

## ***Maintaining Studio Equilibrium***

Vince Pitelka, 2021

Life is a balancing act, in so many ways. The chances of professional success as a studio artisan are improved by good studio design, pleasant surroundings, proper equipment, and an organized work schedule, but all of that is useless without the ability to maintain psychological and emotional well-being. Great art often arises from suffering and deprivation, but consistent long-term studio creativity does not. Smooth studio operation depends on a reasonable level of stability and regularity in working habits and scheduling. At the same time, your accomplishment as an artist over time depends on exploration, risk taking, and a variety of experience. Long-term success in the studio depends on the careful balance of a wide range of things, and neglecting any of them may seriously disrupt creative inspiration and studio productivity.

As professional artists we profit from stability and predictability in day-to-day studio life. However, the kind of organization and scheduling that serve us well can easily evolve into excessive regimentation or repetition. Stasis and stability devoid of experiential variety do not inspire artistic creativity. Ultimately this can be a serious trap for many studio artists, leading to dissatisfaction and burnout. A good measure of ongoing studio well-being is an awareness and appreciation of the passage of time, marked by variety of experience. If your studio schedule and productivity become so regular and predictable that the weeks, months, even years begin to blend together, then you are in trouble or headed for it.

No matter how good your work, if continued long enough without any sort of natural evolution and change, it will eventually become the norm, ordinary and uninspiring. Even if your business is financially successful and you are able to seek variety of experience outside the studio, this can still be a problem. Without ongoing evolution in your work, you will eventually saturate the marketplace with an unchanging product. Artistic growth requires a ready willingness to try new things and take risks in your work. The discovery of a successful style or product is no reason to stop experimenting with new ideas. In fact, exactly the opposite is true if we are to avoid studio burnout and/or market saturation.

Maintaining aesthetic evolution in our work demands that we observe lots of other artwork, past and present. Allocate the funds to subscribe to magazines and buy books, and take the time to read them and to get out to galleries and museums. These will be among the best investments you can make. See the section below on access to information.

In order to sustain a career as an artist/artisan, you must be fulfilled by your work and your studio life. We can't expect to be upbeat and inspired all the time, but our involvement in the studio must produce a level of personal reward or satisfaction. It is our responsibility to

maintain the necessary variety of experience to sustain that condition and to bring creative inspiration. This variety of experience usually involves a balance of things inside and outside the studio. At the most basic level it can be as simple as taking periodic breaks from the studio to work in the garden, go for a walk or bike ride, or read a book.

It is possible to maintain a very well organized, regimented professional studio life and still seek the variety of experience to keep us interested and inspired. Many studio artists/artisans religiously attend a few workshops every year to bring in a constant flow of new ideas and information. A workshop put on by a professional artist packs a great deal of learning and interpersonal experience into a short time period. Information flows from the presenter to the participants and among the participants, who often come from circumstances similar to yours.

When I first embarked on a professional studio career, I sought advice on how to proceed. One of the most valuable guidelines was "Choose your market carefully." Consider the implications of different studio strategies. If your primary intent is to make good money as an autonomous small business person, responding to market needs in steering your product development, you will likely sell your work wholesale through gift shows and craft shows. If, on the other hand, your dream is to make a decent living creating individual, one-of-a-kind sculpture or vessels, you may wish to deal directly with shops, galleries, and online sales venues that you manage. It is possible to strike a happy medium between these, but the essential thing is to plan your studio operation and your market to suit the lifestyle you want. Don't get stuck in a high-production low-return-per-item operation if you what you really want to do is sell one-of-a-kind work to galleries.

Life as an independent studio artist can be a solitary existence. Successful studio artists often seek and enjoy this solitude, but for most of us a certain amount of social interaction is absolutely necessary. If you feel this is lacking in your studio life, do not wait for it to come to you. Seek it out, and do so without hesitation. It may be that you should relocate your studio to a cooperative or to an area with other artists' studios close by. If there are a significant number of clay artists/artisans in your area, consider forming a regional guild, for both the social and practical benefits. In most cases, you will find that other studio artists feel a similar sense of isolation, and they will welcome this involvement. Such a group can arrange exhibitions and sales, organize quantity purchases of supplies and equipment, and even host workshops and other educational opportunities.

The Internet is a wonderful way to stay in touch with clay people all over the world. Participation in online discussion groups like Clayart or the many Facebook clay forums will inevitably put you in e-mail communication with other studio artists facing similar challenges in and out of the studio.

When possible, attend the NCECA conference. You will meet friends from around the country and the world, and you will be energized by all the information and exhibitions. If you participate in online clay discussion forums, one of the real treats of NCECA is meeting some of those people in person. When considering the cost of attending the conference, evaluate your own studio situation, and ask yourself whether you can afford not to attend.

### ***Resources for Students, Studio Artists, and Educators***

Success in any endeavor depends largely upon access to information. History is full of examples of people who ceaselessly beat their heads against the wall in solitary martyrdom, obsessively struggling to reach some elusive goal. Determination and focus are wonderful, as differentiated from bullheaded stubbornness. Failure to take advantage of every possible source of information is counterproductive, and being aware of what information is available is half the battle. In any field, when you know a little about something, it is far easier to approach it seriously and to find out more.

For most studio artists/artisans, access to information is most easily accommodated with a good personal library and the infinite resources of the Web. The range of online sources, both in terms of technical information and aesthetic inspiration is huge and ever-growing. Most major museums now have their collections accessible online, and almost all galleries put their exhibitions online. Those constitute a delightful and bottomless rabbit-hole.

There are few things that will pay for themselves as abundantly as good books. Don't skimp in this regard. Subscribe to major ceramics magazines, and get in the habit of buying a book every month or two. Over time, you will build up a library that will be there whenever you are hungry for ideas or need information in a pinch.

Keep a journal or file of information that interests you. Collect and catalog clay/glaze recipes and decorating techniques. Keep a file of significant information sources. When you come across a magazine article or a passage in a book that is especially useful or interesting, make note of it, and keep a card file or computer record of these citations.

As mentioned earlier, one of the best opportunities to gather a great deal of useful information in a short period of time is to attend the annual NCECA (National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts) conference. This is an extraordinary event, packed with panel discussions, lectures, demonstrations, ceramics exhibitions, and extensive displays by commercial manufacturers, suppliers, and nonprofit groups. Although originally an academic conference, large numbers of independent studio artists now attend and are becoming more active in the organization.