

Monika Gass interviewed

# AARON SCYTHER



photo - Tsubaki Scythe

**Y**our work is outstanding – colourful and strong... very complex art pieces – but still ceramics. How did you start?

From a young age I was drawn to ceramics more than other forms of communication. I think this may not have been the case if I was born in another country with a larger variety of art forms. I really love the temple sculptures in Japan and lacquer work, perhaps that is a different journey in life I could have taken if born in Japan. But ceramics is something that I love. I feel that one can express one's emotions in clay when it is still in its malleable state, so I think this is why I am so drawn towards working in clay and have never considered changing mediums.

I really started my ceramic life when I built my first anagama kiln. My obsession at that time was Shino. Around that time I had a chance to travel to Japan and on my second trip studied with Koie Ryoiji. I had seen Oribe in books and loved it but because at that time there was so little information about it outside of Japan and had never thought of making Oribe. When I left Koie San's studio I moved to Mashiko as I found a production throwing job and a rental studio, also because of the Leach-Hamada relation foreigners were readily accepted into Mashiko. Within less than half a year I could support myself from the work that I had made in my spare time between my throwing job.

It took a few years for me to refine my Oribe and Kizeto and in the beginning years of Mashiko I was doing splash Oribe, a style of Oribe that Koie San invented, from what I have been told one of the influences for splash Oribe was Jackson Pollock. Koie San's extreme genius was often in the way that he was able to blend old ceramic traditions with contemporary ideas. Splash Oribe I did for about one year.

That evolved into a mixture of splash Oribe and abstract Kanji, coded alphabet writings and also I did a few exhibitions from revelations in the Old Testament. The abstract Kanji works were inspired



**3 to 0**, h 20 cm, ø 31 cm, Yobitsugi style *Courtesy of Te Tuhi Contemporary Art Trust photo - Sam Harnett*

from Inoue Yuichi. He is still one of my favourite artists.

It took about 5 years in Mashiko before I started painting works in the traditional Oribe style. As I had never really learnt how to draw or use a brush this evolved from wanting to move away from Koie San's style. Although I say the traditional Oribe style I have always tried to use images that are seen in my life, as this is what the old Oribe potters did – using parts of that time and culture for decoration. But I always try and work within tradition and it is the old pots from Momoyama period (16th century) that I love.

I came up with the word "Hip Hop Oribe" in Japan for the way I work, as hip hop is taking samples of various music, changing them into a new work, adding and mixing new and old. I feel that this what Japanese art and culture has done for centuries. The one thing that is of paramount importance in this style is one must make something that is one's own. I worked in this style for 11 years before leaving Japan. As well as Oribe I often dabbled in porcelain, using clear glazes, blue celadon and started on red enamel work. I fired an anagama that I built with a friend, built a small wood kiln at my studio as well as a wood and charcoal raku kiln.

After leaving Japan and coming to New Zealand I needed to change my style and way of working. The main reasons were lack of materials and the language that I was speaking using mostly Japanese themes, i.e. traditional patterns were not understood by the ceramic clientele in New Zealand. At first I moved to terracotta and three-coloured slip ware, which was a semi easy transition from Oribe and Kizeto because it has the colour elements of green, yellow and clear glazes.

Also the kilns in New Zealand are economical, those that fire relatively well are electric.

I started using Maori prayers and words from Maori prophets as I felt spiritually connected to them and mixed these with my Japanese decoration language.

After 3 years I started to work in porcelain, then I stopped making terracotta, the main reason being



Yobitsugi style vase, h 36 cm, ø 31 cm

photos by Aaron Scythe

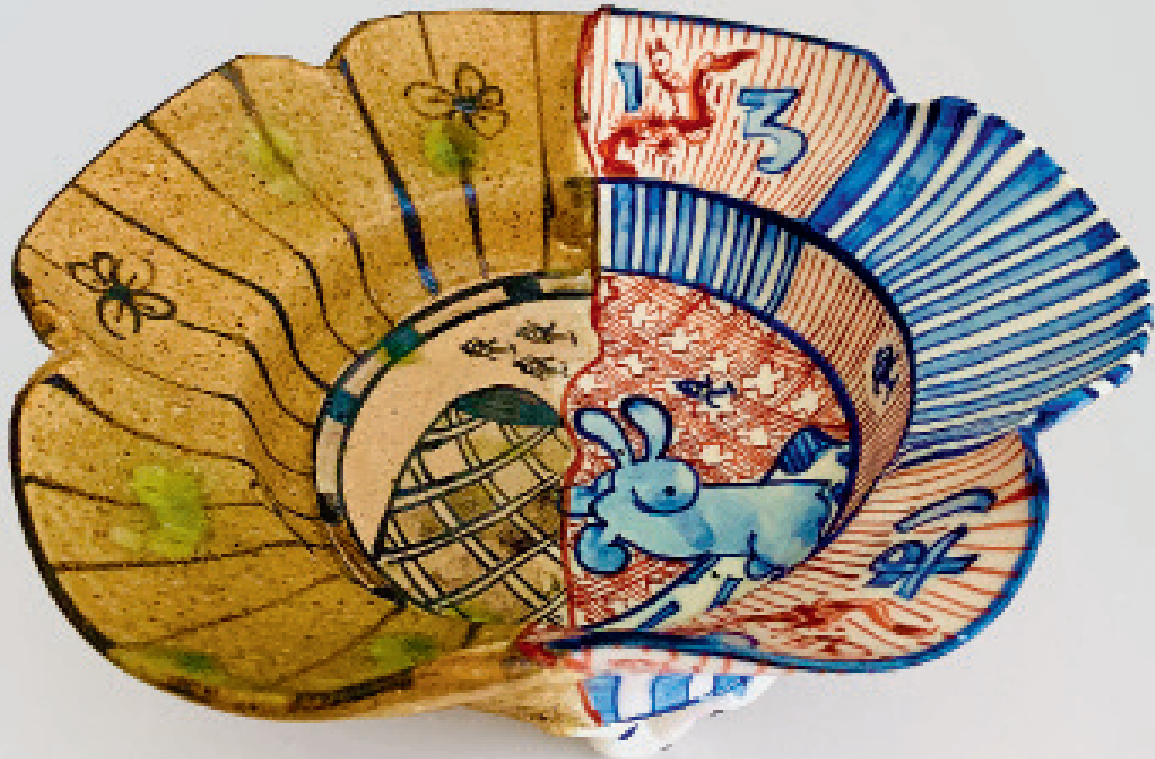
my dislike for lead, even fritted lead. The first porcelain that I made here was using cobalt decoration, which leads into using red enamel onglaze that I had tried once in Japan. With the porcelain work I started using more decorative Kutani patterns mixed with my Oribe style.

I started using titanium lustre on my porcelain about 4 years ago and occasionally tried the Nagasaki onglaze enamels, yellows, green and purple. It took a few years of finding the right techniques and material from this on and off testing but I started working this way about 2 years ago.

In between all of this I have continued to fire Hikidashi work, a mix between Setoguro and American style raku, a style that Koie San invented. 4 years ago I started making Yobitsugi style works. I had an exhibition at a gallery where I have had exhibitions previously and always want to find new ways of working so was trying to think of a new series of works.

After trying coloured slips and glazes but not finding anything that I could call my own and feeling quite depressed about what to do, I had a stupid eureka moment: I could try and emulate Yobitsugi by joining and cutting stoneware and porcelain in the leather hard stage. I was sure it was doomed to fail – as the specific shrinkage rates between stoneware and porcelain are different, I was sure they would rip apart specifically in the cooling down stage. I made two quick test pieces and for some reason it worked! So I made larger test works which worked as well, with glazes that I was using for my Hikidashi pieces, Setoguro, Kizeto and clear glazes, plus my porcelain enamels and lustre.

In some of the works I have made over the last 4 years I have been using images from the “Floating World” and Ukiyoe. I was looking at Pinterest for decoration ideas for ceramics, after seeing a lot of the modern Japanese prints I started to



Yobitsugi style flower dish, h 6.5 cm, ø 17 cm

Nagasaki red, tall-footed bowl, h 7 cm, ø 14 cm





Yobitsugi style teapots, both h 25 cm, L 21 cm, ø 15 cm

want to make prints. But because of the technical needs and equipment I searched for a different way and found the iPad Pro and giclee printing. Once I started to do this on my iPad, prints “moved” onto my ceramics. It is always interesting over the years I have often painted mainly with Sumi. When one is doing both painting and ceramics they seem to feed off each other and working ideas bleed into each other.

***You use ceramic materials but the forms you create are more freestyle than classic. How important is the material in your work?***

The throwing style I use whilst often seeming improvised comes from old making techniques from the 16th century era and like modern Japanese potters who take a modern twist of the old techniques I have tried to build on those. Forms are mostly based on old Oribe, Iga, Shigaraki etc. from the 16th century.

My theory of throwing is this: you want to approach it like running down a stairway, slowly and it is predictable, fast and it is a disaster, you should be just at the threshold of falling, almost losing control but not all control. The techniques that I use help with this approach towards making. When I started making works for wood kilns, I made pots on a kick wheel to try and find the fluidity often seen in old Japanese pots. I also never centred my clay, teaching myself to throw off-centre. The first time I saw Koie throw and the speed of his wheel work, all my perceptions of how to make a pot that I had been taught went out the window. The fluidity and motion that he was able to achieve from his style was incredible and changed my life. From seeing that he could make beautiful works from

any clay using any kiln changed my perception of wood kilns as the best end of all. From his influence I think it is possible to make beautiful works from any medium whether we are specifically talking about ceramic mediums or others. So medium is not that all important in my work, but I am specifically drawn to some more than others. If clay was not a medium of making things, I am sure I would be making something out of a different medium.

More than that I believe everyone has an innate style of making and way of expression – for me this is more important than material.

***You lived in Japan, in one of the HOTSPOTS there, in the famous city of Mashiko. What was your motivation to move to New Zealand?***

We left Mashiko after Fukushima melted down as our children were young and we were worried about radiation exposure in young children and decided to try New Zealand. Mashiko was great to live in though, Japan generally is the country that is always in my heart. The fact that in Japan pottery is not seen as a craft is also inspirational in making works, especially when collectors are able to understand the language that you are trying to speak through – say a tradition of Oribe.

For me Japan was ceramic heaven. But it is interesting to look back on life: if I had not left Japan I would not be making the works that I am making now, it forced me out of the box. Hopefully a good thing ... this out of the box!

***Ceramics in art, pieces like your delicate work: what is your point of view on ceramics in art?***



Tea bowl, h 9.5 cm, ø 13.5 cm

When I am making works it has always been about beauty. I find utilitarian objects beautiful. I was thinking if a vase has been thrown out on rubbish dump, is it beautiful? If that same vase is found and thought beautiful then perhaps it becomes beautiful, especially in the way that it is used? In the end no matter how much I try and make a beautiful work, unless it is admired and/or used then it has no real beauty, even though I still believe in innate beauty – life has many contradictions.

That is what I love about ceramics, it is a conversation between maker and user ... without a user my work really has no meaning. I never really think about what art is or craft, for me they are just unwanted labels. I make what I want to make.

Ceramics over the last decade has been extremely exciting, the way that it has moved away from its roots towards something new. The technology and skill of many young makers is astounding. The only thing that I often worry about is sometimes the idea becomes more important than perhaps the piece. I often have the reverse problem when people value the process over the piece. For me everything is about what has been produced – thus my contradiction about innate beauty.

I often feel like an old man, making the way I make and what I make. Will utilitarian ceramics survive as part of the new ceramic world? As ceramics grows into something new, it fits more for the art gallery.

I often think of ceramics as a bridge to art, or beauty. Hopefully this is so: as a beautifully made plate.

**What are you planning for the future?**

I am not really sure where my work is headed. Life changes and with that I hope that my work changes. Before I men-

tioned new tests I am thinking about. The only thing that I know is that I do not want to become stagnant. I think if that happened I would give up making ceramics. My work has progressed in many ways that I would never have imagined. My style seems to be made up of sequences and progressions of techniques and life changes.

**Statement:**

What I make I feel comes from me ...  
 When you look around at everything ...  
 There is beautiful design everywhere ...  
 Yet it is made in a factory, often without thoughts of ...  
 Nothing left of the human soul ...  
 Completely dehumanised soulless beauty...  
 Like talking to a wall waiting for an answer ... nothing ...  
 Yes – what I make I feel comes from me ...  
 Designed yet often not thought out ...  
 Fingerprints, imperfect forms, distortion, soul ...  
 A human expression ...

*All pots named Yobitsugi style are stoneware and porcelain. Clear glaze, Kizeto, Setoguro, iron and cobalt underglaze, fired to 1250°C. Onglaze enamels (Nagasaki) fired to 780°C. Lacquer (urushi).*

**AARON SCYTHE**  
 Whanganui, New Zealand  
[www.ascythe.com](http://www.ascythe.com)  
[www.facebook.com/godinc247](https://www.facebook.com/godinc247)  
[Aaron.Scythe@godinc247](mailto:Aaron.Scythe@godinc247)