

# *Ceramics*

MONTHLY

Celebrating  
**50** years  
1953-2003



MARCH 2003 \$6 (Can\$9, €7)  
[www.ceramicsmonthly.org](http://www.ceramicsmonthly.org)



# Finding One's Own Voice

by Jeff Shapiro

"Encrusted Vessel with Handles," 8½ inches (22 centimeters) in height, 2002.







The relevancy of who I am and what I produce at this point in my career is a matter of perspective. I have been back in the United States for 20 years, yet all my ceramics training took place during 9 years in Japan. How can I objectively assess my work? I deal with the issue of identity on a regular basis. This questioning, when channeled properly, can be a positive influence in the creative process.

The most common concern, the one that causes me to sit straight up in bed in the middle of the night, is that of complacency: the comfort zone that is the ruin of an artist's creativity, the point at which the work begins a slow and withering death. I only hope that if it happens, I am aware of it.

It was 1981 when I left Japan and returned to my native country to begin making wood-fired pottery for a living. Granted, the costs of buying land and building a house were more reasonable back then. I feel sympathy for young potters who must start out, looking for land, a house and a studio, in the present economic environment.

Beginning with only one firing per year, I have reached the present pace of four firings per year. Each firing requires a month, if you consider the seven to ten days required to load the tunnel kiln, seven to eight days to fire, one week to cool, and one week to unload and clean the work. So, four months of the year are dedicated to firing—the final stage of resolving the work.

When I first returned to the States, my work was undeveloped. It was through trial-and-error that I have found my particular way of working, especially as it pertains to the wood-fire genre. For example: having decided on an organic clay source from southern Jersey, I ordered 30 tons of pure clay. When the dump truck arrived, there were only about 4 tons of pure clay, and the rest of the delivery was rubble—sand/clay and stone. I was thinking I'd



PHOTOS: BOB BARRETT

Jeff Shapiro in his sculpture garden, 2001.





"Partially Covered Rice Straw Vessel,"  
13 inches (33 centimeters) in height, 1999.



"Cast Stone Formation," 21 inches (53 centimeters) in height, stoneware, 2002.



find another source before the pure clay was depleted, but found out that it was actually the rubble that gave the clay its interesting character! Now I use up to 50% rubble in certain clay bodies. There are clay mines on the East Coast, such as Stancill's Clay Mine [499 Mountain Hill Road, Perryville, Maryland 21903; (410) 939-2224], offering unrefined clay—that is, clay in its natural state, prior to being crushed and air floated.

As to the importance of good materials and respect for such materials, I would like to relate an anecdote from my friend and mentor, Takahara Shoji. When I first met him some 24 years ago in Bizen, he was a well-established potter. His firings were different from other potters. There was a real depth to the color and texture. He was firing the whole piece, not just the surface.

His approach had a lot to do with the clay itself. He had learned a few years earlier about a newly uncovered clay site. The clay had wonderful character. Takahara was not wealthy, but he knew how important this clay was, so he scraped together enough money to buy a substantial amount. But he would only allow himself to mix up to 20% of the special clay into his blended body. He promised himself that when he was good enough and his work had matured enough, at age 60, that he would switch the proportion, allowing himself to use up to 80%. Unfortunately, he died just short of his sixtieth birthday.

In Kyoto, the Raku family uses clay that was prepared by the potter of the family from two generations before. So, the wonderfully innovative Raku Kichizaemon, the 15th-generation Raku potter, is using clay prepared by his grandfather, and he prepares clay to be used by his grandchild.





Shapiro fires his tunnel kiln four times a year.

The point of this digression is to stress the importance of clay character, especially with respect to wood firing. Stones in my clay can be upward of an inch in diameter. That has caused me to develop throwing techniques to avoid wearing down the skin on my hands. On the inside, I throw with a chamois in my hand. Sometimes, as I stretch the clay outward, the holes that develop alongside a stone contribute an extra dimension to the work.

I frequently alter the forms, believing the character and strength of this particular genre of work are its asymmetry, an unrefined clay, as well as a more organic approach to forming, and that a perfect shape, cleanly tooled or trimmed, runs counter to what the rest of the process is about. It is necessary to take a holistic approach to the genre, in that material, forming process, loading and firing must all be compatible for the work to be successful.

My present approach to throwing loosely can be explained by a comparison between classical music and jazz. Classical being the equivalent of traditional symmetrical forms versus the spontaneity of improvisation or loosely altered forms. I found I began throwing softer and trimming softer, finding less of a distinction between the two steps. I believe that if the thrown form has a “core” like an invisible backbone, and the energy of the piece is well contained between the lip and foot, that within the top and bottom there is room for improvisation or alteration.

Whereas in the past, for example, if I were throwing a 20-pound vessel, it would have been a technical exercise. I would have slowly expanded the pot to the full size and predetermined shape. Now, I will cone the clay in the same way, but from that point the process has changed drastically. Instead of taking a slow, methodical approach, I quickly throw the form with movements or gestures that expand the clay spontaneously. The asymmetrical result must have a strong base and a resolved lip, as well as dancelike movement in between, and not all work successfully. So I cull, keeping only the ones that are well resolved.

I have also spent a lot of time considering the loading of the kiln, the process that too many people think of as “a step to get



“Rice Straw Bottle,” 8½ inches (22 centimeters) in height, 2000.

through before getting on with the real business of firing.” Actually, the wood firing creates the colors and textures, but loading creates textures and patterns. I try to envision the patterns resulting from the ash flow as well as the flame paths, which are altered according to the way the work is stacked. Although it is neither a practical or efficient way to fire, I now load very little work upright, but then again if I were looking to fire efficiently or practically, I would opt for a different kind of kiln.

Another change in my approach came about rather serendipitously. At some point, my shelves became saturated with ash to the degree that it now drips down from above onto the work below. This ash effect is significantly different from the ash that builds up on the pot’s surface over a week or so of firing. The ash glaze dripping from the shelves has the appearance of a celadon,





"Extruded Vessel," 12 inches  
(30 centimeters) in height, 2002.





sometimes clear green or blue or even opalescent. Occasionally, single drips will cause spots on the surface that look like lichen on stone. Determining which forms to place where and to what extent the dripping will be desirable has become one of the challenges in loading the kiln.

This leads to the most romanticized part of the process, the part that drew most of us in the first place—the firing. My son learned the meaning of pyromaniac at about age three, but his understanding was that just as some people were bakers and some people were accountants, wood-firing potters were pyromaniacs.

I do not profess to know a great deal about other kilns and how other people fire them, but I have learned a great deal from working with my kiln. Melting ash on clay is in itself not such a difficult task. The challenge lies in inducing subtle texture and color, and in knowing how to achieve the greatest range of effects from the firing. For example, the use of light and dark slips has greatly increased my range of surface color. Also, locally reducing an area of the kiln can produce a dynamic color change from work that is only a few inches away. This understanding came about as a result of experimentation. In the words of a great artist, Suzuki Goro: “Know no fear.”

Over the years, I have tried to remain open to new and sometimes unexpected directions. I believe now that many options and opportunities exist, just as a wide spectrum of beauty in nature exists, but that we must first allow ourselves to be aware of the possibilities, then challenge ourselves to step out of our comfort zones. For if we can, the potential rewards are boundless.



“Vessel with Shelf Drips,” 12 inches (30 centimeters) in height, 2000, by Jeff Shapiro, Accord, New York.