

Unexpected Yohen

by Chiho Tokita

After many years of making functional work, I allowed myself to let go of utility and see where that led. My work is now about seeing the sculptural possibilities in functional objects. Keen on exploration of form and clay's material nature, I say in my artist statement that my works are objects that have become unmoored from function, but are reminiscent of use. I use the language and vocabulary from functional ceramics to say something else, to make sculptural interpretations. Interested in juxtapositions and exploring the spaces in-between, my practice looks at the space of possibilities between functional ceramics and sculpture. Recent work uses accumulation and composition. Utilizing the intimate scale of functional ceramics, small vessel forms are abstracted as building blocks, accrued and assembled, to create a larger composite structure, one comprising the surrounding space. It is a structure that is composed as much of what is, as what is not; a composition of objects and empty space, the spaces in-between and around.

My venture into woodfiring began by chance. On a whim, I responded to an invitation to fire in an anagama with people I did not know, in rural Ontario some hours away from where I live. I recall driving in the dark, alongside trucks moving across the province, finding the situation somewhat disorienting. I was on the first midnight to 6 a.m. shift when no doubt my novice status could cause the least harm. Being early November, my firing partner and I took turns running into the studio for the duration of our shift, thawing our numbed fingers and toes. After such an initiation, every experience onwards felt like a bonus. It turned out that the anagama itself was a joint venture between a young man who had experience and a woman who had land, a collaborative experiment situated in an area of beautiful Mennonite farmlands.

As a potter in Toronto with an electric kiln in the proverbial basement studio, my experience with the woodfire kiln comes from the grace of fellow potters and the wonderful inefficiency of this method that has traditionally necessitated a communal effort. My ceramic practice embraces the aesthetics of both the electric and woodfire kiln methods, and working with these contrasting approaches has informed my work in some unexpected ways.

Exploring work in two firing methods has been instructive in that you notice the particular effects of the firing, in the moods they elicit from the work. The work that came out of the first anagama firing had a solemnity that had previously not been evident in my work. Like discovering a new vein, it revealed a quality that had perhaps been untapped. Venturing into this alternative method, I realized it offered new vocabulary, words for saying things that could not be said before.

Having moved to New York City at school age, perhaps there was a subconscious store of images from my early childhood in Japan, because despite knowing so little about wood-fired ceramics, the one thing that I did seem sure about was my intent to pursue its unglazed aesthetic. With this in mind, sitting at the wheel I was surprised by the noticeable difference in my attitude towards the material. It took some time to figure out the nature of this difference, and to realize that the allure of working with the material in an unmediated way was freeing. Unobstructed by glaze considerations, I engaged more consciously with the material and began to make use of its subtleties. This insight proved to be informative and invaluable to my practice, as I tried to figure out how to make from that same place of directness and openness in my other work.

Like many people, I am a fan of Mark Rothko's work and I remember reading that he did not consider his paintings to be about colour. Puzzled, I let those statements simmer until recently, I thought I had grasped what he meant as I thought about a parallel issue in wood-fired ceramics.

One of the sly temptations I have found in woodfiring, apart from the gathering of people and good food and being out in the country, is the seductiveness of *yohen* effects. I have seen incredible surfaces – faint mauves transitioning to sombre greys, browns that speak of rich dark purple, vibrantly muted oranges and reds – colours that intimate a Rothko-esque sensibility, actually. Bedazzled by those nuanced colours and gritty ash textures, it becomes easy to lose the pot for the surface. The allure of kiln effects can sometimes lead one to think that wood-fired ceramics is about the surface, to be so enthralled by the surface that the object underneath becomes secondary. One approach to *yohen* can be to create forms that optimize the kiln effects. Viewed as a blank canvas for the firing, the form is dictated by *yohen* considerations. But as someone whose interests are in form and material, after a while I realized that rather than making work for the firing – literally and metaphorically, I wanted to ask instead what the firing can do for the work. I am always hoping that the surfaces only achievable through this particular method will bring out a new personality, reveal a side to the work that could not come out otherwise but that does not become the work itself. I wanted to approach woodfiring, not for the *yohen* effects but for what those effects allow my work to say. Woodfiring has expanded my vocabulary for expression, but like words, it is a tool. I find the tricky part is making sure that the tool doesn't do all the talking. Because it was so beguiling, colour got confused as being the subject of Rothko's work. Now I understand that colour was his language, his tool.

The effect of woodfiring on my practice has been suprisingly deeper than its beautiful surface.

With financial support from Ontario Arts Council, Chiho Tokita recently spent two months at Guldagergaard – International Ceramics Research Center, Denmark, to explore the language of sculpture. She is grateful to all the people with whom she has fired.