



# Clayton Amemiya

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*Jan Garden Castro  
experiences sculpted clay  
through anagama firing*

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CLAYTON AMEMIYA IS A SEASONED ANAGAMA CRAFTSMAN WHO COMBINES ancient firing techniques he learnt in Okinawa with his own signature style. His ceramic processes begin with wheel-thrown and handmade forms. When the forms are leather hard, he may carve them and smudge on oxides that will interact with the wood ash during the firing. He woodfires the work using an anagama or semi-subterranean kiln. His main inspirations are Korean and Japanese pottery of the 15th and 16th centuries, specifically large Japanese storage jars and Korean rice bowls. The barrel vault on top of the fire brick is a mixture of clay and volcanic cinder. The kiln is about 11 feet long by four feet wide and four feet high. A tall brick chimney in the back releases steam and heat through dry-stacked bricks, which have some air between them and through the top, which is controlled by a damper. The chimney draws heat from the front to the back of the kiln.

Amemiya's pathway to ceramics is original and unexpected. The artist grew up on a Dole Plantation in Hawaii, where his father, aged 56 when Clayton was born, was a *luna*, a foreman in charge of a group of workers. "My father spoke only Japanese and, at that time, I didn't speak a word of Japanese. My mother spoke English because she was born in Hawaii. I never spoke Japanese until I went to the University of Hawaii. Even there, I couldn't speak it until I actually went to live in Japan," the artist related.<sup>1</sup> Each morning began early with a loud whistle or buzzer to wake everyone on the plantation. In his 20s, Amemiya became a United States Vice Consul, a diplomatic position at the United States Consulate General in Okinawa, for 13 months, and then he was transferred to the United States Embassy in Tokyo. There his friend, a secretary at the Consulate, introduced him to Seisho Kuniyoshi, a ceramics artist with whom he began studying forms of pottery.<sup>2</sup> Hamada Shoji, the greatest ceramics artist of his time, was Seisho's teacher. The two were close and Hamada's great collection of antiques benefitted from Seisho's great eye for antiques.

Facing page: View of the inside of the kiln at 90 hours.

Photo by Franco Salmoiraghi.

Top left: **Tsubo (Jar)**. 2015. Ceramic, woodfired. 13.5 x 13 x 13 in.

Top right: **Tsubo (Jar)**. 2015. Ceramic, woodfired. 16 x 13 x 13 in.

Below: **Pi'ihomua Series (No. 10)**.

2015. Ceramic with carved design, woodfired. 19 x 12 x 4 in.

Photos by Andrzej Kramarz, unless noted.







*Above: View of kiln interior before firing.*

*Photo by Clayton Amemiya.*

*Below: Amemiya's Jaboticaba tree.*

*Photo by Jan Castro.*

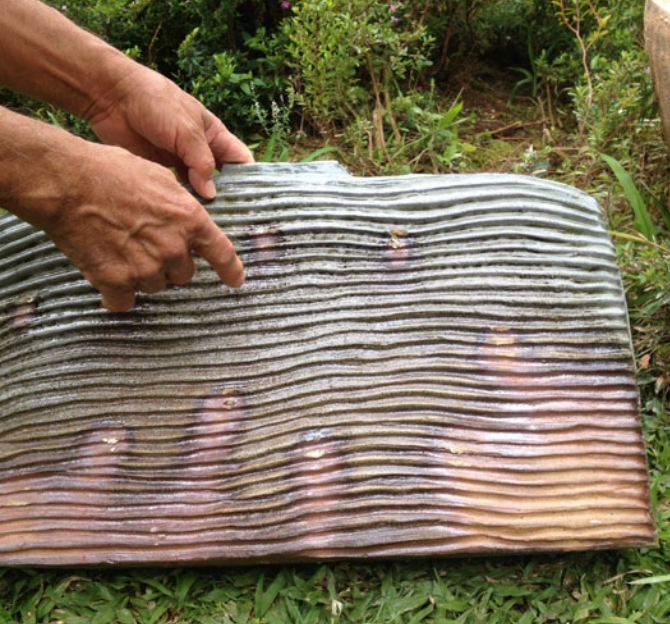


In 1976, Amemiya moved back to Hawaii; in 1979, he purchased three acres of land in Waiakea Uka in north Hilo, Hawaii. As he began his ceramics practice, he also worked to clear and cultivate the land, planting trees, flowers and botanicals native to Hawaii and Central America. In 1986, Seisho came over to help him build his kiln. The kiln, a small potter's studio and a modest gallery are each built into the landscape so that each setting is shaded and cooled by fruiting trees and plants with their own populations of birds, hens and roosters. One hen was strutting on the wood pile just before the big firing. Nature and animals are omnipresent in Amemiya's world. In one area, a bamboo forest that seems to soar about 50 feet high waves above the tops of tangerine, orange, avocado and other trees.

Anagama firing requires intensive preparation. For one, the artist fires 150 to 200 works at a time, so making the work is key. For two, the firing requires two and a half cords of Hawaiian Ohia wood, hand cut and split into small pieces. Ohia wood produces a distinct look, more olive green and yellow than the pine used in Japan to produce a bright green finish. Since the clay is unglazed, the differences in surface colour are based on places where the ash does or does not cover the clay during the firing process. Amemiya says, "I like to fire my pots with the anagama process because wood ash circulating in the kiln at high temperatures causes glazes to form in serendipitous, irregular patterns. Some parts of the clay surfaces remaining unglazed, showing how the flames 'paint' the pieces on their journey from firebox to chimney. The extended firing time over five days creates textures reminiscent of stone. In my pots, I see and feel the upland, rainforest environment where I live and work."<sup>3</sup>

Amemiya's ceramics processes incorporate Japanese, Korean and Chinese styles with his own patterns of carving and incising. Some





thrown pieces are in the style of Korean tea bowls. These are 'rough and smooth', 'earthy and sophisticated' at the same time.<sup>4</sup> Stephen Freedman, potter, gallerist and publisher, notes that Amemiya's design methods begin on the wheel where the artist slows down the wheel so that he may control the shape; Freedman also notes that his "process is completely distinct from any other firing process".<sup>5</sup> For his Jomon-inspired pots – acknowledging and bringing forward Japan's first known civilisation and arts, Amemiya creates a wheel-thrown cylinder shape and then uses coils to add asymmetrical yet somewhat regular ridges around the outside of the form. The artist also carves waves, sand patterns and other inspirations from nature into some forms. He adds touches of oxides to the surfaces, so the creation of each piece is unique. Small teapots require several wheel-formed pieces to be joined together. The firing affects the final hues and textures, so the making process requires faith and experience. With the final colour coming only from the oxides, the ash and the temperatures, the placement of each work in the kiln may variously affect its final hues.

The loading of the four layers of the kiln requires concentration. The loading is strenuous due to the low height of the ceiling, with a back row, two middle shelves and a front shelf. Each piece has to be balanced and also must rest on a clam or limpet shell or it will stick to the shelf. Small pieces are sandwiched between larger works. Amemiya makes several kinds of large slab pots, such as one for single long-stemmed flowers and one for groupings of plants that fit into the kiln more economically than pot-bellied vessels the artist makes.

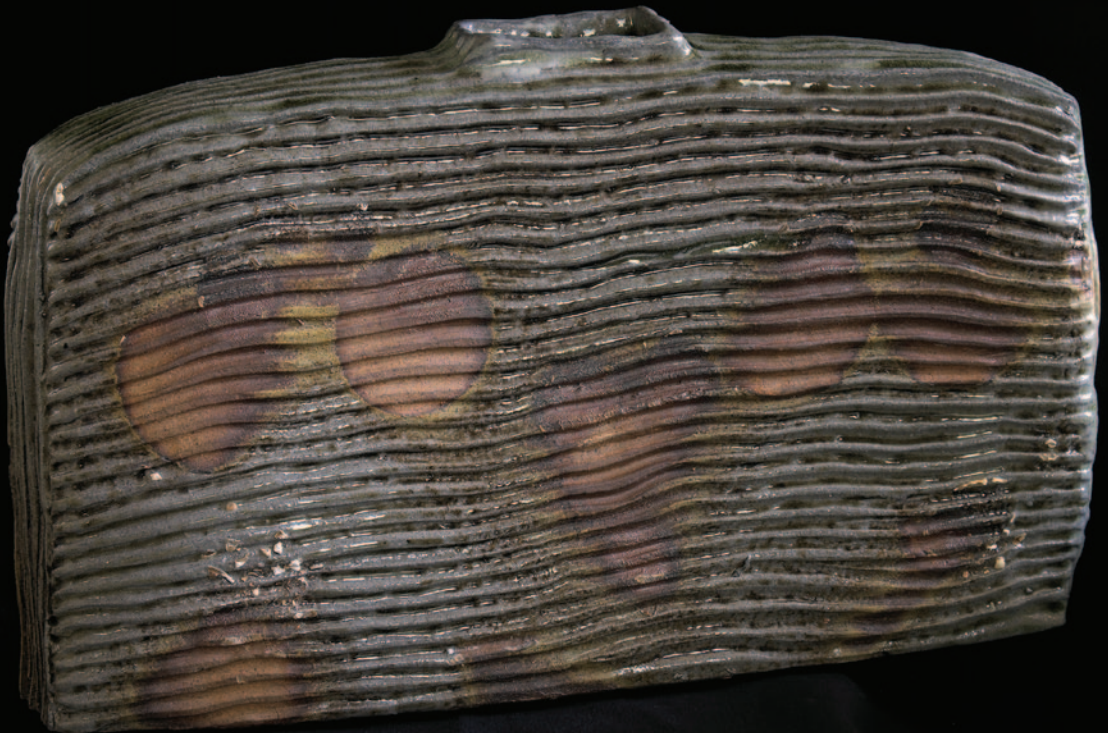
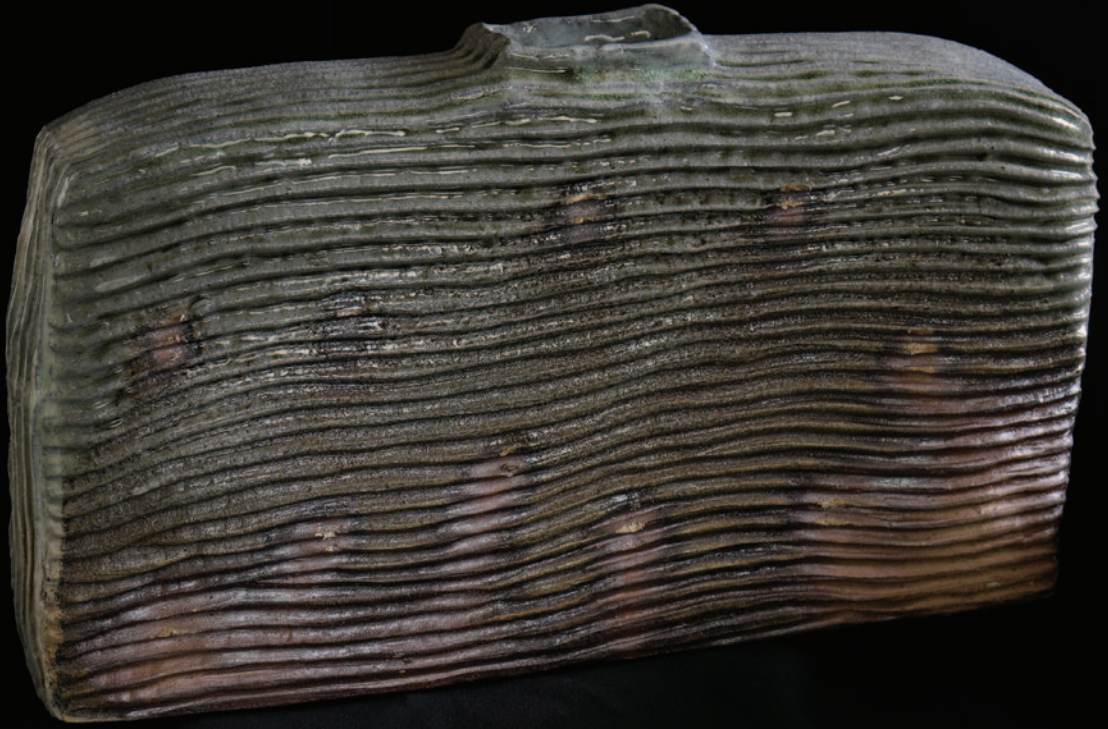
On the day before the firing, large walls of wood tower over each side of the kiln along its 11-foot length. Amemiya fires more than 100 hours during a four to five day period, first starting the fire outside the kiln and making sure the damper is open so that heat filters through to dry out the kiln and the green pieces. Then the fire is gradually moved inside the

*Top left: Flat Pot Series.  
Top right: Seisho Kuniyoshi Series  
(No. 1). 2014. Ceramic, woodfired.  
13 x 10 x 10 in.*

*Photo by Andrzej Kramarz.  
Below: Amemiya feeding the fire at 90  
hours. Photo by Franco Salmoiraghi.*











kiln, and the artist and his helpers begin the process of raking down embers and feeding wood into the kiln every 20 minutes. It takes four to five people working in shifts to constantly feed the fire. Amemiya fires up to 2300°F. He has cones as a guide inside the kiln but cones are not always accurate in a wood kiln. He mainly judges temperature by the colour of the fire, which goes from red to orange to yellow to white-hot. After a cooling period of four to five days, the kiln can be opened and unloaded.

Amemiya's work was well received in a solo show at Hawaii's Honolulu Art Museum from 17 September, to 16 January, 2015. Jay Jensen, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum, observed, "Clayton Amemiya is an artist completely dedicated to his art. He has been making ceramics for more than 40 years, throwing and carving works with consummate skill, yet he surrenders to the chance of the woodfired kiln which he uses and which he cannot control with 100 percent certainty. After tending the kiln during the extended firing time of five days, 24 hours a day, he at last sees the results – works combining his deep understanding of the process and the serendipitous 'gifts' of the kiln. It takes great patience and faith, which Amemiya has in abundance."<sup>6</sup> More than two thirds of the work in the show sold; most collectors visit the artist's studio to score original work.

The name Amemiya, in Japanese, is two characters that mean "rain shrine". As I watched the artist and his helpers stoke and fire the kiln during days and nights of intermittent rain, the glow of the fire inside the kiln burned hotter and hotter, and I could begin to see the changing colours of the fire – a sort of shrine in the rain.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Amemiya, in conversation with Castro on 3.12.15.
2. Kuniyoshi died in Okinawa in 1999.
3. Quote from Exhibition, Honolulu Art Museum, First Hawaiian Center, 17 September–16 January 16, 2015.
4. Amemiya. See full quote in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snVxKAHwQpg> UTube "Refined by Fire".
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snVxKAHwQpg> UTube "Refined by Fire" on Amemiya. Tim Johnson, local potter and others are also quoted. Also, anagama has varied practitioners in the US. Most are experimental. Amemiya combines original and traditional processes with just the right touch.
6. James Jensen, Curator of Contemporary Art, Honolulu Museum of Art, email to Castro on 3.11.15.

Jan Castro's books include *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe* and *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne*. Contact Castro at [www.jancastro.com](http://www.jancastro.com) to receive her monthly "In the Studio" blog.

Facing page, top: *Pi'ihonua Series* (No. 12). 2015. Ceramic, carved design, woodfired. 13 x 21 x 3.5 in. View one.

Facing page, below: *Pi'ihonua Series* (No. 12). View two.

Above photos by Andrzej Kramarz. Top left: *Big Round Pot (Detail from firing)*. Photo by Franco Salmoiraghi.

Top right: *Tsubo (Jar)*. 2014. Ceramic, woodfired. 14 x 17 x 17 in.

Photo by Andrzej Kramarz.

Below: *Clayton Amemiya*.

Photo by Andrzej Kramarz.

