

BEYOND THE PROCESS 1 2

Published in *Ceramics Monthly*, October 1986.

As wood firing has become increasingly popular, numerous conferences and articles on the subject have sought to discover what it is about this method that causes some of us to employ it over other techniques. A few years ago at one of those conferences, the panel found itself involved in an argument over the respective values of different aesthetic experiences. In the midst of the discussion, a member of the audience jumped up and demanded to know "what all of this had to do with wood firing." The incident has remained fresh in my mind because it points out how readily we in the ceramics world have embraced wood firing and its spectacular effects, without bothering to try to understand what it is about this process that moves us. What, for example, is its language and can we as artists still exploit this archaic vocabulary to communicate contemporary concerns?

Instead, we have remained preoccupied with the process, the how-to of wood firing. This is an understandable tendency in a field where method and material have long been emphasized before everything else. Indeed, as a field, we have defined ourselves by our material, and within that field by the process we use rather than by conceptual or aesthetic concerns. It is not surprising, therefore, that when one process or technique ceases to hold any appeal or falls out of fashion, some ceramists begin to search for another process to relieve their boredom and revive lifeless work. It is, consequently, no surprise that some, convinced that electric kilns and applied glazes are keeping them from reaching their full creative potential, have come to believe that wood firing is the answer to their aesthetic dilemmas.

The physically intensive and demanding process, with its phenomenon of melting ash, has become not just a process, but a "whole aesthetic." This attitude, which mistakenly implies that an aesthetic concept is limited to or contained in a specific technique, has not only kept many ceramists from making inspiring contributions to this genre, but has reinforced the opinion of others in the field that wood firing is nothing more than a quaint but irrelevant pastime practiced by those more concerned with life 200 years ago than with life in the latter part of the 20th century.

It is only when we begin to see the effects of wood firing in combination with choices of clay, form and the manipulation of that form as part of the language of ceramic art in general, that we can begin to make important statements which have meaning beyond the narrow or parochial concerns of material and technique. All too often, however, ceramists come to rely on the magical ability of scorch marks and melted ash to transform unsubstantial and poorly conceived pieces into works that on the surface seem exceptional and innovative. Sometimes they even believe that a single effect or combination of effects is more valuable or beautiful than others. While it may be true that some effects are rarer and more difficult to obtain than others, their value depends entirely on how they help to fulfill the conceptual concerns the artist brings to the work.

An effect can only be thought of as successful when it has been physically and intellectually integrated to the point that a person is almost entirely unaware of it when viewing a piece, in much the same way he/she is unaware of the vocabulary of a remarkable novel. It is not the vocabulary of a novel that

rob barnard essays

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makes it important or significant, but how the writer makes use of words to illuminate the human condition. The unfamiliar and peculiar effects of fused ash, brightly colored scorch marks and distorted form (which can be thought of as part of the vocabulary of wood firing) should only be considered a means the ceramist uses to develop a personal language.

Philip Rawson, in the keynote address at the 1984 Canadian Clay Conference (Banff, Alberta), remarked that “unless we develop our language of ceramic signs, recognize what they are and how they work, we remain ceramically illiterate.” He went on to say: “Clay is full of half formed thoughts, inconclusive shapes, rough manufacture and brushwork, casual fantasy. It can be very eye-catching from a distance, but it will only build into strong statements when the character in the variations in shape and placing also carries meaning – when a pot doesn’t have to be a generalized ripple or texture, but a shaped ripple or texture; when each of the ceramic signs connects logically with all the others.”

As long as wood firing is approached as a separate and unique activity within the ceramics field, our attempts to communicate feelings and ideas will be over shadowed and thwarted by the mystical and romantic notions about it so popular at the present. Wood firing must be seen merely for what it is – a technique, one option among many, no more important or valuable than any others existing in ceramic art. It is ultimately the responsibility of the artist, not the exotic and unpredictable effects of wood firing, to create work which has a style or language that points beyond material, function and historical and cultural references to a higher and more profound level of awareness and understanding.