

# TIM ROWAN: AN ARTISTS WAY

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To describe Tim Rowan's sculptural forms is akin to recalling a memory or shape that lies hidden just beyond reach, at the edge of conscious thought. They are known to us, these shapes that his forms reference, but they exist at the periphery; half seen, exerting an influence, creating a framework, within which we live. Rowan's understated, monolithic sculpture brings them into focus, inhabiting a space between the forgotten and useful, with shapes that reveal and conceal. The son of an architect, architectural form and an understanding of heavy machinery come naturally. He uses the machine as art and object, creating forms that suggest the passage of time, the wrought tool, debris. They remark on the fragility of existence and the footfall of man, while also meditating on the nature of human invention and intervention. He describes his work as 'Purposely ambiguous, inspired and informed from many things; industrial relics such as gears, cogs and turbines, old tools. The ordinary, often overlooked remnants and fragments of our past. It is about the struggle between humanity, culture and nature and that which defines the difference.'



Juxtaposed to the sea, is the northeastern landscape of the US with its remnants of an industrial past; cement kilns, construction equipment, shuttered factories. Both are part of the landscape of his childhood. Analogous his life next to the sea as a child is his adult life in the deep woods today. The presence of such large scale natural forces continues to immerse him in the rhythm of the earth, while reinforcing the awareness of the delicate balance of life, the passage of time, the rise and fall of seasons, the ebb and flow of the earth's elements. The work he makes is seeded in an intuitive response to the unmooring of modern living from the pulse of the earth. The use of clay comes from a visceral response to his first exposure to it as a young college student, its materiality and the innate rhythm and timing required appealing to his intuitive connection with the earth. He works almost incessantly, trying to maintain a constant flow in his practice that sustains his emotional and physical energy. Through continuous creation and a process of distillation he isolates the essence. Tim's abstract sculptures are an extension of his psyche and reveal the desire to pare away the non-essential and render the core. A skilled potter he is now a hand builder by choice, exclusively using a coil building technique that slows the process down, giving him time to pay attention to the minutiae and adjusting his methods to suit the clay. He appreciates finding and using local clays with their varying idiosyncrasies, enjoying the challenge of working in tandem with their needs. In the studio he works in a progression, allowing each form to give rise to the next. There is an ebb and flow between material, process and thought culminating in the slow, highly physical act of firing with wood. The fire and ash mark the forms in a sensitive arc between him, the flame, and the sculpture, its subtle alterations paralleling the effect of time on man-made artifacts and relics with their rugged surfaces and weathered patinas.

Seminal too, to his development as an artist was the time he spent in Japan. In 1992 after finishing his undergraduate degree in art he was able to move to Bizen for what would become two intense years of total immersion as an apprentice in the studio of Ryuichi Kakurezaki. The work required that he and another apprentice spend the days doing the hard labour and menial jobs that the studio needed to run and then getting



the evenings off to make work themselves. Living in old semi abandoned farmhouse on the outskirts of town, he hunkered down to learn. Introspection is natural to Tim and it came as a slow revelation that a hundred similar bowls could each have an individual identity; that there were infinite and subtle variations that made each humble bowl distinct; and that every subtle curve or profile could tell a unique story; that the more you perceived the more there was to see. It would be a lesson that he would carry onward into his practice.

Returning to the United States two years later he set up shop in Massachusetts. As he worked to establish a practice he found himself trying to recreate his Japanese experience and making Japanese style tea bowls. It felt unsatisfying, as if in a bubble, and he began to question the validity of transposing a foreign style to an entirely unrelated world. It challenged his conviction of the need for art to be a natural and honest outgrowth of place. Searching for an individual language, one that reflected



his own life and experience he felt that he needed to learn more and decided to go back to school. He went on to earn an M.F.A at the Pennsylvania State University. Since then he has gradually developed a practice from his small studio in the Hudson River valley where he lives with his wife and young son. He says that his time in Japan grounded him and has allowed him to navigate the world of modern ceramics in a way that felt true to his nature. It has also helped him through the hard and demanding life of a potter in a world where the place for the slow and handmade course is inexorably eroding. Though the objects he makes are no longer Japanese in form or content he feels a sense of achievement in having been able to do solo shows in Japan and the UK this past year.

As the first recipient of the Janet Mansfield Award Rowan was given a space to work and fire at the Fule International Ceramic Museums in Fuping this year. Of his time in China and the art that he has created here he has said that 'to work in a place where people have been producing ceramics for a few thousand years is at once inspiring yet also overwhelming. The span of time is beyond my comprehension.

How do I fit into this place this time? I have been generously given this opportunity and have taken on the challenge to work in an unfamiliar environment with unknown tools and materials. Following my intuition and a faith in the process, these works are a result of that effort.'

His studio was right next to ours, where we, part of an Indian delegation of artists, were also working for the opening of the Indian ceramic art museum at Fule. The palpable intensity and single minded focus that he maintained in the midst of the noise and distractions of a studio full of unknown artists, tourists, children, and workers was a lesson in centring. The sound of paddling and scraping clay became a soft backdrop to the intermittent waves of human generated sounds and machine cacophony that fill the studio spaces all day. Firing the kiln itself was a study in patience. As the three days of firing rolled by with the quiet sounds of the fire crackling in the wood fired kiln outside our studio, our own pace grew slower, more contemplative. The work that emerged after two further days of cooling was complete, contained, self assured, and brought all of us around in quiet contemplation. Their presence was so strong they needed no words. A true master, he has through his calm focus brought our own ways of being into sharper definition. It has been a unique privilege to be able to watch this intensely private artist communicate in the common language of clay, the language he feels the most at home in.

Sharbani Das Gupta is an artist and writer based in the USA. Text originally printed in the exhibition catalogue. Images courtesy of Dr I Chi Hsu and the FuLe International Ceramic Museums.

