

WORKING POTTER

BETH BOLGLA

Like most of you who are reading this article, I walked into my first ceramics class, and well, that was it. But perhaps unlike many of you, I never saw myself living in the country in an old farm house with a barn for a studio, hauling clay in my pickup truck, taking long walks, and throwing hundreds of pots with my trusty dog at my side. Don't get me wrong, I have a profound love of nature and admire that solitary lifestyle, and I really believe that it's probably the best choice for anyone wanting to pursue a livelihood in ceramics.

However, I always dreamed about living and working in New York City, and being a part of the great diversity of people and individual expression there. As soon as I was able, I moved from Georgia to New York and never looked back. Living in New York for the past 30 years, and the last 6 years in Brooklyn, has been everything I imagined. I love tall concrete buildings as much as I love old trees. I love walking everywhere I need to go as much as I dislike driving in cars.

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RECIPE



Finding a Studio and Home

Still, it is challenging to be a ceramic artist here. Finding a studio that was somehow affordable and accessible where I could have even an electric kiln was no small feat, and having to do so several times was a nightmare. Lugging clay up flights of stairs or finding the building manager to open the gates and let the delivery truck get near the (hopefully working) freight elevator is a routine nightmare. The closest ceramic supplier is outside the city, requiring a car rental or steep delivery charges. And then there is the two-hour, round-trip daily subway commute. Though I love traveling by train, it is difficult to be so far away from my studio, especially during the drying and firing processes. It is not really possible to follow through on a creative impulse that occurs to me anywhere outside my studio. And though there are some great appreciators in the area, relative to other art forms there is little support for the ceramic arts from museums and galleries—and certainly not for functional pots.

In spite of these challenges and more, the city feels like home to me, and I have been determined to stay. So how have I been able to live here for all these years? Until recently, I have always had gigs to pay for my studio and help support my family. I worked for many years as a museum consultant either in exhibition design, or as a registrar, art handler, or model maker. I also worked for many years as a photo stylist, and taught in a number of schools, and still teach all day on Mondays. Although these jobs were at times interesting and even somewhat fulfilling, they were always a means to another end. I was never confused about that and often I made just enough to pay studio rent and expenses.

I am seriously committed to my studio practice, though I never think of myself as making a living as an artist, but rather as living the life of an artist. To me this means always showing up and doing whatever it takes to support the habit, except compromising where my process leads me. My studio is a sanctuary for me, and once I'm there I rarely invite visitors or leave, except to roll my cart of 5-gallon buckets down the hallway to change the water or clean up. It's a pain not having a sink, but I romanticize it by envisioning Japanese brushwork drawings of people carrying buckets, and I remind myself it's a small price to pay for the good fortune of being in the studio.

Opposite: Beth Bolgla in the studio, 2019. *Photo: Jack Hayes.*
1 Installation from the exhibition "Joy of Color," *Orange Bucket*, 24 in. (61 cm) in width, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2018. *Photo: Uffe Kjaer.* **2** Four cups, 2¾ in. (7 cm) in height, stoneware, 2018.
3 *Moon White Teapot*, 5¼ in. (13 cm) in height, Moon White glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2019. *Photo: Malcolm Varon.*



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Struggle and Pursuit

I am well aware of the struggle to balance making a living with pursuit of one's artistic ideas, and I somehow always come down on the side of following my ideas. The pressure to sell work seems to be in conflict with following an inner path; if you have to produce so many cups to pay rent, how can you take the time to explore making a really good handle, or really explore an idea fully?

When I pursue an idea, it can sometimes take years. I have been making two-handled vessels for over 40 years. In 2000, I was invited by the US State Department to travel to Syria and Saudi Arabia to work with women and students at the University of Damascus. While there, I found amazing two-handled black rubber containers holding all manner of items for sale in the markets. I made drawings and paintings of these containers, but never thought to make an actual object until I happened on some very dark clay. I have worked with this form for many years now and it continues to evolve, most recently during my preparations for a three-person exhibition in Denmark, in September 2018.

Finding Opportunities

Despite my focus on following ideas, no one likes selling pots more than me and it's a huge financial help when I do. I sell my work any way I can. I sell directly from my studio to individuals through word of mouth or from Instagram (a great tool in so



4 *Color Pages*, 10 in. (25½ cm) in height, stoneware, 2018. Photo: Uffe Kjaer. **5** *Red Cut-Out Bucket*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2018. Photo: Malcolm Varon. **6** *Green Landscape Square Vase*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, stoneware, 2018. Photo: Frieda Dean.

many ways), or as part of organized annual open-studio tours in Brooklyn. For several years I had a wholesale account with a shop in Brooklyn. I was a member of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce and participated in trade shows, including Brooklyn Designs and Brooklyn Eats. This led to widespread exposure, several commissions, and a very special collaboration with a baker and expert tea maker for teabowls and plates for a pop-up tea shop in Manhattan. I've been accepted to online and gallery exhibitions. I rarely participate in large local or regional crafts festivals (difficult to do without a car), but I have had good results participating in small select makers' markets.

After all these years though, I might be ready to take my own advice and move to the countryside; the French countryside actually. After attending the Third European Wood Fire Conference and the Grand Fuex 2018, in LaBorne, France, I have found nearby a perfect little *gîte* (small vacation house), just about the size of my Brooklyn apartment, with a room attached off the back for a studio. The area around LaBorne is a dream, quintessential pastoral landscape, with piles of wood stacked everywhere for the wood kilns in every other backyard. And most importantly, there is a community of potters who seem willing and anxious to share space and knowledge. I look forward to this new chapter in my life, and as the poet Mary Oliver says, "Things take the time they take . . ."



CAREER SNAPSHOT

YEARS AS A PROFESSIONAL POTTER

Full time for the last 14 years. Part time for 26 years prior while also working in painting and drawing.

NUMBER OF POTS MADE IN A YEAR

about 500

EDUCATION

MFA in Ceramics from Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia, 1978; also coursework for Masters in Art History, 1978–80.

THE TIME IT TAKES

Making the work including firing: 70%
 Promotion/selling: 25%
 Office/book keeping: 5% only when necessary (taxes, rent, utilities, etc.)

FAVORITE TOOL

new electric drill

FAVORITE PROCESS

throwing . . . at the moment

WHERE IT GOES

Retail Stores: 20%
 Galleries: 20%
 Craft/Art fairs: 20%
 Studio/Home Sales: 20%
 Online: 0% I recently created an online shop and hope to have success selling online.
 Other: 20% commissions or orders from patrons.
 In any given year or years I might sell mostly at small markets (1–3 most years), from my studio (usually as part of local studio tours), in stores (for several years, but not now), or through galleries.

WHERE TO SEE MORE

www.bethbolgla.com

LEARN MORE

Instagram: [@bethbolglastudio](https://www.instagram.com/bethbolglastudio)
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