

## Marcia Selsor - Alternative Firings Workshop in Kilmun

The first word that springs to mind when reflecting on this workshop is ABUNDANCE – of ideas, fabulous pots, fabulous food, company, sunshine and surroundings. Not to mention the oohs and aahs that greeted each new wonder as it emerged from the obvara mix or saggar.

More than twenty of us met at Moira Ferguson's wonderfully welcoming home/studio on the beautiful Holy Loch. As the workshop began the rain, which had been relentless, stopped and the sun appeared.

Marcia briefly ran through the different techniques we would cover and showed examples, as well as offering tips about the construction of raku kilns.

Then we were outside and the firings began. The first technique was Obvara. The recipe involves: 1kg strong white: flour + 1 or 2 packets of fast acting / instant or fresh yeast + 1 tablespoon sugar + 2.6 gallons of water, mixed, allowed to ferment over three days, stirring frequently.

Warm and bubbling buckets of this mix were distributed to the five (!! ) raku kilns that were to be used in Moira's garden.

The kilns were filled with our pots and fired to 870° C (below 805C it's too slimy to work). Once the temperature had been reached the fun began. Pots were lifted using tongs, dipped briefly into the obvara mix then lifted out to gasps as the pots changed in an instant from white to a mix of deep browns and blacks, with white on more exposed, faster drying edges. They were dipped quickly into a bucket of water and laid on the ground, and on we went until the ground was covered with pots. This was a high energy, exhilarating technique, which I occasionally found a little scary with so many people milling around the fiery kilns, gas canisters, buckets and pots.

Ceramic saggars were next, some purpose made, some more ad-hoc using flowerpots. Wood shavings/sawdust went on the bottom of the saggars, then stands raised the pots off the bottom, then the pots went in, then we chose from a mix of sulphates, carbonates, oxides, and/or seaweed, lavender, salts, copper wire, thin strips of steel wool. Kilns were heated fairly fast to 898°C and held for 15-20 minutes, then left to cool. Opening the saggars late in the afternoon led to more oohs and aahs as each new beauty was unveiled.



Marcia introducing herself and how she works.



Obvara firing: pots taken, hot out of the rakukiln...



...then dipped into the Obvara mix...



..where it takes on it's colour before its dipped in water and left to cool.



Some Obvara results.

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Preparing ceramic saggars.



Saggars opened up after firing.



Saggars being packed in a raku kiln.



Foil saggars being packed.



Unwrapping the foil.



Colourful results!

After a very sociable, noisy meal on Saturday night we met on Sunday morning in the studio for work with foil saggars. There were jars of nitrates, chlorides and sulphates waiting for us, dissolved in hot water in a ratio of 25 g to ¼ cup (roughly 3.3 tablespoons?) available to create colour effects. As these are toxic substances, great care was advised – nitro gloves, apply with cotton wool/ cotton buds, fast clear up of any spills etc. A few of us opted to fill our saggars instead with Epsom salts, table salt, steel wool, copper wire etc. - kinder to the environment but offering a smaller colour range.

Pots were wrapped in double foil and tightly closed so no toxins would escape. Kilns were filled, tumble stacked, keeping the sides free so rising flame wouldn't burn up any piece of foil in its path and fired up to 735°C. When the kilns and foil had cooled the pots in all their variety were revealed to more oohs and aahs.

Like a magician saving her best trick till last, the final technique involved horsehair and feathers. Pots were again tumble stacked and kilns fired to just under 600°C. Then the pots were inveigled out using wire coat hangers or occasionally tongs, and quickly rolled in damp sand overlaid with a few horsehairs and feathers. The smaller the rim of the pot and the simpler its form the easier it rolled. The effects were immediate and dramatic – thin black squiggles and feather imprints on white pots. A fabulous array of pots appeared, kilns were turned off and we were done. Cue loud applause all round.

Judging from the email and Facebook buzz afterwards this was a hugely inspiring workshop and I expect we'll see a lot more pots using these techniques in the months ahead.

Iain Campbell



Piping hot pots being rolled over horsehair and feathers.



Pots cooling down.