

Turning a kiln (and a career) upside down

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I was sitting in an Anagama kiln in North Devon ten years ago when it struck me how sculptural the form of it was and I suggested to its builder, renowned potter Sven Bayer, that he should enter it into the annual Turner Prize for British sculpture, as is, where is. Leaving aside their obvious functional properties, anagama kilns, and many other pottery kilns, have a visual aspect which is often very sculptural and at times quite monumental.

Sven was not interested in entering the Turner Prize for some reason, so my next best suggestion was that we should turn the kiln over, take it down to the water nearby and go for a small sea voyage in it. He declined that as well. When I sat inside this amazing kiln I was taken back to days in my childhood when we used to go to the beach for our holidays and sit under the upside-down wooden rowing boats to keep out of the rain or the sun or the wind or simply to create our own small fantasy environments. The boat hull shape was very clear in the kiln, narrowing to both ends, firebox one end and flue the other, and expanding to become quite beamy in the middle. It seemed quite possible to imagine it as a boat that had been left lying upside down on dry land while the owner went off to find more money to make it seaworthy.

I determined to go back home to New Zealand, a country full of boats and amateur boat-builders, and build my own Anagama boat. At the time I was the Director of the Auckland Studio Potters Centre, a well equipped teaching school for recreational pottery students, so I had at my disposal a lot of the equipment and space I needed. I was able to put aside three days each week to work on this project and while there was no indoor space, the NZ summer is kind and I was able to work outside without interruption and without interrupting anyone else for the three months it took to build. It was just as well it was outside because in my ignorance of working with brick, I built myself a basic bench saw with a 200mm dry-cut diamond blade that created a cloud of red dust that looked like a windstorm in the outback of Australia and covered me head to foot each day with red dust until I looked like I was made of brick too (that gave me another idea later). I set up a fan next to the kiln which blew the dust away from me and out towards the road but it dispersed adequately and no-one complained. In later projects I was able to set up a saw that was water-dampened and that problem was solved.

The design of the brick boat was very simple - like a child's drawing of a boat. Sharp at both ends swelling towards the centre, with a cross-section of a pointed Gothic arch running through. I set up guidelines by welding reinforcing rods into the arch shape and fixing them to the steel gunwale that my wife had bought me for my birthday - this was not so much a gift as a means of calling my bluff, to get me to stop talking about the idea and actually get stuck in and do it. If someone gives you a 6 metre long steel gunwale it's really difficult to ignore it. It may be that she saw it as a useful way to get me out of the house from time to time as well, though when I came home each day covered in red dust she may have had second thoughts. The steel gunwale was 6 metres long and 1 metre wide and curved gently to a sharp point at both ends. It provided the basic fixed shape. I then started cutting each brick in 4 directions to account for the curve front to back and to deal with the arch shape top to bottom. I cut the first course and tried a lot of options for holding them together strongly enough to take the forces of the expected water pressure. Normal cement mortar was too weak, polyurethane glues too expensive. I decided to try a mix of marine epoxy two-pot glue and clean dry silica sand to make a mortar with the consistency of normal cement mortar. It worked really well - it was reasonable expensive but very strong and

I started feeling confident about the structure of the boat.

I had no idea whether it would float, so I slipcast a model, a maquette about 200mm long which I floated in the bath. It turned out to be surprisingly accurate, with its walls accidentally being exactly the correct thickness to represent the bricks. It showed the boat floating with 300mm of freeboard until I stood up in the bath at which point it sank. I calculated the boat would weigh 2 tonnes and displace 3 tonnes - a recipe for success.

Each course became a revelation as the shape almost determined itself - if I followed the fixed gunwale shape and at the same time standardised the taper of the arch the shape built itself as if by magic. There are advantages in not planning too much - these small surprises can be very enjoyable. I kept cutting and gluing, neither of these very pleasant processes, for a couple of months (my saw was very slow and if I were to repeat the project today I could do it in less than half the time) until I reached the final keystone arch brick in the middle of the boat which I put in with one hand and a glass of champagne in the other. I hate to spoil the romantic notion of the keystone, but because the boat was 95% structurally reliant on the strong glue the basic principles of arch building were irrelevant. However it still looked the part and under the effects of external water pressure it was going to be very strong. I then employed a friend with a very large crane to turn the boat over while I kept my eyes shut. To my surprise and relief it stayed in one piece. I have since made more risky structures using the same techniques and I now know that it was never going to be a problem, but for the first one there is always stress and expectation of disaster.

Then I did a lot of finishing and tidying up. All of these processes are not particularly enjoyable and involve dust, glue and chemicals and do not have the capacity for creative expression normally associated with clay - they are construction processes and the payoff comes at the end when the work is finished and the vision is realised. Also there is the interesting experience of finalising a work without having to put it through the firing process - that is a process that can make or break a pot and it is entirely absent in most sculptural processes whether working in wood, concrete, stone or bronze. This was actually the first piece of work I had ever made that did not involve fire and its unpredictable effects. This was completely predictable and I must admit to a certain enjoyment of that after years of being at the mercy of the flame.

I had a friend Jeff Thomson who is a sculptor in corrugated iron - roofing iron - and he agreed to make the sails for the boat. He makes roofing iron look so fluid. I installed a water-pipe as the mast and inserted a gas line inside it so that I could have flame come out of the top as my flag, and as small nod to the potters of the world. A 70-year-old friend made a life-buoy of solid terracotta, some 28 kg, to go at the stern. The chances of being killed by that life-buoy were pretty high.

I remembered how I looked covered in red dust while I was building the boat and found an old friend who, from time to time, covered himself in grey powder and went out on the streets busking as a concrete statue, and got him to cover himself in terracotta slip and pose on board as the clay captain. He was great, even though he was terrified - dressed in heavy clothes, covered in wet clay, with flames and wires all around and unable to swim if it sank. But he really looked the part; he stood stock still out of fear mostly.

I had to persuade the local harbour officials to let me launch the boat in the marina - a very upmarket facility filled with million-dollar pleasure boats. It took a great deal of courage on their part to allow this scruffy potter to launch two tonnes of brick right into the middle of their prestigious marina, but they were curious to see what would happen and took the chance. The local Maritime Museum even agreed to break the rules and provide a steam-driven tug to tow me around the harbour - they made the proviso that the length of the tow-rope should be the depth of the harbour plus an extra 3 metres. They were obviously not confident. It was amazing how the

officials were persuaded by my wild optimism and they deserve a lot of credit.

The day of the launch was a little windy and a big crowd turned up to watch me sink, like the crowds who go to the motor racing waiting for the crash. We had a choir who sang a hymn dedicated to shipwrecked sailors, a couple of speeches, and my wife smashed a bottle of champagne against the hull while asking for divine intervention to keep me safe. The crane operator lowered the boat with me inside very slowly into the water without letting me go completely. When it looked like it wasn't going to sink straight away he removed the supports and I was floating! But it was very precarious - I hadn't taken into account the fact that it would be top-heavy with the sails and the mast and not much weight at the bottom. When it did stop rolling the freeboard was exactly 300mm! However it rolled dangerously so we loaded 300kg of ballast into the bottom of the boat and it settled happily but now with only 200mm of freeboard. That was good enough though and I swapped places with Terracotta Man and he set sail behind the tug-boat and did several short laps in the sheltered marina without going too far from shore - the waves were 195mm high.

After an hour or so he noticed quite a bit of water in the bottom. I had completely forgotten about bricks being porous and the water was seeping in from all directions; not too fast and quite manageable but enough to make me nervous, so we tied alongside and people came aboard to have their photos taken, while we bailed out with a small bucket. We had 6 people on board at one stage. The crane man then lifted us out and the boat was taken back to my house.

It eventually became an on-shore sculptural piece at a popular seaside café, where it sits today, for kids to enjoy and have their fantasies in. Just this year it made an entry into the 2010 Ripley's Believe It Or Not Annual - the World's First Brick Boat and the crowning achievement of my career.

What this article is leading to, in a long-winded way, is to show how these idle creative thoughts, if followed through, can be career changing. This first project, which I never regarded as being a sculptural one having no regard for the aesthetics of the work, more an exercise in practical physics, produced an object which, once on dry land, I came to recognise as having sculptural worth. An idea was then born - to explore the use of commercial bricks as a sculptural medium. I was a slow starter - I was actually a potter and pottery-teacher by profession so this was really only a hobby - and I made only one piece each year for the next 4 years using a variety of techniques.

The first was a Brick Bag. This was a really interesting project but a lot of trouble and not one I would care to repeat. Basically I went to a brick factory 100km away and brought back a truck load of bricks still wet out of their huge pug-mill. I cut and altered each one into a diamond shape to make a weaving pattern (based on an indigenous NZ Maori design) while they were still soft. The clay was not very plastic so there were problems. Once assembled in the leather-hard state I deconstructed the piece brick by brick numbering each brick as I went, and dried them, took them back to the factory and put them on the conveyor belt through the 3-day tunnel kiln firing. The factory owner was very helpful and keen to see the results. Once they were fired I brought them back to my workshop and, using epoxy, glued them all together like a giant jigsaw. It went off to an outdoor sculpture park.

The second was an air mattress. I bought a plastic air mattress for \$10 and used that as the template. I extruded my own bricks for this and after calculating the shrinkage, bent them into a curved shape, fired them in my studio and glued them together using the air mattress for support. I was not sure of the finished strength so I filled it with concrete. It went to a local competition where it won first prize and was bought by the City Council.

The next year I made a tiled work using the same diamond weaving pattern. This time I made a wooden frame that looked like the front of a boat and glued the tiles straight on. I pressed the clay for the tiles by hand into a simple mould and glazed them with a beautiful copper lead glaze. This went to another sculpture park in Auckland.

The fourth year I made a seat. By this stage I was becoming familiar with the engineering required for hanging bricks out in unusual positions. I had been awarded a substantial grant from the NZ Arts Council and bought a new diamond saw with water feed and a powerful computer. I found a wonderful 3D computer programme “Sketchup” which now enables me to predict exactly which shaped brick I need as I work through the construction of all my pieces. I have set up a range of jigs on the saw and now have a stockpile of tapered bricks to select from as I work. So I now use a technique of cutting bricks on a diamond saw, I stick them together with glue and as a further precaution I add reinforcing steel through the holes in the bricks packed with epoxy mortar to produce a wide range of shapes, some of them quite improbable for bricks. My seats are tested by a friend who weighs 160kg.

By the fifth year I had stopped making pots altogether and my brick pieces now sell better than my pottery. I have made many sculptural pieces and they have been popular for parks and sculpture gardens. They attract children who love to climb over them and use them for their own little theatres, making up stories as they go.

I have made a Bell, a Bumper Car, a Tent, more boats, many chairs (very comfortable and based on some of the classic chair designs), a giant Corkscrew, a Caravan.

The question all of this raises is: As a potter for 35 years who has stopped using clay as a plastic medium with all of its wonderful characteristics, and moved over to using commercial clay products full-time as a sculptural component, am I still regarded as being one of the Clay Family? As an ex-potter who is hugely informed and influenced by the history of ceramics, particularly kiln building, am I eligible for inclusion in a forum such as this? Am I a traitor to the clay? I have been a “Ceramic artist” in the accepted sense for many years, and to be honest I don’t know how to classify myself now except I know that I am still an artist, but I no longer have to fight against the flame, or even befriend the clay. I am a brick sculptor. Perhaps this Forum may find this question interesting and be prepared to comment on it. I should add that whatever the outcome of that discussion I won’t stop working with bricks. But I must admit that from time to time now I really enjoy making a small kiln load of salt-glazed teapots. There’s nothing quite like it.



