

‘An Old Bastard Lives Here’

You approach Owen Rye’s studio across a small paddock that leads from the main house, nestled amongst trees in a sleepy part of Gippsland’s countryside, in Eastern Victoria. The sign to the left of the entrance to the studio reveals its original incarnation as home to the Boolarra South Primary School, No. 3670. As you enter the studio a ‘tongue-in cheek’ brass plaque on the door proclaims that ‘An Old Bastard Lives Here’, yet anyone who knows Owen Rye well, will know him as a man of great humility, knowledge and intelligence.



The studio still resonates with its past history and whilst its pupils have long since departed it remains a place and site of learning for a man who has dedicated himself over the last 30 years or more to plumbing the mysteries and idiosyncrasies of a wood-firing aesthetic. A blackboard along the main wall still has the alphabet written in chalk in perfect italic script along its upper margin and the space that eager pupils would have once occupied are now replaced by Owen’s pots, some finished, some waiting to be carried a little way down the track from the studio to the kiln. Owen Rye is widely accredited with making a significant contribution to the popularization of wood-firing in Australia and he has made a lasting impact on a generation of young artists, through his teaching and work. Apart from bringing the use of the anagama kiln to prominence he also organized the first Australian Wood-firing Conference, held in Gippsland in 1986 as well as holding numerous exhibitions both nationally and internationally.



Wood-firing is largely but not exclusively about the celebration of accidents and incidents in the firing process and the pursuit and understanding of an aesthetics of imperfection and irregularity. The emergence and celebration of this particular aesthetic is generally agreed to have originated in Japan several centuries ago through the selection of wares, particularly raku tea bowls, chosen by famous tea masters such as Sen-No-Rikyu for use in the Japanese Tea Ceremony or Cha-No-Yu. More recently, the celebrated philosopher and founder of Japan's Folkcraft or Mingei movement, Soetsu Yanagi, wrote about what he saw as a contemporary trend towards asymmetry and irregularity. Yanagi wrote a lot about what he perceived as the popular and conscious pursuit of asymmetry or deformation and how much of what had been achieved unselfconsciously by nameless artisans in the past, had now in the modern industrialised world, to be consciously preserved by the artist-craftsman.

Wood-firing occupies a long and unbroken, centuries old tradition in the development of Japanese ceramics. The peculiar effects wrought on the pot's surface through deposits of ash and the lick of flames defines a whole genre of ceramic production in distinct areas such as Bizen and Shigaraki. In searching for a description of this unique and time worn process, I came upon this introductory essay to an exhibition of the celebrated Bizen potter Kei Fujiwara, written by his son Yu Fujiwara, which is partly reproduced below and eloquently captures the mystique surrounding this time-worn process.

'We who pot with Bizen clay have much time consuming and painstaking work to do before the clay can be thrown on the wheel or other-wise fashioned. To obtain it we

dig to the bottom of the rice paddies, three to five metres deep. There, 10 centimetres or so below lies the raw clay. This is dug out with our hands and exposed to wind and rain for about one year to season it. It is then crushed into small pieces with a tool that looks like a hammer and soaked in water. What results is placed in a biscuit receptacle and the watery residue is gradually absorbed. When it has hardened somewhat, tiny pebbles and other impurities, are removed by our fingertips. This done the clay is tread upon with our feet and kept in an underground cellar for about two years. Then, well seasoned, the clay is ready for the potter to throw or mold to his will. Thus it takes three to four years even to prepare the clay. When the potter has shaped his pots and pieces and the firing has begun, it takes 12 days to complete it. Around the clock the pine wood must be fed to the fire to build up and maintain the 1300 degrees of heat needed before Bizen ware is born. To accomplish this 10 tons of pine wood are consumed. One feels like fainting and becomes dizzy before it is over with. How splendid the beauty of Bizen ware is, forever imprinted with the fire's markings, the madly dancing flames of the fire which has burned so intensely for such a long time. It is staggering to think that once a man has developed a passion for Bizen ware, he is stunned by the thought that he has become a drug addict. Is there any other pottery than Bizen which drives a man to such a degree of madness? ⁱ

To an uninformed outsider it would indeed be most probably construed as a mad endeavour and yet it is a process which has absorbed the minds and hearts of men of great intelligence and its virtues recognized by some of the greatest arbiters of taste in Japanese history. Whilst many wood-firers acknowledge a debt to Japanese tradition, this tradition in itself owes much to the influence of earlier wares from Korea, which Rye himself finds of equal if not greater importance. Also, his own experiences working with archaeologists for 10 years and with potters in Pakistan and Palestine has been pivotal in shaping his own personal aesthetic and approach to wood-firing. He is quick and right to assert that his work is experimental and exploratory rather than traditional. He has absorbed a great deal from frequent visits to America from 1971 where he has conducted many workshops and he admires the work produced by American wood-firers such as Tim Rowan and Scott Parady. In America, the development of Abstract Expressionism found parallels with Japanese Zen aesthetics but these artists absorbed what they learned from Japan and produced work that developed in quite radical and refreshingly different directions.

For the wood-firer, the process of making is very much a blend of being able to assert some control through the choice of clay; the forms to be made; the way in which they are stacked in the kiln and their position in the kiln and then a surrendering of that control to the vagaries of a wood-firing process which ensures that each piece is truly unique and unrepeatable. It is perhaps, in the nature of working within this matrix of unpredictability that so many followers are attracted. In his article 'Anagama: The Art of Uncertainty'ⁱⁱ, Owen Rye describes this process when he says that, 'The art of the anagama involves a continuous process of uncertainty. With only a medieval Japanese model to follow, which is seemingly almost irrelevant to the modern day art world and society, the anagama is, I believe, the most currently viable of the ancient traditions and means more than the concession to tradition that we make by respectfully retaining the Japanese name of this wood-fired tunnel kiln. To me, the art of the anagama means a total aesthetic art form incorporating materials, fire and intuition.'

This exhibition celebrates Owen Rye's beautiful and inspiring work, produced over the long span of his artistic career. The fire continues to burn and delight us with the fruits of his production and celebrates a continuing journey into places that perhaps both he and we are yet to imagine.

Kevin White May 2010

ⁱ The Art Of Kei Fujiwara. The Kei Fujiwara Art Museum.1977

ⁱⁱ The Art of Uncertainty. Ceramics Art and Perception. No.10. 1992