

Introducing Yakishime Ceramic Artist Nozomu Shinohara

For holding his solo exhibition at Tosei Kyoto gallery, we visited Shinohara's studio in Shigaraki. We had an exclusive interview with him about the reason why he decided to start pottery, his thoughts on Shigaraki clay, and his anagama kiln and train kiln!



(Pic: At the entrance of Shinohara's Studio)

— What made you decide to pursue ceramics?

Shinohara : Well... My father had an ordinary job, and my parents' house was in a big city where you could reach the train station within 20 steps. So, there was no one around who is making things. I was the middle of three brothers, and while my older and younger brothers were good at their studies, I was not so good, and my father used to tell me, "You have to learn how to sit in front of a desk first! " While my brothers were studying beside me, I was just sitting at my desk making plastic models. After graduating from high school, I was wondering what to do, and to be honest, I was thinking vaguely carpenter might be good. My parents wanted me to go to college, so I was thinking of going to an architecture school in Toyama. But just then, Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park was open and there were ceramic programs on TV daily, and there I saw ceramics for the first time. Until then, I had no idea that pottery was made by firing clay. So, I thought, "What the heck is pottery? So, I came to Shigaraki and met Mr. Nobuo Furutani who would become my master latter. He was a nicest person.

-What attracted you to Mr.Furutani?

Shinohara : It's a personality. I think it can be called the unshakable truth. He never tell a lie at all, and he live his life with straightforward conviction. That's why I think I would have quit immediately if it had



been someone else instead of him. He and his wife told me a lot about pottery to me whom has nothing know about pottery, and that's when I felt it. I felt that he was someone who would never lie to me. That was the reason why I started making pottery. I also believe that a person's personality comes out in their style of work. His works are really wonderful, and even long time has past since then, he is still one of the most popular artists in Shigaraki. He taught me how to chop wood, sharpen a chainsaw, and even how to make soil. I was 19 years old and grew up in the city. There was no way I could do anything. But he carefully taught me from the very beginning, and that has really helped me now.

— Were you able to give up on the idea of becoming a carpenter once you came to Shigaraki?

Shinohara : Well of course not! There is a saying that once every five years a man has a moment of hesitation Lol. There were times when I wondered if I was doing the right thing. At first, plastic and lacquerware all looked the same to me, and I only thought that I was lucky to be involved in making things. It took me five years that I really started to enjoy pottery. The more I liked it, the more I could see. For example, this brown color (pointing to the pot) used to be just a brown color, but now I have a broader perspective on how to see the color and the depth of the texture. Suddenly, one day, what used to look like this would change in a big way. It was interesting moment to find out that I was able to recognize the texture even from a distance.

— How long did it take you to realize that you were seeing things very differently?

Shinohara : How long has it been? It's took about ten years since I started using Anagama. I need to know the materials well enough to use an Anagama, so the way I see the clay changes, and then I try firing it and deepen my understanding of what the fired material will be like.

-Please tell us about the Shigaraki clay you use.

Shinohara : It is made from a blend of five different types of soil: Kinose clay, which is made from weathered granite and contains a lot of feldspar, and Kibushi clay, which is black and contains a lot of fine powdered carbon, as well as several other types of soil.

Among this clary, especially Kinose clay is very rare and can only be found in Shigaraki and Seto in the world. When the clay is formed, various sediments are piled up on the bottom of the lake and converted into clay, and trees and dead leaves are also added to the clay, which is carbonized into lignite, a substance that looks like a piece of coal. When it is mixed with the clay as a fine powder, it turns black in color. But because it is carbon, the clay turns white when it is fired. This fine powder creates air bubbles in the clay when it is fired, making it resistant to thermal shock. That's why I make clay pots too!



(Pic Left: Kibushi Clay, right: Kinose Clay)

I think first and foremost about what I can do with the soil material itself, and what kind of work will make this soil the coolest. Everyone who comes and goes abroad knows that I'm like that, so they keep bringing me soil from all over the world (laughs). This is from Africa, Nepal, Vietnam, Laos, Brazil and the United States...

-Do you also blend this soil with Shigaraki soil?

Shinohara : No, I think the first thing I'll do is try to see what I can make with just this soil. If I can't use it by itself, maybe I'll try blending it. First of all, it is important to know what you can do with just the materials.

-I see...The importance of the material itself.

Shinohara : That's right. Nowadays there is the way of making pottery like "let's make some Shigaraki ware!" For that purpose, they choose a clay with a lot of feldspar. That's how Shigaraki clay became a brand-name clay. The Shigaraki Clay is a miraculous combination of lumpy and various ingredients. I don't mean to criticize, but I don't think it's right to say that this ingredient is a bit unwieldy from that rough soil, so remove this and add that. The work is only as good as the soil, isn't?



(Pic: Various types of clay lined up in Shinohara's studio.)

-Do you use different kinds of soil for each piece?

Shinohara : That's right. The clay we use is different. The last time I was here, I found some very rough soil. It's so rough that you can't even twist it by hand. Of course, I couldn't use a potter's wheel. But if you hollow it out and fired it, you can make very cool tea bowls that are rugged and tight. So, I've decided this soil is for tea bowls! I don't want to choose this clay because I want to make this kind of work, but I want to think first about what I can make with this clay.

After this, Shinohara took us to the Anagama kiln, about a 20-minute drive from his studio.

— It's a surprisingly small kiln.

Shinohara : That's right. At first, elder artists used to tell me that I couldn't fire anything in such a small kiln. Physically, a larger kiln is better suited for mass production of stable works, but that's not very interesting, is it? Because of this small size, the relationship between the wood and the ashes is directly reflected, which is difficult to achieve, but that is why it has a certain flavor. That's why I think this size is good. But setting the pottery in kiln is very difficult because of this size. It takes two whole days just to set the pottery in the kiln.



(Pic: Shinohara's Anagama)

— How long does it take to do the main firing?

Shinohara : I used to do it for a week or so, but after I've tried everything now I only do main firing for four days. I think it takes about three days to reach 1275-1280 degrees, and then we will keep this high temperature as much as we can. Ash finally starts to melt only when it reaches this temperature. In the past, I used to think about how much wood I should burn based on thermometers and how many sticks I put in. But in the end, that's not good enough. If you want to make a cool pot, you have to look at the pot.

—How do you know the perfect moment of pulling it off by seeing the pot surrounded by red flames while it is being fired?

Shinohara : There was an iron bar that I would bring close to the work. When the temperature is still low, the reflection line of the iron rod is thin, and when it is almost finished, the reflection line becomes thicker. I am deciding by seeing that thickness. I pull out all HIKIDASHI work (The work which was pulling out from the kiln to keep the specific colors) like that.

The purpose of pulling it out from kiln is to stop the ultimate reduction state in the kiln. By doing so, the blue color created in the ultimate reduction state can be stopped in that state. Even if the ashes are melting in the kiln, the moment you pull them out, no matters what the temperature is outside, the temperature will drop at once and the melting ashes will stop flowing. This stops the color and the flow of the ash.





(Pic : Pulling out the work with iron bar)

—That's amazing! I couldn't even imagine it. Is there any chance of dropping it when it is hooked onto that iron bar?

Shinohara : Oh, that's here it is (As showing me a piece of sake bottle that had fallen nearby) It happen all the time! Lol. I used to be scared to stand in front of the kiln because of the huge flames. But what we are doing is not a wood burning contest or a temperature rising contest, we just want to make cool works, so we can't start unless we see the condition of the works themselves.

-Second half of the kiln firing is much busier because of the high temperature, right?

Shinohara: That's right. In the old days, I used to burn the firewood without any sleep, starting with the roasting process to remove moisture from the wood. But if I do that, I'll get tired when it's comes to important time, and I'll just give up. Now I use a burner for roasting, so that I can start after I'm asleep. I simply have to be physically strong. Also, now-days my wife helps me kiln firing so, I was able to sleep better and able to work on a lot of HIKIDASHI pieces which is really helpful.

—Are you particular about the type of firewood you use?

Shinohara : It may sound cool to say that I only use pine trees, but I don't think it was possible to burn only pine trees in Shigaraki in the past. Don't you see it when you look at the view of this mountain? It's not just pine trees, is it? The actual percentage of pine used is about 40%. I also burn a mixture of hardwoods such as Quercus serrata, which contains a lot of titanium, and bamboo. Bamboo contains oil, which gives an interesting view.



(Pic : Piled up fire wood outside of Anagama room)

-I love that you're firing it in the landscape of Shigaraki, it's so honest to the land!

— Where will you be during the kiln firing?

Shinohara: I am resting in this waiting room. There is also a napping room in the back. The one in the back is a more proper room! Lol

Also, this is a cypress bath! It's really nice to take a bath while the kiln is burning.

After this, we went to Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park to see Train kiln that Shinohara had brought back from America and reproduce in Japan.

About Train Kiln

—Please tell me about the structure of the train kiln.

A train kiln is a wood-fired kiln built in the flat land of the United States. The main feature of this kiln is that the combustion chamber is located on top and is separated from the work chamber. If you put firewood in this upper combustion chamber, charcoal will fall to the bottom, so it won't clog. The interesting thing is the movement of the flame, flowing from top to bottom. It is very easy to put the work in and out of the kiln, just by putting it in the body part in the middle. If the damper at the back of the kiln is closed, it can be sealed easily, and the kiln becomes very airtight. Also, the concrete blocks in the base, which look a little uncool at first glance, play an important role in separating the kiln from moisture and

heat.



(Pic: Train Kiln at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park)



(Pic: The base of Train Kiln)

—How did you get to know Train Kiln?

Shinohara : Originally, I didn't want to be self-satisfied and say, "Shigaraki is good. I wanted to be able to tell it in my own words, so I traveled to the United States in 2017. At that time, I was able to see the local soil, fire in the local kiln, in the local climate, and see many things, but I was not able to see the train kiln that was popular in the U.S. at that time. So about two years after I returned to Japan, Dr. Mabuchi, a professor at Stanford University whom I had met there, though I learned later that he was a professor at Stanford University, contacted me and said, "I'm going to use Train Kiln, let's do it together!" So, I went to the professor at Utah State University who designed train kiln.

— What is the kind of work that can only be done at Train Kiln?

Shinohara : It depends on the fire movement. The way the fire flows in an Anagama kiln is completely different from that in a train kiln. Because the fire flows up and down, back and forth, it is possible to



express scenery and colors that are not possible in the Anagama. Also, the technique of reduction cooling can only be done in a train kiln. It is a method of cooling the kiln as it fires. Even if the same clay is used, there are tea bowls that show fire color in the Anagama kiln and beautiful smoked silver in the train kiln!



(Pic : smoked silver colored tea bowls made from train kiln)

— How do we cool it down?

Shinohara : After the temperature reaches a certain level, wet wood is poured in through a small window on the side. This is something I can't do in my anagama, so I was very excited.

-How long will it take to reach 1300 degrees in the train kiln?

Shinohara : The anagama takes about three days, but with train kiln we started from 10:00 in the morning, and by 11:00 that night, the temperature had reached 1300 degrees. We didn't use a single pine tree, but instead used assorted wood that was all over the place and used even wet firewood. So the area around train kiln became so clean.

—How long did it take to build the train kiln?

It was a prefectural course at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, but the production date was postponed due to the Covid-19, but the actual time taken was about 10 days. The structure itself is very simple.

—Why did you decide to recreate the train kiln in Japan?

Shinohara : There has been told that wood-fired kilns are great because they fire without sleep or rest. Also, some kilns are fired for two weeks in other area of Japan. But it doesn't mean that my work of four



days is not good enough comparing to the work being fired for two weeks. More to the point, it's not because electric kilns are not good because you just push a switch. How much sleep I get or how little sleep I get are not the point of creating the quality artwork. Isn't it annoying? if you were told this pot is very expensive because I haven't slept for four whole days. So I wanted to recreate the train kiln and have something I could actually compare it to. Train kilns are considered to have a high air tightness, efficient, and cost-effective. But then, what is cost performance? If a kiln that is said to have good cost performance can't produce any really good products, it can't be said to have good cost performance in the real meaning.

The work I want to create can only be done using my small Anagama. But the reason I use that Anagama is not because I see the highly value in sleepless nights, but because the Anagama is just a tool that can make the most of the properties of the clay. If I could make the most of the properties of the soil in an electric kiln, I would use an electric kiln. Each kiln has its own merits, and there are things that can only be done in that kiln. Therefore, I have no intention to say that my work is better than other wood-fired works from other region, or that anagama is better than train kiln or electric kiln. I just needed to be able to explain it properly.

After this, we went back to his studio to hear more about his work.

—Is there a particular type of work that you like to create?

Shinohara : I want to make cool pots. All the colors that come out of my kiln in on this pot. The most important thing is that I want to reflect the colors that come out of the kiln in my work. I can't do this unless I use Shigaraki clay with my Anagama kiln. Unlike the train kiln, the anagama kiln is directly affected by the wood. The pots are placed at the very end of the kiln, but it is really difficult to decide where to place them so it even takes 2 or 3 hours to just place them.



(Pic : A pot which has all the colors from Shinohara's Anagama.)

I have a few goals: to be able to make what I call "kiln-change" pieces not by chance, but by understanding their properties and aiming for them. Then the next step is to reflect it in a flower vase or pot. And wouldn't it be great to have a work of art in which the view of this pot appears in the palm of your hand next time? So, I recreate that in a tew bowl. And now, I'm going to use an even smaller sake cup to represent the whole scene in the same way. Of these, the most difficult is the tea bowl. The front of the tea bowl is determined by the shape of the work, so I must match the front of the scenery with the front of the shape of the tea bowls, so it is quite difficult.

The others are ceramic boxes. In the beginning, I was trying to transfer the scenery from the vase to the plate, but the plate has two sides, and no matter how cool the scenery is, if it is on the back, it cannot be used as a plate. So, I decided to make a ceramic box. Ceramic boxes are usually used in high-class restaurants, but my works are designed so that people can use them as stand-alone plates in any home, and also enjoy both the front and back views.



(Pic : Shinohara's favorite ceramic box)

—Is there anything that has changed between now and then?

Shinohara : Firing in the kiln is important for a potter, but producing the very good piece of work by chance during the firing process is not good enough. As I said before, if you can't properly reproduce how the miracle was created, you can't be called a full-fledged artist. That's why I make sure to calculate backwards from a bird's eye view. I think I'm able to understand how this miracle happened during the process better than before.

—What has been the most difficult thing for you in your career as a potter?

Shinohara : In the early days, I really had no money. Even if I had a solo exhibition, I would not get paid until two months later, and I would desperately ask for payment as soon as possible. Even though I was married with a wife, I often had no income for two months. When I was going to build my own kiln, there was a fire in the neighborhood and I was busy cleaning it up, which delayed my kiln building for about a week. I even collapsed with a mysterious high fever. But that's how much I wanted to do it. People often say that it's a lot of work, but I just do it because it's fun.

-Have you ever had a setback or felt like you were losing your edge?

Shinohara: That's right. I had decided to try in the Anagama at least ten times. I didn't know anything, and it was natural that I would fail, but I was determined to fire 10 times! My first kiln also failed, as I mentioned earlier. I thought I was going to die. After that, I kept failing. But on the ninth time, a plate with a very beautiful fire color was taken from the farthest shelf. The kiln itself was a failure though. So, I changed the firing method for the tenth time using the ninth time as a hint, and the tenth time was really good. So, I thought I could do it, and decided to keep trying. But I fail again for 11th time lol I taught God



was teasing me. But since then, I stopped counting the wood, stopped looking at the thermometer, and shifted my focus to looking at the work. That's how I gradually started to get good products.

— Is there anything that you would like to challenge in the future?

Shinohara : I have yet to fully understand all the interesting aspects of Shigaraki clay. There are still many materials that I have never seen before. The clay that is suitable for tea bowl that I mentioned at the beginning is not from the famous mountain, it is from a completely different place. I think that my understanding of clay has improved to the point where I can use the clay that I have not been able to utilize yet, so I would like to fire it and make it good. There are still a lot of things I haven't seen yet, and I'm still at where I think ceramic is very interesting, so I always think that I don't want to die now loI I believe Shigaraki ware is cutting-edge. Especially since I'm from a different country, I feel the same way that Americans feel. Using Shigaraki clay in this anagama kiln, without using glaze, I can create such colors and such scenery which is super cool. And it has yet to be fully explored. That's why I feel that what I'm doing is something new and cutting-edge.



(Pic: At the entrance of Shinohara's studio)

How was exclusive interview with Mr. Shinohara?

His thoughts on the Shigaraki clay were far beyond my imagination.

Shinohara's solo exhibition will be held at Tosei Kyoto Gallery from February 4 (Fri.) to February 26 (Sat.). We hope you will enjoy his passionate works.

©2022 Tosei Kyoto Gallery. All Rights Reserved.