

Vince Pitelka, 2016

Thoughts on Productivity

A recent discussion on the Clayart Internet forum focused on the issue of productivity. This thread was generated by a post by an aspiring potter who referred to her pots as “babies,” and explained the steps taken to coax each one through the forming, drying, and firing process, refiring multiple times whenever a piece didn’t turn out just right, carefully repairing and refiring if there were any flaws. This initially brought responses from other aspiring potters equally obsessed with very specific expectations, tediously forcing each pot into submission while unknowingly suppressing the possibility of creative discovery and stylistic evolution. Fortunately, better sense prevailed, and among the best responses was the following from Earl Brunner, a potter and high-school teacher in Las Vegas, Nevada. It refers to making pots, but is really about just making work:

“You people need to make a whole lot more pots. Get them filling up the garage, piled up in the spare bedroom. Boxes of them in the closet and attic. Trip over the suckers getting out of bed. Lots and lots and LOTS of pots. If you are still thinking of them as babies you haven't delivered enough of them. Don't have a small family here. Think queen bee.”

At the NCECA conference several years ago, a panel discussion focused on teaching utilitarian clay in the academic setting. Several panelists including Chris Staley (Penn State University) often used the words “production” and “productivity.” When the floor was opened for questions, a young man stepped up to the microphone and indignantly said “It’s not about production. It’s about the quality and originality of the work. Production doesn’t have anything to do with it.” In response, Chris Staley said the following, and I paraphrase:

“On the contrary, quality and originality have everything to do with production. If you expect to become skilled and make good choices, you must make lots of work and then make more work and make more work. From quantity comes the willingness to take risks, and from risk-taking comes the best learning.”

A recent book on art-making describes an interesting case study. In an experiment at a major university conducted over time, students in some ceramics classes were told they’d be graded solely on the quality of work, regardless of quantity. Students in other classes were told they’d be graded solely on the quantity of work produced, by the pound, regardless of quality. Almost without exception, at final reviews the highest-quality, most original work came from the classes graded on quantity. By producing such a volume of work, the students experienced a dramatic increase in skill-level, and because they did not anticipate being graded on quality, they felt free to take risks and discovered exciting possibilities.

For those in school who have intentions of a studio career, productivity is not optional. Unless you develop superior production skills and an excellent work ethic as innate parts of the studio life while you are in school, it’s unrealistic to expect them to somehow materialize later on.