



The Queue: Ibrahim Said

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Ibrahim Said at work. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel, courtesy of The Clay Studio.

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Ibrahim Said pushes clay to its limits with audacious vessels and sculptures referencing Islamic art.

Ibrahim Said was raised with clay. During his upbringing in Fustat, a Cairo neighborhood known as the home of Egypt's commercial pottery industry, Said's father ran a ceramics workshop. There, the artist threw countless pots, absorbing ideas from his father's artist friends and mastering his materials at a rapid clip. "Being close to him brought me close to clay," Said says of his father. "Although he never pushed me to follow his path, he made me believe I could make anything I wanted with it." With his father's encouragement and his own advanced technical skills honed over hours on the wheel, Said left Fustat in 2002 to exhibit work throughout Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, before emigrating to Greensboro, North Carolina, in 2012.

Said's complex, gravity-defying works showcase his creative and technical ingenuity and incorporate the rich traditions of Islamic art and vernacular Egyptian pottery. His intricately carved vases reference water jugs made between 900 and 1200 CE, which contained internal strainers to filter sediment from river water, carved with designs visible only to the drinker. By placing the patterns on the outside of his vessels, Said brings the inside out, revealing inner beauty and blurring the boundary between public and private.

Said will present a workshop and demonstration at SF Clayworks in San Francisco, June 21–23, and his solo show *From Thebes to Cairo* will be up at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City from May 2 to June 15. American Craft Managing Editor David Schimke wrote about Said's stunning work in "Inside Out" in our Spring 2024 issue.



Ibrahim Said. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel, courtesy of The Clay Studio.

How do you describe your work or practice in 50 words or less?

I am an artist and artisan working in clay. My ideas are born in this material and are rooted in Egyptian culture and folklore, as well as Islamic art and architecture. Though I revere the ancient and traditional work of my home country, I have always wanted to expand upon it. The greatest works do not have to be in the past.

What are the biggest challenges of making such large work, particularly vessels?

Drying time with large work is the most important thing. Adding coils, hand building large sections, and carving sections while still constructing all have different drying times. That is a careful juggling act. Engineering the structures of my sculptures is done through trial and error, as is the firing process.

Tell us about your upcoming solo exhibition From Thebes to Cairo at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City. What are the origins of the work in the show? How does it fit into your body of work?

My work has always been deeply connected to Egyptian and Islamic culture. The seeds for this show were planted in December 2021 when I went to Luxor for the first time. Ideas started forming while I stood in Karnak Temple. Although there is more turquoise and gold luster reduction in this show, it is tied to all my previous work.

What are your favorite tools for working with clay?

I have a small carving knife that I made from grinding a steel saw blade into a point and a square metal rib with a hole in the center. These two tools, along with my compass, are practically all I use.

What is unique or interesting about the craft community in your adopted hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina?

There is an enormous amount of love, respect, and support among the ceramicists in North Carolina. I have close ties in Seagrove and at Starworks in Star, North Carolina. As soon as I moved here in 2012, I was warmly welcomed and felt at home.

Which ceramics artists, exhibitions, or projects do you think the world should know about, and why?

Dr. Diah Eldin Daoud is a professor of ceramics at Helwan University in Cairo and one of the first in Egypt to really synthesize contemporary art with traditional cultural references. Mohamed Mandour

and Nabil Darwiche are two significant Egyptian potters who are grounded in traditional forms and techniques.



Ibrahim Said, *Floating Vase - Cartouche*, 2023, white earthenware, 12.25 x 5 x 5 in. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel.



Ibrahim Said, *Floating Vase - Pisces 2*, 2023, white earthenware, 10 x 6 x 5.5 in. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel.



Ibrahim Said, *Tomb 4*, 2023, white earthenware, 24 x 11.5 x 5.5 in. Photo by Dhanraj Emanuel.