Wood-fired Ceramics Publicatior nternational

Elena Renker The Mingei Film Archive Project A 1964 Interview with Bernard Leach Taxile Doat's Kiln Geoff Crispin Stuart Whatley



experiments with shino



Investigation of the original Japanese shino. This glaze is mainly made up from a feldspar found in the Mino region of Japan, mixed with a small amount of clay and fired very slowly in an anagama. Of course we don't have access to this feldspar so we use a combination of different feldspars



and clays to emulate the result. I tested endless line blends of different combinations of feldspars, china clays, and ball clays to find the best possible shino style glaze with the ingredients available to me. In 2015 I did a residency in Shigaraki Japan where I was able to experiment with many local feldspars, so different form ours. The glaze that I mainly use now was actually discovered by accident, I made a mistake multiplying the ingredients and just loved the result.

While I was pleased with the results of the gas firings, I felt that my next step was to experiment with other firing methods. Shino and wood firing are a match made in heaven, and as there was no one around here in the Auckland area in New Zealand in 2008 who was doing short wood firings without salt or soda, I decided to build my own kiln.

My friend Peter Lange provided me with plans for a 0.85³m (30cu.ft) kiln with a Dutch oven style firebox. When the plans arrived we worked out how many bricks I was going to need. New bricks are very expensive in New Zealand, so I gradually collected second-hand ones over several months, 50 bricks here, 20 bricks there, all different quality, age, and manufacturer, and often with interesting stories attached. I think I must have samples of the entire history of New Zealand firebrick production represented in my kiln. The difficult bit was that they were all slightly different sizes, which made the building all the more challenging.

My sons Yonas and Juleon helped me to put down a decent sized concrete slab. Peter used his brick building computer programme to design the kiln and e-mailed me step-by-step



instructions, a bit like building with Lego. I started building the base of the kiln with concrete blocks. Having the chamber and firebox raised up a bit would make loading and firing much easier and more comfortable. Then I would build a section, take pictures back to the Auckland Studio Potters centre, where they were examined by Peter and other experienced woodfire potters, including Duncan Shearer and Lex Dawson, and whoever else happened to be there. Every step was discussed and argued over and I often ended up having to rebuild sections. I would do more work, returning the following week with another set of pictures for approval. Knowing next to nothing about kilns at this time, I was extremely grateful for the level of enthusiasm and support from everyone.

I had never built anything before so this project was a steep learning curve for me. When I was about three quarters of the way through the building process Peter asked 'You are using a level and a straightedge, aren't you?'. A level? A straight edge? 'Or you can always line it up with the nearest tree', he continued, after seeing the baffled expression on my face. The Bourry-box kiln at Elena Renker's studio, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand, 2014.

Opposite page: Peter Lange and Duncan Shearer at the first firing of Elena Renker's Dutch oven kiln, 2009.

Title page: Tea Bowl, by Elena Renker, 10.5cm in height, 2017. Fired in the Bourry-box kiln. Shino Jar, by Elena Renker, 24cm in height, 2017. Glazed in layers of different shinos. Fired in the Bourrybox kiln.

Opposite page: Seven Sake Cups, by Elena Renker, 2019. Made from different clays, with various shino glazes, fired in the Bourry-box kiln.



Juleon helped with the steel work, doing all the welding for me. The arches went up without any trouble. The final challenge was building the kiln shed and wood storage area. We used only odds and ends that we found lying around on the farm or that we had been given, but we managed to get a structure up.

Peter and Duncan came to fire the kiln with me for the first firing. I had been busy collecting wood, mostly old pallets from the local industrial area. I would drive there at night with my trailer, collect as many pallets as I could stack on it and then break them up. This was an easy and free supply of kiln wood for me. The firing went very well. After loading the kiln with bisque fired pots it did what it was meant to do, and after 12 hours cone 10 was down everywhere.

The type of shino that I mostly use is known as a red shino. When applied thinly it reacts with the iron in the clay body of the pot to form a brown or orange coloured surface. But when applied thickly



it will pinhole, craze, and crawl. I have always glazed by pouring the glaze over the pot in quick, gestural movements, alternating thick and thinly glazed areas, and I really like leaving parts of the pot unglazed showing the clay body. After gas firing these unglazed areas are not very nice, they look raw and unfinished. In a wood firing on the other hand the wood ash settles on all the surfaces, in the cracks, crawls and pinholes, softening everything. The unglazed clay loses its raw look and blends perfectly with the glazed parts of the pot. One of the things that I was looking for when I first started to research shino glazes was the interaction of clay, and glaze and to me the wood-fired shinos do this perfectly.

Pallets are not a very interesting wood to fire with, especially in short firings. The fired results they give are pretty anaemic. So I experimented with collecting different types of wood or other organic material and adding bits with each stoke. I was amazed to see the difference that even small amounts of material could make to the colour of the ash on the pots. Eucalyptus wood gave a bright green ash, plum tree a dark red, pampas grass had a lustre effect. Palm fronds did not really do anything, while wheat husks gave an amazingly rich greenish-blue glaze. I also experimented with adding charcoal onto the pots, pulling pots out of the firebox at high temperature, loading the firebox with green wood at the end of a firing, etc. I really enjoy trying out something new in each firing. Having such a small kiln meant that I could do many firings and not risk a large number of pots when things did not go as planned.

In 2014 after well over 50 firings the throat arch of my kiln was threatening to collapse. This was probably due to my inexperience in brick building. There had also been a lot of development in my area and I was getting worried about new neighbours complaining about the smoke from the kiln. So with the help of my friend, the Japanese kiln builder Masakazu Kusakabe, who was staying with me that summer, we rebuild most of the kiln, changing the design to Kusakabe's famous smokeless Bourry-box design.

Comparing the results from the Dutch oven firebox and the Bourry-box I feel that I had a lot more ash deposits on the pots with the Dutch oven. In the Dutch oven the flames move from the firebox straight onto the bagwall and to the pots. In the Bourry-box on the other hand, the flame has to move down and over the ashpit before reaching the bagwall and the pots, and so there seems to be less ash ending up on the pots. Of course in these short firings only the pots placed



Elena Renker's studio, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand.



on, or right behind the bagwall will receive significant amounts of ash anyway, the rest of the pots will just have a dusting on the rim. But even this little amount makes a big difference to the final look of a piece. It also takes me longer to reach temperature with the Bourry-box kiln, and my firing times have increased to around 16 hours. Looking back I feel that for the type of work that I make and the effects that I want to achieve, the Dutch oven firebox worked better.

However, I still love firing this kiln, Dutch oven or Bourry-box. I mostly fire by myself. I like the rhythm of the stoking, the quiet, being able to listen to the sound of the kiln, the roar of the fire after each stoke. And I like the long, slow process, the challenge of getting the kiln to temperature and the sense of achievement when the cones finally go down. But the best thing is still the opening of the kiln and the fact that I never know what I will find.

Elena Renker grew up in Germany and moved to New Zealand in 1984. She started potting in 1977 at the Golden Bridge Pottery in India, and then in Bavaria before studying graphic design. She completed a diploma in ceramic art in 2007 and established a studio on her farm north of Auckland.

www.elenarenker.com