

MY FAVOURITE GLAZE

Guan, but not forgotten

Guan or possibly kuan is a very old glaze type which originated in ancient China at around about the time that Europe was enjoying the renaissance.

It was made under royal or court patronage and can be loosely described as a highly felspathic stoneware glaze which is pale in colour , sort of whitish/grey with variations of pale grey/green, grey blue, creamy/grey/yellow, or grey/pinky mauve.

This glaze can only be created at stoneware temperatures under reducing conditions, as it is only under reduction that the predominant greyish character is developed.

It is not a clear glaze, although it would be if it were fired high enough. It is not an opaque glaze either, I think a good term would be perlucant, showing just enough passage of light to indicate the clay body colour underneath. It makes a remarkable difference to the glaze to see it over the two different bodies, one white and the other dark.

Traditionally the clay body used is quite dark based on a high iron content. The dark clay/glaze interface layer reflects light in such a way as to give the surface a mysterious depth. The clay must not be too vitreous, as under reduction the iron colourant becomes a flux which can lead to slumping of the body, or worse, shattering of the pot due to the stresses of glaze fit. In fact it is best if the clay is quite porous and sandy, as this lets the glaze craze freely without shattering the body. There is no such clay on the market of which I am aware, so I make up my own.

I started out firing to 1300oC but over time I began firing lower and lower as this seemed to give the better results. I now only fire to 1200oC with the same recipes and I am starting to get some lovely results .I find that I'm firing longer and slower, especially towards the top end of the firing and I'm ball milling the glazes just a little - one hour. It's important not to mill high felspathic glazes for too long as the felspar breaks down very rapidly and the glaze soon becomes unworkable.

It is essential that guan style glazes contain 10% to 20% of limestone or whiting in the mix to develop the grey/green colour. It also helps to create the mass of tiny microscopic bubbles which adds to the opacity of the glass and finally 10% to 20% of fine silica makes up the glaze.

Small additions from one to five percent of such things as talc, bone ash and wood ash give excellent variations on the base glaze.

A good starting recipe is;

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| Felspar | 70 |
| Silica | 20 |
| Whiting | 10 |

Although I use;

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| White micro granite | 85 |
| Limestone | 15 |

The choice of the actual raw materials is quite important, it is surprising how much difference a change in one of the ingredients can make. I have recently been prospecting a wide range of local materials and a white clay straight from the ground can be anything from highly aluminous to highly siliceous, this will have a remarkable effect on the look of the glaze.

Guan is one of a series of traditional glazes which are all inter-related chemically. If the limestone is eliminated, it becomes a shino. When small percentages of talc are added to this glaze it tends towards luan-chuan, when larger amounts are added it shows signs of chun or jun effect, especially in the presence of one to two percent of bone ash and or some wood ash. Alternatively, if a little clay and iron are added to a guan it can become a celadon.

Mix to a unctuous creamy consistency and apply thickly.

Fire in reduction from 1000oC onwards, fire gently and slowly, don't be afraid to underfire and use test rings to check on proceedings throughout the latter part of the firing.

What I admire most about these glazes is the beauty and restraint of the surface, occasionally their great depth, the simplicity of the recipe and technique in general, however, what is not obvious to the casual observer is the complexity of the series of judgments that the potter is required to make to achieve this final result. This is a result of years of fuck-ups that eventually result in some sort of skill or understanding. Perhaps understanding is not the correct word, as it is not at all obvious to me that I have understood anything much at all during the process or that I have developed any particular skill, except that on reflection I see that I have come quite a long way when all the best pieces are assembled ready to go to the gallery, especially when compared to the piles of shards in the corner that didn't make it.

Geoffery Legge (co-owner of Watters Gallery and Legge Gallery) said to me at the opening of my guan/celadon show that this was the most political show I've ever made. Two of my previous shows at Legge Gallery were overtly political "You Arrogant French Bastard" and "A brief history of nuclear Fission" he made the point that preaching at people only turns them off - their eyes glaze over, yet this work which is so quiet and beautiful will have a longer lasting and more productive effect on people in the long run. On reflection I think that he was right.

Many of the pieces in the Legge Gallery show (called "From a Point of Singularity to a Position of Sharing") were tea pots, the vast majority of which were thrown and then altered in such a way as to create unusual and interesting forms while still being perfectly functional. They were shown in trios with 2 matching cups. There were also small bowls and those faceted bottles which were shown singularly.

The title comes from the fact that the previous show was also of kuan glaze pots, but mostly of faceted bottle forms(points of singularity). I wanted the show to follow on from the last one so the kuan glaze was the link there, progressing from the singular bottles to the tea pots which are the position of sharing.

The year before at Legge Gallery I had a show called "Self Knowledge Through Kuan and High Water" on concurrently with Vivienne Furguson's Paintings this show was reviewed in the Sydney Morning Herald by John McDonald who wrote in part:

"The term spiritual is much abused in contemporary art, but there is such an absence of ego in both these exhibitions that it would be vain to see the artists' aspirations in any other light. For a few weeks the gallery has become a temple where the progress of time is suspended, Each of Harrison's pale green bowls and objects has a full and satisfying presence that leaves no room for piece meal criticism,".