

Exploring the Edge

Sandy Lockwood

There is random magic in the interplay between clay, salt, wood, kiln, curiosity and imagination that totally engages me. This synergy of unknown and unknowable factors has me hooked.

Initially, salt-glazing presented an irresistible variety of surface, movement, texture, colour and form. I saw warmth and depth in the work of established salt-glazers and was attracted to the drama that is possible by firing with lots of salt, lots of heat and lots of ash. Some makers utilise these dramatic surface qualities very well – the heavy ash dribble, the well placed wad mark, the 'grunge'.

As my practice developed I became curious about, and attracted to an increasingly subtle and more quietly spoken surface and palette. My making has also changed. I am forming clay in less common ways. Nuance and visual intrigue in both form and surface have become more attractive.

Whilst making work in my studio and also when packing the kiln, I imagine the soft movement of flame and salt vapour, somewhat like the slow passage of time. I don't want the drama of firing to shout over the essence of the clay. I don't want the form and texture that tells the story of making to be out of balance. My current work is more and more about striving to achieve this integration.

From my earliest practice I have been lured by the elusive potential of clay. I love its ability to express fragility and robustness, fluidity and monumental strength, texture and colour. Much arises out of noticing what clay is doing in my hands – using it wet, dry, pushing and pulling, stretching it so the insides are showing, letting the clay speak through kinaesthetic interaction.

I am compelled to explore ideas that take me to the edges of what clay can say. When I work I do not start with a preconceived ideal form as an end goal. Rather, one piece leads me to the next – an evolutionary process. My work, however, is not without consideration. I spend much time thinking about what I am doing and what is next, what is working and what is not.

Much of my relationship with my work is not conscious or explicit. The past embodied in old buildings, stone walls and ancient ruins, the weathering of rock and the patina of time has a deep effect on me. I notice my environment all the time. I have done so for as long as I can remember. I have vivid memories of staying in a very old house in Rye, in England. The floor was not level, the roof was not uniform, the walls were uneven, there was a long story visible on the old whitewashed walls. This environment and my delighted response to it remain etched in my memory and emotions to this day.

In these responses I can sometimes identify the seeds of inspiration for my work, and glimpses of things I am trying to express, although I cannot see clear explicit links. As a result I have learnt to trust an intuitive making process and follow the clay where it leads.

Early days of following prescriptions for salt-glazing alumina silica ratios and how much salt to put in the kiln have evolved into 'what else can this medium produce?' Much of what

interests me now falls toward the edges and boundaries of the medium.

Ian Currie, a good friend, once described to me that the edges of his quadraxial glaze tests (the ones with too much alumina, silica or flux) were the most interesting areas to explore. I think Ian and I have the same kind of curiosity about what happens when you take things to the margin.

The edge is where my attention to form and surface lies now. Some of the clay bodies I make now are so dry they resist the salt and develop a tonal subtlety unachievable by other means. I have also recently been making 'black' clays that can achieve at times, a kind of inky, coal like quality. The colour and surface have mineral, geological and metallic qualities.

Experimentation with my kilns has taken a parallel path to the development of my work. I have been building, salt-glazing and firing wood kilns here in the Southern Highlands of NSW for the last 28 years.

For many years I used a large two chambered kiln. When it needed major repairs I decided that a smaller single chamber kiln might be more appropriate because shorter time between firings would facilitate more experimentation. Thus, I would be able to make changes to clay, forming, packing and firing, see the results and then repeat the process again soon after. I am now completely sold on the idea of smaller kilns. In relation to experimentation, smaller kilns take less energy to fire. They concentrate ones ideas, and provide a more focussed result. Even when using 'small' kilns, getting to know the possibilities of just one packing area of the kiln, firing cycle variations, different effects on clay seems more than a lifetime's work.

Currently my two main wood kilns are a single chamber, sprung arch with 0.85 m^3 (30 cu.ft) packing space, and a 'train style' kiln (the 'Rocket') which has a capacity of about 0.5 m^3 (18 cu.ft). I built my first 'rocket' in 1992 and this kiln is included in *Wood-fired Ceramics – Contemporary Practices* by Coll Minogue and Robert Sanderson (2000). My current 'Rocket' is a later version of the kiln I built at the International Ceramics Festival Aberystwyth, Wales (UK), (see article by Matt Blakely in *The Log Book* issue 17, 2004).

Both kilns have 'Bourry-style' fireboxes. These really suit both my style of salt-glazing and the type of wood that is available to me. Australian Eucalyptus hardwood produces a lot of ember. A deep firebox with adequate mouseholes ensures that the ember can be burnt down easily when necessary. I introduce salt in with the wood on the hobs by placing the large slabs of bark that come from the stringy bark wood, and then throwing the salt onto that. The bark ensures that the salt is not just dumped straight down onto the firebox floor, causing a wood ember salt slag that is difficult to clean out later. It also allows the salt to more slowly vaporise and work with the clay over a longer period of time.

I now bisque my work prior to firing – a step that I previously considered completely unnecessary. (continued on page 35)

The change was mainly instigated by the fact that some of the work I make is quite large and made from clays that are prone to cracking. Also, the packing is somewhat quicker and importantly the firing cycle is shorter. Because I fire the larger kiln with only one helper and I fire the smaller kiln by myself, firing effort is a consideration. I like to fire several times a year and a smaller kiln makes this much more viable.

Both kilns are preheated with bottled gas. I fire the larger kiln to cone 12 over a couple of days using about 12 kg (26 lbs) of salt, and the 'Rocket' is fired over 24 hours using about

8 kg (18 lbs). The length of firing, amount of salt and atmospheric conditions depend on what I am trying to do in each particular firing. I soak at high temperature for some time as this seems critical to the results I am trying to achieve. I fire the first half of the Rocket kiln until the cones are nearly all down and then I start side-stoking using small 2.5 cm (1 inch) diameter pieces of hardwood. The side-stoke area has a brick grate which is removable for cleaning post firing. Also, there is a mousehole directly under the side-stoke grate which is opened when side-stoking starts and provides extra air to assist temperature rise and control of the ember level. The temperature at the back of the kiln is reached quite quickly. Sometimes I add more salt in this area and then side-stoke and soak for a while before finishing off by firing only the front firebox.

Each time I have built a kiln I have found it takes me 9 or 10 firings to understand, develop a sound relationship with it and harness its potential. I believe a kiln is a tool that takes time to learn.

There is nothing more engaging for me than working with clay. I see salt-glazing as a language with which to explore the conscious and unconscious world. Working at the boundaries of the unknown feeds my curiosity and provides endless paths to follow.

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