

Clay Center of New Orleans helps shape local art scene

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The Clay Center of New Orleans is a nonprofit organization that brings ceramic art education and professional opportunities to one central location. (Photo provided by the Clay Center of New Orleans)

During her first week as a Tulane graduate student, ceramic artist Michelle Swafford learned some unexpected news.

"I remember asking my professor what the clay community was like in New Orleans, and he replied, 'Well, I think we're it,' " she said. "I was surprised, because in every other city I had lived in, there were multiple community-oriented ceramics centers."

“As I became more familiar with the community, I realized that there wasn't anywhere that was showing contemporary ceramic artwork on a regular basis. There wasn't anywhere where you could rent studio space if needed, do a residency or take workshops with national-level artists,” she added. “New Orleans has this amazing creative community. But when it came to clay, there was this hole in it.”

Upon discovering the void of local venues supporting ceramic art, Swafford hatched the idea for the [Clay Center of New Orleans](#) (1001 South Broad Street, Unit 116) — a nonprofit organization that will bring ceramic art education and professional opportunities to one central location.

After receiving her master of fine arts degree in studio art in 2016, Swafford became an adjunct assistant professor of ceramics in the Newcomb Art Department. She collaborated with her former student, Tracey Bellina, to launch the center.

“New Orleans’ already thriving community of artists is only growing. Building a clay center that will not only teach ceramic art but also employ artists just made sense,” said Bellina, assistant director of marketing for Tulane [Campus Recreation](#).

The center officially opened in the [ArtEgg Studios building](#) on Friday, Jan. 5.

By incorporating a small [supply shop](#) within the venue, Swafford and Bellina also address the city’s lack of access to ceramic supplies and tools.

“We buy clay and supplies at wholesale prices from Southern Pottery Equipment in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Coastal Ceramic Supply in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and then we resell what we stocked,” said Swafford, noting that the center’s supply shop is open to the public from noon to 6 p.m. every Friday and Saturday.

The center’s next exhibition, called “The Figure in Clay,” opens on Friday, Aug. 3, at 6 p.m.

Juried by ceramic sculptor Nathan Murray, the group exhibition will feature works exploring the form of the human figure and will run through Saturday, Sept. 1.

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— Michelle Swafford, adjunct assistant professor of ceramics in the Newcomb Art Department



Michelle Swafford (left), an adjunct assistant professor of ceramics in the Newcomb Art Department, and Tulane staff member Tracey Bellina are co-founders of the Clay Center of New Orleans. (Photo provided by the Clay Center of New Orleans)