



Reedy Marsh Pottery, venue for the workshop

Getting to Know Woodfire

Ashley McHutchison and Joey Burns share their recent encounter with wood-fire

Immersed in bushland and dwarfed by tree canopies, driving down to Reedy Marsh Pottery stirred feelings of anticipation and excitement as we embarked on a journey that was worlds apart from the fast-paced rat race of the city. These two novice wood-firers were more than willing for the adventure to unfold!

As a pre-conference event to Woodfire TAS 2011, Neil Hoffman organised the 'Getting to Know Woodfire' workshop at Reedy Marsh Pottery. Aimed at people who had little or no experience firing with wood, it was an opportunity to get hands-on experience under the guidance of four highly regarded members of the international wood-fire community – Jack Troy (USA), Owen Rye (AUS), Malina Monks (AUS), and Tara Wilson (USA). The goal was to glaze our pots and pack and fire four kilns over four days. With this line up, it's no wonder that come the first evening, Neil had eighteen fired-up students from all over the world sprawled out in tents around his Reedy Marsh property. With special thanks to the local leeches, our wood-firing quest was off to a good start. Being 'leeches' was a right of passage; if we left unscathed we hadn't had the true Reedy Marsh experience.

After an early morning walk down the bush track to the self-stoked warm bush shower and a throne-like drop toilet, the day was off to a great start. Getting back to nature had its perks – no mobile coverage, no interruptions ... complete immersion in the wood-firing experience.

Participants had been told to bring up to thirty bisqued pots around the size of a mug or bowl. Day



Left: Malina explaining glaze surface to Anthra
Above: Joey Burns choosing glazes
Photos: Alana Blanch

one started with a quick introduction to some suitable glazes and glazing techniques. By late morning our pots were glazed and by late afternoon they were packed into four different kilns – two phoenix fast-fire and two bourry box train kilns. With teams assigned, the hows and whys of packing a wood-burning kiln were discussed. Mentors explained how to pack a kiln to ‘persuade’ the flame path and transfer heat, the pros and cons of loose and tight packing, and, possibly the most important process of all, wadding! We had to ensure that every pot was standing on little balls of a fireclay and sand mix to keep it up off the shelf and avoid potential sticking with melted fly ash ... while, of course, also adding aesthetic value. Lead by mentors Jack and Tara, participants ignited the first two long-throat bourry box kilns. Having two pairs of almost identical kilns allowed the teams to try out different firing techniques, which couldn’t have been more perfect for the bunch of eager stokers. As sunlight faded, dusk fell with a brisk autumn chill. It was hard to move away from the warmth of the campfire and the heat beginning to radiate from the kilns.



Left: Luke packing
Below: Marco, Cila, Lise, Jack, Maddy and Ashwini
Photos: Ashley McHutchison





Left: Unpacking along the human chain - Julie, Arti, Lise, Merrillyn and Jack; photo: Ashley McHutchison

Below: Ash, Lisa, Tara, Ashwini and Anthra are all smiles with their results; photo: Alana Blanch



On the second day, lead by mentors Malina Monks and Owen Rye, the two phoenix fast-fire kilns were lit and all four firings were underway. Malina's kiln was fired in a light reduction atmosphere while Owen's kiln was fired with slightly heavier reduction (that quickly became known as Rye's reduction), producing enough smoke to make you think the kiln shed had caught fire... surely not! Had it not been for Julie's alerting shouts, one of the kiln sheds would have burnt to ashes after a timber beam caught alight via the chimney, not once but several times. These two kilns were fired for around fifteen hours and, as with the other two kilns, a firing roster was made and teams of stokers changed every few hours.

As the firing progressed, the crackling flames on the newly stoked wood were sounds we became attuned to as the kiln became notably hungrier. Listening to, and learning to read, the fires behaviour were deeply engaging experiences. With all going to plan, the firings finished after dinner on day two. It was a rare opportunity to wood-fire four kilns in one location at one time.

The two bourry box kilns were fired for 30-35 hours, one with an extended reduced cooling period over a number of hours, while the other was simply closed up. They were also fired for a longer time period than the other two due to their ability to build up fly ash on the surface of the pots and create natural ash glaze.

On the third day, while the kilns cooled, we engaged in artist talks with Jack Troy, Owen Rye, Ashwini Bhat and Tara Wilson. But there's nothing like a bit of crash cooling to get everyone excited. Late on day



Owen Rye's phoenix fast-fire kiln after the firing

three, as the two phoenix fast-fire kilns were opened, the pinging of pots was music to our ears. Glove-clad helpers unloaded the kilns and the pots were put out on display. A brief discussion as the sun was setting helped relieve some excitement and anxiety about the unpacking of the final two kilns first thing the next morning.

Day four was like Christmas morning. The build up of excitement as we cracked open the final two kilns was almost unbearable. There were many gasps of joy and smiling faces as the pots were passed along a human chain and displayed in the order they came from the kiln – and, considering the relatively short firings, lots of great results were achieved. Post-fire discussion at each of the four kilns involved comparing the two different kiln styles and four different firing methods.

Food was central to the wood firing adventure. We were fed like royalty, all-you-could-eat nourishing food. Thank you Anne, Alana, Adam and co!!! Eating around the campfire was a notable part of the communion, akin to firing the kilns, as participants, mentors and various visitors swapped stories, tips and techniques.

Immense thanks to Neil Hoffman and family, Michael Stephan, Steve Williams and everyone who made the pre-conference workshop and Woodfire TAS 2011 come alive. It was everything we anticipated and so much more! People, pots, bush, wood, food, flame and even the leeches, all made for a memorable adventure.

A word from Neil:

I was keen for several small kilns [to be fired] rather than one big firing ... [offering a] greater opportunity for participants to be involved with each stage, and I wanted people to see that wood-firing doesn't always mean very long firings in very big kilns made of many thousands of bricks ... [to experience] the possibility of solo practice, not always needing a big team or a big kiln to make good work. The different kilns made for valuable comparisons between works being fired in differing 'kiln weather'. I was also keen to have more than one mentor so participants could appreciate a number of approaches to firing and hear a whole range of stories from those who've been wood-firers for some time.

Importantly, others helped greatly to bring this vision to fruition, in particular Michael Stephan who came up from Hobart on a regular basis to help build and rebuild kilns. His youthful energy (compared to that of my aging body) was a godsend. Others who gave their time to help in the lead up to the workshop were Luke, Cilla, and Jilly. I had a great team!

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Reedy Marsh Pottery, Tasmania

Ashley McHutchison is a ceramic artist who lives in Sydney.

Joey Burns is currently enrolled in the Diploma of Ceramics at Brookvale TAFE, Sydney, with his main focus being wood-fired functional pots.



Adam 'leeched'
Photo: Alana Blanch