

# Timeless Beauty

Wood Fired Ceramics by Joe Bruhin



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***Timeless Beauty: Wood Fired Ceramics by Joe Bruhin is a testament to both this artist's love of wood-fired ceramics and his maturity and facility in the medium. The exhibition consists of jars, tea bowls, plates, vases, sake cups and bottles produced over the past fifteen years and fired in Bruhin's Noborigama and Anagama kilns as well as a few works fired in fellow wood-firer Carl Beemer's "Dream Kiln" in Pennsylvania.***

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BRUHIN'S FORMS are inspired by traditional Japanese forms and techniques but he adds personal iconography that make the work uniquely his own. His jars have a healthy globe-like volume with some details that have meaning for Bruhin. He speaks of his art being profoundly transformed by a vision he had a number of years ago. In the vision he was in a dark cave and then emerged from the dark into a nourishing, soft, but intense light. This inspired him to develop his "caves" which are both triangular lug shapes on the shoulders of his jars and tri-

angular marks he has started using for a signature or maker's mark. He also has an interesting interplay with the jars neck, being angular and jagged, contrasting with the soft roundness of the body of the jar. There is simultaneous attraction to the form because of its comforting shape and a warning not to get too close because of the sharp edges of the rim.

Bruhin's special focus is on the surface of his pots, the surface he orchestrates during the wood firing. When asked what his favorite thing about making pots was: throwing

or firing?—he answered—loading the kiln. He enjoys playing the kiln, trying to manipulate the fiery process to create exciting surfaces. He likes a lot of stuff to happen in the kiln during firing: to have the coals build up around certain works; for the wood ash to melt and create a natural glaze—what the Japanese call *shizen-yu*; for ash to pile onto the shoulders of the jars; for drips of molten glass to collide and create a "dragonfly eye" on a pot; and for flashes of flame to race across the surface creating a smoky black cloud. He especially likes *Iga* pots, the works that are placed in the fire box of the kiln. The fire box has the most volatility, ash and flashing, it is also the riskiest place in the kiln. In fact the whole process of firing a wood kiln is full of risk and uncertainty. Wood kilns can take up to ten days to fire—leaving a lot of time for variations in weather, temperature, personnel—all of which can affect outcome. These wood firings make Bruhin a master of the unpredictable,



*Tea Bowl from the Dream Kiln*  
2004; ceramic with natural glaze; Anonymous Loan



*Jar with Dragonfly Eye*

about 2005; ceramic with natural glaze; Collection of Julie Anderies

a gambler of sorts, a magician, and maybe even a martyr to his craft.

Joe Bruhin has referred to his making pots as “a religious experience.” This sentiment, actually, has a profound grounding in the cultural history of wood fired ceramics. Japanese Zen Buddhist monks have held the wood fired tea bowl as a sacred object for many centuries partly due to its dynamic surface. In fact the Japanese reverence for wood fired ceramics can be compared to the exalted status that old master paintings hold in western culture. In the past fifty years wood firing has experienced a revival

in the United States with an avid and dedicated community of ceramic artists. Some of the biggest names in contemporary ceramics (notably Peter Voulkos, Don Reitz and Paul Chaleff) have exuberantly taken on the rigors and dynamic ritual that is wood firing.

Joe Bruhin is very much aware of both the Japanese traditions and the contemporary wood fired ceramics scene. He was born in 1953 and as a young man he was a traveler and seeker. In 1978 he began his studies at Merremac College in Kirkwood, Missouri, and continued at Maryville College in St. Louis,

studying with ceramist, Jeri Au. He finished his formal education at Idaho State University with a residency at Sun Valley Center for Arts and Humanities working with directors, Gayle Prunhuber and Dan Doak and also with visiting artists including Bennett Bean, Clary Illian, Ken Little, Paul Soldner and Stephen De Staebler. After working and saving for many years Joe bought and homesteaded forty acres in Fox, Arkansas. He and his wife started out living in a tepee, after a few years they completed building their cabin, then the kiln. Now he has a house, studio and two wood fired kilns at his Fox Mountain Pottery.

Bruhin has been making pots and wood firing them in Arkansas for more than 20 years. He has been using a multi-chambered *Noborigama* style wood fired kiln he dubbed “Falstaff.” A few years ago he helped with a firing at Carl Beemer’s studio in Bloomberg, Pennsylvania. The kiln was an *Anagama* style kiln (translates as hole or tunnel kiln) that Japanese Ceramic Master Shiho Kanzaki built ten years earlier. This firing inspired Bruhin to build his own *Anagama*, which he fired for the first time last year. He has just finished the second firing of this kiln at the time of this writing.

Anne Gochenor  
CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY CRAFT

## works in the exhibition

### Large Platter

about 1996  
ceramic  
Collection of Maggie  
and Dick Dearnley

### Red Jar

about 1996  
ceramic  
Collection of Patty  
and Ron Pyle

### Red Jar with Stone

About 1997  
ceramic  
Collection of Claudia  
and Walt Stallings

### Bottle

2003  
ceramic  
Collection of Nancy and  
Russell B. McDonough

### Grid Sake Cup

2003  
ceramic  
Courtesy of the artist

### Blue Pearl Jar

2004  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Cavelight

2004  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Anonymous Loan

### Covered Jar

About 2004  
ceramic  
Collection of Masami and Joe Fiser

### Tea Bowl from the Dream Kiln

2004  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Anonymous Loan

### Celadon Bowl

2005  
ceramic  
On Loan from Wendy Saer

### Jar with Dragonfly Eye

About 2005  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Julie Anderies

### Plate

2005  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Anonymous Loan

### Iga Bottle

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Jar

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Zella Von Seger

### Jar from Anagama Kiln

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Rickey Medlock

### Jar from Anagama Kiln

about 2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
On loan from Erle Hammans

### Jar with Caves

about 2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Sheryl Cohen

### Jar with Caves

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of June and  
Edmond Freeman

### Jar with Caves

about 2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of John Lesser

### Platter

about 2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Steve Bruhin

### Sake Cup with green bottom

about 2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist



Plate

2005; ceramic with natural glaze; Anonymous Loan

### Sake Cup with notched foot

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Tea Bowl

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Tea Bowl with Dragonfly Eye

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Collection of Rebecca and Reed  
Thompson

### 2 Vases

2006  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Bottle

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### 4 Iga Bottles

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### 3 Jars with Caves

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### Large Jar

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### 4 Sake Cups

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### 4 Tea Bowls

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### 2 Vases

2007  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Courtesy of the artist

### on the front

*Cavelight*  
2004  
ceramic with natural glaze  
Anonymous Loan

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