

Clay is perhaps the world's most used medium, though in Thailand its uses are mainly utilitarian. Yet while ceramic art might still not be valued here as much as other art forms – painting, for example – it is growing in popularity.

"Most people still think of pottery as a craft and not art," says Sukumarl Leksawat, a ceramic art professor at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Fine Arts. "It's difficult for people to see beyond their utility and daily function," agrees Pim Sudhikham, who also teaches at Chulalongkorn's Faculty of Architecture and is considered one of the medium's stars.

But, after over a decade teaching in one of the country's most prominent



Pim Sudhikham



Sukumarl Leksawat

BREAKING THE MOULD

How Thai artists are smashing local conceptions of what pottery is and can be.

BY TOP KOAYSOMBOON

colleges, both Sukumarl and Pim notice changes. Thai people, they both agree, are starting to see that malleable clay is one of the most expressive materials available. Many of the ceramic artists behind this movement regularly show works here and internationally. We spoke to a selection of local ceramic artists leading the charge.

Sukumarl Leksawat

As a ceramic art lecturer, Sukumarl is moulding the next generation of Thai artists. Her studio in the faculty building is full of moulds, clay prototypes and reference books. "I'm working on a new collection to exhibit at Chamchuri Art Centre in March," she says. "It's inspired by women's clothing dur-



Pim Sudhikham

ing the reigns of King Rama 5 to King Rama 7, which was in turn inspired by Victorian fashions in Great Britain."

Sukumarl adds lace to her signature geometrically shaped vessels to give her work new perspectives. "Laces are delicate; you need to be really careful," she says. "You need to dip them in clay water before placing them onto your surfaces."

As a lecturer, Sukumarl finds grading her student's works a challenge – the art form's subjective nature doesn't lend itself to being judged in a standardised way. Her solution is to grade according to colour-matching and practicality, "but that doesn't mean pieces with bad grades are bad or don't sell," she says. "In art, there's a belief that every work has its own soulmate, and those pieces still sell quickly once they've found theirs."

Sukumarl takes part in her department's annual student exhibition at Bangkok's Silom

Complex. It's during this time that she meets a lot of new and old admirers of the ceramic arts. "There are not as many as those who love paintings, but they are out there," she says. 02-281-2626, www.faa.chula.ac.th

Pim Sudhikam

Fifteen years ago, Pim Sudhikam was a fresh ceramic graduate from Sweden. Since coming back to teach at Chulalongkorn University she has been at the vanguard of the drive to promote ceramics as art.

Pim says it is the versatility and expressiveness of clay that seduced her. "I love the slow, meditative nature of the process, and how it engages the hands. I also like how it's the accidents that happen on the potter's wheel that often bring about the best results."

Aside from teaching, Pim also creates ceramic pieces for exhibitions. For her last exhibition, "Domestic Ware," she embedded glazed thrown porcelain cups, pots and other utensils into solid masses of clay, then fired them slowly in a wood-firing kiln in Ratchaburi. This joining of disparate pieces into one was a statement on the family unit.

Over the years, she has collaborated with artists and people in other fields, including one of the oldest clay factories in Chiang Mai, and Bo and Dylan of Bo.lan, one of the capital's top Thai restaurants, all in an attempt to find new perspectives for her works.

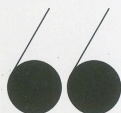
www.pimsudhikam.com

Aor Sutthiprapha

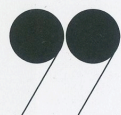
Aor Sutthiprapha's beautiful tea cups bring to mind Japanese or European design, and the closer you look, the more detail you see. A cheerful person, she splits her time between her rooftop studio hidden in a hardware store in Klongtoey and Caffe 352 in Yennakart, where her handmade tablewares contain her other passion: food.

"I'm following in the steps of my icon," she says, referring to Pim, her lecturer at Chulalongkorn University. It was Pim who introduced her to the charms of clay, and inspired her to study ceramic arts at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.

Sweden is evident in Aor's works. "I like the simplicity of Scandinavian style and how it shows off the best aspects of the materials," she says. "Some might say my work looks Japanese but, in the past, Japanese arts inspired American and European art."



The accidents that happen on the potter's wheel often bring about the best results.



Aor Sutthiprapha

Aor's previous collections saw simply shaped ceramic pieces painted using different types of processes, from random paintbrush strokes to continuous dots of different colours. "I was inspired by the concepts of eternity, continuity and concentration in Buddhism," she says.

www.aorsutthiprapha.com

Karin Phisolyabut

Karin Phisolyabut is the founder of Yarnnakarn, a ceramic art studio that produces home decoration items and tablewares. He founded it three years ago, after returning from the UK, where he studied fine art at the University of Kent. But it was at Chulalongkorn University that he first got his hands wet.

"I fell in love with the way clay can be turned into so many things," he says. "It's a miracle. I love the process of using my hands to shape and direct; and the process of kilning to glaze and colour."

Karin designs two collections a year for Yarnnakarn. Typically he reinterprets classic European earthenware into his own contemporary style, resulting in items like dishes and small sculptures of animals for home decoration. He leaves some defects or scars so they don't look factory-made.

Working in the commercial arts can be repetitive, Karin admits, so he creates art to break the routine and express his true self. His last three exhibitions were all connected, each expressing stories lifted from his own dream world. ✨

www.yarnakarn.com



Karin Phisolyabut