

Celeste Flores *How I Got My Start*

I was introduced to blacksmithing in art school. I thought I would focus on it for one semester. It's now been 15 years.

I got my education in forging at The Crucible, in Oakland, California. I started by working as an intern and then I became an instructor. After seeing Crucible employee Carla Hall creating artistic ornamental ironwork, I knew I had found a way to make a career from my art using gates and railings as my canvas.

In 2012 I quit my day job and began teaching at The Crucible about twenty hours a week while taking on small jobs I received via word of mouth. When a friend of mine needed a railing I spent many hours making a striking railing that I knew would serve as a portfolio piece to sell more work.

How I Got Here

Chris Neimer ran the blacksmithing department at The Crucible and taught me how to forge. He was also always there to give me advice and make sure I didn't mess up too badly.

I was never taught exactly how to design architectural work, I just figured it out on my own. I looked at gates and railings, I relearned trigonometry, and attended CBA events to continue my education. I often use Mark Aspery's books to improve my techniques.

I worked for Jerry Coe, a bronze smith in Berkeley, for a couple of years. It was there that I learned to work with bronze. I've since become known for working with non-ferrous metals.



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I created my own work in Jerry's shop and at The Crucible. The SF Bay Area is one of the most expensive places in the world to live. I was grateful to have those shops to work out of but I needed my own space. I began looking for a place to rent when artist co-ops like NIMBY and American Steel began to shut down and kick the



artists out. Industrial space became increasingly scarce and I looked for two years. I occasionally found small shops that were about \$3000.00 a month for rent. I couldn't afford that.

I was very fortunate to hear that a local artist, Sean Orlando, was renting a new space in Oakland. I moved into my new shop in March of 2020. I have no idea how I would have survived without that place. I was not really able to grow my business until then. I was severely limited by the kinds of projects I could take on.

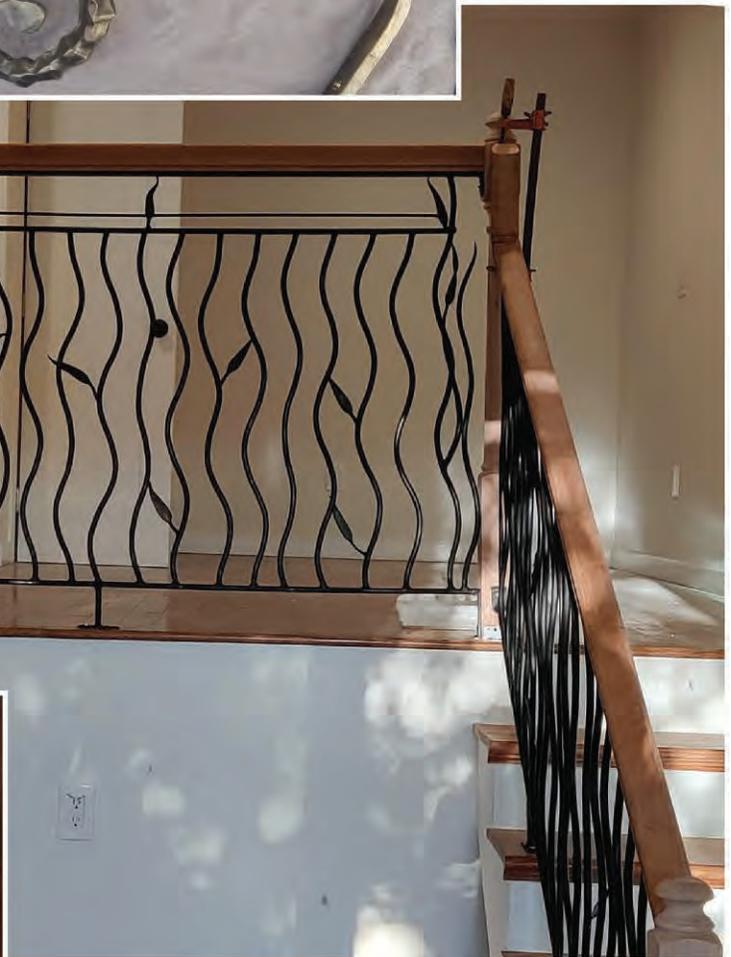
How it's Going

Sean eventually bought a beautiful industrial building by the Richmond shore. It's my dream shop. It has ample power, a thirty-foot ceiling, and several cranes.

Over the past couple of years, I have probably purchased about \$100,000 of equipment and supplies to create a fully functional shop. But looking back I probably would have done it a lot differently.

What's Next

Some of the most successful smiths I have seen have created products to help pay for their baseline expenses. I began experimenting with small hardware, like hooks and brackets, very early on. My pre-made products never sold.



I have always made a living from commission work.

I think my mistake was never fully pursuing my products. I'd make a small run of products, and if they didn't sell I'd move on. I believe I need to have more refined designs and market them. I had never done any more than posting them on social media. I never

contacted designers or architects to tell them about my products. Word-of-mouth worked for my railings because there aren't many good options out there. I don't need to sell that many to make ends meet. Small products require more dedication to marketing.

That is what I'm pursuing now. I'm doing it to have a stable baseline income and to have better cash flow while working on bigger projects. And also because, after a recent injury, I realized that architectural work requires me to be in good physical condition, I don't have a way to make a living if I am injured.

My Art

I always thought I was going to be an artist. I was researching how to become an artist in my middle school library. I read a book that said you need to either have a second job, such as teaching, or become Jeff Koons.

I began art school as a drawing and painting major. I quickly switched majors because, in reality, I was spending ten-hour days in the sculpture studio. I loved ceramics. I still love clay but no one wants to pay me for it. I did a lot of figurative work. I was creating these dark life-sized ceramic sculptures that were moody and ambiguous. I think I wanted to make people uncomfortable. Now I do the opposite.

I create beautiful works of art that are designed to perfectly fit within the space. I love how architectural work can create a sense of atmosphere. It really can transform a space.

When I started getting into architectural work I began studying structures and materials. I find material sciences fascinating. I love finding out about the properties of various materials and being able to control them, especially working with non-ferrous metals. I've worked with steels, stainless, brass, bronze, copper, and aluminum. I have also experimented with monel and titanium.

My shapes have always been organic. Though I love structures and geometry, I really love them within the forms found in nature. The repeated patterns that you find there are fascinating and so beautiful.

Most of the forms in my work are illustrative. I design a lot of things to suit my client's desires, but recognizable and familiar shapes are the best received. I would love to do more experimentation with abstract organic compositions.

I'm very excited about the bronze hardware I am creating. I'm really enjoying the opportunity to experiment. I really love making new forms. Exploration in my work has primarily come from the needs of my clients. I'm so happy to be trying new things because I want to make them.

