

# Art Doesn't Move in a Straight Line

*Article by Kathi Scholz Fertig*



*Linda Shusterman. Teapot. 2004. Wheel thrown porcelain decorated with terra sigillata, scraffitto pattern, slip trailing and glazed, fired in a wood/salt kiln. Cone 11. 30 x 22.5 x 10 cm. Photography: John Woodin.*



*Alan Willoughby. Vase. 2004. Wheel thrown porcelain decorated with terra sigillata and glaze, fired in a wood/salt kiln. Cone 11. 30 x 25 x 15 cm. Photography: John Carlano.*

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I NOTICED ABOUT THE ceramics of Linda Shusterman and Alan Willoughby when I reviewed their summer 2004 exhibition at the M. T. Burton Gallery in Ship Bottom, New Jersey, was the use of symbolic imagery in their pieces, in particular, the spiral and wavy line motifs. It is fitting that these two symbols that have

existed in art and communication for more than 2000 years are a part of their vocabulary (the spiral signifying renewal, reinvention, evolution and the river signifying meandering, forward moving, ebb and flow). As Shusterman states, "The carving seen in the art and architecture of the Mayan ruins inspires repetition of spiral shapes. This spiral is a theme ever



present in my work and represents the spiralling of life and how it is constantly moving."

The separate ways Shusterman and Willoughby use these symbols are indications of the similarities and differences that have allowed them to move so freely in and out of their collaborations through their 30 years of marriage. Shusterman employs these motifs decoratively with delicate slips and sgraffito. Willoughby loves the tactile and physical properties of clay; he creates solid, thick, three-dimensional spirals used as handles or applications.

It is said that art doesn't move in a straight line and the path that these two have taken in their work is a good example of this. As I become more familiar with their work and history, it is now clearer how this symbolism works as a metaphor for their lives, for the evolution of their creative and collaborative involvement over the years. In fact, this newest collaboration with the woodfire kiln has brought them full circle back to their roots in the studio potter movement.

Originally beginning as studio potters, the popular movement of large-scale production propelled them into a wholesale ceramic business in the 1980s. After a period of time, Willoughby found himself in need of a new creative search. He ended his wholesale business and began to help Shusterman with hers by throwing some of her forms for her to decorate.

Their next collaboration was born of necessity. By the 1990s, both found themselves being drawn back toward the ideals of the studio potter. Willoughby was in need of a change of focus, and found himself looking back toward his interest in functional work. He began experimenting with the woodfire kiln. The kiln he fired his work in was at Jasper Brinton's studio in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, and by the late 1990s his expanding involvement led him to have a noborigama woodfire kiln built closer to home, allowing him to work almost exclusively with wood-firing. Once this kiln was built, he found he wasn't producing enough pots to fill the kiln for firing so Shusterman obliged with pots of her own.

The genesis of this newest alliance proved fortuitous; Willoughby began experimenting decorating Shusterman's forms with his slips and terra sigillata. This in turn, freed her to concentrate solely on the creation of her forms with no thought towards his decorative input. Their partnership took on a new depth and complexity, setting a foundation for the interchanging of each other's works and the marrying of ideas into a collective whole. Their different personalities are reflected in their work but, like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, separate and individually shaped, or maybe more fitting, the spiral symbol for yin and yang, they fit together, filling in the gaps the other leaves. Willoughby is full of far-reaching energy and infectious passion. His shapes tend to be gravitational, solid, masculine and earth bound. His



Linda Shusterman. *Vessel Form Series*. 2004. Wheel thrown and assembled porcelain decorated with terra sigillata, sgraffito pattern, slip trailing and glazed, fired in a wood/salt kiln. 61 x 15 cm. Photography John Carlano.

forms are not large but have a massive feel; his palette absorbs the earth colours indicative of wood kiln firing and his decorations are rooted in the architectural forms of twisted wrought iron and carved wood.

A counterbalance to this intensity, Shusterman's quiet strength is expressed in her use of more fanciful shapes that reach for the skies: long, vertical, whimsical, pieces that exhibit a lighter touch, a more feminine





Alan Willoughby. *Split Vase*. 2004. Wheel thrown and altered white stoneware decorated with flashing slip and glaze, fired in a wood/salt kiln. Cone 11. 43 x 25 x 12.5 cm. Photography: John Carlano.

curve. She integrates sgraffito and playful patterns of colour on her forms; her tall undulating shapes hold a regal elegance reminiscent of the moulded pots of ancient Egypt, with crisp edges accentuating their silhouettes and adorned with hieroglyphs.

History, symbolism and sense of place all have influence on these two ceramists. It is with no little consequence that, on a recent trip to Spain, Willoughby encountered the massive organic architecture of the Catalan architect, Antonio Gaudi. Here were examples of the ideal marriage of nature's organic forms combined with architectural elements made by man. In the human-scaled Bellesauard, its menage of gothic and art nouveau and its collective assimilation of idiosyncratic forms and applications, he found a connection with his own move towards the sculptural.

Shusterman's current influence tends towards the colours and shapes of southern Spain and has become more reflective than her series of the late '90s. Her new work is substantiated by the Moorish colours of her palette – blues, oranges and turquoises – and in the Islamic patterning of her sgraffito, like the decorative grates and gates of southern Spain.

They have begun making piece combinations – her sugar and creamer, his tray; her cruet sets, his tray. Although their studio space is one large room, their spaces are divided by an invisible wall. Sharing a studio with Willoughby's passion for woodfiring is no small matter and soon Shusterman took steps towards incorporating the noborigama kiln into her own aesthetic, experimenting with the effects of wood and salt.

For Willoughby, using the noborigama kiln has become an integral part of the whole creative process. His actions as a firer of a wood kiln have, as he states "a significant impact upon the outcome of my work". He enjoys the parameters set by this process and finds freedom in its confines. He strategically places the pieces in the kiln in anticipation of the patterns that might be cast from the shadows of others.

Willoughby defines the collaboration between themselves and the woodfire kiln as "a balance between inward and outward, between individual and community". The process embraces the Zen aesthetic of the beauty of the imperfect. As he states, "Firing with wood is a purifying ritual. It is the "trial by fire" of ancient myths – a collaborative effort between man and fire – to open the kiln door several days after the pots have cooled and we have rested, are moments filled with intense anticipation and excitement."

This new alliance is spiralling Shusterman forward, between herself and the woodfire kiln, and beginning to have an impetus of its own. Her colours are becoming softer, her sgraffito less dominant. Her continued use of the leaf pattern becomes a mechanism of transition as well as a metaphor for this newfound interest. For her it connects the relationship of the woodfiring with trees and nature.

It is the experience of all that has come before, the earlier influences juxtaposed with the new that enhance this complicated partnership. The techniques that both ceramists employ to create their works are ancient and technically difficult, but the end result shows none of this struggle, just an effortless unification of the whole. Both artists wish their pieces to be enjoyed and above all else, used. As Willoughby states, "It is with use that their life is renewed. And when they are used, as clay pots were being used hundreds and thousands of years ago, let us, the maker and the user, remember our connection to these other times, to these other peoples, and have reverence for this miracle which is life."

Kathi Scholz Fertig is a writer on the arts from New Jersey, US.