelance graphic designer since '95, I guess, '96.

CF: So you did not choose, then, to make, say, the jewelry-making or the sewing your ...

HA: I became a graphic designer because, as a designer, you don't give away things. You still have it, whatever you did. Like, I do illustrations and stuff. I keep the illustration. And usually now they're hybrid computer and hand-done, anyway. It was like, I couldn't make this pendant and then sell it, because it was like, "It's one of a kind." I think that's probably what prompted me to get into graphics— not selling, but keeping, your original. And then people always say, "Oh, I love that skirt you made. Will you make me one?" I'm like, "No!" [Laughs]

CF: When sewing, then, you made your own designs?

HA: Yeah, I learned to. The thing is, I don't like sewing that much, but I'm willing to do it for the product. People say, "Make me one." I'm like, "No!" [Both laugh]

CF: Would you say it's that way with most things for you? Are there some processes that you enjoy more than others?

HA: Oh, sure. In sewing, you're always pricking your finger, so, it's painful! [Laughs] I enjoy most crafting processes. It's fun to try and see what you're really bad at. Like clay is squirrely. It's like, "Behave, behave!" [Laughs] And it won't do what I want it to. And then metals are hard, so you're like, "I've got to buff this." [Laughs] It's so different, the whole thing.

CF: You work in clay as well?

HA: I have done. I took a MECA course one summer, and I called it my "Summer of 36 deformed pots." [Both laugh]

CF: You loved them, right?

HA: Well, some of them actually came out pretty nice even though you wouldn't call them standard issue. But I got to try a lot of things, a lot of glazes and raku, etc.

CF: Where do you get your inspiration for projects?

HA: Well, I see things. Sometimes I see things that aren't in the medium or whatever, or something in nature, and that will inspire me to say, "That would be cool." I keep books of ideas. And I don't always make everything. It's ironic, because one time, I was designing watches and clocks in my idea book. And then a few years later, I was in Florence, Italy, at a Swatch store, and I went, "There's my watch. I designed that watch." [Laughs]

CF: Isn't that something? It's like you birthed it out there to the universe and somebody else caught it who happened to work for Swatch.

HA: Exactly. It happens a lot, it's funny. I want to say that I found the Exploratorium in San Francisco that I visited a couple of years ago amazing for the makers idea. That's where I first learned about the makers idea.

CF: So, you've lived in Massachusetts and now you're here in Maine ...

HA: For the last three years, I was in Hanover, New Hampshire, but I'm back to Portland now.

CF: Would you say, at all, that place, perhaps New England, affects what you make or your process? Your product? Or that you impact the place in which you make in the process?

HA: That's a really good question. I'm not sure about place itself. Yeah, I suppose. I do basketry, too, so natural materials sometimes are like, "Wow, inspiring." I'll do a basket, and it'll have a natural twig handle. Or put together various art pieces.

CF: So that material would be from here, from this place.

HA: Yeah. Or use rocks that are from the beach or whatever. It depends. I've made jewelry that had beach rocks in it. Before that was popular!

CF: Again, another of your ideas that you put out there! I'm thinking that also, then, your idea books must be great creations in themselves and records of your ...

HA: It's fun to do that, because you can think of all these things, and you know, "Well, I'm probably not going to make it." But ...

CF: You never know, right? Its time could come.

HA: It could.

CF: Thank you so much, Heather. I really appreciate you taking the time.

HA: Thank you. Good luck.