

**Candidate Statements on Teaching, Professional Performance,
Research/Scholarship/Creative Activity, and Service**

Promotion and Tenure Review 2020-2021 NAME: Gross, Sarah C

Statement of Teaching and Advising Philosophy and Goals

Classroom Teaching

I teach undergraduate ceramics classes from technical, conceptual, and historical perspectives. The technical side includes construction, firing, surface development, and glazing. We develop conceptual thinking through reflection on contemporary art, critique, and considering intention and audience response. I relish introducing students to a broad range of historical approaches to clay, emphasizing geographic and cultural diversity, and drawing connections that illuminate the influence of trade, industry, and other visual art mediums.

I teach all levels of undergraduate ceramics courses. My classes include nonmajors from across KU as well as advanced students in their fourth year of ceramic studies. At the graduate level I work with students in all areas in the Department of Visual Art.

I organize course material to synthesize the technical, conceptual, and historical. I introduce projects with image presentations of ceramic objects from historical and contemporary sources. It is important to show work by non-white contemporary artists and to familiarize students with ceramics made around the world. I bring students to the Spencer Museum of Art to study ceramics from their collection, and I bring examples from my personal collection. Projects have specific technical requirements and broad conceptual themes in order to maximize learning and leave room for a variety of explorations.

In skill-based courses such as Mold Making and Slip Casting, we begin with working with plaster and understanding how molds function before delving into historical context and contemporary art applications. Projects involve pouring solid blocks of plaster, carving 3-dimensional objects and producing complex molds. Once students develop foundational skills,

they engage with more complex concepts such as how functional serving dishes create an interactive environment. Students also conduct research on historical molded ceramics.

I participated in the Best Practices Institute, through the Center for Teaching Excellence, to create a new course, “History of Ceramics.” I developed a structure for a geographically and chronologically enormous subject by looking through humanistic contextual lenses such as “Empires and Export.” This helped me think about my teaching holistically, and I began developing new rubrics for projects in all my courses.

Throughout the semester I maintain rigorous and open dialog with my students. I invite feedback on projects and learning experiences throughout the term. I listen for enthusiasm during demonstrations, presentations, work sessions, and critiques. As a result, I have adjusted my curriculum by adding projects and modifying other assignments.

Undergraduate Advising

Within advising, I work with students over successive semesters, thus enabling me to build relationships and see their strengths evolve. In this way I help students envision potential courses or avenues for growth. With advanced students I encourage group activities outside of the classroom for them to exchange knowledge.

I consider KU course offerings, conferences, study abroad experiences, and internships as paths for their well-rounded development. For example, I directed one student who was interested in East Asian ceramics to the Korean Ceramics course in the Art History department, and I suggested a student struggling with methods of displaying their artwork enroll in a sculpture class to further consider space in their work. I have directed students drawn to a particular artist or technique to summer ceramics workshops. For instance, I advised a double major in Art and Ecology who is captivated by woodfiring to intern at a California ceramics studio. He learned a new style of firing while navigating the ecological demands of a wildfire-prone region.

I emphasize initiative and professionalism. I point out funding inside and outside the university and encourage their ambition. I provide a protocol for requesting letters of recommendation so students may avoid common pitfalls and demonstrate respect. Experience and practice make

writing a cover letter, communicating with recommenders, and preparing for an interview easier, so I insert these activities wherever possible. I identify with many of my students who are apprehensive about pursuing a career after college. I cite artist friends and colleagues who have taken varying paths, often putting my students in touch with these professionals.

In March of 2018, I moderated a panel “Without a Map: Staying in Clay,” at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, featuring three artists I respect and admire who took vastly different paths out of college. The panel offered racially and socioeconomically diverse perspectives. I based the moderator questions on conversations with my students. This is a clear illustration of the reciprocity I seek and the value I place in student experience and feedback.

Graduate Advising and Mentoring

The purpose of the MFA is to deepen one’s technical and conceptual understanding of art through rigorous studio practice, scholarly research, and critique. After graduate school, students follow different paths: some pursue an academic life, some work as studio artists, and many move between these worlds. I aim to help each student clarify their post-graduate goals during our three-year program. My role is to provide support, to challenge, and to foster independent inquiry, as they ultimately progress from my students to my peers.

I strive to build honest and open relationships with graduate students. Trust is paramount. Our conversations provide insight into their lives, sometimes revealing avenues of exploration taken for granted. For example, in a recent studio visit with a graduate student, she mentioned that she danced and played sports for her entire childhood and later coached children’s athletics. I raised the connection between her lifelong investment in physical activity and her use of the figure in her art. This led her to realize that performance art might be a vehicle for expression.

As students approach the end of their program, I share all professional strategies possible. I have practiced interviews, consulted on professional writing and application materials, and conferred on whether to focus on artist residencies or teaching positions. I delight in their successes.

I aim to prepare undergraduates and graduates alike to move through the art world outside of school. Reflective and independent art students become engaged and conscientious citizens,

ready to participate in their communities. I keep this at the forefront of my thoughts in all of my teaching activities.

Statement of Program of Research/Scholarship/Creative or Artistic Performance

(approximately 500-1000 words)

Focus

My creative research is an exploration of the contradiction between physical closeness and emotional distance. My sculpture and installations are manifestations of the experience of sharing space but not intimacy. I explore the various physical, cultural, and social barriers that I feel in daily life such as the peculiarity of being pressed against strangers on a crowded subway. My investigations are materialized in ceramic sculpture and installations that often imply the presence of the body. For instance, pillows will be stacked invitingly on the floor, but they have been pierced full of holes, revealing they are not solid, but hard, empty shells; a red carpet stretches across a room, but with a closer look, the nubby texture is shown to be fingertips, complete with individual finger nails, cast from my own hands.

Major Accomplishments And Significance

My goal is to lay a ground for interpersonal and cross-cultural understanding. I employ motifs inspired by sacred architecture, to create a sense of awe or contemplation. I use multiples and repetition to build pattern, scale, and complexity. This is a reference to the intricate geometries I admire in Islamic art which are intended to promote meditation and worship. In 2014 my efforts were recognized when my installation, "Skin," was purchased by the U.S. Department of State for the embassy in Sana'a, Yemen.

My large works change and evolve each time I install them because I respond to the site and space of each exhibition venue. In addition, every exhibition engages a group of local volunteers who help with the mammoth task of installation. These volunteers bring a piece of themselves to each work, deepening my ties with every community I exhibit in.

My installation, “Continental Drift,” consists of 1050 hexagonal bricks glazed in varying patterns of blue and white. It is a mildly disorienting installation, filling the room with sections of interlocking pattern and meandering footpaths. The patterns glazed onto the bricks refer to the journey of blue and white ceramics as they spread across the world through trade and industry. “Continental Drift” was installed in Lawrence University in Wisconsin, in 2016 in the Leedy Voulkos Art Center in Kansas City, and at the University of the Ozarks in Arkansas. In 2017, at the National Council on Education for the Ceramics Arts, I gave a presentation on the development and logistics of exhibiting “Continental Drift”.

Another large installation, “Consumption,” is a thirty-six-foot long red “carpet” composed of over 700 ceramic tiles, each encrusted with casts of my fingertips. From a distance the piece truly appears to be a velvety carpet, and it slowly reveals itself as the viewer approaches. A simultaneous celebration and criticism of celebrity-worshipping culture, this carpet is too fragile to walk on, yet compels viewers to touch it. This piece has been exhibited in four states, and was viewed by an estimated 5,000 attendees at the National Council on Education for the Ceramics Arts 2019 Annual Exhibition.

My creative practice has been deeply impacted by international exchanges and artist residencies. In 2015, I was invited to Foshan International Ceramics Week in Foshan, China. I lectured and worked alongside other Kansas City area artists and Foshan-based artists in a cultural and artistic exchange, culminating in a group of Chinese artists visiting KU and Kansas City the following spring. In 2016, I was invited to the University of Costa Rica, where I demonstrated my techniques and lectured at two UCR campuses. This was supported by the KU-UCR Faculty Research Fund. The piece I produced is now in the UCR art collection.

In 2017, I visited numerous architectural sites in Morocco and Spain on a research trip supported by the New Faculty General Research Fund. This resulted in a solo exhibition, “To Be Seen,” in the Living Arts Gallery in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In addition, I laid the groundwork for an artist residency in Morocco the following year. An unexpected element of the NFGRF travel was engaging with the story of the Jewish diaspora: numerous sites I visited had changed identities, from synagogue, to mosque, to church. This sense of concealed and layered heritage became the foundation of my next project.

In 2018, with the support of the General Research Fund, I completed two international artist residencies during my pre-tenure research leave. The first residency was at Green Olive Arts in Tetouan, Morocco. The second residency was at c.r.e.t.a. Rome in Rome, Italy. Both residencies were chosen because of their locations: geographically disparate cities with historic Jewish quarters. In Morocco I worked with members of Tetouan's famous artisan community. In Italy I used a locally manufactured red clay, alluding to architectural embellishment around Rome. These residencies resulted in two solo exhibitions, "Seeds" in Tetouan and "Making Way" in Rome, featuring sculptures that explored connections between absence and intimacy, and illuminated the tensions of permanence and impermanence.

Tying these residencies together, in winter of 2020, I mounted a new solo exhibition, supported by my second GRF award, "Trappings," in Ripon, Wisconsin. Signifiers of wealth and comfort were presented with a sinister air; a luxurious drapery rendered in pitted brick clay, floral arrangements bubbled over in acid green glaze. Conceptually, I focused on creating (and subverting) a sense of desire and "outsidership."

Goals for the Next Five Years

I will continue my exploration of architectural fragments and textiles rendered in clay with the creation of a new installation. The Ceramics area has recently procured equipment that make technological processes possible on an industrial scale. I will incorporate this equipment into my practice. I have developed a reputation for large scale modular ceramic installation within the national ceramics community and I plan to continue growing this reputation by showing my work in new locations across the country. As co-investigator for the 2019 Frontiers Arts + Medicine Trailblazer Award, and currently within the Health Humanities and Arts Research Collaborative, my interests in the body are crystallizing around definitions of health, which may be more pertinent now than at any other time in our lives.

Statement of Service to the Department/School or College/University/Profession

I believe that the often invisible labor of faculty service enhanced my education and continues to make my academic community richer and stronger. I consider this work a way of honoring my teachers, colleagues, and students, and of giving back to my field. At the departmental level, I

have served on numerous committees each year, dealing with curriculum, visiting artists, graduate reviews, and scholarships among other issues. In addition, I have been committed to student recruitment, leading a throwing workshop for high school students every year, attending three high school portfolio reviews, and presenting on our MFA Open House Faculty Panel in 2019. I am particularly proud of my service within the Ceramics area, where I have co-hosted over two dozen visiting artists, direct our social media, advise the Ceramics Club, and oversee the many student activities and fundraisers.

At the College level I have served twice on both the SOTA General Research Fund Review Committee and the Beinecke Scholarship Committee. My other service includes the College Academic Council and the Humanities Research Fellowship Committee.

At the University level I have participated in several Center for Teaching Excellence events, including the Celebration of Teaching Poster Session, a Teaching Demonstration and the Best Practices Institute. I have also served as a mentor in the Emerging Scholars Program, a two-time breakout session leader in the annual GTA Conference, and a steering committee member for the Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar.

My service to the Ceramics field is generally connected to the National Council of Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). I bring a group of KU students each year. During 2016 NCECA in Kansas City, I helped coordinate the preconference events in Lawrence with invited artists from New Zealand, Ireland, Mexico, China, and Costa Rica. One of the largest tasks was organizing a team of volunteer translators to assist the Chinese visiting artists for four days of events. I also designed the web page for all preconference events hosted by KU.

Another activity that is important to me, which is closely connected to my teaching, is hosting students in my home for potlucks, ceramics parties, and cup exchanges. This builds community and affords students the opportunity to not only see but use handmade ceramics in a domestic environment. My personal collection of pottery includes work from dozens of contemporary artists. I love to see students pore over my kitchen cupboards to pick the perfect mug or bowl to use. This experience ingrains the value of handmade objects in one's home, building a lifelong relationship with ceramics.

I have valued my service experiences for the opportunities I have had to get to know colleagues across many fields. Further, I have gained a deeper understanding of how the larger institution operates. This in turn has helped me think about how to contextualize my research in communications targeted outside of the arts, and has helped me consider my teaching within the scope of the larger organism of the university.