

Rough Edges

The Work of Tony Clennell

BY HEIDI MCKENZIE

Tony Clennell is the quintessential potter—according to Clennell, he was born to be a potter, it was like an imperative. Still his path to a life of mud-slinging had its twists and turns. Clennell's first degree was in business and he worked in marketing for Kodak before heading back to the University of Western Ontario for his bachelor's degree in education. The eve before he was to take up his assigned teaching post, he landed at the doorstep of the late Phil Aziz, a celebrated local artist in London, Ontario. After a three-hour conversation with a virtual stranger, Clennell packed up his Volkswagen bug and headed for the hills—to Banff, Alberta, Canada's mecca for professional arts development, nestled within the snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains. He's never looked back.

With nearly four decades of professional potting, teaching, and training under his belt, Clennell is currently an adjunct professor of ceramics at Sheridan College and Ontario College of Art and Design University, and a vibrant and active mentor in the clay community at large. He is no stranger to the *Ceramics Monthly* community. Clennell is known as a wood man; he has been attracted to the seductive touch of reduction firing since the beginning, and has been firing wood kilns for nearly 35 years. His work is recognizably his own—voluptuous, generous, organic in luscious earthy tones, rooted in the British Studio tradition, yet holding its own amidst internationally known potters with distinctive personality and flair.



Wood-fired jugs, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, 2012. Photo: Sheila Clennell.

Clennell, now in his early 60s, threw his first pot in 1957 at the age of six. He wedged clay for his Uncle Jimmy at Pinecroft, Canada's longest-running family owned and operated ceramics studio, near Aylmer, Ontario, less than two hours southwest of Toronto. Back in the present, and sitting on the bandstand adjacent to the Pinecroft studio, across the pond from the Green Frog Tea Room on a breezy Sunday morning, Clennell revealed his life-long love affair with clay.

Clennell counts the late British potter, Michael Casson, as the most important mentor of his potting career. He witnessed Casson teaching at a Fusion Ontario conference in the mid-1970s and, in the summer of 1978, Clennell flew to England to spend time with the master. The other instrumental potter in his life is Linda Christianson, with whom Clennell built his 220 cubic-foot wood-firing kiln in Wiarton, Ontario. Also known in ceramic circles as the definitive handle maker, Clennell credits the early blueprints of his generously fashioned signature handle to Christianson's influence. It was in Wiarton on the Bruce Peninsula that Clennell, a single father of two, met his second wife, potter, Sheila Clennell, while teaching



Above: Tony and Sheila Clennell, outside their new studio in Hamilton, Ontario. *Photo: Ali Kazimi.*
Below: Tony at Pinecroft Ceramics Studio, Aylmer Ontario, fall 2012. *Photo: Ali Kazimi.*



at the local high school to supplement his ceramics income. By the mid-80s his pots were making more money than his teaching and the Clennell's went "cold-turkey" full-on into production. Always careful to make select one-off art pieces for his soul, Clennell is a quasi-production potter. He admits, "I always wanted to be Isaac Button but the artist in me had me fail miserably."

After 12 years, the Clennells moved to Beamsville in the Niagara region of Southern Ontario and set up Sour Cherry Pottery, establishing a mid-sized yet prominent clientele base. Clennell started teaching part-time at Sheridan College's Craft and Design program. He loves teaching, a trait he attributes to his frequent journeys to the Stratford Festival with Uncle Jimmy. For Clennell, teaching is performance art, "standing in front of a group of people and entertaining." Clennell situates himself in a symbiotic relationship with clay, "the clay community has been amazing to me. I just enjoy it, the mentorship... teaching keeps you honest." Whenever he can, Clennell finds himself on the workshop circuit where he gets to fuel the enthusiasm for large numbers of would-be potters at once. An advocate of life-long learning, Clennell chose to return to school himself. Children raised, at the age of 55 he set out to complete his MFA at Utah State University, where he was invited on scholarship to create works inspired by the diverse and rugged geography of the desert.

As part of his MFA, Clennell spent three-and-a-half months in Jingdezhen, China, with his classmates. He was in the porcelain capital of the



Hoo-doo, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware, reduction cooled, graduate work from Utah State University, 2008. Photo: Danny Crump.

Basket, 18 in. (46 cm) in width, wood-fired, reduction cooled. Collection of Judith Graham. Photo: Sheila Clennell.



world, and he self-admittedly loathes porcelain. He found he couldn't get enough "nastiness" from the material. His natural inclination was to gravitate to the gruffness of the saggar clay. "It was almost as if I was Voulkos over there—all the Chinese people would be standing around looking at me making these nasty things. They'd always seen pristine perfection as the ideal to strive for, and there I was, making all these oozing and rough edges." Clennell sold everything he made while in China to an appreciative and open-minded client.

Inspired by the hoodoos of the Utah desert, Clennell describes his work from his prolific MFA period as "true grit" stating that "the pots have a really rough edge. I have a rough edge. That's the hard part of being me, and I really want to get back there."

The Burlington Art Centre, one of Canada's pre-eminent public galleries, mounted a three-month retrospective of Tony and Sheila Clennell's work last summer, entitled, "High & Low: A Survey of Sheila and Tony Clennell." Clennell's reference to getting "back there" stems from the couple's recent move an hour west of Toronto to Hamilton, Ontario—formerly an industrial city that is fast living up to its new-found slogan, "Where Art is the New Steel." The move obligated a change of medium, and having dismantled their wood kiln and inherited a near-new large electric kiln from a client, the Clennells set to work trading ochre for red clay bodies, and adjusting pyrometers from high fire to low. As a student at Sheridan College myself at the time, I recall having the privilege in the fall of 2011 of showing Tony Clennell how to set a cone sitter and turn on his first electric kiln.

I dropped by the Clennells first open-studio sale in the spring of 2012, and witnessed the metamorphosis to majolica first-hand. Along with a classic Clennell mug transposed in its low-fire iteration, I purchased a small candy dish. The dish was thrown by Tony and glazed by Sheila. No other single piece of ceramics that I own has received more unsolicited and positive feedback than this dish, which still sits proudly on my kitchen counter. The complexity of thought and design that it captures in vivid, gestural color is entrancing. Clennell told me that they both went back to the abstract expressionists Rothko and Frankenthaler for new-found inspiration. The results have been dazzling, and according to Clennell, "everything Sheila touches, (except for me), turns to gold." Yet, Clennell has been hankering to return to his first love, wood firing. Counting himself more of a "mud and water man" he's finding it a challenge to try and push the majolica palette to his large-scale forms, extending the metaphor from mug and bowl to the five-foot canvas. "With the earthenware, one of the things I've had trouble with is not being able to see the finished product. With wood firing I can build in the ledges." By building in changes to the surface, Clennell can anticipate the way the wood ash and kiln atmosphere will interact with different areas of the piece.

In addition to teaching at Sheridan, Clennell has been making the trip back to Pincroft to throw two days a week with his cousin, Brenda Caverly Smith, who lives on the property with her family, including her husband Paul Smith, and runs the tea room, bed and breakfast, and ceramic studio. Together they have raised two-thirds of the capital necessary to lay the bricks for a new wood kiln and a large gas kiln on the premises. Plans are afoot to transform the 50-acre lushly wooded "Muskoka of the South" into a multi-disciplinary artist retreat. The Clennells have just rented a site on the conservation area a mile away from Pincroft to park their four-person trailer in order to maximize their time with the solid-fuel kilns during peak season. The next chapter in Tony Clennell's life as an artist is yet to unfold, but it promises to be fuelled by the inimitable fire and passion of its maker.

the author *Heidi McKenzie is an artist and art critic living in Toronto, Canada. Keep up with her projects at www.heidimckenzie.ca.*

Top: Candy dish, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, earthenware, white slip, multiple overglazes, thrown by Tony Clennell, glazed by Sheila Clennell, 2012.

Middle: Mugs, to 6 in. (15 cm) in height, earthenware, white slip, multiple overglazes, thrown by Tony Clennell, glazed by Sheila Clennell, 2012.

Bottom: Bottle, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, wood-fired, unglazed, 2010. *Photo: Sheila Clennell.*

