

studio

Process and Perspectives in Clay

talk

2022



Presented by

ceramics
M O N T H L Y

PotteryMaking
Illustrated

BALANCING TIME IN THE STUDIO

Chanakarn Semachai

Editors: How did you come up with the forms and surfaces that are prevalent in your work?

Chanakarn Semachai: I tell stories of my background, experiences, and thoughts through narrative ceramic works. I once read a story about a man who went to jail before social media took over. When he was released, everything had changed about how we live and interact with other human beings. He had so many new things to

learn and keep up with. He felt out of place, like he didn't know this world anymore. This story got me thinking; what if dinosaurs came back to life in this present world? How would they feel? They were here first a long time ago. They died out and we took over, slowly changing their world. They would probably struggle to fit in and strive to live a life that suits this modern world. Yet, they would stand out simply because they are dinosaurs.



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1 Assorted mugs, to 5½ in. (14 cm) in width (each), handbuilt stoneware, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, luster. 2 Chanakarn Semachai loading a piece into the kiln. 3 Fully loaded kiln about to be fired to cone 04.

“ The best way for me to solve a problem is to keep working because I believe we need to push past the ugly to find beauty, or vice versa.”

So, my work is all about dinosaurs as representative of myself and of other people who are either fitting in or who are over it and instead are just being their unique selves while going about their daily routines, such as walking their babies or skateboarding or shopping for groceries. I also put my dinosaurs on pottery surfaces and forms. I always see my pottery as a miniature version of my sculpture, using the elements of sculptural work on pots, like handles taking the form of dinosaurs' tails. It all begins with my sculptures and evolves into vessel forms. My illustrations started when I began making utilitarian forms as I was finding a way to put sculptural concepts on utilitarian objects. People usually ask where I get ideas for my illustrations but honestly, working in the studio alone most of the time encourages my ideas. Programs on Netflix inspire me as well. I unconsciously draw things that I have seen on shows, like a dinosaur surviving a group of zombies, or a cliché dino prom party.

My two- and three-dimensional ideas are always bouncing back and forth in my visual language. I am learning to integrate ceramics and illustration, pottery and sculpture, one culture and another—finding a way for them to complement each other.





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The Studio

My studio is located in Bangkok, Thailand. It's 100 square feet of a spare bedroom that I took over. Picture a square room with two working tables placed next to each other to make one long table, a chair, shelves, and a kiln placed a little bit further in the back of the house. Simple but efficient. It's a safe space for me to create and explore. Since my studio is relatively small, I have to work on only one or two projects at a time. I work on building, glazing, documenting, and packing, followed by cleaning the entire studio, and then start the whole process all over again. Having a studio at home is my favorite aspect; I love not having to commute. I get to go work in the studio first thing in the morning and don't have to worry about driving back home in the middle of the night. My least favorite part is that I work alone. I miss surrounding myself in a big studio community, working alongside other ceramic artists. I miss having people to talk to, bouncing ideas around, solving clay problems, and getting inspired by each other.

I have not gotten many chances to work at different studios, but I have seen so many images of well-organized, clean, and spacious studios, so I kind of have ideas of what I want my studio to be. However, realistically, I feel like I'm still

4 Semachai's studio, set up for an online workshop during the pandemic. 5 A typical view of the studio, with lots of inspiration and source imagery on the wall.

uncertain if Thailand is going to be my forever home; therefore, I'm not looking to expand or build a separate studio. If I decide to settle down here, I would love to build a big studio that has enough space to share and invite artists from other countries to work, live, and learn together.

Paying Dues/Bills

I went to Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, for my undergraduate studies and Edinboro University of Pennsylvania for graduate school, where I studied ceramics. By day, I teach full-time at Chulalongkorn University. By night, I'm a student, pursuing a doctoral degree in creative arts. On weekends, I work part-time as an artisan for Louis Vuitton, creating personalized paintings for clients. As a result, I don't get to spend time in the studio as much as I want, but I try to manage my time so that I meet all of my responsibilities. I have specific schedules of days and times that I have to work for each job; aside from that, I am in the studio most of the time. In periods of crazy deadlines, I usually spend 15–18 hours in the studio a day. During a normal time, if there are no deadlines, I spend 3–5 hours in the studio after work each night.

My day jobs as a professor and part-time painter financially support my artistic life. Without them, I would not be able to ship my work internationally or attend residency programs abroad. Balancing between jobs is a huge part of my life right now, but I'm happy and grateful every single day that I get to make a living out of my art.

Mind

I have always dreamed of having time to read, but have never prioritized it. Movies and documentaries are my go-to sources of inspiration. I'm inspired unconsciously by TV shows and real-crime documentaries. I cannot work in a studio without having something playing on my laptop, especially when I work on building pieces. Later on, when I decorate the surfaces, I have to switch to music, since I have to focus more; it's harder to glance at the screen while painting.

Since I am working in the studio alone, trying to advance my work and make progress in my career in clay can be challenging.



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6 Semachai's worktable with several sculptures in progress, including *I saw myself sleeping* (left) and *Why bring home the bacon, when you can ride a whole hot dog home* (middle). 7 The upper shelves display finished pieces before packing and shipping work to exhibitions. The lower shelves hold drying work before being loaded into a kiln.



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I have sometimes found myself stuck at the stage where I'm not producing something good or creative. The best way for me to solve a problem is to keep working because I believe we need to push past the ugly to find beauty, or vice versa. Keep working, and you will find a way. There are so many times that I landed on some amazing ideas when I was not looking for them.

Having the privilege of living in a small, tropical country like Thailand means that both beaches and mountains are only two hours away from the city. I like to go to the beach when I feel like I need to recharge. Although, I'll admit that doesn't happen too often, as I always feel guilty about not being in the studio. Personally, the best way for me to recharge creatively is to go to ceramics conferences and/or art residencies. For me, getting to know people and immersing myself in unfamiliar places are the best ways for me to enjoy and refresh my thoughts.

Marketing

I'm fortunate that even after having moved back to Thailand, I can continue to sell my work consistently in the US through Companion Gallery. Along with being included in shows, I can exhibit my work in galleries all over the US.



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8 *Impressing your boss* 101, 10½ in. (27 cm) in width, handbuilt stoneware, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 04 in oxidation, luster, plexiglass, wooden stick. **9** Underglaze painting in progress on *Eating your attitude*. **10** *Another level of breaking up with your ex*, 16 in. (41 cm) in width, handbuilt stoneware, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 04 in oxidation, luster, plexiglass. **11** *Controlling their dreams*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 04 in oxidation, luster, plexiglass.

Selling and showing work abroad is the way I stay connected, especially with the pandemic and travel bans. Although I now live in Thailand, the main demand for my work remains in the US. Thanks to social media, I can continually post about my practice and market myself.

Social media, especially Instagram, has become a big part of many ceramic artists' practices. I treat my account as my personal, free, online-gallery space. I have found this very helpful when trying to get my work exposed in a global setting. I notice that people enjoy seeing images of a work process, problem solving, and failures a little bit more than perfect, finished pieces. Maybe we need a reminder that we are all in this together as humans and we are not perfect. I'm not solely dependent on money from selling my work, therefore I have not been focusing or developing good marketing strategies to share with others. However, I will keep telling my stories and hoping they will be heard by the right audience who enjoy and/or want to invest in my work.

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