



1 Oribe Reborn Vessel Form #5, 12 in. (30 cm) in width, natural ash in anagama firing, subsequent Oribe firing, 2020. Photo: Rennio Maifredi.

“The job of the artist isn’t to give people something to look at...the job of the artist is to get people to see.”—Richard Tuttle, artist

The distinction between looking and seeing often resides at the core of Jeff Shapiro’s works in clay and is best seen through his most recent series, *Ice Flow* and *Waterfalls*, with each visually expressing a reference to nature, water, and forms created through temperature, time, and material. These latest groups of sculptures work to capture a slow, evolving sense of time often found in nature, most of which he witnesses daily in his rural, upstate New York environment. Ragged rock cliffs holding the memory of the seasons embedded into the surfaces help to create an understanding and appreciation of nature that he strives to capture, while simultaneously not wanting to copy what he sees. Like much of Shapiro’s work history in clay, his quest to find beauty in the imperfections of nature, often described in Japanese as wabi-sabi,¹ is an aesthetic he brings to his work through innocent observations and an openness to discovery, allowing his sculptures to possess a sense of nonchalance and serendipity. This new work, like the work of his past, continues to build upon a lifetime of observation and acceptance, both in his art and life.

A Change in Direction

Shapiro, born in the Bronx, New York, in 1949, left home at the age of 23 to move to Japan, where he planned to study martial arts. Arriving in 1973 with no background in ceramics, and subsequently visiting the renowned Bizen² potter Isezaki Jun,³ he was invited to participate in one of Jun’s full 10-day anagama firings. Working alongside experienced potters in Bizen and seeing the type of work that came out of these kilns induced an intense emotional response for Shapiro and would soon serve to change his direction from martial arts to a focus on the study of the ceramic arts of Japan. During the subsequent nine years that he was able to work with various potters in Japan, he learned a myriad of ceramic processes, enabling him to develop a love for the traditions that would later influence his own way of thinking and producing art.



2 Jeff Shapiro in the studio forming a large slab vessel, 2019.

After nine years of living, learning, and working in Japan (1973–81), Shapiro returned to set up a studio in his new home in the Hudson Valley of New York with his wife, Hinako, who is accomplished in the culinary arts and astutely helps him understand the relationship between pottery and food. With his knowledge of kiln building, firing with wood, and making tableware, he carefully began work to establish a career as a potter. Early challenges of being a romanticist in his approach to making utilitarian pottery soon intersected with the questions of identifying a market, especially one that found Japanese-style pottery produced by an American a curiosity. A firm commitment to tradition combined with an honest approach to the daily clay-working process helped establish him as a serious artist with an interested public. Through increased daily productivity and being attentive to how nature might influence his work in clay, an artistic voice began to emerge. Using nature and his rural surroundings as a guide for inspiration, the stones and geological formations gently influenced both his pots and sculptures, with each serving as visual maps and references to the land.



3 Ice Flow Geologic Formation #11, 21 in. (53 cm) in width, natural ash and slip in anagama firing, subsequent glaze firing, 2020.

Exploring Nature

Shapiro continues to be interested not in replicating what he sees in nature, but rather researching the essence of objects to create forms in clay that might reflect many of these same qualities. His goal is to display an honesty toward material, process, and ideas. Paying close attention to the clay and how it is prepared, all aspects of glazing, and the loading and firing of his large anagama kiln, he remains receptive to ideas of form and surface that may emerge. An example comes from his most recent *Ice Flow* and *Waterfall* series. The explorations into varying surfaces serve to reveal his ideas through the movement of liquid glaze on sculptures that results from the long wood-firing process and multiple firings. For Shapiro, glaze itself is form, not merely surface. Together with the natural movement of the clay that stems from the way the piece was made, glaze helps to unite both form and surface to create a visual language used to express his ideas. The multiple firings and subsequent layers of glaze interact with the initial wood-fired effects to create a new surface.



4 Oribe Reborn Form #6, 10 in. (25 cm) in width, natural-ash deposit in anagama firing, subsequent Oribe firing, 2020.

As an artist, Shapiro is extremely thoughtful in his approach to his studio production, and with the exception of his own work in clay, he remains quite nonjudgmental when discussing the work of others. While admittedly recognizing the influences of his training in Japan, he equally acknowledges influences from the West, with the work of Peter Voulkos having a great impact on him. Voulkos' attitude toward freedom of movement and scale, as well as the raw strength he brought to his pieces, all had an impact on the making of Shapiro's sculptures. Working alone in his rural upstate New York studio, he is more focused on discovering questions related to his clay practice than finding answers. To help him stay committed to the creative process and the pieces he makes, he remembers fondly the advice he received from a mentor, Suzuki Goro, who said, "Know no fear." For Shapiro, this means "fear of anything; success, failure, financial [issues], etc. Don't let any of that become an impediment to creating and making." He is quick to admit the failures of his early years making pottery and claims these failures have played a pivotal role in his success. For him, making mistakes can be a positive thing if you do not continue to make the same mistakes over and over.



5 Ice Flow Formation #2, 16 in. (41 cm) in width, natural-ash deposit in anagama firing, translucent glaze added in a subsequent firing, 2019.



6 Oribe Reborn Vessel Form #5, 12 in. (30 cm) in width, natural ash in anagama, subsequent Oribe firing, 2020.

Without Effort

An attitude about creating objects and the way Shapiro’s ideas incorporate themselves within the material itself, together with a spontaneity exhibited through form and surface, have been defining facets in his art. The ability to let go within the confines of his work in clay is something he strives for in both his pottery and sculptures. To further express these thoughts, he proclaims an appreciation for the Italian word *sprezzatura*,⁴ a term originating in 1528 that means nonchalance, or without effort, which encapsulates his thinking and approach to working with clay. As Shapiro describes it, “I want to find that 5-year-old child’s spirit, knowing that I have the ability of understanding the tools and processes that I have available, but being able to let go. And this will be something I spend the rest of my life trying to achieve.”



7 Ice Flow Geologic Form #4, 17½ in. (44 cm) in width, ash and slip in anagama, with subsequent glaze firing, 2021. 5–7 Photos: Rennio Maifredi.

For Shapiro, life as an artist continues to evolve while always pursuing his love and understanding for the materials and processes that he uses. Whether he is making functional forms that are enhanced with food and drink, or sculptural pieces that are either vessels or solid in structure, the organic forms and surfaces hold a quiet presence and help stitch together a visual narrative describing the world in which he lives and works. The mystery of the unknown is appealing to him, and making new work and new discoveries serve as reasons to remain excited about tomorrow. And through reflections on his career as an artist, Shapiro says, “As for what the future of my work has in store, that’s still to be discovered . . . that’s what keeps me excited and keeps me going . . . if I know exactly what’s going to happen, in a way that’s the beginning of an artistic decline . . . not knowing what’s ahead is a big part of the challenge for me . . . the most important thing is to stay challenged.”



8 Ice Flow Geologic Formation #10, 14½ in. (37 cm) in width, natural-ash deposit and slip in anagama firing, subsequent glaze firing, 2020.

Since his return from Japan nearly 40 years ago, Shapiro’s studio work provides continued evidence of an artist wishing to embrace new ideas and age-old processes, confirming a commitment to both tradition and innovation. After careful examination of Jeff Shapiro’s work in clay throughout his career, his ceramic work is certain to offer new insights far into the future.

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1 In traditional Japanese aesthetics, wabi-sabi is a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of appreciating beauty that is “imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete” in nature.

2 Bizen is one of the six ancient kiln-site towns in Japan with a tradition going back nearly 1000 years.

3 Isezaki Jun is a Living National Treasure of Japan, Born February 20, 1936, Bizen, Okayama, Japan.

4 Sprezzatura is an Italian word that first appears in Baldassare Castiglione’s 1528 The Book of the Courtier, where it is defined by the author as “a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it.”