

Passionate Fire

Woodfirers of the Hudson Valley

Article by Roger Lipsey



Tony Moore. Shrine #1. Woodfired stoneware with natural willow ash glaze. 37 x 21 x 21 cm.



Paul Chaleff. Long Neck Vase Form. Anagama fired with natural fly ash glaze. 71 x 46 x 46 cm.

TONY MOORE, THE BRITISH-AMERICAN CERAMIC ARTIST and painter, now resident in Cold Spring New York, has known for some time that woodfired kilns, and artists committed to their use, dot the Hudson Valley. Paul Chaleff in Ancramdale, Jeff Shapiro in Accord, Jane Herold in Palisades, Roger Baumann in Lake Peekskill – these and still more artists in the region an hour or two north of New York City have

built mighty kilns, learnt their secrets, and now produce some of the most striking claywork to be found anywhere. In December 2002, Moore, as a guest curator, gathered an exhibition at Germaine Keller Gallery in Garrison's Landing, a river-hugging cluster of 18th and 19th century buildings directly across the Hudson from West Point, the US military academy. The exhibition took place with a full roster of participating artists



Roger Baumann. Ikebana Flower Vase. Woodfired ceramic. 10 x 40 x 10 cm.



Jeff Shapiro. Container. Anagama fired with natural fly ash glaze. 25 x 40 x 40 cm.

from the Hudson Valley including Roger Baumann, Paul Chaleff, Pascal Chmelar, Rich Conti, Jane Herold, Grace Knowlton, Tony Moore, Tim Rowan and Jeff Shapiro. Paul Chaleff was a pioneer in designing and exploring the uses of the woodfired kiln in the mid-1970s, and only a few years later Jeff Shapiro built his first in the US. A second exhibition, under the same title, is being prepared by Keller and

Moore and will open in November 2003.

Readers of this magazine who are ceramic artists or collectors will know that woodfired kilns are becoming the object of a legitimate cult. The source from which most of the artists in Moore's exhibition have drawn is the Japanese woodfired kiln, although the traditional Japanese anagama, or climbing kiln built into a hillside, has given rise in the Hudson Valley to



Jane Herold. *Plate*. Woodfired stoneware. 4 x 25 cm dia.



Rich Conti. *Teapot*. Anagama fired. 14 x 20 x 14 cm.

thoroughly studied woodfired kilns of other types, often resembling adobe dwellings with arched roofs, mysterious chambers and dampers, and much else understood only by initiates.

The kilns deserve cult status because they are often more difficult to build and always more difficult to operate than any other type. They ask much of the artist. Fired for periods lasting from one day to a week or more, they must be patiently and constantly tended: no one sleeps well or long during a firing. And because the kiln is so demanding, firing is a community activity that draws together the artists whose works may be inside the kiln, as well as spouses, assistants and students. The hours are long, the work of stoking and controlling the fire is physically demanding, and the company is good. For all these reasons, firing such a kiln is a vigil and a celebration.

It is also a risk. Even with careful calculation by experienced artists, the result is somewhat unknown until the kiln is cool enough to open and the objects within stand revealed. While some effects are predictable, much that occurs in the closed, superheated kiln is unpredictable. Colours, textures and elements of sculptural shape represent a collaboration between the artist and the fire. Intention and chance are fused into one. This is not a kiln that produces cool perfection. It produces events – objects that have ‘passed through the fire’ and bear its signature. Imperfect to some degree in form, texture and colour, they are nonetheless perfect and, at best, brilliantly alive. In 16th century Japan, Sen-No-Rikyu, the revered founder of the tea ceremony, discovered the perfection of this kind of imperfection and taught enduring lessons about it that still influence us today. The ceramic artists in this exhibition are his heirs.

Roger Baumann’s great hump of a kiln is located at his studio in Lake Peekskill. Teaching at several regional schools, Baumann generously opens his kiln to

the use of students so that they may in time become, like himself, initiates of the sturdy cult of the woodfired kiln. Among his striking contributions to the exhibition is a simple ikebana vessel that evokes things other than itself – the hull of an ancient boat, a ceremonial slipper. It occupies a magical edge where brute matter begins to be form, begins to join the world of shaped and useful objects. “Opting,” he has said, “for the less controlled but oftentimes more magical results of a wood-fuelled kiln, I give up much control to the flame. The resulting pieces are a recording of the pathways of the long lazy flame.”

Paul Chaleff was one of the first artists in the US to explore woodfiring and he has earned an international reputation for work ranging from objects of use to monumental clay sculpture. For those of us who regret the passing of Isamu Noguchi, whose mastery drew from roots in both Western and Japanese art, Chaleff’s art on the sculptural scale offers the opportunity for a new engagement with a major talent of similar background. Chaleff knows his Rikyu, so to speak – he apprenticed at length in Japan – but he also knows his Voukos and the fullness of 20th century abstract painting and sculpture. Among the works in the Garrison’s Landing exhibition, a long-necked vessel of considerable size offers a powerfully sculptural presence. Its charred surfaces and interplay between pure geometry and unpredictable touch take us into a remote realm of sensibility, where things are simpler and more silent.

Pascal Chmelar is a lyrical poet in clay. Catching the spirit of woodfiring from Paul Chaleff, with whom he apprenticed for several years, Chmelar built his own 16-foot anagama kiln in the mid-’90s. His works on exhibition include three plates that show what might have occurred had Kasimir Malevich discovered the woodfired kiln: simple glaze-outlined geometrical shapes are transformed in the fire

into breaths, hovering signs, intimations. Even Chmelar's humbler utilitarian works in the exhibition – a pair of teabowls inscribed with simple fire-modified geometries – share in an aesthetic that is part Japan, part early Modernism, and altogether satisfying in its blend of simple shapes and complex colour and texture (the two features are inextricably bound). Chmelar's work, like that of several others in this exhibition, demonstrates beyond doubt that the spirit of 20th century abstraction endures brilliantly to this day in the art of woodfired clay, as if it has taken shelter there from the trendy battles that rapidly consume one style after another. Again Noguchi comes to mind: he was beyond battles, beyond style, particularly in his later work.

In Woodstock, New York, Rich Conti has revived and now directs the Byrdcliffe Ceramic Studio on the basis of his experience of some of the great clay programs across the US, from Alfred and Pratt Institute to the Archie Bray Foundation. Finest among his contributions to this exhibition is a self-possessed, rather pouty teapot of ochre and grey wood ash that echoes the contours of the vessel itself. Like a small creature of considerable pride, this teapot stands aloof yet also invites touch.

Jane Herold's work in the exhibition takes us into an altogether different world of sensibility. One of Michael Cardew's last apprentices, she worked with this noted artist in Cornwall, England, in the early '80s and bears that rich stamp in her work to this day – the stamp of rural English pottery, of the resolute purpose to make useful objects for daily life. She knows the joy of individually crafted objects for the home and offers that joy to others. This is what William Morris taught long ago in England. The lesson remains whole and live in Herold's pottery – let us call it that because the term, ancient and honourable, truly fits.

"Dining tables and sideboards, counters and kitchen sinks are the exhibitions of which I am most proud," she recently wrote. "Use is an honour, the truest praise you could possibly give, for the kinds of pots I make." Among the exhibited works, a series of dinner plates is particularly pleasing. Their swirling linear sgraffito design is a meal in itself, like a fine coulis of sauce laid into the plate long before pasta or greens arrive. The woodfiring process endows the natural ash glaze with endless small incidents, pocks and differing densities that call one's interest. There is no need to serve a meal; just serve these plates and all will be well.

Grace Knowlton contributed to the Garrison's Landing exhibition four of her signature woodfired



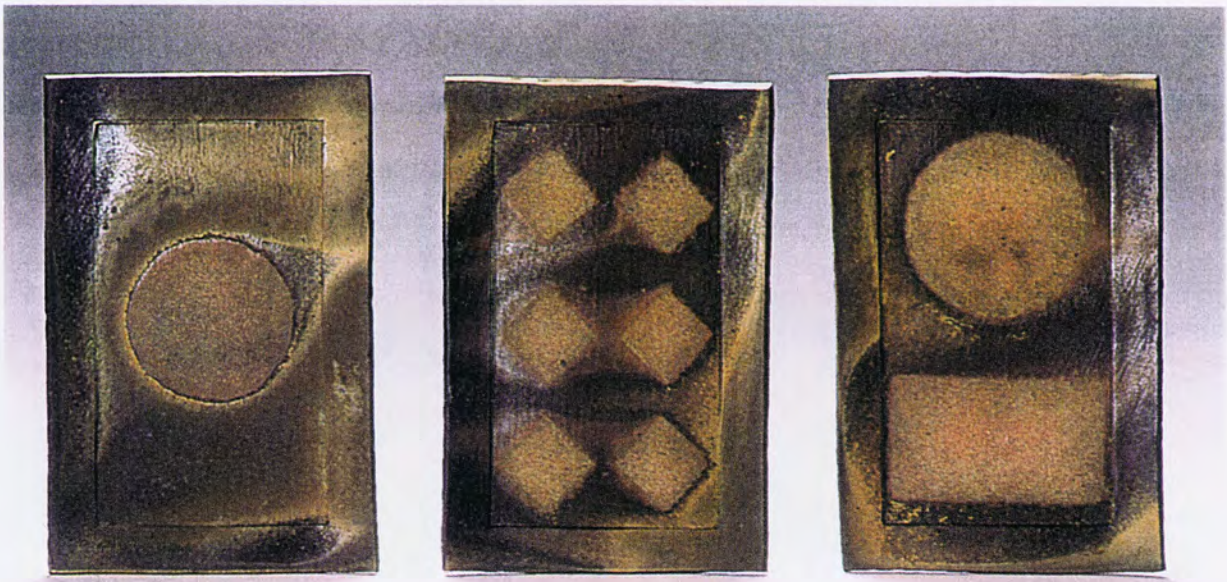
Grace Knowlton. *Four woodfired clay spheres. Anagama fired. 46 x 18 cm.*

clay spheres from the mid 1980s. As much at home as a painter and draughtswoman as an artist in clay, she uses the simplest of forms – the sphere – in a painterly manner as the support for varied texture and colour (again inseparable) and in a sculptural manner as a field for plastic events of all kinds. Rooted in the experience and formal world of American Abstract Expressionism, her work finds its kinships more in that realm – the realm of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell – than in the classic woodfired world.

Tony Moore, curator of this exhibition, is both a ceramic artist and a painter. He is also a kiln builder. At the time of the 2002 exhibition, he was cementing into place the final bricks in the complex woodfired kiln he has built at his home and studio on a mountaintop in Cold Spring, New York. The first firing occurred in May, 2003, after a rough winter that put outdoor work on hold. Technically, the firing was a remarkable success. Some 16 artists participated in the 24-hour firing, and many returned a week later for the labour of kiln opening, followed by a ceremony of good wishes and hope for the future of this new kiln.

Moore is a community builder as well: through this exhibition and other means, he has the generous instinct to draw together the woodfiring artists of the region, to their mutual benefit. Among his works on exhibition, *Shrine #1* particularly stands out. An enigmatic object of quiet poetry, it is something of a kiln itself and perhaps echoes early industrial structures in Moore's native Derbyshire. It offers us a shrine for simple remembrances, simple practices that go to the heart of things. Moore's signature teabowls were also well represented in the exhibition. These are works in which a painter's sure sense for discreet decoration blends with the ceramist's interest in perpetuating the centuries-old tradition of teaware – in his own way.

Tim Rowan is among the artists in the Garrison's Landing exhibition who have entered into Japanese



Pascal Chmelar. *Three Woodfired plates*. Anagama fired with geometric, clay wad masked design. 33 x 22 cm each.



Tim Rowan. *Vessel*. Anagama fired. 23 x 53 x 35 cm.

tradition. After finishing his BFA and MFA degrees, he was apprenticed for two years in Japan and returned to build a largely traditional anagama kiln at his Stoneridge studio. Using only local clay, Rowan has gone in search of an elemental, fire-blasted art that explores the perfection of imperfection. A large handbuilt floor piece, known simply as *Vessel*, lingers in one's memory. It is the single form of many possible things: a relic retrieved from a shipwreck, an archaeological find, a monumental Ikebana vessel that would complement the freshness of flowers and stalks with its earthy weight. Rowan is one who gives his work to the fire and receives it back, changed.

Jeff Shapiro is an artist of international reputation who was apprenticed for seven years in Japan and now lives and works in the Hudson Valley with his Japanese wife. His was one of the first anagama kilns

to be built in the US, and the work he fires in it shows him to be many artists in one – sculptor, painter, potter. His art demonstrates the affinity between the traditional Japanese teaware aesthetic and the most refined 20th century abstract aesthetic. Among the works on exhibition, a large container confirms this view: across the orderly contours of a rather classically proportioned, full-bodied vessel, an intricate flow of colour and texture offers literally innumerable painterly effects.

The exhibition as a whole has a physical impact. We receive many arts with our eyes and minds, with our ears, our hands. But the best of work in clay can be received in still another way. Somehow we recognise our kinship with clay not only through mind and senses but more mysteriously, in the middle of ourselves, as if in the belly. It doesn't matter whether we have ever thrown a pot on the wheel or shaped an object in clay and dipped it in glaze – we somehow know this material. It is already familiar. Skilled artists can work magic with it, show us shapes and textures, presences and moods we have never experienced before. But the best of their work will almost always feel close, approachable.

Dr Roger Lipsey is an independent scholar, speaker and critic who lives in the Hudson Valley. Author of *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Shambhala: Boston, 1987), he is a member of the steering committee for The Buddhism Project and is co-curator of the related exhibition at Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York. *Passionate Fire 2003: Woodfired Ceramics* will open on 1 November and remain on exhibition through 7 December at Germaine Keller Gallery, 17a Garrison's Landing, Garrison, New York (USA). This year the participating artists are Roger Baumann, Joy Brown, Peter Callas, Paul Chaleff, Tony Moore, Chrissy Callas, Tim Rowan and Jeff Shapiro.