RANCHO CUCAMONGA: College ceramics program fires on all cylinders

Chaffey College students are learning technical skills and using multiple kilns.

BY STEPHEN WALL / STAFF WRITER
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Cassandra Jones remembers the first time she made a ceramics art piece.

"It was a big glob of ugly glaze," she said.

The 23-year-old has come a long way since her first ceramics class at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga.

She finished her associate degree and is now a dual major in art history and studio art at Cal State San Bernardino.

Jones returned to Chaffey to master her skills in a summer course taught by Professor Laura Haight, who is also a professional ceramics artist.

Chaffey has one of the most comprehensive ceramics programs in the area. Students learn seven firing techniques in six types of kilns -- gas, soda, electric, Raku, experimental and open pit.

"Our goal is to make it one of the premier programs in Southern California," said Jason Chezalier, the college's dean of visual and performing arts.

Jones sat at pottery wheel on a recent afternoon producing objects that will adorn her apartment. She made two bowls and five cups in recent days.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM
Name: Chaffey College ceramics
Address: 5885 Haven Ave., Rancho Cucamonga
Leader: Jason Chezalier, dean of visual and performing arts
Students: 140 students in fall and spring, 40 students in summer
Mission: Prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities and for careers in visual arts, education, museums, research, and related fields.
Details: Students learn seven firing techniques in six types of kilns; they also prepare pieces for display on campus
Information: 909-652-6066; http://www.chaffey.edu/art/
“When you’re using the wheel, you’re focused on what you’re doing and you’re not thinking about anything else,” said Jones, who lives in San Bernardino. “I feel like I’m in my own world.”

Jones hopes to get a graduate degree in art and eventually get a job in the field.

Industry experts say artists can make good money, and because they’re doing what they love, they tend to be happier in their careers.

College-educated workers with arts degrees earn an average of $49,000 a year, according to a 2015 report from Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce.

Ceramics is a “small but vibrant field,” said Josh Green, executive director of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts in Boulder, Colorado.

“As an art form, ceramics seems to be attaining new interest in leading art markets around the world,” Green said by phone.

Younger ceramic artists are using creative approaches to get their work to the market, including entering into partnerships with industry. They are also selling online, as well as at art fairs, self-staged exhibitions, self-formed cooperatives and at traditional galleries.

“There may be more people successfully making a living than there used to be,” Green said, “but it’s a very difficult way to make a living. You have to be very passionate and committed. The artists of today have to be very entrepreneurial.”

Haight is not only trying to prepare her students to get jobs in ceramics. She wants them to learn life skills such as time management and creative problem solving.

“An art program is really powerful in reinforcing everything else they’re learning,” Haight said.

Students work at their own pace, but they can’t procrastinate because something might go wrong in the process and they won’t have time to begin another piece.

“Things are going to blow up, so you have to have back up plans and be able to change concepts midstream,” Haight said.
Students discover teamwork is essential to success. For example, their pieces are fired together in a Raku kiln. They keep track of what each other is doing to ensure each piece has a hole and won’t blow up when it is fired in the 1,800-degree oven. They also check that each piece is glazed properly.

Failure is a part of learning, she said.

“When something goes wrong, I don’t want them to give up and drop it,” she said.

Working on different kilns allows students’ creativity to flourish, as they can produce a variety of colors and designs.

Students present plans for a final piece in a way that’s similar to how a professional artist submits a proposal for a public installation or private commission. Pieces are displayed in the campus museum at the end of the semester.

“It’s incredibly well done,” Chezalier said. “We’re giving them upper division experiences even though we’re a two-year college.”

About 40 students are taking ceramics courses in the summer, with an average of 140 students enrolled in the fall and spring.

While they get quicker feedback from their instructors and peers during summer classes, the abbreviated schedule means they must produce pieces constantly to meet the eight-week course deadline.

Erika Barrios, who earned a bachelor’s degree in gender and women’s studies at UC Berkeley, is taking a summer class to get better at ceramics. She’s among a handful of students building a portfolio to submit for admission to graduate programs next year.

“I know people think it’s easy,” said Barrios, 29, of Pomona. “But it takes a lot of practice to get skilled at it.”

Paul Garcia, 34, started taking classes at Chaffey in 2012 after working as a tile installer for six years. He works part time in the ceramics department as a laboratory technician, firing kilns, making glazes, repairing wheels and performing other tasks.

He plans to receive his associate degree and continue his studies next year at Cal State Long Beach. He hopes to have a career in ceramics.

“I love the process of creating,” Garcia said. “I can be here for five hours and forget to eat. I love going from something that’s moldable in your hands, to a lasting piece of art that’s functional.”

“Plus, I get to play to fire,” he added with a chuckle.

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