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Debra Herrick

Artist explores Taiwanese heritage and memory though ceramics

In a shared studio at UC Santa Barbara's Art Department, Meiya Sidney □□□ is surrounded by ceramic forms, small curated objects and works-in-progress that reflect both her upbringing in Santa Barbara and her ongoing connection to Taiwan.

Sidney, a fourth-year art honors and College of Creative Studies (CCS) student, works primarily in clay, often combining found materials and miniature forms to create thoughtful, personal installations. "I use ceramics, found objects and small curations to start a conversation between materials," she said. "I'm interested in small gestures, pieces that are subtle but carry meaning."

For her senior thesis exhibition, "with a full moon in each eye," Sidney explores the handbuilt vessel as a medium for transmuting emotion through repeated gestures. The title is drawn from a Hafiz poem, invoking a sense of mystical longing. Influenced by her family's background in Traditional Chinese Medicine, she approaches clay as a kind of skin. She also incorporates found materials like cinder blocks to reference Taiwan's urban landscape. Her process of coil building is rooted in the principles of Mingei folk art and pottery, particularly □□□ — "remembrance, self care and self surrendering."

One of her favorite recent works was inspired by a tree trunk she often passes in Goleta, near where she grew up. The sculpture is tall, curved and covered in organic textures. “I wanted it to feel like a kind of gate, a protective form,” she said.

Her work isn’t limited to sculptural pieces. On her studio wall, a grid of miniature pots and cups — some made on a trip to Taiwan last summer — demonstrate her interest in the “timely preciousness” of small objects. “These were made in a 24-hour studio in Taipei,” she said. “Some of the clays are Japanese imports like porcelain but most local to Taiwan. I carried them home in my suitcase.”

The Taiwan trip was about more than ceramics. Sidney enrolled in an intensive Mandarin course at the Mandarin Training Center at National Taiwan University, bridging the gap between the colloquial Mandarin she speaks with family and more formal grammar. She also developed a relationship with ceramic master □□□ Tony Ong, who taught her new techniques and emphasized the importance of developing personal craftsmanship. “He told me to focus on technique above everything,” Sidney said. “One thing that stuck with me was the idea of □□ , *zhāng lì*, a kind of pulling energy or tension in a piece.”

Returning to UCSB, Sidney, who will graduate this year, continued to explore form and process. One recent project involves a tall clay cylinder marked with her fingerprints, designed to record and reflect the sound of human breath. “It started as a tall vessel,” she said, “but as I was building it, I could hear my breath in it, and that changed the direction of the piece.”

Another experimental work combines small rocks collected from a beach in Taiwan with soil from her childhood home in Santa Barbara. “It’s about bringing two different places together. The places that raised me,” she said.

Sidney’s work is influenced by her cross-cultural background and the dual sense of home she feels in Santa Barbara and Taiwan. She was born in Santa Monica but moved to Santa Barbara as a toddler. Every summer growing up, she and her family would return to Taiwan for several weeks. “It’s always felt like a ritual,” she said. “Even though I didn’t grow up there full-time, it’s a huge part of who I am.”

Her time at UCSB has included work beyond ceramics, too. She’s studied oil painting, printmaking and photography among other disciplines. She also

contributed to a public art installation in the art building called “Rest Over Stress,” a collaborative mural with playful illustrations and a reminder to slow down during finals week. “It was just meant to be a moment of care,” she said.

Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UCSB, The Arts Fund Gallery, Santa Barbara Community Arts Workshop and the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara. She was awarded the YPAR grant from the Shafranski Art Foundation and a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship through CCS. Sidney has also co-curated “The Dragon,” a multigenerational AAPI exhibition at El Presidio, and “Flourish and Flow 1.2,” hosted by Pinaysphere at the Betteravia Gallery.

After graduation, Sidney plans to remain in Santa Barbara for a year or two. She hopes to return to Taiwan for a residency and to pursue graduate school. “I’m still figuring it out,” she said. “But I know I want to keep making things.”

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