

## WOODFIRING – CHALLENGE OR REFUGE

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When I first began making woodfired work my teacher, Yagi Kazuo, warned me that if I couldn't use bland commercial clay and glazes and an electric kiln to make interesting pottery then I had no business fooling around with something as difficult and challenging as woodfiring. Of course, he wasn't talking about the technical side of woodfiring – the ability to fire a kiln and achieve certain dramatic effects. By difficult he meant the ability to discern real artistic achievement from the kind of accidental and random transformation that occurs when clay is subjected to the intense atmosphere and temperature of a woodfired kiln. He recognized the seductive nature of the process and the appeal of scorched clay and brilliant runny glaze and he cautioned me against letting that become the main force behind the work I made. Woodfiring, he felt, could become a crutch and hinder the growth and development of a potter by giving him or her the illusion of success when in fact that so-called "success" was entirely the result of the fortuitous interaction of natural elements like fire and clay. To him art was not about the physical structure of a work, but rather the artist's spiritual struggle that supports that structure.

This "spiritual" struggle by the artist to come to some kind of understanding of "ones own absolutely inconsistent existence" was to Yagi the *raison d'être* for making art. It seems to me that woodfiring only has meaning when it is used as a tool to challenge one's own preconceptions about the nature of beauty and, consequently, begins to make us think about what it means to be human. But if it is used as a refuge from the burden artistic responsibility, like one of those machines found at county fairs across the country that spins a canvas while you drip different color paint on it hoping to create your own "unique" painting, then it is certainly a waste of time and, more importantly, trees. Ultimately, what separates the serious ceramics artist from the indifferent ceramics artist is not what they make – sculpture or pottery – or how they fire – electric or wood – but rather the desire and willingness to explore and discuss in his or her work the kinds of issues Yagi spoke. As he said, "No matter how interesting the procedure might have been, a boring object is just a boring object."