

Good for Function

Many people have been important for my development as a ceramic artist. After fifty years of making, I think back to Wayne Ngan as a very important teacher. Seeing a couple of pieces of his work at an international juried exhibition after my first year of making pots, piqued my interest in his work. Pictures of his house and works on Hornby Island in a new book about ceramic artists made me want to have a look.

After a trip to Seattle, I ventured to Hornby Island to have a look. His hand made house and studio, incorporating many natural elements from the Hornby beach environment, was very eye-opening. Wayne was not there at the time, but I briefly chatted with his wife.

Wayne had always wanted to be a painter and I learned that he had gone to China to study classical painting, finding it more important than spending time with his wife and two children on Hornby. On returning to Hornby, Wayne discovered that he had been replaced in his hand built house and studio by his wife's new paramour, a fry cook! Fortunately for Wayne, a wealthy benefactor, Doris Shadbolt had made a new space for him on the other end of the island, where he created another beautiful handmade house and gardens.

A few years later, six months after Shimaoka's visit to the Banff Centre, I took a course from Wayne, designed for established ceramic artists who had their own studios. It was a wonderful two weeks of making and learning, critics and discussion. My wife and studio partner, Carol, came to Banff for the weekend of crit and evaluation. Wayne expressed two different views of people's work. When he critiqued the work of a rather pompous artist making "confused" work, neither functional nor beautiful.....Wayne said, "OOh You an artist." Other people's work, he would sometimes say....."Good for function."

A few years later, as Carol and I had taught at the University of Alberta, Extension Department, we suggested Wayne for a weekend workshop. We invited him to stay with us and use our studio to make some work to finish at the workshop. Carol bustled around, gathering groceries for some great meals for this exciting visitor.

When I picked Wayne up from the airport, he wanted me to stop at a grocery store to pick up some yams. He said he was on a special yam cleansing diet and that's all he was eating.

When I drove up, Carol greeted us from the door while Wayne stepped out with two laden white plastic bags to which I announced, "Wayne brought yams! He's on a special diet." to which Carol replied, "I love yams.....we can eat them together." (I hate yams.....) He also complimented Carol on the black and white Ikat shirt she was wearing. Carol gave it to him on his departure.

It was a wonderful workshop and Wayne encouraged participants to take a piece home after I would fire them in the wood kiln. Three or four of the pieces went in our large ceramic art collection. It was a very special time.

On one of our trips to Banff Centre to meet a famous American potter, Betty Woodman, we met Casey.....a rich kid from Vancouver. There he was, all blond and blue-eyed, decked out in traditional Japanese work clothing and sitting majestic and gorgeous at the traditional Japanese style throwing wheel he had purchased and had shipped from Japan.

"Hi guys!" He was happy and welcoming and comfortably very sure of himself. He was loved.

On a subsequent visit to Wayne's place on Hornby, I discovered Wayne had built a large workshop with a three hundred cubic foot wood firing anagama kiln. I stayed the night and he

told me he had gone to China and married a Chinese opera singer, who had moved to Hornby with him and stayed for six months, but found the solitary life on Hornby unsatisfying and the winters dreary and had returned to China.

Later, we learned that Casey had come and apprenticed with Wayne for a year and later, in Vancouver, had passed away with AIDS. Before his death, Casey had made five teabowls, one for each of his sisters, which he asked Wayne to fire in his kiln with an ash glaze made from Casey's ashes.

Wayne fired the kiln. He told Carol and I that it was one of the worst firings he had ever had.....but, the five bowls for Casey's sisters were exquisite!

We understood that subsequently, he took down his kiln to make space for his painting studio.