

James Simon

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



Just the Facts

Clay
stoneware sculpture clay with lots of grog

Primary forming method
slab building

Primary firing temperature
mid-range electric and cone 5 gas

Favorite surface treatment
pressing decorative shapes into the clay

Favorite tools
butcher knife

Studio Playlist
all kinds of podcasts, as well as a large world music playlist

Wishlist
a large gas kiln

Studio

My studio on Gist Street was love at first site. My friend Rick and I were driving around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, neighborhoods, checking out interesting buildings and there it was. Formerly a junkyard, the building is 4500 square feet, three stories, and made from red brick. It has wooden floors, large wood beams and rafters, high ceilings, and lots of windows.

In the beginning, it was a rough raw space, jam-packed with junk from the previous owner. I cleaned it out, changed the windows, insulated the ceilings, ran water and gas lines, and put in a gas furnace—pretty much on a do-it-yourself, shoe-string budget. It has a big backyard (2500 square feet) surrounded by 15-foot tall fences. I planted bamboo, fruit trees, and added water features, which provide an oasis of privacy in the middle of a gritty urban environment.

I purchased the building in 2000 in the city's Uptown neighborhood to use as my sculpture and mosaic studios; however, it has served as much more than that. The studio on Gist Street, and Gist Street itself, has become a cultural hub for grass-roots revitalization and change in a blighted neighborhood.

I envisioned creating a stimulating and intellectual community in the space. Something similar to the warm and sharing collaborative work space lifestyle I had experienced while living in Brazil and Mexico. Through small public art projects on the street and events in my space, like the popular Gist Street Reading Series, music, dance, and film events, and most recently a show with the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA)



conference, I have brought, and am continuing to introduce, a diverse range of folks to the neighborhood.

The main front area of the ground floor is where I do most of my dirty and dusty work, including building large ceramic sculptures and sometimes mold making and casting. There is a narrow garage-type space, which once served as the scale area for the junkyard, where my kilns live. In the back, I have built on an addition that has large windows and high ceilings overlooking my bamboo jungle. A glass garage door is open to the yard for most of the summer months. I do most of my mosaics here, as well as sculpture. There is also a small inground swimming pool, which I made out of a large baptismal pool that a church had put on the street for garbage day.

The 2nd floor is a live-in artists' space that I rent to fellow artist friends, and the 3rd floor is a 1400-square-foot open loft space with a (functioning) bathtub right smack in the middle of the floor. The third floor has a wonderful view of downtown Pittsburgh and the surrounding hills. It serves as my living space, office, and design

space. I also host a variety of events here such as literary readings, movie screenings, and live music performances.

What I love about my studio is the friendly, industrial openness that is created by the combination of wood and brick. I have been influenced by Spanish architecture and tropical Latin American living spaces, often lush, open, and colorful. The large outside area gives me the sense that I am in a tropical land far away from the hustle and bustle, yet the location is central to all the commercial and entertainment districts of Pittsburgh.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

Ed Kosowitce (Mr. K) introduced me to clay. He was my inspirational ceramics art teacher at Peabody High School in Pittsburgh. He showed me all the basics and the joy of creativity. I then went on a hitchhiking and freight-train jumping traveling spree that lasted a good 15 years. In those years, I picked up many skills, including woodworking, construction, and stained-glass window making. I eventually apprenticed for four years with master luthier Andrew Dipper in Oxford, England, and



worked as a professional violin maker. One day, I decided to return to the clay I had loved in high school. I spent three years taking ceramics classes offered to the community by George Kokis at the University of Oregon. While there, I developed my skills to create large ceramic sculptures. Today, my process still includes creating sculptures in wet clay; sometimes the larger ones are cast in concrete using plaster throw-away molds. I make all the molds in my studio and it's a big mess.

Combining my violin making skills, my ceramic explorations, and my years of travel, I have many stories to tell, and I like telling them through clay. My public artwork often embraces the history of a community as well as its contemporary life.

I work full time as a public artist, creating sculpture and mosaics for the streets of different cities. This involves working in my studio every day, as well as applying for opportunities and grants from online lists and promoting my work through websites, conventions, talks, and word of mouth. I am also a teaching artist and participate in residency programs in high schools and with community youth organizations, where I teach the kids about clay and mosaics, and we then create public art for their communities.

The help I receive in my studio has proven to be another means of creating learning opportunities and community engagement. I regularly have interns from the local universities helping me. They receive school credits and usually come to the studio for 3 or 4 hours a day. The interns learn through hands-on work, helping with all aspects of creating large-scale sculptures and mosaics, including creating steel armatures, building plaster molds, clay sculpting (often on scaffolding), casting in concrete, and ceramic tile making and glazing for my mosaics. For larger projects I also have paid assistants as needed. I do all installation myself, sometimes with the site contractors depending on the scale of the job and the contract budget details.

I give artist talks mostly regionally at local universities such as Carnegie Mellon, and often in the high schools where I offer residency programs.

Inspiration

I'm interested in culture, history, and all the incredible and diverse people and art, architecture, food, music, and wildlife that exist in



this wonderful, mysterious world. All of these influences feed my artwork, both composition-wise and spiritually. I have been particularly attracted to Chinese and Tibetan meditations, and have practiced Tai Chi Chuan for most of my adult life. I like to read both fiction and non-fiction, as well as poetry. This month I have been reading a fascinating biography of Tolstoy and a book about the great gypsy guitar player Django Reinhart.

My 98-year-old Hungarian virtuoso violinist friend, Kato Havas, always said, "It's the music that creates the technique, not the technique that creates the music." I have always found that to be true with all the arts: if we are true to our own originality and work hard, the magic will come.

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