

studio

Process and Perspectives in Clay

talk

2022



Presented by

ceramics
M O N T H L Y

PotteryMaking
Illustrated

TELLING UNIQUE STORIES

Hitomi Shibata

Editors: How do you come up with forms and surfaces that are prevalent in your work?

Hitomi Shibata: Over the years, one learns the characteristics of the various materials that are available and how to use those materials to best express one's aesthetic goals for both functional and sculptural work. For my functional work, my forms are my own variations of traditional functional forms. I have found a combination of a medium/dark, high-temperature stoneware, thin white slip, and red-iron-oxide brushwork that works well under a basic ash glaze when wood fired. This combination brings me a great deal of satisfaction

personally, and fortunately it also seems to appeal to people who buy the work at my shop and online. My large-scale work, both functional and sculptural, is also based on variations of traditional forms and personal decorative techniques. The sculptural forms are also influenced by the human figure and the landscape.

Eds: What do you think is the role of a maker within our current culture and how do you think you contribute to it?

HS: Making things is an innate human characteristic that has been diminished for most by mass production. Viewing and perhaps



1 Yunomis, 5 in. (13 cm) in height (each), wood fired. 2 Hitomi and Takuro Shibata's wood kilns in Seagrove, North Carolina. 3 Shibata family wood firing in April 2020.

**“ I believe
our handmade
pots are not just
products, but are
unique stories
that reflect a love
for clay.”**

owning and using handmade objects on a daily basis allows one to reconnect with the earth's natural elements transformed into functional objects for daily use, or view sculptures that intrigue and perhaps challenge the viewer to experience new ideas.

As a maker, I have a responsibility to pass it on, both to the public and to the next generation of makers. Sharing knowledge is the goal. This may be done formally by writing articles, or demonstrating in a university or craft center workshop setting, and, perhaps, through individual mentoring of an apprentice.





4

4 Wood firing at Studio Touya, spring 2022. 5 Hitomi Shibata pictured at the Studio Touya wood kiln. *Photo: Copyright ArtHoward2022.* 6 Wild clay plates before wood firing. 7 Wild clay plates after wood firing.

Regional Materials and Traditions

North Carolina has a long history of pottery making that continues today. Native Americans, European immigrants, and contemporary potters have used the natural materials of the North Carolina Piedmont to produce culturally vital pottery and other craft items.

We were living in Shigaraki, Japan, when my husband, Takuro Shibata, accepted an offer to establish STARworks Ceramics, a ceramics research and supply business dedicated to producing and supplying blends of local clays for the pottery communities in North Carolina. Takuro started researching local clays, and I helped with his research and paperwork while also making pots and raising our children at home. We purchased a small piece of property in historic Seagrove, North Carolina, and built a studio (Studio Touya), wood kilns, and a new house. We also renovated an old house and turned it into our gallery (see 2).

Moving from one of Japan's oldest pottery towns to the biggest pottery community in the US, we noticed many differences and many similarities. We have conducted workshops at art centers and schools, joined in lectures and panel discussions at ceramic conferences, and talked about the uniqueness of local wild clays compared to heavily processed clays. We believe that it's very important to talk about the similarities in two very different cultures.

Universally, pottery villages were built near sources of clay. As a student at Okayama University in Okayama, Japan, I had opportunities to meet local potters in the town of Bizen, which is one of the oldest and most unique pottery villages in Japan, and the nearest to the school. Bizen potters use raw, black clay from under rice paddies, firing their pots for two or three weeks in a many-chambered noborigama wood kiln in a practice that dates back to the 8th century.

After finishing my graduate program at Okayama University, I became an artist in residence at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. Shigaraki potters get highly refractory, rough clay from the mountains and they fire pots in an anagama kiln at very high temperatures. They adjust firing methods and temperatures to get the best results for their unique wild clays as they have done for hundreds of years.

I also had an opportunity to work at the Shigaraki Ceramic Research Institute as an assistant. I made many test tiles for different projects, and examined materials, analyzing them for researchers. I was able to learn about Shigaraki's local materials, and the industrial approach to local resources. Using local materials in an old pottery village had a huge impact on my pottery-making methods and style.

Testing, Hybrid Processes, and Methods

Since we came to North Carolina, we have tested and evaluated many local materials. Testing ceramic materials takes time, and it requires lots of patience and old-fashioned hard work. We also dig our own yellow clay from our property, adding it to clay bodies and using it as clay slips. We know many wild clays can be used for pottery, but we have to test to find the best ways to use them. The unique blends of texture and color can bring both joy and satisfaction to the potter (see 6–10).





8 Raw yellow clay from Hitomi and Takuro Shibata's property in Seagrove. **9** Hitomi making a slab plate from raw yellow clay. **10** North Carolina raw red clay. **11** Throwing a yunomi (Japanese tea cup) on the wheel. **12** STARworks clay factory and North Carolina local clay production, with filter-pressed clay in the foreground. *Photo: Copyright CentralParkNC/STARworksNC.*

Research on local materials also takes place at STARworks Ceramics. Their local clay project has been popular and gaining in supporters every year. The STARworks clay team works very hard every day in the clay factory, and I use their unique products regularly (see 11, 12).

Wood-ash glazes have been the most common and traditional glazes in Japan for many centuries. We continue this tradition by collecting the mixed hardwood and pine ash from our wood kiln's firebox, drying it out, then sieving and washing the ash with water in buckets for as long as possible to remove alkaline materials. We then proceed with drying the ash again and processing it to make nice powdered wood ash.

We built our wood kilns and use them to fire our pots because our local clays are highly refractory and need to fire to cone 10 and above to be vitrified. There are many local sawmills in rural North Carolina, and they produce a lot of scrap wood, which is an important fuel source for area potters. We also use seashells, which we pick up when visiting the coast, for supporting pots in our kilns (see 14), and these seashells make beautiful flashing red colors on the pots. We make the wadding clay used for loading pots into the wood kiln from local clay, sand, sawdust, and a small ratio of alumina hydrate. It's important to have good waddings underneath in order to remove pots from the kiln shelves safely, and also to clean shelves easily.

Some of our methods and processes are from old techniques from Japanese pottery traditions,

and nothing is difficult or high tech, but it requires lots of time for preparation, work, and tests. There are some unexpected or strange pots sometimes, but all of the results provide useful information to make better pots the next time.

Studio Life During the Pandemic

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, we've had a reasonable amount of clay stock in our studio, but we've also carefully recycled clay and incorporated wild clay from our property. We cut and split firewood from scrap obtained from local sawmills, fired our wood kiln by ourselves, and generally did all of our work at home. We found that sourcing our materials and supplies locally and from nature (while following regulations), made it possible for us not to rely on big industries or distribution difficulties. It was a huge lesson learned about how we must use our precious resources wisely.

Another big change for me during the pandemic was the way we connected to people. We had online demonstrations, lectures, and meetings with art centers and schools near and far, which was new to us. We were invited as guest speakers by the potters group in the country of Georgia in the Caucasus, and talking about local clays with Georgian potters via an online meeting was so inspiring. We also attended the



11



12



13 Red-iron-oxide (bengara) decoration after bisque firing. **14** Loading our wood kiln, complete with sea shells supporting pots. **15** *Vessels of Dawn and Dusk*, 11 in. (28 cm) in width (each), NC local stoneware, wild clay slip, red iron oxide, wood ash, clear glaze, seashells, wood fired to cone 11, lightly salted, 2021.

International Academy of Ceramics virtual conference, which was organized by IAC members in Finland, and listening to European artists' clay stories was very interesting. In addition, I co-authored a book, *Wild Clay*, and not only worked on writing our clay stories but also conducted online interviews with many wild-clay enthusiasts around the world for the book.

The newest technology is not always useful, but when we had drastic changes in environmental circumstances, the internet became the only way to connect us to the world. It made me think of changing my perspective from local to worldwide, and vice versa.

Balancing Opposites

In my daily practice, I enjoy working in my rustic studio, using local clays, drying pots in the sun, collecting rainwater to use in the studio, listening to the sound of trees swaying in the wind, and cutting and splitting firewood with my family for our next firing.

I try to reduce machine-made elements from the processes as much as possible, and just use my hands, simple tools, natural materials, and wood-firing methods, which are renewable and sustainable in our area.

I believe our handmade pots are not just products, but are unique stories that reflect a love for clay. It's not easy balancing new and old, quantity and quality, local and foreign, time consuming and convenient, and I hope I am clear how and why I make the choice I do to create handmade pots.

Special thanks to Randy Edmonson, ceramic art professor emeritus at Longwood University, and Takuro Shibata, director of STARworks Ceramics in Star, North Carolina.

To learn more, visit www.studiotouya.com.