

The Log Book

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Special Issue **Developing Clay Bodies**

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Place to Place

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In my relatively short pursuit of a career in ceramics, I have lived and worked in Utah, Tennessee and Kentucky (USA), as well as Australia and China. I would suspect with today's trends of national and international ceramics residencies and job market uncertainty, this geographical hop is more common than not, at least at the start of one's career. Not living in any of these areas for longer than three years, each move brought with it the opportunity and obstacle of reconfiguring my clay body recipes. While it is true that nowadays materials can be shipped virtually anywhere to accommodate our own global hopping, it is however, often not necessary or practical to actually do so. Instead, I have learned to adapt my stoneware recipes to what is economical and available, while fulfilling my aesthetic and functional needs. In Utah I developed

Stacking Boxes by
Lindsay Oesterritter,
20cm in height, 2009.
Iron rich stoneware,
press mould, reduction
cooled.
Photograph: Lindsay Oesterritter

Bowl, by Lindsay
Qestemitter, 19 cm
in height, 2008. Iron
rich stoneware, wheel
thrown, reduction
cooled.

Photograph, Lindsay Qestemitter



a foundation of material knowledge, in Tennessee I learned more about where materials are mined, and since have developed a better understanding of local materials and how place can directly influence the aesthetics of what is being made.

During my research at Utah State University in Logan I started to decipher the properties of raw ceramic materials. The studio was equipped with an extensive assortment of materials and experimenting was not only encouraged, it was expected. Along with developing my own clay, it was participating in an environment of shared information and experimentation that became integral to my knowledge of materials.

As a processes oriented maker, I started my own testing by mixing existing recipes that followed general stoneware guidelines. From these initial tests I selected a basic recipe of two fireclays mixed in equal parts. This then became the body that I would eventually hone for several years. I appreciated its simplicity. It opened nicely when trimmed, rarely warped in the kiln, and had a nice fired surface. However, it was not agreeable to throw with, and I wanted it to be slightly darker and more vitreous. Aesthetically it was important that the surface had a variation in texture, never looking too smooth or shiny. Functionally I needed it to hand-build and throw well. Because I rarely use glaze, even as a liner, it also needed to be watertight. I experimented with several different ball clays to aid in plasticity and iron rich clays to darken the fired colour. I also added sand, grog, and even coarse quartz in several differing mesh sizes, to increase surface variation. The bowl illustrated at left is a good example of the phenomena I started calling the 'blueberry effect'. The lighter peach and yellow colours were caused by using green cottonwood in a reduced cooling atmosphere. The darker speckles or blueberries are due to the larger particles of sand and quartz fluxing at peak temperatures. The blueberry effect is always more prominent in the front of the kiln (near the firebox), due to the large amount of flyash.

As there were so many materials to choose from at USU, I literally could select whichever ball clay or iron rich clay worked the best. It wasn't until I left Utah, moving to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, as a resident artist at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, that I had to order, buy, and pick up materials on my own. Availability and shipping cost became major considerations and often determined whether or not I could use them. Some of the materials I had been using in Utah were mined in California and were simply not used in Tennessee.

Another important development that occurred at Arrowmont was



Vase by Lindsay Oesteritter, 25.5 cm in height, 2008.
Iron rich stoneware,
wheel thrown,
reduction cooled.
Photograph David Peters

my interest in the use of local materials. Just before leaving Utah, I started to experiment with found materials, and I was now living on the western border of North Carolina, an area where local materials were both readily available and widely used. North Carolina has long been a haven for ceramic artists due to the copious amounts of natural raw materials found there, including clays that can be fired to cone 10 straight from the ground. These clays often contain many impurities, such as quartz and iron, which naturally achieve characteristics I had previously tried to create using mixed particle sizes and meshes of grog and sand. I realised that this quality which appealed to me is eliminated in industrial processing. 'Stacking Boxes' (see photograph on page 25)

is made from 70% local clay, introduced to me by friend and woodfire potter Josh Copus, in Marshall, NC. I dried it, crushed it by hand, and selectively removed the largest rocks of quartz. Not wishing to refine the clay, I chose instead to adapt my working process to suit it. By using a press mould it was possible to make these boxes without screening the local material. The clay cracked around chunks of quartz and the organic material burned out, leaving it craggy and open.

While local materials have a complexity and organic quality that is lost with industrial refinement, store bought products are more standardised and consistent. In moving from place to place there is a definite tug-of-war between needing predictable results from the kiln and exploring less certain, but more interesting outcomes of local materials I knew I would eventually be leaving. Experimenting with raw materials continues to be an ongoing process and part of what I enjoy about being a ceramic artist.

This past summer I had the good fortune to work as a visiting artist in residence at Strathnairn Arts Association, just outside of Canberra (NSW, Australia). I was attracted to the idea of working in Australia, in particular because of the potential insight I might gain working first-hand with new materials and in the landscape that influenced many contemporary Australian woodfire ceramic artists whose work I admire. Several of the artists I encountered talked about how they adapted their own recipes in order to utilize locally available materials. I suppose this resourcefulness is partly because of their smaller ceramic industry. Also, Australia's landscape is expansive, offering constant panoramic views and many of the communities are rural. It is not surprising that a potter would look to their backyard as a resource as well as for inspiration. One experience that stands out for me is meeting Yuri Wiedenhofer, a woodfire potter in Tanja, NSW. I spent several days sightseeing with him, hiking along the forested coast and in Mimosas National Park. Yuri – with his knowledge gained from experience, has an inspiring ability to see his environment with fresh eyes. For him, everything has the potential of being used somehow. His ceramic work, home, and studio were all built by hand, using the resources of his surroundings. Throughout his studio there were bags of collected materials and beautifully made pots, each with a story of the material from which they were made.

In the short three months that I spent in Australia I experimented with eight different high-fire bodies, mixtures of store bought and locally found materials. 'Whiskey Cups' (see photograph on page 30) is made



*Whiskey Cups by
Lindsay Oesterritter,
each 7 cm in height,
2009. Iron rich
stoneware, Strathnairn
slip, wheel thrown,
reduction cooled.*

Photographs Lindsay Oesterritter

from 50% Bennett's terracotta that is dug just outside of Adelaide, and 50% of a store bought brown stoneware. I wedged in a high refractory white material found in Yass, which was given to me by Ian Jones (a woodfire potter in Gundaroo, NSW) and slipped the cups with clay I dug from the entrance of Strathnairn Arts Association's property.

I continue to use combinations of local and store bought supplies in my current studio in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and enjoy exploring the variations of both. I see the nature of what I do in the woodfire kiln as showcasing clay, highlighting aspects of it with flame work and ash deposits. A clay's functional and physical properties often lead me to a new idea or process as much as my daily surroundings do. The materials I work with are inherently linked to my ideas and surroundings.

Each time I move there is always an initial period of responding to a new location. Meeting new people and organising myself in a different routine and landscape helps to keep my ideas fresh and investigative. I have learned about a spectrum of materials and met amazing craftspeople throughout my travels, and continue to digest these experiences in my work. However, when I look at the work I admire, it is because it achieves a resonance and confidence that I feel can only develop when location is permanent, when the creative explorations are allowed the time to be constant, fluid and intimate to the maker's knowledge of place. While travelling will always be a priority in my life, I look forward to being able to return to a home, studio, and landscape into which I can delve.



Lindsay Oesterritter recently moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky where she is the new assistant professor of ceramics at Western Kentucky University and is looking forward to introducing the students to woodfiring. She studied at Utah State University earning her MFA and at the University of Louisville for her MA.