

# The Mundane and Extraordinary

**POTTER** – JULIAN STAIR finds an intriguing paradox in Rob Barnard's functional pots.

PHOTOGRAPHY – HUBERT GENTRY



At first glance Rob Barnard's career reflects the classic immersion of a Western potter into Oriental ceramic practice. Inspired by a raku tea bowl in Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* while a ceramics student, he moved to Japan in 1974 where he lived for five years before returning to the United States to become one of the first American potters to build his own anagama kiln and start wood firing. However, Barnard's initial contact with Japan was not as a potter pilgrim seeking out National Living Treasures; he has never subscribed to the narrow view of Japanese ceramics as the product of an idyllic pre-industrial society. His route was the product of a series of disparate experiences including military service in Vietnam, a Japanese university education and direct contact with Kazuo Yagi (1918-1979) a co-founder of Sodeisha and the most important post-war avant-garde ceramic artist.

## JAPAN

Like Charlie Sheen's idealistic character in the film *Platoon*, at the age of eighteen Barnard ran away from a secure family home to enlist in the marines, believing it was his patriotic duty. On his way back from Vietnam two years later he found himself stationed on a military base in Okinawa and bought an old taxi cab to tour the island which Soetsu Yanagi, the founder of the Mingei movement, had championed for the beauty of its indigenous craft. There was no great epiphany, but crucially Barnard discovered that 'objects could have a cultural value, and there was freedom

for men to step out of stereotypical roles to become creative'. Two tours of duty later and struggling to find direction at college he became intrigued by ceramics and took himself to the stacks of the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery, one of the most important Oriental collections in America, where he handled a jar made by the 17th century Japanese potter Ninsei. The curator Josephine Knapp was sufficiently impressed by the young man to write a letter of introduction to the prestigious Kyoto City College of Fine Arts, where he won a place in 1974.

It was here that Barnard was taught by Kazuo Yagi, 'the father of modern Japanese ceramics'. [1] With his references to western artists such as Paul Klee, Max Ernst and Joan Miro, Yagi's sculptural work of the 1950s broadened the scope of Japanese ceramics. This openness was in marked contrast to the self-reflection of potters such as Rosanjin Kitaoji of the pre-war Momoyama revival with its celebration of indigenous Japanese pottery. Highly critical of the romanticisation of Japanese ceramics by East and West alike, Yagi encouraged Barnard to always question his own motives and insisted he regard himself as an artist. Paradoxically, during this period, Barnard produced traditional pottery despite becoming a private student of Yagi, achieving a measure of success and winning places in juried exhibitions under the Japanese rather than foreign

THIS PAGE: Spouted bowl, stoneware with white slip and clear glaze, H12cm |  
OPPOSITE PAGE: Teapot, wood-fired stoneware with natural ash glaze, H22cm.





category. On returning to America he brought together the Japanese practice of wood firing with his interest in generic forms from American colonial and English medieval pottery and even industrial ceramic design. But Barnard found a difference between exhibiting in Japan and the USA. In the East, functional pottery had a high status and was perceived as critically challenging regardless of its practical nature whereas in America it was far less highly regarded. However, Barnard was predisposed towards useful objects because they offered an intimacy of aesthetic experience, a conviction he has passionately maintained throughout his career. Forgoing the grand gesture or public arena he opted for the domestic, whereby simple pots experienced during unexceptional times create actuality through what Michael Cardew defined as 'expressive functionality'. [2] Barnard's aim was to counter the separation between object and viewer that characterises much of contemporary art. But instead of offering solace and easy comfort, Barnard took advantage of these unguarded moments to ask searching questions about our expectations of ceramics and art in general.

#### THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION

At the core of Barnard's work is the belief that pots offer experience of both the mundane and the extraordinary. He recounts a conversation in which Yagi spoke about the nature of work made in the 'vibrating space' between beauty and ugliness that generates unpredictable results for artists and challenges its audience. True to this, Barnard's pots are rarely easy. They have a startling frankness that borders on the visceral. The conventional requirements of functional pottery fall away as he celebrates the beauty of imperfection with rough surfaces and a brutal transparency that reveals every aspect of its making. Barnard confronts, more than seduces, his audience – but he is never crude.

Lids fit and spouts pour. The pots are well thrown, balanced in the hand and light when necessary, even delicate. And in these days of 'signature work' and conformity, Barnard produces a remarkable diversity of forms that range from intimate cups and elegant teapots to large and bold jars.

Using wood to fire, only flames and fly ash leave their mark on the undecorated pots; sometimes thick layers of melted ash and seductive flashing are interspersed by viscous rivulets of glass but, more often than not, three days of exposure to burning oak at a temperature of 1400°C leaves raw reds and matt grey blacks with textures that galvanise the hand and lip. In addition, Barnard also produces glazed white pots, which the Japanese call *kohiki* after Korean Yi Dynasty stoneware. By overlapping layers of slip and semi-matt glaze he creates a palette of soft whites that, like the ash, are anti-decorative but integral to the character of the pot and its firing. The translucent washes reveal subtle textures and hidden modulations of form comparable to skin stretching over the body, hinting at its underlying skeletal structure. He also makes a virtue out of technical flaws, applying coatings of slip so thick it becomes opaque and crawls and flakes away from the surface to reveal glimpses of the underlying clay. Whether wood fired or white ware, both approaches emphasise the stark purity of Barnard's forms.

Barnard has emerged over thirty years to become one of America's most respected potters. With work in many major public collections he has an impressive history of exhibitions including solo shows at the Seibu Department Store in Tokyo and in many fine art galleries such as Anton Gallery in Washington DC. He is also a highly articulate potter who has written for American ceramics journals and was for five years the ceramics editor of the art magazine *The New Art Examiner*. He has gained success in America



despite not fitting into the traditional craft sector or the world of sculptural ceramics. It is difficult to remain neutral towards Barnard's work for it has an emotional intensity unusual in the world of functional pottery. The American painter Mark Rothko remarked: 'It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way - not his way'. [3] For Barnard, the decision to make functional pottery is not governed by commercial necessity or even a moral imperative. It is an act of stealth in which high aesthetics and complex ideas disguised as modest objects invade our consciousness. Barnard is a resolute potter constantly engaged in a testing and neverending self-dialogue. By producing familiar but disconcerting pots he draws his spectators into his world, one which is defined by a series of oppositional forces between delicacy and force, the East and the West, the mundane and the extraordinary. **CR**

- [1] Robert Yellen, *Japan Times*, 27 July, 2005  
 [2] Michael Cardew, 'Why Make Pots In The Last Quarter Of The 20th Century?', *Studio Potter*, Vol 7, No 1  
 [3] Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, *New York Times*, June 13, 1943

Barnard's exhibition is at Julian Stair and Edmund de Waal's studio, November 11-13, 11am-6pm; preview November 10, 4-8pm. Unit 7D Vanguard Court, 36-38 Peckham Road, London SE5 8QT. Tel 020 7701 2034

Rob Barnard: Website [www.rob-barnard.com](http://www.rob-barnard.com)

LEFT TO RIGHT: Covered jar, wood-fired stoneware with natural ash glaze, H21cm ■ Vase, stoneware with white slip and clear glaze, H32cm ■ Vase, wood-fired stoneware with natural ash glaze, H23cm ■ Vase, stoneware with white slip and clear glaze, H34cm.

## Technical Notes

### CLAY BODY

Foundry Hill Creme (smooth stoneware clay)	3 parts
Goldart (another smooth body)	1 part
Redart (red earthenware clay)	1 part

This body is used for both types of work.

### SLIP

Kaolin	30
Ball clay	30
Silica	20
Feldspar	20

### GLAZE

Feldspar (potash)	60
Silica	10
Kaolin	20
Dolomite	10

### FIRING

The wood-fired work is done in an anagama kiln; the work is loaded without any applied glaze or pigment. The surfaces are a result of the interaction of the flame and melted wood ash with the clay. Temperatures range from cone 12 in the front of the kiln to cone 6 in the rear. The firing is approximately 60 hours long. The whiteware is fired in an oil fired crossdraught catenary kiln to cone 8.