

# Noel Bailey

# INSPIRED

# by NATURE

by Andrew Buck, EdD

*“This is the point to emphasize the pre-eminence of stone as the material to be carved. I am not thinking of its durability, or even of the shape it will allow. I am thinking of the equal diffusion of light, that compared to most objects, even the hardest and darkest stones possess; I am thinking of hand-polished marble’s glow that can only be compared to the light of flesh-and-blood.”—Adrian Stokes, in *The Image in Form*<sup>1</sup>*

## Form and Image

Stokes’ fascinating essay reminds us that qualities of luminosity and movement present in an art object are inherently capable of stirring viewers’ feelings and imagination. We are moved by form. This draws attention to the significance of three-dimensional form, which is at the heart of every potter’s work. Yet, potters, in contrast to medieval stone carvers, are beholden to resolving surface issues differently. Potters have the challenge and opportunity to make aesthetic decisions involving surface treatment from a vast array of choices. This invites possibilities for raw,

textured, carved, burnished, glazed, painted, and even printed clay surfaces on pottery.

Choices among glazes alone are almost endless. To me, the interplay between form and glazed surfaces is one of the most complex and exciting areas within the aesthetic terrain of pottery. Some potters dip and dunk their wares into glaze or use spray guns to apply glazes to their work. Such a process may create uniform monochromatic glaze such as the celadons used by Fukami Sueharu or Takeshi Yasuda. Others combine pouring glazes on their pieces along with dipping. Many potters are drawn to the organic qualities of raw clay surfaces and invite kiln gods to act favorably during wood firings where wood ash, swirling inside of anagama kilns, lands spontaneously on pots, fusing with the vitreous clay bodies. In addition, some potters choose atmospheric soda firings to achieve various textured glaze surface effects. Let us not forget the realm of raku and saggar firing among the arsenal of aesthetic choices which ceramicists may deploy in the creation of resolved surfaces on pottery. In general, most of us would agree that a potter’s choice of surface



Place setting, 12 in. (30 cm) in diameter, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2016.



treatment in relationship to the vessel's three-dimensional form makes a significant impact on how the finished piece touches its beholder. This also introduces a question we can explore in getting to know a ceramic artist, namely, "What choices do you make in your work in relationship to form and surface, and why?" With these thoughts in mind, let us turn our attention to the ceramic work of Noel Bailey.

**Noel Bailey**

Bailey's ceramic work falls squarely in the category of pottery. He makes platters, plates, bowls, mugs, vases, and pitchers

from his own porcelain clay body formula, which he has used for many years.

Originally from Colorado and now a recognized potter in Vermont, he is inspired by the natural landscape that surrounds him. He is well attuned to nature, intrigued by phenomena like falling water that turns into ice during long, cold Northeast winters. His ceramic work echoes this fascination and interest. Molten glaze in flux, which stops midstream in a fluid descent while running down the face of a platter as the glowing hot kiln cools, references water turning into a wall of wind-swept ice clinging to a rocky outcrop.

Bailey aspires to have his work speak quietly, like movement and materials frozen in time. There is poetry and beauty in his work. It is based in simplicity. Imagine, if we may, Bailey standing outside on a well-worn bike path surrounded by a mixed deciduous and coniferous forest. He stands looking and listening to the sights and sounds of nature on a bright, blue-sky day. He hears the faint rustling of wind in the trees, the gurgling of a nearby stream, and the chirping of cardinals, juncos, and blue jays hidden among the trees. As he listens and scans the landscape, natural points of inspiration come into to focus and capture his attention. His work aims to convey the poignancy of these felt connections with natural phenomena.

Spend time with Bailey's pots and they will speak to you time and time again. A faint line here or there: subtle suggestions and reminders of recent flood high-water marks on covered bridges and low-lying barns. Carved openings on mugs filled with clear glaze: mottled sunlight falling onto the forest floor. Let there always be space among things. Let forms tell their stories, like gently fallen snow on the back-porch steps. Let glazes speak softly but clearly as they flow and crystallize, reminiscent of the sun glistening off of an ice bank, a frozen tableau, in the heart of winter. Movement and luminosity become enshrined in Bailey's pieces as he thoughtfully shapes forms and slowly crafts layers of subtle, yet dynamic, glazes that have become a signature feature of his recent work.

### Process

Nature imparts its own images and life lessons. Working with ceramic materials and processes invites its own lessons as well. In his formative years, Bailey apprenticed with Bill Wilson, a production potter who inspired him to pursue a potter's lifestyle. He was influenced by the subtlety of Richard DeVore, a fellow Coloradan, and inspired by the elegant and austere landscape references of Fukami Sueharu.

Developing a rhythm to the arc of his studio production helps Bailey keep an internalized awareness of what works and what does not. Typically, his production cycle—from throwing and altering to glaze firing—takes about five weeks. Using a small 12 cubic-foot gas kiln enables him to keep his knowledge of glaze application fresh. For Bailey, firing a smaller reduction gas kiln ten or eleven times a year offers a significant advantage over firing a larger kiln two or three times a year. He develops muscle memory of what works best with glazing. Knowing how thick or thin to spray on a glaze, knowing where to vary the thickness, and knowing how to layer sprayed glazes constitute valuable technical knowledge, which he combines with low-tech procedures to create dynamic fired surfaces. One kiln-loading technique that seems to have worked out well for him is turning refractory posts on their sides to create a slight incline for a flat kiln shelf to rest upon. Tilting some of the kiln shelves during glaze firing accentuates the run of the glaze when it is in flux. Bailey is now taking more time to shape each vessel more consciously during the forming stages while the porcelain is leather hard. A mindful awareness helps him convey the essence and subtlety of natural forms that inspire his work.

### Form and Feeling

We may contextualize Bailey's work in terms of its formative intent to evoke feelings of wonder and beauty inspired by nature. In this case, his work may be enjoyed on multiple levels. On the pragmatic plane, his work offers functionality, which brings the warmth and comfort of food. On an aesthetic level, and in an unassuming manner, his work asserts a presence that is invit-



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1 Platter, 20 in. (51 cm) in length, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2017. 2 Cup, 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2016. 3 Bowl, 12 in. (30 cm) in diameter, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2017. 4 Bowl, 9 in. (23 cm) in diameter, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2017. 5 Bowl bottom (detail), 8 in. (20 cm) in diameter, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2016. 6 Noel Bailey finishing a large bowl, 2017. 7 Kiln stack with tilted shelves, various dimensions, 2016. 6, 7 Photos: Corey Hendrickson.



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8 Platter, 19 in. (48 cm) in length, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2017.  
9 Mug, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2017.

ing and varied. Each modulating, sloping edge confidently works to suggest a natural shape or form from his immediate environment. The apparent simplicity of his altered forms yields an abundance of complexity to journey through repeatedly in an unhurried state of mind. Just be with it. Slowing down is good. Notice more. In looking carefully at his pieces, viewers are bound to become more alert and mindful. The dynamics that charge his pieces, as subtle as they are, resonate with gracefulness and elegance. Bailey's developed state of craftsmanship enables him to communicate feelings evoked by natural forms and images. His porcelain work invites viewers to participate imaginatively through the power of suggestion, offering an opportunity to develop a unique relationship with each piece. Bailey's vocabulary of selective lines, modulating edges, subtle colors, organic shapes and forms, as well as glazes frozen in motion are all suggestive of the natural world within which we live.

### The Ceramic World

Simplicity and reference to nature are two distinctive features of Bailey's functional work. Of course, many potters are drawn to the linkage between humble earthen materials inherent in the production of pottery, the primal process of transformative firing that yields functional work, and an organic, simplified aesthetic.

Contemporaries who aspire to imbue simplicity, subtlety, or reference to landscape in their porcelain work include British potters Martin Lungley, Matthew Blakely, and Kyra Cane.<sup>2</sup> In Australia, Keiko Matsui offers simplified, altered forms in the series *Contained* and *Objects*. Matsui's streamlined forms with articulated seams remind me of the minimalism found in Bailey's work, though the starting point of inspiration feels different.<sup>3</sup> The movement and serenity of Bailey's pieces seems to resonate closely in spirit with the ceramic work of Toshio Ōhi.<sup>4</sup> However, Bailey has created a distinctive style that draws inspiration from his aesthetic mentors DeVore and Sueharu. He combines an attention to nuanced form and the subtleties of glazing that constitute gentle interpretations of hushed moments in nature. The seasonal landscape continues to serve as his primary reference point and source of inspiration.

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*All process photos (see Monthly Method) were taken by Corey Hendrickson. To see more of his work, visit [www.coreyhendrickson.com](http://www.coreyhendrickson.com).*

1 Wolheim, Richard. Ed. *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*. Icon Editions, Harper & Row, Publishers. New York. 1972. p.151.

2 Cooper, Emanuel. *Contemporary Ceramics*. Thames & Hudson Ltd. London. 2009.

3 <http://keikomatsui.com.au/gallery/contained12>.

4 Crueger, Crueger, & Ito. *Modern Japanese Ceramics: Pathways of Innovation & Tradition*. Lark Books, a division of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc. New York. 2004.

5 A production of Vermont Frog Hollow Crafts Center & Regional Educational Television Network (RETN).

Learn more about Noel Bailey and his ceramic processes and ideas in a short video at the following link: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=adzOiDjd\\_bs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adzOiDjd_bs).<sup>5</sup>



## Noel Bailey: Introducing Variation

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### Forming Techniques:

#### The Split Undulating Foot Rim

Noel Bailey begins by throwing tightly made porcelain mugs in the shape of simple cylinders on the potters' wheel. Once they have firmed up, he flips them over and trims a distinctive undulating foot rim on the base. To do this, he uses a round tool he modified from an auto repair shop. Tools suited for this process can also be made by grinding down a needle tool to dull it or grinding down a metal dental tool to a dull, smooth point. Bailey pushes the tool into the foot rim from a vertical direction (1). This splits the rim into an inner and outer rim. He proceeds by taking a fettling knife and holding the point horizontally against the outer foot rim. As the potter's wheel spins, he cuts into the outer foot moving up and down slowly to create an undulating line (2). He removes unwanted clay (3) and smooths out the visible, undulating outer foot rim (4). He then smooths the inner foot rim and leaves it alone since this is what the mug will rest on. He darts the cylinder walls, cutting out narrow V-shaped sections from the rim down into the body (5) to alter the shape and create more space under the handles of his mugs (6, 7).



### Forming Techniques: Constructing Platters

Bailey enjoys working with the off-centered format of long platters. His platters are made out of slabs of clay that are formed over a bisque hump mold (8). As the clay slab dries and hardens to a workable state, Bailey throws a large foot ring on a bat on the potter's wheel. In a manner similar to the one described above, he creates a split undulating foot ring for the platter (9–11). Once the large foot ring firms up sufficiently, Bailey uses a fettling knife to release it from the bat (12, 13), and maneuvers it into position (14). After scoring and adding slip he then attaches it firmly to the back of platter. Even though his basement studio maintains a fairly high level of humidity, he covers the work in plastic to ensure even drying of the foot and platter. He wisely introduces slits on the foot

rim to minimize the chances of cracking as the piece dries and shrinks (15, 16). He also adds a ridge (a small coil) between the back of the platter and the outer foot rim to increase the strength of the joined pieces (17). After smoothing by hand and with a metal rib, this join provides a seamless transition between the foot and surface of the platter (18). Alterations to the surface face of the platter are kept to a minimum. The ideas behind a particular piece help him to decide where to thicken or thin edges ever so slightly. He may introduce a sense of movement by altering the width of the platter at selective locations across its length (19), so that the movement traveling around the edges of the platter relates to the movement of the foot-rim (20) and prospective glazes.





### Glazing Techniques: Color, Thickness, and Temperature

When Bailey approaches glazing a platter or bowl, he thinks about functionality and its relationship with food. From his perspective, white ware provides a pristine canvas to present food beautifully. He may put a slight mark or colored glaze in the center of bowls or plates that will be covered by food at meal times.

When it comes to his free-form platters, he holds each piece in his hands and thinks about the different elements that will be used in glazing it. His palette is spare. It is composed of two matte glazes, one slate in color (a combination of cobalt and iron oxides), and the other tan (rutile). He uses the matte glazes to suggest landscape imagery towards the base of his pieces. This keeps them grounded and anchored. He may use a pencil to sketch out about where the darker matte glazes

would appear, especially if he is working on a new design (21). Bailey uses a clear glaze for the final top layer.

He has found that two variables influence the extent to which his glazes run—how thickly they are applied and how high a temperature the kiln achieves during firing. He enjoys the outcomes of spraying glazes because of overlapping over spray (22). He has found through experience that the clear floating glaze creates a dramatic, defined line if it is applied thickly and runs down into the matte area. Keeping all of this experiential knowledge in mind informs how he executes glaze applications and firing to achieve soft, gradual transitions or eye-catching hard edges. Once a firing has reached maturity, he turns off the kiln, plugs it up and allows it to cool down for two days. He then returns with anticipation to see the final results of the firing.