

## Craftsman House studio encourages young potters

The kiln gods are watching.

Clay dragons, skulls and angels perch atop the gas kiln behind Craftsman House. Owner Jeff Schorr, 42, said the “kiln gods” watch over the firing process. Maybe they watch over the artists, too.

Craftsman House on 2955 Central Ave. isn’t just an art gallery and café. It’s also a pottery studio where new potters from around the U.S. work as resident artists. Most of them are recent graduates from ceramics programs who want experience in a studio, Schorr said. Residents work in the gallery and café in exchange for studio space.

When Jeff and Stephanie Schorr opened Craftsman House in 2005, Stephanie Schorr decided to share her studio space with young artists. She hopes the residency program will help young potters learn “the skills to go out into the art world and support themselves.”

Branan Mercer, 26, is one of two current residents. Two years ago, he packed up his red Ford truck and drove to Craftsman House from Alabama. He chose Craftsman House’s residency program because he could make pottery in the studio and sell it in the gallery.

Mercer discovered his passion for pottery during a ceramics class at Auburn University in Alabama. He can still remember the first thing he made – a simple bowl.

“They always say the first things you make [represent] what you’re going to make in the future,” Mercer said.

He still likes making simple, “functional” pottery like mugs, bowls and pots. Simple shapes highlight the glazes he applies. Mercer dips each piece of pottery in a glaze, then fires the pottery in a gas kiln that reaches 2200 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat and lack of oxygen inside the kiln turns the pieces various colors, depending on the glaze.

“I like the fire to ... show me what the piece is going to be,” Mercer said.

When he takes the pottery out of the kiln, he never knows what to expect.

“It can either be really great or really horrible,” he said. “But when it’s really great, it ... gives you chill bumps.”

Mercer also teaches at Creative Clay one day a week, teaching developmentally-disabled adults.

“Seeing them work is pretty inspirational because they’re very free about [their art],” he said. “They’re better than 50 percent of the artists out there that are trying to be professional artists.”

Mercer and his wife live in a studio apartment above Craftsman House, so he often makes pottery in the studio during the evenings. His black lab, Jackson, watches while Mercer and fellow resident Priya Thoresen work. Sometimes Jackson’s tail knocks over the pottery.

As he shapes pottery out of wet clay, Branan listens to country music. He never liked country music until he left Alabama. Now, the music helps him “feel closer to home.”

Thoresen, 24, said she doesn’t even hear the music when she gets intent on her work. While Mercer loves glazes, Thoresen loves shapes.

Thoresen started her residency in February. After graduating from Berea College in Kentucky with a degree in studio art, she taught English in Japan for a year. She worked during the week and made pottery every Saturday at a local studio. Sometimes she traveled to Japanese towns known for their pottery.

Today, she incorporates Japanese techniques into her pieces. The Japanese hold their dishes in their hands so Japanese potters craft dishes that feel good. Thoresen said she likes making round bowls that “you can curve your hands around.”

She wears a bright apron made from Japanese fabric while she works. Her hands and arms are splattered with wet clay and her blonde hair sticks to her forehead in the summer heat.

Both Thoresen and Mercer said new potters have to be patient. They made a lot of crooked pottery at the beginning of their careers.

“If you don’t keep trying you won’t get better at it,” Thoresen said.

“It’s frustrating when you first start because you rarely make anything that’s worth looking at,” Mercer said.

But eventually, the hard work pays off.

“I’ve been here for two years, and I’m just now getting to the point where I have a consistent body of work that I’m excited about,” Mercer said.

He sells his work in Craftsman House’s gallery, which displays craft artwork from national artists. Mercer has also sold his pottery at the Saturday Morning Market

and past Craftsman House events. He said it's always exciting when "someone likes [his work] so much that they're willing to pay for it."

Mercer has two weeks left of his residency. At the end of June, he and his wife will move to Fairhope, Ala., where he will manage a ceramics gallery called The Kiln.

"Long-term, I'd like to get my work in galleries throughout the country ... and raise a family," Mercer said. "I don't really plan on trying to be famous or anything, but I can't help but try to make the best work possible."