



# *Playing with*



# At the annual Fuego Friday, ceramics faculty and students give the community a chance to participate in an ancient art.

**O**n Halloween night, the first cold snap of autumn nipped at trick-or-treaters and crept as close as it dared to flames flickering outside the University of Oklahoma ceramics lab just north of the research campus. The chill was no match for the festive atmosphere of Fuego Friday, where a human flower pot, a few ghouls and a dead ringer for Vincent Price warmed themselves around three glowing kilns.

In its ninth year, the event started as a public iron pour on Parrington Oval, organized by OU associate professor of art Jonathan Hils. Inviting the public to join OU students in creating art is not new, but the proximity to molten metal slurped into molds like liquid Jell-O heightened audience appreciation. For the past two years, Fuego Friday has welcomed visitors to another visual spectacle—the transformation of humble clay into functional works of art. *continued*

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A sample ring taken from the salt kiln works like a gauge, letting Stuart Asprey know the fire is at the proper temperature and also that volunteers have shoveled in enough salt to bring out the orange-peel effect desirable in salt firings.

Jiaxin Jiang

# Fire

By LYNETTE LOBBAN



Lynette Lobban

Lizzie Evans, an OU art minor, celebrates Halloween at the Ninth Annual Fuego Friday, sponsored by the OU School of Art and Art History and the Red Clay Faction.

“One of the reasons for doing this is to raise awareness of the ceramics department and to give the public an idea of what we’re doing down here,” says Stuart Asprey, assistant professor of ceramics in the School of Art and Art History. Besides, it’s great fun.

Projected onto a make-shift screen, the original 1931 *Frankenstein* greeted visitors to the event. While Boris Karloff cowered from a burning branch, more than 50 students, faculty and curiosity seekers were drawn like heat-seeking missiles to the fiery kilns. Asprey moved among them with the energy and intensity of a three-ring circus master, checking times and temperatures with giant gloved hands while tossing out tidbits of science and history.

“This process hasn’t really changed in thousands of years,” he says. “I have a real appreciation for things that are low-tech, for things that don’t need a micro-chip to make them work.”

Days earlier the professor and members of the Red Clay Faction, the student ceramics group, had set the process in motion, preparing a raku kiln, a salt kiln and the main attraction—a cone 10 kiln, which would be opened at its peak of 2300 degrees. If all went well, the firings would reach their peaks within a two-hour time frame.

For a nominal fee, guests could select a pot or vase made by art students and faculty, paint it with their choice of glaze and watch as it was placed into the kiln. An hour or so later, they could see how the glaze changed in the firing process and take their creation home at the end of the evening. Proceeds from the event will help the Red Clay Faction assist students with travel expenses to a na-



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Ceramics graduate student David Stevens puts a lid on a small trashcan where he will place a pot from the salt kiln. The smoke and ashes from the fire in the trashcan will enhance the glaze as it cools.

tional ceramics conference in Rhode Island this spring.

“Making a glaze is much like following a recipe,” says Asprey. “Some students tinker and make their own glazes. For Fuego Friday, we used traditional American raku glazes. The glaze dries very fast. The clay body actually pulls in the liquid. At 1800 to 1900 degrees, they can look inside the kiln and watch the glazes changing from molten to a solid on the spot.”

Ceramics graduate students David Stevens and a volunteer carry in the raku kiln like a palanquin, holding onto poles extending from the front and back of a metal box, the size of a small trunk. Like many who work with clay, Stevens talks about fire as if it were a living thing. The fire needs a constant supply of oxygen, he says, and when it has consumed all that is available inside the kiln, it pulls oxygen from the glaze and the clay, resulting in the intense colors associated with raku.

“The fire is selfish,” says Stevens, “and it wants to live.”

As the raku firing process was nearing completion, Stevens filled small trash cans with newspaper that he lit with a blowtorch and immediately covered to smother the blaze. The ashes from the



AT LEFT: Ceramics graduate students David Stevens, right, and Keith Lebaron carried in the raku kiln like a palanquin, holding onto poles extending from the front and back of a metal box, the size of a small trunk.

AT RIGHT: OU alumna Jade McIntosh, of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, applies a raku glaze to a pot made by a ceramics student or faculty member. Guests were invited to paint with the provided glazes and take home a fired pot at the end of the evening.

paper reduce the temperature of a pot pulled fresh from the kiln, and the ensuing smoke darkens the glaze to a metallic finish.

The brick salt kiln, built last year by Asprey and students, resembles a tidy fairy tale house with one notable exception. Smoke poured from the chimney, and flames were visible through every chink in the brick as if the Three Little Pigs had let a house party get out of control. When the fire inside reached a certain temperature, volunteers began shoveling coarse salt through the ports. The work was hard and fast, like stoking a firebox on a moving train. Even on a cold night, volunteers worked up a sweat while Asprey offered up another chemistry lesson.

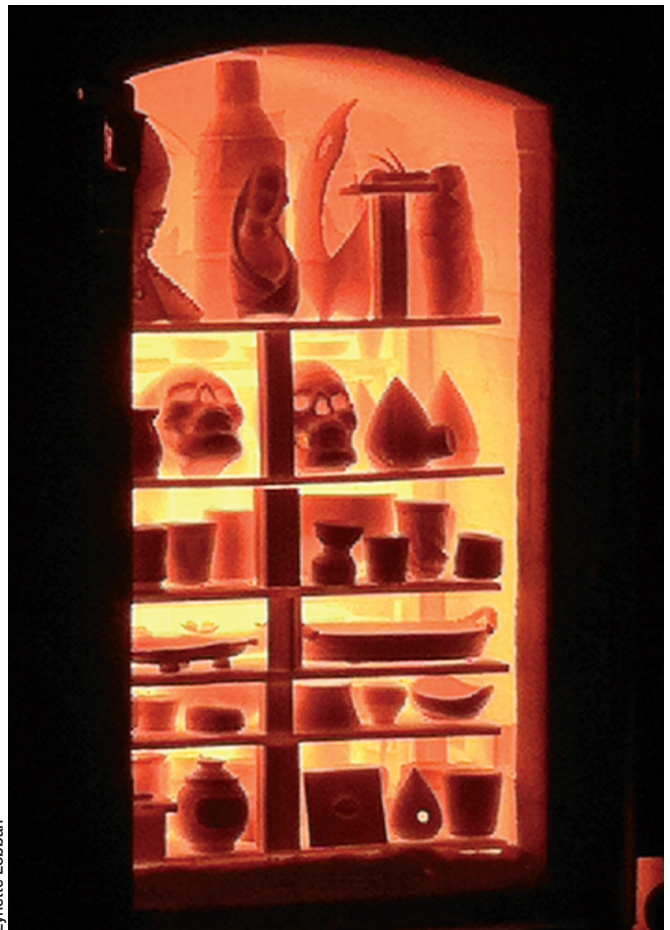
“The salt vaporizes because of the high temperature, and the sodium molecules separate from the chlorine molecules,” he says. “So basically the sodium in the salt is attracted to the pots. It gives the pot an orange peel effect.”

Asprey kept tabs on the quantity of salt by pulling a series of clay rings from inside the kiln with something akin to a fireplace poker. When he was satisfied with the color and texture of the sample ring, he let the volunteers put down their shovels. *continued*

Ceramics students helped build the salt kiln at the ceramics lab. Resembling a small brick house, the kiln has spaces between bricks for the salt to be shoveled in during the firing and a chimney for the smoke to escape.



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AT LEFT: Stuart Asprey, assistant professor of ceramics at OU, explains the workings of the Cone 10 kiln in the background. A Cone 10 kiln can get up to 2300 degrees Fahrenheit. AT RIGHT: The grand finale of the evening was when Asprey demonstrated the quick-cooling technique where the kiln door is swung open at peak temperature, which not only quickly reduces the temperature, but also enhances the color of the glazes. Many of the objects were Halloween-themed in observance of Fuego Friday.

Throughout the evening, Asprey referred to a paper notebook, a log of past firings to compare times and temperatures and to record how the kilns were performing that night. The firings in the raku and salt kilns had gone off like clockwork. All that was left was the grand finale, opening the door of the third kiln when it reached its target temperature of 2350 degrees Fahrenheit.

“The rush of cold air into the kiln quickly cools the glazes, and a lot of the iron sulphates transform their surface color from brick reds to more yellow ochre ambers,” he explained. “When that door opens, it is a visual spectacle that you cannot top.”

Stevens and Asprey had learned the “quick reduction” method from Doug Casebeer, ceramics artistic director at Anderson Ranch in Colorado. Every semester Casebeer conducts a two-day, artist-in-residence workshop at OU and shares what he has learned during the previous year. During a summer program at the ranch, they needed a way to speed cool the kilns for the next class. Casebeer discovered that opening the door at the kiln’s peak temperature not only cooled off the ceramics more quickly, but also enhanced the glaze. This would be the second time Asprey and crew would at-

tempt Casebeer’s technique for a live audience.

Even on a cold night, 2350 degrees will take your eyebrows off at six feet. One couple whose costumed child came dressed head to toe in cardboard moved off the front line. Conversations hushed as all outside lights were extinguished. The crowd waited for the door to open on a blazing kiln as though waiting for a fire-breathing dragon to open its mouth.

With a tug from Stevens, the door swung open to accompanying “oohs” and “aahs” from the crowd. Asprey had not oversold his product. The visual spectacle was surreal. Against a fiery backdrop, Halloween-themed skulls and limbs, vases and saints shimmered in the golden heat—cooling, but not cracking.

“It’s great when everything goes off this well,” Asprey concluded. “The creation of ceramics is an art, but it’s also science and history. There are potters everywhere. If any visitors or alumni want to come hang out at the ceramics lab, I welcome them with open arms.”

*Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.*