



Outdoor sculpture, anagama-fired and painted.

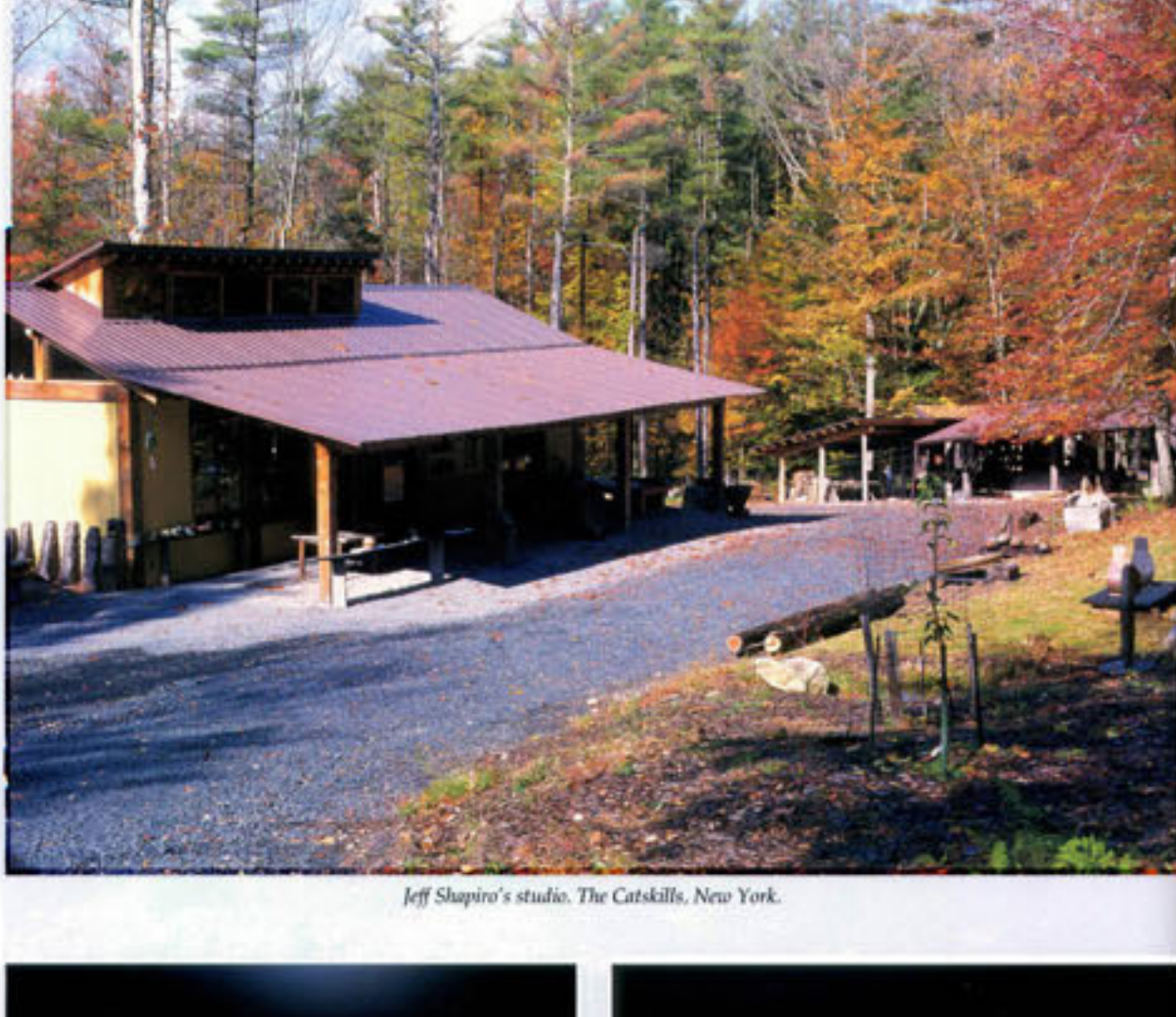
In Context With the Surroundings

Article by Jeff Shapiro

THE SUBJECT OF CONTEXT BRINGS TO MIND A poignant lesson I learned some 25 years ago. While I was in Switzerland, I was invited to visit a Japanese woman fibre artist. She was married

to a wealthy Swiss industrialist. When we arrived at their palatial home, we came through the garden. There were three large pine trees. In the top of one of the trees, perched on a branch, was a Japanese man

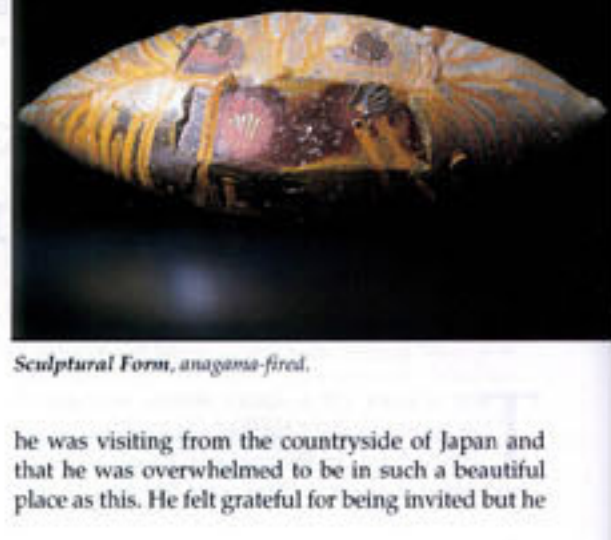
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Jeff Shapiro's studio, The Catskills, New York.



Three Globe Vessels, anagama-fired.



Sculptural Form, anagama-fired.

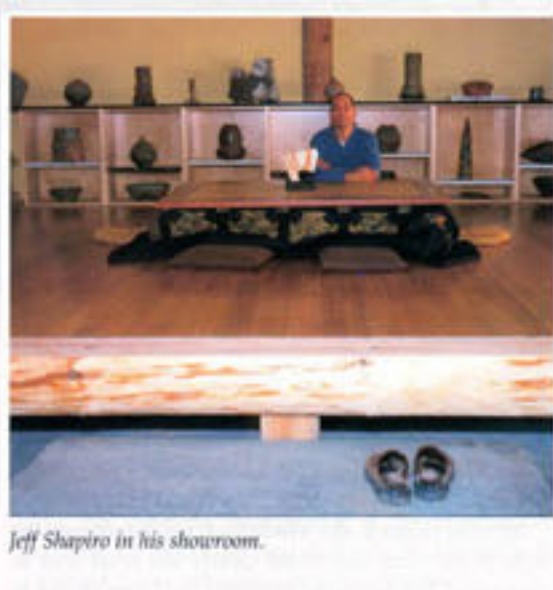
with traditional two-toed shoes and pruning shears. When I greeted him in Japanese, he came half way down the tree to hold a conversation. He related that

he was visiting from the countryside of Japan and that he was overwhelmed to be in such a beautiful place as this. He felt grateful for being invited but he

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Encrusted Vessel, Anagama-fired.



Jeff Shapiro in his showroom.



Dish with handle, Anagama-fired.

had no way to return the favour, except, that he was a gardener. He realised that the pine trees were badly in need of some pruning and this would be his gift to the

Swiss industrialist husband of his friend. He then excused himself and climbed back up the tree. I went inside to meet the fibre artist and she took us down to

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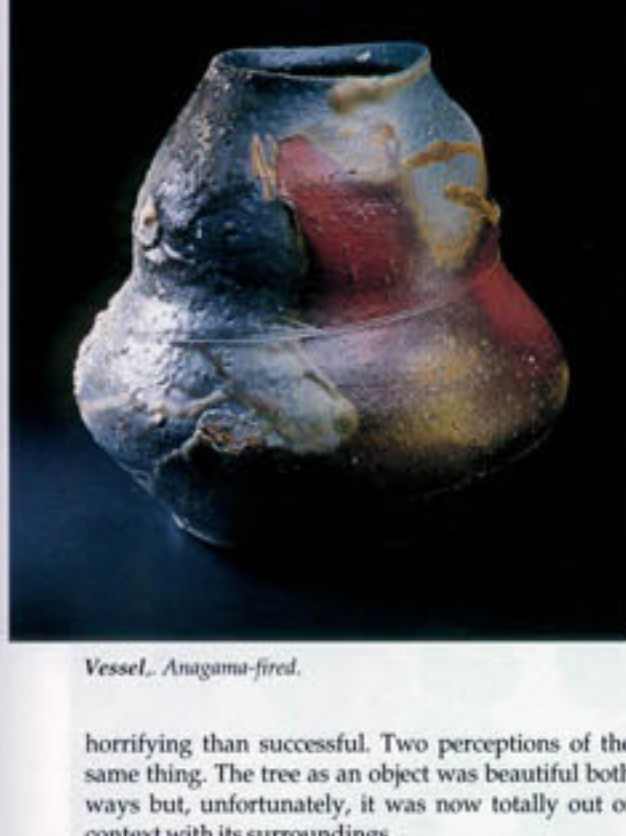
Sculptural Form, Anagama-fired.

her studio. It was a wonderful space with one whole wall of sliding windows facing out to the garden. A short while later, the husband came home. With a friendly handshake and a smile, he welcomed us. He was facing the windows and as I watched his expression, I saw it go from a friendly smile to a look of uncertainty to a look of intense anger and the colour of his face went from rosy to ashen. He was looking past us through the windows at which time he blurted out something to the effect: "What is that guy doing in my tree!" I came to learn that these three pine trees had been considered family heirlooms and had

been nurtured for almost 200 years. They were highly regarded for their size and volume. When I turned to see for myself what had happened, at the base of the three trees, where there once was grass, were piles of branches on the ground.

Moving closer to the windows I could make out the tops of the trees and could clearly see what was so shocking. The Japanese gardener had proceeded to prune the giant pines so that they now looked like large bonsai, with only a few branches remaining on each tree. He considered it to be a work of art. The industrialist considered it to be, shall we say, more

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Vessel, Anagama-fired.

horrifying than successful. Two perceptions of the same thing. The tree as an object was beautiful both ways but, unfortunately, it was now totally out of context with its surroundings.

Recently, I have become concerned with the idea of context. On one level, it is the context of how work is displayed or perceived in relation to its immediate surroundings. In the more abstract sense, I am interested in the broader meaning of context such as who I am, what is the meaning for me, having studied in Japan but making work now back in the US, my own country. Is the work in harmony or out of context? I want to challenge and be challenged, to inspire and be inspired, to move when I feel moved, to feel the passion to create as a response to what I see, hear, touch, smell and taste.

My work evolves due to internal as well as external influences. I find that, as my years advance, certain experiences and images from my past rise to my consciousness and give me food for creative thought. Externally I find that if I leave myself open to unplanned events, there is occasion to come upon a new direction of work discovered perhaps fortuitously through an inadvertent step in a familiar process. For example, recognising in the unconscious stacking of pieces of clay that would normally be recycled, a concept for a new series of work.

My newest work is more sculptural in essence. Though predominantly making work in the woodfire genre, I am eager to experiment with mixed media as well as a wider spectrum of surfaces including, but



Extruded Vessel, Anagama-fired.

not exclusive to, woodfiring. I am also at a point in my personal time line that crosses back and forth between the realm of utilitarian function and sculpture. I am excited each time I find a new direction in which to experiment. I ask that the viewing audience does not see my work with any preconceived expectations but, rather, come with an open mind and assess each piece as a separate entity with its own validity.

Jeff Shapiro is a ceramic artist living in the Catskills, NY, with his wife, Hinako, and their two children. He will have an exhibition of his work at Dailchi Arts, New York, June 12 - 30, 2001. Photographs by Bob Barrett.

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