

Documenting Fire

A Profile of Brian Benfer's Industrial Series

*Dawn Padula discusses the
process and the evolution of this
current body of work*

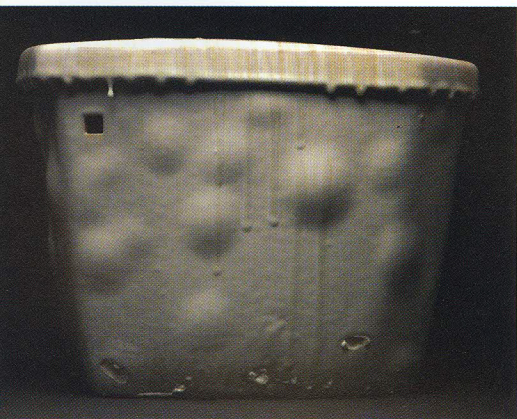
Above: *Untitled IC-71 (Detail)*.
Below: *Untitled IC-71*. 2008.
Porcelain. 14 x 18 x 9 in.

RESIDUE IS DEFINED AS BEING, "SOMETHING THAT remains after a part is taken, separated or designated or after the completion of a process". For artist Brian Benfer, the concept of residue has long been the impetus for his body of work.

The artist explains that his work is informed by the impressions left behind from the process and experience itself. Benfer says, "Memory and the physical residue that exists from experiential situations intrigue me.

Time has played a major role in my work, often being the primary source of residue." He continues on to say, "Acting as a physical diary of sorts, the remains speak volumes about my personal exploration, referencing historical aspects and utilizing contemporary mind sets." In the recent past, Benfer's media choices, though mostly ceramic in nature, have run the gamut from site-specific installations to clay paintings to video pieces. Recently, his work has involved a return to the ceramic object as a means by which he can document time, space and experiences via the fire itself.

Benfer first conceptualized what he now refers to as his *Industrial Series* while heading-up the ceramics program at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts. The





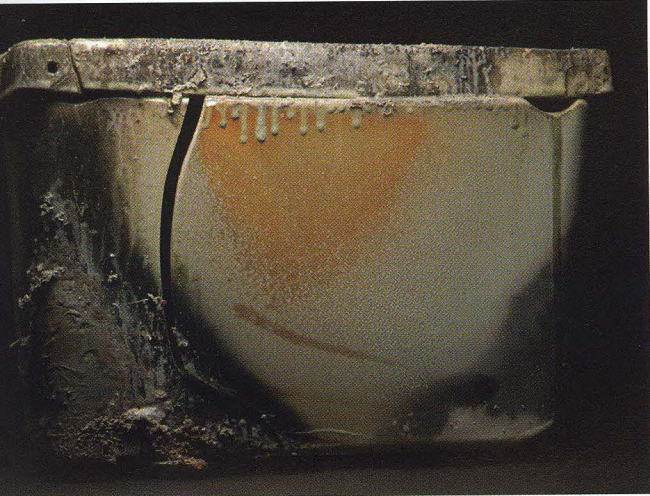
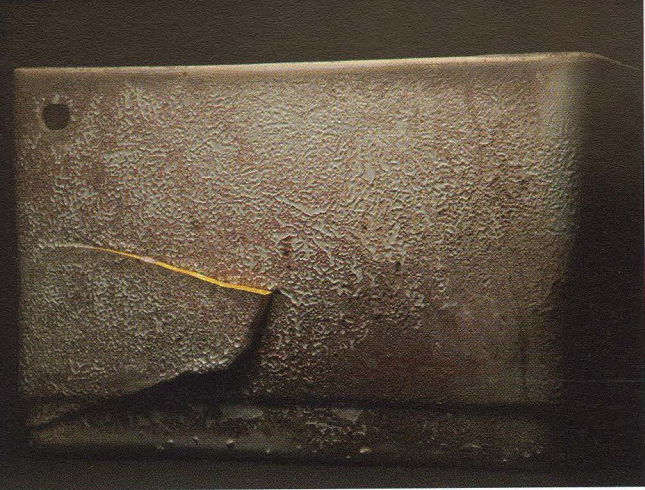
artist inherited several industrial materials as a result of the phasing out of the school's ceramic engineering department. In coming up with a use for the found objects, Benfer contemplated their purpose. He remarks, "Being that the crucibles are designed to withstand high temperatures and thermal shock, I thought it would be interesting to see how they would hold up through the woodfiring/*hikidashi* process." More important than the physical outcome was the ideology that was sparked consequentially in Benfer. He says, "I realized that it really was not about me making objects but it was more about me trying to find a vehicle to document the effects the fire would have on the material – an attempt at deconstructing the object." Benfer goes on to clarify how this experiment serves as a compliment to his interest in residue. "I feel there needs to be a disconnect from my being involved in the process of creation (for example, object making). In the case of the industrial objects, my role was that of mediator, meaning I physically positioned the entities together where, through time, they evolved. The results are a pure residual of their interaction."

Soon after firing industrial ceramics at Rutgers for the first time, Benfer was invited to take part in a five-year celebration of the wood kiln at Tohisoo Mansion in Kohila, Estonia. During the symposium, he spent the greater part of his time there writing, as well as experimenting with installation-type work in the country's wooded areas. His only connection with the ceramic object involved creating tea bowls for the purpose of sharing the *hikidashi* technique with the other artists participating in the symposium. Prior to one of the three firings of the wood kiln that summer, Benfer felt the need to contribute an object to the process. Remembering his experiences at Rutgers, he asked the Mansion staff if there was anything appropriate readily available and he was led to the basement where he acquired an old German porcelain toilet. As most artists who fire kilns devote a great deal of time to creating objects that will eventually be placed in the fire, Benfer's contribution of an already fabricated toilet sparked quite the conversation among the participants. "You should have seen the looks on some of their faces," Benfer exclaims. Questionable or not, the finished object returned a notable result. "It was interesting to me to see how the porcelain warped, bloated and



Top left: *Untitled IC-69*. 2008. Porcelain with gold leaf. 14 x 20 x 9 in.
 Top right: *Firing with the Bonners*.
 Above: *Untitled IC-69 (Alternate view)*.
 Below: *Untitled IC-1*. 2005. Porcelain. 15 x 22 x 14 in.





Top left: **Untitled IC-64**. 2008.
Porcelain with gold leaf.
12 x 19 x 8 in.

Top right: **Untitled IC-64 (Detail)**.
Above: **Untitled IC-15**. 2006. Porcelain.
14 x 20 x 9 in.

Below: **Untitled IC-61**. 2008.
Porcelain. 14 x 21 x 8 in.



deformed. The outcome opened the door for the possibility of firing similar objects," says Benfer. And fire similar objects, he did. The Estonia firing, in conjunction with his foray into the firing of industrial objects at Rutgers, parlayed itself into a new body of work. Through further experimentation of this sort, the artist sought to document the fire itself by capturing 'footage' of its unedited effect on the face of the object.

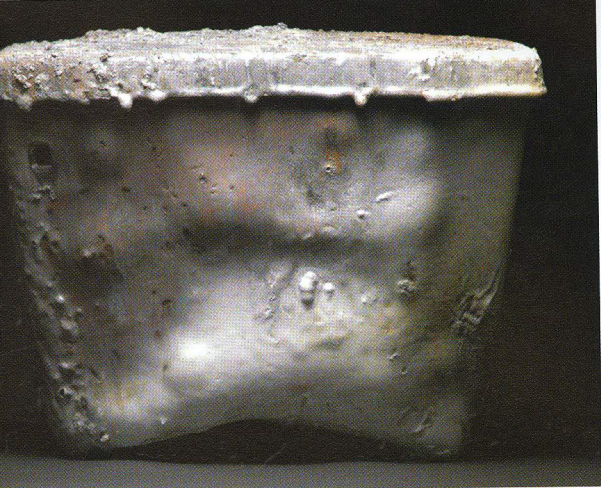
Benfer explains that the more experience he had with firing kilns, the more interested he became in exploring other aspects of it. He elaborates by saying, "For me, I understand the idea behind making an object and having the fire affect and change it. But I was more intrigued by conveying the essence of what the fire is actually

doing." Benfer found that re-firing industrial objects was fortuitous in that it helped aid the viewer in visually understanding the process. He states, "The outcome of utilizing everyday, recognizable objects clearly shows the experiential alterations via heat and fire."

In addition, the concept provokes an interesting challenge to the intentions of traditional object makers. Where most utilize the fire-based process to beautify a static object, Benfer is using the process to show the raw effects of the fire in its purest form, often resulting in the kiln creating sculpture. The use of the wood kiln for such documentation, versus other kiln options, is purposeful. "The wood kiln is as archaic as they come," states Benfer, "meaning, you take a tree, chop it up and then burn the earth with it. Firing industrial ceramics via this medium seemed the ultimate juxtaposition of technological materials (industry) with archaic firing practices."

Documentation of the effects of the fire is not the only aspect of this work that has come to the surface. Beyond the undeniable homage to Duchamp, the work also holds associations with the Asian aesthetic, ceremonial water vessels and the tea ceremony. But other conversations evoked by the work, such as those of environmental consciousness and recycling, stems from Benfer's archeological-like unearthing of shards from the kiln's floor.

"As a result of the firing process, many of the pieces fall apart," Benfer explains. "I felt bad throwing them



in the trash since many of the objects were found, older porcelain pieces – they usually had some sort of historical connection.” At the time, the artist was living in a house/studio space constructed primarily of recycled materials by a local builder. Benfer continues, “The builder said to me that, in the spirit of reuse, I should just glue the pieces back together instead of scrapping the work altogether.” The artist heeded this advice—rummaging through the ash finding remnants from the carnage. And like the museum conservator, he reassembled the objects into their original shape and form. Once assembled, he then accentuated the cracks and seams with gold. Benfer explains his reasoning, “There was gold leaf lying around the studio in which I was working and I was immediately compelled to start filling the cracks with gold. Having seen so many of the historical ceramics from the East repaired in that manner, I thought that doing so would be the next logical step in the progression of the work.”

Benfer goes on to say that this series not only has helped him to explore further his interest in residue, but also, it serves as a testament to his interest in ceramics on the whole. He explains, “Industrial ceramics have enabled me a continued participation in what I view as being the most significant traditional aspect of the discipline: the fire. It provokes an interesting dialogue between the old and the new by presenting an honest focus on elements of the fire without creating an object.”



Top left: **Untitled IC-72**. 2008.
Porcelain. 14 x 18 x 10 in.

Top right: **Untitled IC-63**. 2008
Porcelain with gold leaf.
13 x 21 x 8 in.

Above: **Untitled IC-69 (Detail)**.
Below: **Brian Benfer's Signature**.

Dawn M Padula is Assistant Professor of Voice and Director of Vocal Studies at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington, US. In addition to being a vocal pedagogue and professional opera singer, Padula is also a free-lance writer and long-time follower of the arts.

Brian Benfer holds a BFA in Studio Art from Humboldt State University and an MFA in Visual Arts from Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts. Pieces from his *Industrial Series* were featured in the 2009 NCECA Clay National Biennial Exhibition held in Phoenix, Arizona, US and at the 2008 Crafting Content Symposium held in Fayetteville, Arkansas, US.

All photos by Brian Benfer.

