

Gareth Mason

Bushcraft

The idea that art emanates from a place where there are no roads is a bit of a cliché but I confess a weakness for it. Off the beaten track, different skills are required and jeopardy is ever present. The net result is enhanced experience. Ask any mountaineer. It is alluring, but the wilderness is not for everyone.

Fiery metamorphosis is the dazzling, visionary aspect of ceramic experience. It speaks to the 'old brain'. This is no surprise considering transubstantiation has enraptured human imagination since the dawn of our race, underpinning rituals, superstitions—and our progress—across cultures and millennia. We love glittering things brought into being by forces beyond our ken. We want to bear witness and to know awe. Clay has this potential in spades.

How does work satisfy the complete person? How does any relationship function healthily? It takes commitment to accommodate the whole being. My life-long, love-hate tussle with clay gives full reign to my quirks and foibles so is it any wonder that received precepts of skill and design make me twitchy? It is not that I separate skill from the creative act in any way: in my world, creativity and skill are atomically bound. However, I treat skill like clay, as a malleable entity, in pursuit of that spark of wide eyed wonder.

Whatever pains I take, my efforts to dictate outcomes are frequently foiled by events in the kiln. Fire's destructive bent is a brutal check-and-balance to complacency. I take its tough love personally, carefully rigging my kiln packs, setting myself up for 'creative failure'. Failure is a pillar of my practice: I value it to the point of morbidity. Consequently, my skills are crash-tested in pretty inhospitable terrain. I have habituated myself to the insecurity of the badlands; treacherous, searing, fiercely beautiful places ostensibly abandoned by skill. Cunning bushcraft, however, offers the chance of repose in pristine oases. This is ceramic territory at its most vivid: all clay people know it. Most (understandably) seek more pastoral climes but the wilderness transfixes me. My objects bespeak it: their physical travails can be seen as analogues of defiant, resurgent human instinct and tenacity. And they are still pots.

Wild implies untamed. Need the hand be always controlling? Some of my materials are indeed "raw"—as-dug, unprocessed or found—but the bulk are standardized, processed, homogenized: they arrive in plastic packs and bags, remote from their more-than-human origins. So for me the hand is an agent of re-wilding as well as husbandry.

The Wilds are both palpable and ethereal. Such are our powers of projection, a blister, a crack, a luscious drip, each affects us viscerally. This is embodied intelligence in action. Thence the imagination: my paltry dalliance in 'the wilds' pales before its untrammelled potency. I credit everyone with this power. Emotion and reason are indivisible and each of my objects proffers its own testimony to this. The wilds of clay call to our sensitized emergent curiosity, the very wilds of aesthetic arousal.