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Pineapple, 022, Conversation – behind the cover art

Jesse W. Standlea
St. Margaret's Episcopal School

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Abstract

Many sources date the pit-firing process as a 30,000 plus years-old ceramic firing technique. Every year I take my AP 3D Design class to the beach to fire ceramic pieces using this method. Being a contemporary sculptor who shows in Los Angeles I have always appreciated pit-fired pieces but never used one in my own art practice until now. A connection between the first method of firing ceramics and my art practice seemed unrelated. The title for my piece might add to the disconnect; and yet these seemingly unrelated elements force the work into a place where the artistic process and art object coexist.

Author/Artist Bio

Jesse Standlea is an artist, educator and advocate of the arts. His artwork straddles the line between functional and conceptual art practices. He regularly shows in Los Angeles and is a member of Durden and Ray Fine Art located in downtown Los Angeles, CA. He teaches three-dimensional art at St. Margaret's in San Juan Capistrano where he is the current Visual Arts Department Chair. He holds a BFA in Ceramics from Cal State Fullerton and an MFA in Sculpture from Claremont Graduate University. At Claremont he was awarded the Helen B. Dooley Art Fellowship and worked for Roland Reiss as an artist assistant. He has worked in independent schools for 10 years and taught at the college level. As an advocate for the arts, he has spoken at numerous events, put on workshops and hosted benefits such as "Empty Bowls" raising funds for a local food bank and gander outreach program.

Keywords

3D design, ceramics, sculpture, pitfire, contemporary art, philosophy, history

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Many sources date the pit-firing process as a 30,000 plus years-old ceramic firing technique. Every year I take my AP 3D Design class to the beach to fire ceramic pieces using this method. Being a contemporary sculptor who shows in Los Angeles I have always appreciated pit-fired pieces but never used one in my own art practice until now. A connection between the first method of firing ceramics and my art practice seemed unrelated. The title for my piece might add to the disconnect; and yet these seemingly unrelated elements force the work into a place where the artistic process and art object coexist.

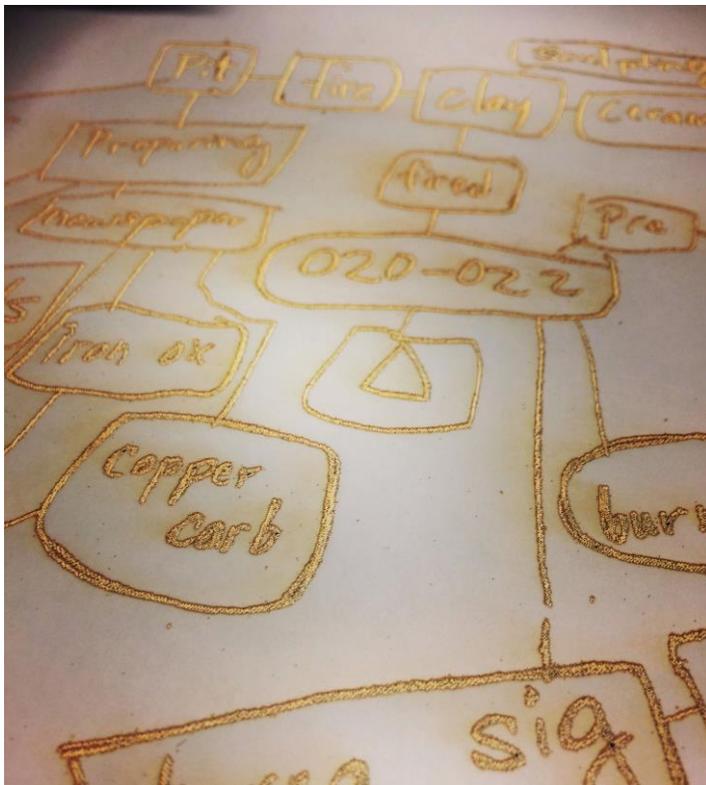


The title “Pineapple, 022, Conversation” represents key elements of the process that went into making it. After we arrived at the beach, unpacked the ceramic wares and the supplies for the day, everyone’s interest focused in on the food. I brought a pineapple for breakfast. Students from the Advanced Placement 3D Design class watched as I brought out a chef’s knife and

cutting board to break down and serve up breakfast. The rind of the pineapple would be used along with coffee grounds, seaweed, sawdust, and newspaper at the base of the pit. The unfired clay pieces were stacked on top of the organic and combustible materials. Next, wood was carefully stacked on top of the ceramics and lit to burn all at once, as adding wood to the fire, once started, can actually lower the temperature in the pit. “022” refers to cone 022, or about 1,100 degrees, the temperature at which the ceramics were fired. At this temperature the ceramics are considered low-fire earthenware and are porous enough to record the smoke, and atmosphere created by the salts, added iron oxide and other organic matter placed in the pit. After the wood burns to coal, old kiln shelves are stacked on top of the coals to sustain the temperature. We started this process around 8:00 am and we pulled the pieces out of the pit kiln around 6:00 pm.



As we sat around the fire, we talked about the history of pit-firing and how it relates to us today. A conversation about community, history and our individual art practices developed. Historically these processes required collaboration and cooperation in order to produce the wares that would help early man store food, a technology that their survival depended upon. As we grilled salmon and marinated tri tip kabobs the conversation shifted to contemporary art practices. In this outdoor classroom we talked about Plato's allegory of the Cave. I encourage them to be open to trying out new forms of art before they start the "concentration" section of their AP portfolios that will require them to spend about a semester in one area within three dimensional design, a vast field including but not limited to ceramics and sculpture. One of the difficulties for the young artist making the jump to think about 3D art objects beyond "sculpture in the round" is the enterprise of making work itself. It often requires the artist to put a great deal of personal investment into the processes of creating that the viewer largely will not see.



Expression is not limited to an object. An idea can be performed, or be something you literally feel, like a sound piece, or something physically encompassing you as with installation art. But, even for the performance artist or artist that works site-specifically, the brainstorming and generating of ideas is difficult to represent in the piece itself. Perhaps it was the encouragement to think about

art in the expanded field that led me to put modern objects or the popularly vernacular “traditional” art objects in the same space as the ideas that went into making it and reflections about it.

In the piece Pineapple, 022, Conversation, I take a brainstorming session that I wrote after our conversation around the smoldering pit-fire and transferred it onto a modern designed, pit-fired ceramic piece. The steps in making this piece started as a demonstration, I then reflected on the processes of pit-fire in my sketchbook and thought to connect the text from my sketchbook with the handmade pit-fired piece. It is the last part that specifically takes 30,000 year of history into the contemporary realm. By combining the process into the same space as the object, I confuse the typical artist’s process of generating idea followed by the making of the object and concluded with reflection of work. Pineapple, 022, Conversation flattens this to exist in the same space and to connect seemingly unrelated information that was vital to the art making experience.

