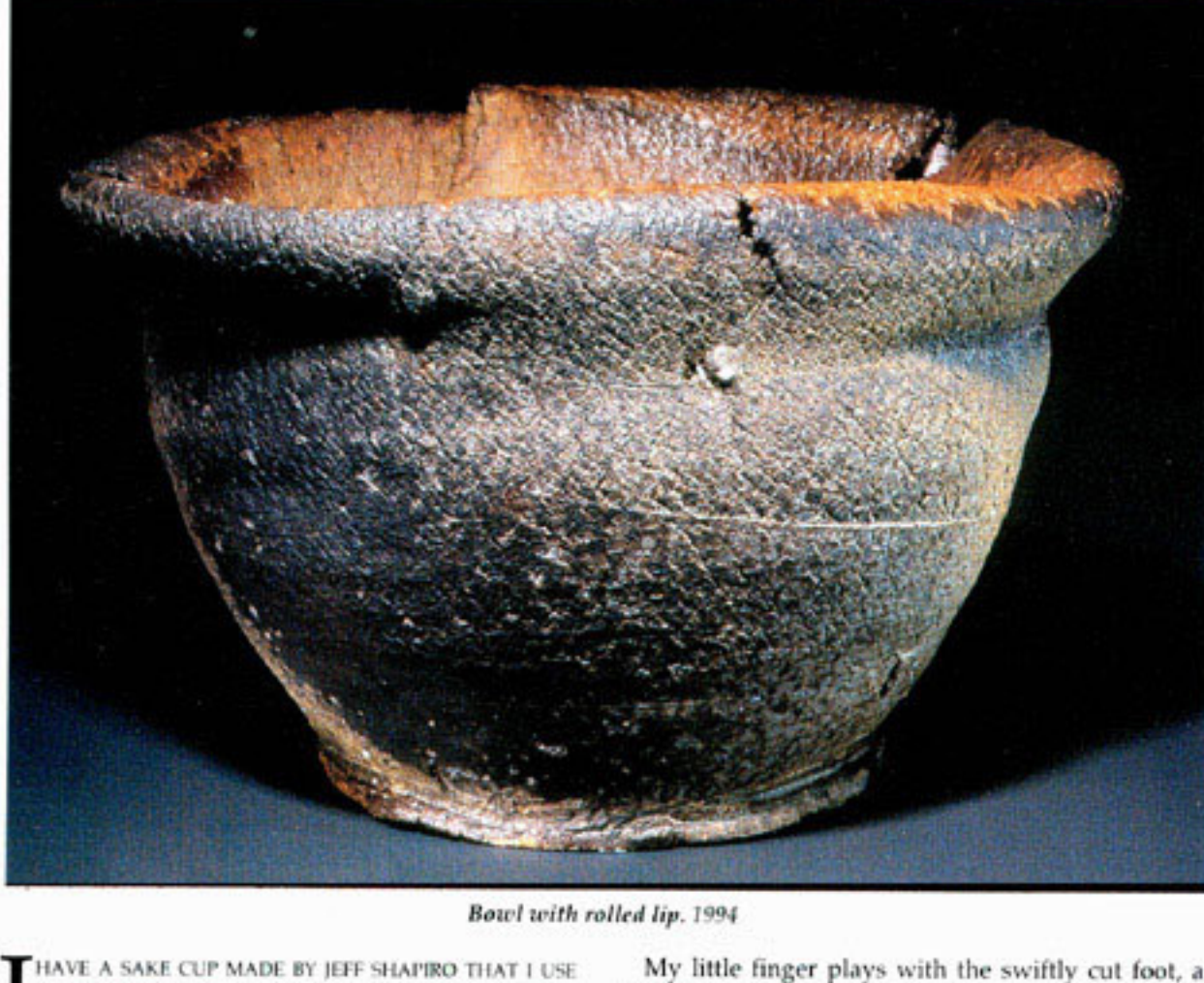


Jeff Shapiro's Gestures of Creativity

Article by Mark Hewitt



Bowl with rolled lip. 1994

I HAVE A SAKE CUP MADE BY JEFF SHAPIRO THAT I USE instead for whisky. It is tall and narrow and tapers gently inward towards its rounded flaring rim. Made quickly with soft clay on a slow moving wheel, it has a slight asymmetry with an easy throwing indentation into which I cosily rest my thumb. Its surface has the familiar texture of an unshaven face, day old stubble breaking to soft, clean cheek. The slick red shadowed side turns to a rougher grey watermelon rind crinkle, some of which has flaked off at the rim and where the pot bevels down to its tiny foot.

There are small stones and grains of sand breaking the surface, and a solitary rice straw ash mark gives the side a diagonal lilt. A tracery of markings from slurry and fingers have created a map of movement and action on its surface. After a few single malts I am sure I can replay the gestures of its making.

My little finger plays with the swiftly cut foot, a jagged nub of clay demands to be tweaked by my fingernail but, as yet, it has stubbornly refused to yield. Upside down the foot reminds me of an ear, a calligraphically suggestive spiralling inward, through which to hear the pot.

Presently it is empty, unwashed since its last use, a mellow fruitiness lingers in its pores, needing a powerful inhalation to dislodge. Once, while desperately seeking the last drop, my tongue got stuck in it.

Shapiro has a touch like a gentle breeze. His pots have an offhanded freshness about them, achieved by a finely tuned sense of balance. They walk a knife edge between structure and collapse. As if with an easy shrug of the shoulder, or a subtle flick of the wrist, he pulls off complicated intuitive gestural flourishes that reveal both himself and his materials. Working at the

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Steeple series #1. 1994

loose, spontaneous end of the ceramic spectrum, he walks the line between becoming contrived by overworking the clay, or not touching the clay at all. It is as if asking himself: "How little can I touch the clay and bring it to life?" Though torn, cut, ripped, squeezed and beaten, his pots are in no way violent. They are not bombastic gargoyles but, rather, they display an underlying calm that no amount of turmoil can disturb. I see a kinship between Shapiro's anagama fired ceramics and the work of British sculptor, Andy Goldsworthy – both use the landscape in an abstract way, manipulating various elements to shed new light on its beauty. Whereas Goldsworthy uses water, mud, rocks and vegetation in ephemeral configurations that profoundly shift our perception of these natural elements, Shapiro reveals unseen qualities in clay and makes them permanent with the same



Form on metal stand. Stone Formation series #1. 1996

softly observed delicacy and grandeur. Shapiro's pots assume the dignity of lichen covered rocks on a mountainside, they display the haphazard complexity of a long time surface. The lightness of his touch prevents the gloomy descent of gravity, they are saved from being boorishly earnest.

The techniques he employs in making them reveal the structure of clay in insightful ways: edges have the random fluted normalcy of mountain ridges, sections that are torn and broken at unusual stages of dryness create lines of peculiar integrity that alert us to the clay of the pot's inner structure. These actions, though considered, are immediate and fresh, his proddings and carvings are confident and effective; he only has one chance.

Equal weight is given to sculptural and functional forms in his making cycle: pots are sketched and then

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Vessel with white stone. 1995

made in series. While his functional aesthetic is based on the tea ceremony, it has been twisted and altered into an idiosyncratic style that is as much American as it is Japanese. He is no slave to tradition, rather he improvises adventurously at the edge of convention. His sculptural pieces explore purely formal and gestural attributes of the medium, and they are filled with dynamism and intrigue.

Stacking the kiln is meticulously planned, photographic records of the precise location of each pot in each row back from the firebox allow for detailed meditations on the passage of the flame and ash through the kiln. Astute observations over the years have led to greater understanding of each small space in the kiln. Particular care is taken on the location and wadding of pots in the firebox. Embers are repeatedly shovelled on to these pots in the latter stages of the firing giving some of Shapiro's pots their luxuriant blackened surfaces where unmelted carbon has been trapped in the underlying sticky molten ash. Layers of ash, melted, cooled, redeposited and melted again, are the oils lavished thickly on the craggy canvases below. For all the apparently accidental appearance of their surfaces, as little as possible is actually left to what might be called 'chance'.

Fired for a remarkably relaxed eight days in his Accord, Catskill NY, anagama, my whisky cup, like all



Small form with kiln drips and white stone. 1996

of his pots, was born old. The appeal of anagama pots resides partly in this evocation of antiquity, both in process and appearance. Of course there is always the danger of becoming cloyingly archaic, of exhibiting a faux rusticity, but scratch the surface of Shapiro's pots and you find a complex vision of time and nature.

They carry the wisdom of time, but also the exhaustion of the prematurely aged. In eight days they have become 10,000 years old. The old may be wise but they are also tired. These pots are both wise and wizened, experienced and wrinkled but, fortunately, have had the decency not to have had a face lift. They wear their age unashamedly.

Conventional epithets for the surface of anagama pots favour the vocabulary of violence. Words like scar, battleground, trauma and madness attempt to describe a seemingly nightmarish war with the fire. These markings, however, can also be thought of as the pot's face, showing the marks of experience, a topography that includes the hidden places, behind an ear, the nape of the neck, the bumps and blemishes that show a life lived, not avoided or disguised. They are also the marks of the skill of the potter, his chosen palette, his willingness to embrace the fire. These pots are part celebration, part warning: they contain a *fin de siècle* revelry and foreboding. They are the calm in the eye of a hurricane.

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Vessel with slit and horizontal drips. 1996

It is a difficult aesthetic. The recent efforts of writers describing and promoting woodfiring potters have raised the level of appreciation in the marketplace for this style of work, in particular the results achieved from extended woodfiring such as in anagama kilns. Proximity to the cosmopolitan refinement of New York provides a growing outlet for some of Shapiro's pieces, but gaining access to Japan has held the key to the viability of his aesthetic.

Japanese expatriots, Nipponophiles and patrons at periodic exhibitions in Japan have added to the understanding. Connections developed during his apprenticeship in Japan, friendship with a number of leading Japanese potters, business arrangements with department stores in Japan and help from his wife, Hinako, have helped create a network in which Shapiro can continue his work. Regular gallery exhibitions in America, home sales and a sizeable American following help foster his talent.

The value of Shapiro's work resides not in its obscurity or rarity but in its goodness. Its quality is clear. Its vision of nature is wild and complicated, not given to easy understanding but rewarding the attentive traveller. Shapiro's deft musings, bold counterpoints and elaborate incendiary explorations help us understand the gestures of creativity, more about the passage of time, and more about the soft, the dry and the hard.



Form on metal base with torn opening. 1996.

Mark Hewitt is a potter from North Carolina, USA. Photographs by Bob Barrett.

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