



Lugged Vessel. 2005. Thrown and altered stoneware with Titanium ash and natural fly ash glazes. Anagama woodfired. 26 cm/h.



Dancing Vessel 4. 2005. Thrown and altered porcelain. Natural fly ash glaze. Anagama woodfired. 15 cm/h.

Liquid Animation

Paul McAllister finds energy in the woodfiring techniques of Ben Brierley

WOODFIRING, IN THE UK AT LEAST, and particularly anagama firing is often cast as anachronism (in fact, at times it seems that the terms woodfire and anagama have become pejorative). Economic and political life in the UK is dominated by London and the South East of England. Arguably metropolitan tastes and choices (driven by these influences) have dominated the narrative of the UK ceramics scene, with Edmund De Waal's Oriental inflected minimalism at the conservative end of the spectrum and perhaps Grayson Perry's post-modern eclecticism at the vanguard. Woodfired work would rarely be included in this spectrum even though there is evidence of a persistent group of practitioners and an increasingly aware and enthusiastic audience for the work they produce.

Established practitioners such as Svend Bayer and Nic Collins have developed robust reputations. One emerging and developing UK talent is that of Ben Brierley. Ben is a product of the University of Wolverhampton and University of Wales Institute-Cardiff ceramics courses, graduating with his MA in

1996. He is steadily developing a reputation for his quirky anagama fired ceramics.

Brierley's work, while respectful of the historic traditions of woodfired ceramics, does not rely on what other commentators might see as clichéd anachronism. To many woodfire potters, the approaches and techniques Brierley adopts are familiar, and these esoteric concerns are possibly easily overlooked or misinterpreted by the uninitiated. Like many potters working in a similar way he is engaged with the whole process. Clay body development, slips and glazes, the making of work, firing and kiln building are all integral components to his engagement with the process and to an understanding of its gestation. There is an integration emerging in Brierley's practice as a woodfire potter that has evolved through a long hard process of trial and error and ultimately necessity.

The work is thrown, altered, distorted, both as a result of the making process and the firing process. There are both instinctive and informed sensibilities at play here. Choices are made that encourage particular qualities. Brierley has worked hard at developing clay-bodies responsive to the possibilities of extended woodfirings. Most are porcelain or porcelaineous stoneware, sometimes fluxed with nepheline syenite and enlivened by alluvial Cornish mud. Gabbroic estuary clay is a favourite, adding small quantities of iron and other impurities to encourage colour in the body. Larger pieces utilise additions of molochite in the clay.

Although Brierley uses applied glazes at times, they are economically applied, mainly on interiors. He has experimented with and often uses carbon trap shino's, saggars and ash glazes high in titania depending on the form and finish required. Ultimately what he achieves is an amalgam of all the aspects of the materials, the process and his expressive intentions.

Brierley's current forms range from small whiskey/shot cups, tea bowls, jugs and vases to large platters and bottles. They often possess a distorted torque as if ready to dash off in a whirl of energy. This is a play between the makers' deliberate distortion on and sometimes off the wheel and the pyroplasticity encouraged through claybody and arrangement in the kiln, through sideways or angular placement on shells or wadding.

The animation and sprung dynamic of the freshly thrown clay, rendered sterile in the bisque firing, is brought back to life, the clay softening through prolonged pyroplastic blasts of heat, a storm of ash and



Dancing Vessel 7. 2005. Thrown and hand built porcelain. Natural ash glaze, carbon trapped by fire box coals. Anagama woodfired. 48 cm/h.



Dancing Vessel 6. 2006.
 Thrown and altered porcelain.
 Flame flashed. Anagama
 woodfired. 16 cm/h.



extensive exploration of kilns. He has built and redesigned a number of kilns over the years, tinkering with different configurations to enhance the extended firings and increase those volatile ash-laden qualities that he is passionate about. He currently uses a kiln that he has designed combining what he sees as the best qualities available from other kilns he has used; a large sunken fire box with a grate for control of secondary air, accompanied by an organic upside down boat-shaped chamber. His wood source utilises pine and walnut and he reaches cone 13 and 12, front and back respectively.

The work invites the kinesthetic experience, a message relayed through the medium of clay from maker to user. Sensual and tactile, using a cup with a gently paddled, squeezed or twisted body, invites exploration from the hand and the eye. It is this experience that is perhaps the best argument for the continuation of studio pottery making. The Anglo-Japanese potter Takeshi Yasuda once described pots in museum cases as 'beautiful ghosts', insinuating the loss of intimacy perhaps, and betraying (or perhaps lamenting) the persistence of the handmade pot and its true value.

Aware of the dogma some might conveniently associate with woodfiring, Ben Brierley's work is far from corrupted. Although he may at times cast his gaze and then throw a nod and a wink to history, his vision is open to the future. This is work made by a man firmly located in the modern world, with clear choices being exercised with dynamism and energy, passing on his self-evident revelling in the clay and fire.

Left: **Dancing Vessel 2.** 2006. Thrown and hand built stoneware with Porcelain slip and engobe decoration. Natural fly ash glaze and fire marks. Anagama woodfired. 78 cm/h.

fluctuating atmosphere. This liberation regains that liquid sensuousness of the freshly thrown form, but also acquires scars and bruises from the near elemental forces of the anagama firing. Throwing marks emerge through rivulets of ash glaze or a flashed clay surface, giving the appearance of a stretched torso captured in mid movement, rib cage protruding through the taut clay 'skin'.

The sense of movement in Brierley's work is a reflection of his gentle sense of humour. He likens the work to the anthropomorphism of domestic objects from Walt Disney's *The sorcerers apprentice*, imagining bottle forms in conversation, positioned in relation to one another and their domestic context, jauntily in communion, thick as thieves. He also credits influence from Scandinavian domestic ceramic design and contemporary Japanese Iga wares.

An aspect of this way of working that lends the work a certain 'frisson' is the element of risk inherent in the firing process. Brierley's work cannot really be separated from his