an interview with
Simon Levin

The Road to Mata Ortiz

Sneak Preview:
Baltimore’s 2005 “Tour de Clay”

Firing Damp Work

New Glazes for Cone 6 oxidation and Cone 10 Reduction

Photographing Ceramics

The Gallery Shuffle
Stoney Jar. 13” x 13”. Anagama-fired stoneware clay, fired in a six-day firing, using cedar and willow; reduction cooled. This piece was placed in the bottom front of the kiln.

Red Path Pitcher. 10” x 7”. Anagama-fired stoneware. This piece was placed in the middle of the kiln.

Shell Bowls. 8½” diameter x 2½” deep. Anagama-fired porcelain with inlaid slip. These were placed in the back of the kiln.
As a genre, the work in this exhibition could be referred to as “just” functional pottery, i.e. bowls, pitchers, cups, jars, and trivets (not that there’s anything wrong with that). But isn’t it possible that the beauty, depth, and spirit of these objects could be as meaningful, inspiring, and intelligent as any great painting or sculpture? Aren’t all disciplines—including painting, sculpture, and architecture—crafts? When one looks at the history of art, isn’t it true that great art has come from every “craft,” and been made from just about every possible material? Simon Levin’s work is the epitome of this concept. Instead of mixing paints, he paints with fire and melting ash. The building of his anagama kiln specifically for his choice of form and surface becomes his architecture, and the precise stacking of the kiln to optimize the possibilities of “random kiln accidents,” becomes a phenomenal piece of impeccably-designed and constructed sculpture. The pots are beautifully made with wholesome gestures, a natural simplicity, and the equipoise of a venerable master. The viewer doesn’t look at one of these pots and think, “This is the form and this is the glaze.” On the contrary, such close attention is paid to every detail, from the lip to the foot to the fire, that the surface and form are totally integrated and harmonious. This work has an intoxicating quality that one rarely sees, and Simon Levin and his work have become synonymous.

Why did you name the exhibition “All Cylinders Firing?”

In March of 2004, we were unloading the fourth firing of the Mill Creek anagama kiln, and one of the tea bowls that came out of the kiln struck me as such a strong piece, I described it as firing on all cylinders. The more this list grows and the more I strive to attend to each. When all of these elements are working together, exploring and reiterating an idea, the piece is successful; all the cylinders are firing. Sometimes—just sometimes—the sum of all these is greater than the parts; a synergistic energy occurs, causing the work to surpass its engineering. This elusive quality fascinates me; it is something I will spend my life chasing. This show is a selection of works from the past four firings of the Mill Creek anagama. Out of those firings, I saved over 200 of the best pots. From these, I further filtered out any that I felt were misfiring in the slightest way. I wanted to uphold the title of this show.

Why are you firing with wood, and why do you think there is such an interest in wood firing now? Is there a return to the risk-taking, up-against-the-wall, mind-expanding, non-commercialism of the ’60s? Is it a reaction to the boredom of the sure thing? Is it a “screw you,” “in-your-face” reaction to the political and material climate of the world now?

I agree that wood-fired pottery is enjoying a renaissance, but I don’t see it as a fashion trend or a political statement. Wood-fired pots tell a story and everyone loves a good story. A good story is timeless and universal. We see the ash and heat the wood-fired pot has experienced. We are keyed into the placement of the pot in the kiln and the potter’s decisions and the results of those choices. Once we have become literate in the process, we deeply enjoy the variations, surprises, and depth of these ceramic narratives.

Wood-firing is also a deeply intimate experience. I spend so much effort and energy attempting to make the work more my own. I designed the clay recipes to respond the way I am interested; I leave my choices of process evident on the ware; I designed and built the kiln to leave specific marks on the pottery. Even the choices I make in how I load and fire drastically affect the way the work looks. I believe it is the intimacy which wood-firing offers that is the most seductive to others.

In our disposable culture, a relationship with our objects is an appealing alternative. Wood firing is a process of individuality. The making of each piece is full of variables and no two pieces are ever alike. The
ash and flame moving through the kiln etch their paths across the ware. The ash melts, forming a natural glaze bonded to the clay. I make my work to take advantage of these variables, enhancing forms, and “painting” with fire. The loading of the kiln takes a day and a half because placement determines the pots’ markings. Wood firing is an intense and communal activity. For each firing, we have a crew of four to six people, who take shifts working around the clock for four days to load and fire the pots. The pots reward you by showing the passage of time and flame and labor. Each piece is a narrative telling the story of every log split and the journey of ceramics through a river of flame. Those who participated in a firing feel a strong connection to the pottery they earned. And those who use wood-fired pots can sense and read that story and continue the tale of interaction by eating and drinking from the pottery.

Lastly, wood-firing ties us to the past and yet offers tremendous opportunities for innovation. There is a richness and novelty in good wood-fired work that grounds us and stirs the imagination simultaneously. This balance between new and ancient is compelling.

How did you come to be a potter?

How I came to be a potter and how I came to be a better potter are two different stories. I took ceramics my last semester of college after many, many courses in art. I hold a baccalaureate degree in psychology as I was discouraged from double majoring. Although I enjoyed painting and sculpture, I never felt a connection or understanding of the media. Functionality was my doorway to making honest, non-contrived art. Holding a fired pot that felt durable and comfortable—knowing that I made it—was thrilling and liberating.
For two years after that, I made terribly bad pots, but I was undaunted; I have the gift of self discipline and a dogged determination. Still, this would not have been enough if not for good teachers who taught me how to learn, see, and think about pottery. In 1992, I studied for a year at the University of Georgia, where I was able to study for a semester each with Michael Simon and Linda Christianson. They challenged me to be present in my every choice made in the construction of a pot: the lip, the rim, the wall, the exterior, the interior, the bottom, the weight, the clay treatment, the surface, the attachments and so on. Quiet comments they made then still drift into my making.

What makes a good pot?

Clay is a language, a form of non-verbal communication. Clay speaks through the visual, but also through touch and use. If weight, color, texture, feel, and utility articulate on a theme, and the synergy of these speaking together reveals a truth to us, that is a good pot. I look for a revelation of process; seeing the maker’s hands and the fire’s touch connects me to the journey the clay has made—it begins the relationship between the user and the ware. Pressing your lips against a warm mug is an intimate moment with an object reaffirming that relationship daily.

“All art is learned by imitation.”

Comment.

There is some truth to this statement; imitation helps us develop our eye, as well as gives us room to explore why we admire or are interested in something. Imitation seems to play a large role, but doesn’t account for all art learning. Synthesis is distinctly different from imitation. The end product of synthesis is not replication, but larger ideas percolated and resubmitted through a distinctly different filter. I was recently at the Utilitarian Clay conference at Arrowmont, where one of the panels attempted to tackle the ideas of imitation and plagiarism. Like many panel discussions, they sparked more dialogue than they provided answers. The room became somewhat heated with everyone in the audience wanting to weigh in. I am still mulling over that which was discussed, divining my own thoughts and feelings on the issues.

We are definitely taught to shy away from imitation. The pressure on artists in the United States to be totally unique is immense and unrealistic. There is so much bad art that lacks substance in its attempt to not repeat. Whereas

Celestial Bowl. 8½” diameter x 2½” deep. Anagama fired porcelain with Avery slip.

Neuman’s Jar. 13” x 12”. Anagama fired Neuman’s Red Fire clay with dry slip application.
we hold innovation up high, artists in other countries, like Japan, suffer under the cannons of tradition. Japan seems equally inundated with bad art, although their bane is heartless, inattentive replications of ancient pots.

I look at my teachers’ work and think of their influence on me. Most of what I have stolen from them is not technique or style, but their philosophies which resonated. The ideas that drive them in their work spoke to me; what they value, I came to value. My pottery doesn’t look like Michael Simon’s, Linda Christianson’s, or Clary Illian’s, but it has many of the same core ideas. From the foundation that they provided me, come pots through the filter of my own interests and experiences.

How did you make the choices that led you to where you are and what you do?

I am very happy with where I am and what I do. I am enjoying the pots that I make and the nagging feeling that I need to make them better. I feel very lucky to be a full-time studio potter, making work that pushes and pleases me. Because I feel that I am in such a good place, its hard to answer this huge question without falling into pitfall after pitfall of cliché. How do I answer it without saying things like “follow your bliss,” or “be true to yourself,” or come off sounding like a Hallmark inspirational message?

I guess I should explain where I am and what I do—that should dispel any quixotic notions. I make about $20,000 a year, I cut corners and save: my wife and I both work full-time and share full-time care of two children. We live in a rural area where we keep our overhead low. Ultimately, I am where I am because I am very selfish about what I do. I make only the pots that interest me. I love what I am doing and I believe this joy shows in the work. Taking commissions or making work to appeal to the greatest common denominator would leach my pleasure from the making, and I find myself unwilling to sully the process.

As to the small, daily choices I make in the pots, those evolve naturally from going to the studio regularly and being attentive. Things are best in the studio when I am in dialogue with the clay and the ware. When I wake up in the morning, hoping to get back to the conversation in the studio, the work is the best. Early in a throwing cycle, it is hard and sometimes awkward trying to get back in touch with the issues that were so alive before the last firing, but each firing answers some questions and asks more that need to be broached in the studio.

Why do you make the type of pots that you make?

I make wood-fired utilitarian pottery. Behind the creation of these vessels are several driving philosophies. These philosophies guide all aspects of my work. I believe in making pots for everyday use, that work well for the functions intended. The pots I make are made of clay bodies that are reactive to variations in temperature and atmosphere. I integrate throwing lines and evidence of human touch into surface design; I do not hide attachments of handles or spouts. I seek the inherent qualities in the marks different tools make, and I approach each individual pot with a similar feel though the tool might differ. Ware from a wood kiln speaks loudly about its making. Utilitarian pots may never be part of the avant-garde, a cup lacks the shock value typically associated with avant-garde movements. Yet artistic potters are privy to a unique and subversive role in contemporary art; whereas much of 20th Century art has been an attempt to merge art and life, pulling Art out of museums, or bringing life into the setting of the museum, the functional pot continues to hold a place in everyone’s home. It is the home, rather than an artistic institution, that I feel we potters should exploit. A cup is one of the first things we hold in the morning, and often one to the last things we touch at night. By reintroducing artistic ware into the home, we can reconnect art and the everyday.