

Tim Alexander: On the Rim

Recent explorations from the kiln of Island Pottery, Rosspport

When you drive through the hamlet of Rosspport (pop. 125) there is a narrow causeway that can pull you off the main street and over to Nicol Island. There, on the southeast edge of the island, with staggering views of adjacent cliffs and peninsulas across the bay, you might find Tim Alexander. Without doubt his Island Pottery, established in 1993, is a major cultural attraction for the large North Superior region.



Yes, pots are cultural entities. Once you peek beyond the premise of utility, beyond the fact that the vessel is an instrument made to perform a task, almost every aspect of process and form related to that pot might be accounted for in terms drawn from global ceramic traditions. To a very great extent since the 1950's, Canadian ceramic studios have undergone a marked orientalizing in approaches and techniques, extending aesthetic lineage that can be traced back to Medieval Japan, Song Dynasty China and Choson Korea. While Alexander's work is of that strain, he is informed as well by 17th century European salt wares and 19th century Canadian crockery.

In his formative years, Tim Alexander would readily attest that his creative impulses were stimulated by the outlook and practical methods of Bernard Leach. Leach was a British printmaker who, in witnessing the collapse of centuries old folk traditions in Japan, became the advocate for contemporary studio pottery and craft practice in general. In the middle of the 20th century, he promulgated the aesthetics of the handmade at a point when the job-lot practice of industry had all but eradicated the hallmarks of individual makers. The work of his students, like Britain's Michael Cardew and Minnesota's Warren Mackenzie, has directly affected Alexander. Subsequent studio ceramists, like American Peter Voulkos, used the vessel as a matrix, a framework, for personal meaning and gestural expression freed from function. Both of those strands of history can still be savoured in Alexander's pots today.

Today, at mid-career, aspects of source and influence are thoroughly internalized in Alexander's current work. With mastery, skill has become a transparent faculty, and attention has turned elsewhere: how do you connect the products of an age-old trade, one that comes with the associations of countless historical idioms and the numerous technical problems, to the consciousness of this historical moment? In recent



decades many functional potters have returned to an emphasis on graphic applications and decorative surface treatments, always with the attendant problems of integration of form, process and content. Most of these potters are working for convenience in the low to medium fire range.

Alexander is working at the more rigorous and austere high-firing stoneware range where, for instance, an easily controlled spectrum of colour effects is highly problematic and surface modulations are extremely difficult to control.

Perhaps because Alexander lives surrounded by the splendor of the boreal forest, perched on the rim of the largest of Canada's Great Lakes, his ruminations of late have inclined toward considerations of place and belonging. Given the lineage of his practice, for Alexander, this evolved into notions best described as a suffusion akin to the way raw clay is suffused with moisture. How might his life practice transmute into the things he makes? How might the abiding sense of Being Here Now show up over there, in a practical pot or a ceramic work that references functionality? And how indeed is that even possible when each pot has to be submitted to a savage kiln experience to be completed?

How could he permit life on the rim of the 21st century in Rosspport, Ontario, as it distills within him, to be evinced in his work, since vessel makers are not customarily thought to be landscapists? For Alexander, the task of allowing life to permeate the work has become an exercise fostered close to the threshold, the rim, of conscious perception, by meditative exercise. Eastern spiritual perspectives ranging



2

from Ba'hai to Zen are known to have fortified the work of many of his predecessors working within the zone that ceramic historian Garth Clark has coined The Ethical Pot. Importantly, each potter has to find his own "Way" independent of any guru, philosophy, or approach. In this tradition of potting, it is customary for personality - what we might call the egocentric autograph - to arise from within the peculiar ergonomics of craft excellence, rather than being inscribed deliberately and consciously on the surface. In working this way, by submitting thoroughly to material and process, one arrives at authentic voice.

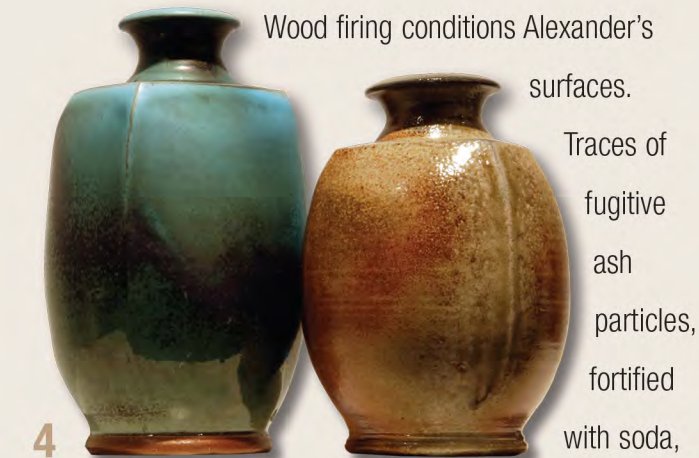
Alexander has now achieved this and more. He has pushed some of his work to the margins where functionality has become incidental. He certainly stretched the repertoire of forms established as the mainstay of his studio commerce. Initially, rims became a basic defining feature perhaps because the rim of Lake Superior is unfathomably varied. Some of Alexander's rims are massive and rolling, others cantilevered and spare, still others indented and obscured as they fall inward from a broad surface.

Lake effects become subliminal to those of us who live in close proximity to large freshwater bodies. It is not that we are inured to the wonder, just conditioned to the phenomena. After fifteen years at



3

Island Pottery, Alexander knows them all well through observation from the decks of his home and through kayaking by its varied shore, or from driving along its undulating fiords and over its rock-cut bluffs peppered with breathtaking vistas. He knows the bold sweep of lake currents as they affect the texture of water. He knows lake surface seen from a bird's eye view, mottled by driven rain, whipped by summer squalls, striated by ice floes. He knows it as thick black ice scored by skates. He knows the enormous pleasure of nacreous reflections on summer's mirror bright calm. At Rosspport, many such impressions translate into stoneware forms, porcelain surfaces, and a myriad of nature-derived patterns.



4

Wood firing conditions Alexander's surfaces. Traces of fugitive ash particles, fortified with soda, lend a softening, organic rind. In using this technology, kiln atmosphere supplies subtle tonal gradations modulated by drafts. Occasional drizzles wrought by concentrated currents attest to the crucial component of kiln placement. The kiln itself needs to be internalized by its user, to be, in a sense, inhabited, so that each chamber, shelf configuration, level, nook and cranny have known capacities to enhance the vivacity of its strategically located contents. Hence, through accumulated experiential

knowledge, the potter's fabled alliance with nature's materials and processes, and all of their respective patinas, become the potter's palette. In this technology, the kiln is the implement of application.

Glazes, when used on this recent work, have been gauged to withstand an irregular kiln atmosphere that fluctuates between reduction and oxidation effects. Classic iron-rich blacks, celadon greens and copper reds are vivified by transformative ash dusting to reinforce aqueous or geological landscape associations. Large porcelain platters seem cupped with brushed whirlpools, and covered storage jars resonate with the memories of ancient prototypes.

A suite of generous vessels with small central apertures recalls beach boulders that retain primordial secrets. Tiny



5





6 bosses punctuate some surfaces with systems of radiating incisions that imply asterism, the sparkle of miniscule glints alive with interconnectivity. Tall, tapered bottles record the momentous fall of single raindrops on the surface of the lake as if they reverberate to the geological sediment far below.

Given his geographical isolation, Alexander's resumé may seem spare and uneventful but that, too, is entirely in keeping with his philosophy of ensuring that his work is accessible to people in his immediate sphere. While he does act as a cultural node in his locale, he receives travelers from across the country and south of the border who pass on the highway or dock on the lake. Developing client relationships first hand allows him to support his family, but closing the gap between production and reception means that he is constantly an ambassador for his own art form.

Readers may detect that the writer is a senior ceramic



7 specialist, a ceramic connoisseur and collector, as well as a public gallery curator, with genuine admiration for Tim Alexander's

achievement and keen enthusiasm for the very high international standards he attains. It is remarkable that he can take raw clay, make of it things durable and useful, that are informed by various traditions, that speak of this Province and his location in it, and that impart the luster of his life experience here. Maturity has splendid dividends. The recent achievements of Tim Alexander provide stunning proof.

Glenn Allison, Curator.



8

Works in the Exhibition

- 1 *Lakebed Series Platter I*, 2006; stoneware, wood-fired, salt and soda glaze, 5H x 47W x 44D cm
- 2 *Rim Series IX*, 2007; stoneware, wood-fired, soda glaze, 8H x 9.5W x 9.5D cm
- 3 *Wave Vase I*, 2008; stoneware, wood-fired, salt and soda glaze, 28H x 18W x 14D cm
- 4 (L) *Squared Vase*, 2007; stoneware, wood-fired, soda glaze, 29H x 17W x 17D cm
(R) *Squared Vase*, 2006; stoneware, wood-fired, soda glaze, 24H x 16W x 16D cm
- 5 *Squared Jar I*, 2004; stoneware, wood-fired, salt and soda glaze, 23H x 14W x 14D cm
- 6 *Lakebed Series Platter V*, 2008; stoneware, wood-fired, salt and soda glaze, 6H x 45W x 41D cm
- 7 *Swirl Platter I*, 2005; porcelain, electric fired; 6H x 43W x 39D cm
- 8 (L) *Rim Series I*, 2007; stoneware, wood-fired, soda glaze; 21H x 25W x 25D cm
(R) *Vase with Lugs*, 2008; stoneware, wood-fired, soda glaze; 46H x 37W cm

Tim Alexander: On The Rim

Recent explorations from the kiln of Island Pottery, Rosspport

is an exhibition organized by the Thunder Bay Art Gallery and presented to the public

November 14, 2008 to January 11, 2009

Published by the Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay, Ontario
Copyright 2009. All Rights reserved
Not to be reproduced without permission.

The Gallery and the Artist acknowledge the continuing support of the City of Thunder Bay, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts, The Department of Canadian Heritage and Lakehead Public Schools

Printing and Design by Lehto Rainbow Printers Ltd.

Photography by Jennifer Bullock and Klaus Rossler Photography
Tim Alexander and Vivian Alexander

ISBN -13: 978-0-920539-80-4



Recent explorations from the kiln of Island Pottery, Rosspport

On The Rim



THUNDER BAY
ART GALLERY

1080 Keewatin Street, P.O. Box 10193, Thunder Bay, ON P7B 6T7
www.theag.ca