Tony Moore. ***Mother Geisha****. Wood-fired ceramic, paddled and wire carved, natural fly-ash, anagama fired eight days to cone 8. 59 x 39.5 x 39.5 cm.*

Clay, Fire & Intention

A panel discussion introduced and led by Roger Lipsey

The participants in this discussion included Roger Baumann, Joy Brown, Paul Chaleff, Tony Moore (who also curated the exhibition), Tim Rowan and Jeff Shapiro.

CERAMIC ART IS A MYSTERIOUS AND MARVELLOUS medium. With weaving, it is probably the most ancient of arts. As it has reached us in the US, it often has two marks on it. One mark is Japan – Japan and the enduring influence of Sen-no Rikyu, the 16th century tea master who, though not himself a ceramic artist, shaped tea taste. His vision of simplicity, subtlety, and abstraction has touched us all. Like Johann Sebastian Bach, Rikyu was the source of a sensibility that prevails to this day.

But there is something else in ceramic art: the Western and modern language of abstraction. Our native exploration of abstraction carried right through the 20th century and into our own time from its origins in 1910 in France and Germany. Ceramic artists have their full share in that language; they belong to it, it belongs to them, just as much as it belongs to painters, sculptors, and other kinds of makers. These are the twin origins of much – though not all – we are discussing in ceramic art today: Rikyu's tea taste and 20th century abstraction.

One of the features of ceramic art that separates it from many other arts in our time is the recognised need for rigorous training – in a word, the need for apprenticeship. In the world at large, apprenticeship is nearly a forgotten word. Yet many of the ceramic artists in this discussion studied in traditional, and traditionally tough, workshops in Japan, and all of them would agree that apprenticeship was key to the development of maturity in their art.

This brings us to the first of several questions for the panel. Could you each tell us something of your apprenticeship experiences?

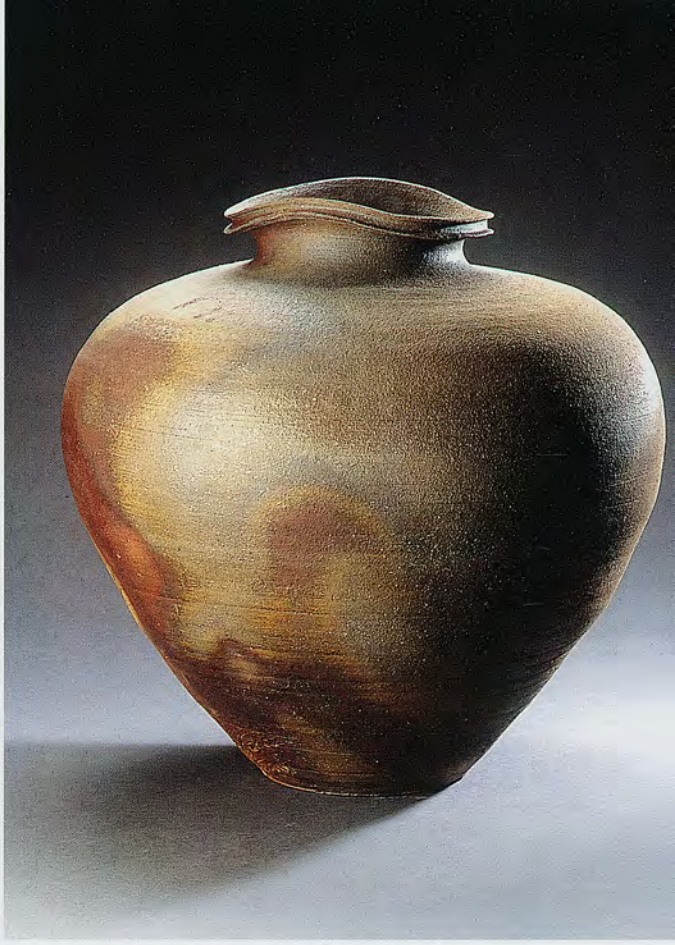
Joy Brown: I lived most of my early life in Japan. My father was a medical doctor who started a hospital there in the early '50s. I returned to the US for college but then resumed my life in Japan as an apprentice in pottery in Tamba. I was there for about a year. It was one of the most gruelling years of my life. I was the lowest person on the totem pole. We were to make little sake cups, and that's all we made all year long – thousands of them, never firing any. The essence of the process was that thinking dropped out. Your presence with the clay and your own internal process were all that mattered. The cups were like little dots along a line reflecting that internal process. In that experience I learnt. In college, I had been politically active. In Tamba, all that went out the window for the time being. If what I could do to help in the studio was serve tea, that's what I did. It was a total experience, profound in terms of laying the structure for how I work now.

Jeff Shapiro: I studied and lived in Japan for nine years, taking a non-traditional approach in the sense that I studied with a number of masters. The first one in Bizen was Isezaki Jun, from one of the original Bizen families. He invited me to come to a firing, and once there I realised that the entire village of Bizen, probably 350 kilns, related to clay. There were people who just fired kilns, people who made boxes, people who dug clay. There were results from all this effort – pieces were produced and sold – but the process was also a lifestyle.

Apprenticeships are long-term in Japan. If you spend seven to ten years as an apprentice, during that period you will have a meagre livelihood, if any. But at the end of your apprenticeship, traditionally you are able to buy land nearby, gain the patronage of your teacher and your teacher's clients, and – if your work is good – make a good living. In that pattern of apprenticeship, the first few years are minimal in terms of what's learnt. You have to learn the ropes of that particular workshop. You start to feel your way around. Gradually, as you understand more, you're given more responsibility and your work becomes part of the studio's output. By the end of those eight to 10 years, you've become a fully capable production potter.

Westerners who go to Japan to apprentice but only give it a year or two can't condense 10 years' worth of apprenticeship into that relatively short time. They will start just as long-term apprentices start, for the first six months literally sweeping floors and making clay. That might be the only thing they'll do, depending on the customs of the workshop. And they often feel gypped: "How can I learn anything here when I'm spending my first six months just making clay?" The answer is, you probably can't. If you're planning on having the full experience within a year or at most two years, it is probably not going to happen. It will be worthwhile, but it won't be a full apprenticeship.

I spent my first year at a studio in Kyoto. I didn't really like my teacher's work, but he had the inspired idea of telling me to go around and look at old kilns, look at old work, look at the exhibitions in town. When I saw the work of Bizen, I knew what I had to do next and went there for further training. But in time I moved on from Bizen. I did a year of apprenticeship at a kiln site in Kyushu – a tea ceremony kiln site, Takatori Seizan. I did another year in Shikoku with a potter who at first turned me away – "No, we don't need anybody." I really responded to his work, and so I decided to write him a letter. "No," he replied, "we don't take any people, don't write me again." I wrote another letter. He said to stop writing letters. I wrote him a third letter, and he said, "Well, I can't have you sending me letters all the time, so come work here and we'll see how it works out." I stayed for a year.



Paul Chaleff. ***Large Jar Form with Undulating Lip.*** *Wood-fired ceramic, wheel thrown, natural fly-ash glaze, anagama fired. 51 x 52 x 52 cm.*

After that, I had a sponsor, a country gentleman who owned a large construction company. He wanted to import culture into his little seaside village, and so he sponsored me there and generously built a house, studio and kiln. I stayed for three years. Then we had a sudden falling out, and I left. At that point I was yearning to return to the US but I didn't feel that I had enough ability yet, and so I went back and studied a further year at Bizen and learnt more about firing clay. Even after living and working for nine years in Japan, the technical ability I had acquired was at a low level. I was just a naive kid who didn't gain as much as he could have from Japan, technically speaking. But lessons from those years in Japan come up even now, 30 years later. There were undercurrents, there was so much about nature and process. It is all in my work now.

Paul Chaleff: I was a potter for 10 years before I went to Japan. I was already reasonably skilled when I decided that there was something very beautiful about a certain firing technique I'd encountered, and I went to search it out. I was American, and my concept was that I couldn't subordinate my personality to somebody else for a long period of time because I was already formed. But I lived in Japan for two years. Once there, I realised that some potters were famous,

but there was no correlation between famous and good. To make your own way, you have to use your eyes and rely on your own taste. Eventually I found an unknown potter who was poor, struggling, and unaccepted, but he was irreverent and I appreciated that. He made me an offer I couldn't refuse: "Look, I know where everything is, but I'm Japanese so they won't let me in. You're a foreigner, and you're our ticket in. I know all the apprentices and what they're doing. We can go in and study, but without getting caught in the system." This suited our personalities.

We did that for a little over a year. We cut wood and built and fired many kilns. As far as I was concerned, I was still searching for a specific solution to an artistic problem I had encountered in the US: I couldn't get the richness out of the kinds of firings I knew, I had seen these beautiful pots, and I wanted to find out how they were fired. Once I understood what I had come to understand, I returned to the US. I hadn't wanted to stay in Japan long – I was never really comfortable there.

At the time, 1977 or so, there was only one successfully functioning wood-burning kiln in the US – Peter Callas'. With Joy Brown's help, I built a large anagama in Pine Plains, New York. It was a struggle. We didn't know what materials to use. At first we wanted to model it exactly on what we had seen and used in Japan. Eventually we made some changes, not in principle but in details.

I have never lost an ounce of my original reverence for those primal pieces that I had first seen in the US and eventually learnt about in Japan.

Tim Rowan: I spent two years in Bizen apprenticed to Kakurezaki Ryuichi, making clay and cleaning and that sort of thing. Apart from the techniques you learn during a time of that kind, you're also learning about yourself, partly because so much of your previous life is removed. I was in a fairly isolated situation, alone in the studio working with my teacher and one other apprentice.

Tony Moore: I have served no apprenticeship of any kind. I've not followed many rules. At art school in England I started out in the clay studio but was soon drawn to sculpture. I came to the Yale School of Art in my early 20s, but my real focus was New York, which seemed to me the centre of the art world. After earning an MFA at Yale, I moved to New York and lived there for about 25 years – living the artist life. My sculpture gradually became painterly, and people started to refer to it as painting, and after a while I started calling myself a painter. During that time, I made some ceramics at Rutgers, mainly slab work and, thanks to a friend in England, started to form a ceramics collection. Ragnar Naess, an outstanding ceramic artist in New York, eventually said to me: "Tony, you collect ceramics. Why don't you try your own hand? You could take my class at the 92nd Street Y." And I did. It got to the point where I was sitting in front of the door at the Y, waiting for it to open, and at the end of the day I was the last person out. From that time, 1996, I have been on a quest to make up for lost time, to research, to visit other artists, to study their kilns, go to exhibitions, and essentially experience the fullness of the world of ceramics – particularly woodfired ceramics. Without the other artists on this panel, I wouldn't be here today. I have learnt from them. They have been a large part of my apprenticeship.

THE ARTIST'S PURPOSE

Roger Lipsey: Roger Baumann, could we begin the next cycle of discussion with you? We have assembled here one work by each panelist, as a support for exploring your mission as an artist. What is the essence of your art, and your sense of purpose as an artist?

Roger Baumann: There is a search for form and for the language of the physical object. it is also about communication. But I suppose that I should back up a little and say something about how I came to clay. I have little formal training in ceramics. I was an English major as an undergraduate and have a masters in art education, but I am basically self-taught. I had access to a decent studio but little instruction, and I just asked questions non-stop of people who knew more than I did. In 1998 I was invited to join a small group of international artists to work in Japan. Japan is the centre of the world if you're involved in woodfired pots. I stayed in Japan, and now I return to Japan quite often with groups of students. It offers enough for a lifetime of exploration; it is a wonderful, confounding place.

I struggle with the language of the object. How to articulate an emotion, a poetic gesture, in a physical object. That is the struggle, and that is my quest. The piece I brought to this discussion is an exploration of the quality or atmosphere called *wabi* by the Japanese. It is something natural, uncontrived. But there is always a struggle when you make something with your hands because it can't help but be contrived. I wanted an unpretentious chunk of clay associated with an element of nature. There is a concavity where you can place moss.

Paul Chaleff: Throwing and woodfiring are activities you can learn from and grow with. They are only part of the work, but for me those are the inspirational parts – like drawing for some painters. I use many other techniques; I have a large gas kiln, an electric kiln, I've worked in porcelain. But I'm informed by woodfiring. It is free, it is gestural, it has more serendipity than other work, you take more chances, and you learn from that. You have to constantly reanalyse who you are, and analyse the work – is it good? Bad? Why is it good, how is it good? Where is it strong? Where weak? – and let all of that inform your intelligence and your heart. Some people have used

the wood fire as a sculptural tool. I don't use the woodfire kiln as a sculptural tool as much as I use it as an inspirational tool. Then I go to other kilns and activities, take what I've learnt from woodfiring, gobble it up, translate it.

Jars are a universal type, a form of storage. Storage has many meanings. What would you store in a jar of this kind? Is it seeds, is it next year's life? Is it memories? Is it parts of yourself? You can make a jar in a factory but, given a choice, who would want to store memories in a factory-made jar?

Tony Moore: My work is concerned with energy, the energy that is all around us, that passes through us—the energy of existence itself. What interests me about woodfiring is the organic nature of the kiln. You release the object that you make to the fire of the kiln. It doesn't pass completely out of your control, but there are unexpected occurrences and you are working hand in hand with nature. The ash effects, the dryness of the surface, the colouration of the clay from fire marks – all such things are fitting to the work.

Joy Brown: Woodfiring forces me to grow. The process makes me discover myself in places where I need to develop a whole self. I probably went into clay originally so that I didn't have to talk to anybody. I could just point at the object, and people would look at that, not at me. But this work pushes me to the edges of who I am, and nudges me to grow in a more whole way.

The woodfiring process is a community effort. You need a community to fire the kiln, and so you're put to work with other people. Over the years, your intention and the clay and the fire and the kiln grow together. You're able to reveal the spirit in which the piece was made more and more clearly. When I work on these pieces, it is a meditation. It is a grounding. It is quiet. Technically, I make sculptural figures in just the same way I learnt to make big jars. We coiled and paddled and pinched big jars on a wheel, and that's how I make these – they're coiled and paddled and pinched. For me, they have the same spirit as a pot. I hope that the quiet place from which they emerge is revealed in the work.

Roger Baumann: I think we've probably all felt that quiet place in the work. It has something to do with the solitary nature of a ceramic artist, a potter. When it is four in the morning, and you've been working in the studio since three in the afternoon, you feel it is difficult to articulate something like that?

Paul Chaleff: The most creative part of it is the solitary part. It feeds you. You've been alone for days, or 18 hours at a stretch, and you feel enriched. Many young artists don't realise how much alone time comes with clay, don't realise that you have to keep reaching every day, every year, until you're sometimes in places you don't want to face. And then you have to reach through those places also.

Joy Brown. ***Sitter with Hands Crossed****. Wood-fired ceramic, coiled and slab built, anagama fired for eight days. 38 x 34 x 38 cm.*

Tim Rowan: The simple boxes, from a series I started a few years ago, show my interest in architecture and the sense of place and home. In that spirit I use native materials and try to find the best ways to use them. I often work with lidded containers that have the inside concealed. Formally, I'm interested in how the pieces work together and separately. I dig my own clay in central New Jersey. I live in Ulster County (New York State), but you find terminal glacial moraine in New Jersey. That's where all the clay is. I enjoy the process of finding clay, digging it, and then the experimentation of working with it, trying to figure it out. The clay I used for the boxes couldn't really be thrown on a wheel, and so I have to use other processes to work with it. Each clay speaks about a specific place, and it is unique to that place. With globalisation, many places are losing their identities. If you drive down these Wal-Mart roads in any town, you realise that you could be nearly anywhere in the world. That loss of specificity, of a sense of place, is happening everywhere. These are things I think about.

Jeff Shapiro: I try to perceive the artistic elements of what I'm doing, rather than collect information that can be dissected intellectually. I want to be moved and inspired and respond to what I encounter. I approach the process of making as a creative process, giving myself the freedom to improvise, to run with

Jeff Shapiro. ***Platter****. Wood-fired ceramic, natural fly-ash glaze, anagama fired for eight days. 9 x 40.5 cm.*

an idea and see where it takes me, to keep the work alive and evolving. If I don't approach my work in this way, it stagnates. I am interested in making my work more fluid. This may be the result of softer clay or of more spontaneous forming techniques. Less attention spent on technical perfection and more time spent on understanding the holistic approach to concept, material, and process. In the woodfire genre, the appeal of firing effects often dictates and overshadows other aspects of the work, but actually the material and forming process, as well as surface colour and texture, must be compatible. The firing alone cannot make up for weaknesses in either the clay character or the forming process. I respond to the beauty in the imperfections of nature. Perfection does not necessarily equate with beauty. It is for us to discover, to expand our vision and appreciate the beauty that exists outside of a predetermined Western perception. A torn leaf, a twisted branch, a crack in a wall. In ceramics, even cracks in clay can be beautiful, depending on how they relate to other aspects of a piece.

THE QUESTION OF QUALITY

Roger Lipsey: How can you know that a work is good or not? How do you recognise quality? As a student of Rikyu, I want to introduce this topic by recalling a tale of Rikyu and his wife So-on, who was also a great connoisseur of tea wares. Once Rikyu bought a famous incense burner at a high price. When he returned home with it, he and So-on sat down and gazed at it for some time. At last she said, "I think the feet are a little too high. Don't you think it would look better if they were cut down a bit?" Rikyu replied, "That's just what I was thinking." He sent for the stone carver and had one-tenth of an inch taken off. Such is the tale. All of you cull your own work—some things are better, some worse. What is the basis for judgment?

Paul Chaleff: Actually, I think Rikyu did something fairly despicable. It is the artist who makes the work and decides what he wants to exhibit or sell. That's the work, it shouldn't go beyond that. I've heard from curators and collectors that I shouldn't be the one culling, they should be the one culling. An artist is somebody who has a vision and presents that vision, good or bad, agreed to or not agreed to. In California, Rikyu could have been sued for what he did. You can accept a work of art or not – but you can't change it, that's unethical.

Tony Moore: Constantly pushing the threshold of your own experience in this process of discovery, just a little more and a little more, is a challenge. But, ultimately, what makes a work of art good? You have to let time pass.

Tim Rowan. ***Vessel****, wood-fired ceramic, hand formed found clay with stone inclusions, anagama fired eight days. 25.5 x 30.5 x 33 cm.*

Joy Brown: In the past, I was interested in judging a piece good or bad, but now I'm more interested in defining the quality that is unique to a piece. It is the artist's voice and expression filtering up into this physical form. It has a specific quality that evolves over many years. It is different for different people and different cultures. The response to it is intuitive and visceral, but informed by all one knows, all one has of tradition, skill, discipline.

THE QUESTION OF BEAUTY

Jeff Shapiro: I'm not interested in making something that nobody else has ever made. If that happens in the process, that's fine, but the important thing is to continue evolving as a person and for the work itself to continue evolving. That can't happen from an attitude of complacency or from a comfort zone. The important thing is to keep yourself on the edge, to keep yourself at the place where you're constantly feeling challenged as a human being and as an artist.

Paul Chaleff: We've touched on the idea of tradition throughout this discussion. When I went to Japan, I saw potters that carry a phenomenal weight of tradition on their shoulders. They have to find their own voices in that context. At that point in my training, Japanese tradition was as foreign to me as Pop Art was to them. But later I began to understand that working within a tradition can be experienced as something wholly new or as connecting the new to the old. There is a continuum. Once I put an 8000-year-old Neolithic Chinese pot on my lap. I reached inside – and felt a repair. The repair was made in just the same way I repair. Somebody 8000 years ago had the same idea. This was one of the most poignant moments of my life. I felt connected.

We are a human continuum with the same feelings, probably since the beginning. Bread smells good when it is baking, and it has always smelled good. Woodfired pieces would feel right in a 10,000-year-old house, in a 1000-year-old house, in a 500-year-old house, in a contemporary house, and – to be optimistic – 500 or 5000 years from now, they will still feel right.

Dr Roger Lipsey is the author of *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, reissued as a Dover paperback in 2004. He is currently writing a book on the abstract drawings of the Trappist monk and author, Thomas Merton, to be published by Shambhala Publications in 2006. This discussion was held in November, 2003, at the Garrison Art Centre, in Garrison's Landing, New York, moderated by Roger Lipsey. The artists were represented in an exhibition, which included Chrissy and Peter Callas, at the Germaine Keller Gallery located at 17A Garrison's Landing, NY 10524, USA Germainekeller@aol.com