

Stepping Out
THROUGH THE
IN DOOR

by Sam Chung





Every artist faces doors of opportunity that open up when least expected, usually when you are fully absorbed in your work. When you realize that there is the potential to see a whole new world, should you step beyond that door? For most of us, the idea of moving our work in a new direction can be both terrifying and exhilarating. The thrill of the new is balanced by the inclination to be cautious. We're plagued by all those neurotic questions that are really just speaking to our egos: "What if I veer off into some obscure point of no return? What if I completely embarrass myself? What will my audience think? Will I even have an audience for this work?" Next to discovering a good idea in the first place, one of the hardest challenges is deciding to move beyond a good idea so it can evolve into something else. As my first ceramics professor Ron Gallas would always say, "Sammy, you don't know if you don't go!"

How often and when you decide to make a shift in your work seems to be based on personality, life experience, temperament, and threshold for change. Moving to a new city or traveling always seems to have a jarring effect on one's creative life; it always feels a bit strange trying to make your former, familiar work in a new, unfamiliar setting. What follows is an abbreviated narrative of how my work has developed over the years and the transitional moments that have pushed me in different directions.

I was lucky enough to receive a summer travel fellowship after my second year of graduate school, and traveled to India for seven weeks. I visited numerous historical sites, and became enamored with architecture from the Mughal Empire. Being around these buildings was like being transported to an exotic, otherworldly kingdom. I became interested in the tangential relationships between pottery and architecture and their shared goals of creating form and space for a utilitarian purpose. So, upon returning from India, I began to appropriate the design motifs in Mughal architecture as a way to revisit my memory of those places. I also shifted my process toward using template-based slab construction to reference the architecture. This work evolved for five to six years until I felt that the Indian references started to feel too distant and I was ready to move on from this idea.

I recognized this awareness for architecture via travel, and it became a way for me to expand my work in other directions. The ideas that fueled my pottery forms thereafter started from a more experiential source and were informed by the distinctive architecture



I observed in subsequent travel domestically and abroad. I explored pottery forms inspired by things ranging from historical kilns in China to barn sheds in Ireland, while continuing to develop my template-based slab construction process.

After moving to Arizona State University about seven years ago, I could feel the impulse to start a new body of work. It was also, quite frankly, very unsettling because while I felt it was time for a fresh start, I had no idea where I would take my work.

Most of my work up to this point was soda-fired. I experimented with various colored matte glazes and discovered a complexity to the colors that I could achieve by soda firing with 1–1½ pounds of soda ash. The glazes created a hazy atmosphere on the pots' surfaces that served as a nice backdrop to the dream-like reference to memory. While my forms changed over the years, my

1 *Cloud Bottle Couple*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, porcelain, glaze, china paint, 2014. 2 *Ewer*, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, soda-fired porcelain, 2001. 3 *Pitcher*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, soda-fired porcelain, 2006. 4 *Ewer*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, soda-fired porcelain, 2008. 5 Sam Chung working in the studio at the Archie Bray Foundation, 2014. Photo: Rachel Hicks.

firing process had remained the same. I think this speaks to the power and seduction of the ceramic process. This seems to be an inherent tendency when working with a material like ceramics. I had a natural desire to master soda-firing, but it also became an addicting default firing process without considering its relevance to new forms and ideas.

During my first year in Arizona, I participated in a collaborative project with five other potters organized by the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We were tasked with making work for each other to glaze. Not only was it fascinating to see the variety of results, but it also gave me an outside view of what my work could be. The graphic decal images that Andy Brayman created on the surfaces of my forms pushed me over the edge, and I knew that a new palette was in order.

At the time, I was still quite invested in soda-firing, but I felt like I had worn the same shirt for a dozen years and needed a wardrobe change. I altered my glaze palette toward strong, monochromatic colors and began to experiment with china painting. After spending a few hours absorbed in painting my first lines on a pot, I was hooked. China painting became an incredible new glazing option that allowed me to control color and line in a deliberate way. It was like having access to an analog version of Adobe Photoshop.

Drawing Connections

As artists, we often try to connect the dots to draw relationships between disparate ideas and visual information. Since my visit to India years ago, I have always loved the poetic line quality of Islamic calligraphy, and likewise, the bold and vibrant colors of street art or graffiti. I discovered a quality in my line work that was reminiscent of these script styles. After researching both forms of script, I found some uncanny similarities in their stylizations, as if they were siblings from different eras. I became interested in the new story this unlikely pairing of styles, one from the past one from the present, could tell. I explored this for a little less than a year before exhibiting the work for the first time in a small group show. Although nothing sold from the show, I forged ahead because I knew there was a lot more to explore and I continued developing this work for about two more years.



6



7

6–7 *Place/Setting*, installation shot, 12 ft (3.5 m) in length, porcelain, birch platform, at “Sam Chung; Place/Setting,” Jane Hartsook Gallery, Greenwich House Pottery, New York, New York, 2011. 8 *Teapot*, 9 in. (23 cm) in length, porcelain, glaze, china paint, 2009. 9 *Cloud Vase*, 13 in. (33 cm) in length, porcelain, glaze, china paint, 2010. 10 *Cloud Bottle*, 14 in. (35 cm) in length, porcelain, glaze, china paint, 2014.



8



9

Eventually, I stumbled upon a book of Korean cloud motifs. The first thing that struck me was how much the shapes resembled the forms I was making at the time. I also responded to the fact that these motifs had a connection to my own ethnic ancestry. So, I sketched many variations of these cloud forms, which then became the side profiles of templates for teapots. This set off a new direction for a number of other pots using my same slab-construction method.

At some point, I wanted to do more than simply transcribe these cloud motifs into templates for forms, so I decided to incorporate the motifs onto traditional Korean pottery forms. In this way, the motifs were further reinforced by their cultural source. I also let go of my familiar slab construction process, which actually felt liberating. I became reacquainted with the freedom of wheel throwing and altering these forms, which, like my china painting, was much more improvisational. The thrill of the unknown was definitely revitalizing as was working with forms that had more of a personal and historical connection.

Scaling Up

These *Cloud Bottles* became the inspiration for a large installation titled *Place/Setting* in 2011 at Greenwich House Pottery. The representation of clouds put my works into a cultural and geographical framework and it made me think of placing them in the context of a physical landscape. I imagined a dinner table on which I would pair my cloud bottles with organically contoured plates and bowls stacked within each other to reference topography. During this project, it became evident that I was inspired by both Korean and Scandinavian aesthetics, via the bottles and plate shapes respectively. I spent several months planning the layout with the individual pieces, doing a number of sketches, making prototypes using foam molds, and creating a full-scale, paper mock-up on my dining room floor. While it was a challenge to work at this large scale, working outside of my normal processes was refreshing.

Narrowing the Focus

I have stepped away from installation work, and am focusing back on traditional Korean bottle forms, particularly the rice-bale bottle forms from the Joseon Dynasty. These bottles came out of further research into traditional Korean forms. There is a quirkiness about these bottles



10

that I find endearing, as if the pots are being given a second life by being turned on their sides. It makes me think about my role as a maker and my responsibility to tell a new story with an existing language.

Taking Chances

When it comes to making transitions, you sometimes have to trust your gut. If something is calling you, answer the call. Without taking chances, you may lose a great new direction in your work.

We are all working along a continuum and aspects of our ideas and processes tend to bleed into one another. Transitions may be easy to see in retrospect, but your work is living, breathing, and evolving. Let it grow!

Check out the digital version of this issue at www.ceramicsmonthly.org to read an excerpt of an article on Sam Chung written by Glen R. Brown from our March 2003 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*.



SAM CHUNG

TIME LINE

		<p>Architecture/ Soda-fired vessels, Northern Michigan University, Associate Professor</p>			<p>Calligraphic/Graffiti, Arizona State University, Assistant Professor</p>
<p>1994–97</p>	<p>1998–07</p>	<p>2008</p>	<p>2009–11</p>	<p>2011–Present</p>	
			<p>“Exquisite Pots: Six Degrees of Collaboration,” Northern Clay Center</p>		<p>Cloud Series, Arizona State University, Associate Professor</p>
<p>Soda-fired vessels, Arizona State University, Graduate Student</p>					

CLOUD VASE by Sam Chung

My current work is wheel-thrown with porcelain, cut, altered, and assembled from parts. The cloud shapes are lightly sketched onto the leather-hard-clay surface with a pointed, pencil-like tool. This part is quite improvisational and one of the parts I enjoy most about the making process. Once the cloud contours are laid out, I cut into the wall of the pot along some of the contours and pull the cut portion of the clay wall away from the form so it projects away from the form (1). The resulting gap is filled with a slab piece that is trimmed until it fits the opening (2) and then attached (3).



1 After cutting into the wall of the pot, pull the cut portion of the clay wall away from the form. 2 Cut a slab piece to fill the gap. Score and slip both the pot and the slab. 3 Firmly press the fitted slab into place to fill the gap. 4 Use a soft clay coil to blend the seam between the pot and the slab. 5 Refine the edge of the pot with a metal rib once it reaches a firm leather-hard stage. 6 After the pot comes out of the cone 6 glaze firing, use a wax pencil to sketch lines for china painting. 7 Use a soft sable liner brush to brush on china paint. 8 Clean up the edges of the china paint lines with cut-up pieces of make-up sponges. 9 After the china painted lines are cleaned up, the piece is ready to fire to cone 017. Repeat the process for each application of china paint.

The seam against the pot is blended with a coil of soft clay (4). This process is repeated throughout the form until the projecting contours are distributed around the pot. After the pot reaches a firm leather-hard stage, I refine the edges with a metal rib (5).

Once the pot is bone dry, I bisque fire the work to cone 06 and then line the inside of the pot with a cone 10 clear glaze. I then do a high-fire bisque to cone 10 in a reduced atmosphere. Afterward, I spray on a cone 6 commercial clear glaze when the pot is still warm, which helps evaporate some

of the water from the glaze so it adheres to the surface, then I reload it into an electric kiln and fire to cone 6. This may sound backward but it resolved a crazing issue I was having with my glaze. It also allowed me to patch any small cracks in the clay that may have resulted during the cone 10 firing.

Once the piece comes out of the cone 6 glaze firing, it is ready for china painting. I sketch out what and where I want to paint onto the pot with a wax pencil (6). I usually start with my black line work first. I mix my black china paint with an oil medium until it is thin enough to brush on smoothly yet thick enough so the painted line is not translucent. The lines are painted with a soft sable liner brush (7). Once the line work is painted, I clean the edges with small cut-up pieces of make-up sponges (8). I then fire this black coat to get the layout established. My china paint firings usually take about 3–4 hours to reach cone 017 and I fire the pieces after each application of china paint. I apply solid blocks of color by dabbing on the china paint with a sponge. I usually need to apply between 2–4 coats of china paint to develop an opacity with color.

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