

STUDIO VISIT

Nicholas Bernard

Scottsdale, Arizona



Just the Facts

Clay

custom earthenware mixed by Laguna Clay

Primary forming method
throwing

Primary firing temperature

oxidation in a gas kiln to cone 03 and electric firing to cone 04

Favorite surface treatment

slip texture with layers of sprayed fritted colored slips and oxide washes

Favorite tools

small metal rib

Studio

I built my studio in 1989, behind my home in Scottsdale, having just shut my “production” company down after six up and down years. I jettisoned the employees, landlords, tax man, and the rest. The 1200-square-foot building is bright, airy, and perfect for one person who works seven days a week. After 23 years, it’s like your favorite pair of boots, broken in and super comfy.

The space is growing and used organically. The big table is used for display during studio shows, then pots move to shelving so I can drop a seamless backdrop and shoot pictures. If I need the table saw, same thing, it’s right there under the removable tabletop. The porch showroom didn’t exist until 2008, the back spray area didn’t exist until 2010. The throwing area is the only place that has been reasonably static since 1989. Even that has been upgraded with damp boxes and a wedging table.

The studio I have now is the result of a process of becoming more competent and more confident. The skills to design and execute what you see here has taken 30 years as a professional. Add school and the rest, and it’s close to 40 years. To pay for all of it means that the work needs to be viable, and it needs to sell every day nationally. As time progresses, you get to make more pots and make them better; to joyfully get up every day, run to the studio, continue to improve, and keep paying attention to every detail. It’s great to have the freedom, and after all this time, the skills and confidence to do exactly what I want.



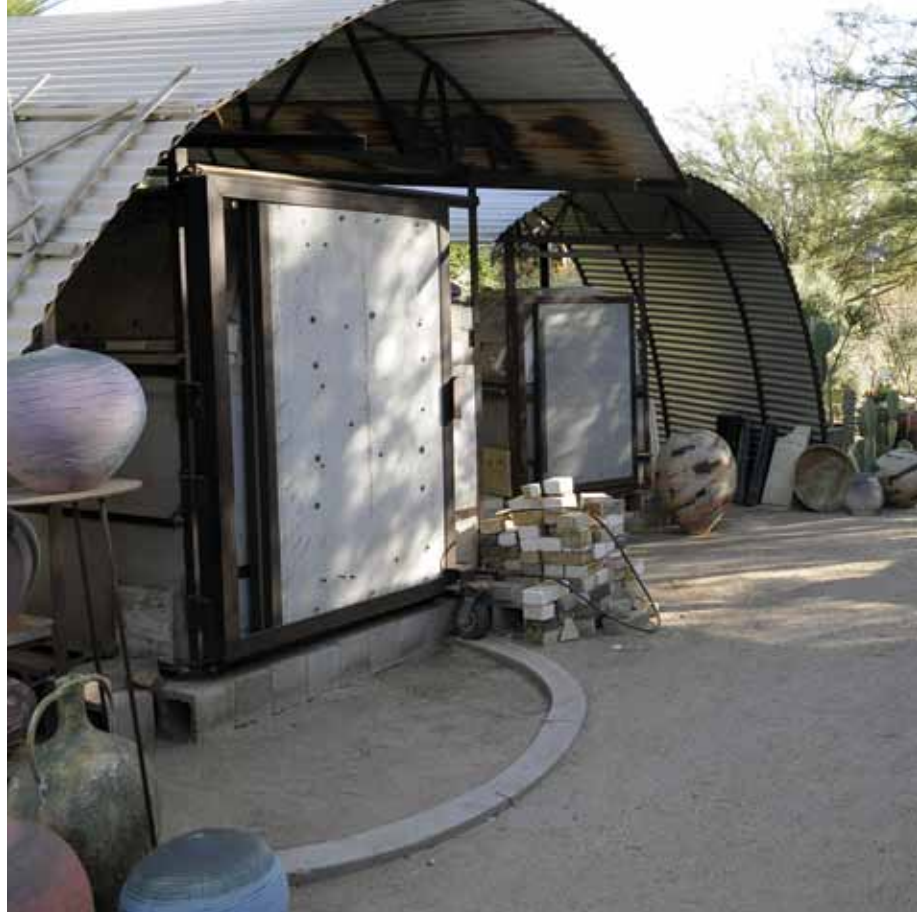
Paying Dues (and Bills)

As a teenager, I worked as an apprentice for two different potters on the East Coast. I then moved to Arizona and received a BFA from Arizona State University in 1981. I was an artist-in-residence for the Tempe Public Schools for two years, which gave me a free place to work right out of school. When that ended, I rented my first studio with another artist. From 1981–95 the pots were raku and saggar fired. I sold my personal and production-company work through wholesale shows and galleries until 1995. Then, I did a one-year stint managing a moving company, after that, five years in Chicago building and running another production pottery. During my time in Chicago, I became a reasonably competent woodworker/carpenter, as making my own pots didn't fit into the program. Those and other skills have been a huge help over the years in building new kilns, expanding the studio, and endless other projects that make the studio a destination for collectors, students, and the curious. Upon returning from Chicago in 2001, a new evolution began. In 2009, a grant from the Arizona Commission for the Arts was the catalyst for the development of this current body of work.

Mind

Traveling, when possible, gets me out of the rut that is so easy to dig. Learning to play guitar, building things, playing with other materials, and doing other creative stuff helps me to re-energize and revitalize, and always leads to the next step when the regular work is losing momentum. When things aren't fun, I walk away and wait until it is. Every aspect of the work deserves my full attention and respect.

When I started out, there was no Internet. We shot slides and looked at magazines, can you imagine? It's great to see virtually everything going on in our little ceramics world, and the rest of it, with a click of the mouse. In the office, I spend a lot of time looking at gallery exhibitions online, and YouTube videos of classic rock and roll on a big monitor at full volume. Satellite radio in the studio keeps me company with baseball games, audio books, and blues for 45 plus hours a week. Office work adds another 10 to 15 hours. I shoot and process all the pictures for my website, galleries, and clients. I also update the website as often as possible with new images, studio news, and the occasional online show. I make, handle, pack, ship, and sell the work myself. I have, however,



turned my yard work over to a trusty helper; this concession has spared my aging body, and improved my work beyond measure.

Body

Making pots and all of the related activities are truly hard on the body. I train 5–7 days a week with weights and also run on an elliptical machine. Being strong is the best way to avoid injury. Having health insurance has always been a priority. When cash flow and revenue was higher and more people depended on me, I also carried disability insurance. Even with a high deductible it's expensive, but being uninsured is not an option. Anything is better than nothing.

Marketing

Selling and marketing is so different than it used to be. Going to wholesale and retail events nationally used to be viable. I've stopped traveling all over the country and placed "parental controls" on ZAPP and JAS, the online clearing houses for show applications, limiting myself to just two applications a year. I'll do only two street fairs, if I get in, and focus the rest of my energy on consignment galleries and studio clientele. Juried and other national invitational shows provide anticipation and amusement, new entries for the resume, a little exposure and additional sales during the year. I use an online email service to keep commercial and private clients up to date with new work and studio events. The wholesale business for my kind of work and price points is pretty much gone. Ironically, when I started in 1981, all I did was consignment. Now, 40% of revenue comes from consignment galleries, 10% wholesale, 10% from shows, and 40% from the studio/website.

I'm very fortunate to be in a place that can support those kinds of retail numbers, it has however taken years of very concentrated effort to make it happen. The personal touch in the studio, one on one with customers in a beautiful environment has allowed me to continue to work every day. My marketing strategy is to make the best pots I can. A professional presentation either in the studio or online is essential; "build it, and they will come." Being honest, reliable, and drama free are very important too.

Tourists, locals, and people who just get lost all end up in the studio eventually. My little handmade sign at the end of the driveway has been very effective. I also do one publicized studio sale for the holidays, and I'm a host site for Arizona State University's Ceramic Research Center studio tour. The rest of the new visitors come from being invited to the studio at the two outside shows I do, and from people bringing their friends.

I always ask people to add their email address to my list wherever I am so they will get invitations to future events. These connections and contacts form the basis for the business that I have. My website and a fairly large web presence also widen the audience for my work.

Most Important Lesson

Unfortunately nothing is easy; there are constant disappointments. Fortunately, and most importantly, the work keeps growing and is more than challenging. Every day there are successes and little victories that keep me going back to the studio. Doing all the work, and paying attention to the details with patience is very satisfying.

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