

LECTURE: IN SEARCH OF MY MARK

Shawn O'Connor



SHAWN O'CONNOR 1 Mug, 2009, wood-fired stoneware, 4" x 4.5" x 4", Example of "Flame Deflector" used to control how the flame and ash are deposited on the surface of the work. "Flame Deflector" is pictured in upper left hand corner. 2 Yunomi loaded in kiln with saggars, 2011, Example of how pieces are loaded in the kiln with the localized sagger technique 3 Yunomi, 2011, wood-fired stoneware, 4.25" x 3" x 3" each. Images of finished Yunomi with localized sagger technique. Charcoal was used inside of the sagger.

Firing with wood was a part of my upbringing. I was raised in an old rural farmhouse in Maine that was heated with a wood stove during the cold winter months. This meant that we were constantly feeding the fire in order to heat our home, requiring a lot of work and attentiveness. Preparing a winter's worth of wood required a few weeks of hauling, splitting, and stacking. This process was instilled in my life from an early age, and I have always enjoyed the method and rhythm of this physical labor, as well as the sense of accomplishment. I am certain I am not unique in my romanticism and connection to this labor-intensive process. There are many ceramic artists who share similar experiences and an attraction to using wood as a fuel source for the production of their ceramic works. The traditional quality of the work, the connection to the land and process, and mystical beauty of color and texture achieved in a wood burning kiln is unmatched by other firing processes. These characteristics of wood-fired ceramics have been admired and celebrated for thousands of years.

Until the discovery of fossil fuels, all ceramic objects were fired with wood, leaving the process with an unprecedented 20,000 plus year history and many rich traditions. The most defining characteristic of wood-firing is the pattern created by flame and ash deposits specifically captured on a raw surface, creating organic marks and earth tone colors. The unglazed surface aesthetic of the wood-fired process has gained relative popularity in the last 40 years in the

United States, and is mainly influenced by the traditional firing practices and surface aesthetics of Japan as well as China, Korea, and Thailand.

Typically, the aesthetic of wood-fired ceramic wares revolve around the subtleties of surface color, texture, and gloss. Each element is dependent on the clay body, temperature, ash buildup, kiln type, and arrangement of work inside the kiln. Clays and slips ideal for wood-firing are chemically compatible with the byproducts of wood: ash and combustible gas vapors. For example, iron-rich clays perform well as they contribute a red-orange color palette and, in reduction, the iron can produce deep brown hues. This record of the process and unique surface potential is what sets wood-firing apart from other ceramic firing techniques. I have seen many wood-fire artists experiment with different clays: sometimes sourced individually, or from industrial mining. The clay body and slips can create variations, but are predominantly constrained to a color range of brown, orange, and red earth tones which often fall within the historic appearance of wood-fired ceramics.

On top of the type of kiln, the duration, and achieved temperature of firing, the type and amount of wood is also a factor in creating a diversity of surface textures and colors. Larger wood kilns, like anagamas, require longer firing times and large amounts of wood fuel to reach temperatures, thus depositing copious amounts of ash on the surface. On the contrary, smaller wood kilns designed

to be fuel-efficient, like a catenary arch or a bourry box, will produce surfaces with less ash buildup. Lastly, tumble stacking, positioning, wadding placement, and the form of the work all dictate marks of the flame and deposits of ash. With experience, many accomplished wood-firers' have been able to anticipate marks, but there is always room for surprise. Although the mark of the flame is organic in line and shape, and can change from dramatic to subtle, there is an uncertainty as to how the ash deposits will vary to produce dry to wet textures. Overall, the wood-fired aesthetic is tied to its process: a record of time, heat, and material. The small details in color and texture require contemplation and investigation, but is there more ceramic artists can do with these elements?

While there are many artists exploring the subtle nuances of achievable surfaces in the wood kiln, in my observations there are not a lot of artists pushing the boundaries of the traditional surface pattern that is associated with unglazed wood-fired works. This perhaps is due to limited clay and slip bodies that are complementary with the process, the unpredictability of the byproducts of wood, or the fear of competing with what the ceramic community knows as a staple surface aesthetic. Moving this aesthetic, which has a long-rooted history and tradition, forward to include additional diverse and contemporary relevance is no easy task. By experimenting with non-traditional approaches to flame control and geometric surface decoration, I am attempting to challenge the perception of what the typical unglazed wood-fired surface can look like. I have started exploring new firing methods and loading techniques to reconsider some of the limitations.

I have been working on developing techniques that go beyond specific wadding placement, organic flame patterns, and serendipitous natural ash deposits. In the beginning of my exploration I was thinking about flame control, and intentional flame marks that are geometric and repetitive. Instead of using the work itself, stacked to control the path of the flame, I started to create objects with the sole purpose of controlling or deflecting the flame. These deflectors, walls of bisque clay with holes, lines, and shapes cut into them, allow the flame and ash to touch only selected areas of the work's surface. With control of the flame, recognizable shapes and symbols can be added to the surface of the work through the process. I have successfully created grid and checkered patterns, and non-organic shapes that can be repeated on multiple pieces of work. This familiar imagery allows for new context to be added to the dialogue other than the mystical beauty and abstract marks of the process we have historically associated with the wood-fired surface.

Additionally, I have experimented with saggars, which are protective fireclay containers completely enclosing a ceramic ware while it is being fired. Saggars have been used in wood kilns for hundreds of years to protect work from the open flame, smoke, gasses, and debris. They often are used to protect works with refined decoration and/or glazes from the disruptive atmosphere in the kiln. In modern times, with electric and gas kilns, the use of saggars is no longer needed. Still, some contemporary artists are using saggars to create a desired surface effect, typically in a low temperature range. Applying this approach of intentional sagger use, coupled with control over mark making with flame, I started using saggars to produce specific unconventional surface colors and saturation from the kiln atmosphere. Filling the saggars with different natural combustibles and oxides, I have been able to create a surface with qualities that reference traditional surfaces, but in



2



3

a non-traditional form. Charcoal, iron scraps, and other organic materials like walnut shells have given me surfaces resembling low temperature pit firing. Small amounts of different oxides mixed with sawdust inside the saggars have produced surfaces similar to that of raku. These experimental techniques are the beginning of my journey into developing a surface that both acknowledges the wood-fired historical aesthetic and challenges it at the same time.

My academic training has prepared me to produce expressive and diverse work while also celebrating and honoring past traditions. As a maker of utilitarian objects, craftsmanship and quality are key definers of the wares I produce. By combining the tradition of craft and articulating my individual voice in my work I have found techniques that add to the visual language of wood-fired surfaces. The unglazed wood-fired surface will always be strongly linked with the historical aesthetic originating from Japan, China, and Taiwan. Organic flame patterns, ash deposits, and other surface marks left from the process create a mystical beauty that provides imagery for contemplation. As an artist, it is my job to question, innovate, push limits, and explore. Adding a contemporary language to a practice with a deep history will help wood-fired ceramicists build a relevant dialogue in the broader context of art. I hope to add new tools and techniques to the process and inspire others to start re-imagining the traditional wood-fired surface.

Shawn O'Connor received his MFA in Ceramics from Syracuse University in 2010. Since graduate school, Shawn has continued to focus on making utilitarian wood-fired vessels. Shawn is currently an Assistant Professor, teaching ceramics and sculpture, and Associate Director of Galleries and Museums at Sweet Briar College in Virginia.