



In Search of My Mark

Shawn O'Connor searches for new effects from traditional woodfiring

DURING MY FIRST YEAR GRADUATE REVIEW, my committee brought to my attention that the work I was making looked generic. In many ways they were right. My forms were basic and, as I looked at my work, I noticed that it did not contain any mastery of skill or show any personal touch. I was finishing my work by firing everything in the wood kiln. This was not providing success at finding my own voice. I was getting what I thought were good results; I had nice flashing and toasty warm colours but my woodfired pots looked like any woodfired pots you could find around the country with typical ash and flash effects. I wondered how I could create work that was not generic looking. During my review, one of my advisors challenged me to do something with the woodfire process that had not been done before. This seemed like an impossible challenge since woodfiring has such a long history, but I was up for the challenge. What excited me about the woodfire process was the ability for mark making or decoration on the surface using the flame and the heat. How could I get away from what I had already been taught about woodfiring? How could I rid my work of the generic woodfire look? How could I create my mark within woodfiring?

Woodfiring has a long history in the ceramic world. The first ceramic pieces ever made were fired with wood, as were all the rest of ceramics

Above: Platter. 2011. 14 x 14 x 1.5 in.

Woodfired stoneware.

Below: Bread Plate. 2011. 7 x 7 x .5 in.

Woodfired stoneware.





Above: *Mug with Spots from Deflector (Detail)*.
Centre: *Yunomis with Localized Fuming*. 2010. 3.5 x 3.5 x 4 in.
Below: *Tumbler and Deflector*. 2009. (Tumbler) 3 x 3 x 6 in.

in history, until the discovery of fossil fuels in the late 1800s. This leaves the woodfiring process with an unprecedented history and many traditions and/or ways of working. Here in the US, we have a blend of many traditions of woodfiring that have converged from several different cultures. The Native Americans had been using wood to fire their earthenware pots for thousands of years before Europeans and Africans brought their techniques over in the colonization of North America. The European colonies supported potters in many villages and towns making salt glazed and alkaline glazed woodfired stoneware. The most recent influence would be that of North American potters going to Asia to study and Asian potters coming to North America to share their techniques. China, Korea, Thailand, Australia and Japan were all among the exchange of knowledge and techniques brought to North America. The exchanges with Japan in the 1960s and 1970s introduced North American potters to the beauty of unglazed woodfired stoneware. Other potters, starting in the 1950s, were studying how to fire glaze work in wood kilns at the workshops of Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew of England.

American woodfiring is now a mix of all of these traditions and techniques. The influence of Japan and the unglazed surface has become a desired aesthetic amongst many contemporary potters working in North America. The ceramic artist, Marie Woo, described the difficulty of the unglazed woodfired surface in a letter she wrote to a friend while studying in Bizen, Japan. She wrote, "You misunderstand. Bizen has no applied glaze. That's what makes it such a challenge. You can't rely on using glaze or decoration. The form is the pot and the pot is the form."¹ Potters seem to always be trying to have the finished pot retain the same feel as a freshly thrown pot. That freshly thrown pot seems alive; the form is pure, the pot has breath, and the surface has a warm softness like skin. The unglazed surface coming out of a wood kiln is a closely resembling surface to that of a freshly thrown pot. This may be largely attributed to the popularity of the unglazed surface of the wood

The most defining aspect of woodfiring with an unglazed surface is the ability to create flame patterns on the surface of the work. Controlling the path of the flame by tumble stacking work to create interesting spaces between pieces for the flame to pass through. This method dictates what flame pattern is left on the surface of the work. Since this technique has become popular and has been around for centuries, the work tends to look somewhat the same. The aesthetic of this technique has not changed much or progressed in the last 1000 years. During my investigation of the wood kiln I tried to think about how I can change this standardized look and think about the wood kiln in



a new way. One of my first thoughts was to think about what other ways I could control the path of the flame in the kiln.

I created what I call 'Flame Deflectors'. These deflectors, or wall of clay with holes, lines and shapes cut into them, allow the flame to move through and only touch selected areas of the work's surface. I made these deflectors by throwing bottomless cylinders, cutting them in half and cutting into the wall in various manners. The deflectors would be loaded in the kiln facing the firebox with work set inside the half circle. I place the work as close to the interior wall as possible, hoping that the flame will only mark the surface exposed by the openings in the deflectors. The deflectors were made of a course stoneware that was used as the shop clay for introductory clay classes at Syracuse University, which was made of 45 percent Hawthorn Bond, 45 percent Om4 ball clay and 10 percent F4 feldspar, with additional grog to taste. I would wedge in more grog and some fine sawdust to open the body up a little more. This open and porous clay body would ensure that the deflector would not shrink around the pot placed inside. I was also hoping that the open clay body would allow the deflectors to be reused in multiple firings.

This experiment was more successful than I anticipated even though somewhat predictable. I was impressed with the way the flame had moved through the deflector and marked the surface of the work with the same pattern I had cut in to the deflector. The lines were not crisp, but the images on the surfaces were recognizable as the shapes that I had cut. Only simple shapes and patterns allowed for results that seemed controlled and not obscure. The control of the flame to put an inorganic pattern on the surface of the work contradicts the organic nature of firing with wood kilns. Typically work fired in wood kilns with unglazed surfaces acquires that mystical beauty that the flame can provide as it licks the surface of your work. The organic quality of the flame is what provides this mystical beauty. The surface coming out of the wood kiln can feel like the night sky, with infinite depth. With control of the flame to add recognizable symbols (or a verbal language) to the work, allows for other content to be added to the conversation beyond the mystical beauty of the surface.

Deflectors with optimal size openings were the most successful, as were those with multiple openings that were spaced appropriately. I have been unable to reproduce any imagery that has fine detail or is complex in shape. This leaves basic shapes to work with, lines, circles,

Above: Yunomi with Localized Fuming (Detail). 2011. 3 x 3 x 4.5 in.

Centre: Colander used as Deflector for Bowl. 2009. 10 x 10 x 6 in.

Below: Bowl that was Fired in Colander.





*Above: Mug (Detail).
Centre: 3. Pitcher with Localized
Fuming, 2011. 7 x 6 x 13 in.
Below: Deflector with Cup Loaded
in Kiln (Notice placement on front
of shelf with nothing in front).*



squares and so forth. In order to produce the best results, the deflectors needed to be as close as possible to the pot. Reusing deflectors had little success, as the pot in the interior shrunk much more than the already vitrified deflector, pulling it too far away from the deflector and obscuring the image or pattern. Placement within the kiln was important. Deflectors that worked the best were in the front of the kiln close to the fire box, where the flame was the most aggressive and pushed through the opening. Deflectors located in the back of the kiln had a lower percent of success as the flame tended to slow and lazily wrap around the deflector instead of passing through it.

Who knows if my flame deflectors are an original idea that no one in the history of woodfiring has ever tried, but I do feel as if I am starting to think outside of the traditional way of working in a wood kiln which, I believe, will move me towards finding my own voice within the process. In order for that to happen, I need to reflect upon how these effects inform my recognition beyond, "I like those effects." What are these effects telling me about myself, where I am coming from and where I want to go?

These are all questions that we struggle with as makers. The constant experimentation reflects my nature as an inquisitive person and keeps the process fresh with new results to draw from for the next round of work. The challenge of control in the process of woodfiring, with its so many variables, keeps me engaged. The inorganic quality of this technique has not found its way into my work consistently but has led to other experiments within mark making.

Lately I have been using saggers (containers made from refractory clay in which a pot is placed before it is fired) in a non-traditional way. The sagger is a protective box made of clay that holds the ware in the kiln. Its purpose is to support the pottery, making it possible to fill the kiln to any height and to protect the ware from the direct contact with flame and hot gases from the fire.² As mentioned previously, wood was used to fire all ceramics until the late 1800s but, with the discovery of fossil fuels, (namely propane and natural gas) the use of

saggers became unnecessary. In ancient practice, saggers were particularly necessary when firing glaze work with wood and later coal, the exposure of the ware to the atmosphere in these kilns promoted flashing and non-uniformity in glaze colour. These effects are desired aesthetics and effects for art potters, but for industrial setting these effects are considered flaws.

In modern practice, however, people are using saggers as a specialised finishing technique. Pots are placed within saggers that are filled with combustibles and chemicals or oxides in order to achieve surface effects. I am using this technique but, instead of placing the entire pot inside the sagger, I am using small saggers to localise areas

on the surface of the pot in order to create specialised effects. This effect has that mystical beauty and organic language so commonly associated with the woodfired surface.

There is a small amount of the process that will always remain uncontrollable, in effect identifying singularity within each piece. This technique is accomplished by first, creating a pinch pot out of wadding. I make my wadding out of Hawthorn bond fire clay and as much fine sawdust as I can mix in without it being too crumbly. This wadding leaves a soft tan colour and comes off the work easily as long as enough sawdust has been added to the mix. I fill that pinch pot with charcoal, sawdust, oxides and other combustibles. I then select a piece to load on top of the pinch pot. Depending on the shape of the pot I might use an additional coil of wadding to create a tight seal between the surface of the work and the rim of the pinch pot, creating a localised reduction atmosphere within the pinch pot, that will create an effect upon the surface during the firing. A kiln fired on combustibles such as gas, oil, coal or wood will release carbon monoxide and hydrogen gases into the kiln if the fuel is not completely burned off.³ The clay bodies and glazes in the kiln are changed chemically as the carbon and hydrogen gases search for more oxygen to become carbon dioxide (CO₂) and water vapor (H₂O). This is happening in the kiln anyway but, with the use of the sagger, this effect becomes more controllable. Currently I have only experimented with filling the pinch pots with charcoal, sawdust and a few oxides and have been able to reproduce a surface with a dark carbon mark on the surface. I use mainly terra sigillatta on the surface of my work, made from various ball clays. Each of these clays contains different amounts of iron oxide (Fe₂O₃). When iron oxide is exposed to a heavy reduction atmosphere, the iron oxide will change to reduced iron oxide (FeO) and will produce a brilliant black-rust colour that will sometimes contain speckled metallic flecks. Filling the pinch pots with different materials could produce a wide range of colours and effects on the surface. The possibilities of this process seem endless.

These experiments have given me fuel for my work and excitement about the possibilities. Now out of graduate school, I feel as if I am finding a voice within my work or at least a literal and figurative vocabulary with which to communicate. As my craftsmanship and technical abilities improve I am consistently gaining confidence. The ongoing experimentation about stacking and firing has kept me excited about the process and has made me even more passionate about finding that ever elusive 'mark' that is my own.

Shawn O'Connor earned his BFA at the University of Southern Maine in 2005. After undergraduate studies O'Connor became a resident and staff member at Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine. He also completed a six-week residency at the Robert M. MacNamara Foundation on Westport Island, Maine. In May of 2010, O'Connor earned his MFA in Ceramics from Syracuse University. The main focus of his research in graduate school revolved around woodfiring. While at Syracuse he designed and constructed a train style wood kiln about which an article was published in the *Log Book*. O'Connor most recently completed a year-long artist in residency at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Above: Bowl that was Fired in Colander (Detail).

Below: The Artist's Stamp.

FOOTNOTES

1. Marie Woo, "Marie Woo: an American Potter in Japan" *Craft Horizons*, May/June 1961. pp 24-29.
2. Daniel Rhodes, *Kilns Design Construction and Operation*, Pitman Publishing, 1969 p 157.
3. Mimi Obstler, *Out of the Earth Into the Fire; A Course in Ceramic Materials for the Studio Potter*, second edition, The American Ceramic Society, 2000 pp 7-8.

