

Teaching Philosophy — Austin Sheppard

My teaching is grounded in the belief that sculpture is both a material and an intellectual practice—a space where technical skill, conceptual rigor, and personal experience intersect. In my courses, I emphasize material fluency, process, and critical inquiry, encouraging students to move confidently between traditional methods and experimental approaches. Whether teaching Sculpture I, Three-Dimensional Design, or Senior Studio, I guide students through foundational techniques such as welding, casting, woodworking, and mold-making while helping them understand how craft, form, and concept shape one another.

My goal as a teacher is to empower students to become independent, curious makers capable of articulating their ideas with clarity and intention. I design assignments that balance structure with flexibility, allowing students to explore materials in ways that respond to their interests, backgrounds, and developing artistic voices. Critique plays a central role in this process. I approach critique as a collaborative, empathetic practice—one grounded in shared inquiry, mutual respect, and accountable dialogue. Students learn not only to analyze their own decisions, but to consider diverse perspectives and ways of knowing.

My commitment to inclusive and accessible instruction is shaped by my early development at UNC–Pembroke, one of the most diverse universities in the Southeast. This experience taught me how profoundly cultural identity, family history, and community shape students' creative approaches. At Coker University, my Inclusive Excellence Fellowship allowed me to research equitable studio practices and develop affordable material strategies that reduce financial barriers. In my classes, I prioritize transparent safety training, flexible project pathways, and material approaches that welcome students with varying levels of prior experience. I work intentionally to create a studio environment where all students feel supported in taking risks, confronting uncertainty, and growing through process.

Interdisciplinarity is central to my pedagogy. In a recent Senior Studio course composed of both graphic design and studio art majors, students expanded design principles into sculptural and spatial work. Two students earned significant recognition for this interdisciplinary exploration: one received the Tri-State Sculptors Scholarship, and another earned an Emerging Artist Grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission. These outcomes reflect my belief that students thrive when encouraged to question categories,

cross boundaries, and pursue ambitious work grounded in both technique and critical thought.

My teaching is strengthened by my own ongoing studio practice and professional research. International residencies in Finland, Latvia, Scotland, Germany, and Costa Rica broaden the theoretical and cultural perspectives I bring into the classroom. As Director of the Cecelia Coker Bell Gallery, I mentor students through exhibition practices, curatorial strategies, and professional development—skills that complement their studio training and prepare them for future opportunities.

Ultimately, I aim to cultivate a studio environment where students develop the confidence, discipline, and curiosity necessary to sustain a lifelong creative practice. I see teaching as a reciprocal process: the studio is a shared learning space where technical instruction, material exploration, cultural awareness, and critical dialogue shape the growth of both student and teacher.