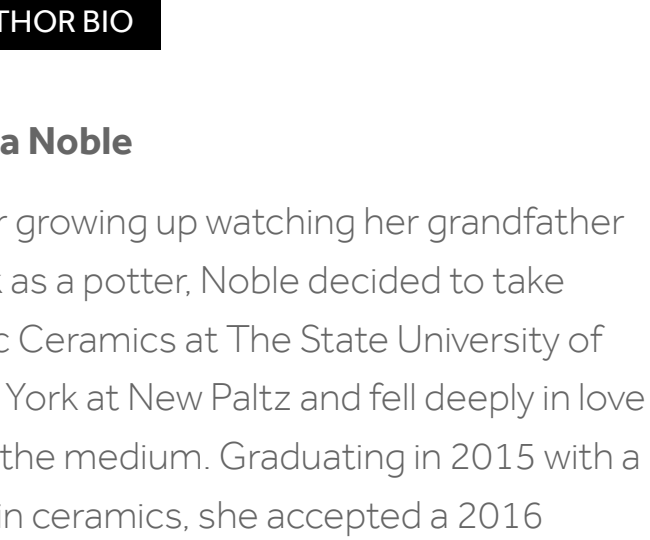


Meredith Kunhardt stoking the kiln Photo credit: Josh Coleman



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AUTHOR BIO

Kayla Noble

After growing up watching her grandfather work as a potter, Noble decided to take Basic Ceramics at The State University of New York at New Paltz and fell deeply in love with the medium. Graduating in 2015 with a BFA in ceramics, she accepted a 2016 residency at Taos Clay, in Taos, New Mexico. After the residency ended, she stayed in Taos for several years, set up a home studio practice, and enjoyed the feral and vivacious community one can find in a small mountain town. It was here that she was introduced to skiing and wood firing. In 2020 she came back to the Hudson Valley and currently resides in Newburgh, New York. As she continues to develop and grow her studio practice, she works to define what it means to be an artist, craftsperson, and designer in this ever changing and growing world. She approaches both her art and writing with an unfiltered and all-encompassing curiosity, like that of a child. "Right now, I make pots with a feeling of quiet profundity."

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Over the Hills and Through the Woods

KAYLA NOBLE

July 1, 2021

In the hills of the New York's Hudson Valley, hidden deep in the woods, potters lead secret lives. Their houses are full of precious things; things made by hands, things collected from the earth. Entire lives woven together by a deep love of process and reverence for craft and the natural world. These artists have carved out enchanting spaces, full of whimsy and wonder.

For each visit, my faithful Subaru and I travel over the hills and through the woods. Winding country roads that cut through farmland turn into winding country roads that cut through forest. My eyes veer from the road, eager to see old houses in devastatingly beautiful states of disrepair. As my car lumbers up long, gravel driveways, pots and sculpture begin to populate the landscapes – a sign that I've found my destination. The properties are thick with trees and geologic curiosities. Most striking to me were the monumental pieces of granite emerging from the earth around which Joy Brown has constructed her life; and the faces of blue stone, artifacts of mining, into which Tim Rowan has nestled. Life revolves around geology. They offer me tea, eager to share their stories and happy to listen to me as I try to articulate what exactly has brought me to their respective doorsteps. We talk about our mutual acquaintances, the pottery world is small. I proudly share that my grandfather is also a potter (and a harpsichord builder) wanting to show off my lineage of craft. They have gardens, many sheds, a studio or even two, probably a cat, maybe a dog. They all have a wood kiln, intriguing and mystical to me. How do they work? How did they get there? How do you learn? Why?



TONY MOORE

COLD SPRING, NEW YORK

Tony's history is in the fine arts, mostly drawing and painting. Analytical, thoughtful, his kiln is the final mark-making tool. He describes the marks from the kiln as having the same feeling as a gesture drawing: fluid and open, riding on a wave of intention. The marks come together and create something greater than the sum of their parts. Tony has command of his self-described "battleship." When loading, he orchestrates his crew from inside the kiln like a conductor, a performance of nuance and skill, as he organizes both pottery and people. This dance is the result of a lot of practice. The kiln was erected in 2001–2002, designed in consultation with Kenton Baker and Beverly Fisher of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He has since been perfecting the art of communal firings, no easy task. Tony's attitude about firing feels scientific/pragmatic. He says it all comes down to a basic understanding of fire and recommends I spend some time interacting with a wood-burning stove.

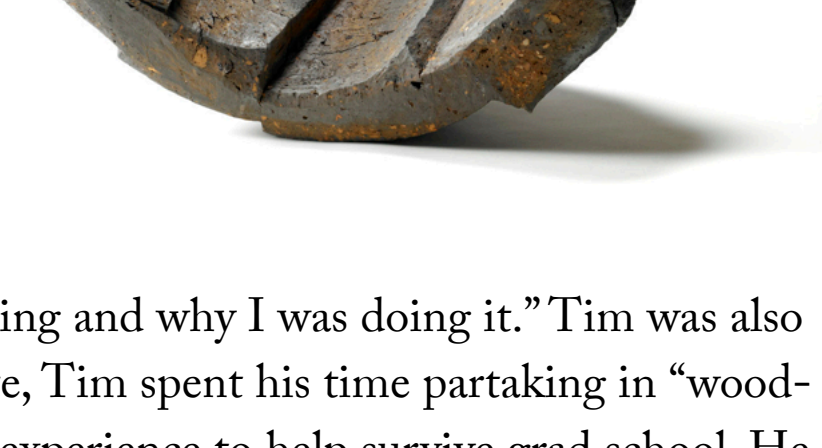
A theme that held through our conversation is the importance of fluidity – changing readily, shifting, not fixed, stable, or rigid; but elegance and grace. Tony talks about wanting to paint again, but without a sense of urgency. He tells me you don't know what kind of artist you are going to be until you finish making the art, much like you don't know what kind of pots you will have made until they come out of the kiln, I thought.

TIM ROWAN

STONERIDGE, NEW YORK

"You don't have control, like complete control over the process. Which is really freeing and interesting. I think most people who do wood-firing...if you knew what would happen, you wouldn't be doing it. You'd lose all interest if you knew exactly how it was going to turn out. Vulnerability. It's a weird thing, right? You have to totally put yourself into it, like a hundred percent, then also be willing to get slammed a hundred percent. A good metaphor for life."

Tim began his clay journey in a friend's garage. After some classes at a community college in Connecticut, he found his way to the State University of New York, at New Paltz. He developed an interest in wood-firing while an undergrad and began to work for Jeff Shapiro. After graduation Tim built a tunnel kiln on the New Paltz campus. This kiln has been rebuilt, modified, and fired by many students, including several friends of mine, over the years. Tim's relationship with Jeff led to an apprenticeship in Japan where he only began to scratch the surface of what there was to learn about Japanese pottery. The apprenticeship was followed by a residency at a studio in Detroit, then grad school. "I wanted to learn more about what I was doing and why I was doing it." Tim was also awarded a scholarship. Money helps. During his two years at Penn State, Tim spent his time partaking in "wood-firing and wild clay activities." Tim talked about the importance of life experience to help survive grad school. He doesn't think he could have survived if he had not had the experiences of an apprenticeship and residency.



"It's really basic, you could just do it anywhere. You don't need anything...dirt.. clay, you can find that just about anywhere."

It's about the simplicity of the process. He knows how to operate his kiln and doesn't have to rely on other people and technology. His process is completely manual. There is a give and take relationship with the kiln, also with the native clays Rowan works with. They're not totally predictable. You have to learn how to interact with them. Rowan has placed his trust in nature rather than trust in the industrial process. When you dig your own clay, when you build your own kiln, you know its story and quirks.



MEREDITH AND HARRY KUNHARDT, 28A CLAY

WEST SHOKAN, NEW YORK

An introduction to ceramics at Skidmore College, many workshops, generous mentors, and an imperfect apprenticeship brought Meredith and Harry Kunhardt to West Shokan, New York. They began collecting bricks, lots of bricks. Things fell into place: they bought their rental property, they found more bricks, they built their kiln, and established 28A Clay in 2017.

When building their kiln, Meredith and Harry did not follow one specific design, but rather drew from extensive research and a wealth of knowledge from firing many kilns. They built to suit their needs and kept certain areas changeable. Meredith likes a massive firebox. What's the point if you can't throw a whole log in? Suzanne, the little pink kiln, was born.

Recently 28A was able to take on a paid apprentice and Meredith and Harry have seen a huge difference in how they can manage production work, which in turn allows for more time to develop their own studio pottery practice. After being on the receiving end of an unpaid apprenticeship, payment was important for the couple. Even if it is "so good," how can you live? Being in a situation where you are dependent on someone for housing can get messy quickly, as they experienced.

Meredith describes what it is like to fire alone and the intimate conversation she is able to have with a kiln:

"When I get to be by myself with the kiln and be in the process of it, I feel like I can hear my thoughts a little better. I have time to hear my responses to what's going on with the fire. What an amazing thing to try to learn. The whole experience, the sound, the sight, the physicality of it, and the sky, having to be outside – I think I fell in love with a squirrel once. There is so much quiet and so many opportunities to pay attention... That's just such an amazing gift."

"It's like a cat that you know where it likes to be scratched," Meredith says.

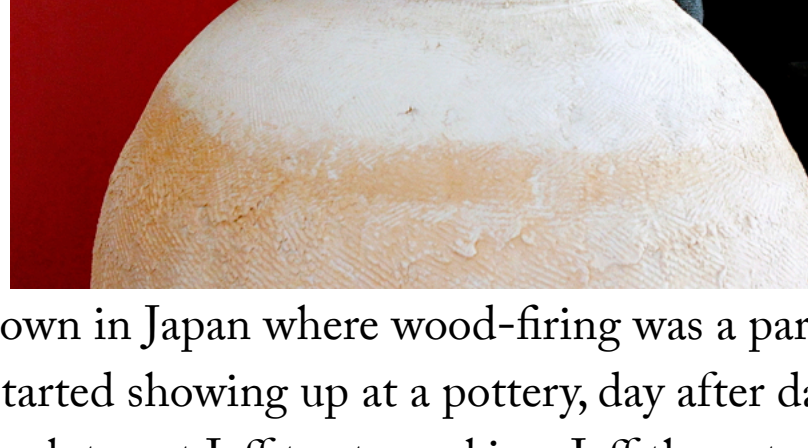
"It's kind of like a puzzle or something, but not quite..." Harry says, his voice trailing off.

It's kind of like a puzzle, but the puzzle is alive, flirtatious, rambunctious, shy.

I am impressed at all the young couple has accomplished in a relatively short amount of time. They truly demonstrate what passion, drive, and determination can accomplish.

JEFF SHAPIRO

ACCORD, NEW YORK



"I think it is a kind of romanticism that takes over all of your senses and desires.

But I think it's kind of like a relationship, you know, like a personal relationship. So oftentimes when you meet somebody there's that period in the beginning where romanticism is all that matters. And it's a good thing, because that's what lets you get totally involved. But at some point, if it's going to be a long term relationship... you have to become more pragmatic about it, to make sure that the relationship lasts successfully."

After traveling for some years, Jeff found himself in a small pottery town in Japan where wood-firing was a part of everyone's daily life – cyclical, communal, much like farming. He started showing up at a pottery, day after day, asking if he could apprentice. The potter finally caved; if that's what it took to get Jeff to stop asking, Jeff then stayed in Japan for eight years, learning. When he came back to the States he bought property in the then-affordable Hudson Valley. For Jeff, woodfiring must serve the purpose of the work. Does it complete the work? How are you using the kiln and all of its nuances?

Jeff brings up the increasing popularity of wood-firing. What can happen when something becomes popular? Or, dare I say, trendy? Jeff thinks it can get away from the "real value of woodfiring." When Jeff fires it is a quiet, slow, and private affair. There is no music, no drinking. Just listening to the kiln. Jeff describes his intention of wood-firing: to pay homage to the cyclical nature of a lifestyle revolving around wood-firing, like he saw in Japan. He refers to a Japanese concept that imperfections of nature have a beauty to them, that there are always variations outside of control.

"Getting ash to melt on clay is not a big deal: take temperature up, fire with wood, you're gonna get some ash melting on clay. But after that, all the subtleties: how many layers, what point do you start to melt, do you continue that melting, do you bring temperature down, have subsequent layers that then go up and down? Variations of clays right next to each other...some people just jump into it without really thinking first... people could maybe slow down a little bit"



Jeff has adopted a mantra to "know no fear," as his colleague Suzuki Goro told him. Fear impedes creativity. Fearlessness can be a kind of vulnerability.

LYNN ISSACSON, NEW PROSPECT POTTERY

PINE BUSH, NEW YORK



Soon after landing back in New York I begin to ask around about wood-firing. I am quickly directed to Lynn Issacson.

Lynn holds an MFA in painting and spent many years teaching art in a junior high school in the South Bronx. Like most art teachers, Lynn had to be exceptionally creative with next to no budget. After a year-long sabbatical taking drafting, woodshop, and metal-shop classes at City College, Lynn took over the position of ceramics teacher at the junior high. She was met with resistance from the principal, a former shop teacher. "He did not like that I wanted to do that."

"Because you're a woman?" I ask.

"Whatever his issue was...I sort of morphed into ceramics to rescue my ass in teaching. I was getting \$250 a year to teach [art to] a thousand kids. You can't buy a pencil and scissors, I was pulling rabbits out of a hat and it was costing me a lot of money."

Like any good teacher, Lynn is constantly participating in classes and workshops. She took her first formal pottery class at the Art School at Old Church in the late 1990s and remains ever hungry to keep learning. Her focus on firing is to understand the process, rather than produce a lot of work. After firing with Tony Moore for about 20 years, Lynn decided it was time to build her own kiln "because I needed to know that after all these years I understood what I was doing." In 2019 Lynn hired Justin Lambert to design and construct her anagama. Despite the learning curve and challenges of organizing communal firings, Lynn finds immense joy in bringing people together around her kiln. "I love the fact that it's so many young people, and young women especially. And it's just, wow! I'm paying it forward and taking the ride along with everyone."

When I fire with Lynn I feel heard, seen, and valued. She is quick to answer my many questions and I never feel self conscious about asking about something that might seem obvious or simple.

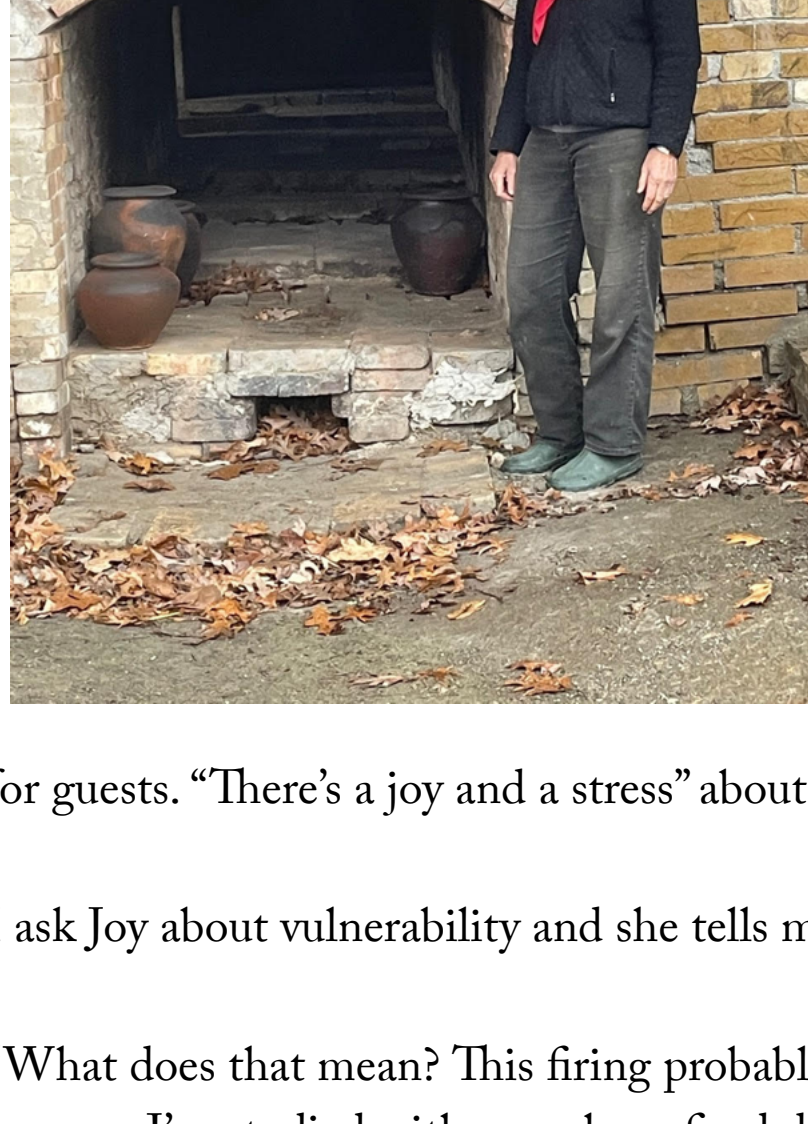
JOY BROWN

KENT, CONNECTICUT

Joy Brown's life has always been defined by a love of objects. During her childhood in Japan she was finely attuned to the preciousness and spirit that a thing can have. She attended college in the States, studied ceramics, and returned to Japan. A visit turned into a move and Joy stayed for several years working as an apprentice in two different studios. There was not much formal instruction during the apprenticeships and Joy learned through being present with the clay. "When you make and destroy one form thousands of times you begin to have a conversation with the object."



In Japan, Joy observed, the men are the potters and the women do "everything else." They're both locked into rigid roles. Everyone is dependent on each other.



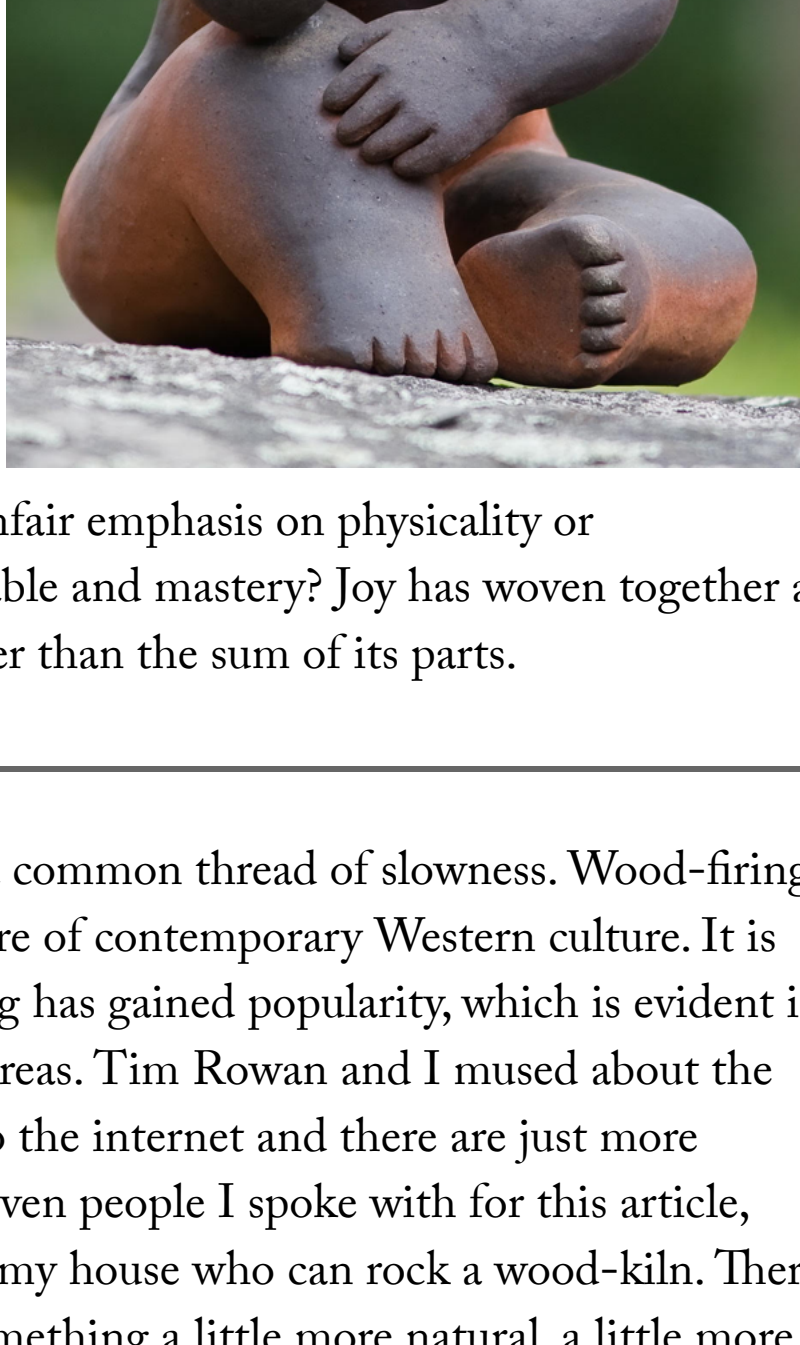
Joy then moved to Wingdale, New York, a tiny tourist trap of a town where city people can see the humble artisan at work. Here Joy got over being shy (because you can't be shy and sell pottery) and experienced the loud and reverberating dissonance that can appear in one's late twenties. She had a wealth of experience and deep knowledge of the ceramic process, yet she was experiencing something far from the harmonious existence her mentors in Japan had. Through a series of events and the benefit of affordable property Joy was able to set up her life, kiln, studio, nest.

Firing Joy's kiln is a big communal effort. Joy places her work in the back of the kiln where a soft touch finishes her pieces. The kiln is fired for eight or nine days; the entire process from loading to unloading takes about a month. She works with a carefully selected, intimate group of people, artfully arranging shifts like a mindful host of a large dinner party. It is not surprising that Joy does in fact take on the role of host, juggling managing the firing, feeding friends, and making time for guests. "There's a joy and a stress" about organizing a group of people to work together.

I ask Joy about vulnerability and she tells me of the time that someone described her firing as a "women's firing."

"What does that mean? This firing probably is equally men and women. I've studied with men, have fired different kilns with men, and there's a different attitude and approach. I can't remember from firing to firing, it needs communal knowing to fire this kiln. There are people who have been firing [this kiln] for twenty-some years or more that know just as much as I do about certain parts of the firing. I have an overview, and I plan a lot of the energy fields; who is where and when. There's a whole team that knows what to do to fire this kiln...There's an energy field that's set up to know what to do. Is that vulnerability? It's a different kind of strength to let the field know what to do. It guides me – it's sort of like life itself; if you have trust in the process and the people around you and the system that you've created then you can kind of let it go a little bit."

And it's not all about gender, but more of a yin and yang according to Joy. We're just perceiving things through a cultural lens that has attributed certain qualities to be male and female. You have to let it go. You get old, you get pregnant, your leg gets broken; you can't place an unfair emphasis on physicality or individualism. How can we question what is perceived to be knowledgeable and mastery? Joy has woven together a community around her kiln. It comes together to create something bigger than the sum of its parts.



After speaking with these artists I am left thinking about a few things: a common thread of slowness. Wood-firing seems to be the antithesis to the increasingly digital and fast-paced nature of contemporary Western culture. It is not efficient in either time or money. In the past few decades wood-firing has gained popularity, which is evident in the exponential growth of kilns in the Hudson Valley and surrounding areas. Tim Rowan and I are just more people who can ask about wood-firing. For example, in addition to the seven people I spoke with for this article, there are at least ten more humans who live within an hour's drive from my house who can rock a wood-kiln. There is also a more sociological explanation – maybe we're just looking for something a little more natural, a little more human.

I turn to wood-firing for several reasons. Primarily because it completes my work – the mark of a wood kiln activates the surface of my clay forms, showing the record of a slow and intentional process that pays homage to geology. I am shamelessly romanticized by the dualities involved – simplicity juxtaposed with complexity, control co-existing with complete surrender, delightful surprises alongside glorious flameouts.

