Playing with Fire and Kiln Gods

Martie Geiger-Ho explains why she is so driven to make ceramics

I've read it in print and heard it expressed out loud, and now I, too, believe that one of the main reasons why I and so many other people are driven to make ceramics is because we have discovered that by showing our hands into oozing, earthy, life-sustaining, soft, sticky, muddy clay that we can, for a brief period of time, reconnect with nature on a simple but intimate level. It is widely reported by many ceramists that when they begin working with clay they feel rejuvenated and more in touch with the natural world. However, when I touch clay that tactile encounter takes me a step beyond the normal pleasant primal associations experienced by most potters. For me, contact with clay induces more than mere physical sensations – it also launches me into the realm of the imagination where my mind seems to give way to the world of the unconscious and its ancient archetypes.

Not content to simply revel in the primal experience of tapping into my archaic inner-self, I often feel compelled to express these experiences directly in clay. This need to acknowledge the spiritual aspect through the medium clay has motivated me to make work that celebrates and comments on my psychic association with the ceramic process itself. My association with the primal aspect of clay as terra firma, along with my desire to connect with the history, traditions and materials necessary for the production of ceramics, to include earth, fire, air and water, has led me to write my own kiln god/dess myth, create kiln god/dess themed performance pieces, and finally to make kiln god/dess sculptures.

Mind/Matter Kiln Goddess. Whitesure paper clay, underglaze, glaze and lustres 29 x 20 x 10 cm.
In Chinese cities such as Jingdezhen and Hong Kong, which either have or once supported a ceramics industry, kiln gods are worshipped and honoured as important deities that help to protect the welfare of the entire ceramic community. Many ceramic producing cities or regions in China have their own local deity(s) and customs of worship.

While many different beliefs, customs and types of kiln gods have developed since antiquity among diverse cultures throughout the world, it appears that kiln gods customs in the US are among the most unstructured in terms of not having any formally acknowledged rituals or documented customs. Unlike kiln gods in places like China, American potters do not adhere to any prescribed standards of form and appearance for their kiln gods. The kiln gods are more often given the form of small fanciful figures or creatures that usually sport whimsical or grotesque features.

Serving as charms or talismans, kiln gods are meant to guard against any kind of bad luck that might befall any type of ceramic ware. They are especially important for glaze firings. Standing guard over the kiln, the kiln god is entrusted with the duty of protecting the fragile ware from all types of harm, especially unlucky firing problems such as stress cracks or glaze defects.

As every ceramist knows, the causes of subtle variations in the kiln that spell the difference between opening it and finding pottery with scintillating glazes and surfaces boasting dramatic tonal shifts, or experiencing the disappointment of finding drab work lacking in spirit, are sometimes elusive problems that are difficult to pinpoint. In the end, these discrepancies can sometimes only be blamed on the fickle nature of the kiln gods or other powers beyond our control. And, although I admit that it does sound a little absurd that any sane person would try to gain assistance from the paranormal world of kiln spirits, I can assure you that if you or a loved one has ever tried to even-out a temperamentally large gas kiln snowballing its way to cone 10, that you would do almost anything, short of throwing yourself into the inferno, to try and balance the odds for success in your favour. Sometimes even the most experienced potter can encounter unforeseen difficulties during the precarious glaze firing stage of ceramic making. It is for this reason that potters engage in the stress relieving, albeit superstitious activity of making kiln gods.

The cathartic ritualistic act of making kiln gods is an activity that has always been an important part of my ceramic making activities. After I decided to begin making kiln god sculptures as permanent works, I began to focus on both the formal problems of presentation and on the meaning or content of the resulting sculpture. After a bit of soul searching, it seemed logical to me that I should make my guardians female because I saw a strong relationship between the ancient figure of the Great Mother Who has power over the earth, and kiln gods/desses who are responsible for watching over the successful fusion of raw clay and minerals into pottery through exposure to the primal force of raw heat and fire. The style of my female kiln guardians, or god/desses is also based on my interpretation of prehistoric female fertility figures and imagery.

The exploration of psychic symbols in my work is meant to provide viewers with the opportunity to experience the work through different levels and meanings. These meanings might allude to any or all of the following topics: the underlying urges and desires to create art through the primal materials of earth, water, fire and air (the ceramic process); the association and anthropomorphisation of pottery with the Great Mother archetype according to Neumann’s model of “woman = body = vessel = world”; and how the process

Guardian of Dreams and Pottery. Stoneware, glaze, underglaze and lustres. 52 x 17.5 x 29 cm.

In the United States, kiln gods or kiln guardians, as I sometimes like to refer to them, are usually spontaneously fashioned by potters from wet clay just prior to a kiln firing. Unlike the kiln gods of China, which are generally positioned in their own permanent Taoist or ‘folk religion’ temple or shrine and located near the kiln, Western kiln gods are most often displayed directly on the kiln’s roof, or, on a ledge above the kiln door, where they can ‘watch’ over the firing.
of making ceramics and creating kiln gods can be experienced in terms of sacred rituals and numinous experiences. I feel that the content of my work expresses the universal need felt by many ceramic artists for a common understanding and shared experience into the mysteries and myths that are a part of the ceramic process.

The growth of the personal symbolism in my kiln god/dess sculptures over the past several years has caused me to become more self-conscious and deliberate in the way that I arrange the elements in my kiln god/dess sculptures and I suppose that this may be another reason why my recent works outwardly include symbols that represent the psyche as an expressive agent or force. Additionally, I have begun to title my work so that my references to the psychological workings of the human mind can be immediately grasped. The titles of my sculptures indicate my interest in analytical psychology and its subsequent influence as a major force in my work.

There are many reasons why American ceramists make kiln gods, however, I believe that, like myself, most ceramists make kiln guardians as a means for helping to relieve stress and to dispel the anxiety caused by the difficulty of trying to control the outcome of a ceramic firing. For me the process of ceramics has always seemed magical and I have never had a firing I could totally control, including electric kiln firings. This seems to be the case for most ceramists and I imagine that this is why so many different cultures from around the world have developed some sort of kiln god mythology as a way of coping with the insecurities that come with making and firing ceramics. Also, for many ceramists living in places like the United States where kiln gods are not actually worshiped, their presence at the top of the kiln during a firing still seems mighty reassuring.

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