

tracking fire

clay collaborations of
the pacific rim

masakazu kusakabe

marc lancet

TRACKING FIRE Clay Collaborations of the Pacific Rim

is an exhibition of ceramic sculpture and functional ware. Two artists from different countries developed a dialogue in clay over the past eight years.

Masakazu Kusakabe of Miharu, Japan and Marc Lancet of Winters, California, celebrate the cross currents of cultural understanding and richness through the medium of clay. Their unusual relationship as clay artisans, and the tandem works they create, illustrate a cultural story in ceramics. Their working relationship redefines the clay medium from a regional or national interpretation to an international ceramics realm of the Pacific Rim. Lancet's clay sculptures and Kusakabe's vessel forms acknowledge the ancient traditions of Japanese ceramics while

broadening California's aesthetic and historical understanding of the medium. Their contemporary ceramic work is then traditionally fired in a hand built, wood-fire kiln whose structure and firing methods were developed over a thousand years ago. The structure of the kiln, the placement of the pieces in the kiln, and the play of flames on each piece further define the successful outcome of each form.

The Dancing Fire Wood Kiln was built on the grounds of Solano Community College, Solano County, California in July 1998. This arching two-chambered brick structure measures twenty-two feet long, eight feet wide and nineteen feet tall at the chimney. It is defined by the type of flame it is designed to produce. The relationship of the builder with the kiln has

been likened to that of a musician and instrument. As a master kiln builder Masakazu Kusakabe has engineered more than twenty-five kilns in Japan and now the United States. Most have been wood-fire. Kiln interiors usually are made of smooth fire brick. Kusakabe designed an inner three-dimensional checkerboard surface of large incised bricks to agitate the flame as it rolls through the kiln.¹ Having seen numerous perfected kiln interiors, Kusakabe desired to build a kiln based on distortion where the flame could flow, dance and swirl, in addition to "talk with the pieces."²

The kiln's unique persona evolves from its dancing flame quality. Some have described working with wood-fire kilns as a "sensing as much as a knowing,"³ and it is often the balance between the two that ensures a successful partnership. In July of 1998, Kusakabe-sensei, Lancet, and thirty others built the Dancing Fire Wood Kiln in one week. Its first fire occurred soon thereafter and lasted for several days. The kiln cooled for a week before its celebrated opening in August.

Large, outdoor kilns developed in ancient insular communities throughout Asia, specifically China, Korea, and Japan. First partially subterranean tunnel kilns (*anagama*) then chamber kilns

(*noborigama*) were built on sloping hillsides. Individual nuances evolved but their consistent basic design was to draft heat, flame and ash through the various kiln chambers to physically effect the hundreds of clay pieces contained therein. Firing in Japan has always been regarded as a natural process. Consequently, the fired clay piece is considered more a record of the play of various forces and not a static object.⁴ Accordingly, interior kiln zones were understood by their practitioners. They could read the trail of flames, ash deposits and heat marks long after the kiln cooled. With over thirty years of experience Kusakabe has mastered this skill and now shares his insights with the growing community of American wood-fire potters.⁵

Other integral factors effect the color, texture and overall appearance of wood-fired ceramics. The physical character of the clay, its grittiness or purity and plasticity, is of utmost consideration. Minerals found in clay bodies respond differently to heat and flame. Often it is desirable to avoid refinement of clay material to sustain its inherent personality and substance. Wood types used to fire the cycles of the kiln also play an important role. Different woods burn at different rates and create entirely unique environments inside the kiln. Wood ash drawn through the kiln lands on forms, then melts, to become a natural glaze. The variables in wood-firing are numerous and to some extent not reproducible, leaving the process of wood-firing open to the serendipitous. This chance quality is an important factor to its success in the United States. Wood-fire ceramics depart dramatically in concept and execution from traditional European ideas of what constitutes art, beauty and refinement.⁶

The arena of kilns and clay brought Kusakabe and Lancet together. Their individual works remain distinct but not unaffected.



Masakazu Kusakabe. *Hanaire* (flower vase), 1998. Wood-fired ceramic, 9 x 6 x 6"

Kusakabe's pottery is functional, encompassing traditional tea ware, sake ware and other vessel forms. His present day techniques of throwing, building and firing date back hundreds of years. The tradition and practice of ceramics are deeply appreciated and understood throughout Japanese society as it has been for centuries. Kusakabe's preference for these forms supports the view that common utensils, especially those employed in the Tea Ceremony, receive the same respect and affection as a painting or sculpture.⁷ The *chaire* (tea caddy), and *matcha jawan* (tea bowl), *hanaire* (flower vase) and *mizusashi* (fresh water jar) are the forms exhibited in *Tracking Fire* and document his recent output from the Dancing Fire kiln.

Western impulses may suggest we simply view these pieces and casually assess their visual engagement. Their intention, however, goes beyond a quick appreciation to a deeper aesthetic contemplation. The Japanese Tea Ceremony reached its apex during the 16th century and fostered a renaissance within ceramics. Kusakabe's work redresses this celebrated ceramic tradition originally expressed in a highly ritualized Zen ceremony of drinking tea. The meaning of beauty was understood through the tea utensils, fostering nobility and purity of thought.⁸ The sensorial implication of each piece goes beyond the visual to the tactile. There is an appreciation for the rough surface of bowls and the subtle warmth one feels when drinking tea from their rim. The vessel's irregular shape, surface treatment, clay texture and glaze, all of which endure the week long baptism of the kiln, are summarized in one seemingly simple form of clay. To avoid the artificial these works are considered unique like nature itself. "Only an object that is natural and wholesome manifests the truest beauty."⁹

Restating the ceramic traditions of the past is not the intent of the contemporary Japanese potter. Lancel particularly admires Kusakabe's ability to innovate within a strong tradition and find pleasure in those subtleties. Kusakabe himself makes little separation between life and ceramics and his statement that, "we

play with flame, fire and kiln as friends," enlightens our understanding as to the depth of his focus. It is as much a goal of the Japanese potter to develop spirit along with ceramic skill. Kusakabe has sustained this capacity through decades of research, practice, study and teaching. He states, "...it is important to create a personal and warm atmosphere and relationship with our pieces. The 'faces' of the works are influenced by all aspects of the firing process, and thus lovely, passionate and tender 'faces' and 'bodies' are born."¹⁰

Kusakabe's response to American culture appears in his ceramic vessels. Assured forms, tactile surfaces and color passages evoke the impression of mountainous Northern California locales. Discussing tea bowls in geological terms is not new to Japanese ceramics. For Kusakabe his new works possess a quiet depth and majestic stillness. His savoring of American landscape and culture brings fresh realization to traditional ceramic form.

Marc Lancel's sabbatical to Japan in 1992 led to Kusakabe's studio two hours north of Tokyo. There Lancel's persistent and enlightening discipline of throwing traditional Japanese ceramic forms occurred. He vividly recounts the rigors of stripping away his ingrained Western aesthetic of volume and form to leave open the possibility of understanding the essence of Japanese ceramics. Those lessons are in part why this accomplished American sculptor refers to Masakazu Kusakabe as *sensei* (teacher).

Creating traditional Japanese tea ware has influenced Lancel's studio process, valuing spontaneity informed by experience over laboriously planned pursuits. Wood-firing his sculpture broadens the serendipitous while also expanding his vocabulary of ceramic surface treatment. Prior to embracing the wood-fire aesthetic, Lancel mastered pit firing, raku, salt firing and sager firing. These methods, like that of wood-firing, reflect the drama of the forces of nature acting on ceramic material. Key to Lancel's wood-fired ceramic sculpture is his belief that this process imbues sculpture and pottery with the qualities of *wabi* and *sabi*, two non-

translatable Japanese terms that embody opposing yet harmonious characteristics. Quite simply, *wabi* is a sense of incomplete, showing no self-will and no desire for perfection. *Sabi* is the absence of obvious beauty.¹¹

For Lancet, these qualities make wood-fire objects a part of nature. He explains, "There is nothing

superficial or overly intended about their markings... the artist collaborates with nature, inviting it to register its influence on the work."¹² As a sculptor he affirms that he has learned more from making tea bowls than from any other activity.

Today Marc Lancet's totemic sculptures reflect his fervent response to the spontaneous and freedom with materials. Lancet's primeval figures posture to one side while balancing stacked unrelated objects on their heads. Predisposed to an aesthetic of pre-Colombian cultures, Lancet's imagery and organic use of materials render his work timeless. His contemporary statement is often expressed with humor that reminds the viewer these are works from the here and now. The wood-fire process purifies Lancet's sculptural form. Many figures



Marc Lancet. *Solitude is Like the Rain* (JEFB Series), 1998. Wood-fired ceramic, 9 x 20 x 11"

are denuded of contextual accouterment enabling the sculptures to resonate with simple powerful statements.

Lancet's duality of time and timelessness evoke in figurative sculpture similar concerns Kusakabe renders in vessel form. Both are keenly aware of the implication of the passage of time and both are willing to move forward with their own inner-directed creativity. Their special kinship, shared in the realm of ceramics, facilitates an aesthetic dialogue that is just now beginning to unfold. Their clay offerings in both vessel and sculptural form demonstrate a cross cultural dialogue that exceeds physical boundaries and cultural limitations.

Nancy M. Servis
Pence Gallery Director

MASAKAZU KUSAKABE

is a Japanese ceramic artist whose work encompasses traditional Japanese forms, contemporary functional pottery, and ceramic sculpture. His work has been exhibited in Japan and America. In addition to his ceramic practice of thirty-five years, Kusakabe teaches art, paints, and pursues a passion for astronomy. Kusakabe has recently completed a handbook on kiln building and continues to teach periodic workshops in the United States with Marc Lancet.

MARC LANCET is beginning his fourteenth year as a professor of three-dimensional art at Solano Community College. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture and a Master of Arts in education from the University of California, Santa Barbara. He studied at L'école Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts and apprenticed in fine art casting at a foundry in Paris, France. His artist-in-residencies include: Japan's Shigaraki Ceramic Culture Park; the architectural terra cotta company of Gladding, McBean and Co. of Lincoln, CA and Indiana University.

tracking fire

clay collaborations of
the pacific rim

MASAKAZU KUSAKABE
MARC LANCET

April 30 - May 29, 1999

Opening Festivities: Friday, April 30

6:30 p.m. Sacramento Taiko Dan Drumming Ensemble, Outdoor Stage

7:00 - 9:00 p.m. Opening Reception

Lecture by Marc Lancet, Wednesday May 12 at 12 noon

Gallery Hours: Tuesday - Saturday, noon - 4 p.m.

Funded by the City of Davis Arts Contract Program and in conjunction with the 10th Annual California Conference for the Advancement of Ceramic Art

Acknowledgments

The premise of this exhibition was inspired by the fine presentation of the exhibition, *Translations in Clay*, held at the Fairfield City Arts Center in 1997 and curated by Shelly Willis. Visual documentation for the Pence Gallery exhibit includes photographer, Hedi Desuyo and Laura Napier for her rendering of the Dancing Fire Wood Kiln. Dino Gay of Dino Gay Design Studio is gratefully acknowledged for his essay design. The Pence Gallery Association would also like to thank the City of Davis Arts Contract Program for their generous funding of *Tracking Fire: Clay Collaborations of the Pacific Rim*.

Bibliography

- Hammitzsch, Horst. *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony: A Guide to the Tea Way*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.
- Kusakabe, Masakazu. *Dancing Fire Wood Kiln Handbook*, 1998.
- Leach, Bernard. *A Potter's Book*. London: Farber and Farber Limited, 1976.
- Lopez, Barry. "Before the Temple of Fire." *Harper's Magazine*, January, 1998, pp. 35 - 50.
- Speight, Charlotte F. and John Toki. *Hands in Clay: An Introduction to Ceramics*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995. 3rd edition.
- Troy, Jack. *Wood-Fired Stoneware and Porcelain*. Radnor, PA: Chilton Book Company, 1995.
- Wilson, Richard L. *Inside Japanese Ceramics: A Primer of Materials, Techniques and Traditions*. New York: Weatherhill, Inc., 1995.
- Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. New York: Kodansha International, 1989.

Notes

1. The incised bricks, called elephant's teeth, trap airborne ash. Over many firings this build-up will randomly drip in the form of natural glaze on top of the vessels and forms below.
2. Kusakabe, p. 3.
3. Troy, p. xi.
4. Troy, p. 15. Troy is citing Daniel Rhodes in *Tamba Pottery*.
5. Lopez, pp. 36-37. Lopez states that in 1980 perhaps a dozen anagama wood-fire kilns were operating in the United States; by the late 1990's the number was passing 100. Marc Lancet is aware of at least six wood-fire kilns in California in locales like the Napa Valley, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Palm Springs and Santa Cruz.
6. Lopez, p. 39.
7. Yanagi, p. 147.
8. Speight/Toki, p. 65, Yanagi, p. 147.
9. Yanagi, p. 143.
10. Kusakabe, p. 3.
11. Hammitzsch, pp. 46-47.
12. Letter from Marc Lancet to the author, February 2, 1999.