

Ceramics

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Kevin Nguyen
Designs a Career
in Ceramics

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The Ceramic Realm of Kevin Nguyen

by Judy Seckler

The Xiem (pronounced “sim”) Clay Center is setback from the street, which makes its discovery all the more appealing for first-time visitors. Every inch of the 4500-square-foot space on Lake Street in Pasadena, California, with its 24 wheels and four state-of-the-art kilns, is spotless. The modern glass and stucco structure, with its angular architectural details, welcomes artists to dive in.

“The center is a dream place for me and it happened so fast. It’s almost beyond belief,” recalls Kevin Xiem Nguyen, the center’s founder.

“Black Bowl Series” to 9½ in. (24 cm) in height, thrown Black Mountain clay with porcelain slip inlay exterior and sprayed porcelain slip interior, commercial glaze, fired to Cone 5 in oxidation.

It’s a vision that got its start a little more than three years ago through the partnership of Nguyen, an Art Center College of Design graduate, and Brian Fees, a CFO of a software services firm. Fees, a collector of ceramics, met Nguyen selling his work at weekend craft shows like the Beverly Hills “Affair in the Garden,” where he was awarded “Best of Show” during the last four years. Nguyen was at a crossroads in his career as an industrial designer at the time. After following a friend to a ceramics class in Santa Monica, California, “an obsessive love of clay” took hold over him. One he thought he could parlay into a business and a new career. He approached Fees—who had a penchant for buying buildings, fixing them up and reselling them—with the idea of creating a new educational clay center and artistic community, which Nguyen could call home base. To make





A view of the Xiem gallery space, which features both emerging and well-known regional and national artists.

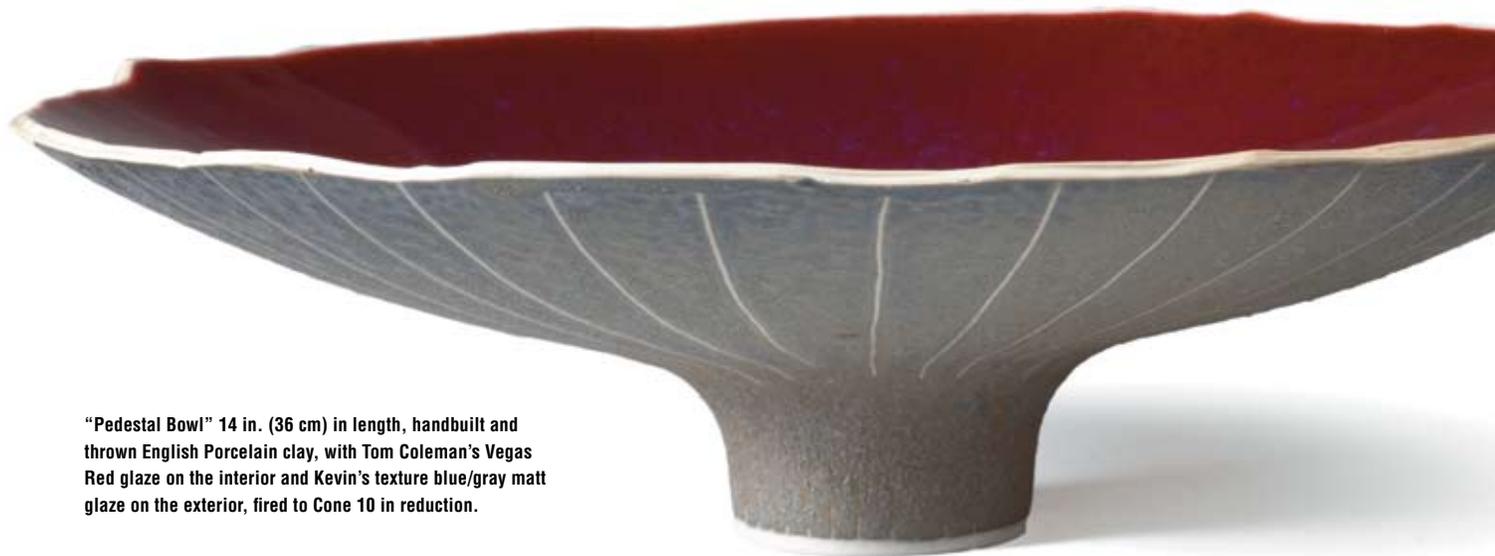
the concept work, the two men embarked on a journey, researching what it would take to create a thriving artistic community. On a vacation to five or six countries, among them Denmark, Sweden and Finland, they saw how others before them had established successful clay studios.

In the solitary world of ceramics, it's common for artists to work alone or with a spouse or partner. It's unusual to produce work based on a well-thought-out business plan that drives both the artist and the business forward, although it's a common model used in business circles. The 35-year-old Nguyen attributes his industrial design skills for propelling him in a new direction. Fees credits the profitability of the venture on a three-prong approach: different levels of monthly, quarterly and yearly memberships, a range of beginner, intermediate and advanced classes, as well as sales from Nguyen's work, which accounts for fifty percent of the center's revenue. "We've established a loyal clientele and the revenue generated is predictable from month to month," Fees explained. He also realized the need to buy property outright instead of leasing. He noticed in his research that several studios had run aground when they lost their leases and he wanted to avoid the same scenario. A frame store leases 1000 square feet of the building, which defrays overhead costs. The division of labor between the partners is what one would expect. Nguyen serves as chief clay artist, and as the center's graphic, product and furniture designer, producing T-shirts, packaging and handmade brushes that are sold at the center's retail store. The store also carries an impressive selection of ceramic tools. Additionally, Nguyen serves as the center's buyer, looking for ceramic gems to be sold alongside his work. Fees

pays the mortgage and the instructors. He handles all the finances and tracks the money. Another staff member, center director Suzette Munnik, handles class scheduling and curates the gallery shows that run four times a year. Junzo Mori serves as the center's lab technician, supervising the firings.

Fees, who had relocated to Atlanta, spent a year traveling back and forth on weekends to the West Coast to oversee construction. Meanwhile, Nguyen showed his work at additional craft shows, where his sales generated additional start-up money for the center. During the shows, Nguyen established a mailing list of 1000 clients. Invitations to the center's opening in October 2003 were generated from his list. "All have become customers," Nguyen said. Simultaneously, the center held its first exhibition, a combination of Nguyen's work and nearby faculty teachers, creating a list of potential teachers for the center.

It took eleven months of preparation before the center could open; a bit longer than Nguyen's original optimistic estimate of three months but the partners knew their vision wasn't going to happen overnight. At last, Nguyen had a studio to generate his ceramic art while providing a range of classes offered at various levels of expertise in wheel throwing, handbuilding, tile making, sculpture and glaze calculation. A premier studio membership allows members 24-hour access to the clay center. All of the membership levels allow patrons 4500 cubic inches of bisque and glaze firings per month. About 35 glazes are available to the members for their use. It's a hands-on environment where students can practice their skills and improve in the company of others.



"Pedestal Bowl" 14 in. (36 cm) in length, handbuilt and thrown English Porcelain clay, with Tom Coleman's Vegas Red glaze on the interior and Kevin's texture blue/gray matt glaze on the exterior, fired to Cone 10 in reduction.



Members work on the wheels in the Xiem studio. All levels of membership allow patrons 4500 cubic inches of bisque and glaze firing space per month, while a premier membership allows patrons 24-hour studio access.



The retail store sells an impressive selection of ceramic tools and handmade brushes, as well as the work of Nguyen and other ceramics artists.

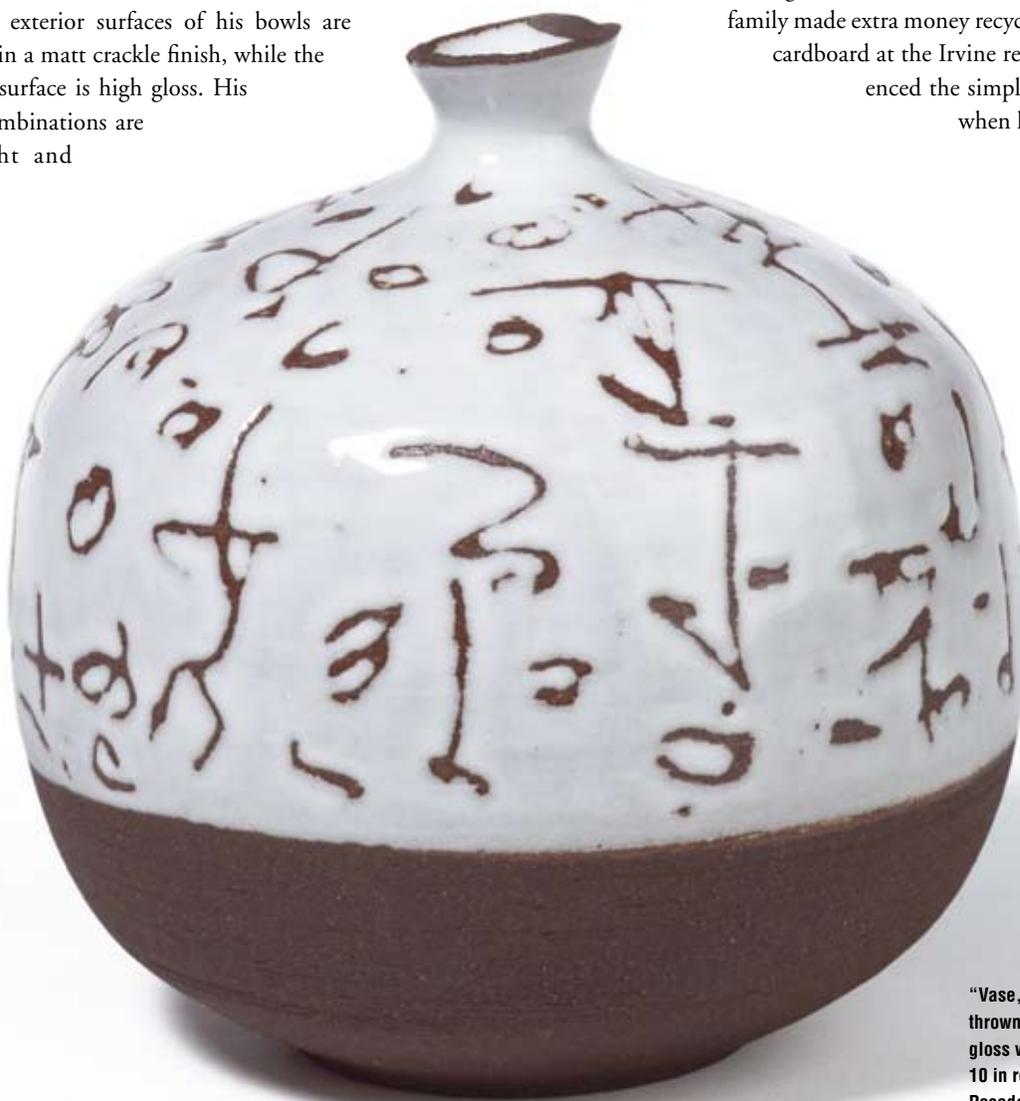
All this might not have been possible if Fees didn't have confidence in Nguyen's work. "I knew there was a commitment there. I was skeptical at first but then I attended some of his shows and saw there was a following for his work," Fees recalls. The skills culled from Nguyen's background as an industrial designer have played an integral part in his transition. He keeps up with design influences. Being able to take a concept to finished product with a budget, producing a beautiful object that also improves the quality of life and being immersed in Asian aesthetics all factor into his ceramic work. "He relates color to designer trends. He's very aware of contemporary colors," Munnik said. "He gets this from his training." In addition, the artist knows his market of 24–50 year olds.

Nguyen's ceramic work is a constantly evolving experiment with process and glazes. The common thread that runs through his current work is a passion for color and texture. In one style, crisp, contemporary lines telegraph his industrial design background. For these pieces, he uses wheel-thrown stoneware that is fired to Cone 10. The exterior surfaces of his bowls are covered in a matt crackle finish, while the interior surface is high gloss. His color combinations are so bright and

satisfying that, overall, his pieces seem to glow. Because of Nguyen's use of inlaid and sprayed porcelain slip, the inside surface has the look and feel of porcelain. Working in a second process, Nguyen makes wide- and thin-necked stoneware vases with contrasting textures. A major portion of the body is sanded to produce variations in the surface, giving the pieces an earthy persona. The primary texture of the work is interrupted by matt bas-relief patterns. Fired to Cone 10, the end result is a cross between a modern and Craftsman look. As he evolves, his expressive approach to texture is evident.

A lot has changed for the boy who started life in Ben Tre, a small Vietnamese village. In 1986, the then-14-year-old Nguyen, his parents and five siblings immigrated to Costa Mesa, California, seeking political asylum because his father had been a soldier with the anti-Communist government. He arrived in Southern California never having seen a modern refrigerator or stove. He had never watched TV or movies on a VCR.

His first task was to learn English and Spanish at Costa Mesa high school and weekends working at swap meets. His family made extra money recycling cans, newspapers and cardboard at the Irvine recycling center. He experienced the simple joys of his new country when he visited supermarkets to look at all the products



"Vase," 9 in. (23 cm) in height, thrown Black Mountain stoneware, gloss white glaze, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, by Kevin Nguyen, Pasadena, California.



Exterior view of the 4500-square-foot Xiem Clay Center. Through their research, Nguyen and Fees decided it would be best to buy the building outright, rather than lease. To help defray overhead costs, they lease 1000 square feet of the building to a frame store.

on the shelves and take advantage of the air conditioning. He studied math, engineering and physics at a nearby community college and Cal State Long Beach but soon became enamoured with industrial design. He left behind his academic career track, winning a scholarship to Art Center College of Design. After five years, his interest in industrial design took a back seat to ceramics. Since then, his ceramic work has garnered much attention in and around Pasadena. In 2006, Nguyen was chosen as one of six Pasadena Arts Council Gold Crown Honorees, celebrated as having significantly enhanced the cultural life of the city. It's all about taking small steps, according to the partners. "I've been involved in a lot of small businesses. It grows and you hire more people. Then you have to grow into that," said Fees. Aside from custom packaging for various tool kits, another project on the horizon is to design software to track cubic firing inches. "It will

only print a slip if you have a positive balance," Nguyen said. The plan is to launch the program by the year's end. Fees wants to offer it to universities without cost since firing is the most difficult and expensive part of the ceramic process. There's no telling where the center's growth will go, given Nguyen's ongoing ability to top himself. He promotes the Xiem Clay Center (www.xiemclaycenter.com), its retail store and gallery with verve.

And he retains a child's wonderment about it all. "When I look back, it's one of the most amazing journeys: not having been around a society with modern conveniences, it's almost a 180-degree turn-around," Nguyen marveled.

the author *A frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly, Judy Seckler lives in Los Angeles and writes about art and architecture.*