

Carbon and other colours

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Raku and saggar firing incorporates a large element of chaos into their process. There is something about the absence of control that comes with these methods that makes the practice very seductive.

Alpaca wool raku refers to a method where wool is draped over the ceramic piece which is extremely hot, freshly pulled from the kiln. Due to the intense heat, the wool carbonises and adheres to the surface of the work. Alpaca wool is an exceptionally fine fibre, which leaves a beautiful tracery thin of lines. Often horsehair is also used, which creates bolder impressions.

My method of saggar firing involves a special combination of acids and organic colourants, such as seaweed, steel-wool, and other combustibles to create a galaxy-like effect.

Once the vessel is treated, it is wrapped in an aluminium foil which is the "saggar". The work is then wood fired in a barrel, scoured, waxed, and polished by hand. Traditionally, saggars were made from clay, in essence placing a piece within a piece Russian-doll style. However, I find aluminium foil much more efficient.

The sense of captured movement imbued by the reactions of the natural combustibles draws the eye. The smooth, curved plane of the vessels walls evokes the desire to touch and hold. Whether it is a smoke stain from a gumleaf or a twisting frizzle of alpaca wool, the motion and energy that the process traps make it extremely rewarding.

Combined with the traditional forms of the vessels, the beauty of the uncontrolled nature of the surface treatment is brought to the fore. The unrestrained nature of these methods also means that each piece is unique.

While I have some understanding of what a given mix of colourants, combustibles and application will do, it is still largely unknown. Accepting and revelling in that ignorance is what makes the process so exciting and enjoyable.

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