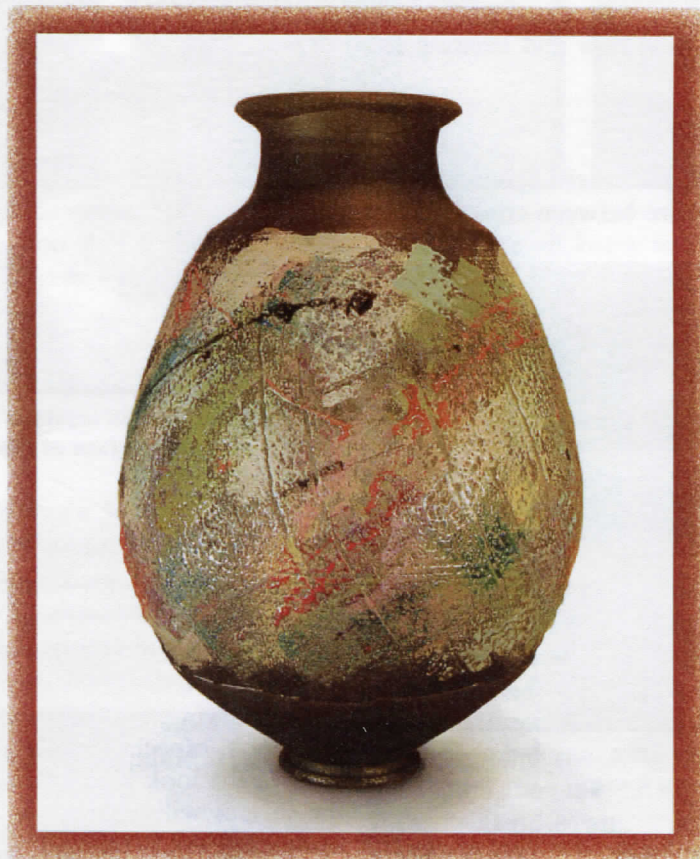


Beyond the Norm

Experimenting with “Alternative” Raku Glazes

by Steven Branfman



Vessel, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, combed and incised surface, brushed and splattered commercial low-fire glaze, raku fired, by Steven Branfman.

Raku—even those new to clay and the various ways in which it can be fired have some notion and make some assumptions about raku. Most often, the image that is conjured up is a roaring, flaming kiln, an unusual collection of tools more commonly seen next to a fireplace or welding station, metal cans and enough smoke to summon the regional fire department. What’s also most commonly envisioned is the expected result of high copper luster, white crackle glaze and black, raw surfaces. Of course, this is not surprising as the lure of copper, bronze and pearl-like iridescence contrasted with the black or gray of an unglazed area is attractive, can be startling and is often seen as exotic.

For good or for bad, raku is a technique that’s simple in concept, requires rudimentary firing facilities and is easy to do. Because of this simplicity, many wares display superficial aesthetics and lack individuality and power. The kind of effects described above offer

an exhilarating and sometimes intoxicating foray into the technique, but the excitement that they stir can be short lived, not to mention commonplace. A deeper understanding of the process along with experimentation and higher expectations can yield sophisticated colors, textures and surfaces not necessarily recognized as “raku.”

The Western Raku Method

Raku as we practice it in the West is a low-fire method in which we quickly heat the ware, remove it from the kiln when the glaze has melted, and perform some type of post-firing process to the piece. Though the post-firing phase is not part of the traditional Japanese practice, it has become the signature of Western raku. The post-firing phase is usually an immersion in sawdust or some other organic combustible material in order to affect the final outcome on the glaze and the raw clay. Deciding when the glaze has melted takes practice and

is best done by visual observation, though many potters use pyrometers to aid in making that decision.

There are many aspects to the raku technique, all of which have the potential to affect the final outcome, and all of which require practice, experimentation, trial and error and patience. In a previous article, I discussed raku glazes in depth covering a variety of types (see PMI July/Aug 2006). Here, we'll concentrate on so-called "alternative" glazes; that is, glazes not usually associated with, or understood to be used in the raku technique. I will also discuss methods of application that have the potential to yield new and exciting surfaces and results.

Getting Started

Though there's no accepted standard firing temperature for raku, most potters fire between cone 010 and

made low-fire and so-called "raku" glazes. The brushes I use are inexpensive Chinese bristle brushes designed to be used and thrown away. Throw away? No way! These are my favorite brushes and they're available in any paint or home center.

My glazing method centers around applying thin, multiple layers of glaze. While the application appears



A collection of commercial low-fire glazes and underglazes; all perfectly suitable for raku firing.

06. I have a collection of commercial low-fire glazes and underglazes, all of which are perfectly suitable for raku firing. In addition to low-fire glazes and underglazes, I also routinely use cone 6 and cone 10 stoneware glazes. There will be more on their use later. I also use home-



A collection of cone 6 and cone 10 stoneware glazes that I use in raku firing.



I apply multiple thin layers of glaze by drawing the brush lightly over the surface of the pot.

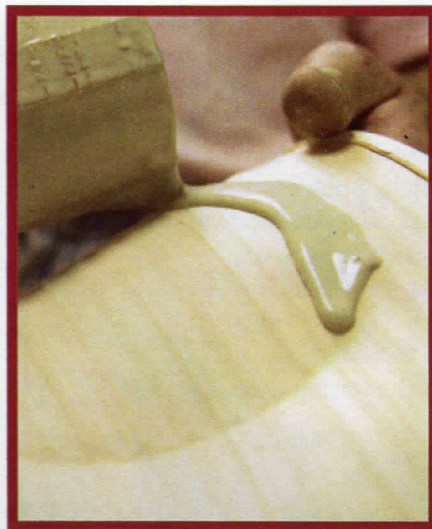
to be quite random, it's carefully planned and executed. I may use a single glaze or as many as fifteen different glazes on a single piece. The brushes I use are perfectly suited as they do not hold much glaze and they transfer glaze very unevenly. I draw the brush lightly over



In this image, you can see that the brush has multiple glazes on it.

the surface of the pot, depositing varying thicknesses of glaze.

With each successive layer, the surface gets deeper and the glaze coating becomes more and more variable. Most of my pots have deeply textured surfaces to begin with. My application is intended to accentuate the texture in the clay. In certain areas the thickness and unevenness of glaze becomes a texture in and of itself.



Other methods of application that I use frequently are splattering, dripping and very controlled pouring. These approaches add movement and contrast to the somewhat static effect achieved by the way I brush. Experimenting with the thickness of glaze for pouring will give you different results depending on the way the glaze runs, drips and melts.

Though we all know to thoroughly mix a glaze before using it, there are times when I either don't bother or I will purposely gather glaze from the inside wall or lid of the bucket or jar. Doing this often gives you an "incomplete" glaze that may offer unusual and unpredictable results.

Every step of my process is predicted and planned. My choice of glazes and application of those glazes determines the firing. Though some potters use pyrometers or even cones in their raku firings to carefully judge glaze maturity, I find that doing this eliminates an important degree of variability and control. The most important component of my firing is the degree to which I allow the glazes to melt and flow. Since I'm using glazes that mature at different temperatures, careful observation of the surface is necessary to achieve the "correct" melting. My intention is to have some areas smooth and glossy, some not quite as melted, and others with the appearance of dry and underfired glaze. I can also control the degree to which poured glaze runs and drips over the surface of the pot by how much I allow it to melt.

The Firing Process



My firing site contains six kilns of different sizes and types, including four recycled electric kilns fired with propane, a wood-fired kiln and kiln manufactured by Ceramic Services of Chino, California. The site is clean, organized and has plenty of space. Successful firing requires planning, choreography and concentration, which results in a calm atmosphere. I always fire with the help of a single assistant.



After carefully examining the surfaces for desirable glaze melt, a piece is removed from the kiln. Bowls and small pieces are taken with tongs directly through the flue hole in the top of the kiln.



In this photograph, my assistant has just removed the lid so I can retrieve a larger piece with tongs.



Next, he sprays areas of the surface with water. This brightens the glazes and reduces the likelihood of copper lusters. You can also control cooling by pouring water onto your piece as you would pour a glaze, or by using compressed air.



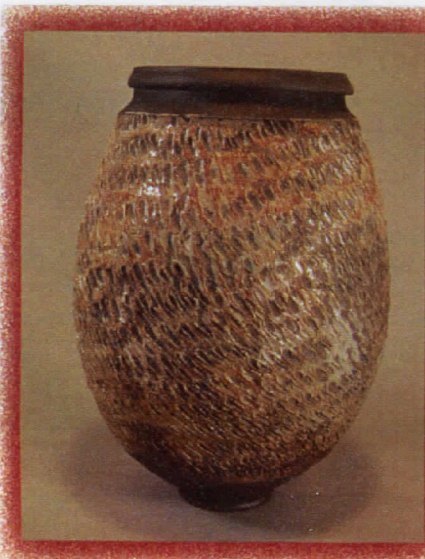
After sufficient spraying, the piece is placed in a small metal container, sprinkled with coarse sawdust, allowed to flame, then covered.



Being patient and allowing the piece to cool to the touch before opening the container all but eliminates cracking due to fast cooling.



Raku ware must be cleaned to rid the piece of soot, ash and carbon that gets deposited on the surface. Use an abrasive cleaner and scrub brush or steel wool. Anything that washes off is supposed to come off!



Glazes are always formulated and designed to be fired within certain cone ranges. However, when using glazes for strictly decorative purposes, the prescribed firing range can be ignored. Raku, with its style of visual observation to determine glaze readiness, lends itself perfectly to experimenting with glazes that mature at different temperatures. If used alone, high-fire glazes will be very dry and slip-like at the low temperatures of raku. If combined with low-fire or raku glazes, contact with these glazes will flux the high-fire glazes causing them to melt (more or less). I have a random stock of commercial low-fire glazes and underglazes that I have collected over the years. Use what you have, what you can find and what is available.

Turn to page 46 for some of Steven Branfman's glaze recipes.

Left: The finished piece.