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## A TALE OF TWO CULTURES

Kevin Xiem Nguyen's ceramic art represents harrowing escape from Vietnam to the U.S.

By Priscilla Fleming Vayda  
Correspondent

Ceramist Kevin Xiem Nguyen's latest body of work, "Ceramic Journey," is a reflection, in part, of his journey as a teenager from Vietnam to Southern California.

It also is a testament to his love of art, of ceramics, of good design.

In an exhibition of work opening Aug. 14 at Xiem Clay Center in Pasadena, Nguyen has used clay as an expression, he said, "of where I am coming from and what I am doing now, I have had this idea of doing a series reflecting on the journey, on the experience of growing up in Vietnam and in the United States."

In June 1986, the 14-year-old Nguyen escaped from Saigon along with his parents, three sisters and two brothers.

Fleeing by boat, the group of refugees and their captain headed for the Philippines, but during the journey they were lost at sea with no water or food. After 10 days, they finally reached a refugee camp but not everyone survived. Eight or 10 people, said Nguyen, died on the trip and more died on the island, including one brother.

They made their way to the United States. Once in Costa Mesa, where an older brother lived, Nguyen set about learning English and getting a high

### KEVIN XIEM NGUYEN: CERAMIC JOURNEY

Xiem Clay Center, 1563 N. Lake Ave., Pasadena  
10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, Aug. 14-Sept. 11  
Opening Reception 6-10 p.m. Aug. 14 (626) 794-5833

school education. From there it was on to Cal State Long Beach and then Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. He studied industrial design and began a career in that field before he fell under the spell of ceramics in early 2000.

"I learned to work from the wheel, how to throw a pot on the wheel," he said, "and the process from start to finish, where you can see the shape form before your eyes, the instant gratification, I very much enjoyed the process. I really enjoy design, but my passion is clay. It was incredible and I can't even describe how I felt."

So he began more serious study, this time in clay, moving on to a position as a teaching assistant at Santa Monica College. He began exhibiting his work and then, in 2003, opened the Xiem Clay Center in Pasadena.

It has been nonstop ceramics ever since.

Nguyen's work is very contemporary, featuring one-of-a-kind textured clay works, each bearing his special sense

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CERAMIST  
KEVIN XIEM NGUYEN



Ceramist Kevin Xiem Nguyen opened Xiem Clay Center, where an exhibit of his clay art opens on Aug. 14.

of design. Two connected pieces in the exhibition, entitled "The Survival," relate to his life in Vietnam and the family's escape from Saigon. Working with soldate clay, the artist fashioned the works of clay, literally carving them by hand. One symbolizes a house in Vietnam where he had been badly burned as a child, while the companion piece, an abstract work with a boat image etched on it, speaks of his sea journey and the family's escape from oppression.

"Both were dark periods in my life," he said.

Nguyen has created about 20 new pieces for this exhibition, including both wheel-thrown objects and hand-built pieces constructed with coils. Many of the works are about healing and about relationships, and the artist often incorporates found objects in his work, ranging from wood to metal and leather. One large bottle-shaped work is decorated with windows representing the opportunities in this country, he said. Another is a tall contemporary vase, called "Garden of Flowers."

"My signature," he said, "is a rough edge. It does not matter what the shape or form is, but the piece always has rough edges."

After a piece is built but still wet, Nguyen will often work in impressions, building on the texture of the work. Usually he uses no glaze, just a little color that forms during the oxidation process.

In addition to the larger pieces on exhibition, the artist is showing a number of small works created during a trip to Joshua Tree.

"I climbed into the mountains and wanted to express the wilderness," he said. "I found lots of rocks, and a friend had a bag of clay so I worked on capturing the texture of the rocks. I call the work 'The Experience,'" he said. "It doesn't matter where I go. I work on capturing the essence of the area with either drawings or clay. Whatever I have or find, I work in, toilet paper, newspaper, chalk, pen, whatever captures that moment. And every day, in some way, I work in design or drawing."