

STUDIO VISIT

# Ashwini Bhat

Petaluma, California



## Just the Facts

### Clay

stoneware from Laguna Clay, Aardvark Clays, and East Bay Clays

Primary forming method  
handbuilding

Primary firing temperature  
2230°F (1221°C)

Favorite surface treatment  
too many to list

### Favorite tool

paddle made of solid Pondicherry  
mango wood

### Playlist

I often listen to audiobooks. My recent favorites are: *The Hidden Life of Trees*, *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, and *The Overstory*. I also listen to a lot of Max Richter, Leonard Cohen, and Prince.

## Studio

I've waited patiently for my current studio. Barn 5400 is a visionary makerspace situated in an old lumber yard in Petaluma, California. We are a diverse group of clay and fabric artists, painters, soap makers, produce distributors, coffee roasters, etc. We share a common room in addition to having private studios, and there's room for more makers to join. The vision is to create a sustainable space that attracts people of all ages. I have plans to start an artists' lecture series and teach workshops from my studio in the near future.

I happened to read an article in the local newspaper about the lumber yard getting a make-over, and that the main goal for the project was to create a community-oriented place with a farmer's market, food trucks, live music, etc., with a special focus on artists and makers. I've always been drawn to collaborations, so the community aspect of this project immediately drew me in. Meeting the Barn 5400 core team members only strengthened that belief. I joined the team in November 2018.

The advantage of a group makerspace is that all of us get to bounce ideas off of one another and learn from each other's practices and processes. The disadvantage could be the echoing of sound in a community space. Unlike running a small-scale business in one's garage where, for instance, you can loudly play music or podcasts, in a cooperative space, everyone needs to be considerate of others and take their presence into account while working independently.

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My studio space is 700 square feet, laid out in a long rectangle. I've divided it into 100 square feet of gallery/retail space and 600 square feet of making space. I work around a large wooden table. There's a mirror placed so that it allows me to see the back of any sculpture I'm working on. There are adjustable shelves, a wedging table overlooking the outdoors, and a dedicated glaze corner with all my materials arranged in alphabetical order. Other equipment and furnishings include a sink with a Gleco trap, a tiny refrigerator and microwave, and a work table near the mirror that currently functions as my office desk. Cornerstone Properties, which runs Barn 5400, has also provided me with a custom-made shipping container that I use as my kiln shed. The container is designed with two circulation vents, and the Barn 5400 team added a beautiful skylight and painted my name on the container—which is visible from the Old Redwood Highway.

My studio also includes a clean corner for photography. As I've been photographing all my work since 2012, I've learned a lot of technical skills. This task has caused me a lot of frustration, but has

ultimately been satisfying. A large front-loading electric kiln is on my wishlist, but not having one now won't stop me from building big! I am in the process of figuring out how to effectively construct large-scale sculptures in sections.

### Materials and Processes

Although I'm trained in wheel throwing, I became a handbuilder by choice. I'm passionate about form—mass, volume, and material. I find it poignant that even in transformation, as clay turns to fired ceramic, traces of process—a fingertip depression, scrape, or dent—remain legible. I want my sculptures to invite viewers to walk around them, to interact with the revealed and the hidden.

In my studio practice I mostly use stoneware. I tend toward groggy red clays. During my seven years of traveling and working in various studios, I handled many clays. I work intuitively, by listening to the material. After years of nomadic life, when I moved to California I wanted to take advantage of being in one place. In a couple months, I tested nearly 20 types of clays, various slips, and glazes. Slowly, I



fell in love with multiple firings, surface layering, and cold finishing. Currently my favorite West Coast clays are several from Aardvark Clay and Supplies, East Bay Clay, and Laguna Clay Company. Most of the time, I add grog or sand and constantly alter the clays ever so slightly to suit the moment. I mix glazes the way I cook, always improvising.

When I am not traveling, I am in my studio every day, including weekends. My partner (writer Forrest Gander) and I go to museums, exhibition openings, poetry readings, and try to explore California through our research road trips, hiking whenever possible. My inspiration comes from various sources—reading, travels, mythology, archaeology, history, and geology. Most of my work honors the particular geography where my sculptures come into being.

### Paying Dues (and Bills)

I have a somewhat unusual background, having studied Indian classical dance and literature for many years before coming to clay. My training in clay was on the kick wheel at Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, India. We made our own clay without clay mixers, pugmills, or slab rollers. While learning to center, I

remember watching my teacher, Ray Meeker, working on 20-foot-tall sculptures.

After training, I continued working at Golden Bridge for four years as an artist in residence until I established my own studio. I built a rammed-earth house and wood kiln and began accepting offers for residencies. In 2015, I moved to the US on an artistic-merit visa (called an O1 Visa). The process to attain this visa was challenging: a strong CV along with several previously published articles on my work in international publications were the most important parts of the application process. I also had to produce several recommendation letters and I am grateful for the support of numerous artists who vouched for my work. After the long, 5-month wait, I had another challenge of having to choose between the artist visa or the Fulbright award I had just won. Fulbright had a rule that wouldn't allow me to travel for two years after the fellowship ended, whereas the O1 Visa gave me the freedom to travel and work. I chose the latter. Between 2015–17, I lived out of suitcases, traveling, firing different kilns, interacting with international artists. I did a residency in Northern California and fell in love with the landscape and the



people. Eventually, I moved to Petaluma, California. During my first year there, I taught classes at Sonoma Ceramics at Sonoma Community Center. This year, I am greedy for more time in my own studio.

### Marketing

I often collaborate with artists in other genres—which is thrilling and instructive in itself, but I've found it also extends my market. As a result, articles and essays on my work have been published not only in international ceramics magazines, but also in literary and opinion magazines and journals.

I mostly sell through galleries. Most recently, I had a solo show at Lacoste/Keane Gallery and was part of a group show at Cavin-Morris Gallery. I also have some work available at In Tandem Gallery and Companion Gallery. During the initial years, I worked as an editorial assistant at a very interesting, experimental online literary magazine. That work subsidized my income from selling artwork, but as I traveled more, that editorial work became difficult due to the logistics of working remotely. Now I rely on my studio work and sales from shows in the galleries for income. A portion of my income also comes

from collaborations, grants, and fellowships. We have some foot traffic already at Barn 5400 even though we are a new establishment, and the team there has some great plans in store as we continue to grow. I do sell through my new studio gallery, but I prefer to refer buyers and collectors to my representing gallery, Lacoste/Keane. I continue to accept commissioned work and engage in collaborations.

I've designed a website to showcase my artwork and update it myself. I send out 3–4 newsletters annually to keep my mailing list informed about what's happening in my studio. As for social media, I tend to use Instagram more than Facebook to document my process.

### Most Important Lesson

I know I am on a difficult journey as an artist, but it's a privilege to be able to see, absorb, and respond to this life practicing what one loves to do. Every day is a studio day, every aspect of my life is interconnected and feeds into my artistic practice.

<https://ashwinibhat.com>

Instagram: @ashwinibhat

Lacoste/Keane Gallery: [www.lacostekeane.com](http://www.lacostekeane.com)