



Two views of
Jeff Shapiro's kiln.

Shapiro approaches each area of the kiln in a different way. He introduces local reduction by mounding or covering various pieces with coals to increase the spectrum of effects which come out of the kiln, saying: "Covering a work with coals creates a crusty surface, similar in quality to bamacles coming out of the ocean." He suggests the following criteria for the student woodfirer: "Think about the clay first. Give due consideration to loading." (He dry-runs loading configurations in his studio prior to loading the kiln so that the desired results are considered even before the work is placed in the kiln. He sketches the stack and notes are taken for future reference.) "Consider the aesthetic over the technical." As he says, "It's not so difficult to just melt ash on clay."

JEFF SHAPIRO, ACCORD, NY, studied for seven years in Japan. In 1982 he built his first kiln in Accord. In 1996 he took it apart and rebuilt a smaller kiln because the first was too large. The second kiln is 6.5 m (20 ft) long x 2 m (72 in) wide x 1.4 m (55 in) high. He wanted to fire more often, sometimes three to four times a year so that he could concentrate on the widest spectrum of work. In other words, he wanted to see more frequent results.

This anagama or tunnel kiln has a wide opening at the front, the same dimensions as its width, which facilitates easier loading of the work. The first kiln had a narrower door and a more traditional rounded front, which he had to enlarge out of necessity because of an injured back. Although a noborigama is more consistent and easier to fire, he wanted the more dramatic effects that an anagama kiln can give, while acknowledging a higher risk in the percentage of loss of work from the kiln. For him, woodfiring is a life-style commitment. One has to have the land, resources of wood and life-process in order to fire and support a wood kiln. "It is like farming, living cyclically from season to season," he says.

The kiln is fired for 7-8 days, using 6-7 cords of ash which he acquires from a local baseball bat manufacturing company, already cut up into 1 m (40 in) lengths. About 10 per cent of pine is also used in side stoking during the firing. Shapiro concentrates his own work in the front of the kiln, renting out the back third to other potters and students.

By using a wide selection of clay bodies he is able to produce the widest spectrum of results from several firings.

Recently he has been exploring this dynamic in the production of tiles set into an architectural grid. He is now thinking more about diversity, large works, mixed media and different firing processes, such as the small wood, ash, salt fast-fire kiln which he has just constructed. The clay which he uses is a mix of commercial clay bodies, such as Laguna B mix, and clay from a depleted clay deposit in Southern New Jersey. He had purchased 30 tons of this material which consisted of approximately four tons of pure clay and 25 tons of rubble, but then realised that it was this material, both stones and organic matter, which gave the clay its indigenous character. Although there is always a balance in ceramics between the technical and the aesthetic, it is the aesthetic concerns which are of major interest to him.