

Aesthetics of Woodfiring

by Jeff Shapiro

Aesthetic: Of or relating to beauty or what is beautiful.

At *The Naked Truth* woodfire conference in Iowa this past September 2004, we began a discussion about the aesthetics of woodfiring. I was more concerned about raising questions than finding answers.

Is there a common aesthetic, a definable aesthetic that can be used for the woodfire genre at large? Perhaps not. What is it about woodfiring that is actually attractive? The surface? surely; the process?, in most cases. I believe that whatever the context and environment, or whatever previous experience or preconceived ideas one brings to the table, the aesthetic of woodfiring has to do with the acceptance of a beauty that is somewhat of a parallel universe, in that it is not the conventional western perception of classical beauty. Not a symmetrical perfect beauty in the same way that western society defines God in a perfect state of glory, but a beauty that coexists within a realm that most of us are unaware of. The Japanese sensibility of Nature is inherently close to the aesthetic of woodfiring. It takes time and a certain amount of undoing or 'unlearning' to 'see' the beauty that exists in Nature; a twisted branch, torn leaf, or cracked surface. These 'mishaps' of nature have their own beauty if we allow ourselves to appreciate outside our comfort zone of acceptance.

Consider the exquisite patterns of a snake. Though the image of snake / reptile is perhaps repugnant to some, we must learn to disassociate the information from the sheer and pure beauty that exists in any given entity, whether animate or inanimate.

One point of discussion is that of aesthetics vs. efficiency. I suggest that if one is overly concerned with efficiency, woodfiring is not the most suitable way of firing. Certainly woodfiring can be made more and more efficient, but I contend that it actually runs counter to the aesthetic of woodfiring. For if you make the kiln constantly more efficient, you end up in the final stage with the most efficient way to fire – an electric kiln!! Some of the best woodfirings I have had were the ones that were the most difficult.



*Untitled form
by Jeff Shapiro.
Wood-fired, natural
ash deposit on an
iron rich clay body.
30.5 cm in height.*

This is not an emotional response. But rather there is a very simple explanation. The interesting effects occur due to fluctuations in the atmosphere as well as rising and dropping of temperature. This builds subtle layers on the surface of the fired clay. A straight climb in temperature would be an efficient way of firing but it would also create a very mediocre palette of color and texture.

I remember an incident that was a perfect example for showing the difference between firing for efficiency and aesthetics. I had contacted a company selling refractory materials to inquire about coating the inside surface of my tunnel kiln door. The reason was, that in summer, there was a great deal of heat coming off the front of the door and it was somewhat uncomfortable to fire. When I spoke to the owner, I told him the problem and he said that one of his company's products would take care of all my problems! He asked how long I was firing. When I replied seven to eight days, he happily stated that he would cut that back by over two days! I expressed to him that it was not a concern and that I chose to fire for that many days.

'Nonsense', came his reply. He then asked how much wood I used. When I told him that I use five to six cords, he stated that he would cut wood consumption by one to two cords! I tried to explain that it was neither my intention nor desire to do any such thing. He could not comprehend my answer. We were talking apples and oranges as though we were from different planets.

It is paramount to remember that the kiln is a means of producing the final work, in essence a tool. The kiln itself can have a beautiful design and have a strong presence as an entity on its own, but the bottom line is what comes out of the kiln. So, while perhaps striving to achieve a woodfire kiln that will fire in eight hours is an interesting challenge, it is only valid as far as a technical exercise is concerned. Unless the work is enhanced by such an approach, I believe it is unnecessary and unwarranted. Just as each material has its own character and use, so it is with the kiln. Being overly concerned with efficiency is not to be confused with understanding and being in control of one's tools and processes. But to become too concerned with efficiency is to thwart artistic creativity and to impede the potential for character that develops in an imperfect atmosphere. If one thinks of pottery making as the equivalent of making production items for mass consumption, then efficiency is certainly important and the discussion of aesthetics is diminished. But if the maker has the intention of producing work that touches the spirit and excites the senses, then aesthetic choices are of great importance.

The aesthetic that I speak of is one that comes from the 'imperfections of nature'. It cannot be forced or imitated but rather 'assisted' in the way we choose material, forming process and decoration. A ceramic piece that has slumped in the fire or a form that has been torn open by the flame is not necessarily a better or worse piece (I am not addressing function at this time), but if it has slumped just right and the crack reveals the inner material of the form in a way that could not be perceived otherwise, then the piece can actually be a stronger work. This is not a premeditated approach, but rather a way of perceiving and learning to see a particular beauty that we were not perhaps aware of previously.

The range of work being produced in wood kilns is varied and particular to each maker. We are always making choices; what material to use, how to form, how to load and fire or how to



decorate. My choices tend to be concerned with aesthetics, but how can you define an aesthetic that includes drippy, gnarly, and crusty surfaces as well as surfaces that are quiet, and subdued with little or no ash? The bottom line is that when the work comes out of the kiln, if it speaks to me, then it is good!

*Tea bowl form
by Jeff Shapiro.
Abstract Shino
glazing.
12.7cm wide.*

**Jeff Shapiro lives in upstate N.Y., USA with his wife
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in galleries across America, Japan, Italy, Germany,
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Editor's Note: Jeff Shapiro would welcome and is willing
to respond to any differing points of view that readers may
have on the aesthetics of woodfiring, via The Log Book.
