
Vigorous and exciting, woodfiring in Australia enjoys a large and enthusiastic following, like no other I have ever seen. It is not just about firing with wood. It is much deeper than that – a reflection perhaps on those pioneers: Australian potters in the 1950s and 60s like Ivan Englund, Harold Hughes, Ivan McMenim and Peter Rushforth, who built simple woodfiring kilns, and prospected for local minerals for clay bodies and glaze materials. Until the recent financial cuts in education, woodfiring was a major study area within the ceramics departments of third level colleges and universities in Australia. Today, the aesthetic values of woodfiring still attract many to the process. This woodfiring conference, the fifth to be held in Australia within the past 20 years, was hosted by Ian Jones and Moraig McKenna at their ‘Old Saint Luke’s Church’ studio, close to the small town of Gundaroo, New South Wales.

On the Friday evening guest demonstrators Herve Rouxseau (FR) and Linda Christiansen (USA) were introduced by the master of ceremonies for the conference – Paul Davis, Head of Pottery at Sturt Craft Centre, Mittagong. Each gave a personal and enlightening resume of their working practices and philosophies to the 150 participants packed in the Gundaroo Hall – venue for lecture presentations and panel discussions during the conference. During his talk Herve was assisted by a translator, however his work did not require translation: powerful, challenging and self-confident, Linda gave a sideways and often humorous glance at her influences, her home and her work.

The following morning Peter Rushforth gave the conference opening address in the large marquee adjacent to the studio, before Herve and Linda began their individual demonstrations that continued throughout the weekend. Peter observed that compared to when he first started out, at a time when there was little information available, by contrast there is now an information explosion, and a generosity of spirit that will no doubt continue to inspire gatherings such as this in the future.

In addition to the demonstrations by Linda and Herve, six Australian assistants – Madine Morris, Kirk Winter, Virginia Jones, Ray Cavill, Steve Williams and Petre Soooboda gave demonstrations of their individual working practices. Outside, and undaunted by the blazing sun, Daniel Lafferty, aided by a willing group of helpers was building a small Boxie box kiln. Also outdoors Chester Nilsa created a ground plan of the front section of an anagama firebox to illustrate his methods of tumble-stacking.

On Saturday evening Janet DelBoe, Head of Ceramics at the Australian National University in Canberra, opened the delegates exhibition A Delegate Situation at the Urning Church in Gundaroo. This was an informal opportunity to see the work of all those attending the conference.

Presentation of papers began with Ray Cavill, Steven Harrison and Gary Hill all concentrating on issues relating to kilns and various aspects of firing. Later during the conference Barbara Campbell-Allen chaired a lively panel of speakers – Yuri Westenholzer, Steve Williams, Virginia Jones, Malina Meira and Moraig McKenna – who addressed the topics of woodfire sculpture and installation. On Monday Dall Nichols discussed woodfiring, often humorously, from the perspective of a non-woodfiring soda-glaze ceramicist; Robert Sanderson gave a short history of the Bounty Box kiln and Robert Barron described the effects he has achieved on wood fired in the firebox of his climbing kiln.

On Sunday afternoon all the participants travelled to the Wattum Art Centre in Canberra, where Coli Minogue gave a wide presentation about women woodfiring, prior to the closing reception for the Australian Woodfire Survey 2005 Exhibition: Curated by Dr. Owen Ryan. This was a magnificent show revealing the diversity, vitality and creative skills of 40 outstanding woodfire artists/artists. Next was the ANCA (Australian National Capital Artists) Gallery, where the exhibition Woodfire Journeys was opened.

Top: Linda Christiansen (USA), timing the run to give strength and definition, gently persuading the clay to respond, always giving the pieces life by gentle alteration. Below: Herve Rouxseau (FR), seeking boldy and dynamically, built hollow forms resembling botting wood or ancient rock.