

MFA graduate changes the landscape of ASU ceramics program

By Sarah Marie Brazeal, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Nicole Ponsart, who is graduating from the ASU School of Art's MFA program this spring, has been recognized by her professors for consistently going above and beyond expectations — both in her artistic practice and in her support of fellow graduate students.

She is known for fostering a collaborative and inclusive environment, always willing to lend her time and expertise to others while maintaining a rigorous and thoughtful approach to her own work. One of her most impactful contributions to the ASU community is the clay recycling program she initiated.

"When I first arrived in Arizona and got started in the program, I quickly realized that access to affordable ceramic materials and supplies was severely limited, far more limited than it was for me in Canada," she said.

Ceramics Professor Sam Chung, Ponsart's advisor in her first semester at ASU, sent out some emails asking the ASU ceramics alumni who work at various institutions around the metro Phoenix area if they had scrap clay they wanted to get rid of, recycle or re-home.

"This sparked a very fruitful and generative relationship between me and Phoenix College," Ponsart said, "where I would go and collect dry, discarded clay scraps every six to eight weeks from their ceramics department and recycle the clay back at the ASU Grant Street Studios, where I had my studio space."

By collecting scrap clay from community colleges across Arizona and repurposing it for use by herself and other graduate students, Ponsart has created a sustainable system that reflects both ingenuity and environmental responsibility. This initiative has not only conserved resources but also strengthened ties across educational institutions.

"This pipeline has now been passed on to the new graduate students working in clay and helps to provide free materials for those who want to try ceramics for the first time, work at a larger scale, or for those who just moved to the country and are starting from scratch like I did three years ago."

Ponsart said through her relationship with Phoenix College, she was able to create all of her work from 100% discarded, recycled clay.

Her work is deeply rooted in place, drawing inspiration from the landscapes of the Southwest —canyons, buttes and the vast desert terrain. Through ceramics, she explores the physicality of the land, using form and texture to echo the geological and structural beauty of her surroundings.

Ponsart's artistic excellence and leadership have been recognized through multiple grants and awards — including the Ed Moulthrop Scholarship, Martin Wong Foundation Ceramic Graduate Student Scholarship, Katherine K. Herberger Scholarship, Curran-Bleakney Scholarship, Herbert Smith Graduate Fellowship and a Graduate Fellowship — underscoring the significance of her contributions to both the arts and the academic community.

Question: Does your work have an aspect that affects, enriches or integrates with the community (either at ASU or more broadly)? If so, can you please describe it?

Answer: My thesis work explores the way landscapes are staged, framed and constructed both physically and culturally. "BACKLOT" invites viewers to navigate a ceramic canyon installed inside the gallery, allowing them to physically step into the work and rethink the scale, place and authenticity of familiar landscapes and the places around us. I see this as an invitation for community dialogue about our relationship to place, memory and the built environment and who holds the pen for history. The work itself was created through a generative community relationship with Phoenix College, as they provided me with the scrap clay from their classes that allowed me to build the installation. It's through this mutually beneficial relationship where the work situates itself as the metaphor for community collaboration, knowledge sharing and physically getting involved with the research through the use of a simple material like clay.

Q: What was your "aha" moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

A: Growing up on the west coast of Canada, in Coquitlam, British Columbia, the ocean was always nearby and the rain was ever present in my daily life. Using the heel of my boot to create channels to redirect water on the beach or in the garden was certainly a top childhood pastime. I would drain the contents from one puddle to the next or unclog storm drains, create dams and carve out rivers for the water to move through. It was in this action of creation, where I could use my body to shape and form the sediment around me, where I think my love for clay was really born.

Later in life when clay found its way in, I discovered a lot of it had overlaps with the actions and habits I formed as a child making "rivers" in the dirt. As I got older, the scale to which I wanted to build increased quite significantly, and I found myself constructing these same metaphorical rivers, rocks and mountains well into my adult life, and now in another country as a graduate student. But the real "aha" moment was realizing that ceramics was this perfect sedimentary material that held a memory that could bridge both this material experimentation or "play phase" and create large-scale installations of several objects to then illustrate concepts and ideas. The material allowed me to create forms that were more "permanent" that could illustrate concepts and ideas in real-time and space to share with others.

Q: What's something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?

A: I learned how to fully embrace the process of making as the research — that discovery doesn't only happen at the end of a project but all the way through. I have always been a very hands-on, hard-working type of artist who truly enjoys putting in the extra time to make things myself, learn how things go together and find ways to reverse-engineer materials, processes and equipment. I think that through this approach a lot of learning can occur and you really find out how it is that things go together, work and create harmony.

In this day and age, especially in America, you have the ability to go out and go to the store or order online almost anything you want, right away and use it to create whatever you want. But what really happens is this slow degradation of inherent knowledge from learning how to do it or make it yourself? When things go wrong, if you always rely on just buying what you need from the store or obtaining a "new one," you never really learn to troubleshoot the things along the way that cause the problems. You don't learn why or how or what to do to traverse the problem.

I think through the MFA program at ASU and a lot of inspiration and motivation from my advisor, Susan Beiner, it was this journey of "doing" the work that became a part of the work and the basis for the research.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I chose to come to ASU knowing it was in proximity to some pretty spectacular landscape photography sites, geologically significant places and culturally important sites that I wanted to be nearby to help inspire my work and research. When I came to visit the campus and the studio spaces at Grant Street Studios in Phoenix prior to accepting an offer, I was shown around by Susan Beiner and got a sense for who she was and what she was about, and the reason for me attending became a desire to work with and learn from her. There was a fierceness and a drive in her that I respected and admired, something you really don't see as often anymore. Her generosity of time, her technical knowledge and ability to problem solve through a positive lens was something I didn't know I needed in my life, and it transformed the way I do my work, approach a project and enroll others in what I'm doing.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: Definitely Susan Beiner, and I guess it was never really one thing in particular but a way of being. Be generous, show up for others and have integrity. She was someone who I could always count on, who would show up, no matter how busy her schedule was, no matter what country she was in; she would make the time and make it happen for me if I needed it. If we couldn't find the answer to a problem we faced together, she would track down someone who would know; she's relentless in her pursuit of community and approach to mentorship and someone I could not have gone through this program without. She's also someone who has a high level of integrity, someone who does what they say they're going to do when they said they would do it. This in and of itself is really rare; having integrity and being your word is really magical when you see it practiced in person.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: Your friends, colleagues and professors are going to be a network for you, forever. Invest the time and energy to create a really generative and mutually beneficial relationship that will help span the years to come. When you look back on your life in 10 years, it's going to be these people in those moments that stand the test of time. The people who helped you when you really needed

it, the people you helped across the finish line, the work you did with those around you, etc.

Q: What was your favorite spot on campus, whether for studying, meeting friends or just thinking about life?

A: I'm very rarely on the Tempe campus compared to the amount of time that I'm at the ASU Grant Street Studios in Phoenix; however, my favorite spot on campus is likely the Secret Garden. It's located behind my partner's office in the Dixie Gammage, and at certain times of the year, the lovebirds come to eat the seeds and fruits from the trees. I love studying there because it's a bit cooler, beautifully kept with the gardens and arboretum, and the birds are quite funny. They have this obnoxiously loud noise they make for being such a small, colorful, cute bird, and when they call to each other, it is as if they are doing it at full volume all the time, like children. It's great, it adds a bit of humor into the day and makes you feel like you're in the middle of something. This is also a great spot to see multiple stray cats and the occasional desert fox in the evening.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: I'm really looking forward to going back to Canada after graduation in May and bringing my newfound appreciation for the geographical and political climate, nature and wilderness I think need after being in the United States for three years. I look forward to teaching ceramics there and working in some time to attend some artist-in-residence opportunities. I'm really looking forward to being out of Phoenix for the summer!

I'll be setting up a home studio when I get back to Canada this summer, working on some pieces that I think will help expand the work I began at ASU, and attending some artist-in-residence opportunities. I'm looking forward to teaching over the summer and in the fall in Vancouver and want to infuse the new approaches, techniques and methods of making into my new classes. Mostly, I'm looking forward to re-learning how to relax, slow down and enjoy some well-earned time off while working at a new, slower pace from home.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ponsart with her various ceramic materials at ASU's Grant Street Studios.

Text image(s)



Flyer for Ponsart thesis exhibition, "[BACKLOT](#)." Her work can be found online at her website, www.nicoleponsart.com, or on Instagram [@nicoleponsartceramics](#) and [@nikkiponz](#).