

# TONY MOORE in four firings



Roger Lipsey

## 1. Kiln = koan

Tony Moore, the Anglo-American ceramic artist who lives and works on a hilltop in the lower Hudson Valley, has a koan. Such good fortune: his koan is evident, unavoidable. It is his kiln. A massive bicameral anagama and noborigama, it sets the scale for materials and effort, creative imagination and results, and not least for the community of artists and friends who participate in firings. Materials – a Great Wall of China of firewood, gathered from the endless forests in the region, cut to precise size and thickness. Effort – mental, physical, emotional. The kiln has its own mind, it is as dangerous as a tiger on a boat adrift at sea.

It responds to foresight and calculations but retains all privileges – to act differently than expected, to create or destroy, to melt a potter's hopes or reward them beyond expectation. Community – Moore is not the only servant of the kiln. Every firing needs a cast of participants to feed the flames, make adjustments, keep watch through the night. The kiln is a magnet, the centre of the most sincere community imaginable in the sense that participants know they are needed and willingly give their all.

Moore's creative instrument is the kiln. Larger than him, larger than any of us, he built it some ten years ago and since then

has belonged to it. As a Zen meditator belongs to his koan until it's solved. But there is a difference: this koan doesn't ask to be definitively solved, it asks to be lived and explored. Each firing is a solution that poses new questions.

## 2. Feet of clay

A few years ago Moore began asking around in his Hudson Valley community for feet. He wanted friends and family, local artists, even the day labourers assisting his kiln operation to allow him to mould clay around their feet, leading eventually to a pair of clay shoes. It was not a casual project: he made some seventy pairs of shoes, half of them fired in the anagama, the other half in the noborigama. In the end he could array them as if two ancient armies had left their footwear behind. Taken two by two rather than in battle formation, they are touching objects. Nostalgic, timeless – fossil footwear from some long-ago peasant culture. Placed at a doorway, a pair of them extends a welcome. Someone is at home. They set a standard of simplicity. There are many Moores in this one fellow wrestling with a kiln. The maker of footwear is a poet of the everyday, of the plain and blessed human. And a poet concerned with time. These feet of clay both abolish time and accentuate it.

## 3. Stone inclusions

There is a debate in the soul of this artist – so I surmise – between two identities: the poet we have encountered and a warrior “with stone inclusions”. The phrase is from the technical description of certain recent works. Consider a sequence of platters. The

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top **Intersection** (detail), 70 pairs of ceramic shoes directly moulded from the feet of members of the community", 2008

below **See Without Fear**  
16.5 x 26.7 x 19 cm, 2009

opposite page  
**Large Anagama Platter**  
39.5 x 57.25 x 6.5 cm, 2010





top **Large Noborigama Platter**, 39.5 x 57.25 x 6.5 cm, 2012

opposite page **Large Anagama Platter**, 39.5 x 57.25 x 6.5 cm cm, 2012

first represents in every sense of the word painting with fire, as Moore has said of his work. It is the work of a ceramic artist who has coaxed the kiln into becoming a colour-field painter using glaze and flame and ash to make a new poetry. The charred lower corner enters into this poetry as a counterpoint, a painterly gesture in keeping with modernist treatment of the edge. The platter continues its homage to modernism – to Matisse’s vision of the essence of trees, Bonnard’s muted palette, even Redon’s enigmatic atmospheres – but with stone inclusions (white fire-resistant quartz) playing two quite different roles: as rocky elements of landscape and as seemingly random interruptions. Some sensibility other than the poetic and lyrical is nearby. It demands a place, makes its marks.

“Large Anagama Platter” (opposite page) carries that sensibility to its limit: the stone inclusions dominate a cratered field, the impress of plant and crustacean forms feels strewn against a harsh ground. If modernism is still to be considered, it is the modernism of art brut, of deliberate and willing harshness, born of curiosity about the limits of painting or sculpting with fire in cooperation with the kiln, but also – so I surmise – born of the artist’s internal need to find a compelling visual equivalent to the harshness of our world. Works in Moore’s past, particularly the series constructed from moulds of the artist’s head serving as memento mori in war protests and reflections on mortality, bear out this interpretation. There is a stone inclusion in our lives.

But the sequence doesn’t end there. The platter returns the poet and the warrior to harmony. It is a most original work in

which “crawling shino”, controlled as much by the kiln as by the artist, creates a surface both brut and lyrical. I have never seen such a thing before.

#### 4. Coomaraswamy’s bridge

Who isn’t struck from time to time by the unknowability and inevitability of creative trajectories – of where the artist is today and where he or she goes next. From one perspective the trajectory is wholly unknown; one can’t possibly predict. From a second perspective there is an internal logic tied to a specific sensibility that presses toward completion. The process is risky.

Coomaraswamy’s bridge comes to mind. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) was an art historian and religious philosopher of overwhelming learning who tolerated in his writings creative riffs of great poetic power. In an essay on Buddhist art he thought about the symbolism of the bridge in a way that evokes the clarity and enigma of the artist’s path. The magical passage begins with reflections on the locality of religious symbols.

[Symbols] can . . . be carried from place to place. Not that the Spirit is therefore in one place more than another or can be carried about, but that we ... are necessarily in some one place or another. If the use of the symbol is to function ... as a bridge between the world of local position and a “world” that cannot be traversed or described in terms of size, it is sufficiently evident that the hither end of such a bridge must be somewhere, and in fact wherever our edification begins: procedure is from the known to the unknown; it is the other end of the bridge that has no position.

Tony Moore is traversing such a bridge. Dare one say – would it spoil anything? – that the journey is a pilgrimage. In that light, his recent works are in part landscapes of the journey and the record of a pilgrim’s heartening dreams. Shoes also are needed.



#### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My work is concerned with the relationship of humanity and nature. I conceive of an expanded concept of "Nature" as embodying all existence, both the seen and unseen, sociopolitical events, daily occurrences, as well as private intuitions that are made concrete through creative action. My objects are places of remembrance where multiplicities of associations take place. Most recently these have been concerned with issues of the human condition. Often the resultant forms are discovered as though they were preexistent, and my own actions are to simply reveal their inherent truth.

#### TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The works are fired in a Japanese style, eighteen foot long, double chambered, Anagama-Noborigama wood-fire kiln for four days in atmospheric reduction to pyrometric cones 10 – 12. Approximately three and a half cords of mixed hardwood are used throughout the firing.

#### PAINTING WITH FIRE

In wood-firing it is my intent to work hand in hand with nature, to dust the surface of my objects with a wood-ash patina and to impart the vibrancy of fire colour to their forms.

**Roger Lipsey**, PhD, writes on a wide range of topics from art history and criticism to spirituality. His book *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (1988) remains in print with Dover Books.

*Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of Buddhist Art," in Coomaraswamy 1: Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism, ed. Roger Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, 158–59.*

**Tony Moore** was born in England on January 23rd 1948. He moved to the US from 1971-73 where he received a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Sculpture from Yale University. He became an American citizen and maintained a studio in NYC from 1973 to 1998 before relocating 50 miles north to the picturesque Hudson Valley where he built a studio and Anagama/Noborigama kiln on a mountain top property near Cold Spring, NY. Tony Moore's work is represented in international museum collections, including the Guggenheim Museum and Brooklyn Museum, US and the Yorkshire Museum and Derby Museum, UK.

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