

Paruth Hann

Siem Reap, Cambodia. Interpretation by Pari Gilmour



Just the Facts

Clay

red Cambodian stoneware from Siem Reap

Primary forming method

throwing and handbuilding

Favorite surface treatment

carving and relief sculpture

Favorite tools

my carving tool—a knife made from a hacksaw blade

Studio

My studio is located on the main road that runs between Ton Le Sap Lake wharf and the old market in Siem Reap. The road is busy with local traffic and tourists travelling back and forth. Previously, I had a good location on the main road to Siem Reap airport but last June, I had to move as the land my studio was on was being reclaimed to build a new road to the lake.

My main work area is a large covered space 16x26 feet (5x8 meters) with no walls. It is an ideal environment for working with clay; in the tropical climate of Cambodia it is nearly always cool and comfortable. In the rainy season, from July to September, it is sheltered but not too hot. In April it is too hot even for local people but at that time of year this area is a good place to work early in the morning or late in the evening.

My studio is a place where the indoors and outdoors as well as my family and my working life come together! In addition to running my pottery business, I am a full-time single mother. Because this space is so open, there is no division between my role as a parent and my role as a potter. I am always both. The children spend a lot of time in the studio with me on their own projects. The studio is set up for classes, which I run for tourists as well as school children. There are six kick wheels and several work tables. Tourists find the atmosphere inviting and interesting.

The humidity in Cambodia gives a great deal of flexibility for developing carved and sculptured surface treatments. For example, my large elephant jars take three days to create and the slow drying time caused by the dampness is very helpful. I have a large drying room



PHOTOS: PARI GILMOUR

measuring 10×13 feet (3×4 meters) with a good air flow. I also place objects in the sun if necessary. The humidity in the atmosphere buffers the heat from the sun. My Australian potter friends tell me that Cambodian clay is very robust compared to many prepared commercial clay bodies available in the West. I surprise them when I add damp clay to an almost dry object if a hole or a crack develops.

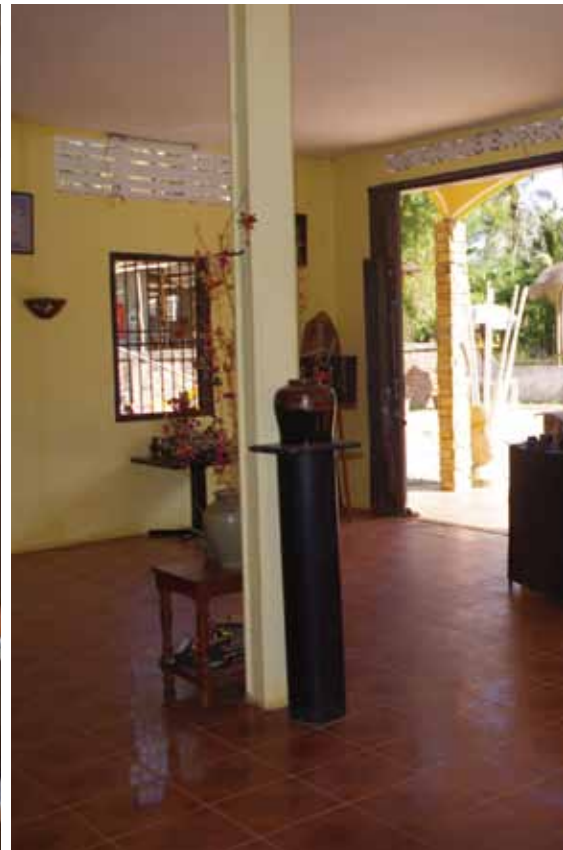
I am fortunate to have a 12-cubic-foot, four-burner gas kiln from Australia. It was donated by GE&GE Kilns (<http://geandgekilns.com/index.html>) in Australia. Major Ian N. Brookes Rtd., with some financial assistance from the late Janet Mansfield, organized the acquisition and transportation of the kiln from Australia to Siem Reap. Australian potters assisted Ian with some of the costs and another friend of Ian's who works in trans-shipment, financed the actual sea transport from Port Melbourne to Port Sihanoukville in Cambodia via Singapore. This was quite a logistical achievement on Ian's part! He is a huge supporter of traditional Cambodian female potters and a good friend. Another Australian potter, Bronwyn Kemp, helped me set up when the kiln arrived in Siem Reap.

I use this kiln for bisque and earthenware firing. I have a smaller gas kiln that is about 1 cubic meter with one large gas burner. The results in this kiln can be quite inconsistent, as it fires super-fast, and I get reduction and oxidation at the same time. This can be very interesting and works nicely for me as a lot of my work has sculptural features.

At my previous location, I had a wood-fired kiln. I have transported the bricks to the new location but am yet to set it up. This kiln was very effective. The firing chamber measured one cubic meter and I was able to fire it to stoneware temperatures overnight. I plan to rebuild it when I get some muscle power to help me!

Materials

I use a red-colored clay from the Banteay S'rei area here in Siem Reap. It is a good clay to handle but if I fire it to stoneware temperatures, I end up with dunting, possibly because of a high-silica content. To deal with this challenge, I really only had the choice of finding a new source of clay or developing mid-fire glazes. Kemp spent more than a month with me early in 2010 and helped me develop glazes that



will mature at around 2228°F (1220°C). However, these glazes use frit and this makes me dependent on friends from overseas bringing frit with them when they visit.

Finding new clay sources is not easy. Cambodia has an agricultural economy and land is mainly used for food production. When someone discovers a new source of stoneware clay, they don't share the information.

Ingredients for glaze making can vary a great deal. Whenever I get a new bag, I have to carry out testing to see what sort of results I will get. I tend to make my glazes in very small batches as required. I make a big variety of ware so making a big batch of frit-based glaze doesn't work for me.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

I was born during the Pol Pot era in the Roluos area, not far from Siem Reap. My mother died before I was 6 years old and I was one of 12 children. Our family occupation is rice farming, so I did not have access to education. I have learned everything by seeking information and asking people to help me. I have taught myself English and some French. I was always interested in pottery, and in my 20s I learned about mold making and started teaching myself to throw.

I had been running my business for a couple of years when I first met Kemp and several other international potters. It was very inspiring to see how they worked and the many techniques and creative ideas that formed a basis for their art. So when Kemp offered to stay with me for some time in 2010 I was very excited. She helped me refine my

throwing skills and encouraged me to develop a wider range of products based on both traditional and contemporary design concepts.

Apart from a making very broad range of pottery, I also offer lessons for tourists and local school groups. I work closely with my students and help them create something that they can feel good about. Then we choose a glaze and I fire it for them. I offer both raku and mid-fired creative opportunities. People like to try something new, and so we even had a small pit firing recently.

Body

My biggest challenge is that I am a very small person and my job is so physically demanding. I work very long hours, often starting early in the morning and sometimes working well into the night if I am firing for students or meeting an urgent order. I make sure I eat healthy food and I pay a lady to help me with housework and in the studio. However, it is difficult to have reliable, year-round help as people in Siem Reap are also farmers and must tend to seasonal demands for planting and harvesting rice. My oldest daughter is able to assist me and, when she isn't at school, she works for me around the house.

Mind

Siem Reap is most well-known for the ancient temples built by the Kings of Angkor. I take a great deal of inspiration from these monuments and work to accurately portray the unique and beautiful patterns of a particular era. Within Cambodia, the general approach to art is very conservative; however, I have a friend in Kampong



Chnang province (the traditional home of pottery in Cambodia) who also likes to think of new ideas, so it is great to be able to share my thoughts with her, and hear about her new projects.

I gain a great deal of creative nourishment when my overseas friends visit. I love sharing ideas and we always find we learn from each other. It is thanks to the encouragement of people such as Brookes and Kemp that I have developed some more adventurous designs, including my lotus and bamboo ideas.

My personal Facebook page is a great way to maintain networking with friends and supporters. I love the quick chats with someone even though they may be thousands of miles away. I have also gained new customers through social media.

I really enjoy teaching, be it local school children or tourists. This is such a rewarding part of my work. My job is so varied. I am always “open for business” and never know who is going to walk through the gate. As I often have several projects running at the same time, I am never bored. While teaching and making work, my delightful daughters can be with me all the time. They love pottery and my oldest daughter, Nisa, is very creative. I am sure Mary will be too. Every day they both give me so much inspiration.

Marketing

Diversity and self-promotion are the real keys to building a business in Cambodia. Making a living selling pottery to tourists is very competitive so I try to develop new ideas and promote my business as widely as possible. I do this through tourist publications and by

placing brochures in hotels. I am also building networks, particularly with overseas potters who tell others about my work.

Having my own website and using this as a marketing tool is becoming more successful. It is important to update regularly and have new products for repeat customers. A friend here in Cambodia helps with this and we are getting very positive feedback.

The reality of running my own business full time and being a full-time mom is very challenging. I need to come up with new ideas all the time as there is not protection for an artist’s intellectual property in Cambodia. If I develop a new idea, it will be copied and identical designs will be selling in the local market in less than a year. I depend on people wanting a genuine handmade item that will carry meaning for them when they return home.

Most important Lesson

I have learned to trust my creativity and to experiment. I try new things all the time and my pottery friends from overseas have really supported me in this.

Paruth Hann’s work will be included in the exhibition, “Earth and Fire,” in September 2014 at The Workhouse Arts Center in Lorton, Virginia, which will be part of the 3rd Southeast Asian Ceramics Symposium, organized by Hadrian Mendoza.

<http://angkorpotterycenter.weebly.com>
paruthhann@angkorpotterycenter.com