

HANSON HOWARD GALLERY

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The Appeal of the Anagama: Why this Ancient Method Still Survives

November 7, 2017

Penelope Dews :: November 2nd - 18th at Hanson Howard Gallery



Rhino and Cattle Egret



Luciano



Kitsune

When we see wood fired ceramics we are immediately aware it is unlike the ceramic work we typically encounter. Much of what we see in ceramic art is fired in electric or gas kilns, though if we are not familiar with the techniques, this is not something we would register. We would probably note there is a distinctively "earthier" appearance with the wood fired pieces. What sets wood fired ceramics apart is the tonality and textures that can only be obtained through this centuries old process using the Anagama or Noborigama kilns. Originally from China, the Anagama kiln found its way to Japan in the 5th century. All these years later the technique and structures have remained true to the original methods.

This is what excites me about wood fired ceramics. I love the variety I see in surfaces and I'm drawn to the rich earth tones, immediately, but I also have a deep appreciation for the archaic. The fact that ancient methods survive solely because no new developments have improved on them is a beautiful thing. These continued practices tie us to our history as the arts can do so well.



Anagama Kiln at Hiroshi Ogawa's Studio



Noborigama Kiln Chamber

The Anagama kiln is an earthen structure built in a sloping shape with a firebox at one end and a chimney flue at the other. The fire and the ceramics share the same, single chamber. The craft of this firing method is in the understanding of how to load the kiln. This requires imagining the path the fire will take, how the ashes and the embers may fall depending on where the pieces are placed in relation to the fire and to each other. Although there is an element of chance always, there is also skill, developed through experience that determines the final outcome of the firing. I imagine it is this combination of skill and chance in Anagama firing that enchants these ceramic artists. Craftsmen tend to have a deep respect for the nature of their material and allowing for that nature to play its role in the collaboration.



Penelope Dew's Elephant is an example of the surface created in the Noborigama kiln

The temperature can reach 2,500 °F, producing fly ash and volatile salts. It is the complex interaction between the flame, ash and minerals of the clay that forms the natural ash glaze which may vary in texture and thickness. The surface may turn out smooth and glossy or rough and sharp.

A Noborigama is attached to the Anagama and the fire flows from the Anagama through the Noborigama to get to the chimney flue. The soda is introduced to the Noborigama when it has reached its highest temperature. The soda produces a shinier surface which also has an orange peel appearance.



The firing may take around 100 hours. The entire time it must be stoked around the clock. This can take up to eight cords of wood. The cooling period can take just as long before the kiln is ready to be unloaded.

Penelope Dews produces wood fired ceramic sculptures, portraying mainly animals, and other natural forms. She chooses wood firing for the subtle colors and stone like surface. Ranging from realistic to whimsical, her animals exude peaceful, playful expressions with a touch of the mysterious. The sculptures are hollow and formed by pinching together modified coils (short, fat and flattened). Paddling, scraping, and smoothing conceals where coils overlap. Often the faces and extremities are carefully detailed, while the bodies are left uniform and unadorned. In contrast, others are highly decorated, with colored clay slips, textured by stamping, carving or added pieces of clay.

Penelope's latest work is featured in the gallery through November 18th, 2017. These pieces were fired in the Anagama/Noborigama kiln at Hiroshi Ogawa's in Elkton, OR earlier this fall.

*All images here are the property of Penelope Dews.

-Élan Chardin Gombart

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