

Message in a Bottle: The Unique works of JAMES CHANEY

Jimmy Clark



When one thinks of slip-cast ceramics, you might expect precise, perhaps intricate pieces, exhibiting a certain air of perfection. Furthermore you would probably expect them to be either monotone, showing exclusively the colour of the clay body or glazed with solid bright colours, fastidiously applied in a very exacting manner.

I assume if you share these preconceptions of slip-cast works, you would be as surprised as I was that the wood-fired, seemingly free formed sake bottles created by James Chaney are created in plaster moulds but this is indeed the case.

This is primarily due to Chaney's preferred firing method, which is wood-firing in the anagama kiln. This Japanese-inspired kiln consists of a single long chamber, which induces considerable ash flow over several days that bonds with the surface of the pieces to create random glazing and flashing effects.

Push Pull, 15 x 10 x 9 cm

Within the broad spectrum of the now ubiquitous field of atmospheric firing, Chaney's are the first slip-cast works I have encountered. He terms this unusual combination, "a synthesis of opposites".

Chaney first experienced wood firing in 1995 when he was invited to include a few pieces in an anagama firing by Pennsylvania ceramic artist, Gary Greenburg. Subsequently he was invited to place works in the Kanzaki Shiho/Karl Beamer anagama kiln, also in Pennsylvania.

These encounters were soon fortified through a seminal visit in 1997 to Tokoname Japan, a major ceramic manufacturing

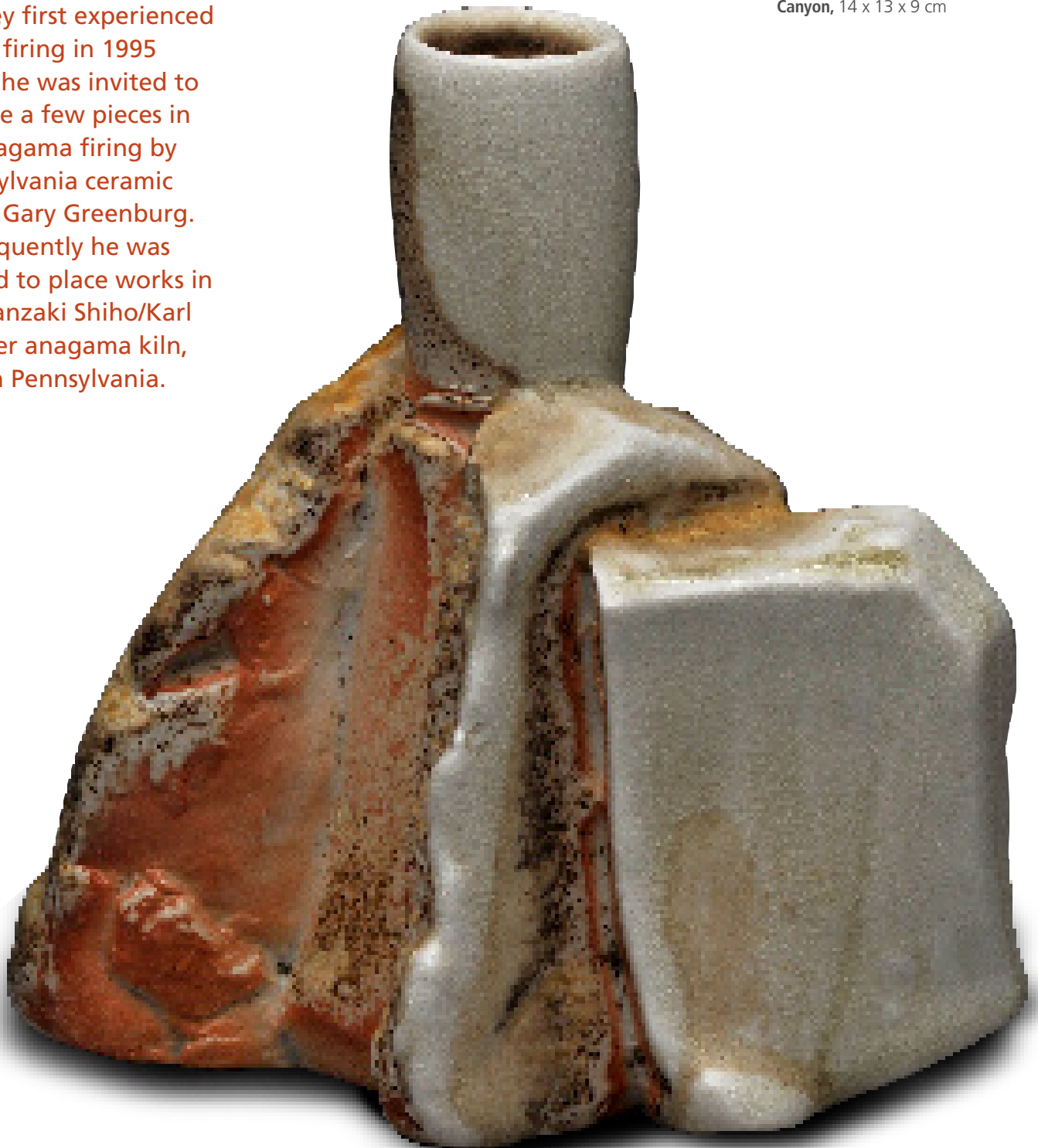
centre. There he participated in IWCAT a five week international symposium/workshop/homestay. This experience immersed him in a ceramic culture, which reveres the varied and unpredictable results of wood-firing.

There he also first encountered the "wabi sabi" aesthetic, which embraces the beauty of imperfection or accidental occurrence. According to this philosophy, the knot becomes the most interesting part of the wood. The variable yet appealing results of the anagama firing proved particularly alluring to Chaney and he built his own kiln in 1997, firing it for the first time in 1998.

During his subsequent explorations Chaney began to focus

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Canyon, 14 x 13 x 9 cm





on the sake bottle as his iconic form. Partially inspired by his acknowledged influences: Ron Nagle and Ken Price, both of whom discovered infinite variations derived from the cup form, Chaney has undertaken producing myriad varieties of the sake pouring vessel.

While the results of an anagama firing remain unpredictable, there remains a considerable range of options that Chaney can use to influence results. Placement in the kiln is paramount, front, middle or rear can greatly influence the effects of wood ash, as can temperature and atmosphere. Pieces can be placed upright, on their sides, or even upside down to alter the direction of glaze drips produced by the firing. Several have been fired multiple times until the desired naturally occurring patina is achieved.

Chaney describes this dance with wood-firing as “conditioning chance”, a concept he borrows from the artist/composer, John Cage. By this, he means creating a parameter in which things are allowed to occur. One can influence but not control the outcome.

Chaney was drawn to slip-casting early in his career through a workshop he attended at the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan Wisconsin

Chaney began forming unconventional solid clay prototypes, using plaster mould technology to render these solid three-dimensional expressions hollow. Slip-casting provides Chaney with a ready supply of blank canvases to display the multiple effects of the anagama fire. His approach to casting further affirms his play with serendipity.



top **Gourd Form**, 14 x 10 x 10 cm

right **Ab-Ex**, 15 x 10 x 8 cm

opposite page **Little Big Pot**, 18 x 10 x 10 cm

affiliated with the manufacturer of high end bathroom fixtures. The workshop, led by Jack Earl and Richard Notkin, two contemporary masters of the technique, opened his eyes to the sculptural applications of slip casting. Successive workshops at the University of Hartford, led by Richard Shaw and Ron Nagle, both legendary slip casters, further expanded his conceptual horizons. Chaney began forming unconventional solid clay prototypes, using plaster mould technology to render these solid three-dimensional expressions hollow.

Slip-casting provides Chaney with a ready supply of blank canvases to display the multiple effects of the anagama fire. His approach to casting further affirms his play with serendipity. Forms sometimes are found in lumps of clay rescued from the recycled clay pile, other times in gourds, masks or other found objects. His eye is attuned to find beauty in unexpected places. He likes to refer to a sign he saw at a junkyard in Arkansas: "It's here if you can find it".

Chaney combines these found forms with thrown necks to create his pouring vessels. As with his previously mentioned influences, Price and Nagle, his primary concern is form rather than function but one could easily envision his pieces enhancing a meticulously prepared serving of sushi. He is a ceramic artist who has combined seemingly disparate elements of both technique and aesthetics to create a singular vision.

Jimmy Clark is adjunct instructor of ceramics at Rowan University in Glassboro New Jersey. He is Director Emeritus of The Clay Studio and is represented by the Rosenfeld Gallery in Philadelphia.

Photo credit - Hub Willson



James Chaney was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1949. He earned his MFA degree at Kent State University in Ohio in 1975 and began his teaching career at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa. In 1976 he taught at Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, Arkansas. In 1977 he joined the art faculty at Kutztown University, Kutztown, Pennsylvania, where he continues to teach ceramics and coordinate the BFA Crafts Degree curriculum. He participated in the first plaster/clay workshop sponsored by the Kohler Corporation, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and subsequently was invited to participate in the international residency IWCAT, Tokoname, Japan. His sake forms are exhibited regionally and nationally.

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