

Generational Crossroads



Article By Anne Carolyn Wollman

*Kakurezaki Ryuichi Group of six abstracted vessels 61 x 20 x 20 cm each
Woodfired stoneware one with black-blue slip, others with natural effects from kiln positioning*

IN APRIL 2006 A NUMBER OF EVENTS WILL BE JOINTLY sponsored by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Japan Society of Boston, and the Lacoste Gallery in Concord, MA, to highlight the visits of the Japanese Living National Treasure Isezaki Jun, his son Isezaki Koichiro, and Isezaki's former apprentice Kakurezaki Ryuichi, now a master. Isezaki's influence on two Japanese and two American ceramic artists will be explored in *Generational Crossroads* which will open on April 1, 2006, at the Lacoste Gallery. The concept for this show was inspired by my trip to Bizen, Japan, in 2003 with Jeff Shapiro and a small group of ceramic collectors.

Situated in Okayama prefecture on the midcoast of Honshu Island and bordered by the Inland Sea, Bizen claims a 1000-year tradition of ceramic history and is the site of one of the six ancient kilns. The home of Isezaki Jun is the village of Imbe in Bizen, a peaceful environment dotted with hundreds of ceramic workshops, woodfiring kilns and retail ceramic shops. In that ceramic environment the traditional master/apprentice relationship flourishes.

For hundreds of years this relationship has provided the knowledge, fuelled the enthusiasm and nurtured the creativity of the apprentices who are fortunate enough to work with the accomplished masters. My thought was that the special relationship shared by the five potters in this show would be a unique theme and provide the content for an unusual exhibit of masterful ceramics for the American audience.

This show pays tribute to the master Isezaki Jun, who believes that it is important to keep the Bizen tradition alive from one generation to another, while he simultaneously embraces the idea that a ceramic artist must be free to express his own spirit and soul. It was Isezaki Jun's openness to new ideas, his innate understanding of the history and tradition of this pottery town, and his warm welcome for foreign apprentices that appealed to Jeff Shapiro 30 years ago. Although Shapiro was not strictly an apprentice of Isezaki Jun, he worked and studied in Imbe with Yamashita Joji, a former apprentice of Isezaki. During this time, Shapiro became friends with a number of local potters, especially Isezaki's apprentice, Kakurezaki

Ryuichi. Consequently, he developed strong ties to the Bizen woodfiring tradition. Shapiro's spontaneous approach to his work attracted Isezaki Jun's son, Koichiro, who came to apprentice at Shapiro's studio in upstate NY. Another young potter, Tim Rowan, had been Jeff's studio assistant earlier while he was studying at SUNY in New Paltz. Rowan was enthused by Shapiro's commitment to a life in clay and he set out for Japan after graduation to begin an apprenticeship with Kakurezaki. Thus the exhibiting artists have strong working and personal connections, each having contributed in some way to the life-style and career of the others. The giving and taking among them has created a web where time and space meet, has contributed to their creativity and growth as artists and provided bonds of friendship across the generation gap.

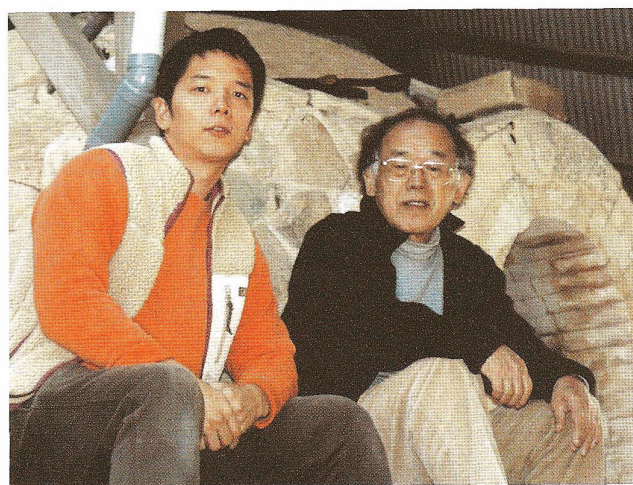
Common to the five artists are their educational experiences in Bizen, learning to work with the clay, and becoming adept with the Japanese woodfiring technique in an anagama tunnel kiln and a no-origama (climbing) chambered kiln. The Bizen clay, a black waxy substance containing iron is dug up under rice fields and is used for fine work. When mixed with rougher Bizen mountain clay, it is used for making other ware. Much time and effort is spent in clay preparation such as sieving and slaking as well as slicing the clay, running it through the fingers and pulling out undesirable stones.

This process retains the *tsuji aji* or clay character of the sought-after Bizen ware. In reduction firing, the iron content produces a red or brown colour and sometimes purple or eggplant tones. In oxidation, the clay body is a light beige which allows the rice straw to leave a crimson 'fire cord' marking. Although it is a stoneware clay, it is not fired as hot as other clays such as Shigaraki, Iga or Seto. Typically the firing period takes from one week to 12 days but, in some cases, as with Kakurezaki's kiln, it may take 20-22 days to produce the desired effects.

The potters who know their kilns well are able to place each piece in an optimal position to achieve the best surface patterns. Since Bizen clay is not available in the US, Shapiro and Rowan often dig their own local clay and look for a high content of impurities such as felspar and quartzite. Shapiro's clay is mixed with commercial clay in proportions that vary depending on what is being made. Tim Rowan's pieces are often made from unsifted rubble clay so full of pebbles and foreign matter that it cannot be thrown and is used only for handbuilding. Tradition is important for Isezaki Jun. His work consists of both wheel



Isezaki Jun. Platter. Rice straw markings in centre. Woodfired stoneware. 42.5 x 9 cm.



Isezaki Jun and Isezaki Koichiro, father and son, in front of their anagama kiln.



Kakurezaki Ryuichi working on a stepped slab fry.



*Jeff Shapiro. **Platter.** Rough, crusty and heavy clay with fissures.
Woodfired, shino glaze. 38 x 40.5 x 12.5cm.*



*Jeff Shapiro. **Container.** Altered reddish brown woodfired
stoneware with natural ash deposit. 23 x 25.5 x 15 cm.*

thrown and coiled vases, some with raked designs: water containers, sake bottles, trays and platters, many with rice straw markings. Other vessels are made especially for serving Japanese cuisine or for flower arranging. Prized especially are his tea bowls made for the tea ceremony, carefully thrown and decorated with either abstract rice straw markings or melted ash deposits. But Isezaki is also known for his abstract sculptural forms that are modelled from thick slabs. Some of these pieces have a blue sheen, the result of a reduction firing in his anagama kiln.

Kakurezaki Ryuichi's work, on the other hand, departs from traditional Bizen but still shares some affinities such as rice straw decoration and similar surface colour. His angled geometric shapes and use of coarse clays other than Bizen have broken away from the rounded forms of earlier traditional vessels. Some take a combative stance such as his covered boxes in the *Phalanx* series. (*Ceramics: Art and Perception*, 33, 1998, 'The Winds of Change' by Robert Yellin). Several vase shapes in the abstract group take on the appearance of booted fencers ready for battle, or the postures of a combative dance, while some

stand tall and stolid. The striking colour makes this work even more unusual. Even pieces such as vases, trays and teabowls exhibit this confrontational and non-traditional mode. Making sculpture using the vessel form as a starting point is his forte. Kakurezaki attributes his singular approach to Izesaki's influence: "In Jun's studio, progress was up to the individual and I was encouraged to find my own voice."

Jeff Shapiro is quick to clarify that he is not a Bizen potter. "I feel close to the process, techniques and aesthetic of Bizen woodfiring, but my interest lies in reinterpreting what I have learnt and abstracting it." Shapiro makes altered vessel forms and tea bowls, but he approaches the work as sculpture; every piece is a product of his abstract thinking and personality. His platters are thick and rough. They appear to originate from a wad of clay that he attacks and pulls in every direction until a unique and delicate but mysterious form appears. His large sculptural slab-based constructions are far removed from the vessel and become architectural renderings with deposits of melted ash serving as descriptive decoration. Even though he has moved beyond tradition, his life-style, teaching methods, studio, house and attached gallery reflect his Japanese orientation.

"Jeff Shapiro introduced me to an aesthetic approach to life and I went to Japan to discover it for myself in a personal and profound way," writes Tim Rowan. Rowan's views of clay and life are interconnected. He feels that his work reflects not only his ideas, but also his heart and soul, a concept expressed by Isezaki Jun. In fashioning the gritty and rough pieces by hand, Rowan reveals a part of himself. The work speaks for him and it is through the work that you get to know him. The soap dishes, sake cups, tea bowls, flower baskets and trays take on a life of their own and prod us to think about what they might be, how to use them, and to recognise their aesthetic value and grace. His surfaces are gouged, jagged, rough, worn and cracked. There is an earthy aura and bravura about them, seen especially in his mortuary boxes and skeletal clay baskets whose rib bones seem to have not yet disintegrated. These pieces seem to have been dug up from the earth and reflect the artist's resolve to make art out of sombre objects. In large machine and tool shapes, Rowan takes the ordinary and makes it into striking sculpture. Apprenticing



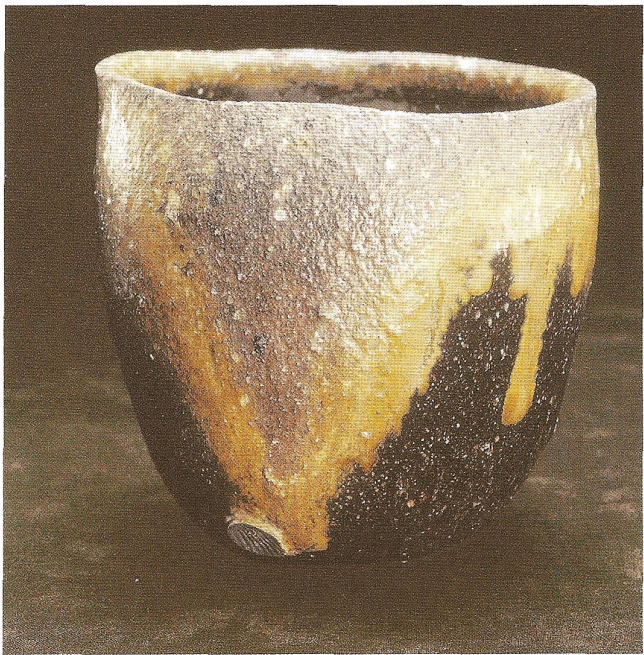
Tim Rowan. *Untitled*. Woodfired native clay. 40.5 x 40.5 x 40.5 cm.



Tim Rowan. *Box*. Woodfired native clay. 20 x 17.5 x 20 cm.



Isezaki Koichiro. *Faceted vase forms*. 45 x 12.5 and 49 x 12.5 cm.



Isezaki Koichiro. *Teabowl*. Woodfired stoneware, black slip. 11.5 x 10.5 cm.

with Kakurezaki contributed to his integrity and courage to take ceramics to new frontiers.

After working in the US for two years, Isezaki Koichiro began to question his ceramic origins. "An environment that was so foreign caused me to think and reassess my identity as a Japanese potter from Bizen. Why clay and why unglazed firing?" He answered his own question: "I realised the beauty of woodfired ceramics as a result of working with Jeff Shapiro." Koichiro described the master/apprentice relationship in a most succinct and meaningful way, "What should be learnt is not so much about form or technique, but rather more about the thought process and passion for the work." His tea bowl forms exhibited recently in a Tokyo gallery display fired surfaces with exquisite colours and some markings that appear on traditional Bizen ware, but these reveal a fresh silhouette from the rim to the foot.

As we express homage to Isezaki Jun, it is important to pay tribute to the Japanese aesthetic sensibility and tradition, as well as to the artists who have given new life to this genre of work. Highlighting the work of the five exhibiting artists, *Generational Crossroads* will be a milestone because it is the first time these mentors and apprentices, now teachers, have shown together. In this show, content and environment will be experienced as one comprehensive body of work, and the dramatic installation designed by the artists is intended to be visually stimulating and complementary to the work.

There are several quotes from the participating Japanese artists which express not only the uniqueness of this show, but also what it attempts to share with American audiences about Bizen philosophy and aesthetics. "For the younger generation," says Isezaki Jun, "it is necessary to proceed in study and production without being restricted, and to forge ahead and create something new. And this will be their tradition." Kakurezaki Ryuichi agrees with this theory: "Japanese pottery is handed down from generation to generation... with a constant awareness of contemporariness based on tradition." Isezaki Koichiro clarifies the traditional apprentice relationship by stating: "In the East, tradition has a different meaning from the West. In Japan tradition is *dento* and refers to continuity." There is a magic in this continuity and in the master/apprentice relationship which stimulates a fortunate few to become masterful creators and fine teachers. It generates a passion for education, growth and the dynamic aesthetic displayed in *Generational Crossroads*.

Anne Carolyn Wollman is a collector, curator and writer with a special interest in ceramic art. The exhibition, *Generational Crossroads*, will open at LaCoste Gallery, Concord, MA, on April 1, 2006, in association with sponsored events in Boston.