

# Susan Filley & Eric Serritella

Chapel Hill, North Carolina



## Just the Facts (Susan)

### Clay

porcelain

### Primary forming method

throwing and altering

### Primary firing temperature

cone 10–11 reduction

### Favorite surface treatment

clean lines and smooth surfaces

### Favorite tools

plaster bats and flexible metal ribs

## Just the Facts (Eric)

### Clay

I use about eight different stoneware bodies from Standard Ceramic Supply and Laguna Clay Company. I occasionally use a little bit of porcelain.

### Primary forming method

wheel throwing and handbuilding (slab, coil, and pinch)

### Primary firing temperature

cone 4–5 oxidation

### Favorite surface treatment

hand carving

### Favorite tools

Chinese fish-belly knife

## Studio

**Susan Filley:** I have a wonderful studio, which we built six years ago. It is a passive-solar 800-square-foot building with 9-foot ceilings and great light. It is just about 30 feet from my house and only 5 miles outside of Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The space is open, filled with light, and the passive solar design is always comfortable and easy to cool or heat. All my past studios were small, cramped, cold, and dark. With this big space, I have a room for photography, a gallery space, a kiln shed for my Geil kiln, and I built a water-bath spray booth (made from a physics lab fume hood discarded from University of North Carolina surplus). The view of the garden, seasons changing, and my dogs playing is really special.

When I built this studio, I was moving from two studios in South Carolina, my small half garage at my home and my studio business in Charleston, a gallery and 2000-square-foot studio that accommodated 15–20 renters in both private and shared spaces. So I was both upsizing and downsizing my studio space. I had initially thought I might have enough space to rent to someone, but with all my business equipment it was easy to fill or even overflow the entire space.

**Eric Serritella:** I currently rent a room in Susan Filley's studio (which she formerly used as her gallery space). I contacted her about opportunities for studio space around Chapel Hill prior to moving there from New York state. I knew that she was a prominent artist in the area, and thought she could provide some good information and leads. In the end, we decided to try out a space-sharing arrangement in her studio. My space is 10×15 feet, with a door that separates it from the rest of the studio. The rent is very affordable.



Susan helped me to furnish the space, get set up, and even offered space in a storage shed for keeping extra supplies. I love the fact that the studio is on a small farm with horses and dogs and lots of sunshine. The space is much smaller than the full studio I had in New York, but I find this conducive to staying organized. I keep only tools that I immediately need around me, and store the rest in Susan's shed.

Contrary to what I just said about liking the smaller space, it does present some challenges. I'm grateful that my kiln and clay are in the main studio area, yet I'm still often out of table space. I work on the floor with larger slabs until a sculpture is assembled and bring it up to a work table for final designing and sculpting.

Things get a bit cramped in my room from time to time when there are pieces in process, finished pieces drying, bisqued pieces waiting for oxides to be applied, and fired pieces waiting to be photographed. I've learned to move slowly near the crowded storage shelf as those flowing branches can easily grab a loose piece of clothing. Sometimes I'll temporarily store work in my kiln to minimize the risk of breakage. I also move finished work out and into a rented storage area while accumulating work for a show.

## Sharing Space

**SF:** When Eric called, I knew that it would be hard to carve out a space, but I also knew that it would be hard for him to find another place that would work.

My gallery room is a wonderful plus for me but I don't have regular customers coming in so I offered that room to Eric. I have a shed that I could use for all the pedestals that I own. I have to keep my work boxed in storage, which means it isn't as easy to keep track of.

In my first two years out of grad school I had a free studio offered to me in Baton Rouge. It was such a unique opportunity and that, combined with additional assistance from Joe Bova at Louisiana State University, really helped me get started in my career. I next moved to North Carolina and was offered a space in Marie Summers' studio and was able to use Tom Spleth's gas kiln for three years.

So, with so many generous friends helping me over the years, I felt I was able to help Eric get through his transition year. I went through a year of moving without a good studio to work in and I know how difficult it can be. I guess my feeling was that sometimes it is important to pass it forward.

There are now two electric kilns and more clay stored in the studio. I miss the extra space and having my work on display in the



former gallery space rather than all in storage, but Eric has made it work by trying to help out in many thoughtful ways. I knew this agreement was not going to be about the income of the studio rent, but instead a situation that would be of value based on the positive ways that we worked and helped each other out.

**SF and ES:** In addition to rent, Eric contributes toward the utilities. He brought his own kiln, so wear and tear on Susan's wasn't a concern. They compare past utility costs to current and Eric contributes based upon that difference. Eric's current work is best fired in oxidation, so he can easily track the extra electric costs since the studio has its own meter.

Susan is currently firing all of her work, including bisque, in her gas kiln, so coordinating kiln space isn't an issue. Eric's electric kiln is in Susan's space though, and since it has a loud downdraft vent, he schedules his computer-controlled firings primarily overnight or at times when Susan won't be in the studio.

As professionals, Susan and Eric both follow the unwritten rule, "If you lose it or break it, you replace it." So while each has his or her own tools and equipment, when there's a cause to share, each knows that any loss or damage will be taken care of. In fact, Eric recently paid to have an electric upgrade and disconnect box put in as the kiln plug and wall receptacle blew during a firing.

While Eric and Susan are quite similar and compatible interpersonally, it was agreed from the start that small talk wasn't necessary and that brief and courteous morning and evening salutations were

sufficient to minimize interruptions. What has really made the situation most manageable is the door between the work spaces. This allows both to work independently and come and go without interrupting each other. Most days Eric is in the studio before Susan. To respect her space, he plans to do things like loading the kiln or pulling from his clay supply in the main studio before she comes in or on the days when she's not around.

Susan often works in the evening, with longer glazing and firing days. It has evolved into a nice balance of schedules, with times when each has the studio alone, and others when both are there and can enjoy the benefits of some shared conversation.

To keep different clays from contaminating one another in a shared space, cleanliness is key. In order to avoid contamination of Susan's porcelain from Eric's multiple stoneware bodies, each has his or hers own tools, wheels, and equipment, and Eric cleans his hands before entering Susan's porcelain area. To play it safe, Eric chooses to avoid the shared sink and does his nightly tool cleaning outside using the hose. He keeps a bucket of water and sponge in his area for cleaning tabletops and tools during the day. Being separated by a door helps, and he also cleans his tools and the floor every night before leaving to avoid tracking anything into Susan's work area.

## Paying Dues (and Bills)

**SF:** I have a liberal arts degree and an MFA in ceramics from LSU. I feel I have also learned a lot through working on my own and



creating studio opportunities. I worked for three years with Tom Coleman helping him build Coleman Clay. Then I moved to South Carolina and built a business, Charleston ClayWorks, that included a ceramics gallery, studio spaces, and classes. In the process, I've learned a lot about business through these experiences, all of which is much needed for a career in clay.

In the 30-plus years that I have worked in clay, I have also raised my two great kids and survived the chaos of moving my family, my studio, and myself seven different times. (Have a ton of bricks, will travel.) My studio time has varied while I taught at a community college in Virginia, worked at Coleman Clay in Las Vegas, built ClayWorks in Charleston, and then became involved with the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). For 10 years, I was on the Board and served as President of NCECA, which was a great experience but definitely took a huge chunk of time away from the studio. Through it all, I have always found ways to continuously make pots by putting in long hours and loving what I do.

With two kids in college, I am also doing some work outside the studio right now. While the timing is complicated, it has helped get us through these past few years.

**ES:** Being an artist is a second career for me, after spending sixteen years as a marketing executive. I am self-taught with artist residencies in Taiwan in 2004 and 2006. I started as a production potter doing about 20 street shows a year and my work slowly evolved into the more sculptural pieces I'm doing now.

For the first 10 years I spent 70–80 hours a week working, with about 60–65 of them in the studio. When I shifted to sculptural pieces, I was able to gradually scale that back, though making work with clay is still my full-time employment. Since moving, I am spending about 40–45 hours a week in the studio and 5–10 on the business side. I'm trying to spend more time with my wife and kids in our new location.

## Mind

**SF:** I do most of my reading in the studio with audio books. This allows me to choose a wide variety of books and I love the sense of 'free' listening time. I read everything, from fiction to history to non-fiction.

I live my life with a sense of always feeling "project rich." I have so much I want to do and not enough time to ever do it all. This is true in my studio and there my greatest recharge is working on new pieces with the momentum of good ideas coming together. I also get creatively recharged in my garden, being with my family, and working for the arts, such as NCECA and local arts organizations. I just came home from donating some time and cup making to Penland School of Crafts, and it gave me new ideas for forms and studio processes.

Sharing a studio with another artist is also beneficial. On some days, we sit down over a cup of tea to chat. It's nice to have an extra set of hands or a different perspective from time to time. And nice



to talk shop when I unload a kiln or we hit a process question. We are also planning to do several workshops together.

**ES:** I read “Goodnight Moon” with the kids at bedtime. Otherwise I don’t get much time to read. I do listen to audio books in the studio, mostly mysteries and sometimes historical fiction. A good audio book can be meditative and for me as it’s great to get lost in a story.

Having the chance to recharge creatively is currently a big gap in my life. Since we have two young kids whom I want to spend time with and I spend so much time working, there’s not much “me” time left over. Flat-water kayaking is my best rejuvenation as it combines exercise, nature, and meditation.

Recognition for my work is also rejuvenating. I’m not embarrassed to say that it feels good to evoke an emotion from a viewer. That’s what art is all about, right? And I admit that it feels good to win an award or place an important piece.

## Marketing

**SF:** Over the years, I have sold my work through craft fairs, wholesale fairs, galleries, and directly to buyers. I like to sell pots at workshops, to students and/or collectors as I feel they better understand the work and the process. It is fun to talk to them and learn how or why they like the pots. However, my favorite marketing situation was when I owned my own gallery in South Carolina. I had my work, as well as that of other potters and a few studio members, on display. It was a pleasure to curate the space, talk about all the potters’ work, and

my pots sold well. It allowed me to make a wide variety of pots, new forms and glazes, and gave me time to look at them.

**ES:** I sell my work in a variety of ways: direct commissions from collectors represent 30–40% of sales, retail shows represent 40–50%, national group shows, exhibitions, and gallery representation represent 10–15% each. I keep snail-mail and email lists for promoting upcoming exhibitions and shows.

Because of the nature of my work, I only do two or three retail shows each year that target established collectors and curators for public collections.

My web site really comes into play as a support for direct commissions and credibility validation for collectors contemplating a purchase, but isn’t really directly responsible for creating the sale. Most people who visit my site have seen my work on exhibition and are interested in learning or seeing more. The web site is a resource to see credentials, past work, and to begin a dialog about creating a new piece for someone.

A real key for me is to have multiple streams of income. Sometimes retail sales are up and galleries are down. Or commissions are light but I’ll have work out in several national exhibitions. Having a variety of ways to generate income simultaneously has proven successful for me over the years.

Probably the biggest challenge to creating one-of-a-kind work is cash flow. Because it takes so long to create each piece—up to a month of carving for a large piece, plus drying and firing times—I



can only do a few retail shows or solo shows a year. It can take six months just to have enough work for one exhibition.

So while a good national retail show may provide nearly half of a full year's income in a single weekend, I might go without many sales during the time I'm accumulating the work to display. Fortunately, we are pretty financially aware and know that an expanded bank balance after a show might need to carry us for the next half of a year.

To counter cash flow challenges, I usually keep a backlog of commissioned work and I space out completing and delivering them. I try to finish at least one a month, even if it's modest in size, to help keep some money flowing in between bigger sales opportunities.

Certainly multiple income streams have the advantage of increasing the odds that at least one of the methods is "hot" during a certain time frame. When several are good simultaneously then there are lots of smiles around the house.

I try to participate annually in several national group exhibitions to which I'm either invited or to which I apply from those listed in *Ceramics Monthly*. The benefit is that I only have to supply one or two pieces and have the possibility of getting work into a new geographic location and in front of new prospects.

I have also donated work to art auction fund raisers in the past. Sometimes museums pay the artist a portion of the sale to help encourage larger works, and sometimes not. So I weigh the pros and cons. For example, I just had a piece accepted into the North Carolina Museum of Art's auction. Donations are eligible

for a prize that could cover some of the cost, but essentially I consider it a marketing expense. In return for the donation, I'll have work on display front of my new local market's best collectors. And I can attend the event *gratis*, so that creates an opportunity to network.

For me, patience is the key. It's not uncommon for a call or studio visit to come more than a year after someone has seen work someplace. It's just a matter of the timing unique to each collector.

Finally, I value building and maintaining relationships with my collectors. I find that collectors really embrace knowing an artist's history and being a part of their growth and I really enjoy getting to know them. I have many collectors who own multiple pieces of different styles or from different stages of my artistic evolution. They are also wonderful about exposing others to my work. One's best customer is often an existing customer.

## Most Important Lesson

SF: Working leads to better work.

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Susan Filley on Facebook.

ES: Always strive to make better work. Do the best you can from where you are at, and always keep looking for improvement. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there and take some risks.

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