

Studio Visit | Elizabeth Robinson Wiley Rangely, Colorado



Just the Facts

Clay

Cone 6 Aspen Porcelain
from Mile Hi Ceramics

Primary forming method

Throwing

Favorite surface treatment

Laser-transfer collage over
cone 6 and cone 03 glazes

Primary firing method

Electric kiln: cone 6 and 03

Favorite tool

My red Mud Tools rib, and my new Peter Puggier pugmill. After 6 years of reclaiming my clay in buckets and a plaster slab, I'm so glad I can just pug out fresh clay from scrap and get to work!

studio

My studio is an old 500-square-foot stucco building on Main St. in Rangely, Colorado, a tiny, isolated town in the high desert country of Northwest Colorado. The building was a hair salon called “The Beauty Bar” for years before being bought, gutted, and abandoned. Before that it was a shoe repair shop. My husband and I wrote a very small check for the derelict building six years ago, then proceeded to write many more checks for the renovation, which took six months. When we initially considered buying the building, we naively thought I could slap a coat of paint on the walls and start making pots, but because it had been vacant for years, we learned that we would need to do a more complete renovation before it could be occupied. This necessitated savvy negotiations with the building inspector and meetings with the town council to agree on how close to code I would bring the building. At the time, I balked, impatient to get in the studio, but I have always been glad we took the time to fix it up; not only did I improve the property's value, but it feels good to work in a space that is mostly finished and that I had a hand in creating.

My favorite things about my studio are also some of my least favorites. I love its age and charm, but not so much its small size and radically uneven floors that require a wedge under every table to make it level. I like the Main Street location and the potential for any random person to walk through the door and talk about—and sometimes buy—pottery, though I don't always like being disturbed when I'm working or the increased cost



of having a separate commercial property. Most of all, I love that it's a mile away from my house, so when I'm at work, the time is all mine and not shared with kids or laundry, but I often wish it were right out the back door and I could run over to quickly load a kiln or cover pots.

paying dues (and bills)

I took my first ceramics course in college halfway through a degree in biology. By the time I graduated with a bachelors degree in botany and an art minor, I was hooked and decided to seek more training and a taste of the "real world." Looking for opportunities outside traditional academia, I spent the next six years traveling the country and working wherever I could find a place to make pots and learn. This included studio assistant jobs and residencies, workshops, a cross-country road trip to visit potters' studios (primarily in Minnesota), a job in a production studio, as well as stints as a special student at

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academic institutions. During this time, I gained a lot of technical skill, life experience, and a critical eye for form and surface.

Ready to push myself intellectually, I went to graduate school and received my MFA from Ohio University in 2002. From there I jumped at the chance to return to Colorado and took a job as Program Director at the Carbondale Clay Center. I left Carbondale to get married, moved to the remote region of Colorado where my husband teaches, and set out to make a go of life as a potter.

Prior to having children, I spent upwards of 50–60 hours a week in the studio, including nights working into the wee hours. Currently, with a six-month-old and a three-year-old who need routine, regular meals, and lots of time with mom, my studio hours are much more limited. I can usually arrange a work schedule that gets me into the studio about 20 hours a week, usually in 2–3 hour chunks, where I've learned to make each moment count. I do my bookkeeping, business communication, and

marketing from home. I miss the focus and exploration of long hours in the studio, but I believe the directness and efficiency I have been compelled to foster lately will always serve me well in my studio practice.

In addition to being self-employed as a studio potter, I have a home-based design business called Postcards for Artists where I primarily design promotional postcards and exhibition announcements for other artists and a few galleries. It is a great source of extra income; I can adjust my level of business to the flow of family life, and fit the work into the crevices of time I get at home. I also teach a beginning ceramics class at the local community college. There is no way to quantify the number of hours a week I work, as life and work are constantly flowing together.

body

Mostly we focus on eating very healthfully: all whole foods, very little processed or packaged foods, lots of veggies, whole grains and the like. To be perfectly honest, I don't look forward to exercise. I work out when I can—usually on the days when the recreation center offers baby sitting. My biggest obstacle to exercise right now is that if I can get an hour to myself, I will almost always go to the studio. So, for now, cliché as it sounds, a lot of my workouts involve chasing the three-year-old while lugging around the baby. We are incredibly fortunate to have health insurance through my husband's job. We have a limited income, and it takes a large chunk out of his monthly paycheck, but the co-pays are reasonable and the coverage has been very good.

mind

I just finished reading a great group of essays by Barbara Kingsolver called *High Tide in Tucson*; she uses language so beautifully to get across an idea. I'm a bookworm and love contemporary literature. I don't have much time to sit and read these days, and when I do, I'm usually reading about parenting, gardening, or something else very hands-on or practical. I always have an audio book going in the studio and on the two-hour drive to the grocery store.

I recharge by spending time outdoors in the sunshine and focusing on being still, by keeping in touch with other artists, and by going to the studio. We go to Denver twice a year, and I try to see an exhibition or go to the art museum while I'm there. The hardest thing about living in such a remote area is not being around art and other artists.

marketing

I have been very fortunate that I haven't had to do a lot of marketing to stay busy. For me, the best strategy initially was to spend my energy trying to make the best work possible and not be in a huge hurry to sell. Since finishing graduate school, I have made myself easy to find by maintaining a website and Facebook pages. The only frustrating thing about keeping up an online presence is the time it takes to stay current, as well as responding to people who make inquiries that you never hear back from. I also send e-newsletters and show announcements a few times a year and print postcards and distribute them. Although it might seem self-serving to say so, I think postcards are one of the most effective ways to market artwork. Emails are often unread and easily deleted and people surf





away from websites; postcards are tactile and, if beautiful, hang around on desktops, refrigerators, and studio walls for a long time, reminding people about the work.

Before having children, about 65% of my sales came from a weekly market in Aspen and out of my studio showroom, where I spent most of my time, as well as sales from a variety of exhibitions and galleries. Right now, I mainly sell my work through a few galleries and to customers who contact me directly to request or commission work. I am fortunate to work with some wonderful galleries that provide great exposure for my work, as well as sales. Because direct sales also make sense financially, I am finally setting up an Etsy store to sell pots online. The trouble is, I keep sending the work away instead of photographing it and keeping it on the shelf to sell. I will get better at this. I have not sought opportunities to wholesale work, though I have done a few orders when requested. Although shipping out work that is already sold is very sensible, I find I'm more comfortable with people purchasing work they've already seen and loved.

Currently, with my limited work schedule, I am not seeking new markets, though I welcome most opportunities to show and sell that arise. I'm not the best business person, since I prefer to make what I want and then find a way to sell it, rather than focusing on making work to sell. My work is very labor intensive, so although it's not cheap, profit margins aren't high. I cannot yet hold myself up as inspiration to anybody looking to make much money selling pottery, though I feel profoundly fortunate to be doing something I love.

most valuable lesson

Embrace and engage each stage of life as it comes; each offers opportunities for artistic as well as personal growth. I loved the time I spent as an obsessive, nomadic young potter, yearning to work hard and learn and see and do everything, where the focus was on discovery rather than sales. It was exhilarating and exhausting. Right now, as a busy mom, studio time is small and precious, important personally, but also necessary for the support of my family. It, too, is exhilarating and exhausting. I yearn for more time in the studio, free of distractions and the pressure of making money, but appreciate the consistency and maturity my work has gained through the discipline of being tied to a limited schedule, and show and sale obligations. I also cherish the blessings and responsibilities of parenthood. Older friends and mentors demonstrate to me that as time passes, and children grow, studio time will stretch longer, and the work, too, will continue to grow and change, sometimes in short spurts like a storm, sometimes like the gradual progression of a season.

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