Sac State student makes 1,000 bowls to earn degree, help community

Christopher Thompson’s work in Sacramento State’s Master’s of Studio Art program is going to benefit a large number of people.

The Sacramento State student is hand-making 1,000 ceramic bowls while in the program. The sale of those bowls could raise up to $50,000 to help feed local residents in need.

Thompson made the project’s first bowl in November 2011. He has spent the last year and a half making more – throwing the clay, shaping it, firing it in the kiln, then glazing it. But these are anything but mass-produced bowls. Each is unique, with glazes used to create bowls with deep shades of blue, brilliant reds and other vibrant colors. They also come in various sizes.

The bowls will go on display at more than a dozen local galleries during midtown Sacramento’s Second Saturday art celebration July 12. That is where patrons will be able to purchase them.

Thompson usually gets $200 to $350 per bowl based on size, but has reduced that to $50 to $100 for the July event.

All the galleries are taking half the commission they normally would, says Thompson, and he’ll get just enough to cover the cost of clay and reimburse the University for production costs. The bulk of the sales money will be divided among Loaves and Fishes, Senior Gleaners and Meals on Wheels.

Fans of ceramics can get a preview of the works at Sac State. The Masters’ Art Show in the Library Gallery Annex has 90 of the bowls on display. Gallery hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and the exhibit runs through Friday, May 24.

Thompson came up with the idea after the first round of critiques for his master’s program. The review suggested he display more focus, choose a form and perfect it, and come up with something that was bigger than himself.

“After the critique I kind of sequestered myself, moved the outside influences away from me, and did some meditation,” Thompson says.
He wanted to do something that benefitted others. He also liked the number 1,000. “While it seems daunting, we can still wrap our minds around the figure.”

Professor Scott Parady, one of Thompson’s faculty advisors, was somewhat taken aback when first told of the proposal. “I thought it seemed like a lot to take on, and maybe too focused,” he says with a laugh. “I don’t know that that notion has changed much.”

Parady admires the way Thompson has stuck with the project. “Chris has a lot of fortitude, and when he puts his mind to something, he’s going to do it,” he says.

The project is also a participatory effort. Thompson held several glazing “parties” that allowed friends, fellow artists and gallery patrons to finish the inside of individual bowls. More than 300 people have taken part in these collaborations.

“The collaborations are all about giving the piece a louder voice so it’s not just me,” Thompson says.

This is something of a rebirth for the 52-year-old Thompson. While he worked with porcelain in his early 20s, he yielded to those who said he would never be able to make a living at it.

After a career in the publishing world, Thompson decided it was time to re-explore his first love. “I got bit by the clay bug once again,” he says. “This has been a complete redefinition of myself.”

And by redefining himself, Thompson has brought beauty and a social consciousness to his work.

For more information on the 1,000 bowls, visit Thompson’s Facebook page. For media assistance, call Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156.

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