

WOODFIRE
TAS 2011

E-shouts - Owen Rye & Jack Troy



Owen Rye and Jack Troy review Woodfire Tasmania 2011 through the eyes of seasoned woodfirers

Part I – Owen Rye

Owen Rye and Jack Troy in conversation in E-Shouts.

The array of exhibitions was the best I have seen at any woodfire event, in both quality and range.

IMAGINE – IF YOU HAVE THAT CAPABILITY – A RIVER named Meander, doing just that in a small town named Deloraine with a main street that emulates the river; in Tasmania, Australia's island state on the edge of the Southern Ocean. Then place several hundred woodfire aficionados in town. You now have the makings of Woodfire Tasmania 2011 (WF11), the recent Australian woodfire conference, latest in a line going back every two or three years to 1986. A new organiser, each time a woodfirer, and a new location for each event has ensured a distinctive character and a new set of aims, keeping Australian woodfiring vital and progressive.

Early woodfire conferences, dating back to Gippsland 1986, focussed on the technical – kiln design, stacking and firing and suitable clay bodies. Later the focus became the aesthetics of woodfiring and, as confidence grew, individual attitudes and approaches to a personal style became more prominent issues, as did broader rationales for woodfiring. While the earlier conferences were exclusively attended by potters who woodfired their work, recent events have increasingly included outsiders such as gallery owners, collectors and commentators. This creates a fresh input of ideas. The wider significance of WF11 attracted participants from as far afield as the US, Netherlands, Norway, Estonia, India, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand and Bali.

For WF11 Neil Hoffmann and a team of hard working helpers put together a combination of workshops, exhibitions, panel discussions and entertainments that participants declared the best

woodfire conference ever. Deloraine, the town, helped this result considerably. The location of a large craft fair held annually, Deloraine is small enough to walk from one end to another, finding everyone you seek along the way.

A 'team' working together in time-extended woodfiring of necessity becomes cohesive in order to achieve a common goal. The resulting group bonding, carried over on a larger scale, allowed several hundred woodfirers to meet in a spirit of 'we are all in this together'. As Willi Singleton said in *Töpferblatt* 2/2010, about the European Woodfire Conference of 2010 in Germany: "I enjoyed the people that gathered there. There was a distinct lack of self-important egotistical swagger . . ." The same applied in Tasmania and I suspect that internationally the variable nature of the woodfiring process beats out the swagger as firings fail to meet expectations and disasters happen. Instead, firing as a team implants equality.

Pre-conference workshops, each filled to capacity were offered by Carol and Arthur Rosser, Ben Richardson with Donna Gillis, Ian Jones and Moraig McKenna and, at Neil Hoffmann's Reedy Marsh studios, with Malina Monks, Tara Wilson, Jack Troy and Owen Rye. The Reedy Marsh workshop involved two pairs of kilns (two Phoenix style and two train kilns), each fired differently to allow comparison of results between pairs as well as between kiln types. A wide range of clays and glazes going into the kilns allowed broad insight in to the potential of these kilns. A conflux of leeches at the site ensured much stomping and high stepping, ultimately leading to the Bernard Award, to the person attracting the most. Ashwini Bhat from India was the popular winner with four.

As for the serious business, the individual talks and panels, I particularly enjoyed presentations by Steve Williams, Malina Monks, Graeme Wilkie, Jack Troy and the "Meaning in Woodfire panel" (What, fundamentally, is significant about this genre of ceramic work in the contemporary context, if anything?) with Jacqui Clayton as moderator, Torbjorn Kvasbo, Josh Copus, John Freeland and Toni Warburton. The latter two

as commentators rather than woodfirers presented a different perspective. Some previously unseen talents for comedy emerged in the "Hot Dates and Melting Moments" panel: Ursula Burgoyne, Rowley Drysdale, Janet Mansfield and Chester Nealie. Over all of the presentations, Bernadette Mansfield was perfect in the role of emcee, ensuring a timely flow of panels and lively introductions. Smaller more intimate talks and panels on Sunday allowed participants to enter more easily into discussions with the presenters. This is a good format, worth repeating next time.

Other forums and panels included "Draft, Drag and Dribble" (Why do woodfirers have this inclination to share the production of their work with another force . . . the forces and influences of wood fuelled fire?); "E-Shouts: Jack Troy and Owen Rye in conversation" (Discussion stemming from email correspondence between two enthusiasts of the art of woodfire); "What If? Tales of the Unexpected: Invention and Discovery" (Those who work with woodfiring and other atmospheric processes are accustomed to dealing with uncertainty. Panellists compared their processes of discovery, revealing how unforeseen developments have given rise to new work, new clays and glazes, new firing processes); "Four Ways To Skin A Pot: Diversity in woodfire practice" (Focus on some of the many woodfiring methods used to develop unique surfaces on ceramic objects); Q&A: "Kilns: Getting started with woodfire" (Discussion about kiln design and firing methods); and "Tasmanian Materials" (Tasmanian raw materials suitable for ceramics production).

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Robert Sanderson from *The Log Book* presented the Log Book Award for an Emerging Woodfirer to the winner Michael Stephan from Tasmania. This award is now a feature in woodfire events internationally and I hope that someday funds might be found to bring previous winners together for a residency where they could work together, as an international event. Hoffmann presented awards for Woodfire Exposed, a photo competition for images on the theme of wood-firing. Entries were invited from anywhere in the world via email and Robert Sanderson selected finalists and judged the winning entries. Su Acheson was overall winner of the generous \$250 AUD Woodfire Tasmania award with Gyan Daniel Wall awarded second place. Geoff Thomas won the award for most tragic photograph with his image of a row of gaping sided vessels. I suggest that other conference organisers take note of this competition and run similar events and that the images could be made public on a suitable web site.

The Reedy Marsh Woodfire Challenge highlighted the final day and brought everyone at the conference together in spectacular fashion. This called for teams to dig and prepare clay, make pots suitable for serving food, fire them with wood in a kiln constructed on the day and prepare, cook and present food to the judges. A significant member of each team was the waitress assigned not just to present food but to win over the crowd and the judges with their attire and demeanour. If you were not there you can only imagine. Creative, informative and entertaining were key criteria. The all day event ended with many attempts at bribery, many awards and, perhaps, too many drinks for the judges.

The array of exhibitions was the best I have seen at any woodfire event, in both quality and range. The largest was *Inside Woodfire – Fifty Australian Stories*. Other group exhibitions included *Continental Drift*, *Anagama in South India*; *Top of the South*, *New Zealand Woodfired Ceramics*; *International Woodfired Tableware*; *They Stoked We're Stoked*, work of international presenters;

Atmos-fire which included non-woodfired ceramics where surfaces depended on other kiln 'weather' scenarios that also yield unpredictable results; *Early Career USA Woodfirers*; and *Vintage Tasmanian Woodfire*. Michael Stephan and Ian Jones / Moraig McKenna presented individual exhibitions.

For me, the Indian exhibition was the big surprise. (I was not aware before of anagama firing in India.) It was curated by Madhulika Ghosh and Ray Meeker. The large scale, stunningly impressive work being done in Pondicherry by the group working with Meeker was discussed in a talk by Baht and is well worth following up: <http://www.raymeeker.com>.

I was pleased to open the *Early Career USA Woodfirers* exhibition, curated by Tara Wilson and showing work by the latest generation involved in woodfire; strong

assured work that speaks well for the future of the genre. More broadly I was delighted that a feature of the entire event was the attendance and participation of a significant proportion of a younger generation of woodfirers from several countries, making enthusiastic contributions that suggest a healthy future for the genre. Getting to Australia, or travelling within due to the size of this country is expensive so just being there showed a significant commitment.

I would like to mention many more names and their contributions but this comment will then read much like a phone book and will generate the same level of interest.

Owen Rye's book *The Art of Woodfire* was launched at Woodfire 2011. Rye is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics. For more detail of exhibitions, panels and images from the event: <http://www.woodfiredtasmania.com.au/>. For further images: http://www.thekilnshed.net/Conrad_Calimpongs_Kiln_Shed/My_Albums/Pages/Woodfire_Tasmania_2011.html
A distressing postscript to the conference: soon after, Ian Jones and Moraig McKenna lost their studio and home at Gundaroo to fire.

Facing page clockwise from top left:
Reedy Marsh Firing Workshop. Photo by Barbara Rye.
Tara Wilson Kiln Opening at Reedy Marsh. Photo by Owen Rye.
Neil Hoffmann. Photo by Lucille Nobleza.
Panel of Presenters. Photo by Lucille Nobleza.
Art of Woodfire Book Launch. Photo by Barbara Rye.

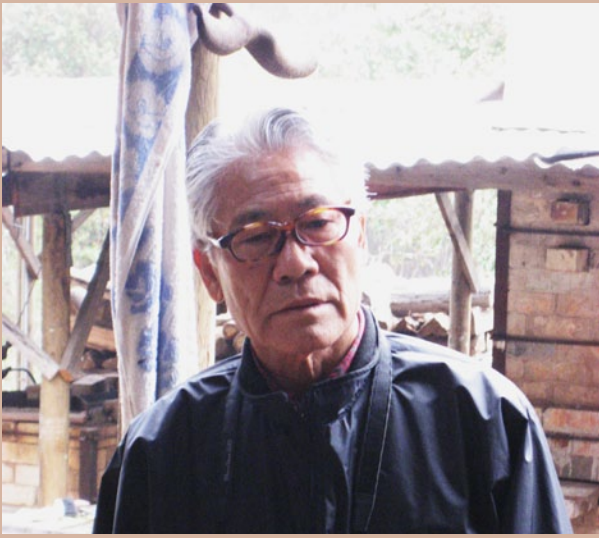
A new organiser, each time a woodfirer and a new location for each event has ensured a distinctive character and a new set of aims, keeping Australian woodfiring vital and progressive.



**The Ego, the Uncertainty Principle
and Firing in Good Faith:
Zen, Existentialism and the Allure of
Woodfiring**

John Freeland
Woodfire Tasmania
April 2011





*Clockwise from top left: Shiro Otani. Photo by Owen Rye.
 Mixing the clay. Photo by Grace Cochrane.
 Alex using logsplitter at Reedy Marsh Workshop.
 Photo by Barbara Rye.
 Otani preparing pots. Photo by Grace Cochrane.
 Lise Edwards with her work from the workshop.
 Photo by Owen Rye.
 Reedy Marsh Kiln Area. Photo by Grace Cochrane.*



Clockwise from top left: Steve Williams, Janet Mansfield and Penny Smith collaborating on making pots.

Photo by Grace Cochran.

The Daniel Laferty kiln team stacking the door.

Photo by Neil Hoffmann.

Team leader Gyan Daniel Wall putting on the finishing touches.

Photo by Neil Hoffmann.

The winning wood stack by the Copus team.

Photo by Grace Cochran.

Penny Smith, Zsolt Faludi, Paul Davis and Grace Cochran offering support.

Photo by Lucille Nobleza.

High five between Josh Copus and Ashwini Bhat in front of their kiln.

Photo by Grace Cochran.

Judges reviewing the Yuri Wiedenoffer team kiln.

Photo by Grace Cochran.



Part II - Jack Troy

The Kiln Area at Reedy Marsh.

THIS WAS THE 7TH AUSTRALIAN WOODFIRING conference, with a few more than 200 participants (approximately 130 females and 70 males). About 30 were under age 30, with roughly 130 between the ages of 30-60 and, as co-organiser Neil Hoffman put it, “Around 40 were over 60; some quite round.” Fifty were Tasmanians, 122 were from Australia’s eastern states, four from western states and 24 were international delegates. Clicking on the Woodfire Tasmania 2011 web site provides a look at the extensive program, from four preconference workshops, three full days of forums, demonstrations, individual presentations and exhibitions, together with the culminating event: an extravaganza of clay, kiln building, woodfiring and kiln-centric food preparation extensively documented by photographers.

Brett Martin, a photographer, observes, “It seems to me that woodfirers epitomise the interior dialogue of the craftsperson. They are concerned with self-transformation through knowledge, yet fascinated by the unknowable element of fire.”

On the last day of the conference, at Hoffman and Anne Blanch’s 160 acre redoubt in the bush, several kilometres outside Deloraine, I set my axe aside and indulged in a modest epiphany: “I can think of a dozen people who would rather watch a DVD entitled *Tasmanian Deviltry: The Reedy Marsh Woodfire Challenge*, than experience it in real time.”

I had been splitting blackwood on a rainy, muddy Sunday morning. More than 100 of us were sorted into groups of 10 to 20 and charged with locating ‘wild’ clay on the property, digging and processing it to make pots we had fire in kilns of our own devising, while more or less simultaneously preparing and cooking a meal to be served with improvised panache to a panel of judges on our barely-cooled pieces later that day.

A young accountant in our group had located and dug several buckets of clay and a dozen

hands squeezed it free of stones and twigs over a wheelbarrow. Josh Copus and several enterprising folks arranged a few dozen bricks into Tasmania's smallest fast-fire kiln; Ashwini Bhat (part of an Indian contingent) was preparing *papadams* with roast eggplant dip and yogurt; *uppma*, roast tomatoes with sweet and spicy chutney, a roast sweet potato/dry mango powder side-dish and vermicelli pudding for dessert. My sub-group administered CPR to a sputtering campfire under a sheet of old metal roofing on which to dry our handbuilt serving vessels that we shielded from the rain by more roofing, held up by bricks, bat-spit and sealing wax. Overall, our cooperative urgency suggested that a vessel had foundered on a nearby shoal; that we had all been washed ashore and someone with a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* was scheming our way out of the dilemma. Resplendent in plastic bags, Gore-Tex, Drizabones and at least one black, street-length Burberry, we personified 'Making Do' with gusto.

This culminating hands-on event helped to balance the many presentations and exhibitions of the previous days, which began with exhibition openings (one of which featured pancakes at 8:30 a.m.) and lasted, far into the night. The pervasive communal atmosphere resulted in a gallimaufry of participants, somehow brought together by having helped tend a first firing somewhere, years or decades before, and catching a happy contagion leading to airline tickets and here we were. Early on, I was introduced to a potter from Iowa (US) who had moved to Tasmania with her husband to farm saffron (a spice that wholesales in Australia for \$31.60 AUD a gram and is, by weight, worth more than gold). The same day, I shared lunch with an immunologist/epidemiologist and woodfiring enthusiast who is working on yet another degree, this one in ceramics.

Other highlights included:

- Witnessing Hoffman and Blanch's home temporarily skyrocket in value with the extensive exhibition of early Gwyn Hanssen Piggott pots on a table with those of Peter Rushforth and other progenitors of the Australian woodfiring movement.

- Shiro Otani, like a smiling honorary saint, ageless, wordless and unchallenged, cheerily throwing bowls in a tent during a steady rain, at some remove from the purposeful chaos of the Reedy Marsh Challenge.

- Realising from gruesome evidence that everyone who disembarked at Reedy Marsh relinquished their usual blood group classification, temporarily becoming Type O (universal donors) for innumerable ground leeches, insatiably lusting for ankles. (Who would have guessed a love for pottery might include the need for leech-proof socks?)

The conference proved that woodfiring often brings with it an endemic thoughtfulness born of reflection – perhaps the consequence of divining inexplicable results of firings. This was born out in talks such as Graeme Wilke's, "Being in the Void". Wilkie stated, "For me, beauty is somehow connected with awe. When a work can evoke a sense of mystery that leads to an attitude of experiential inquiry into the paradoxes it contains with the possibility that it may extend the viewer's understanding of the world, it has achieved its purpose."

To pick through the rich stew of individual presentations: Malina Monks' "Pattern: Steeped in Memory" – a poignant, evocative account relating her Scottish upbringing to her signature,

The patina of memory is another reference, made by several artists who refer to the links of memory in terms of making traditions, of being linked to the past by knowledge and practice and previous makers. This would suggest authenticity, a sense of belonging to a distinguished lineage, a sense of special membership.

grid-like sculptural forms; Hilary Kane's adventuresome sorties of kiln-building and firing in Indonesia, "Painting with Fire; Painting with Clay;" Antra Sinha, representing a contingent of potters and sculptors from Ray Meeker's Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, India, documenting making and installing a massive anagama-fired multi-piece sculpture; and Torbjorn Kvasbo's "Between Clay and Mind" – a summary of his evolution from woodfiring potter to non-firing conceptual artist. In addition, Donna Gillis (a US-raised potter who has worked in Japan for 40-plus years) and Shiro Otani, both self-effacing contributors, described their work in historical context; careful not to use their work to draw undo attention to themselves. (Otani-san built one of the first anagamas in the US, at Arrowmont School of Crafts in 1977, where it continues to function as an incubator for dozens of workshops involving many hundreds of participants.)

The book launch of *The Art of Woodfire* by Owen Rye was fortuitous, though its title lacks a critical adjective: Australian. Images and statements by more than 30 current practitioners complement Rye's exposition of the people and aesthetic values shaping the genre's development in his country. These observations move beyond the 'home repair manual' aspects of woodfiring emphasised in the first conferences in the 1980s and show that many Australian ceramists are accomplished, well read and express themselves thoughtfully in words blessedly free from viral 'artspeak' and jargon:

While good art is not necessarily proportionate to depth of feeling on behalf of either the maker or audience, the humbling fact about woodfiring is how seldom one succeeds in creating work that is redolent of the powerful elemental processes embedded in the practice. ~ Rowley Drysdale.

[Regarding woodfiring] *The synergy of unknown and unknowable factors is enticing. ~ Sandy Lockwood.*

My approach was linear; I thought I could understand the art by knowing the technology. ~ Bill Samuels.

To fire with wood is to consummate an intuitive approach to material and energy. It is to organize oneself. ~ Yuri Wiedenhofer

The objects I realize through making become touchstones for places unspoiled – wild places where elemental friction and edgy encounters prevail.

~ Neil Hoffman.

I sing to my sailing kiln and it brings good promise. ~ Kirk Winter.

Pot gazing is the most important part of the equation; it can take a while for a vessel to reveal itself, to

tell the story of its journey with fire and for me to understand this tale. ~ Su Hanna.

[Of his work] *There are cultural references, but I do not dwell on them. The shapes chosen from the repertoire are limited to those that I judge to be receptive arenas for woodfire effects. I prefer them to perform some useful function in the home of the eventual owner, so their subtleties can infiltrate the consciousness of the user. ~ Arthur Rosser*

My intention is to allow the firing process to create distinctive surfaces and individuality in my work, while the experience of landscape provides

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inspiration for the concept. ~ Barbara Campbell-Allen

I try to live and fire as gently as possible. ~ Steve Harrison.

In the same vein, a pair of excellent critical essays was printed in a large foldout poster accompanying the exhibition, *Inside Woodfire. Fifty Australian Stories*. (One longed for a beautiful, expensive book to capture this magnificent show.) In "The Importance of Not Being Earnest", Brett Martin, a photographer, observes, "It seems to me that woodfirers epitomise the interior dialogue of the craftsperson. They are concerned with self-transformation through knowledge, yet fascinated by the unknowable element of fire. There is a paradox, a dialectic, at the heart of this which is beautiful: attempting to control a process that can never be completely controlled. This is a calling [that] requires an unusual combination of personal attributes: stamina and lightness. And an appreciation that there are no ends, only means." Penny Smith's essay, "Friendly

Fire” draws parallels between the evocative aspects of woodfired work and the rise of *locovore* (place-based) cooking and eating, or *gout du terroir* (taste of the soil).

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For me, the most politicising aspect of the conference had nothing to do with woodfiring per se. The films of Torbjorn Kvasbo (*Marl Hole*) and Alexandra Englefriet (*Tracks in the Flats*), both of which are accessible online, might be subtitled, *Privilege*. Their work harkens back to the 1960s and 1970s, with artists such as George Geyer, who documented unfired clay work photographically and then abandoned it to the elements. Geyer has said of his work: “Empirical method, process, entropy, emotion, physical risk, permanence versus impermanence, geology, research; these are the tools of my trade. If it is successful, it is because of these tools. If the work fails it is because of my improper use of these tools.”

The week before coming to Tasmania I had been a visiting artist in a local Pennsylvania high school (where the total budget allocation to fund a clay project for 35 students allowed for buying 100 pounds of clay [45.5 kilograms]) and here was Englefriet, in another film, earnestly treading up to her knees in an entire roomful of clay simply to make marks in it. The *Marl Hole* artists, of whom she was one, used massive machinery to basically duplicate what children do in sandboxes with Tonka toys. (Children, however, work without hired professional help and leave no carbon footprint, unlike this project’s consumption of diesel fuel). I realised how privileged artists are in other, more progressive countries, in receiving funding for experimental projects, while in the US, subsidy for the arts and public broadcasting is at an all-time low and sinking further while dodging conservative bullets. I thought to myself how gleeful right-wing American politicians would be to get their hands on these films and show their constituents the folly of funding the arts.

On the flight home (speaking of carbon footprints), I recalled an exchange I had many years ago with a painter friend: “These conferences you go to,” he inquired, “What do you do there?”

“We share meals and information, learn about how we do the same things differently, discuss material and intangible challenges of our genre, experience new work while having a chance to meet the people who make it and discover what we have in common with others equally interested in feeding their curiosity. Inevitably, conferences generate unquantifiable *bonhomie*.”

“Painters don’t have conferences,” he replied. “There wouldn’t be enough corners for us to sit in and look at each other.”

His rejoinder reminded me of something Wilkie said in his talk: “Art today for me has become small, superficial and self-indulgent in its emotional range, narcissistic rather than truly scholarly or progressive.” Let’s hope the 8th Australian woodfiring conference, wherever and whenever it is, will successfully resist such a fate.



Jack Troy.

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