

WORKING POTTER IAN CONNORS

As a young potter working through a recent setback in my career, I am facing a common struggle. I am constantly searching for creative paths to support myself financially so I can prioritize my artistic growth when I'm in the studio. Although I was fortunate enough to find a passion for pottery in my youth, I wonder how my work might have grown if I hadn't been as focused on making a sustainable living from clay early on.

After high school, I was introduced to a potter named Tony Winchester. I spent the summer with Tony and his wife, Mindy, in their studio and traveling to art fairs. They graciously welcomed me into their home and, for the first time, I witnessed the daily life of a studio potter. Until this point I had no idea what it took to make a living as an artist. Tony taught me all sorts of things

about making and selling work. At 18 years old, I got to see the joys and difficulties of making pottery as a full-time job. This was an extremely influential time and it deeply affected the path I have chosen. I spent most of my college summers working with Tony in some capacity, and he is still a close friend and mentor.

Learning About Balance

While I was studying at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I naively thought I would be able to graduate and immediately support myself making pottery. After graduation, I went on to do a residency at Taos Clay in El Prado, New Mexico, and tried to survive on my stipend, teaching, and sales alone. I quickly realized that without another source of income or compromising the





3

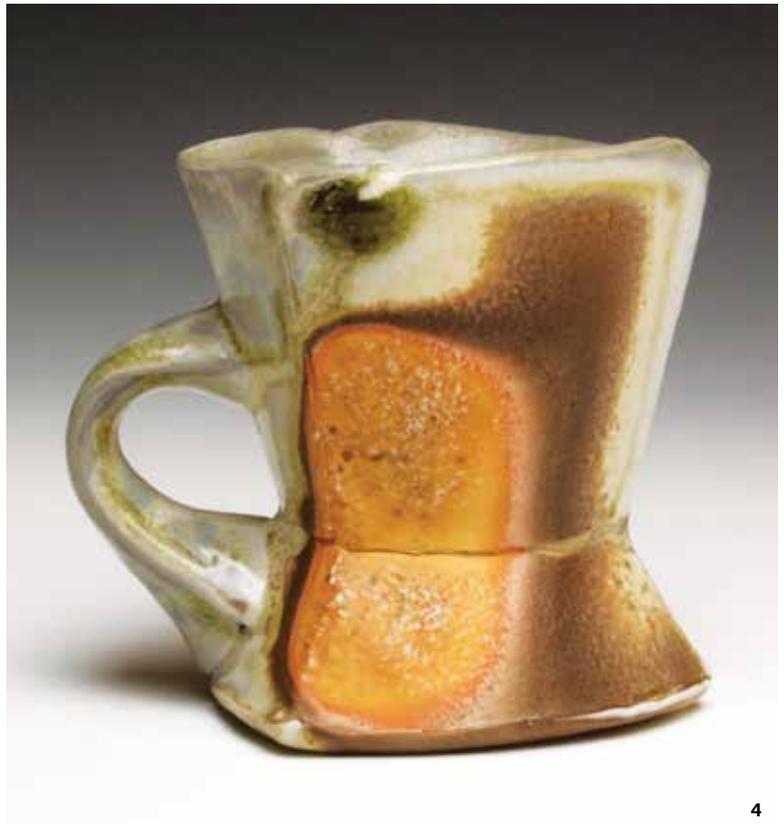
1 Ian Connors in the studio. Photo: Cody Hilleboe. 2 Vase, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, 2017. 3 Cream and sugar set, 9 in. (23 cm) in diameter, 2017. 4 Mug, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, 2016. All pieces: porcelain, wood fired to cone 10.

quality of the work to make it more affordable, I would be unable to support myself right away making pots. Initially, I was concerned that working part-time jobs away from the studio would push me further from my goals. In practice, these outside jobs have actually taken a lot of stress out of my studio, allowing me to slow down and focus on the quality of my work. I have been able to protect my time in the studio from the influence of sales and the pressure to make what sells.

This idea was encouraged while I was an apprentice with Simon Levin at Mill Creek Pottery, after my residency at Taos Clay. During that year and a half, I continued to sell work, but the fact that I wasn't dependent on that income alone gave me the freedom to take chances I hadn't allowed myself. Simon taught me how to make pots that have more character by helping me clarify the ideas that made my work personal. This encouragement to dive deeper into those ideas helped my pots become more genuine and cohesive. I started handbuilding and began developing the work I make now.

Professional Growth

My work grew exponentially toward the end of my apprenticeship as I continued to develop professionally.



4



5

While apprenticing with Simon, I had the opportunity to see how he interacted with galleries and customers. I was included in his home and online sales and played an active role in their promotion. That gave me visibility to Simon's audience and allowed me to learn by doing. I also had the opportunity to travel to conferences, workshops, and home sales. Assisting with those events allowed me to see lots of great art and get to know many of the artists on a personal level. Seeing how each of those artists found a different path to a successful studio practice was encouraging.

I market my work based on how involved my making process is. I avoid selling at craft fairs because I can't justify the overhead cost and energy associated with traveling and booth fees. Gallery sales are a great way to sell work without requiring much extra time from the artist, with the added benefit of being not only a source of income, but a promotional tool to share my work with a larger audience. I do at least one big online sale around the holidays and always try to keep a handful of pots available for purchase on my website. I try to do as many home sales and pottery tours as I can, because the overhead is low and meeting my customers is nourishing.

Setbacks and a Time for Change

Last May I had the first major setback of my career when I broke my back in a diving accident. I spent the next two months in an

upper body brace and decided to move out of the studio I had been renting. Along with the financial setbacks that came from the injury, I was unable to make work for about six months. I was extremely lucky that my parents were able to house me and help me through this time, but still it was very difficult both physically and mentally. It made me look at my life, career, and wellbeing with a new sense of urgency.

Before my injury, I was struggling with technical issues associated with my making process and high-temperature wood firings. I lost more than half of a firing (about 70 pots) right before a big deadline. I was struggling with the workload of preparing for an anagama firing and feeling isolated working alone. After spending this past summer working full time at a bike shop and getting physically back into shape, I went on a month-long road trip. I used that time to look for a studio out west, focus on improving my attitude, and celebrate my health. I made my way down the Rockies, skiing at a dozen resorts from Big Sky, Montana, to Taos, New Mexico.

Skiing and the outdoors have played a formative role in my identity, and I intend to follow those passions as I begin to put down roots. I am currently working full time at the Taos Ski Valley as I ease my way into rebuilding my studio practice. I am making work at Taos Clay until the end of the ski season, and plan to be making pots full time by the summer. I am re-tooling my making



6



7

process, experimenting with low-fire earthenware in an attempt to resolve some of the technical issues I faced previously, speed up my firing cycle, and give my body a break from splitting wood and loading large kilns.

I plan to continue wood firing a couple of times a year, but I am excited about the challenges of exploring a new firing range. My forms and surfaces were created with wood firing in mind, leaving me curious to see how I can use new techniques to my advantage, and how the work will change accordingly. I am working to come to terms with the financial instability of a career in clay while focusing on the beauty of this unconventional lifestyle. I feel extremely privileged to be a part of this passionate community and find strength in our continued survival as a vibrant profession.



CAREER SNAPSHOT

YEARS AS A PROFESSIONAL POTTER

4

NUMBER OF POTS MADE IN A YEAR

600–800

EDUCATION

2009 Summer Apprenticeship, Winchester Pottery, Persia, Iowa

2014 Bachelor of Fine Arts with a concentration in ceramics from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

2017 Apprenticeship with Simon Levin, Mill Creek Pottery, Gresham, Wisconsin

THE TIME IT TAKES

Making work (including firing): 80%

Promotions/Selling: 15%

Office/Bookkeeping: 5%

FAVORITE TOOL

industrial felt-covered work table

FAVORITE PROCESS

building with soft slabs from templates

WHERE IT GOES

Retail Stores: 10%

Galleries: 40%

Craft/Art Fairs: 0%

Studio/Home Sales: 30%

Online: 20%

WHERE TO SEE MORE

Lillstreet Gallery <https://lillstreetgallery.com>

Etsy www.etsy.com/shop/ianConnors

LEARN MORE

www.ianconnors.com

Instagram: [@ianconnorspottery](https://www.instagram.com/ianconnorspottery)

5 Tumbler set, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, 2016. 6 Creamer, 5 in. (13 cm) in diameter, 2017. 7 Side plate, 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter, 2017. All pieces: porcelain, wood fired to cone 10.