

The Personal Is Professional

Project Art, a renovated mill on the banks of a Massachusetts river, is alive with artists, exhibitions, and events. It's also Leslie Ferrin's home.

INTERVIEW BY

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LESLIE FERRIN WEARS THREE professional hats. Through Ferrin Gallery, which she established in 1979, she represents many contemporary artists, with an emphasis on figural sculpture and studio ceramics. She also has a busy roster of lectures and consulting gigs. And she's the director of Project Art, an 8,000-square-foot live/work compound on the banks of the Westfield River in Cummington, Massachusetts, that hosts resident artists, exhibitions, salon-style talks, and potluck suppers. It's also where Ferrin lives.

We asked the multifaceted Ferrin about her decidedly artful balancing act.

You have an unusual living arrangement. Can you describe where you live – and who else lives here?

The Project Art building looks like a giant barn. It's not; it's got two apartments. One houses sculptor Sergei Isupov, his wife, Kadri Pärnamets, and their 3-year-old-daughter, Roosie. Sergei is my partner in Project Art. The other has my daughter,

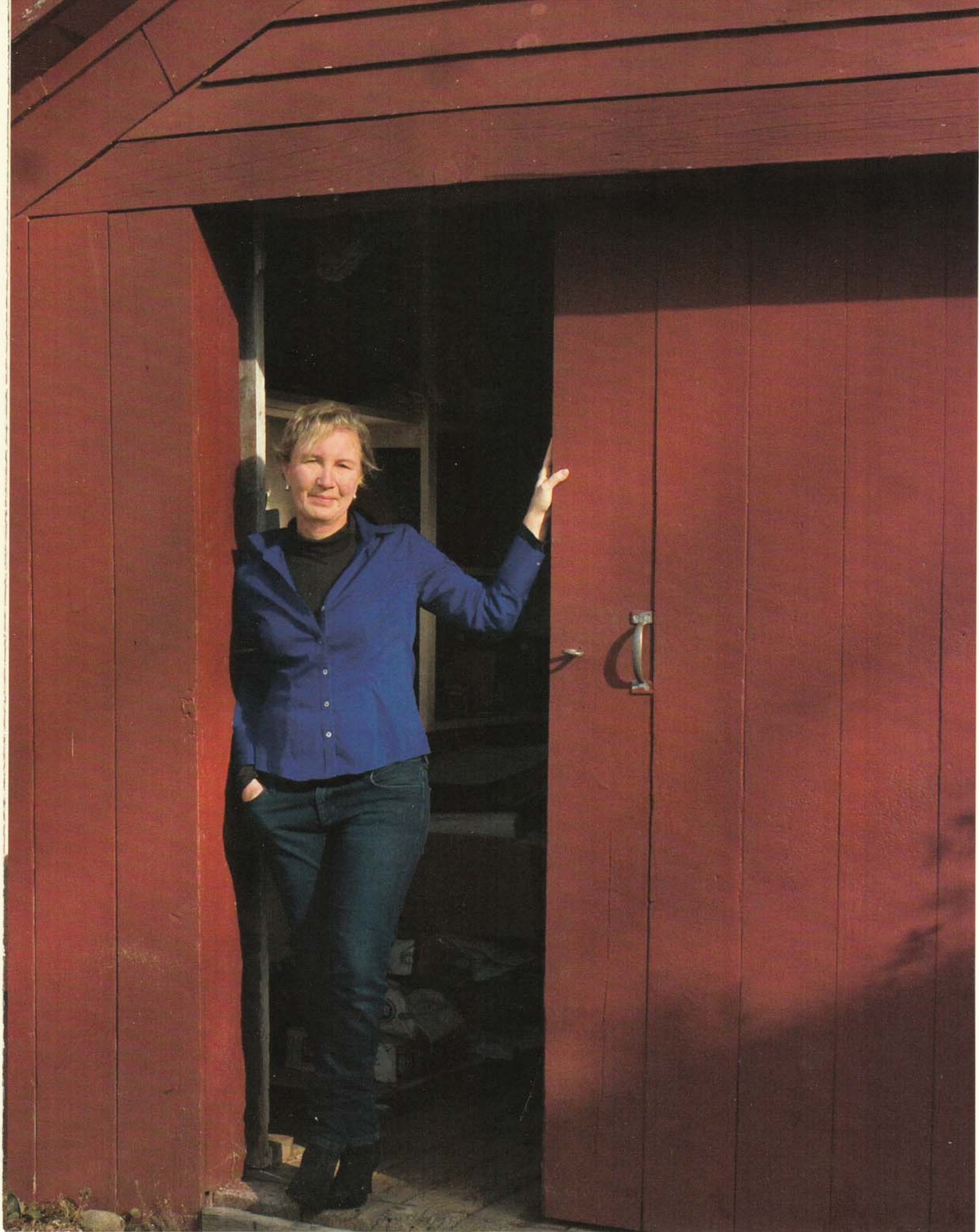
Lucy, 16, and me. My son, Graeme, recently started college, so our resident artist, sculptor Kate Roberts, is in his room right now. Other live-in residents have stayed in Sergei's apartment when he's traveling.

In addition to living space, there are artist studios, a seasonal gallery, an office, a library, a kitchenette, and event space where we do artist talks and potluck suppers. My mother, June Ferrin, who is a painter, lives next door. She bought the house after we moved here. For years potter Jeffrey Lipton was next to her, while he was apprenticing with Mark Shapiro. It's artists' row.

Did you envision all this when you first laid eyes on the building?

I brought Michael McCarthy, a friend and potter, with me to see the building in 2003. Immediately, we saw the potential. The setting – between a winding street in a rural town and a winding river – is absolutely beautiful. Cummington is right between the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley, and easy access







Above: Ferrin and her daughter, Lucy Sloan, live at Project Art in one of its two apartments. Son Graeme recently departed for college.

Right: Ferrin chats in her office with Michael McCarthy, a friend and studio potter who helped her scout the building. He was a studio resident from 2006 to 2012.

Below right: Miriam Kaye's *Swans*, an oil painting on a piano lid, framed with mother-of-pearl buttons. "Every piece has a personal story," Ferrin says.



to both regions appealed to me, because Ferrin Gallery was already in the Berkshires.

Sergei and I were working together at the time – I was representing him – and I knew he wanted a quieter, less demanding place to live than Richmond, Virginia, where he was. The idea of a more rural place appealed to him, so he and I decided to buy the building together. He was glad to have that partnership include me being the manager; it allows him more time for art and more flexibility to travel. And Michael had a studio here for many years.

How do you delineate public and private spaces – or do you? Delineation is easier on the professional side. My office, which



is downstairs, is public space, and colleagues wouldn't simply wander into the apartment. On the personal side, it's harder. To family, when I'm in the building, I'm home. And so many artists are friends! Sometimes I've struggled to carve out private space for myself.

That said, it turns out that to have many people in and closely connected to the building has allowed me, as a single mom, the freedom to travel for work and entrust responsibility for the building – and the kids – to my artist community. So there are advantages to blending the personal and professional.

When's the space most lively?

When we host potluck suppers that include salon-style artists'



Clockwise from top left: Roosi, the daughter of Project Art partner Sergei Isupov and wife Kadri Pärnamets, plays under the watchful eye of *Modesty*, one of her dad's sculptures; Isupov in his workspace; the happy family; and Kate Roberts, a 2012 Project Art-funded resident.

talks, the place is hopping. Our most recent event included Sergei and Jason Walker, a visiting ceramic artist. A former resident, Deborah Schwartzkopf, came over from Snow Farm [a craft program in Williamsburg, Massachusetts], where she'd taught a weekend workshop. Although she and Jason are both Pacific Northwest-based, they'd never met. Kate did a wonderful presentation, and people came from the Berkshires and from the Pioneer Valley. We had two 3-year-olds and a teenager, then people in their 20s and 30s on up.

All of the ceramic artists bring food for the potluck in a dish they've made, which looks so beautiful on the table. Because my mother collected vintage

dishes and linens, our eclectic take on the family china definitely comes out for parties.

How much of the art in your living space was made by artists you work with?

A lot. I'm surrounded by art – that's one of the perks of my job.

Do you have a favorite piece?

Every piece has a personal story, from the hooked rug my oldest friend Martha North made to Miriam Kaye's double swan piece that mixes painting with buttons she found at an old button factory. There are commemorative pieces and thank-you gifts.

I think the accumulation – the collection as a meaningful whole – is more the point than favoring any individual piece. Growing up with a mother who collected beautiful things, it's understandable that I feel this way.

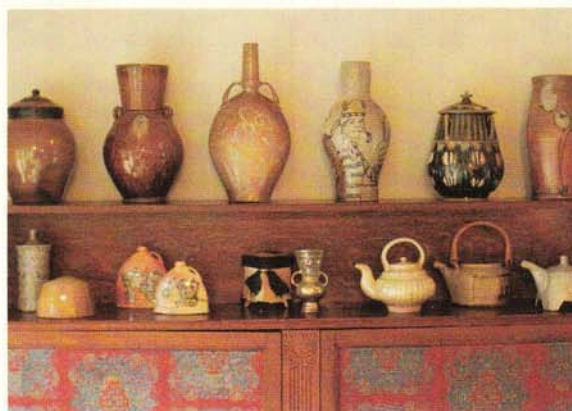
You must have beloved ceramics.

I have one of the original fish platters by Mara Superior,



Left: A nook showcases ceramic art and works on paper, including, on the bottom shelf, a plate and cup made for Ferrin's son by Sarah Grinnell, a classmate.

Right: A well-stocked hutch celebrates ceramic artists and studio potters, among them Mark Hewitt, Michael Simon, Beatrice Wood, Linda Sikora, and Warren MacKenzie.





Project Art is many things; above all, it is a community. Clockwise from head of the table: Leslie Ferrin, June Ferrin (Leslie's mother), Kate Roberts, Jeffrey Lipton, Kadri Pärnamets, Sergei Isupov, Michael McCarthy, Sarah Grinnell, and Lucy Sloan.

which I love to use to serve fish or asparagus. My collections of Donna McGee's and Megan Hart's pottery are in regular use. And, as is true of anyone who works with ceramic artists, I have bottles, vases, bowls, and, of course, cups made by many artists – Michael McCarthy, Michael Simon, Mark Shapiro, Molly Hatch.

This mismatched accumulation makes my house resemble artists' houses, which also display respect and admiration for each other's work via similarly stocked shelves.

Do you have a current favorite?

A recent treasure is a plate and mug made by a young artist, Sarah Grinnell, who graduated from high school with my son. I taught a visual literacy course there. Sarah made a mug and a plate for each classmate – it was a very small graduating class – with silhouettes of each person on both pieces and an image on the plate of something that individual is passionate about. For my son, it was a map, because he is passionate about travel.

I love that her work is in our house, representing the next generation of artists.

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Right: A plate, tumbler, and small bowl made by Michael McCarthy. He is a former apprentice of Mark Shapiro, whose soup bowl completes the setting.

Far right: Fresh flowers in a Karen Karnes vessel, along with a loaf of Sergei Isupov's sourdough rye served on a Roy Superior cheese board.

