On maintaining a beginner's mi



Ceramicist Stefanie Guerrero discusses the fruits of informal education, sitting with the unknown, and building the spaces you want to inhabit.

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As told to Carolyn Bernucca, 1668 words.

Tags: Art, Design, Education, Multi-tasking, Business, Independence, First attempts.

How did you become what you are today — a ceramicist, a teacher, and the owner of a ceramics studio?

My journey with clay began in high school, where I learned hand building techniques. That was where I first developed my love for the medium and its versatility. But then I put it down for a while. It wasn't until I moved to New York City in 2016 that I felt drawn back to ceramics. On a whim, I took a pottery class to learn wheel throwing and expand my skills beyond what I'd learned in high school. Shortly after, I got a job assisting Cassie Griffin in her studio in Red Hook. She took a chance on me; I had very limited experience, and I learned so much about the ins and outs of running a ceramics studio. Cassie gave me a hands-on education, and a vision for manifesting my own creative dreams. At one point, she asked me what I wanted from this opportunity, and I looked around confidently and told her, "I hope to have this one day: my own dedicated studio where I can practice my own work."

When did you decide to build your own studio? How did you do it?

I founded my studio in 2020. I had been at other ceramic studios since 2016, but none of them were offering what I was looking for. When you don't have something, it's an opportunity to create it yourself. I "built" my studio around this kiln I had bought and planned to leave in my previous studio space. When lockdown happened, that was no longer a storage option, and my sweet landlord said I could put it in the basement. When I finally got it there, though, I was like, "Look at this ginormous space. I can't just keep this to myself." Lockdown gave me the time to slowly start outfitting the studio. I would just walk around Ridgewood and find things like shelving and tables on the street, and drag everything back. I also ended up finding a wheel for $100 on Craigslist; the owner literally lived down the street. Small things like that reassured me that I was on the right path, moving in the right direction.



What challenges have you faced since then?

I have to admit that I went into [opening the studio] very naively, mainly driven by my passion for nurturing community through art. I did not have business experience under my belt, and nothing quite prepared me for the demands of building my creative vision from the ground up. The beginning was rough; there's a lot of not-cute stuff that goes into sustaining the studio. Like I said, the space started as an unfinished New York City basement. It was dirty; I must have mopped it 20 times to get rid of all the grit. *[laughs]*

At the same time, no formal business knowledge could replace the education I've received by just jumping in, staying flexible, addressing challenges as learning opportunities, and listening to my community's needs. My goal was always to facilitate creative connections, so my business decisions have always boiled down to serving that mission responsibly and sustainably. I am so far from perfect, but the chance to keep extending access to the studio, and harnessing the communal power of art, makes me excited. I welcome the ride ahead. I feel very blessed. I don't know anyone else in New York City who has a setup like this.

What does your day-to-day look like?

Most of my day to day is centered around the studio — anything from equipment upkeep to material inventory to marketing to accounting. I'm also a teacher, so much of my time is spent preparing materials for and actually leading classes and workshops. In this moment, my day-to-day also includes exploring new processes for my own practice. It's important to me to retain a beginner's mind and creative energy, and grant myself permission for failure, so that innovation can unfold. For a long time, though, I didn't feel able to access that place, because of all of the upkeep and admin work in my day to day. So right now, I'm trying to just sit and welcome in more childlike risk and curiosity.

How has your personal art practice changed since building a home studio?

It's been challenging, I'm not going to lie. Having access to my own studio brings me a tremendous amount of joy; I can just go downstairs and work at any hour of the day. But you know, the studio is both my workspace and my business, and there are pressures tied to each, especially this idea of, "Now that I have a space, I need to create more." I've burnt out a number of times, and I've struggled to find balance. Working nonstop drains my practice of pleasure, and that doesn't do anyone any favors.





When did you feel ready to be a teacher?

I don’t know that I ever said to myself, “I’m ready to teach.” But I know what I have historically valued in other teachers. To me, allowing open communication; embracing vulnerability; and creating an encouraging, nonjudgmental space where people feel comfortable freely expressing themselves, are all characteristics of a good teacher. I’ve found that the deepest insights emerge when people can share their stories and ideas without fear. I’ve learned a lot these past few years about how to be a good teacher, and I will forever want to improve.

How does teaching serve and inform your own creative practice and process?

Teaching helps me channel a spirit of innovation, radical acceptance, and the beginner’s mind that I was talking about earlier, and that has made my work much better. So much of my work explores themes of adaptability, change, and embracing life’s natural chaos; through teaching and fostering a community with my students, I’ve been introduced to new ways of seeing and making that have served as guides, and have literally helped me adapt when I’m feeling doubtful or stuck.

Both teaching and running my business can be chaotic, but each has helped me become a better version of myself, and thus a better artist, by forcing me to seek out a work-life balance, be willing to adjust, and practice gentleness with myself through ups and downs. [Teaching] has also helped me to enjoy my solitude. There was a time when I couldn’t sit with my own thoughts; nowadays, meditation and alone time are crucial forms of

nourishment for me, and contribute to an artistic practice that arises from joy.

What does the space between inspiration and creation look like for you?

Oh, that space is the best. My perfectionism often stifles my creativity, so if I'm feeling inspired, I try not to overthink it, and instead let exploration be the destination, find beauty in the unexpected, as well as in my own unfiltered point of view. It's a lot of observing and listening. Grabbing the clay and just shaping and playing with it. Sometimes I just sit with it — I'll just hold it in a ball and allow myself to start connecting with it naturally.

What do you do when a project isn't turning out how you hoped it would? Do you ever abandon projects?

With clay, there are moments when a sculpture just, for example, collapses from its own weight during construction. But rather than scrapping a piece out of frustration, I try to just radically change course. Sometimes I have to let a piece that is heading in a direction I didn't foresee, or don't really want, just exist as it is for a while, and trust that I'll come back to it when the time is right. I don't like to throw things away; I like to finish them, even if at the end it's not what I was envisioning or expecting.



How do you feel when you've finished a project, and what do you do with those feelings?

I typically feel a mix of relief and sadness. And I've actually been pondering the sadness recently — where is it coming from? Am I sad that I probably won't have the piece in my possession anymore? Am I sad that this period in my life is over and it's time to move on? It can feel so abrupt sometimes. There's also joy, though, because I've brought these visions to life, and I get to look back on that journey. It takes a lot to transform the things I feel within myself into a sculpture. These pieces start from nothing, and by the end, they've changed so much and so have I.

What lessons has being an artist taught you that you've been able to carry into other areas of your life?

My practice has, I think, made me more brave and more accepting of imperfection. It's taught me to silence my inner critic, to trust and embrace myself more, and — I hate to say this — amplify my weirdness. It's also helped me learn how to let go; with ceramics and sculpture, you can plan so much, but then it's up to the kiln gods. All of that acceptance has transcended from my artistic practice into my being; as I create more, I'm able to see that whatever progress I've made, or whatever I've achieved, was already within me.

Stefanie Guerrero recommends:

Inviting friends over for tea

Nina Simone's live performance of "Feelings" at the 1976 Montreux Jazz Festival

The courage to always keep moving, keep growing, and keep healing

Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love*

Participating in Gaza Mutual Aid Solidarity

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