



Micki's work is testament to the skills and sensitivity that can be developed in a practice where focus, time, concentration, dedication and perception are prime. The difficult task of wood firing and salt glazing is demanding and the results are so often unpredictable. Micki has used this element of chance to develop and hone her aesthetic. Her work is a pleasure to touch and hold. She is a great maker as well as a great friend.

Sandy Lockwood, ceramic artist



Micki Schloessingk

The Language of Clay



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Earth, Fire and Salt

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## Earth, Fire and Salt

The earth is important to Micki Schloessingk. Feeling the ground beneath her feet, holding the clay in her hands, Micki's sense of the world is much informed by her physical interaction with it. Micki transforms clay from the earth into tactile objects that we may use and delight in everyday. She does so with a physical knowledge that has culminated from many years spent working with clay and with a sensitivity for its fundamental qualities.

Micki sets out 'to make pots that grow on those that use them.'<sup>1</sup> Her tenacity in doing so has been sustained across decades of making and exploration. It is bound by her holistic approach to life. Micki takes time to notice and feel the world around her, and she gives of her time and her experience to others. There is an ecology of making that seems to have grown around Micki's practice and it is one of creative exchange.

Micki is a leading maker of wood fired pottery in the UK, indeed one of a small group worldwide. Her understanding of the language of clay is ingrained in every piece she creates. The assured forms, evocative textures and rich colorations do not come about through happenstance. Although there is inevitably an element of unpredictability in the firing process, Micki has a sensitive knowledge of the palette of wood firing and salt glazing, one that informs her every decision in the studio.



1. Micki Schloessingk



In making pots to be used and enjoyed by others, the sense of touch and the interaction with each pot are integral to how they're made. Skill, knowledge and sensitivity contribute to each pot in equal measure and when the kiln door is opened after a firing, Micki is full of excitement and anxiety. Detailed note-taking, intricate and precise kiln packing, exact feeding of the kiln with wood and salt at optimum moments during the two-day firing cycle, all make their marks on each and every pot. And each and every pot makes its mark on Micki as she considers its final character. Each pot goes out into the world with care and passion in its making.

The consideration then passes to us. For, choosing a pot to use and to have in our lives is a delightful decision. We touch it, hold it, view it, sense how it makes us feel. Pots can bring real pleasure to our everyday, they can enhance daily routines and rituals. The raw materiality of clay, the insight and ability of the potter, and the practical demands of daily life, each of these impact on the form, aesthetic and function of ceramic pots. It's well worth taking the time to delight in them.

Micki's exhibition *Earth, Fire and Salt* is a celebration of exemplary wood fired pottery. It is another thread in *The Language of Clay: Part One* series. This is a series of exhibitions that explores just a handful of the multifarious manifestations of clay. Anna Noël's exhibition *Telling Tales* has brought us fables and suspended animation in Anna's figurative ceramics. Anne Gibbs' exhibition will explore sculptural forms and our sense of space. All the work is brought into being with skill and sensitivity; attributes that stem from dedication to and intrigue in an arguably indefatigable medium.

Ceri Jones







Sensitivity is one of those elusive aspects of making pottery that is critical to success. It connects to the way the potter considers detail in form, perhaps the manner in which a rim undulates without looking inept, or the way that a gentle indent has been made in a cup without it looking accidental. Perhaps most of all, in the attitude to every aspect of cajoling an elegant form out of a seemingly lifeless lump of clay. Sensitivity is also prevalent in Micki's creative workspace and is key in forming the 'circumstances from which good work may emerge', as the potter Richard Batterham once observed.

The strength in the form of her pots is fundamental in producing an underlying structure to allow the rather unpredictable firing process to integrate and enhance the surface. Without clarity of form the surface would quickly lose its visual and tactile impact. Strength is also apparent in decisions about shape where, for example, a sensibility to the attachment of a handle which fits the human hand also elegantly wraps itself into the form of the pot.

Enjoying lunch with Micki's pots and pots  
by Richard Batterham and Svend Bayer



Her work has a slight air of mystery, it suggests rather than dictates ways of using and allows another person to develop the creative potential inherent through use. How satisfying to fill one of her basket forms with food, encouraging tactile interaction when the pot is passed around the dining table. Similarly a large jug in use will often require a two handed grip, bringing instant tactile response. That integration of form and surface with sensitivity throughout her making, transfers to human interaction when you use one of her elegant pots.



As Micki was preparing for this significant exhibition of her work she was aware that presenting a glimpse of the very best of what she has been making for the past year will be as important for her as for the exhibition visitor. To gain an understanding of what she makes it is important to observe how the work is constantly evolving within its own boundaries. Micki has been making pots for a long time but the work never stands still. Each firing presents a moment of evaluation and drives her instinct to do better, to bring new emphasis and sometimes to recognise the need for change. She is still learning about the potential of her kiln and the differing opportunities it opens up for creative playfulness. My enquiry about her recent investigations making pairs of bottle forms, prompted her to comment 'these bottles are also expressive, they are something to do with conversations, and the pots excite me and remind me of people.' This relatively new work takes advantage of the area of the kiln that is closest to the wood fire, almost in the firebox itself. Other tall bottle forms are placed behind the bag wall, an area that gets tremendous heat, salt and ash. Micki uses these pots as protectors for work that sits behind them.



In complete contrast to this risky excitement Micki has another item in her repertoire which is rarely seen outside of the studio. She makes spoons by modelling the clay in the palm of her hand. She commented 'the spoon making is always incredibly calming and nurturing to me, so that feeds a very vulnerable part of me, it's not so visible in my pots'. The spoons seem to represent not only that personal contemplative need but also an opportunity to have complete creative freedom from the everyday demands of pottery making. Her spoons are very beautiful, tactile objects and epitomise the care and attention that she puts into even the humblest of pots she makes, intended to enrich the lives of others.

Alex McErlain





## In conversation with Micki Schloessing

Chatting at Bridge Pottery, Ceri Jones hears about some of the influences and insights informing Micki's practice.

**CJ:** Established in 1987, how has the pottery evolved?

**MS:** I would say it has grown organically and often evolved quite spontaneously. I have ideas in my mind for a while, then it's the right time and we get moving on something. I do remember feeling unsettled for many years, living here was intended to be a pause. However, once I did make the commitment to be here it was very exciting. I contacted architect David Lea and together we came up with a simple, very good design for the gallery and the kiln room, using green and local materials. I was meant to be writing a book on salt glazing at the time, so I decided that I would travel and do some research into wood firing salt kilns. The kilns of Gwyn Hansen in Australia, Kevin Crowe in the US and Herve Rousse in France inspired the design of my new kiln. Luckily this young American potter, Kirke, who'd just finished an apprenticeship, got in touch as he needed a

place to work and he was very keen on wood firing. He, along with a Danish student, Anna, helped me to build my kiln. We built it in six weeks and during the process it kept evolving. Whilst we were building it I decided to extend the firebox, to double its size, so I could have space for a front chamber in which to fire pots without salt, relying on the wood ash for glaze. The front chamber became a new playground that I would find challenging but engaging. Slowly, slowly, progress is on-going.

**CJ:** You seem very open to creative conversations and explorations. Individual potters come and work with you here. Has collaboration always been important to the way you work?

**MS:** Well it's sort of come about in this post-family phase of life. To run a pottery on your own, especially doing wood firing, is daunting. I often need help and I like the energy of having people around. Many have passed through here, we tend to stay quite connected, people come back, come and go, so without being very intentional about it, it's a way to stay productive. It wasn't a plan, it has just sort of happened.

**CJ:** You've stated a wonderful aim, 'to make pots that grow on those that use them.' Is your thinking behind this to make pots that are very much of you but that will also grow to have an everyday familiarity unique to the user?

**MS:** I don't see myself as a production potter but I do love to make pots that people will use. I like to make cups and jugs but am also drawn to forms that are slightly elusive. My pots suggest use but do not define it. I don't think I'm a very defined person. The form needs to be strong and clear, but inviting. In a similar vein I've been slightly hesitant not to do too much decoration because that can feel like I'm imposing myself. Though sometimes I wish I had the courage to make more marks. I look forward to the next ten years as I hope I'll get braver with mark making. I like to make very simple drawings, I've started to draw on tiles. There's something very intriguing about writing and drawing into clay, I'm not sure where it will go but I'm conscious of it affecting me deeply.

**CJ:** So you throw and you hand build. Would you say there's a particular form that you especially enjoy making?

**MS:** I think the form I most like to throw is the bowl. I'm definitely a bowl person. I love making cut-sided tea bowls but also large salad bowls. There is huge scope in making different kinds of bowls on the wheel. With hand building the things I most like to make can be very modest. They're to do with touch and feel. This piece for example, a palm-sized slab bowl, I find very pleasing. I like hand building to have a kind of ease and directness of approach. I like simple forms, such as the spoons I'm making at the moment. Somehow with hand building I'm more emotionally involved. With throwing you tend to fall back on the training and the technical skills that you've learnt. But for me there's more freedom in hand building, it's an area for self-expression and exploration. Again, like the mark making, it's an area that I haven't given enough time to in my life.



**CJ:** I'm aware that you take notes as you make, is that something that you do throughout the whole process?

**MS:** On the making day I have this little notebook and I write down the weight of the clay, what the clay is, rough measurements, which part of the kiln it will go in. . . . Then, when I come back and am slipping each piece, maybe two days later, I write more notes. After the firing I always record how pieces have worked out. Then there is this notebook that I try and keep with me all the time, often in the morning I'll write a little, so this morning I had a thought about my spoons for example, which I could jot down. I fear losing my ideas so I do like to keep this notebook close to me. Then I have the kiln-firing book. When we unpack the kiln, I do a quick drawing of what I see, and the most important thing is actually the measurements of the spaces between pots and shelves because that is what determines the salt and the flame path going through the kiln. Too much space and they might be over salted, too little space and they're under salted. Then I write down quick notes on the pots as they come out, and take photos of each shelf. I've got more and more detailed in my notes over the years.

**CJ:** Your finished pieces are bursting with rich tones. You use slips and then there's obviously the flames, the ash, the salt vapour. Can you tell us a little bit more about the finishing processes?

**MS:** One critical thing that you didn't mention is the clay body. The clay body gives the tone. The basic clay I use for most of the work in the main chamber is the *terre de Saint Amand*, from central France. It's a clay that's been used for a long time for wood fired salt glaze. It contains something like 1.5% of iron, it's quite plastic and responds well to both salt and wood ash. So I think of the clay as being my base palette and then I'll apply slips that either lighten or darken the colours. I think my default slips are reds and oranges, fiery colours, the colours of India. When I went to India I was 19 and I'd never come across a potter. I got to India and pots were everywhere, on the side of the road, in markets, huge piles of beautiful water jars and different shaped pots, all in this terracotta red which was the colour of the earth. It made such an impact on me. So reds, yellows, oranges are the colours that I've developed in my work and which I've been constantly adapting and testing.

That said I do also love the raw un-slipped clay body, its greys and browns and greens, when very ashy.

**CJ:** Tell us about the packing of the kiln and the need to channel the flames.

**MS:** The relation of one pot to another is important. If you put one pot in front of another then it's protecting the pot behind it from the flames. The part that's facing the flame is exposed to the salt and the wood ash and the effects can be dramatic, whereas the part that's protected will be more subtly toned, particularly in the front chamber. In the main chamber the wood ash affects the pots on the edge but it doesn't get through to the back, whereas the salt goes through the whole chamber and disperses more evenly.

**CJ:** Wood firing, and salt glazing specifically, how early did these influence your own practice?

**MS:** When I was at Harrow College of Art, we were meant to go and work in a pottery during the first summer and I'd come across this pot in an Irish pottery I'd worked in, prior to going to college.

This little pot was on the windowsill of the room I slept in. I didn't know it at the time, but it was wood fired and salt glazed, and I developed a passion for this pot. Luckily the potter had his name on the bottom, it was Gustave Tiffoche, so I found out where this potter was in Brittany, turned up on his doorstep and said 'can I help you this summer?' He was a lovely man who had a successful pottery, making tableware, and he also had a wood/salt firing kiln. He agreed to have me for the summer and it was a really good experience. I got a good work ethic from there too (including a two hour lunch break). So when I went back to Harrow for the second year, I immediately built a small wood/oil firing kiln and then fired most of my work in this kiln. I already knew that's what I wanted to do. When I set up my first pottery in Yorkshire in 1975 I built a large wood firing kiln, designed with the help of Tiffoche. So I was committed to wood firing very early. It is such a big field, I feel that having just one lifetime isn't enough.





## Biography

Micki is a maker of wood fired and salt glaze ceramics. She has been making pots since being struck by the vibrant red earth and terracotta wares in India, where she travelled aged 19. It was the raw qualities of clay that affected Micki, that the earth under our feet could be transformed into vessels for our everyday. Wood firing was, and remains, prevalent in India. It is a dynamic firing process that alters the clay body in myriad ways. Micki works her cross draft, wood fire kiln within exacting parameters. Conditions in a wood fire kiln are volatile and the effects on each pot are variable and unique. Micki knows and embraces the characteristics of wood fired ceramics and explores these to rigorous ends in each of her handmade pots.

Since that informative encounter with ceramics in India, Micki has been dedicated to her pottery practice. Working and researching pot-making and kiln-firing has led Micki to Ireland where she worked with Gratten Freyer, to France where she worked with Gustave Tiffoche, to Breda in Spain and, more recently, to Australia and the USA. Attending the Studio Pottery course at Harrow College of Art, Micki was taught by Mick Casson, Walter Keeler and Victor Margrie. Aged 26, Micki established her first pottery making wood fired, salt glaze tableware in Bentham, North Yorkshire. Twelve years later Micki moved with her family to the Gower peninsula in south Wales where she built up Bridge Pottery in the rural hamlet of Cheriton.

For the past sixteen years Micki has continued to develop Bridge Pottery, which now comprises a gallery, kiln shed, studio spaces, clay room, and versatile outdoor areas. It is a dynamic and peaceful environment into which Micki welcomes many visiting potters, students and members of the public. Creative conversation and collaboration are integral to Micki's practice that, by its nature, continues to evolve and shift with each pot that is fired.

Micki has work in several collections. These include the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Crafts Council Collection in London, Instituut Pieter Brueghel in the Netherlands, Rudolf Strasser Collection at the Museum of the City of Lanshut in Germany, and the William Ismay Collection in York Art Gallery. Recent exhibitions have shown work by Micki at the Craft in America Centre in Los Angeles, Contemporary Applied Arts in London, Creabiz in Denmark, Bevere Gallery in Worcester, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. Micki has presented at conferences such as the European Wood Fire Conference in Guldageraard, Denmark and Women and Wood Firing in Arizona.

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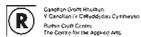
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