

Virginia Leonard

Auckland, New Zealand
by Elizabeth Kozlowski



Just the Facts

Clay

mainly raku clay, a small amount of porcelain, and a wee bit of paper clay

Primary forming method

coiling

Primary firing temperature

cone 5, 2156°F (1180°C)

Favorite surface treatment

The rougher the better! I like to apply more stain (and talc) than necessary so the glaze will pool. I also enjoy scraping everything off my worktable, applying it to a piece, and seeing what comes out at the other end of a firing.

Favorite tools

I only use my hands, although I have a new favorite tool, a hammer.

This story begins on a bright, sunny June day about an hour outside of the city of Copenhagen, Denmark. I believe there are paths we are meant to cross, and this was one of those instances. What was initially a spontaneous trip to visit Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center in Skaelskør ended with the beginnings of a friendship and a newly found appreciation for a country 7810 miles away—New Zealand, or *Aotearoa* in Māori. *Aotearoa* loosely translates to “the land of the long white cloud.” This phrase aptly describes the islands of New Zealand, which artist Virginia Leonard calls home. Her former studio in Davenport, a coastal town just a ferry ride from the city of Auckland, was surrounded by beaches and the sounds of the Pacific Ocean. What follows is adapted from a conversation Virginia and I shared over a delicious meal at her home there, prior to her move to a new space in Auckland.

Studio

Elizabeth Kozlowski (EK) (pictured above left): What does a typical studio day look like for you?

Virginia Leonard (VL) (pictured above right): I begin work at around 9:30 or 10:00am and I work until around 3:30 or 4:00pm. I try and stick to this schedule, 5 days a week. When I can't, I will put in a few hours over the weekend. I only make work and listen to podcasts at the studio—I do not take my laptop, and do not send emails or talk on the phone. I limit those activities to times when I am at home.

I sometimes work straight through the day or I'll stop for 30 minutes around 2:00pm. I don't like people popping in, so I do spend the majority of my studio time on my own. My



family is banning me from working on weekends at the moment, which I'm struggling with.

EK: Please describe your studio set up for our readers.

VL: My new studio is smaller than my old one. Now that we are back in the city of Auckland, space is very expensive. Currently I have a studio at my freight company's warehouse. Because most of my work is freighted overseas, I have formed a strong relationship with them and was offered space. I find it difficult to carry my big works to and from the kilns. My partner, Olly, has the studio upstairs, so I try to coordinate loading and unloading my kiln when he is available to help.

It's interesting driving to my studio now that we have moved back to the city. I used to walk 20 steps to the studio from the house and be ready for work and I could dip in and dip out as much as I wanted. Now with a 15-minute drive, I must plan my working hours.

I have a worktable to handbuild on, an outside glaze table, and two kilns: one single-phase electric kiln (8 cubic feet) and a three-phase electric kiln (25 cubic feet). I use one very large table to build all my work on, so all my coiling is done on this. I use a smaller table to roll out shards and any big flat areas of clay that I will use in the work.

Generally, most of my work is too heavy to be stored on shelving. Finished works or parts of works rest on steel plinths or on the floor. I spend time with the forms, changing plinths and changing

the order of a work. Often a base will sit for weeks or months before I go back to it and make another piece to sit on top or underneath. After a few months if it is still just there and I haven't resolved it into a finished work, then I will take the hammer to it and break it up into small shapes and re-incorporate these bits into another work.

I do all my glazing on tall steel plinths, which are located outside or in a small tiled room. I use the glaze in a painterly way; I move quickly between various stains, so there is always just as much glaze on the floor as on the work. I always come in early the next day to do clean up. Glazing is the most physical part of the process and my body is always sore and very tired after a day of glazing.

EK: Can you share how you maintain a disciplined studio practice?

VL: I am ruthless with the pieces I make and smash a fair bit of work that I think is weak or don't like. I trust my own aesthetics. Even if Olly insists that a particular piece is good, I may still leave it for a few days in order to contemplate it. If I still think it is weak, I will take a hammer to it. This is actually my new favorite thing: breaking up finished works, and reassembling them into other works.

I work much more efficiently in my new studio; there are no distractions and I get to see the work with fresh eyes, which never happened when the studio was at home and I was always working.



Now with the distance between my home and studio, I have time to think about the work and can begin to resolve it in my head before my hands get hold of it.

Paying Dues (and Bills)

EK: Here comes the dreaded question. What are your biggest expenses as an artist?

VL: My overhead is considerable. Electricity is a huge cost. My biggest expense, though, is freight. I live at the bottom of the South Pacific and I mainly exhibit in Europe, the US, and Australia . . . It's the killer, that's where all my profit goes—to pay my freight bills.

Thankfully, more recently my galleries have begun to cover this cost. I also applied to Creative New Zealand for a grant to cover freight for a show in the US and was awarded funding, which is great. I will apply again the next time I have a large show going to Europe. In addition, I have access to a residency in the South of France with a ceramics studio. So, I may go at the end of 2020 and make a body of work there for my next exhibition in Europe.

Marketing

I believe most of my work has been noticed by overseas galleries through Instagram and the residencies I have done. It is also important that curators see the work. This happened when I was in Denmark making work and was introduced to Mindy Solomon. A gallery will reach out and slowly a relationship is formed. I think as

a New Zealander, because we live at the very bottom of the South Pacific, we are travelers by nature. We are isolated, so we do try and see the world. I feel the same when it comes to my work. I don't hesitate to have shows anywhere in the world. I know my work is packed well with very little chance for breakage, and I get to travel, too.

Inspiration

EK: What inspirations do you find, outside of the art world?

VL: I think I could be put in a little dark room and the work would be the same. The inspiration comes from within. Of course, I need to be away from this intensity sometimes. I live by the beach, so I go there and swim and float. This is relaxing and it helps a lot physically. I also see the osteopath once a week. But this is all physical stuff. The thinking and the planning I do all the time in my head. I can have times at home where I will be very quiet, and I am just giving my head lots of space to think about the work. I am always planning and pushing the boundaries of clay in my head.

If I want inspiration outside of myself, I look at painting. Right now it's Gerhard Richter, Howard Hodgkin, and images on Instagram.

EK: What pushes you to continue creating work?

VL: It forms a part of me, it's what I do. I deal with the constant reminder of my limited body and chronic pain—the work keeps me alive.



I typically also have two solo shows a year and some group shows, mainly overseas. I like to work under pressure and don't like it when I am at a loose end. I work best at a frantic pace—the work always seems fresher. I tend to overwork my pieces when I have too much time on my hands.

EK: What's something recent that's opened your mind to a new way of thinking/making?

VL: I was in the middle of the Melbourne Art Fair last year. It was chaos; it was heaving with people. I met another artist, Peter Adsett, and he spent some time with me talking about my work. He asked me what my motivation was, my conceptual ideas about the pieces. So, I began talking to him about the work and dealing with the voicelessness of chronic pain. But he came back to his original question, what is in your mind when you are actually making the work? And I answered, "Not much. I just go hard and trust my process." He said, "Your intelligence is in your fingers, just trust your fingers and don't think about the conceptual ideas, just don't think." It was liberating.

Most Important Lesson

EK: What do you consider to be your most important lessons, in art or life?

VL: Trust your practice, trust your fingers. Don't look too much at other artists' work. Rather, look inward at your own work. Don't be complacent. Always push your work. Don't be lazy and don't

listen to other people when they say the work is amazing. Listen only to yourself.

EK: How do you define success within your practice?

VL: Oh, that's easy—if the work is good. And when I say that, I mean if I think the work is good. My gut feeling, my aesthetic—I'd say uncomfortable is a really good word to describe it. If the work is uncomfortable and slightly obnoxious, as in loud or annoying, if it makes you feel as though you have to be careful around it, then I think it is good. Overthought is a word I would use to describe an unsuccessful piece.

You can find Virginia on Instagram @ginleonard. Her work can be found at the following galleries: Martin Brown Contemporary (www.martinbrowncontemporary.com) in Paddington, New South Wales, Australia; Paul Nache (www.paulnache.com) in Gisborne, New Zealand; Mindy Solomon (<http://mindysolomon.com>) in Miami, Florida; Taste Contemporary (www.tastecontemporary.com) in Geneva, Switzerland; and Gow Langsford Gallery (gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz) in Auckland, New Zealand.

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