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VoyagePhoenix

Meet Sam Chung



Today we'd like to introduce you to Sam Chung.

Every artist has a unique story. Can you briefly walk us through yours?

I've always been interested in art making, ever since I was a child. I was lucky enough to have parents who were supportive of my interests. This was particularly true when I did my undergraduate studies at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. I stumbled through a brutal first year of college taking classes in Physics and Calculus, thinking I was supposed to become an engineer or architect. My mom convinced me to take an art class and cultivate a talent I already had. That's when I started to have fun in school and discovered a pursuit that felt truly meaningful.

I realized that I wanted my life to fit around art, versus trying to fit art around my life. I took my first ceramics class at that time, and that sent me in a direction exploring this medium further through summer school, workshops, and eventually graduate school at Arizona State University. After completing my MFA, I did a residency at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado, and then started teaching ceramics full-time at Northern Michigan University where I stayed for almost ten years. After that, I came back to the desert to teach at ASU. I never imagined that I would end up working in ceramics for my livelihood, but it has given me so many great things: travel, exhibitions, lectures/workshops, artist residencies, and an amazing community.

Please tell us about your art.

I make pots. It sounds simple but it's a niche that you understand once you get sucked into it. I always loved the interactive aspect of functional pottery. I originally wanted to be an architect, but pots had a

similar approach of balancing form, function and design, only on a smaller scale, so they seemed to fulfill that creative need. Clay is an amazingly versatile material and I am always amazed at how it has the ability to transform in its many stages. It starts from a formless blob of plastic material and can be transformed into a distinct, hardened object that can potentially survive for thousands of years. Working with clay is very process-heavy, and there is a lot to know. Things do not always go as planned so it has this barbaric way of laughing at your overconfidence...which is part of the draw. I keep going back for more punishment until I get what I want or learn how to work around it. Clay also teaches you a lot about being human, knowing how to let go of things or work with what you get.



My current work has moved away from purely functional vessels. I have been revisiting historical pottery forms from Korea to reference the roots of my own ancestry, but also think about them as contemporary objects. The cloud has been a primary motif in my work and I am using it as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of identity. It is stylized in both historical and contemporary representations as a way to talk about past and present, old and new. I cannot control how people interpret my work, so at the very least, I hope they can identify something familiar in a traditional pot, but also find curiosity in how that pot is interpreted as a new kind of object.



Do you have any advice for other artists? Any lessons you wished you learned earlier?

From my personal experience, you have to love what you do enough to sustain a career as an artist. Otherwise, there's nothing to keep you going when times are challenging. When it comes down to it, you have to be the one to take the initiative to move forward in your practice and career. You should be willing to work incredibly hard with no guarantees.

I would also say that it has been helpful for me to maintain a level-headed attitude and not get too caught up in the ups and downs that happen in the course of my career. Good things will happen, bad things will happen, but you always have to move forward. Also, the way that you move forward may be very different from the way

someone else moves forward, so be cautious of comparing yourself with others. Just be you. If there's a lesson I wish I had learned earlier, it would be to live with less fear. Fear kills the soul.

How or where can people see your work? How can people support your work?

I work with several galleries around the country on a regular basis: Harvey Meadows Gallery (Aspen, CO), Gallery IMA (Seattle, WA), Tansey Contemporary (Denver, CO) and CLAYAKAR (Iowa City, IA). I also show at many other galleries and art spaces for other "one-off" solo or group shows. I currently have work showing at Signature Gallery (Atlanta, GA) and Northern Clay Center (Minneapolis, MN). People can find my work through any of the venues above. I also occasionally have pop-up sales in my online shop for smaller items like cups.



Photo credits: Tim Bailey (in-studio), Gallery I | M | A (gallery display)