

## Metropolis | Fixations



Kevin Xiem Nguyen runs the Xiem Clay Center, where artists and students can "grow through practice, practice, practice."

## The Shape of Things to Come

In Pasadena, the Wheels Are Turning for Ceramics

Kevin Xiem Nguyen looks like the art student he once was, complete with clay-smudged shirt and glaze chips under his nails. But instead of throwing pots in some dim garage, he runs the Xiem Clay Center, a modern, light-washed space that opened last month in Pasadena. When he's not shaping his own graceful vessels out of porcelain or black mountain clay, he oversees the classes, workshops, shows and other activities offered by the center, which has 24 new wheels and three state-of-the-art kilns.

That a boy who began life in a Vietnamese village, fled in a boat to the Philippines and arrived in the U.S. never having watched TV, slept in a bed or seen a refrigerator could reach this point is almost beyond Nguyen's comprehension—on the rare occasions when he stops to think about it. Since 1986, when he landed in Orange County with his parents and five siblings, he has been going to school or working. After graduating from Costa Mesa High School, where his first job was learning English, he studied math, engineering and physics at Orange Coast College and Cal State Long Beach before discovering industrial design. He won a scholarship to Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, and when he finished in 1997, began drawing computer parts, cameras, furniture and graphics for industrial design firms.

One day, a colleague brought a pot that he had made in a ceramics class in Santa Monica. Its shape, glaze and practical, hand-made beauty moved Nguyen profoundly—enough to join his friend's class, take another and seek out a mentor, Richard McColl, who teaches ceramics at Santa Monica College. "I felt an instant, obsessive love for clay," Nguyen says, "and for the instant gratification of the process. Within minutes, a ceramic piece takes shape before your eyes. In product design, going from concept to production can take a year."

He studied, practiced, joined clay societies, went to conferences and entered competitions. His pieces, with their simple forms and striking glazes, began attracting collectors. Two of these, Pamela Simpson, a marketing expert, and Brian Fees, a software consulting company CFO, offered to back Nguyen in starting his own ceramics center on the east side of L.A., where such facilities are lacking. They bought an unfinished Pasadena building, modified and completed it, and on Oct. 11, Mayor Bill Bogaard cut the ribbon on the new 4,500-square-foot Xiem (pronounced "sim") Clay Center.

Artists and aspiring clay-makers can choose from among three membership levels: premier, which offers 24-hour access to all facilities for \$130 a month; regular, which permits Tuesday through Saturday use from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. for \$105; and firing, which provides access to glazes and kilns for \$90. Members also get a discount on classes taught by well-known ceramics instructors in such skills as wheel-throwing, tile-making, color and surface design and glaze calculation. The gallery space features monthly ceramics shows, and an adjoining store sells materials.

"My vision," Nguyen says in his musically accented English, "was for a place where artists and students can come anytime to work, share knowledge, inspire each other and grow through practice, practice, practice. More than listening to hours of lectures, you just get your hands on it and do it." —SUSAN HEEGER

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