

JOHN DIX

Where the magic happens

Most anagamas have areas from front to back, top to bottom, that fire differently: temperature, amount of ash build-up and atmosphere can vary greatly. The back of my kiln fires a cone lower than the front; usually cone 11 is soft when 12 is down in the front. Having far less ash deposits, it is ideal for developing the buttery matt red and white of shino glazes. It's a safe and relatively dependable area. The front stack, which receives much more ash and is hotter, (cone 12 often puddles) is wonderful for yakishime (natural ash) pieces. But my favourite area is the floor around the firebox. It's the high-risk high-reward area where the real magic happens.

Loading a wood kiln is more challenging than a gas or

electric one. The flame is directional. I think of it as waves pounding a beach. With each stoke a heavily reductive flame rips through the kiln from front to chimney, depositing tiny amounts of ash on the work as it squeezes through the negative space. As the wood burns down, the flame backs off and the atmosphere turns to oxidizing, and it's time to stoke again. Over the course of the firing, the little bits of ash from each stoke build up. Then at high temp it melts. Being directional, one side of the piece typically gets a much heavier deposit of ash. When loading each piece, an aesthetic decision has to be made as to where on the work you want that ash. What's the front of the piece? Would horizontal drips be better than verti-



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cal? Where does the wadding go? Shells anyone? How many? Loading is the most mentally and physically difficult part of the process. The decisions you make in loading are crucial to the look of the final piece.

If you think of a wood kiln as a tool to paint the pots with fire and ash, in the firebox it's more like using a trowel. As the name implies, the firebox is where the wood is put and burned. Along with fire and ash you have the added element of embers. Pots placed in and around the firebox get covered with the embers, creating a thick molten crust. Over a 6-day firing a large ember-pile builds up and it is the interaction between the embers/charcoal and the clay/glaze that make the most intriguing pieces. Pot placement and ember management during the firing will make the difference between a bad, good or great piece.

My firebox is relatively large measuring 160 cm wide x 120 cm to the first stack of shelves. Pots are stacked directly on the floor making a horse-shoe shape around the stokehole at the front with empty space in the middle for the wood to burn. The work is often 'tumble' stacked, lying on its sides and piled on top of one another: it is locked together with wadding (special clay to keep the pots from sticking to each other or the floor/shelves) and shells. Here you need to imagine how the embers will cover the work. Along the sides the pieces will be completely buried. Toward the back of the firebox the ember pile

opposite page **Hiki-dashi Mizusashi**
(water jar for tea ceremony)

right **Vase**, natural ash fired on floor of kiln



tapers off and cuts through the pots on an angle, leaving parts of the pots exposed above the embers. Positioning work here is crucial. Where the embers accumulate around the base of a pot you can get a most dramatic effect: black and crusty on the bottom, shiny drippy melted ash on the top. A pot on its side will have a perpendicular divide cutting through, and where the two meet is where the whole spectrum of the rainbow can develop.

I generally fire three types of work here: unglazed, shino glazed and hiki-dashi. The unglazed work will more often be stacked where it will get completely buried in the embers. These pieces will be loaded face down supported on shells and wadding. As the pieces get covered in the ember pile, the ash slowly melts and drips around the underside of the pots. Being buried they stay in a reductive atmosphere for much of the firing. This can result in beautiful blues and reds along with crusty blacks, known as koge in Japan. It's the most unpredictable place in the kiln.

The shino glaze pieces I put a bit further back so the ember pile can cut through the work, leaving part of the pot exposed. The koge from the embers contrasts beautifully with the milky whiteness of the shino. And on that magic line where the two meet, brilliant blues and purples, and greens develop.

Hiki-dashi is a Japanese term for work that is pulled out of the kiln and quickly cooled. A clay body that can handle thermal shock is necessary and my open, toothy Shigaraki clay is

below **Shino glaze guinomi** (sake cup) hiki-dashi

opposite page **Shino glaze basket** fired on floor where ember/charcoal cut through

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perfect. At the end of the firing I will pull six to ten pieces, from sake cups and teabowls to medium size vases, both glazed and unglazed work. The crash cooling develops a palette of colours and surface texture that is completely different from the work that remains in the kiln. Hiki-dashi has a couple of other benefits: it gives me a good idea of how the firing has progressed, and there is that gratification of having new work in hand. It's a long road from loading (5 days) to firing (6 days) to cooling (another 5 to 7 days) before seeing any results. The hiki-dashi stems that hunger.

Wood-fired surfaces are a rather esoteric aesthetic and take an appreciation of Japanese art history to fully appreciate. Pottery development the world over is similar to any science or technology: further refinement, more efficient processes, better craftsmanship. Kilns became more and more efficient by burning less wood to higher temps. Clays became more refined. Glazes were developed in chemistry labs by scientists. The end product has sometimes become a technological marvel that leaves the mind in awe but the heart a bit empty. This progressive march also took place in Japan. However in the late 1500's the aesthetic of wabi-sabi revolutionized the tea ceremony. Wabi-sabi is often translated as "rustic simplicity" or "the beauty of an object in its natural state of decline". This appreciation for unrefined work allowed certain pottery villages throughout Japan to forgo the progressive march and maintain the simple beauty of unrefined clay and fire. This aesthetic started to gain popularity in the West from the mid-twentieth century, primarily in the U.S. Today there are thousands of wood kilns in America alone.

I came to Japan in 1989 on a pilgrimage to learn more of wood-firing. I worked with potters in Bizen and Shigaraki, two pottery towns with long traditions of wood-firing unglazed ware. In 1995 I was offered a chance to build a kiln in the Tanba region, another famous wood-firing centre, and have stayed. I built a kiln





with a large firebox to exploit the interaction between the work and embers. I believe it's these firebox pieces in particular that have gotten my work recognized here and abroad and allowed me to exhibit in department stores and galleries throughout the country. It's a bit unusual for a gaijin (foreigner) potter to be recognized for styles of work that are influenced by historical Japanese pottery, and it is gratifying to be able to show in Japan. But each firing puts it all on the line again, since the anagama is a medieval tool fraught with pitfalls.

So when I finally unbrick the door, my palms are sweaty and my heart is beating a bit faster. The firebox pieces make or break a firing in my mind, and I will know as soon as I get in the kiln. The work is covered with ash, everything dark grey or black. The pots must be carefully pried off the floor, and only when lifted to show the underside do I know if it was successful or not. I call it "pulling diamonds out of the dirt". A few gems from here and my soul is satiated. There will be beautiful work throughout the kiln, but it's in the firebox where the magic happens.

John Dix was born in 1960 in Flint, MI. From 1982-1983 studied at Northern Michigan University. 1983-85 apprentice, Terrestrial Forming Pottery, Whitehall, MI. 1987-89 worked as studio manager at Terrestrial Forming Pottery. 1989 Moved to Japan. 1989-91 studied at Tekisui Pottery Studio, Ashiya. 1992-94 worked with Bizen potter Kanichi Mikami. 1994 teaching at Unknown Pottery School in Nishinomiya. 1995 built hybrid woodfire kiln in Sasayama. He exhibited in notable galleries in Japan and in the USA and articles where published in The Log Book, Ceramics Technical, Ceramics Monthly, Japan Times, Ceramics Art and Perception.

His work has been collected by Philadelphia Museum of Art, permanent collection.

John Dix has spent the last 20 of his 30 years with clay primarily in Japan. This has led to works that show a strong Japanese influence but still retain elements of his early training in the West. "The word that best describes my approach to clay is 'serendipity'. I'll have a starting point without a clear destination, a familiar path (constructing a teapot, a sake bottle, etc.), which I always give myself permission to diverge from. This freedom brings freshness to the work and has sustained me over the years."

For the last 16 years John has been based in the area of Japan called Tamba, an ancient pottery region. There he has built a studio and a 2-chamber anagama hybrid, which he fires two or three times a year for up to 7 days a firing. His work is either glazed with a Shino type glaze or is left bare for the accumulated ash to decorate.

"Firing takes the idea of 'serendipity' to a higher level. I don't know of any other art form where chance plays such a pivotal role."

Loading the kiln with glazed and unglazed pots takes 5 days. Over the course of the one-week firing copious amounts of ash are produced, giving each piece its own unique character.

"It is physically and mentally draining. Years and years went by before I even started to understand what was happening in the kiln."

John still defers to the gods of chance, but in fact at this point he has succeeded in wresting control of the process and mastering all aspects of his firing. John regularly exhibits at galleries and department stores in Tokyo, Kansai (Osaka/Kyoto/Kobe) and also in the U.S.



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