

Vince Pitelka – [www.vincepitelka.com](http://www.vincepitelka.com)

## **Advanced Clay Studio – Kilns and Firing Theory – Syllabus**

This syllabus includes important information of use throughout the semester. Review it often, and pay close attention to the scheduled assigned readings, assignment and final exam due dates, and the four reviews – first quarter, midterm, third quarter and final.

### ***Course Objectives - to build studio self-confidence and independence based on:***

---

- An improved sense of personal artistic concept and direction.
- An advanced working knowledge of ceramic form and decoration.
- A sound working knowledge of clay/glaze chemistry and kilns/firing theory.
- A familiarity with professional studio practice.
- An awareness of the evolution of ceramics through history worldwide, and the inherent ethnic and cultural diversity in ceramic form and decoration.

### ***Required and Recommended Texts***

---

- Pitelka, Vince. *Clay: A Studio Handbook*, American Ceramic Society 2016
- ***Recommended Text*** - Olson, Fred. *The Kiln Book*, Krause Publications, 2011

### ***Course Description***

---

This course involves a complex dynamic, combining students ranging from early intermediate to the most advanced. In order for this to work, expectations and requirements must be flexible, and it is up to each of you to work collaboratively with me in order to make the most of this opportunity. Our goals are to increase your command of the ceramic medium, to help you develop individual content and style in your work based on your own personal involvement with clay, and to ultimately get to a point where you are autonomous, self-sufficient, self-directed in the studio. Primary emphasis is hands-on studio work, building on the skills and knowledge you have accumulated in previous studio experience. We do not normally have regular studio demonstrations in this class, but I am happy to do demos when you request or when I recognize a need.

The secondary emphasis this semester is an exploration of different kinds of kilns and approaches to firing theory. Through the semester we will have a series of discussions exploring kiln history, design, construction, operation, maintenance, and the theory of firing. As a component of our investigation of kilns, you are expected to include your work in as many different kinds of firings as is practical, and in all cases to keep careful notes and kiln logs. We will coordinate group firings to facilitate this effort. There will be a take-home final exam covering the concepts and terminology of kilns and firing theory.

### ***Inventorying Your Knowledge and Skills***

---

It's important to achieve broad-based familiarity with ceramic materials and techniques, so as you proceed through the advanced studio series, periodically inventory the skills and techniques you have explored, and purposefully address any weaknesses. It's too easy for an emerging artist to settle into

the first thing they're good at without experiencing all the alternatives. Invariably the resulting work betrays a shallowness of method and material, and lacking familiarity with other directions in clay the artist often experiences studio burn-out.

Look over the skills inventory form, put it to good use, and don't be intimidated by it. You don't need to be expert in all areas, but if clay is your area of concentration, you should become acquainted with all of them during your BFA or certificate studies. The pursuit of knowledge is habit forming, and when you already know a little about something it is far easier to find out more later on. Also, you will be far more certain of your own stylistic direction if it arises from broad fluency in ceramic materials, process, and form. It is what you don't know that holds you back.

As you approach each of the assigned studio projects, don't just pursue it in terms of the technique, form, and surface decoration you most enjoy. Think about where you need to build your skills, and specifically plan your approach to the assignment in order to address your weaknesses.

### ***How Much Work Should You Do In This Class?***

---

The amount of work you do is up to you, but there is no substitute for practice. You have to make an enormous amount of work to become an autonomous, confident studio artist, and there are no shortcuts in this regard. From quantity production comes fluency in the media and the willingness to take risks, and from risk-taking comes the most productive learning.

Professional clay artists out there in the real world have to work very hard to earn a good living. If you have made the right choice and are genuinely dedicated, the studio involvement and commitment will come easy, and the independent studio lifestyle will be tremendously rewarding. But if working hard in the studio comes as a struggle here at the Craft Center, it is unrealistic to assume that the necessary motivation and self-discipline will magically materialize once you are out of school. Your future success in clay hinges on your level of dedication and accomplishment here.

### ***Assigned Studio Projects***

---

For each of project you will receive a handout outlining specific requirements, but the essence of each is explained below. I put a great deal of thought into the conceptual framework of these assignments in order to make them fully adaptable to serious potters and sculptors, and I am excited to see what comes of this.

#### ***First Quarter Project***

- A sculptural (functional or non-functional - all functional work is sculptural) set working off of the concepts represented in the work of Kimberlee Joy Roth and/or Christian Tonsgard in the January *Ceramics Monthly*. Must include at least ten individual parts that fit together into a unique and hopefully unexpected presentation arrangement on the table and/or the wall. The number of parts depends on the size and complexity of each part. The presentation arrangement must be at least four feet across if handbuilt and six feet if thrown unless you can come up with a good reason to make it smaller. Must be completed in greenware by first quarter review.

### ***Second Quarter Project***

- A series of sculptures or narrative vessels (quantity dependent on size) or a sculptural installation conceptually driven by something going on in the world that you find particularly disturbing. You can be as literal or abstract as you wish in the work itself, but you must be able to clearly articulate the concept verbally and in print. Submit a project proposal via email by Friday, February 13 (how appropriate). Must be glaze-fired by midsemester review, including work from first quarter review.

### ***Third Quarter Project***

- A set of at least six handbuilt or eight thrown covered vessels designed specifically to store things or materials that you've never seen covered vessel designed for. Feel free to make it very quirky. Exterior imagery must relate to what's stored inside, and access must be via some interesting and unusual design, rather than just a lift-off lid. The access might be a door, drawer, lid with wire hinge and closure, etc. Mixed media is encouraged. Submit a project proposal via email by Wednesday, March 4. Must be glaze-fired by third quarter review.

### ***Final Project***

- Two options:
  - A series of sculptures or sculptural vessels addressing the concepts of food and/or eating in an unusual or unexpected way. Number depends on size and complexity.
  - A series of utilitarian vessels, possibly in an integrated set, designed to serve some particular food or drink and/or to function for a particular special occasion. If utilitarian vessels, the function must be so specifically defined that the vessels are less appropriate or even inappropriate for any other foods or beverages and/or special occasions. Make it ambitious.

Submit a proposal. Work to be glaze-fired and all post-firing work completed by final review.

### ***Studio Time***

---

This class meets from 1:15 to 4:15. We will spend considerable in-class time on lecture/discussions, which will always begin just after 1:15 unless I schedule them otherwise. There will always be studio work time in every class period. Put it to good use, and be in your studio area working after every lecture or discussion, and for the duration of the class period. In addition, you are required to put in a minimum of six hours per week outside of class to make satisfactory progress on your work. Establish a practical and efficient work schedule and stick to it.

### ***Concept/Content and Narrative***

---

This may seem redundant after going through the assignment list above, but concept, content, and narrative are central whether you are doing figurative sculpture or functional pots. There needs to be some clear conceptual framework behind your work that steers your direction. You need to have a clear idea of what you are trying to say through your work. Unless your work "speaks" to the user/viewer with authority and originality it will be seen as ordinary. We tend to talk about content with work that is obviously narrative, but intent and content are important no matter what kind of work you are doing in art. Even the simplest pot has specific concept and/or intent behind it and conveys a lot of information. If utility is a primary concern, you must consider the degree to which your work visually communicates its function and invites use.

As you are searching for honest personal direction in your work, take chances. Make work that addresses personal commitments and concerns. Experiment with expressive surfaces to enhance the visual punch of your work. Don't ever settle for work that simply fulfills an assignment. Make it uniquely yours. Make work that represents you – your tastes, your likes and dislikes, your sense of craftsmanship and finish. Inevitably, your work says something about who you are – it tells people how you want them to think of you.

### ***Choice of Materials in Your Work***

---

Carefully select clays, slips, patinas, and glazes appropriate to practical utility, visual/tactile effect, and/or narrative intent. In making your work, try to anticipate the subsequent stages of surface decoration and plan accordingly. Over time, you will learn that certain decorating methods and materials work best on particular forms or claybodies, or in particular firing processes, and you will be able to plan your work with that in mind.

In addition to ceramic materials, use anything at all that is appropriate to your intent and narrative. Mixed media combinations open up a world of possibility in contemporary art and craft. Check out the mixed media information on the “syllabi-handouts” page of my website. Very few non-ceramic materials will survive the firing process, and shrinkage must be accommodated, but a wide variety of materials can be incorporated after firing.

### ***Access to Information Outside of Class***

---

If you are unsure of something or need information feel free to contact me at any reasonable time in or out of class. If I'm not here, call my cell. Remember that the resident artist serves as back-up faculty and is available to provide information and help you with your work.

Keep your text and sketchbook around at all times to consult when needed. My book has a very complete glossary of terms and a separate glossary of ceramic raw materials, so put them to good use. There is an extensive range of handouts available on my website under “Syllabi and Handouts.” The Internet offers a growing wealth of gallery, museum, and studio websites where you can explore images of historical and contemporary ceramics and gather useful information and recipes.

We have a very good little library containing a great collection of books and the major contemporary fine craft magazines. Spend time online and in the library regularly keeping track of what is going on in the clay world, and to bring that information into our class discussions. If you talk about your work and the work of others in the context of historical and contemporary clay, I will notice.

### ***The Journal/Sketchbook***

---

All art students diligently keep journals/notebooks in which they record and develop imagery, information and ideas, right? It would be so counterproductive not to do so. Any emerging artists will accomplish far more and become more certain of their intent and direction if they conscientiously keep journals/notebooks. For this class, it is a requirement. Purchase a good quality

artist's sketchbook (not lined paper), and use it to develop your ideas and record technical notes, clay and glaze recipes, etc. Adapt the sketchbook to your individual needs. Record the decorative effects, slips, glazes, etc. that you use on each piece, so that once the work is fired you can build on your successes. Make note of what works and what doesn't. Be your own best critic, and respond to your own self-criticism by addressing weaknesses in particular pieces or techniques. ***In class discussions and critiques you are required to know exactly what techniques, slips, and glazes you used on each finished piece.***

I will not collect the journals for grading, but I expect to see you using them on a day-to-day basis, and I reserve the right to ask to see them at any time. Again, don't approach this as a required part of the class. Instead, adapt the journal/sketchbook to your own use and let it become an important and permanent part of the way you work. You will profit greatly from that.

### ***Determining Your Grade***

---

Up to 80% of your grade depends on studio work you complete, on your proactive participation in individual and group kiln firings (keeping good kiln logs), and on your performance on the take-home final exam. Originality, productivity, and innovation will be generously rewarded. 20% depends on proactive participation in the studio dynamic, including general cooperation with other students, responsible kiln practices (sign-up, loading, firing, unloading, cleanup), general studio cleanup, and active contribution to group reviews.

### ***Individual and Group Reviews***

---

At midterm and finals we will schedule the primary individual and group reviews to evaluate and document your progress. At the 1/4 and 3/4 points we will have short group reviews to help you stay on schedule and ensure that each of you is aware of what everyone else is doing. You are required to participate actively in all reviews. Ask questions and make comments. If you do not participate, you diminish the effectiveness of someone else's review.

### ***Contacting You via Email***

---

I will regularly send class information via email. It is your responsibility to check your email frequently. Make sure the email address you provided is one you are checking. You are responsible for all information sent to you via email.

### ***Use of Electronic Devices During Class***

---

Much of what you learn is from each other, watching and listening. You are welcome to play music if you can all agree on what to listen to, but make sure that there is never more than one music source playing at any time in the classroom, and keep the volume at a reasonable level. I have a player that will connect to your phone or other MP3 unit. Do not use headphones during regular class hours, because they isolate you from the group.

No texting or cell phone usage during class. Do not read or reply to a text or answer your phone during class unless you are expecting a genuinely important call, and in that case leave the classroom before answering.

### ***Required and Recommended Tools and Supplies***

---

By now you all own a good range of ceramic tools, but you should continue to add to your collection every semester. There's a good assortment in the gallery, and an infinite variety available online. A variety of interesting and unusual tools imported from East Asia are available at websites like [www.chineseclayart.com](http://www.chineseclayart.com). To save money, consult "Making, Finding, Improvising Studio Tools and Equipment" in the text.

### ***Required Tools and Supplies***

---

- Text - *Clay: A Studio Handbook*
- Good sketchbook (not lined paper!!)
- Pocket folder for handouts
- Selection of band-loop trimming tools and/or steel-strap trimming tools - wire-loop tools are intended for sculpting wet clay
- Selection of sponges, including large poly sponges that can be cut or carved for glaze/slip stamps and other special applications
- Cut-off wires - if you are throwing off the hump, make a Japanese-style cut-off string
- Wooden knife and assortment of wooden modeling tools
- Needle tools
- Metal, wood, and rubber ribs
- Pieces of chamois if you are throwing
- Fettling knife and X-Acto knife (pencil-thin model with 1" tapered blade)
- Serrated metal ribs for scoring clay
- Calipers if you are throwing
- Good, ball-bearing rolling-pin if you are handbuilding
- Stanley "Surform Pocket Plane" and "Surform Shaver"
- At least six empty hair-tint bottles to use for trailing slips and glazes
- Selection of brushes for slips, patinas, and glazes - the bamboo handle long-bristled brushes are best, including the wide hakeme brushes
- 30-gallon trash can for storing clay - avoid the ones with the built-in wheels - they cannot take the weight of a full load of clay
- 5-gallon plastic buckets with lids for recycling clay
- Professional-quality twin-element respirator that fits your face and has replaceable filter elements.
- Supply of plastic sheeting for covering wares during drying - dry-cleaner bags work best.
- Collection of textured or patterned objects and materials for pressing into the clay or for making bisque stamps.
- Collection of patterned and/or textured bisque stamps and rollers - the more the better.
- 12" and 24" rulers

- Banding wheel/turntable - the inexpensive CSI turntables available from most ceramic suppliers are adequate, but if you can afford it, get a metal ball-bearing banding wheel such as a Shimpo, Laguna, or Bailey.
- Wood paddles

### ***Recommended Tools and Supplies***

---

- Compass for drawing circles
- Plastic or metal draftsman's square
- Stanley Surform round and half-round blades (just get the blades – they're available through amazon.com)
- 3/8" and 1/2" wood dowel for making throwing sticks, jug fingers, sponge sticks, modeling tools
- Supply of fairly heavy canvas for covering work surfaces and for rolling out slabs - best prices are at big fabric stores, or as painter's drop-cloth canvas at house paint stores
- Old towels, tee-shirts, or other soft absorbent rags
- Apron
- Several cheap or recycled bed sheets if you are doing large sculptural work - to cover your work under the plastic during drying so that condensation doesn't concentrate on small areas of the work.
- Clear plastic storage boxes with snap lids to use as portable damp boxes for small forms - these are very handy, and once you use them, you won't want to be without them.

### ***Course Schedule***

---

This schedule includes pertinent dates, lectures, reading assignments, and group reviews. Dates are approximate.

**First Week** - Introduction to class and discussion of first quarter project.

**Second Week** - Slide discussion - *Introduction to Kiln Types and General Firing Practice*.

**Third Week** - Slide discussion - *Firing Theory, Part One*. Discussion of second quarter project.

**Fourth Week** - ***First Quarter Review on Monday*** – first project due in greenware. ***Second quarter project proposal due by Friday***.

**Fifth Week** - Slide discussion - *Firing Theory, Part Two, Specialized Firing Processes*.

**Sixth Week** - Discussion of third quarter projects.

**Seventh Week** - Group and individual mid-semester reviews. ***Group Mid-Semester Review on Wednesday*** - First and second quarter projects glaze-fired. ***Third quarter project proposal due by Friday***.

**Eighth Week – Spring Break!**

**Ninth Week** - Slide discussion - *Fuel Kiln Design and Construction, Part One*.

**Tenth Week** - Work on third quarter projects. Discussion of final project.

**Eleventh Week** - Slide discussion - *Fuel Kiln Design and Construction, Part Two*. ***Final project proposal due by Wednesday.***

**Twelfth Week** - ***Third Quarter Review on Monday***. Third quarter projects glaze fired. Slide discussion - *Kiln History, Part One*. Hand out take-home exam on kilns and firing theory.

**Thirteenth Week** - Slide discussion - *Kiln History, Part Two*.

**Fourteenth Week** - Finish all studio projects and glaze-firing.

**Fifteenth Week** - Group reviews, individual reviews, studio cleanup. ***Group Final on Friday 9:00 to 4:15. Take-home exam due via email by following Monday.***