

Volume 1

FIERY FORAYS

GALLERY 60 NYC

&

NEW ENGLAND WOOD FIRING CONFERENCE

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Eike Maas

LOVE LETTER

I am twelve miles south of Death Valley, hidden below a plateau of long-resting ash, where the Wild and Scenic Amargosa River bends to disappear into the earth...

I remember China Ranch and its nine or ten residents, pack of coyotes, ravens and minor wildlife, the Willow Creek and its spring, one thousand and eighty-eight date palms including the dozen from 1920, the shabby structures scattered around in the sun, the Badlands flanking the fields, the old train tracks that used to haul ore, the secret rooms carved of desert geology, the silence after sunset and the solitude that encloses all of it in the endless dust. The dry nights walking through shining blueness, the color thick enough to have substance; the weeks swaddling my naked spirit in sunburnt purpose to distract from the terror of loneliness; where, with bruised palm knuckles, through four



miles' march of sweating labor, the gift of realignment was delivered upon bowed shoulders: the overwhelming relief of inevitability. All of this, there in the dirt.



I have bathed in the stuff and swaddled myself in it, the Earth-stuff made on the Third Day, churning for eons to settle in the lines on my face. It is with me in the buckets of earth that I hauled across the country, nondescript white plastic filled with the screaming dirt inside, the dirt that calls out remember! I took it with me in the dust that blew past my closed eyes like a dream, and that dried my mouth with the shadow of a kiss.

What can conjure the power of this place in the dust, now, when I am not there? There, where I grabbed onto the flying threads of the circling vortex to be whisked into the void, to emerge from it with a handful of dust, the alchemy completed by the transformative power of a place as silent and throbbing as the universe from beginning to end, the gold gleaming inside. Where the body's hermetic seal is broken by gypsum glitter and wind, penetrated under the divine light of the Milky Way, where for a moment I was the axis of the universe, encircled by its crown. To float unattached, then feel the corporal pulse of the beating Earth. This place, weightless, alive on its own and churning in the desert absolutely wildly, writhing and twisting and whirling - dancing, alive! My heart pounds! Do you feel it?



Trevor Youngberg

FIERY FORAYS

In reflecting upon the current body of work shown here at Gallery 60 NYC, I am particularly struck by the range of colors and surfaces the body of works possess. In all wood-fire ceramics, the forces of temperature and the kiln's atmosphere have both a mighty and mysterious effect on aesthetic qualities. Personally, as I continue to make and fire, teach and learn, I find myself repeatedly sensing that while specific goals are met, like improving the overall quality of firings, the formative forces that create the kiln effects remain elusive.

Take for instance the Blue Vase. This piece, for me, represents a step forward in comprehending the kiln's response to a particular method of stoking. We add wood to the front of the kiln as well as to an auxiliary firebox located at the center of the kiln. Apart from, through the diligent work of fellow stoke crew members, having



discovered the kiln's preference for simultaneous stoking of the fireboxes...I was both surprised and delighted to see the gray-blue and white surface of this piece as it stood out in the kiln upon unloading. My guess is that a combination of close proximity to the auxiliary firebox, high temperatures, heavy wood ash accumulation and a restricted supply of oxygen produced this most interesting effect. The unique qualities not only caught my attention at the time, they continue to serve as inspiration for further investigation in future firings. With practice and a bit of luck, a greater understanding of the variables that yielded these results may emerge.

The Magenta Mug with natural ash glaze is another example of how a new aspect of our process affects the fired outcome. Over the past year or so, I, along with a small group of fellow potters, have begun an exploration of the offerings of reduction cooling, a process that involves regulating the kiln's atmosphere as it cools. Simply put, iron in the clay responds, oftentimes favorably, to a high-fuel / low-oxygen environment. Experimentation with this newfound world of color and surface has opened up a myriad of possibilities. Excitement mounts as I, along with cherished friends and fellow potters, experience the thrill of chasing the unknown while finding inspiration to further investigate the creative potential of this most special method.

Alongside an amazing group of potters, I find myself wondering what kinds of challenges, discoveries, and fired outcomes lie ahead? One thing I know, we'll keep questioning

while engaging in our visceral conversation and most definitely continue to experience the challenges and triumphs of wood-firing.



FOUR YEARS ON A STONE



Wood firing is an integral part of my pottery practice, and it all began when I was an apprentice in Japan. I was the first *deshi* to Kojima Kaitaro, a well-known potter in Sōja, Japan, specializing in Oribe, Shino, and Seto pottery. As an eager, just-graduated 23-year-old, growing into my role as an apprentice took time and patience.

石の上にも三年 (**Ishi no ue ni mo sannen**) – Three years on a stone. This proverb was imparted to me early on, and I took it to heart. It means that in the face of adversity, one can achieve



their goals with patience and perseverance. My job was to clean, prepare, observe, and anticipate. Long days consisted not only of assisting with pottery but also of chauffeuring, cooking, cleaning, and walking the dog (Bruce!). There were freezing cold mornings filled with the smell of the kerosene stove, the beautiful view from the studio of an ancient burial mound, and the rhythm and seasonality of the food and traditions.

Gradually, under my *sensei's* watchful eye, I improved my techniques and was, in turn, entrusted with bigger and more difficult projects. It was then that Kojima-sensei introduced me to the art of Japanese wood firing.

There is something about this trifecta of clay, wood, and fire that creates an incredible beauty and synergy that cannot be measured by just its parts. The intense and lengthy process of creating the work, stacking the kiln with the utmost thoughtfulness and care, and the actual firing encompasses a journey of dedication and skill. The community that forms around the firing becomes your family through shared strategies, stories, and late nights. To see the pots slowly accumulate flurries of ash as the firing progresses, the flames

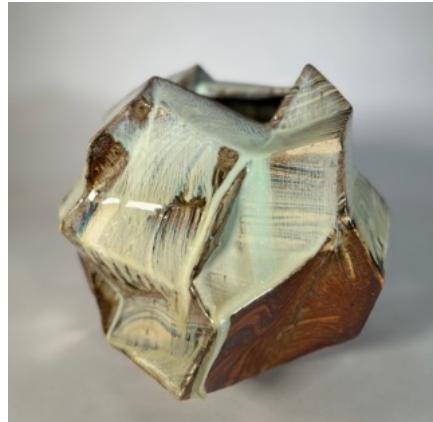
licking the pots and traveling through the kiln, is just magical. When all the parts align, the results are completely unique and spectacular. Watching my first *hikidashi*—a red-hot tea bowl being extracted from the kiln to cool into a deep and soft kuro Oribe—was mesmerizing. I was so immersed that I stared too long and too close and melted my glasses. I was hooked.

Wood firing feels like a ritual, a collaboration with the elements. It transforms clay into more than just a functional object—it becomes a record of the clay and fire's journey, an alchemy between earth and flame. It was raw and unforgiving at times, unpredictable, yet it resonated with a deep truth about the nature of creation.

At the end of my four-year apprenticeship, my teacher granted me my own signature for my pots. I was 一人前

(**ichininmae**), a full-fledged Japanese potter, and I had the opportunity to hold a solo show in Okayama. Working on my own independent creations after the years of

apprenticeship felt both effortless and invigorating. It made me want to experiment with sculptural shapes and different clays and glazes to see how the wood fire would transform them. It's a process I continue today, and I am always surprised and awestruck by the results.



In my current body of work at *Fiat Ignis II*, I have returned to my sculptural roots from my thesis work in college. I am still fascinated by the interaction between flame, ash, and form. In these works, I explore the possible dimensions that wood firing can contribute to the movement and life of a pot. The flame and ash flow through the kiln, and around your pots, marking them in distinct or intriguingly subtle ways. Creating surfaces that redirect and play with the flame and ash during wood firing is a fascinating process and one that I will continue to explore with absolute joy.



Jenna Pyzowski

ANCIENT STONE REBORN

I became interested in ceramics because of my love of ancient and classical sculpture, ruins, and artifacts. I look at these objects in museums and they are silent, but they still speak, and they open up a curiosity within me of the story they are trying to tell - who created it, where in the earth did the material come from, who used it or who does it represent, and how many hands did it pass through before it wound up here in a glass case? Stone, ceramic, and metals stand the test of time better than wood or fibers. And now, we are adding new man made materials to the earth: plastics - which are really ancient in origin as well, as they are created from fossil fuels. Who knows what the artifacts



of our time will look like in two thousand years, if the earth survives that long. Who will be there to discover them?

As ceramic artists, we are manipulating materials that are the result of millions of years of geological processes, stone eroded into tiny particles that will become clay, as well as stone ground to dust by humans to create glazes. We take these ancient materials from the earth and initiate a geological event to create essentially permanent forms to satisfy our needs and aesthetic desires. Permanent... until they are ground back into dust, maybe in a few million years time. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust... so much slower than the decomposition of our bodies.



Post-industrial mass produced pottery, like many other easily acquired products, separates many people from the idea of

how ceramic objects are actually made. I think about these things as I work with and fire clay. I choose these processes and materials because they connect me to humans that lived hundreds and thousands of years before me in all parts of the world. I think about my Mediterranean roots, and if any of the objects I've admired in museums could have been made or used by an ancestor of mine.

Wood firing connects us to the earth more clearly than newer firing methods. Not only do we create the work itself with the materials it has provided to us, but we collaborate with the trees beyond using them as a fuel source- they paint our work with the minerals they drank from the soil when they turn to ash and melt on the surface of our pieces. The inferno reminds us that we are recreating an environment like that of the earth's core. There is nothing like looking into the kiln at top temperatures and feeling the heat pulsing through the glowing pots as new ash lands and eventually disappears into their illuminated forms. The night shift is my favorite because the world around the kiln is quiet and dark and you can feel the true magic of the kiln when it is glowing and breathing and has become a living creature. We, the artists, have relinquished much of our control and entrust the kiln to finish the project as it desires. Sometimes we will be disappointed, but the absolute love and respect for the process, and the breathtaking results of the successes, are worth the hours of labor and the inevitable losses. When the bricks of the door are taken down and the ash is swept away, each piece that emerges from the kiln is already marked by the events of the past few days with flame patterns, drips of ash, and wad marks

that tell us how it stood in the kiln throughout its transformation. Now the pieces will go on to live their lives, which will be much longer than their creator's, and continue their history that began millions of years ago deep within the earth.



A KILN HAD TO BE BUILT

Sooner or later, every woodfire potter wants to build their own kiln. Every kiln produces its own, peculiar effects, changing the color of different clays and depositing ash in its own way and the potter needs to make work that is suited to that particular kiln. But it's probably a good thing that most potters building their first kiln don't know how much it will require of them in terms of time, physical labor, and mental energy. Because if they did know what it takes, many of them would never start. Not to mention the cost. Constructing a kiln is a little like building a fire-breathing beast that burns money.

Earlier this fall, I began construction on a small anagama, or single chambered kiln, in Ashton, Maryland, near my studio in Washington, DC. My partner in this project, Jordan Taylor, is a highly experienced potter and kiln builder. Together we designed the kiln (with considerable input from Jordan) and



began digging the foundation in mid-October. Every decision that we made, from where to site the kiln in his shed to whether or not to have a grate, had implications for the materials it would take and the manual labor we would have to invest.

That labor has been provided almost entirely by Jordan and me. Before becoming a potter, I was an award-winning journalist and health policy expert, neither of which exactly prepares a person for hard physical work. Moving more than 3,800 bricks (and still counting) and digging an 8- by 5- by 3-foot hole by hand has required more stamina than anything I've ever encountered.

We are building a sprung-arch kiln, which simply means we constructed the scaffolding for the arch from split bamboo, which has been bent into shape and held in place with wire. Once the bricks are in place, we'll remove the scaffolding - and pray the arch does not collapse. Bamboo strips are thin, light and yet incredibly strong, holding up several hundred pounds of brick and the downward force they exert as we build from the bottom up towards the top of the arch. Along the kiln's crest, we have to make compound cuts in



bricks that will serve as keystones. The wedge shape of the keys holds the entire magnificent construction in place, taking on the compressive forces of the bricks beside it. From the back, the kiln is a leviathan, a bamboo and brick creature whose thermodynamic shape mirrors the hydrodynamic build of a whale.

Historians marvel at the arched stone bridges built by the Romans, but arched kilns were being built in China as early as 2000 BCE. Either way, constructing a tube made from brick is an ancient process that gets reinvented every time a potter makes the fateful decision to build their own kiln.



ENTANGLEMENT

A potter I visited in Shigaraki once mentioned that metamorphic rock could be considered the ultimate form of ceramic art—if you assume the earth itself is the kiln. Later, he took me to a hill to show me the remnants of an ancient *anagama*, a wood-fired kiln. The hill was steep, and it was easy to imagine how people had taken advantage of the slope to build a climbing kiln. After slipping a few times on the incline, he picked up what I thought was a rock. But no—it wasn't a rock. It was a fragment of a *saggar*.



A *saggar* is a ceramic container used to protect vessels from natural wood ash, allowing ancient potters to achieve incredibly refined surfaces without the benefit of modern

electric or gas kilns. In fact, the dynamic textures of the *saggar* itself were far more interesting than the objects it once protected.

All my teabowls are fired in *saggars*, but I cut holes into the sides so I can observe the interaction between the inner and outer atmospheres. The relationship between what's inside and what's outside is endlessly fascinating to me. When you think about the core of the soul, you inevitably consider the body that contains it—and vice versa.



My friends and mentors often say, "Kiichi, don't overthink it. Just do it." And they're right—at least, I think so. Oops, there it is again—'think.' All I know is the direction I'm headed, and the final destination doesn't matter. You could describe me with a proverb: *Blind men appraising an elephant*. Perhaps it's time for a cup of tea as we reflect on the beautiful foolishness of these things.

The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and the walls, not in the roof and walls themselves

— Okakura Kakuzo "The Book of Tea" 1906

This book is published to celebrate the second year of our wood-fired pottery group exhibition, a milestone that reflects the passion and dedication of the artists who bring this ceramic art to life.

Fiat Ignis II: Let There Be Fire

Pottery & Ceramic Art Exhibition Gallery 60 NYC x New England Wood Firing Conference

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the artists and participants who made this exhibition possible. Your creativity and commitment continue to inspire and elevate the world of ceramic art.

Ceramic Artists:

Keiko Inouye, Eike Maas, Shannon Brownlee, Judy Weddle, Mark Robert Rountree, Jenna Pyzowski, Trevor Youngberg, Frank Olt, Minkyung Choi, Mandy Henson Wasserman, Dan Christoffel, Kiichi Takeuchi

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