

Emily Schroeder Willis

Chicago, Illinois



Just the Facts

Clay

Archie Bray cone 6 porcelain

Primary forming method
pinching

Primary firing temperature
cone 6 oxidation

Favorite surface treatment
wax resist

Favorite tools
my fingers and wood tools

Studio

I just relocated my studio in the Ravenswood neighborhood in Chicago. It's in a great part of the city, and there are a lot of other art studios in the building I moved into (originally the home of the Bull Dog Lock Company). There is a great artwalk in the neighborhood every fall that increases the visibility of the artists in the area. The studio, which is roughly 600 square feet in size, includes work spaces for three people, an electric kiln, and a small glaze kitchen with all of the ingredients we use to mix glazes and the tools needed to apply them. I just moved into the studio this summer and currently have two studio mates. About 130 square feet is my own personal dedicated work space with a wet table to work on and a dry table to sketch and draw on.

Since it's such a new space, it's hard to point out the things I love about it. But the first thing that jumps to mind is the windows! Having had several spaces with little to no light, it's great to have a space that has one entire wall of windows. Also, with this most recent move, I have decided to make the studio much more homey than my former spaces were. I actually bought some new furniture that fits the space, rather than rummaging for used stuff that will make do. I have to say, it's already made a big difference. It feels much more personal and a lot more enjoyable to be in.



Like most artists, I always wish the studio was closer to home to make it easy to pop in and out of. It's definitely not too far (only 4½ miles away), but in the city it can sometimes take 45 minutes to go that distance if there is a big event going on.

Training

I have my BFA in ceramics from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and my MFA is from the University of Colorado, Boulder. Additionally, I did a post-baccalaureate study for a semester at the Australian National University in Canberra, a summer residency as well as a two-year residency at the Archie Bray Foundation, and a six-week residency at the Zentrum für Keramik in Berlin, Germany. But honestly, I feel like the people who you work with at those places are really what train you the most. A place is just a location, people are what create the learning. With that said, I would have to say my training came from Mark Pharis, Margaret Bohls, Janet DeBoos,

Josh DeWeese, Kim Dickey, and Scott Chamberlin as well as the incredible artists who I worked with at those places such as Anne Kückelhaus, Janice Jakielski, Matt McConnell, Talice Lee, Alison Reintjes, Sandra Trujillo, Leanne McClurg, and Geof Wheeler.

My computer is at home, and I spend at least 5–10 hours a week there, working on things like my website, answering emails, doing research for events, preparing for workshops and presentations, as well as handling the day-to-day business stuff. In my actual working studio, I aim to have three dedicated studio days, so in an average week, I get about 20 hours of studio time. Depending on what else is going on, those hours can fluctuate.

Making it Work

I work anywhere from 20–38 hours a week at non-art jobs. I have been piecing together odd jobs and teaching for the past 10 years, but my studio pays for itself. When I can find teaching positions,



those are obviously great, but in Chicago, there aren't nearly as many ceramic programs as you might imagine, and, more specifically, schools that teach functional ceramics. This fall I am teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which I am really excited about.

Body

When I lived in Colorado, I would get outside a lot for hikes, runs, and, in the winter, snowshoeing. In Chicago it's pretty painstaking to get to a place to go hiking. In lieu of that, I pretty much bike anywhere and everywhere I go when there isn't snow on the ground. Most people think it's pretty funny because the city can be chaotic with the traffic, pedestrians, and crazy cabs, but I love it! It gets me out and keeps me active without sacrificing time in the studio, which is precious. Recently I have been taking a yoga class here and there, and that has helped some lower-back problems and shoulder tension I have developed through the years. Also, I am a big fan of acupuncture. I used to think it was odd and a little creepy, but now I would take an acupuncture treatment over a massage any day!

Currently, my insurance is covered through my husband's job, but I used to pay for a low-income, basic healthcare plan. For several years after my undergraduate degree, I didn't have health insurance and tried to live a risk-free life (read here: no extreme sports, skiing, biking, etc.) to help make me feel less on edge about a potential injury. Four days after I finally ponied up and got health

insurance, my appendix ruptured. Thankfully it was all covered by my basic plan. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had it; you can't plan for things like that. Since then, I have met several people who had to file for bankruptcy because they broke a leg, or something similar, and didn't have health insurance. Those situations are what make me stress the importance to people, especially young adults, of having health insurance of *any* kind.

Mind

I have a book of daily meditations by Frederick Buechner called *Listening to Your Life* that I try to read regularly. It's a good way to get yourself focused for the day. But honestly, I have a tough time reading books, mostly because I rarely have time to sit that long without having a project to work on. Malcolm Gladwell's book *What the Dog Saw* has been on my night stand for a year. I do listen to a lot of podcasts though. My absolute must haves are: *All Songs Considered*, *Wait! Wait! Don't Tell Me*, and lately I have been totally hooked on *99% Invisible*.

I have begun to realize I really need mini-residencies. After school and especially now being married to a non-artist, it's really hard to find dedicated studio time. I am trying to work it out that every six months I do something out of my studio/comfort zone. Whether that means visiting an artist friend for a week and making work in their studio or finding a short-term, one-month residency, I really need that time to just get out of my head and try something new. Also, I have been trying to get out at least once a month with



artist friends. It can be really tough because when studio time is so precious it's hard to sacrifice that time for a social hour, but I have come to realize that time can be just as productive.

Marketing

I think I have tried almost all of the following marketing methods: wholesale, retail, galleries, and online. I feel like each year things shift. Some years, I do really well in galleries, other years I do really well at selling out of my own studio during community events. I think you have to try everything and see what works. Also, the management in galleries is in flux a lot of times, and that can change how well you sell in a particular place.

Regarding selling work out of my own studio, Sarah Jaeger told me once to expect to live in a location ten years before I really started to turn a profit. That has taught me a lot about connecting to the people in my community and the important role that place plays.

The biggest game changer for marketing has been through the ceramics collective group that I am part of, Objective Clay. This year, I have sold the majority of my work through that group, which has been great. It's an online gallery in which the group has total control over how it is managed and curated. It's been a great endeavor!

I send out an email two to three times per year to people who sign up to be on my mailing list. It typically happens when something big happens, such as a studio move, finishing a residency, or to promote an exhibition of my work. I also use Instagram to connect people to my work. I find that much easier and more natural than Facebook.

The most important success I've had so far online was realizing I could successfully sell my work through my own website. It didn't really occur to me that I had my own audience until I had a show with an online-only gallery and all but one of the people who purchased work from the exhibition were from my own mailing list. That gave me the confidence to try and do more on my own.

The most disappointing or frustrating experiences online has been that it takes *time!* It takes a lot of time to manage an online sales gallery—more than I originally thought—but once you get a system down, it begins to get easier.

Most Important Lesson

Nothing is a dead end. All work leads somewhere, it just may not fully come to completion for many years, but don't second guess yourself. Push yourself to try new things and stop looking only at your peer artists for inspiration. Matthew Metz said something at a workshop I attended in undergraduate school that has stuck with me to this day. He said to not just look at contemporary artists you like, find out who they are looking at and research those primary sources. Find inspiration in the work that they find inspiring. Otherwise, we will just end up with everyone making very similar work.

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