

RAKU

Raku is a firing process which originated in Korea.

It was adopted by Japan in the 16th century where it soon became the accepted technique for firing ceremonial bowls for the Tea Ceremony.

Pieces to be raku fired are generally, but not always, bisque fired before glazing. After glazing they are re-fired to around 1000 degrees centigrade and removed with tongs from the kiln when incandescent to be plunged into sawdust, wood shavings and sometimes hay or other organic material.

The difference in temperature is extreme and the glaze crackles as a result of it. When the red-hot object hits the sawdust, the sawdust ignites. The object is quickly smothered and deprived of oxygen and the flames are extinguished and replaced by thick smoke. This smoke blackens any unglazed parts of the object indelibly while penetrating the newly formed surface fissures in the glaze and creating the characteristic black crackled look.

Rich metallic lusters can be obtained from the use of copper, silver, cobalt or iron oxide in the glaze formulae. By controlling amount of oxygen that is made available during the firing and the length of the smoking time any number of different effects can be produced.

A jet of water, which lowers the temperature enough to prevent any further chemical reaction, fixes the effect.

When the pieces have cooled down they have to be scrubbed to rid them of tar and ash. A few sculptors use this method to make larger pieces working with heavily grogged clay, which can withstand the violence of the firing and the extremes of temperature.

Joanna Hair started raku firing her animals in 1985.

The word raku in Japanese means pleasure or ease: it was inscribed on the gold signet offered to the Tea Master Chojiru in 1598 who then adopted the name for his family and is thought to be the first to have use the raku firing process in Japan.

Many artists today who raku fire subscribe to the raku philosophy: of working in partnership with the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. To accept their mark on the final work is to find beauty in a chance encounter, to relinquish full control and to be happy.

Bénédicte Giniaux

*A four-minute video on the gallery's website:
Workshop tour - Joanna Hair - February 2017*