

Tulliallan: Zahed Taj-Eddin

BY BELINDA GLENNON

From when I first saw the photographs of Zahed's beautifully formed sculptures I found them quite captivating so was immediately keen to watch his demonstrations. The Friday evening talks gave us more information about what to expect and this was the first mention of Egyptian Faience which he would also be demonstrating.



Zahed was born in Aleppo in Syria. There he studied Fine Art, he told us that this was quite a classical training where he was taught skills in sculpture and anatomy. His work both the sculptures and his work recreating faience shabtis all have a strong narrative relating to his home and the recent atrocities in Syria.

On the Saturday Zahed began by telling us some of the history of Egyptian Faience. His background as an archeologist and his research as part of his PhD means he has an incredible understanding of this ancient material. Faience is virtually clay free and was made from the simplest raw ingredients of crushed desert sand and pebbles, some ash from plants, or salts from dried lakes, with some colouring oxides. This material when fired produces a beautiful finish resembling semi precious stones such as turquoise or lapis lazuli.

Faience was used from 4th millennium BC until 7th century AD all across Egypt, Persia and Mesopotamia. Zahed, in his exacting research, found a method to replicate this practice which had been lost. He has exhibited his 'Nu' Shabtis widely in museums and galleries where they provide a comment on our modern lives, in contrast to their previous purpose in Ancient Egypt as funeral figurines ready to serve their master in the afterlife.

So using a mixture of sand, silica, soda ash and copper oxide, Zahed made a paste. This paste is not plastic like clay at all, although he said you could add clay aid this. His demonstration illustrated what a difficult material it was to work with as he had trouble getting the consistency right, the sand he was using was too coarse and a tiny drop too





much water would make it unworkable! He used small moulds to show how it could be used as well as using his 'Nu' Sabti mould to make a figurine. A couple of pieces of faience went into the raku kiln and came back as stunning turquoise amulets!

Later in the day Zahed moved onto creating one of his beautiful bull sculptures. He deftly formed the body and legs from seemingly simple slabs of crackle clay he shaped into a cylinder for the body and head and cones for the legs. With practice and skill these soon took on the bull's form, with the head and horns added last.

Zahed's assistant read us the fable he had written relating the story of his animals and their interactions which explained how this

story paralleled the political situation in Syria. The bulls symbolising the regime, the other animals are the people and the woman comes to challenge the bulls. I found this story and connecting Syria and his sculptures profoundly moving.

Zahed was a fantastic demonstrator, I felt honoured to see him work and hear his ancient and modern tales weaving history, archaeology, mythology, war, emigration, refugees all together, producing his intelligent and thought provoking art works.

Tulliallan: Peter Hayes

BY EILEEN WILSON

This was my first visit to Tulliallan and the Scottish Potter's Association (SPA) Spring Workshops, it's not that I hadn't heard about them or was not interested enough in ceramics to partake of the show; it was my unpredictable work-pattern in psychotherapy that made taking a whole weekend 'out' such a challenge.

However, it was time to take the plunge so the diary was cleared, the bags packed and I was off and heading North – revelling in the decadence of the situation – it was such a self-indulgent luxury! Plus, what would I do if I found it boring after paying for the whole weekend? I need not have feared – it was a fabulous experience...

My next dilemma was who to choose to watch – one ceramic artist the whole weekend, to get a real feeling of continuity; a beginning, middle and end to the actual projects shown or dip in and dip out of all three demonstrations as the fancy took me? I would class my ceramic approach as naturally erring towards hand-building and love the visual effects and immediacy of raku, but would dearly love to throw more confidently, so would it be Stuart Whatley?

The choice became clearer as I walked through the demonstrator's work areas, being wowed in turn by the figures created in Egyptian Faience by Syrian artist Zahed Taj-Eddin and Stuart Whatley's hand-thrown pieces but it was the colourful and intriguing mixed-media raku work of Peter Hayes, that caught my attention and stole my heart, so much so, I claimed a bit of Peter for myself by putting my name on one of his amazing and unique ceramic pieces.

Peter took us through the basics of making his 'rock and blade' mini sculptures, using a mix of both Raku clay for the base and Extra White Porcelain Paper Clay for the 'blade'. I was intrigued by the free and comfortable way he worked with the clay – and the audience, bringing them into play through sheer skill and mastery punctuated by telling stories about the ceramic disasters he had encountered in the past.

I was amazed and heartened in this eco-conscious age by the simple techniques and materials he used to shape the clay; egg thick twine or torn fabric strips of various thicknesses were wrapped around the clay which formed rough troughs and peaks in the sculptured rock bases making them appear old and weathered with age. The thinner blade shapes were roughly sliced off a block of white clay then shaped, edges finely moulded and punctured with holes before being set aside to dry. This in Peter's case was remarkably quick as he favours the use of a gas-fired blowtorch as encouragement! A mixture of excitement and trepidation arose as he played the flame vigorously over the sculpture's surface causing it to crackle and fume but against all the odds – remain intact. Amazingly, Peter can dry items in this way – ready for firing – in as little as five hours!

Firing was the next stage to experience and despite the cold wind the vast majority of the group filed out to watch this exciting process unfold. This was also our first real introduction to Peter's son Justin, whose earthy level-headedness proved to be the perfect foil to Peter's wild and creative spiritedness. This, in part, is what made their demonstration experience so effective and special – as together, they quite stole the show!

Justin was just as knowledgeable and enthusiastic a tutor as his father, never seeming to tire from explaining the mystery of raku and obvara-firing techniques. Obvara firing was something I had not heard of before so was intrigued to learn it was when items removed from the kiln at 900°C were plunged into a bucket containing a liquid 'sourdough' solution then left to cool in the



open. I was amazed as the flour and sugar concoction formed unique golden patterns on the cooling surface which instantly resembled aged bone, ash sprinkled on the solution's surface encouraged black specks to form.

Other hollow pieces became broken or exploded in the kiln which instead of being discarded, were lovingly fitted back together by Justin who used a variety of ingredients including liquid resin, colouring powders and vermiculite as glue. When cured, the pieces were buffed down to reveal lines of jewel-like coloured resin where the broken gaps had been – simply stunning. I could go on and on about Peter and Justin's raku double-act, but hope your appetite has been whetted enough for you to look him up for yourself or join in with a future opportunity such as this?

Happy potting...

Tulliallan: Stuart Whatley

BY KRISTA BLACK

What an inspirational weekend we had with the Scottish Potters association when Stuart traveled down from Edinbane Pottery on the Isle of Skye to demonstrate for us.



He brings with him a lifetime of experience, having started potting life with his dad in 1970's. The environment and landscape of Skye influence all aspects of his raw glazed pots, with sprigging detail of birds and fish impressions in gentle colours, reflecting the landscape. Fired in his handmade wood or salt kilns, he says his customers come to the pottery and, 'react to our landscape and take away a bit of Skye.'

Stuarts enthusiasm and love of his craft shines through in his demonstration, beginning Saturday with throwing techniques. His work is quite spontaneous, free flowing and seemingly effortless. He explains he, 'makes a bit of a mess,' slip and clay flying onto the shoes of the participants, meanwhile he keeps us engaged with stories of Skye and his workshop processes.

Stuart throws small squared off mug shapes, a planter, parts of two tea pots and a large plater. Most are decorated with a gentle

swoop of a textured rib giving interest and depth to the outside, which comes to life in the kiln, catching the sprigging details. The platter is thrown and is quickly altered with an expert hand that looks like an accident judging from the sharp intake of breath of the audience! He then slams down two 10lb balls of clay onto one another. He gently moves his hands a few times, and it's centered.

He still uses the marine plywood batt system made by him and his father in the 1970's. Many of his tools are handmade and designed for a specific purpose. Wound wire cutting tools, various expired credit cards and hewn wood tools. He shows us how to make a twisted brass wire cutting tool and passes everything around for us to see. He says he gets 'a real kick out of solving a problem.' He recounted needing a specific part for a piece of equipment, but because he lives so remotely it would entailed a two-hour round trip. He recalled waking in the middle of the night and realising, 'I've got it, I've thought of a homemade solution!'



On the second day, Stuart trims his thrown work, attaches handles and adds a neck to the lamp base. His pottery is made for purpose and truly functional, 'what's the point in making a handle that doesn't fit the hand?' He demonstrates three and two finger handles and pulls them from the squared off mugs and jug. Stuart reminds us to look at the negative space when making handles, likening it to calligraphy. He uses a chuck to support the lip of the pieces and trims the foot. When putting the teapot together, as with his other pieces, you can tell he has spent time considering the user. The handle placement is comfortable and there is a loop of clay to hold when pouring. He explains the most effective way to finish the spout so

it doesn't drip, and to throw the lid so that it is counterweighted and won't fall out when pouring.

A master craftsman, Stuart's forms, glazes and surface decoration are a collection of a lifetime of knowledge with an emphasis on functionality and a reflection of his environment on Skye. His methods are considered and practiced, whether in the studio or kiln room and he shares them generously with us over the weekend leaving us inspired. His years of knowledge and traditions are evident in his work.