

SEApots- Contemporary Southeast Asian Ceramics

By Hadrian Mendoza

INTRODUCTION

SEApots is composed of a group of over 150 contemporary ceramic artists coming from 10 Southeast Asian countries which include Cambodia, Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Laos. The goal of SEApots is to uplift and expose contemporary SEA'n ceramic artists internationally through events such as exhibitions and conferences, and at the same time creating a synergy among a community of artists and scholars who assist one another through advancement in their fields. By coming together as a region, this group is able to make a stronger impact on the international ceramics scene.

The formation of this group is exciting because a majority of these artists have not been exposed internationally. During a time when SEA is on an economic rise, artists must find a way to benefit from this trend through activities such as exhibitions, lectures, commissions, residencies, demonstrations and conferences.

HISTORY

SEApots was conceived in 2007 when I was awarded the Toyota Foundation Japan grant entitled "unlocking Southeast Asia's potential." This grant enabled 45 SEA'n ceramic artists to convene at The Ayala Museum in Makati, Philippines for "Earth and Fire: 1st Southeast Asian Ceramics Festival." In 2012 I received a grant from Futo Industries in China to organize "Clay Unity: 2nd Southeast Asian Ceramics Conference" which took place at Fule International Ceramics Museum, in which 22 artists participated in a month long residency to create over 300 pieces for the newly constructed SEA'n museum on site. In 2014, a grant from the Asian Cultural Council based in New York funded "Earth and Fire: 3rd Southeast Asian Ceramics Conference" which took place at The Workhouse Arts Center located in Lorton, Virginia. "Earth and Fire" included 14 artists who presented their works and techniques during the conference and over 40 artists who exhibited their works. In December of 2016, Ayala Foundation will sponsor "The Tree of Life: 4th Southeast Asian Ceramics Festival" which will take place at The Ayala Museum in Makati, Philippines.

Historically, these 10 countries have worked well together and have shared many values. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with "goals of economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the spirit of partnership and equality for a prosperous and peaceful community." The motto of ASEAN is "One vision. One Identity. One Community." The example set by ASEAN has laid the groundwork for the region's mentality. SEApots looks to take these values and incorporate them into its practices.

An intriguing quality of this region is the cultural diversity each country possesses despite sharing a common history. Ceramics from these countries are all linked by a common thread of utilitarianism. Today, the pottery industry in this region is thriving because they are inspired by ancient wares. Everyday folk earthenware from this region have common features such as shape, clay and firing style.

But the contemporary studio potters/ceramic artists from each country has their own distinct style in shape, firing, surface treatment, glaze, texture and concept.

WHY CERAMICS CONFERENCES ARE UNIQUE

Ceramics conferences are unique because they are in a class of their own when it comes to art. The separation has been evident since the beginning and there has always been a question whether ceramics is an art or a craft. The argument of “Art vs. craft” has been a question that has never been resolved. Why has ceramics always been considered a level below fine arts such as painting, drawing and sculpture? Perhaps it is because historically, ceramics has always been tied to utilitarian wares and are considered “common” and normal in everyday lives. Fine art has always been considered a luxury. As a result, the monetary value of fine arts has always been higher than that of ceramics, even though not all ceramic pieces are utilitarian. Ceramics conferences are unique in comparison to other art conferences. This division has translated into conferences where the art is presented as an everyday normal activity. They include demonstrations by artists which pull in the public and create a dialogue between both sides. The viewers are encouraged to join and to learn and follow the techniques of the artists, which creates a friendly atmosphere. Most of the conferences I have attended have a feel of “home,” as opposed to having a “gallery” feel.

TRANSNATIONALISM AND GLOBALISM

The internet has played an important role in helping this core group of artists grow and interact through the use of social media. Facebook has been an effective tool to communicate basic information to the group. I have started a group called “SEApots” which has over 400 members. It is used to announce events such as exhibitions, call for entries, exhibition reviews, workshops, lectures and apprenticeships. Some posts even ask if anyone will be at a particular conference and would like to meet up.

After basic information has been exchanged, then specific and official conversations/announcements/invitations are then communicated through private email messages.

This form of communication bridges the gap of our national boundary. By seeing photos and seeing real time messages, it feels as if we are all in the same country. In this system, we forget about our physical distance and in some cases people have made stronger bonds with individuals from other nations than that of their own countrymen/women.

GROWTH and SUSTAINABILITY

Now that SEApots has a solid core of artists who support and collaborate with each other, the next step would be to open an NGO under the “SEApots” name. The NGO would have to be set up in Southeast Asia (ideally the Philippines) and include members from each SEA country. Having an NGO would give SEApots an official track record along with a platform to apply for substantial grants. Also, there is a greater chance in receiving a grant when the application comes from an NGO than from a private individual.

Applying for an NGO would be the most effective way to make SEApots self-sustaining. But there are also other ways to acquire funds such as artist commissions donated from event related sales, small grants applied by an individual, private grants/donations and crowd funding such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo.

MODELS TO FOLLOW

Artist Run Institutions and Collectives throughout the world run in different ways depending on their goals and capital. Black Dot Gallery and Platform in Australia and The Front in New Orleans are artist run institutions that rely heavily on volunteers. All 3 institutions include a mix of new and experienced artists. There would be more new artists in the group because joining institutions like this are believed to help them succeed and advance in their careers.

A successful model to follow would be Momenta Art in New York which was founded in 1986. Momenta art is an artist run not-for-profit organization that provides forums for public dialog through art projects by emerging and underrepresented artists. Their programs include exhibitions, public events, publications and educational series that address contemporary issues. Momenta Art focuses on art's potential to contribute to a positive transformation to our society. Momenta art operates on 2 paid employees which include the executive director and a program & administrative director. The board of directors is comprised of 12 members with an advisory board of an additional 19 individuals. There are annual fundraisers and membership packages which provide capital to Momenta Art

SEApots can follow Momenta Art's model and incorporate the other institutions' strategy of utilizing volunteers to assist in various tasks.

THE FUTURE

SEApots has been alive since 2007 and has a track record of 3 major conferences in 3 different countries. We have garnered attention from other ceramic institutions and have collaborated with other leading groups such as International Academy of Ceramics (Switzerland), Putik Foundation (Philippines), Ayala Foundation (Philippines), Asian Cultural Council (NY, USA), Futo Industries (China) and The Toyota Foundation (Japan.) I plan to steadily strengthen the bond between the 150+ members and one day transform SEApots into an NGO that has the tools and drive to be a major player in the international ceramics scene.