

Water...

Water has played an important role in our evolving palette. Typically we use oak and other hardwoods to heat the kiln. Firing over 60 hours we slowly build up a very large coal bed in the firebox that overflows onto the larger pots stacked in front of the shelves. When we first began firing this kiln in 1997 we tried various methods to reduce visible smoke. One shovelful of sopping wet sawdust tossed in before a full stoke clears the carbon out of the chimney emissions. As the water is volatilized it expands more than a thousand-fold. The force of the steam creates a complex and evocative crazing on the front of the pots facing the firebox. However, that amount of steam also carries the sawdust solubles throughout the kiln, creating a glossy vapour glazing on the 'backsides' of the work, a result less in accordance with our aesthetic desires.

Our current process is to use 'wet' wood, meaning both wood that is green and sappy as well as an uncovered wood stack that adds the surface moisture supplied by recent weather. Once we reach 980°C (1800°F) in the rear of the kiln the chimney smoke is totally clear, yet each stoke provides a normal, intense reduction cycle. The stoking rhythm must be accurate – not too soon and not too late – to manage the somewhat larger coal bed created by the greener wood, yet keep the temperature range of a stoking cycle moving higher. With wetter wood we also do more double stoking, meaning we cover the coal bed with a layer of wood followed by filling the one foot square door opening with stacked wood which is slowly pushed into the kiln as it burns during that stoke ('rifling').

With our very smooth, ball clay body this fresh wood approach creates rich, naturally ash-glazed surfaces. We are always in search of alternative ways of reaching our aesthetic goals. To create work with an austere, dark grey palette we have also dripped water onto the coal bed during cooling. This keeps the kiln in strong reduction during red heat, preventing black iron oxide from obtaining the oxygen that would otherwise enable conversion to red iron oxide. To reduce air infiltration during reduced-cooling firings we cover the chimney, seal the horizontal flue with sand between two dampers, and cover the door and side-stoke ports with slip-covered paper. Alternatively, to enhance the rich reds created during cooling we do none of this, letting our current level of air infiltration do its magic.

Catherine White and Warren Frederick live and work in Warrenton, Virginia, USA. Married, they artistically work independently, although not without influence, and share the myriad tasks of a ceramic studio.

www.catherinewhite.com

www.warrenfrederick.com



aartivir
woodfire wonderland

Having studied painting for four years at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University in Baroda, and for a further two years at the Hyderabad Central University, my path quite serendipitously led to the Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP) in Pondicherry, south east India.¹ Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith established GBP in the early 1970s, making wood-fired functional stoneware. In 1983 they began offering a course with the aim of teaching students everything they needed to know about clay, glazes, and firing in order to establish studios of their own. At GBP students benefit from abundant clay; several woodfire kilns; an appreciation of process and materials; teachers generous in their support, encouragement and honest critique, and an atmosphere imbued with a love of learning. These attributes contribute to making

Borders and Fences
by Aarti Vir, 37 cm in
width, 2010. Wood-fired
saltglaze.

GBP the foremost centre for ceramics education in the country.

The primal essence of the clay and the fire instantly resonated with me. The process, its gradual evolution, the alchemy, and the travails soon became a metaphor for my life. The clay has centred me. The fire has tested me. From the clay and the fire I've learnt that fundamental lesson of life – to move on it is imperative to let go!

My studio sits smack in the middle of a city that has in recent times earned the moniker 'Cyberabad'. In the gleaming chrome and glass edifices, visible from my doorstep, the rhythm of life follows a different piper. Leaving the frenzy of that archetypal urban India behind, I fall through the rabbit hole to my studio, where the rhythm still follows the seasons and the sun.

On returning to my hometown of Hyderabad early in 1999, after three years at GBP, I spent a year establishing my studio and finding reliable suppliers for all the materials I would need. I make my own clay, slips and glazes. As the work has evolved gradually, so has the clay body. It is now a handbuilding clay, as opposed to the throwing body that it was when I first began using it. Two significant changes in terms of surfaces and firing over the last five years are that I now bisque all my work, which gives me much more freedom to layer slips and glazes – I sometimes use as many as three or four slips, as well as a glaze on a single piece.

The other change is that I now woodfire. I fired with oil for almost



*Above and opposite
page (detail):
Threshold by Aarti Vir,
53.5 cm in width, 2014.
Wood-fired saltglaze.*

ten years. My reasons for building an oil kiln at the time were pragmatic. Wood was hard to find in the city. Oil was not that expensive back then. A local manufacturer of inexpensive forced air burners made it easy to just stop dithering and get that kiln built and firing. But firing with oil was noisy and smelly. It was a strange, unpredictable, fussy kiln, and sadly, I did not grow to love it in all the time that I used it.

I've always salt-glazed. I now have flyash to add to my palette and repertoire of surfaces. I think that having trained as a painter makes me highly susceptible to the seduction of surface. Early in 2010 I finally built a slightly modified version of the 0.6m³ (20 cu.ft) 'student kiln' that Ray Meeker designed, and which I had helped to fire at GBP.

There's something about the way in which a woodfiring engages the body and the senses that makes it magical. In much the same way that I enjoy using a kick wheel more than an electric wheel, or making and stretching slabs by hand rather than with a slab roller, I enjoy woodfiring. It engages me on every level. A little bit like yoga! Breath, body and mind in sync.

Wood is not easy to obtain and is more expensive every time I order a load. Hyderabad is a landlocked arid city on the Deccan Plateau. The Casuarina wood I use is cultivated along the coast, some 500km away. In June last year the state of Andhra Pradesh, of which Hyderabad has been a capital since Indian independence, was divided into two states – Telangana and Andhra. Hyderabad now belongs to Telangana, and



Aarti Vir's 0.6 m³ down-draught woodfire saltglaze kiln packed and ready for firing at her studio in Hyderabad, India. It has a single firebox beneath the chamber and firings to 1300°C take 24 hours.

the coast to Andhra. Consequently Casuarina is currently worth its weight in gold.

Over the years, as I've resolved some of my own compelling existential dilemmas and made my peace with the fact that I'm engaged in an activity that benefits no one, that my privileges abound in a country where inequality and inequity are always conspicuously present, I find myself increasingly turning to an interior world. Complicated as an interior life can be, creating simple strong forms to express it appeals to me. Once a concept, a thought, a conversation, an image, an emotion works its way into my consciousness and so into the work, I'm like a dog with a bone. The work evolves, changes form, accumulates more meaning or sheds some weight, but it doesn't go away until I've well and truly worked it out of my system. Sometimes, like that precious bone, I'll bury it some place safe, if I know I will not be able to work on it for sometime – to be retrieved later, and to slowly savour it again,

rework it, distil the essence until I feel ready to let it go.

'Borders and Fences' has been one such series that has engaged me for several years. I am intrigued by the concept of borders and fences, meant to keep people in or out, boundaries that can be tangible or imagined, physical or psychological. And almost always with the boundaries one apprehends the fascinating spaces in between; the minuscule passageways that allow a subversion of the boundaries; the 'crack that lets the light in' that keeps the darkness from engulfing us, is far more compelling than the walls that will sooner or later crumble and fall.

Another concept that has held my attention has been that of the 'Threshold'. An idea ripe with the connotations of beginnings, endings, journeys, of being on the cusp of change. Neither inside nor out, neither yesterday nor tomorrow, here nor there. I've been working on it for over three years now and it has been through several avatars. Soon after I began working on it, I travelled to Bali to work as an Artist in Residence



Kalachakra by Aarti Vir, 29 cm in height, 2014. Wood-fired saltglaze.

at the Gaya Ceramics Art Centre. The timeworn steps of the ancient temples I saw in Bali infused another interpretation of the idea into my consciousness. A threshold implies a journey. One that came before one reached the threshold. Another that will follow. And every step in the journey will leave its mark. I continued working on the idea after I returned to my own studio, and also later in Fuping, China – where I worked for six weeks as part of a group of 18 Indian artists in residence. China gave the work another dimension. The journey isn't necessarily linear; not just going forwards or backwards; sideways perhaps; or into the clouds and out of them again... the idea remains potent, the form not resolved to my satisfaction yet, and awaiting more layers, more dimensions.

In February this year, I was part of a group show, titled *digging TIME*, curated by Vineet Kacker, himself an established ceramic artist, based in Delhi. The show was an exploration of the idea of *Time* and the strange and subtle ways in which the mind perceives, distorts, and experiences *Time*. To me, the curatorial note suggested an elegant synchronicity with where I was at in my series on the idea of the threshold. And although that show has ended, my work on the subject has only just begun.

'No man steps in the same river twice' said Heraclitus. The river, constantly flowing, is never the same from one moment to the next. It is impossible to remain on the threshold forever, the journey never ends.

The Kalachakra – the wheel of time, relentlessly moves on. Today



The kiln yard at
Aarti Vir's studio in
Hyderabad, India.
All photographs Aarti Vir.

might be similar to yesterday, but never the same. And although this moment – now – might leave an indelible, eternal imprint, it remains ephemeral.

Our minds on the other hand are a maze. In this maze time takes on enigmatic attributes. A single moment stands still, stretches on forever. An immensity flies by in the blink of an eye. And the beauty of that ephemeral moment can live on forever in this maze.

Falling through that rabbit hole to my studio, I enter a space that can only be called uplifting. It's the time I spend with the clay and the fire, exploring the concept as much as the material that invigorates and sustains me.

Aarti Vir studied painting before training as a potter, and establishing her studio in Hyderabad, India in 1999. She has participated in residencies in Bali and China and her work has been widely exhibited internationally.

www.aartivirceramics.com

1. 'Bird Song – Woodfiring at the Golden Bridge Pottery', by Aarti Vir, *The Log Book*, issue 40, 2009.

adelsouki

an anagama in the brazilian countryside

The decision to build an anagama (in 1997) wasn't made overnight, but rather as the culmination of a journey of over 20 years involvement with ceramics, which gained strength in 1982, the year that I met the Japanese potter Toshiko Ishii. I had my first contact with high temperature woodfiring with Toshiko, using a Bizen type kiln built on the farm where she lived, approximately 40km from Belo Horizonte, capital of the State of Minas Gerais. I was very impressed by Toshiko's work and the woodfire process. Toshiko had lived on this farm with her husband Nobukane Ishii since the 1970s, when they left São Paulo, where they had first arrived as immigrants from Kyoto in the 1930s. I began to follow the progress of Toshiko's work, together with that of other potters I got to know at this time.

*Adel Souki's anagama,
in Brumadinho, Minas
Gerais, Brazil.*

Photograph: Adel Souki.

