

Couple puts their 'clay heads' together

Local artists keep fires burning in tucked-away Bloomington Clay Studio

By Jimmy Jenkins

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Artist Shu-Mei Chan wears a pair of clay headphones that have Bluetooth speakers and were part of an interactive installation. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

BLOOMINGTON — Southeast of town, just off Ind. 446, a passion for art is being stoked in a quiet wood.

The Bloomington Clay Studio has, since 2008, been growing and thriving there, with classes and workshops offered.

The studio began in the minds of local artists Shu-Mei Chan and Daniel Evans. The husband and wife team runs the clay studio and a nonprofit group they founded, the Quarry Projects.

Chan and Evans wanted to create an art space where professional artists who are interested in working with clay can come to experience the medium. The space is also a safe haven for community members who want to try their hand at clay and ceramics.

But first, Chan and Evans had to find a home.

A place to call home

"This was a foreclosed property we found on HomeFinder.com," Chan said of the collection of buildings in which she now works and lives.

Used by the previous owner for a different series of private businesses, the property encompasses one large building where Chan and others have their studios and a gallery, as well as smaller adjoining buildings they are converting into more studio space and a potential artist residence.

"It's not quite Feng Shui yet," Evans said while walking amongst pottery wheels and electric kilns. "But it's getting there." His studio is in a converted two-car garage, with large picture windows that overlook the beautiful, wooded property.

Also on the property are two wood-fired kilns that Evans built by hand with the help of a studio assistant.

"Brains — brawn," Evans said when describing the roles of Chan and himself, respectively.

A self-proclaimed "clay head," Evans built the Anagama, or "cave kiln" by researching a lot of books or "mainly looking at the pictures," as he put it.

"I've been around a lot of kilns and built a lot over the past 20 years," he said. He's also had the opportunity to be around master kiln builders throughout his life.

Evans came to clay through apprenticeships, "which is very common in other cultures but not so much here," he said.

Growing up in Louisville, he went to college and worked jobs to support his "clay habit." While completing an artist residency program in Helena, Mont., he met his future wife and partner in art. They married in 2003 and moved to New York where they both received more schooling. They made their way to IU, where Chan got a graduate fellowship. She graduated in 2008 with an MFA in ceramics.

"We both came to clay later in life," Chan said. "Art had always been a part of my life, but working with clay was something of a revelation."

Originally from New Jersey, Chan discovered clay after college at a community center and has been hooked ever since.

It was this experience amongst others that prompted her to begin her own community-based art center.

No agendas

"The times I have been the most creative were when I didn't have anyone watching over me," Chan said. "I think sometimes, in institutional settings, there's too much of a program — they have an agenda. We try to have as little agenda as possible for the people that come here."

Evans, who recently taught at Vincennes University, also chaffed at the thought of too much institutional control.

"As much as I love academia, I found that I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to continue to teach, but the way I wanted to."

The response from the community has been very positive.

"We've had an outpouring of support from the community," Evans said. "I think it shows that there's a need for this. If you can come in and make something with your hands — there's something special about the permanence of it."

Chan and Evans give classes on ceramics that are open to the public, and they rent studio space to local artists who are interested in working with clay. Those who come to the clay studio usually have some experience with ceramics, but for many it is their first foray into the field.

Evans enjoys watching their students grow.

"When someone comes in here, with very little or no experience in clay, and they leave here loving it, actively pursuing it, that warms the cockles of my heart."

Chan laughed at this heartfelt expression and said, "We don't necessarily think we're going to change everyone's lives, but we want to give them that opportunity to see where art can take you."

Working with clay

Working with clay is appealing for a variety of reasons, Evans said.

"Some people like functional pottery, others want things created by people that they know. There's a transference going on there that I think is very powerful. We really want to facilitate a different way for people to come to clay and to come to art. Ultimately this is a place where we're just trying to have some fun and get to know ourselves better."

The gallery is not, Chan and Evans stressed, how they make money. "This place is why we try to make money elsewhere."

Chan teaches part time and works at the IU School of Fine Arts Gallery, while Evans does some construction and works on commissioned pieces.

"We have to keep the lights on," Evans said. "However, we want to make sure this place is accessible, not just some art studio for the elite."

To that end, the clay studio offers scholarships and uses a sliding scale for the pricing of their classes.

Both Chan and Evans are accomplished artists who sell their own art in locally owned shops and through Etsy, the international online marketplace of handcrafted goods.

They also rely upon the help of interns such as Paul Hayes. A 23-year-old Nashville native, Hayes first came to the clay studio a year ago and is in the middle of a year and a half internship there while taking online courses toward a general studies degree.

The kiln

"Paul has flowered over the past year," Chan said. He has also become quite adept at working with the Anagama kilns. His work, on display in the gallery at the studio, is representative of the kinds of effects wood firing can have on clay.

"I like the way it's a completely organic way of firing ceramic," Hayes said. "The kiln itself is in the shape of a flame. So when the flame moves through the kiln, you can pack it in ways that give you a cool design on your pots, like this one," he said holding up an ash glaze covered mug.

"During firing, the clay gets really sticky, and the carbon ash and smoke get trapped in the glaze, so you have a permanent record of what happened. You can literally see the path of the flame."

Operating the Anagama is arduous but rewarding.

"The whole process is a lot of work," Hayes said. "I split wood all year just to fire it once."

Volunteers fire the kiln for five consecutive days, working six-hour shifts and stoking the fire every three minutes.

"Most of the people that are into wood firing are pyros," Chan joked. "A lot of people are into the labor — it takes a lot of wood. An intense fire has to be kept alive for five days. So there's gathering and chopping and stacking the wood, and all night vigils stoking the kiln. There's a rhythm — you have to feed it — like a living, breathing being."

But the end result is a beautiful creation that has a much more raw and rugged look than clay fired in an electric kiln.

Hayes does not know where he'll go after his internship, but he feels that the clay studio helped him find his direction in

life.

Finding your way

The artists at Bloomington Clay Studio, 6900 E. Gross Lane, don't recommend the directions you may find from traditional sources. Instead, visit www.bloomingtonclaystudio.com, click "contact us," and follow those instructions. Call 812-340-8462 or 812-340-4831 for more.

You can also send an e-mail to bloomingtonclaystudio@gmail.com for more information about the clay studio.

SoFA show

Evans and Chan's IU School of Fine Arts Gallery exhibit, "The Fulcrum Lost its Feather," opens Tuesday at the gallery, 1201 E. Seventh St. There will be a reception 7-9 p.m. Friday.

The installation of ceramic/clay objects and other media was inspired by simple machines, the flight of birds and gospel music. According to SoFA: "At its heart, the project is a meditation on, song about, and child of interdependent relationships. Using a simple call-and-response approach, the two artists will use clay and each other as their starting point."

Find out more about the SoFA Gallery and the exhibit online at www.indiana.edu/~sofa.