



An Artist Residency in Taiwan

*Missouri State University student
Craig Hartenberger stokes the
Anagama kiln at Tainan National
University of the Arts.*

DURING THE MONTHS OF JANUARY THROUGH MARCH, 2012, I had the good fortune of serving as a resident visiting artist in the Graduate Institute of Applied Art at Tainan National University of the Arts in Taiwan (TNNUA). This was an opportunity to engage in several professional activities, as well as to experience more closely Taiwanese culture. The opportunity to travel and spend several months as a resident artist was unique for me, as it was the longest residency that I have experienced. The length of the stay afforded me the chance to dig more deeply into the culture and to glean from that experience visual and conceptual information that I could include in my creative work.

Professors Ching-Yuan, Chang and Po-Ching, Fang served as my hosts during this three-month stay. Professor Chang (who is in charge of the graduate program) and Dr Fang (who runs the undergraduate program) have each built lively and active ceramics programs with strong students from throughout Taiwan, as well as from foreign countries such as the US, Malaysia and Singapore.

*Keith Ekstam recounts
his experiences in Tainan*

The professors have built a varied and high energy visiting artist program, with artists working primarily in the graduate studios. Several visiting artists overlapped during my stay there, representing several countries while working on a variety of projects, including Tetsuya Ishiyama, Gen Hoshino and Chica Inaba from Japan; Haejung Lee, a Korean-American; Arina Alincai from Romania and Virginia Pfau from the US.

Chang has also developed a mandatory exchange program for his graduate students, each of whom must work abroad sometime during their second year. As part of this exchange program, three students from the US were also visiting artists during the spring semester at



Left: Pigs of God New Year's Contest parade, Sanxia, Taiwan.

Right: Typical rural scene in Taiwan.

TNNUA, including our student, Craig Hartenberger from Missouri State University. The combination of visiting artists and motivated graduate students created an energetic studio environment. When asked why they have so many visiting artists, Chang replied that it was one of the most important things he does as an art educator, to expose his students to the many ideas that visitors from around the world bring to the studio. This is certainly a two way street, as all the visiting artists get to experience Taiwan on a personal basis.

The campus of TNNUA is only about 15 years old and is found in a rural part of the southern part of Taiwan's Tainan City administrative area, formerly Tainan County. The facilities are modern and well-equipped and are conducive to effectively making work. Living quarters for me consisted of living in the well kept faculty housing on campus. The whole set up made for an easy transition from traveller to visiting artist.

Upon arriving and while fighting jet-lag, clay mixing was in order so that I could commence to making work, which was scheduled to be shown in a solo exhibition in one of the campus galleries. In order to accommodate a 15 March exhibition opening, plans were made to fire the large Anagama kiln on campus, so we mixed a clay body able to withstand the intensity of the upcoming firing. The last few days of February into early March were targeted as the time frame in which to fire the kiln. I was able to work long hours on a consistent basis for several weeks building numerous large and small scale sculptures that would be fired in the kiln and that would make up my exhibition.

I knew that my residency would be multi-faceted and, within a week of arriving, I was involved in a day-long final critique of graduate student work; this included the two TNNUA professors, myself and two guest reviewers. The next day I spent several hours viewing advanced undergraduate student work during their final critique as well. These days were intense and draining, but productive days for all.

During my stay, several trips to the Taipei area were made in order to view exhibitions and attend opening receptions for shows by Ching-Yuan Chang, Hsu Yung-Hsu, Shin-Yu Wang, Chih-Jung Lu, Gen Hoshino, Chica Inaba, Fang-Yi Chu and Haejung Lee. Various Chinese New Year's celebrations and events were attended as well. This included visiting the Sanxia Zushi Taoist Temple to view the Pig's of God New Year's Contest, where farmer's compete to raise the largest pig, which is then sacrificed in the name of Taoist god Zushi-Ye. Also of great interest was experiencing the Yanshui Fireworks Festivals, where hundreds of thousands of bottle rockets are shot directly at the thousands of participants in the town streets.

It is obvious that, since Taiwan is a relatively small island with a large population, space is scarce and the use of all available land for myriad rural and urban purposes is an obvious reality. This creates a dynamic circumstance of multiple human land uses adjacent to one another. There is a seemingly never-ending flow of contrasting sensory information experienced on an intimate scale (textures, colours, sounds, smells and so forth). I believe that you see these things with a heightened sense of awareness during international travel; things that are somewhat familiar take on a larger, more important presence in a new setting.



Left: Ching-Yuan, Chang and Keith Ekstam admiring large buckets of Taiwanese epoxy.
Right: Sculptural parts being gathered for assembly.



One of the most interesting aspects of staying and working in one place for so long is the opportunity to experience more intimately the surrounding environs and local culture. The campus adjoins Tachi village, a small and interesting farming town, where one could eat at two local restaurants and shop at a local general store. Within scooter-riding distance of the campus are several towns, such as Liou-Jia, Shan-Hua and Madou. These towns were our resource for everything from grocery shopping, to eating out, to attending night markets to buying needed items at what has been dubbed 'The Everything Store'. I cannot explain fully how out of the ordinary it is on so many levels to spend time in these average, traditional towns which are far removed from major urban centres.

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As mentioned earlier, one of my goals during the residency was to fire the school's large Anagama kiln. Three of us were able to successfully fire the kiln; Craig Hartenberger, University of South Carolina graduate student Danny Crocco and I worked long, arduous shifts during a four day firing. The firing results were mixed, but allowed for reasonably successful work. My interest in firing the Anagama was to gain successfully finished woodfired forms for use in my solo exhibition. By combining these forms with lower temperature glaze-fired objects, my plan was to provide the visual approximation of the sensory experiences I had during my stay. I also believe the firing created some momentum for the TNNUA program to investigate further Anagama woodfirings.

In addition to presenting the solo exhibition titled *Trace Elements*, I was able to complete other professionally related activities, including

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Overview and detail shots (insets) of Trace Elements exhibition at TNNUA.

workshop demonstrations in the TNNUA undergraduate studios, a lecture on my creative work at TNNUA, as well as lectures at National Taiwan University of the Arts in Bon-Qiao City and at the Asia-Pacific Institute of Creative Arts in Toufen City.

Visiting the studios of several Taiwanese ceramics artists during the various travel days was of great interest to me and to the students who came along. In the south, we visited the studios of Hsu Yung-Hsu in Guantien and Kuo-Wei Lee near PingTung city. North of Taipei, we visited the studios of Wen-Yi Gong and Cheng-Hsun Chen. Hsu Yung-Hsu probably has the largest personal studio kiln in all of Taiwan, made to accommodate his large sculptural work, many of which were on display in a solo exhibition in February in Taipei City.

I think any discussion about Taiwan cannot be made without speaking of the food culture, an interesting mix of traditional Taiwanese, Chinese, along with some Japanese influence. The food is largely farm to market fresh, with each village or town boasting dozens, if not hundreds of food shops, stalls and restaurants of all sizes and shapes, with a never-ending range of flavours, tastes and textures. I have had the good fortune of travelling to Taiwan on several occasions and I can honestly say that each time I still experienced new flavours, textures and tastes. This aspect of Taiwanese culture surely affected my creative work as several of the pieces in my exhibition incorporated vegetable/fruit/food imagery.

This artist residency was a busy and rewarding time and gave me the opportunity to engage in several professional activities, to embrace the cultural aspects of life in Taiwan, to see old friends and colleagues and to meet new ones. In all ways, this was an enriching and positive experience in a fascinating and interesting place.

Keith Ekstam is a Professor of Art and Design at Missouri State University in Springfield. He earned his MFA in ceramics and drawing from The University of Michigan School of Art in 1987. Ekstam has exhibited his artwork in more than 200 international, national and regional juried and invitational exhibitions and has been a visiting artist at more than 50 institutions and art organisations both abroad and in the US, where he has conducted artist residencies, studio workshops and lectures. His artwork can be found in numerous public and private collections including the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, The Great China Ceramic Art Museum in Jingdezhen, People's Republic of China, and the Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum and Tainan National University of the Arts in Taiwan.