

Taking Friendly Fire

Ken Matsuzaki and the Yohen Challenge

Article by Andrew Maske



Container. Natural ash glaze yohen shino. 30.5 x 18 x 25.5 cm.



Vase. Natural ash glaze, yohen shino. 28 x 17.5 x 17.5 cm.



Vase. Natural ash glaze. 30.5 x 20 x 20 cm.

“IN A TIME OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTY, with a leader struggling to impose adherence to his vision of order and progress, discerning artists emerge to point a way out of the chaos toward a new realm where creativity fuses the spirits of man and nature.” A hopeful speculation on cultural life at the beginning of America's new millennium? No – it is a description of what took place during Japan's Momoyama period, roughly 1575 – 1625, widely considered to be a golden age of Japanese culture. After a century of military unrest during which central authority was weak and warlords battled each other for territorial gains, in the late 16th century a series of authoritarian rulers sought to bring the country under control. It was during that era that *chanoyu* (the tea ceremony) reached its philosophical apex, and Japan's ceramic art attained its greatest heights of innovation and energy.

Although he has mastered a wide variety of techniques, formats, and styles during the course of his long career, Ken Matsuzaki today seems most at home among the textures, colours and forms that were first seen 400 years ago. This is in no way to imply that what Matsuzaki creates are simply his own versions of Momoyama period wares; rather, it

is the power of that age that emanates from the products of his kiln. In fact, only a few of Matsuzaki's ceramic shapes have clear antecedents in the wares of historical kilns, and even these have been altered to match his conceptual goals.

What sets Matsuzaki apart from other potters is the care he gives to the form and finish in the construction of his pieces – and his willingness to risk the potential ruin of what has been so carefully built in the volatile environment of his kiln. His unfired pots can be likened to soldiers sent to the front lines, destined to return home as either heroes or corpses. But Matsuzaki knows well that the risk of his firing method is necessary to give birth to works that vibrate with energy and strength.

The ability to ‘let go’ of his pots and allow the fire to do its work over a period of days in a woodfired kiln did not come quickly or easily for Matsuzaki. He built his first wood-burning kiln 28 years ago, and created his unique climbing kiln with two fire mouths nearly two decades after. His current kiln was created with a chamber designed specifically to fire unglazed pieces so that they are covered with large quantities of kiln ash during the course of the firing. Depending on the interaction of a variety of factors, including fuel type, draught,



Rectangular Vase. Natural ash glaze. 25.5 x 12.5 x 10 cm.

distribution of pieces, length of firing and changes in kiln temperature, the silica in the ash that collected on the pots vitrifies and forms a patchy 'natural' ash glaze. In addition, the draught that moves the flame through the kiln can create flashes of reds, browns and blacks on the exposed surfaces of the pots. These effects are known in Japan as *yohen* (kiln-change), because they occur strictly as a result of the firing itself.

Yohen works are subject to increased risk because they entail firings of three days or longer (Matsuzaki fires for seven days) and because reliance is placed on the incidental movement of flame and ash in the kiln to complete the pieces. If an unglazed item is placed in a position where it is not reached by ash or flame, it comes out of the kiln as simply a bland, monochromatic ceramic piece with no glaze – not exciting and, in the potter's eyes, a failure.

The challenge of a yohen firing is to position the pots and carefully manipulate the course of the firing so that the maximum variety of colour and desired ash effects are achieved. This takes tremendous effort for Matsuzaki who has to keep a close eye on the firing for an entire week. (Of course, he has a number of assistants to feed the kiln and allow him to catch a wink or two now and then.)



Square Vase. Natural ash glaze, *yohen shino*. 25.5 x 10 x 10 cm.

In 2001, Ken Matsuzaki at last took a step that he had been contemplating for seven years. He was determined to try Shino ware in the yohen chamber of his climbing kiln, and thereby create a new type of ware – yohen Shino. He wrote about his reasons for this decision: "Just firing Shino ware in a yohen manner doesn't necessarily mean that the pieces will come out with yohen effects. More than making Shino simply for the sake of making Shino, what I really wanted to do was achieve my own Shino... By firing Shino without protective saggars in the *oguchi* (yohen-firing chamber) of my climbing kiln and allowing the kiln ash to fall on the pieces, I was able to create a natural ash glaze yohen Shino, which has brought me even closer to my Shino."¹

Now, six years later, Matsuzaki has succeeded in making yohen Shino one of his signature wares. The frosting-like glaze often bears the marks of the maker's fingers, frozen for all time like waves in a glacial sea. Depending upon the concentration and distribution of iron oxide, the highlight colouring in these pieces can range from maroon to pink to gold-tinged. The yohen Shino wares that have been subjected to significant amounts of natural ash during firing display even more varied characteristics.



Oribe Bowl. 12.5 x 17.5 x 20 cm.



Oribe Sake Cup. 7.5 x 5 x 5 cm.

As his confidence in firing yohen Shino has increased, so has Matsuzaki's skill in creating unique and evocative pieces adorned only by natural ash glaze. His bold and masculine shapes are suitably matched with the reds, browns, greens, golds and greys created by flame and wood ash. To facilitate the development of the desired colours and textures, Matsuzaki manipulates his pots in the kiln, knocking over some of them several days into the firing so that they will be covered with ash on all sides. Just how and where that ash accumulates, however, depends as much upon the forces of the fire as upon Matsuzaki himself. Although he uses different types of wood during the course of the firing, adds charcoal at certain stages and shifts the pots' position to influence the accumulation of ash, ultimately it is the kiln and its flame that determine the end results.

Firing in other parts of the kiln, Matsuzaki has achieved fine results with his Oribe-style wares as well. The beauty of this copper green glaze led to his selection as one of several contemporary potters working in the Oribe style who were featured in the US Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2003 exhibition *Turning Point: Oribe and the Arts of Sixteenth Century Japan*. Matsuzaki's carefully considered forms match well with the Oribe style dishes and sake cups he creates, but the bright quality of his green glaze complements larger pieces too.

On many of his larger works, Matsuzaki uses texturing to add further sophistication and interest. Perhaps this technique comes from the influence of his teacher, the Living National Treasure Tatsuzo Shi-maoka, who uses rope impressions of various types to decorate the exteriors of his ceramics. In any case, Matsuzaki's textures endow his pieces with unique qualities. Another excellent example of Matsuzaki's use of surface effects can be seen in the diagonal linear pattern found on his *Vase With Natural Ash Glaze*, featured in the recent Boston Museum of Fine Arts

exhibition *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century*.²

Along with their outstanding sculptural aspects, all of Ken Matsuzaki's ceramics are fully functional. I have whisked up powdered green tea in one of his yohen Shino tea bowls and found that it suited the task perfectly. I have also seen striking flower arrangements created using his large ash-glazed pieces. Matsuzaki's sake flasks are easy to hold, and his *yunomi* tea cups and *guinomi* sake cups are pleasing to the touch of both hands and lips.

The functional beauty of Matsuzaki's works reflects his understanding of the nature of the creative process and artistic innovation. He knows that original work is not limited to art that has been conceived entirely in the maker's imagination. He understands that every artist is indebted to those who came before; not only to teachers, but to those who have left works of inspiring quality. As Matsuzaki has proven, there are limitless discoveries to make, even within the realm of functional ceramics. As a friend of the fire, Matsuzaki has developed the perfect relationship to carry forward his exploration of the possibilities of clay and flame in the spirit of Japan's great Momoyama ceramics tradition.

REFERENCES:

1. Matsuzaki Ken, *Haikaburi yohen Shino: Kamabe Goroku* (Statement from the Vicinity of the Kiln: Ash Glazed yohen Shino) in Hankyu Department Store, *The 23rd Matsuzaki Ken Ceramics Exhibition*, (Osaka: 2002).
2. Illustrated in Joe Earle, *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2005), p. 85.

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