

Bucket #4 from the
Oribe Reborn series.



IMAGINE

A PLACE WHERE ALL OF NATURE GATHERS:

CRAGGY MOUNTAINS AND FOREST STREAMS, THE KELP-RICH SEABED AND THE ROCK-STREWN SANDY SHORE, SHEARING GLACIERS AND GLIDING ICE FLOES, FROM THE FIRST FRESHNESS OF SPRING TO THE DEAD OF WINTER, TOGETHER IN ONE SPOT. NOW PUT A CAVERNOUS WOOD-FIRED KILN OUT BACK. THERE, IN A NUTSHELL, YOU HAVE THE STUDIO OF JEFF SHAPIRO.

SHAPIRO HAS LIVED AND WORKED HERE, up a proverbially winding road in Accord, New York, since 1981. That was when he returned from a nine-year stint in Japan, where he'd gone to study martial arts. That didn't work out, but he stayed for the ceramics. He had no previous background in the arts, but an early trip down south to Kyushu got him interested — seeing clay crushed by waterpower, digging young bamboo shoots for breakfast. What sealed the deal was his time in Bizen, famed for its centuries-old tradition of unglazed stoneware manufacture. In this small town, there were 350 kilns going; almost everyone worked in the clay industry. The potters themselves impressed him as Japanese versions of James

Words Glenn Adamson Photography Carlton Davis



Anagama wood kiln, fired up. **Opposite page:** *Ice Flow, Monolithic Form #2*



Dean. They spoke little, smoked much, never gave a compliment, and made things like nothing he'd seen in his life, gutsy, rough, and limned with fire.

In Bizen, Shapiro was mentored by Isezaki Jun, who had a profound influence on him; and then went on to the Japan Sea Coast. There, under the auspices of a patron, he set up his own studio on a mountaintop, looking out over abandoned rice fields. He made things all day, most days. By the time he came back to the USA, he knew as much about Japanese ceramics as any American could. His aim wasn't to replicate the experiences he'd had — that would have been impossible, not least because of the differences in available materials and prevailing culture — but to extend what he had learned, through a process of continual self-discovery.

Forty years later, he's still at it. Shapiro's life follows the rhythms of the pottery. It takes him months to make enough work to fill the kiln, and eight days to fire it. The variables in play are dauntingly numerous: differences in clay body, glazing, positioning in the kiln, firing temperatures, even which wood is used for fuel. Shapiro only uses the front two-thirds of the kiln chamber, closest to the fire, where its unpredictable but intense effects are at their greatest.

Those effects are vividly directional. The side of a piece that faces the fire is more apt to collect greenish glaze from the flying ash. (This is thanks to trace minerals in the wood, taken up from the ground by the trees as they grow; in this sense, wood-fired ceramics really do represent an accumulation of deep time.) Natural ash deposit glaze also settles on the work, whichever side is facing up; glassy drips may hang from the bottom. The proximity of the other objects in the kiln also has an effect, each piece introducing patterns of fuming or shadowing to its neighbors. A final, discreet touch is left by seashells, which Shapiro uses as props to hold the pieces up off the kiln shelves and one another; they leave permanent impressions in the surface, like so many signatures.

With all this in mind, Shapiro takes his time loading the kiln — about ten days on average — it is a primary compositional aspect of his art. But it's not as though matters are out of his hands when he closes the doors. He manages the long firing with care, observing through peepholes in the front and on the sides of the kiln. He also directly intervenes by using long-handled shovels to reach in and deposit ash or embers here and there, a Bizen technique. The last few days are critical, when the kiln is at its hottest, the glassy glaze running freely.

For all his experience, when the kiln finally cools and he opens it up, he has no idea exactly what he'll find. He is able

to get radically different results from the same ingredients — a certain iron-rich clay body, say, with a certain glaze. This has motivated him to revisit certain combinations repeatedly, exploring the full range of material interactions, accumulating over time into discrete bodies of work.

One of these is *Oribe Reborn*, an allusion to one of the historic wares of Japan. The name comes not from a potter, but rather a connoisseur, the 16th-century tea master Furuta Oribe, who helped to define a cultivated appreciation of expressive irregularity. Uniquely in his practice, Shapiro imports the glaze he uses in his Oribe from Japan — and it's easy to see why, as it ranges from a subtle mossy green, where it is thinly applied, to a lustrous lagoon blue where it pools more deeply.

A second idiom, *Ice Flow*, is more local in derivation, having been inspired in part by the spectacular icicle-draped cliffs of the Hudson River valley. Here Shapiro is using a thick feldspathic glaze over a somber black substrate, which seems to peer through the translucent carapace of crystalline white.

In both these idioms, and elsewhere in his work, Shapiro traverses a range of forms from the functional (tea bowls, plates, vases and the like) to the purely sculptural. The latter often suggest geological findings, excavated rather than shaped by human hands. He also makes organic shapes, sometimes split open to reveal a vital core within, recalling the overripe fruits in Dutch still life paintings.

Shapiro likens the permissive range in his work to that encompassing classical orchestration and free jazz — though it's clear that his own leanings are toward the

improvisational. He's been a potter for almost fifty years, yet his goal is to see (as he puts it) "with the eyes of a five-year-old child." This small studio, containing so many worlds, is the result. When the kiln is opened, revealing what its gods have granted this time, it's like your very first snowfall. Utterly magical. An experience you'd never think to improve upon. But which you still want to happen again, and again, and again. ■

Glenn Adamson is a curator, writer and historian who works at the intersection of craft, design and contemporary art. He is the former Director of the Museum of Arts and Design; Head of Research at the V&A; and Curator at the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee. Adamson's recent publications Fewer Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects, 2018, and Craft: An American History, 2021, are published by Bloomsbury. Carlton Davis is a regular contributor to UD. He shoots for Tanqueray, Ralph Lauren and Vera Wang, among others, and is represented by CLM-Agency.com @carltond



Work in pre and post firing stages. **Opposite page:** Shapiro's kiln god.