

MONIKA GASS SPEAKS TO

LUCIEN KOONCE

I have followed you on social media for nearly fifteen years, and I continue to see your amazing pieces; they are so beautiful! How did you come to create such awesome surfaces, colours and forms?

What I make now has been a continuous journey for about that same period of time, beginning back in 2009. I will elaborate on the specific event for this present body of work in a bit. It all started with employing the “kurinuki” technique when making my vessels, and, during that beginning period, starting to fire with Chris Gustin in his anagama, as well as becoming friends with Jeff Shapiro. Gustin’s vast knowledge of wood firing presented



Chawan/Tea Bowl, h 9.5 cm x w 12.7 cm x ø 12.7 cm, hand formed and hollowed (kurinuki technique) stoneware clay and oribe glaze, oxidation fired to cone 9

the ideal environment to fire my work. And I consider Jeff to be a mentor as I have looked to his knowledge and creativity for inspiration. Coupled to this is the interest I have had in the Japanese aesthetic regarding wood firing, as well as their traditions surrounding the various forms that I make, such as the chawan/tea bowl and the guinomi/sake cup. Jeff Shapiro’s knowledge in this area helped to solidify the direction I wanted to explore in my ceramics.

What kinds of expectations did you have when you started, what kind of ceramics did you start with, and were there ever changes in forms and/or material, as well as the firing process?

I had never worked with clay until I was a student attending East Carolina University in my hometown of Greenville, NC. I fell in love with the medium, ended up majoring in it and getting my BFA. I went on to get my MFA in ceramics at the University of Iowa and have continued to work with clay for all the years since, although sometimes rather sporadically. My beginning work was done on the wheel, and I focused on making covered containers. I had

undergraduate professors that allowed me to explore this direction at will, and studio mates that were always willing to give advice and technical help. Once I entered my graduate studies, I made the decision to stop throwing and to work with hand-building, even if I had no clue as to what method I wanted to pursue. Too, my previous two years were spent making vessels, and now I found myself wanting to embark upon sculptural forms.

The clay studio at U. of Iowa had a very large extruder, most likely industrial, which was used for making clay and processing slops. This is where I began to investigate the use of extrusion for making work. At that time, 1979, extrusion was not used in the clay studio

Thus, I found myself in an environment where getting back into making was ideal. And it was here that I began working on a body of hand-built work that drew from folk art, and I was introduced to wood firing on a much greater level than I ever experienced in college.

Life being what life can be, after many years of being in the Seagrove area, I transitioned into teaching and was an adjunct with the University of North Carolina – Charlotte, teaching in the Ceramics Department. And, as it seems to go for me, anytime a new chapter in my life starts, my work changes. And while this was a period of reconnecting to academics as far as



Guinomi/Sake Cup, h 7 cm x w 6.4 cm x ø 6.4 cm, hand-carved, hollowed (kurinuki technique) stoneware clay, shino glaze, iron-rich clay slip brushwork, natural ash glaze, wood fired (anagama) for five days to cone 12

as it is today. Back then there were very few ceramicists employing that method.

Despite having good success in the ceramics field with these forms, once I graduated, real life kicked in and I found the years slowly clicking away without making work, at least physically. The mental aspect of creating never left.

Eventually I found myself connecting with the history and traditions of North Carolina pottery, and I ended up buying land in the Seagrove, NC area and setting up a studio. For those unfamiliar with this region of North Carolina, it has a rich heritage of pottery making, and there are many contemporary studios in existence.



Guinomi/Sake Cup, h 7.6 cm x w 5 cm x ø 5 cm, hand formed and hollowed (kurinuki technique) stoneware, black oribe glaze, and natural ash glaze; wood fired (anagama) for five days to c/12

my ceramics making was concerned, not a lot of variety was made.

Finally, in 2008, I moved to western Massachusetts where my current journey began (see www.lucienkoonce.com/biography for images of work made during these various stages of my life). And it was, in reality, one of those instances where coincidences happen to line up correctly, or, you could say, being at the right place at the right time. You occasionally read about an event that changed someone's life, and for me it was the approach to my way of making and the forms.

I was a one year sabbatical replacement for the ceramics



Hanaire/Flower Vase, h 23 cm x w 10 cm x ø 10 cm, hand formed stoneware clay and oribe glaze; oxidation fired to cone 9

teacher at a private prep high school – Northfield Mount Hermon – here in western Massachusetts. Part of my duties was library coverage in the evenings. It was in January 2009 that I happened to look through that month's issue of *Ceramics Monthly* magazine and I came across an article about a Japanese ceramicist named Keneta Masanao. He is an eight generation Hagi potter, and what was so unique, at least to me, was that he used a hollowing out of the form technique called "kurinuki". The only way I can describe my reaction to this was it was like a light bulb turning on in my brain! As rudimentary as that process is, and long as it has been used by many cultures through out history, it was in this place and at this time that my work changed. In all of my previous years of making ceramics, I made forms that I would describe as very tight. Over the years I would see pots that were very loose and I envied that. But I came to accept the way I made work as just being who I was. Oh, but how that changed on that single evening in the NMH library!

Do you come from a creative family?

That's a plain and simple answer. No, my parents were not artists, nor went to art museums, and art didn't hang on the walls of our home. And I was never into art. I took what I had to in grade school, and only took one art course in high school. But it was in my last year of high school that I did get exposure to the Art Department at East Carolina University through friends who were students there. But I attribute my starting in college, after being out of high school for three years, to a friend I had who was in the Interior Design Department, which was part of the Fine Arts Department. In my defence, I can say that I have always liked architecture and home furnishings; it was something that was part of who I was, I guess. After seeing what the students in that department were doing with a house owned by the college, I made the decision to start college.

The one of the requirements for the Fine Art Department was that you had to take several three-dimensional courses, such as sculpture, jewellery design, ceramics, etc., and several two-dimensional courses, such as commercial art, painting, printmaking, etc. Long story short, I never took an interior design course. The moment I sat down and tried to centre a lump of clay on a kick wheel, I was smitten! It was relatively easy for me to progress quickly, I could comprehend the forms of vases, cups, tea pots, etc., and fire was involved! I remember walking around the art building and seeing painting and sculptures, and wondering how someone managed to think in such a manner to make those compositions. But pots, I could fully understand. Of course, as I continued in my studies through the college years, I began to think in such a way that allowed me to understand that thought process.

You work as a professional artist, you are well connected and online selling appears fruitful. But in reality, how hard is it?

Despite how it may appear, I am still trying to figure that piece out. I have a few galleries that represent me, and sales through them can be unpredictable, which reflects, in my opinion, the economics at any given time. While buying work through my website is available, sales are not frequent. And I price my work on my website for the same price that my galleries do as I will not undercut them.

The internet has definitely made it much easier to reach potential clients throughout the world, but there are so many in this field, thus the competition is great. I have always said that there is no other medium quite like clay for what you can do with it. So there are many niches for people's work to fall under. I think it all boils down to if your work "speaks" to a prospective buyer. And there are so many reasons people buy – is it for investment, to use the pieces daily, to decorate with, etc.? Yes, it is hard.

Tell us a bit about your secrets, great crazy GREEN colours, some technical details, – what is the most fascinating thing for you?

I don't really have any secrets. Wood firing and its success depends on so many factors, which, seemingly, can change from one firing to the next. As I mentioned above, I have been fortunate to fire for many years, starting back



Wood fired Chawan, h 10 cm x w 12.7 cm x ø 12 cm, hand-carved, hollowed (kurinuki technique) stoneware clay, shino glaze, iron-rich clay slip brushwork, natural ash glaze, wood fired (anagama) for five days, cone 12



Guinomi/Sake Cup, h 5.7 cm x w 6.35 cm x ø 6.6 cm, hand formed (kurinuki technique) black stoneware clay, shino glaze, natural ash glaze, wood fired (anagama) for five days to cone 12

in 2009, with Chris Gustin. And over time I have learned where to place things in the anagama for the effects I hope for. Shino glazes have been wonderful to work with, as have various “wild” clays I secure from time to time. Also, I believe that clay colour is important as to how it responds to the form and associated glazes.

Regarding the green oribe glaze, I have been fascinated by this glaze since first discovering the work of Shigemasa Higashida, who is a Japanese oribe master. I have dabbled with monochrome oribe starting back in 2010. But it has been only recently, 2020, that I began to investigate it in a serious manner. I found numerous glaze recipes online and experimented with them, and the firing is straight oxidation in an electric kiln.

What will come next? Will you be working in your typical style and going deeper, and are there new things coming up? Tell us about your wishes and inspirations.

Currently I am building two wood kilns back to back on a central chimney. One is a small down-draft kiln, and the other is a tunnel kiln. Since Covid, I have not wood fired and have been working on getting these two kilns complete. Paying as I go makes it a slow process, for the materials involved are expensive. But I am excited about the prospects of having these kilns at my studio and looking forward to gaining a deeper knowledge of firing. I know the learning curve will be difficult, despite the exposure I have had while being involved in communal firings. But I believe that being in complete control of loading and firing is necessary for advancing my work. Thus, I see my vessels staying along the same lines, but I do want to expand into more sculptural forms. Despite all of what I have made over the years, I consider myself a vessel maker; they are what I feel confident in. But it will be challenging and an opportunity for growth in making sculpture.

Last, but not least, as I enter into the remaining years of life, my hopes are to continue to keep making work and fully navigate all that comes with wood firing. Being a ceramicist defines me, and I can't imagine doing anything other than working in clay.

MONIKA GASS

Graduate ceramist, art historian, writer, curator. Council Member of IAC/AIC.

Lucien M. Koonce

EDUCATION: University of Iowa; Iowa City, IA., Master of Fine Arts (Ceramics), University of Iowa; Iowa City, IA., Master of Arts (Ceramics), East Carolina University; Greenville, NC., Bachelor of Fine Arts (Ceramics). Please see his website for the long list of exhibitions. His awards: 2nd Place: International Ceramics Juried Exhibition, The Center for Contemporary Art, Benmeister, NJ. Juror: Garth Johnson. Best in Show: Shino Splendor, District Clay Gallery, Washington, DC. Juror: Joe Hicks. Honourable Mention: Workhouse Clay International 2017, Workhouse Arts Center, Lorton, VA. Juror: Chris Gustin. Syracuse University Shaped Clay Society Award: The Almighty Cup, Gandee Gallery, Fabius, NY. Juror: Jeremy Randall. 1st Place, Honourable Mention: Drink This, The Workhouse International Ceramic Cup Show, Workhouse Arts Center, Lorton, VA (2015); Juror: Phil Rogers. Honourable Mention: The Clay Cup, Icon, Vessel, Canvas, George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO. (2012); Juror: Pete Pinnell.

LUCIEN M. KOONCE

12 Kingsley Avenue
Haydenville, MA 01039
413.268.7186 (studio/home)
lmkoonce@mindspring.com
www.lucienkoonce.com
<http://lmkoonceceramics.blogspot.com>

