ATMOSPHERIC FIRINGS
Atmospheric Firings
July 30 - September 11, 2011
Reception: Friday, July 29, from 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Featuring:
Sam Hoffman, Terry Inokuma, Jennifer Klein, Marc Lancet, Diane Levinson, Hiroshi Ogawa, Masuo Ojima, Andy Ruble, and Tim Steele

Museum Hours:
Tuesday - Sunday, 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.;
Thursday until 7:00 p.m.
Closed Mondays and holidays

The Triton Museum of Art is funded in part by grants from the City of Santa Clara and Arts Council Silicon Valley
Wood-fire ceramic art, borne of processes centuries old, also contains aesthetics of modern art in the surface quality of the natural wood ash glaze. Even though the process of wood-fire glazing may seem like magic to the layman, it remains pure on account of the process and ingredients—clay pots and burning wood. We find beauty in the unending variety of the surface quality on wood-fire ceramics. The potter, master of control, must release the work to the fire, to chance. This sacrifice takes a great toll on the artistic ego; no one knows exactly what will happen inside the river of fire.

It is with great satisfaction that the Triton Museum of Art is able to host this exhibition of atmospherically fired ceramic art by these nine gifted artists. Each, in their way, reaches back to the earliest forms of artistic creation, thus tightening the continuum of the human need to create. Their devotion to the most primal of elements—earth from which they shape, and fire through which they transform—result in more than aesthetically pleasing artifacts. They put us in touch with the very ground of our being, which is, at its most profound level, the greatest power of art.

Preston Metcalf
Chief Curator
Triton Museum of Art

The atmosphere in a wood-firing kiln is a process of reduction and oxidation. We stoke wood, it combusts to create an oxygen starved atmosphere, and then over a period of minutes, starts to burn cleaner and creates an oxidized atmosphere.

It is in this path of flames that each piece takes on its own beauty with wood ash, flame impingement, and surface qualities on the clay.

It is with this essence that these wood-fired pieces take on a process of the soul, rather than a project of the intellect. It is this essence and beauty that hopefully the viewer draws out of each of these pieces.

Hiroshi Ogawa
Entropy: a measure of the unavailable energy in a closed thermodynamic system that is also usually considered to be a measure of the system’s disorder, and that varies directly with any reversible change in the heat in the system and inversely with the temperature of the system; broadly: the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system. [Merriam-Webster, 2011]

Atmospheric firing” describes a ceramic process in which clay is glazed and decorated, as well as heated, in the chamber of a kiln. Some techniques, such as wood-firing, use the fuel source itself to affect the environment within a kiln. When wood is burned, it releases minerals and gasses, as well as wood ash, which have the potential to change the ceramic object. In other atmospheric processes, such as salt or soda firing, a chemical is added to the kiln’s heat source, filling the chamber with vapors that can bond with the clay, creating uniquely glazed and flashed surfaces. The final appearance of the work is dependant on the minerals in the clay and how they react to the fire. Many potters explore the interaction of flame with slips and glazes applied to work before firing, while many prefer to leave the clay raw.

There is a significant element of chance and serendipity with atmospheric firing. It is impossible to choreograph exactly how vapors will bond with pieces or how wood ash will flow through a kiln and settle to melt on the ceramic surface. Artists using these atmospheric processes are not looking for a predictable approach to making pottery; they seek asymmetries, variations, and irregularities.

Though the “happy accidents” that can occur in atmospheric firing are often exciting, there is much risk involved with these processes. Potters are keenly aware of the second law of thermodynamics which states without additional energy, heat will never flow from a colder body to a warmer one, and that within a closed system, there is always an increasing tendency towards disorder. As potters add energy to their kilns and heat the clay, pieces become pyroplastic and fluid. If a firing is not stopped at exactly the right moment, the clay will slump and eventually melt. In atmospheric kilns, sodium vapors can etch into and erode clay surfaces. Imprecise stoking of wood into a firebox can damage wares and molten glaze can fuse pieces to the kiln. There are many potential pitfalls in these firings, including “playing it safe” and not changing the atmosphere of a kiln enough or adding too much energy to the kiln. Artists who choose atmospheric firing must balance the risks of the process with the desired results. It is common for potters to discard many unsuccessful pieces in pursuit of a specific aesthetic.

While there is much potential for failure, the pieces that survive these torturous firings are unique. Different kilns and firing styles produce a wide variety of results; ceramic artists have a vast spectrum of colors and textures to explore. Some potters seek quiet pieces that radiate warm orange, yellow, and red hues with a sprinkling of fine glaze. Others look for crusty, flame-blown surfaces with dramatic glass runs and carbon trapping. Hard edges can be softened and brushwork blurred or distorted. Artists are using atmospheric firing to explore the entire breadth of ceramics, from fiercely utilitarian tableware to highly conceptual sculpture.

Our fast paced culture is dominated by homogeneity and a need for “sameness” and a “quick fix.” Works fired in atmospheric kilns fill a void created in peoples’ lives by the pressures of 21st century society. These pieces have an aesthetic of contrast and asymmetry that is a perfect complement to the meditative process of making pottery.

Samuel Hoffman

Choosing Wood-fire: Aesthetic Capacity

By Our Choices We Are Known

We choose wood-fire. Any conversation about wood-fired aesthetics must begin with our quixotic choice. Superficially, our choice may appear at worst insane (showing a complete lack of reason or foresight) and at the very least counterintuitive, running counter to millennia of human innovation. What does it mean that we are able to choose wood-fire? Why choose labor intensive rather than labor saving?

What does it mean that artists today can choose wood-fire? Choice is the inherent difference that separates us from our ceramic predecessors—we can choose. For our ancient ceramicist ancestor’s wood-fire was the only option. Given a wide range of possibilities, unavailable to the ancients, we choose wood-fire, firmly establishing our art as a 21st century endeavor. While our kiln sites may seem imbued with a primordial vitality, we are not returning to ancient ways and practices. We come to wood-fire guided by our vision as contemporary artists; our goals, our efforts, our stringings are very different from the originators of the practice of wood-fire. Simply stated, we choose wood-fire because it suits our artistic vision: just as Claude Monet chose oil paint, Jackson Pollock chose house paint, Joseph Beuys chose society and Andy Goldsworthy chooses natural materials and environments.

What does it signify that we eschew many easier and perhaps more popular choices? Both gas and electric kilns are readily available in computer-enhanced models that will fire from start to finish without human intervention. We can now literally load a kiln, light it, and leave. In choosing to wood-fire we choose to work hard. This is not efficient, not labor saving—it flies in the face of every standard of success of an information-driven industrial society, every standard with the possible exception of the uncompromising standards of fine art. As artists, wood-fire satisfies our artistic vision in a way that no other method comes close to achieving.

Ancient ceramicists turned to wood-firing as necessity, as the only method of hardening the clay into functional vessels. They were following the dictates of necessity rather than artistic vision. 21st-century artists find in wood-firing a combination of colors and textures that integrate with form to create profound expressions of a contemporary aesthetic. These were not the concerns of the ancients. Choice is the vital component of our wood-fire practice. It exposes our distinctly 21st-century motives that fix us firmly as contemporary artists of our time. In Japanese Wood-fired Ceramics I write:

Why in the face of modern convenience are ceramic artists internationally choosing to wood-fire? Only beauty offers an acceptable explanation. And not just beautiful, not just an “oh that’s lovely,” casually noted beauty. It must be an extraordinary beauty, a heart achingly arresting beauty; a beauty of epic proportions, a beauty worth working for, a beauty only achievable by way of wood-firing. It can be no less. For what other goal would artists dedicate so much time and effort?

Choice and Potential

It is in the nature of art that our endeavors consistently expand beyond our current understanding. More will be expressed in wood-fire than today’s practitioners can predict. I have exposed some of the meanings inherent in our choice to wood-fire. Wood-fired works can act on the open, appreciative heart. The best wood-fired art challenges us and offers rewards to our greatest aesthetic capacities. We must meet the work with the insight and respect it demands. As citizens of contemporary art, we are heirs to all that has gone before us. As artists we strive to realize wood-fire’s infinite aesthetic potential.

Marc Lancet

Excerpted from the article presented at the First European Wood-fire Conference in Brollin, Germany, September 2010
Samuel HOFFMAN
Corvallis, Oregon

I am interested more in artistic exploration than expression; my work is primarily motivated by curiosity about the nature of clay and fire. My passion for ceramics is influenced by a background in mathematics, chemistry, and astronomy. I enjoy using the scientific method of inquiry when experimenting with materials and firings. But I also employ risk and chance as allies in my creative process, an artistic balance that lies somewhere between alchemy and science.

When firing in wood and vapor kilns, subtle changes in the shape of a piece can influence how flames move over the clay and, consequently, how it is colored and textured. I am particularly excited by the possibilities of combining intentional marks with the serendipitous glaze effects from the fire. In my recent work, I have been exploring the ceramic vessel as a kind of lens, much like that of a telescope or microscope. By manipulating the two-dimensional surfaces of a three-dimensional form, I hope to create an illusion of depth, be it celestial or cellular, that goes beyond the piece itself.

1. **Cloud Hidden,** Whereabouts
   Unknown, vase, 25” x 12” x 10”
   wheel thrown high silica porcelain (formulated by artist)
   wood-fired to cone 14 in Hikarigama, reduction cooled

2. **Orbital,** wall plate, 11” x 11” x 1”
   wheel thrown high silica porcelain (formulated by artist)
   applied flashing slips and oxides
   fired inverted on a pedestal to enhance glaze effects
   soda vapor fired with gas to cone 10, reduction cooled

3. **Microcosmos,** wall platter, 15” x 15” x 2”
   wheel thrown high alumina stoneware (formulated by artist)
   applied equisetum (horsetail plant) and flashing slips
   fired inverted on a pedestal to enhance glaze effects
   wood-fired to cone 14 in Hikarigama, reduction cooled

Photography: Bill Bachhuber
This series of useable trays in the form of a common Japanese playing card is a response to the recent tsunami that hit Sendai and the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. Each card design has been altered to remind us of our use of nuclear power for energy production, and the process following the disaster of the cooling tower meltdown.

Curiosity brought me to take one step beyond the initial release of the work to the anagama fire. By ‘defiling’ such a colorful and reminiscent memory from my childhood was ultimately cathartic; both in the altering of the imagery and in painting the wood-fired trays, the surfaces often coveted by wood-fire purists as untouched by anything but wood ash and flame.

“You are lost the instant you know what the result will be.”
—Juan Gris

One often finds that experience requires adjustment due to uncontrollable elements, ultimately giving us the choice to reach a littler further.
Jennifer Long Klein has made her living as a studio potter for more than 30 years in Carmel Valley, CA. She participated in her first wood-fire at Hiroshi Ogawa’s in Elkton, Oregon in 2002. Enticed by the camaraderie of working with other potters, combined with the mystery and new challenges posed by the unpredictable often subtle effects of atmospheric firing; she has returned to Elkton annually ever since.

“My eyes were opened to a new aesthetic allowing my work to grow in unforeseen ways. Participating in firings and creating new work specifically for the four day Anagama firing has become the high point of my year.”

1. **Teapot**, 9” x 9” x 7”  
   Wood-fired stoneware

2. **Plate**, 12” diameter  
   Wood-fired stoneware

3. **Coiled Vase**, 17” x 11”  
   Wood and Soda fired stoneware

Photography: James Dewrance
Why in the face of modern convenience are ceramic artists internationally choosing to wood-fire? Only beauty offers an acceptable explanation. And not just beautiful, not just an "oh that's lovely," casually noted beauty. It must be an extraordinary beauty, a heart achingly arresting beauty; a beauty of epic proportions, a beauty worth working for, a beauty only achievable by way of wood-firing. It can be no less. For what other goal would artists dedicate so much time and effort?

(Excerpted from Japanese Wood-fired Ceramics)
Why Clay? PROCESS, FORM, SURFACE, COLOR, PLASTICITY, COMMUNITY, HUMILITY, TENACITY, JOY, FRUSTRATION, ANGST, BEAUTY, AWE INSPIRING, PHYSICAL, FANTASTIC, working with clay encompasses all. My current work/series began during the George W. Bush years when Weapons of Mass Destruction became shortened to WMDs—a description we heard repeatedly each day in the months leading up to the Iraq War. The pieces have morphed into Tools for future generations.

“I don’t know what kind of weapons will be used in the third world war, assuming there will be a third world war. But I can tell you what the fourth world war will be fought with—stone clubs.”

—Albert Einstein

I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to explore the effects of wood-firing clay thanks to Hiroshi Ogawa of Elkton, Oregon and Phil Park and Izzy Lewis of Spring Valley, California. After 30 plus years of exploring the material to have the opportunity to truly paint with the fire has been a gift to which I am most grateful.

1. Weapons of Mass Construction #14 (Fissures), 11” x 22” x 15”
   2011, Woodfired, Ceramic with Found Objects

2. Weapons of Mass Construction #13 (Chain), 11” x 14” x 12”
   2011, Woodfired, Ceramic with Found Objects

3. Weapons of Mass Construction #15
   12” x 22” x 15”
   2011, Woodfired, Ceramic with Found Objects

Photography: James Dewrance
‘Shibui’—a profound, quiet feeling suggesting depth, simplicity and purity. There is no exact English counterpart for the word; ‘austere,’ ‘subdued’ and ‘restrained’ come closest. To the Japanese, ‘shibui’ describes the beauty of inner illumination.

It is this inner essence that I seek in my pottery, a process of the soul rather than a project for the intellect. It is the beauty that the viewer himself draws out of the piece more than an aesthetic imposed by its creator.

I hope the earth, water and fire that have united to create these pots will stir your imagination to see the spirit within.
Mas OJIMA
Los Angeles, California

Finding a voice has always been the goal in my creative work. After three decades of experiences in different clays, temperatures and techniques I have become aware of the one nature of clay that most represent my personality.

Traditional Japanese wood-firing, seemingly simple yet so unpredictable, has taught me to appreciate the power of nature: fire, flame, wind, ash and to let one’s Ego disappear as one opens the kiln to cherish those moments of success.

1. Vase, 29” x 17”
   Anagama fired stoneware

2. Sculpture Vase, 18” x 12” x 14”
   Anagama fired stoneware

3. Sculpture #1, 5” x 15” x 17”
   Anagama fired stoneware

Photography: Harry Chamberlain
I create sculpture that explores the hybridization of organic and architectural structure. By observing and referencing details of our universe which, range from the microscopic (dividing cells, mushroom spores, pollen, and bone structure) to the mammoth (large-scale bridges, refineries, and ships), I gather ideas for surface and form.

I have always been interested in how objects in nature form and how manmade objects reflect these same intractable laws. Quite simply, the hybridization of structural references has expanded the possibilities for nature’s pure and perfect geometries. By reducing the sculpture to its pure essence of structure, the work simultaneously conveys the grace of natural arches and cathedral naves. Every structural link becomes an integral part of the piece’s survival as a whole. Much like Buckminster Fuller’s idea of tensegrity, the minimal amount of material for maximum strength drives me to push the ceramic material to the threshold of its tensile strength.

I become overwhelmed when standing at the base of a suspension bridge, and marvel at the hollowed-out remains of a Cholla cactus. How is a simple lattice pattern so strong? How is an eagle wing so rigid yet flexible? These are the questions that fuel my sculptural inspiration.
Tim STEELE
Corvallis, Oregon

Tim Steele began making pots in 1985, after admiring the work of others for many years. He is self-taught through books, experimentation, observation and practice but credits four potters with guiding and influencing him; Priscilla Hoback, Bill Daley, Doug Casebeer and Hiroshi Ogawa. Tim’s work is handbuilt and explores functional forms without compromising traditional sculptural concerns. His interest in the effect of altering shapes and dimensions is enhanced by the nuances created by the atmospheric firing environment.

Tim maintains a home studio outside of Corvallis, Oregon where he lives with his wife, two Shetland Sheepdogs and a cat.

1. Twisted 3 corner vase, 15” x 5”
Wood and soda fired, hand built stoneware

2. Angled Vase, 15” x 3” x 5”
Wood-fired, hand built stoneware

3. Zipper Vase, 12” x 5” x 3”
Wood-fired, hand built stoneware

Photography: Bill Bachhuber
This catalogue has been underwritten by Ko Nishimura to whom the Museum and the artists wish to express their heartfelt gratitude and appreciation.

We would like to thank Hiroshi Ogawa for his generous spirit in teaching and sharing his kiln, Hikarigama.

—Terry Inokuma, Sam Hoffman, Tim Steele, Diane Levinson, Jennifer Klein, Mas Ojima and all the potters whose lives and work has changed because of Hikarigama

I would like to thank Scott Parady, and Nick Schwartz for letting me be a part of their woodfire community over the years.

—Andy Ruble

I would like to thank Fred Olsen and Carol Spahn, with whom I first built a wood-fire kiln. Fred Olsen, during a firing at his studio in Palm Desert, was instrumental in providing the vocabulary of woodfire in English. Finally, I would like to thank my collaborator and coauthor Masakazu Kusakabe. In our twenty year collaboration, we have taught and learned from each other and the many artists with whom we have worked.

—Marc Lancet

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