

Justin Rothshank

Goshen, Indiana



Just the Facts

Clay

primarily earthenware, but also some stoneware and porcelain

Primary forming method

wheel throwing

Primary firing temperature

electric to cone 04, wood fired to cone 10

Favorite surface treatment

decals of any kind

Favorite tools

HP printer and a pair of scissors

Studio

I have a home studio. It's located in the basement of my three-story garage, which is built into a hill and situated in a wooded, rural area. My wife is also an artist, and her studio is in the house. The fact that both of us work at home makes managing childcare and workloads easier than if one of us worked offsite.

My studio opens up into the backyard/kilnyard. The attic of the garage is my office/photo area, and the main floor of the garage is storage for cars, boxes, bubble wrap, and all sorts of other things. The studio itself is 600 square feet. It feels small, but because of its size it seems to flow pretty well, since everything is nearly within arms reach! Additionally, all my work tables, ware carts, and glaze buckets are on wheels so I can move them easily. I have three potter's wheels in use regularly. One electric wheel is for standing to throw production work, another electric wheel is for sitting to throw large platters and large pots, and one treadle wheel is for trimming everything. I have two large work benches that are used for everything else, from attaching handles to glazing and applying decals, to storage. I also have in-floor (radiant) heat and solar panels generating electricity to sell back to our public service company and offset the electric bill.

The studio has slowly morphed into a good, workable space. When the weather is warm enough, about nine months a year, the two sets of double doors are open all day long and I can look out into the woods and the yard. I love this, and also that my studio is at home. I do, however, wish the studio was larger and could accommodate a small gallery space. This is the biggest downside, but it has also forced me to be efficient with equipment and production schedules.

I have an outdoor shed area that houses my electric kilns and another covered area for my wood kiln. The shed was added onto the workspace about three years ago, adding



about 300 square feet of covered, outdoor area that is good for storage of bisqueware and non-freezable items. I fire my electric kilns 3–6 times a week and having them outside has been fantastic. If the kilns were inside the studio, in the summer, the heat would be oppressive and in the winter, the smell/fumes would be detrimental. I need only to walk about 10 feet from my potter’s wheel/ware carts to get to the kilns. This is a good situation for production work. Even in the cold winter it’s been fine to fire the kilns regularly. I just put them on preheat to load them, and unload them while they’re still warm.

I have a 2–chamber wood kiln, with the rear chamber for soda. I fire it 3–4 times a year. I chose to build a large-ish kiln because of my interest in working with other regional clay artists. The wood kiln is a way for me to connect with other makers. I usually fill the rear chamber with my own work, and share most of the front chamber with 4–6 other artists who are interested in wood firing. Each firing can hold 300–500 pieces so there’s plenty of space to go around, and ample time for exchange of ideas and community building. This work differs considerably from my regular production work, and wood firing is a way for me to change up my production routines and keep a fresh perspective. The kiln is located about 40 feet from the back door of my studio, under a covered shed that is 20 feet wide and 50 feet long. Much of the

free space under this shed roof is used for wood storage. In the next two years, I hope to build a small gas-fired soda kiln in this area as well. Wood comes from wherever I can find it cheaply or free. Usually it’s a combination of downed trees from friends/neighbors, off cuts from a small Amish sawmill, and wood from our property.

Work is constantly in flux in the studio. Because of its small size, I need to finish and ship a body of work regularly to make room for new work to happen. Just this fall, I finished the attic of my garage into an office/storage/photo area. This has added another 300 square feet of “clean” space. I am able to print shipping labels, design and print decals, and manage online sales in this space instead of on my couch at 11 pm.

These two small additions to the original studio make my total work space about 1200 square feet spread over three floors. While at times this is not ideal, for the most part I feel like it’s an excellent setup.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

I studied ceramics and sculpture at Goshen College after having an extremely enthusiastic and supportive high school ceramics teacher. Upon graduation, I moved to Pittsburgh to spend a year as an apprentice for a cabinet maker/furniture designer. I did lots



of sanding, marquetry, and veneer work during this time, while also making pots when I could. I also connected with a group of other young artists and we formed a non-profit organization called the Union Project (www.unionproject.org). This non-profit became my job and my passion for nearly nine years. I spent all my spare time making pots in my basement and in community clay studios. I was able to connect with Dale Huffman at that time, and assist him in firing his wood kiln. Eventually, I started a community clay studio in the Union Project (CM Jan 2008, pg. 28–31). One could say that much of my training in ceramics has come from hands on learning, watching others, and reading books and magazines. I've attended workshops over the years as well, picking up advice and techniques wherever I can.

I spend about 40–50 hours a week in the studio. I try to work a consistent schedule, and make an effort not to work on Sunday, unless I'm traveling or quickly loading a kiln. I don't work any other job.

Body

I try to eat a healthy diet, mostly local organic foods. I try to sleep eight hours a night, though that's been difficult now that we have two boys under the age of five. I try to take a 20–40 minute walk five days a week. Regular exercise outside of walking has been a struggle for me, though it continues to be a goal to strive for. Our family's single biggest monthly expense is health insurance. We have to purchase our own, but this feels like an important investment in sustaining our lifestyle.

Mind

I am a big fan of historical nonfiction, mostly biographies. I've read the biographies of many of our presidents, including a very in depth look at the life of Lyndon Johnson by Robert Caro. I love to read about political systems, management processes, and general history. Really exciting stuff! I also read lots of books to my children.

I've found that I recharge creatively by watching what other artists are doing and making, and engaging them in conversation about it. I think this is one of my favorite reasons for wood firing, and the primary reason why I wanted my own wood kiln. But I also enjoy going to exhibitions, working collaboratively with other artists, or thinking about ways to engage others in the creative process.

One of the most important things for me as an artist is to continue to make work. I make lots of stuff, all the time. I try to salvage mistakes by experimenting with them more. Experimenting through making is an important part of the creative process for me.

Marketing

Much of my business is wholesale. I sell to galleries, museum shops, gift shops, and also do other bulk orders. This is 50% of my sales. I sell work online and do a yearly open house as part of the Michiana Pottery Tour, which account for around 25% of my sales. I consign work to half a dozen galleries and participate in



invitational and juried shows whenever I can. These sales makeup around 20% of the total. I teach workshops to round out the final 5%. I use social media and email marketing to promote my work. Not having a retail space, I have felt that it was important to photograph my work and put it online as soon as possible. Otherwise no one will see it. I have attended one trade show and one large retail show each year for the last five years. So marketing between these shows has been essential. My photo booth is always up in my studio and I shoot images with my iPhone and try to post the images regularly. This has served me well and allowed me to make sales while cultivating feedback about new work from a broad audience. It's also allowed me to feel some connection with a larger clay community while working in a rural setting.

Because much of my business is wholesale, and this method works well for me and my family, I've chosen wholesale markets to present my work. I've found a mix of markets through having an online presence, showing up at wholesale trade shows, and making connections in less traditional handmade markets. Utilizing my knowledge of ceramic decals has made it relatively simple to design work for a very focused audience, like fans of the band, The Steel Wheels, or patrons of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine for example.

I've also found that my market continues to grow as I find ways to continue making work on a regular basis. Customers and clients come and go, by my longevity in the field has allowed my work to get out in both the real world and the virtual world.

Some of my best wholesale customers have found me on Etsy or Facebook in recent years, but I'd never have been successful in those platforms without also finding customers through traditional galleries or craft shows.

One of my greatest successes online has been an annual, online only, April Fool's Day sale. It's been a way to introduce new people to my work, offer a great discount on some new work along with regular production pieces, and make some sales during a time that has been traditionally slow for me.

A regular frustration with my online experience is that I feel like it only portrays a portion of me and my work. Misconceptions and misunderstandings perpetuate very easily online, and I don't think there's a good option for addressing this.

Best Advice

I think the best piece of advice is to simply make lots of work. There's no replacement for time in the studio, making new things out of clay. Getting better happens through practice, ideas grow through repetition, and new work evolves over periods of time invested in making.

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