

Marcia Selsor workshop

BY KEVIN ANDREW MORRIS

I was lucky enough to gain a space on this workshop which ran from 18-19 May 2019. It covered alternative firing processes including obvara, foil saggars, ceramic saggars and using horsehair & feathers.



It was lead by Marcia Selsor who had previously delivered this workshop for the SPA in 2016 and kindly hosted by Fran Marquis at Springfield Creative Arts in Arbroath.

In advance of the workshop participants were instructed to make pieces for the workshop using either porcelain, a fine raku clay or white grogged stoneware with no heavy grog (so that pieces could be burnished). A recipe* for a super fast terra sigillata was also provided by Marcia to be applied to our work before bisque firing between 965°C and 1000°C. It was recommended that a higher bisque might be more suitable for the obvara technique but not to fire the work too high so as to not lose the shine from burnishing.

We were also asked to bring underglazes or slips for extra colour, aluminum foil, cotton balls, copper sulphate, epsom salts, cobalt

sulphate, ferric chloride, sugar, salt, seaweed, weeds, feather, horse hair, copper carbonate, table salt, sawdust, wood, thin copper wire, bronze or steel wool, miracle grow, combustible materials and of course food for a shared lunch on both days. Each person was asked to provide their own ceramic saggars if possible.

After setting up the vast array of raku kilns, burners and buckets in the garden, we had a quick introduction by Marica and started with the obvara technique. The work was heated to 900°C before being plunged into the obvara mixture** working well across textured surfaces and the slip cast 'Arbroath Smokies' I had brought. It was important not to let the temperature drop below 815°C and recommended to try different types of flour. With fish on the brain and the pleasant aroma of burnt toast in the garden it was time for lunch.

Following lunch we prepared our foil and ceramic saggars. Ferric chloride copper sulphate (mixed 1:4 parts water) along with other additions such as epsom salts and the ever popular miracle grow(!) were sprinkled and dabbed using cotton wool on to the surface of our work before being tightly wrapped in two layers of tin foil making sure that the foil touched the surface of the pot. The foil saggars were tumble stacked into several raku kilns and heated to 745°C, soaking for five minutes, then allowing to cool before being unwrapped. It was important to keep an eye on the foil to make sure it wasn't fired too hot or it would start to disintegrate. The ceramic saggars were then filled with a range of materials before being loaded into a gas kiln and fired to 920°C soaking for 10 to 20 minutes and left to cool over night. Myself and the Aberdeen Potters drove back up the coast that evening but those that stayed in Arbroath enjoyed dinner at the Old Boatyard Restaurant.



We returned the next day to unwrap our foil saggars in the sunshine, a few of us decided to apply more of the chemicals and refire our works as we felt the effect was quite subtle, whilst those that wanted to practiced the obvara technique. We lunched in the sun. While the ceramic saggars cooled we set up for the horsehair and feather technique, works were loaded into raku kilns and fired to 600°C. Once hot they were removed from the kiln and placed onto trays containing sand to avoid thermal shock. Old kiln shelves had also been used over the weekend for this purpose. Different types of feather and hair (including pig!) were applied to the work through various means including dropping, using tweezers, pulling hair 'through' the work like a wire and 'drawing' using longer feathers. Saggars were unloaded and results from this full weekend were reviewed.

I thoroughly enjoyed attending my first SPA workshop and left with a new found confidence to try out some of these techniques in my practice, I also had the opportunity to share them with students at Grays School of Art soon after.

*Marcia Selsor's Super fast Terra Sigilata

1 litre plastic bottle filled 3/4 with water.
250 grams of ball clay, shake well.
Add 5-7 drops of Darvon 7 or sodium silicate.
Shake again.

Let it sit for an hour. If there is any clear water at the top, add a drop or two more sodium silicate. Shake and let settle.

Put the bottle in a bowl large enough to hold the contents. Puncture the bottle above the dark sediment at the bottom. Remove the lid and let it drain out the hole into the bowl. Put the terra sig into a storage container. Spray or apply with a good soft brush.

Burnish with a soft foam sponge, or a soft plastic bag. Don't touch the piece until it is fired or the oil from your fingers can leave marks.

**Jane Jeremyn's recipe for Obvara

Mix 1 kg flour / 1 or 2 sachets dried yeast / 1 tablespoon sugar and 8-10 litres warm water.

Leave covered in a warm place for three days, stirring frequently.

Paul Fessler's Lemon Pudding

Mix the juice of 10 lemons with 1 tin of condensed milk and 900ml of single cream. In another bowl add layers of this mixture and digestive biscuits. Mix some sugar and cinnamon, sprinkle this on the top. Cover the bowl with clingfilm and put it in the fridge overnight.