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Elena Renker

NEW ZEALAND STUDIO POTTER

by Andrew Buck, EdD

To understand Elena Renker, an adept studio potter, it is helpful to develop a picture of the habitat, history, and culture of New Zealand where she lives. New Zealand is comprised of North Island, South Island, and a string of smaller islands. It is bound by the Tasman Sea on the west and the South Pacific Ocean on the east. The landscape encompasses mountain ranges, lush forests, and beaches, all of which rest on an expansive volcanic plateau. Portions of *The Hobbit* were filmed there.¹ New Zealand is unique in world history. It has only been inhabited since the late 13th century when Polynesian islanders first discovered it. They became known as the Maori, an indigenous people with ancestral land rights.²

During the contentious 1800s, the island peoples aligned themselves with the British, who had settled as traders during the colonial era.³ As we fast forward through time, the British population grew, outpacing the Maori tribes. Western ideas and technology came to dominate New Zealand culture. Despite New Zealand's current modernization, its remote geographic location in the South Pacific keeps it isolated. I would venture to guess, too, that it is somewhat saner than the rest of the world, primarily because it is not crowded or over-developed. People who live there tend to be self-sustaining out of necessity, and rely on each other because it is so isolated. Renker fits well into this survivalist landscape of New Zealand, a country of immigrants and descendants of immigrants.

Originally from Germany, Renker emigrated in the 1980s when her family applied for permanent residency in New Zealand. They welcomed new ventures in life and sought a less troubled place on the globe in which to live.

The Homestead

Renker currently lives on a small 20-acre farm with cattle, chickens, and a large garden. She is a mother of five. Several of her adult children and their respective mates live on the family property. Her role as a mother takes precedence over being a potter, but, as she notes, making pottery is simply integrated into her life. She may get up in the morning to throw pots, then weed the substantial garden, have lunch with her adult children, and trim pots in the late afternoon. Her lifestyle exemplifies what we might consider the back-to-the-land movement and the realization of an idealized life of a studio potter. Renker, like many New Zealanders, tends to be very self-sufficient. She was a DIY maker long before the term became fashionable. For example, she used to make some of her children's clothes and an occasional handmade toy. She sees her pottery-making as a natural extension of this nurturing, motherly role. It is not uncommon for her visiting children to stop by the studio and ask for cups, bowls, or plates they might need or want for their kitchens. Of course, she

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gives to them unselfishly. Renker also exhibits work in galleries and shows her work in local and national annual ceramic exhibits. For the past six years, she has enjoyed an annual open studio sale day where she scrubs down the studio, washes the windows, puts out her wares and opens her studio to guests and customers. Her children chip in to help by setting up displays, wrapping wares, and answering questions for patrons. Her daughter, who studied baking in Paris, sets up a refreshment stand with an assortment of home baked goods. Her annual open studio sale has grown in popularity and is an event that many people are eager to attend.

Renker's personal disposition, a strong and self-taught style of learning, and diverse international experiences with pottery-making form the substrate upon which her passion for pottery rests. Her activities of throwing, trimming, glazing and firing transpire with apparent ease or effortlessness, like the rising and setting of the sun. When the time is right, making pots is what she does. Having a home studio and a wood-fired kiln in the backyard are part of the conditions that make this possible. The endless possibilities inherent in the process of making ceramics sustain her personal interest and appetite for producing pottery. The caliber of her work has attracted the attention of patrons internationally through her shop on Etsy.

A Later-in-Life Return to Pottery

As a teenager in the late 1970s, Renker was fortunate to have three formative experiences that laid the ground work for her return to pottery later in life. She attended a very intimate, alternative high school outside of Woodstock, New York, where she was strongly encouraged by her teachers to pursue art. She also studied ceramics





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1 Three faceted shino boxes, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware, fired to cone 10, 2017. 2 Elena Renker in her studio with some of her fired ceramic pieces. 3 Interior view of the studio. 4 View of Renker's studio from the vegetable garden. 5 Four faceted shino vases, to 11 in. (28 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware, fired to cone 10, 2017.

briefly at Golden Bridge Pottery in India when she was 18.⁴ In her wanderlust years, she spent a year in Bavaria, Germany, serving as an intern with a Canadian potter who ran a production pottery. According to Renker, the potter was very strict. The young Renker was not allowed to fire any pots for the first 6 months. Instead, she had to cut each and every pot that she threw on the potter's wheel in half. The strict discipline of the production studio was tough, but it provided Renker with a very strong foundation for her wheel-throwing skills. As Renker entered her 20s, she went to Munich, Germany, to study commercial graphic art. However, life came to her in unexpected ways. It was around this time that she got married and had her first child. A few years later, she and her husband moved to New Zealand. She spent the next fourteen years of her life raising her children and taking care of family. Renker returned to pottery making in 1998 as an avocation after her youngest child began attending school.⁵

International Influences and Learning

After seeing her pots, I was surprised to learn that Renker never studied extensively with a Japanese teabowl master. It seems rather that, as a self-directed learner, she absorbs information easily and

figures out what she needs to know in order to make what she wants. Like most studio potters, she produces a broad array of wheel-thrown functional ware. However, over the past ten years she has become particularly fond of making teabowls. Her particular fascination with the loosely formed, free-spirited teabowl comes out of a few key events in her life as a potter: the influence of her teacher, her direct experience with wood firing, advance studies of shino glazing, and her participation in a Korean teabowl festival.

When Renker returned to making pottery as a mature adult in New Zealand, she studied with Campbell Hegan at the outstanding facilities of the Auckland Studio Potters, a community-based ceramics center.⁶ He helped loosen up her approach to throwing, which, in combination with wood firing at Auckland Studio Potters, changed the direction of her aesthetic. Setting up a home studio was a natural progression after taking classes at the community-based ceramic center. While she set up her home studio, Otago Polytechnic launched a distance degree program in ceramic arts in which she enrolled. Hegan served as her local primary tutor. The late Len Castle, one of the superstars of New Zealand pottery, also served as her tutor. Renker worked slowly and methodically, completing the two-year program over four years. She took an extra year to

obtain an advanced certificate for which she conducted an in-depth investigation of Japanese shino glazes. This thread of interest in shino continues in the present. For example, Renker undertook a one-month residency at The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Japan in 2015.⁷ She conducted numerous glaze tests and visited local feldspar mines there to better appreciate and understand the one-of-a-kind feldspars used in Japanese shino glazes.

Building a Wood Kiln

In 2009, a couple of years after Renker completed her formal studies, she decided to build her own wood kiln. She said, "I have the space. I have the trees. Why not? It just seemed to make sense." Once she decided to build a wood kiln, she went to the Auckland Studio Potters and asked if anyone had any plans for a good one. One of the members, Peter Lange, knew a potter in Italy who had a good design. Lange guided and advised her from a distance in the kiln construction. Basically, Renker collected fire bricks from hither and yon, took them home, and built the kiln in her backyard from scratch. She would take pictures each step of the way and then show the photos to the Auckland Studio Potters. Lange and a few others would look closely at the progress of her work. They provided advice and feedback about what she needed to keep doing or to change and make differently. In the end, the kiln, designed with a Dutch-oven fire box, was a bit rickety, but it worked very well.

After the first firing, she was on her own. In recent years, Masakazu Kusakabe, an experienced Japanese kiln-builder, helped her rebuild the fire box using a bourry fire box design. Wood firing itself is an art form and requires a nuanced understanding of many variables. It is a very fluid process that is not easily controlled. For example, the color of glazes and raw clay changes dramatically with the type of wood used. Renker notes that New Zealand pine burns very hot and clean with a long flame. When she uses reclaimed wood pallets to fire her kiln, she adds one type of local tree or plant such as eucalyptus or rhododendron. This can dramatically impact the effects of firing on her pots.

The Spirit of the Teabowl

Renker first attended the Mungyeong Traditional Tea Bowl (Chasabal) Festival in Korea as a presenter in 2009.⁸ She returned to the Tea Bowl Festival for five consecutive years thereafter, enjoying the camaraderie with fellow potters who were more than happy to share tips and tricks of the trade. The recurrent experience deepened within her an appreciation for the subtle design of teabowls. She migrated toward a rustic Eastern aesthetic where the forming process was visibly celebrated, as opposed to being masked, hidden, or erased. Her involvement in the teabowl festival also opened the door to an international network of friends and fellow potters. She took advantage of these contacts and continues to seek out workshops around the globe that match her interests. For example,



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6 Teabowl, 5½ in. (14 cm) in diameter, stoneware, gray/black decoration, gas fired to cone 10. 7 Two faceted shino teabowls, 4¾ in. (12 cm) in width, wood-fired stoneware, fired to cone 10, 2017. 8 Faceted shino lidded jar, 8¾ in. (22 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware, fired to cone 10, 2017. 9 Faceted shino lidded jar, 6¾ in. (16 cm) in length, wood-fired black clay, fired to cone 10, 2017. 10 Faceted shino sake cups, 2½ in. (6 cm) in width, stoneware, gas fired for 48 hours to cone 8, 2015. Photos: Kurt Renker.

in 2011, she participated in a workshop with Rizu Takahashi, a Japanese teabowl master, in Devon, England, while at a workshop organized by Lisa Hammond.⁹ While she did not return home to begin making faceted teabowls immediately after the workshop, she noticed these ideas emerging in her teabowls a few years later. She truly enjoys learning as much about making pottery as she can and surrounds herself with like-minded artists who share her interests. During this past summer, Renker came to the US and produced some new work that she then fired in an anagama wood kiln with Jack Troy.

Renker successfully weaves together multiple processes, including organically crafting vessels, shino glazing with its idiosyncratic behavior, spontaneously brushing or flicking oxide underglaze designs, and wood firing with its random qualities and unpredictable glaze results. These improvisational and spontaneous processes work harmoniously together to create unpredictable outcomes. Her Western roots come out in discussing her approach to underglaze mark making. “I read a book on Robert Motherwell. In it he said, ‘You know, you make a mark and stand by it. This is your mark. This mark is you.’ I think that is important.” She doesn’t fuss with her work. Her actions with clay are very gestural. It is as if Renker channels her life force into this formative dynamic. Her understandings of Eastern and Western ceramic culture, years of devoted learning and pragmatic practice, coupled with a down-to-earth, matter-of-fact way of being result in clarity and decisiveness in her work. As Renker continues her work as a potter, while tending to her farm and family in the bucolic landscape of New Zealand, she grows in becoming a master studio potter, queen of wood firing, and maker of things useful and beautiful.

Challenges

While readers might be inclined to think that I have painted an idyllic version of Renker’s journey and practice as a potter, none of this comes easy. Some kiln firings are complete disappointments. Interestingly enough, one of the primary material problems that Renker faces, along with all other potters in New Zealand, is the supply of clay bodies. Almost all clay bodies are imported. When manufactured clay bodies or raw materials for clay bodies run out and are no longer available, she and the other potters have to start all over again figuring out how new clay bodies behave and interact with glazes during firing. One of Renker’s strategic responses is to wedge together clay bodies from three different countries. Her vessels are truly international in form and spirit. This is testimony to the creative, inventive spirit of Renker and the resourcefulness of the ceramic arts community in New Zealand.



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To see more of Elena Renker’s work and learn more about her process, see page 42, and visit her website, www.elenarenker.com and her Etsy page, www.etsy.com/shop/elenarenker.

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1 www.newzealand.com/au/feature/new-zealand-geography-and-geology

2 <https://teara.govt.nz/en/history/page-1>

3 www.britannica.com/topic/Maori; www.maori.com

4 www.raymeeker.com/index.php

5 www.elenarenker.com/Info/Info/About.html

6 <http://ceramics.co.nz>

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9 <http://elenarenker.blogspot.com.br/2011/11/rizu-takahashi-workshop-in-devon.html>

Elena Renker: Making a Wood-Fired Teabowl by Andrew Buck, EdD

Elena Renker's approach to making wood-fired teabowls follows traditional practices but allows room for creativity and innovation. The process is demarcated by three major processes: shaping the clay form, glazing the bisque clay body, and wood firing the final work. Renker's way of working the raw clay tends to emphasize the gestural and immediate. For example, in the forming process, she may cut faceted edges, make indentations with a throwing stick, or use a butter board to paddle the form into a desired shape. Hand carving the interior and exterior creates a rustic appearance to her smoothly wrought teabowls. Renker's way of glazing tends toward simplicity. She uses rapidly drawn brush marks of red iron oxide with flicks and splatters to leave painterly marks on her work. After glazing the interior, she pours shino glaze onto selected exterior areas of each piece, which creates a contrasting surface for future ash deposits in the wood firing.

Wood firing is by far the most indirect formative process to which Renker surrenders her work. The art of kiln firing involves controlling the amount of air, fuel, and oxygen available to achieve mature firing temperatures of 2372°F

(1300°C). According to Renker, "The wood has to be dry enough. If it contains too much moisture, then too much energy is used to get it to burn, and the temperature will not rise past a certain point. If it is too dry, it does not have enough energy left in it and again, the high temperature will not be achieved. Too much stoking can choke the kiln, too little can starve it. Careful control between the amount of wood, air, and kiln draft are necessary. It requires watching the flames carefully as they flow like water through the kiln up and out the chimney, and listening to the sound of the flames in the kiln, that particular roar after giving it a good stoke." At the maturation point, glazes flux and fuse with the clay body; it is a dance of science and art melding together in magic. The flow of wood ash through the kiln, and how it is deposited on each piece where it is then transformed into glaze, varies with each firing. This process ensures that each piece is one of a kind. Renker has learned not to judge pieces too quickly when they first come out of the kiln. She has found that some pieces change slightly in color and grow on her gradually, revealing their beauty over time.



1 Begin by faceting the sides of the teabowl. **2** Having completed the faceting, create indents and shape the bowl by hitting it with a piece of wood. **3** Create an opening in the bowl by pushing down into the center with a dowel. **4** With the opening created, carve some clay out, leaving about ½ in. (1.5 cm) thick walls. **5** Shape the bowl again, this time using a paddle.



6 Continue shaping the bowl, until the form is where you would like it to be. 7 With the main form created, begin carving the foot of the bowl. 8 The last step before drying is shaping the rim. 9 When the bowl is dry, sand the inside of the bowl to smooth out some of the carving marks. 10 Decorate the bowl with red iron oxide slip. 11 Glaze the outside of the bowl by pouring a shino glaze over sections of the surface. 12 The glazed bowl is now ready for firing. 13–15 Photos: Kurt Renker. 13 View of the kiln being loaded with work propped up on wadding and seashells. 14 This is a view of the flames during firing. 15 This is the kiln chamber after firing. 13–15 Photos: Malayka Yoseph.