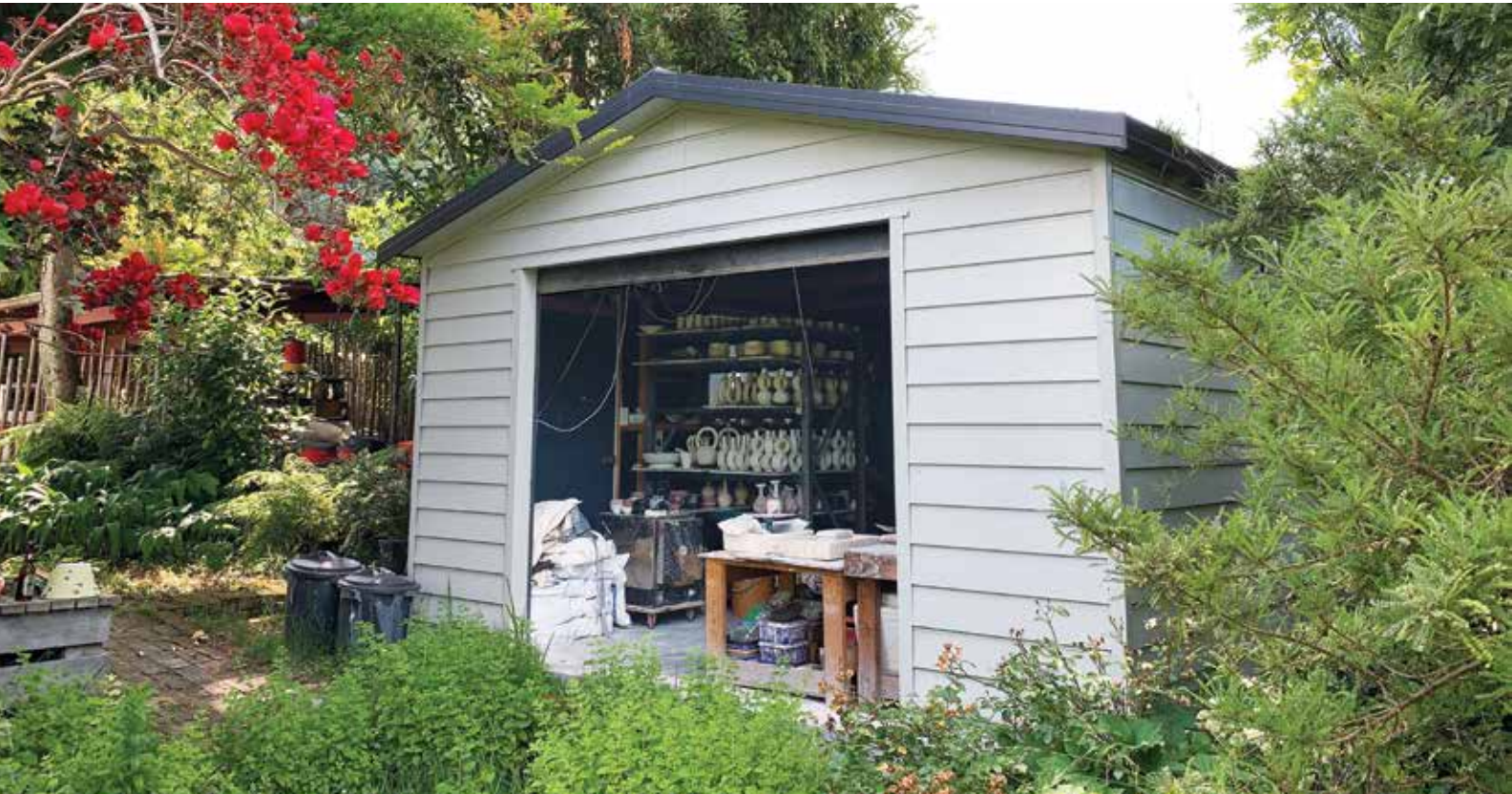


STUDIO VISIT

Aaron Scythe

Whanganui, New Zealand

by Lisa Orr and Nick Weddell



Just the Facts

Clay

stoneware and porcelain

Primary forming method

wheel thrown and altered

Primary firing temperature

cone 10

Favorite surface treatment

painted imagery and brushwork

Favorite tools

potter's wheel and
decorating brushes

Favorite music

Japanese rapcore, YamaArashi

Studio

While some of us slow the pottery wheel to make expressive work, Japanese-trained, New Zealand potter Aaron Scythe speeds up his wheel to make some of the marks that he explains, “hold the emotions of the maker.” Not exactly centering, he gathers clay in the middle of the wheel, opening and pulling up the clay before total command is established. Suddenly, a ring is torn off, flipped, and, in seconds, blended to a freshly thrown base and set on a board next to 15 others. The former skater/punk rocker likens it to the amount of control one has running down steps. “If you want to take risks, you don’t walk down a flight of steps and you don’t run pell-mell,” he says, “because you will fall onto your face. The trick is to get up to a decent jog so you are kind of about to stumble. Throwing on the wheel quickly is like jogging down the steps at a mad pace to find that fluidity and life in clay, so you can make the mistakes that you want to make.”

Scythe embraces the natural behaviors and characteristics of plastic clay and in his practice he harnesses what most would consider mistakes. He works at achieving excellence in his soft, yet vigorous forms through constant practice, as he enjoys putting in 10–14-hour days, six days a week.

Scythe’s current studio is in a single-car garage about 15 steps from his back door. His studio includes two medium-sized electric kilns, one small wheel, two tables, plaster bats, two sets of shelves, glaze buckets, sieves, a banding wheel, and more. About his equipment, he says, “I have one small kiln for doing my *hikidashi* (work that’s pulled out of the kiln at a high temperature



and cooled rapidly) work. My electric wheel is an ancient Shippo wheel—a bit noisy but still spins around and has good traction.” A self-described reclusive workaholic who doesn’t go out; if he is not in the studio, he says he stays “at home sitting in bed drawing, painting on the iPad, or making teabowls, and unwinding at the end of the day by drinking beer and making more work.” Because the painting on his pots takes about 80% of his making time, he created a nook in the house as his decoration area to be nearby his wife and children. His steadfast work ethic has paid off in over 60 solo shows in Japan and many more in New Zealand.

Compelling Techniques

Scythe’s current *yobitisugi* or borrowed-patches process aligns with the contemporary Japanese Basara style, which is a rebellious and exuberant take on the wabi-sabi philosophy of the 16th-century Momoyama period. The effect is a boisterous and harmonious floating patchwork of clays that frame traditional and contemporary drawings deftly painted in cobalt or enamel. By piecing porcelain and stoneware shard shapes together when the clay is still very soft, he utilizes the sentiment and beauty of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art

of repair, but with mismatched clays that graciously adapt to each other. Time-warped worlds collide creating mysterious narratives consisting of landscapes, body parts, patterns, or elusive writing. These little glimpses look to his wife, Saori, like peeping through keyholes: delicate and lightly erotic, but not too overt. Visually compelling and welcoming to the hand, it is important to him that his pieces “actually function, [as] pottery is an art that comes into one’s mundane life by being held and touched to the lips. It is a bridge toward art in general.”

Paying Dues (and Bills)

Originally from Auckland, Scythe found himself drawn to pottery at a young age, getting a job pouring slip into molds as a teenager. Over the next several years, he found new ways to pursue pottery making, including taking courses in Sydney, Australia. There, a wood-fire potter introduced him to some older Japanese and Korean pots. Those expressive vessels called out to his soul. Being mostly self-taught, these became his romantic ideal, and he used the time-honored process of emulating them to learn about them. Embarking on his quest, he became a resident at the Sturt Craft Center outside of



Sydney, where he built an anagama and practiced shino glazing. After working on his own there for about two years, a visiting Japanese ceramic artist invited him to Japan to be an apprentice.

A New Life Building a Career

Scythe instantly felt at home in Japan and wanted to keep working there. He later joined the studio of Ryoji Koie as a guest. The freedom he saw in Koie's process changed him forever, and Koie remains one of his favorite potters, along with Suzuki Goro. He traveled two times to Japan on three-month visas, and for the third trip Koie procured a cultural visa for him, which would last six months to two years. Between his three-month stays, as he had to leave Japan each time to reapply for a visa, he lived in Sydney, Australia, for about three months and worked in a hamburger bar as a dishwasher, prepper, and waiter to get money for airfare and travel. Upon returning to Japan the third time for his lengthier stay, he moved to Mashiko, found a job throwing, and set up his own studio. Some months later, after many 16-hour days working in both studios, he fired the works he had been making on his own, sold them at the Mashiko pottery festival, and was off and running as a potter working in Japan.

At that time, he was making his inventive gas-fired versions of shino, kizeto, and oribe ware. Ten years later, he and a friend built an anagama and he added *hikidashiguro* (pulled-out-black style) to

his practice, based on the 16th-century method of using Seto-guro bowls as draw-trials for shino glazes. Once Scythe and Saori were married, he received a spouse visa, and then was granted a permanent visa after living there for 10 years. Scythe grew a successful career in Japan over 17 years, and he and Saori, also his business manager, had never planned on leaving. However, after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster (only 90 miles from Mashiko), they decided to move to New Zealand to keep their children safe from radiation.

In Mashiko, Scythe had a purpose-built studio with two walls lined with shelves—he needed a step ladder to reach the top ones. There were separate stoneware and porcelain work areas with their own wheels and designated pug-mills for both clays, and a decorating and glazing space. The studio also had a kiln shed with a gas kiln and a wood kiln. It was pottery heaven. Upon returning to New Zealand, when creating a new studio, he focused on what could be found second hand to equip the space. Currently, he is trying to see what he can do with as little as possible, as he and his family eventually want to return to Japan.

Marketing

Being a studio potter in Whanganui, New Zealand, has its challenges. It is a rural area, suppliers offer very limited tools and materials, the audience is smaller than in Japan, and there is a smaller demand for a wide variety of forms compared to Japan.



Scythe experimented with every available clay and kiln type before settling on a cone-10 electric kiln. Since much of his current audience is interested in plates, cups, and mugs, he makes a huge variety of them (approximately 50 styles of cups) to keep his customers coming back. Additionally, he adds imagery relatable to New Zealanders and embosses sections with Maori prophet messages. His enamels are lead free, and he keeps the area where he works in the house impeccably clean. In terms of recent graphic imagery, Scythe is inspired by the modern Japanese Shunga print movement and taught himself to draw in that style using an iPad. He now creates large archival prints for sale alongside his ceramic work, and fragments of those images find their way back to the pottery pieces, repairing the objects and adding to the narratives.

Scythe works prodigiously like the dedicated Japanese potter he trained as, creating five times the amount of work needed for each exhibition. Saori selects the groupings of work for shows in New Zealand and abroad, and she has plenty from which to choose, as Scythe's work lines practically every shelf in every room of their home.

When he moved to New Zealand, he left a lot of work in Japan to provide inventory for his galleries. Scythe prefers to sell exclusively through galleries as he has a good partnership with them and continues sending work over to them as needed. As he is not living in Japan, it is difficult to maintain a good collector base. Despite this, because

Japanese galleries do so much work for the artist—writing about their work for exhibitions, managing the relationships with collectors, and maintaining a web presence—through this relationship he is still able to sell work there and have more time in the studio.

Most Important Lesson

In Japan there is a saying *nana korobi ya oki*, which means fall down seven times, get up eight times. A daring relentlessness characterizes his work and, perhaps, Scythe's life. He and his family plan to move back to Tajimi, Japan, in the Gifu prefecture in a couple of years. It is an old pottery town, north of Nagoya, and he has a good relationship with a museum and gallery located there. Scythe adds that they also have the best eel restaurant in town.

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Gallery representation: The Nevica Project in the US, The Vivian Gallery, New Zealand.