

Notes on Richard Bresnahan's 2006 Keynote Address "Ancient Fires to a Humane Future"

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Richard Bresnahan is the artist in residence at Saint John's University where he founded and has conducted a pottery studio for the past 27 years. He established the studio in 1979 after returning from four years in Japan where he apprenticed with the renowned potter Nakazato Takashi. He is known for his woodfired wares and his environmentally conscious approach to creating ceramics.

Bresnahan is the subject of a KTCA Public Television documentary entitled *Clay, Wood, Fire and Spirit*. Produced by John Whitehead, the documentary was nominated for four Grammy awards, winning two, including the award for best cultural documentary. Bresnahan's work has been exhibited at many galleries worldwide, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA). In 2001 Dr. Matthew Welch, curator



of Japanese and Korean Art at the MIA, published *Body of Clay, Soul of Fire*, a book which examines Bresnahan's pottery and his methods. The book was one of three finalists for the prestigious Benjamin Franklin award. Bresnahan lives in Avon, Minnesota, with his wife, Colette and three children.

Richard Bresnahan gave the opening keynote address at the 2006 ASIANetwork Conference. His speech, entitled "Ancient Fires to a Humane Future: Asia as the Foundation to Twenty-first Century Environmentalism," demonstrated how the sustainable systems for ceramics production that developed in Asia over the past 5000 years have not only inspired him and his work, but have also informed his methodology. Bresnahan employed a diverse collection of slides to visually represent and reinforce the various themes of the lecture. We highlight several of these themes and images below.

Theme 1: Use of indigenous materials. Traditionally in Japan, potters employed the concept of *tsuchiagi*, where local clays were used giving the ceramics they made a certain regional identity and tied them to the local environment. Very often glazes also were made from local materials. Unlike most potters in the United States, Bresnahan operates his studio using clay and glaze materials found on or near the campus of Saint John's University. Bresnahan harvested clay from a field near campus that will sustain his studio for more than 300 years of pottery and sculpture making.

Right: The hammer part of the clay stamper crushing the hard iron clay at the Onda Pottery in Kyushu, which has been in operation for 280 years.



Theme 2: Connection to nature, the seasons and food. Bresnahan learned in Japan that a potter committed to a sustainable system of ceramic production harmonized his work with the natural order of things. The potter's experience was closely tied to the passing of the seasons and the food cycle, as materials from plants, nuts and fruits became available for certain periods and then disappear again until the following year. The potters of Japan developed processes to take advantage of seasonally available materials. Efficiency was a highly prized attribute, as today's lunch might be tomorrow's source of glaze material.

Bresnahan maintains that to begin to gain any understanding of sustainable systems, a person must witness the passing of an entire calendar year to understand the interconnectedness of the artist, the studio and nature.

Left: The bowl depicting the spiraling bird image is entitled "Nature leaves humans behind" meaning that if we do not listen to nature, human beings as a family will be left behind.

Theme 3: Community. Bresnahan highlighted the importance of the communal model for ceramics production that is particular to Asia. Historically, kilns were designed to serve a public purpose. The ceramic work provided both the food storage and the aesthetic and ritualistic instruments upon which Asian communities developed and prospered. Multi-chambered kilns were developed to allow multiple family groups to fire their ceramics at the same time and render tremendous energy savings.

Bresnahan’s own three-chambered kiln, named for his mentor, Sr. Johanna Becker, OSB, was designed so that only a community of workers, working around the clock for up to 11 days, was able to fire it successfully. Twenty-seven artists from around the world have participated in a wood firing at Bresnahan’s studio. The kiln can hold up to 14,000 pieces at a time and is fired primarily with deadfall found on the campus of Saint John’s University.



Community of workers and artists at the Johanna Kiln.

Theme 4: Utility. Bresnahan demonstrated the importance of a connection between a potter and the use of the pieces he creates. In a sustainable system, the potter creates functional works to be used by members of the community. Therefore, Bresnahan focuses his work on pieces that not only are aesthetically pleasing, but also serve a specific function or utility.

In his speech, he demonstrated the destructive nature of a ceramics system modified to meet the needs of distant consumers with no connection to the potter. Bresnahan showed a photograph of an impoverished and suffering potter at a large ceramics complex in Jingdezhen China from the early 20th century. All of the pots produced were destined for European and American markets. Shard piles of discarded pots that did not meet the standard required for export created mountains of wasted materials.



Functional pieces: Covered bowl and cup.



Left: The hills behind the boats at the river loading area in Jingdezhen are broken shard piles. The porcelain shard piles were over 60 feet high and hundreds of yards long. This porcelain had not met the exacting standards placed on the pottery community by European exporters, resulting in ecological destruction to the region. Moreover, ship loads of clay and wood had to be transported to Jingdezhen because the clay deposits had all been depleted and the forest clear cut, turning the soil into desert and making food production all but impossible.

Theme 5: Collaboration. Bresnahan believes that collaboration among artists is an essential ethic in sustainable systems. Every year his studio welcomes visiting potters from all over the world to work in the studio and produce objects for the annual woodfiring. Bresnahan also works with artists in other disciplines to create more durable, more functional and more beautiful pieces. For example, Bresnahan collaborates with his friend and fellow artist, Paul Krueger, to make some of the studio’s most remarkable works. Krueger applies rattan handles to Bresnahan’s ceramic teapots to give them the strength and resiliency they require for daily use.

Collaboration also serves another purpose in Bresnahan’s studio—efficiency. Many Master Potters from Japan, including Suzuki Goro and Koie Ryoji, have not only visited the studio to work, but have also sent unfired pieces by mail for firing in the Johanna kiln. The reason is simple: to fire a kiln the size of Bresnahan’s in Japan would cost more than \$60,000 in wood fuel alone. By opening his studio and his kiln to artists from around the world, Bresnahan is allowing important pieces to be made that otherwise might never have had the chance to be fired in a wood kiln.



Left: Double-gourd teapot—Bresnahan and Krueger collaboration.



Suzuki Goro, recently declared a Japanese National Living Treasure, from Seto, Japan, working on a portfolio of work.

More illustrations from Bresnahan’s presentation are found on page 24 of the newsletter.

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but it was too painful and embarrassing all around. Now I just don't bother anymore and everyone is relieved. It was the same thing with my friends. It made it worse that I still looked like them—I suppose it was a reminder that it could happen to them as well.

One day I walked out my door with nothing more than a briefcase and my best suit—as though I was just going off to work. I never went back.”

He's rubbing a spot on the inside lining of his suit, and I can see that the material has started to fray. “I learned to sew,” he murmurs almost as an afterthought.

The lining had developed a tear. He flips it up just long enough for me to see the stitches, tiny and impossibly straight. “I take it off at night so that I don't wrinkle it in my sleep.” He laughs low and without humor. “One night I almost froze to death. It was my first January, and it got so cold. Every third month I save up to have it dry-cleaned, and I have to hide for a night and a day. In between I hang it over a steaming subway grate.”

He used English when he first spoke to me, but since then he's switched to

Japanese. Sometimes I understand his words, sometimes not, but always from his expression, I know exactly what he means.

“Occasionally I buy a cheap ticket and ride back and forth on the train. I can do this because I look just like a businessman. But it has to be during rush hour, when it's the most crowded and uncomfortable. I always stand. Sometimes I catch a young lady's eye.” He smiles. “Life isn't so bad.”

When he walks among the people at the station, nobody notices him. That minor gesture—or lack thereof—makes him feel a part of things. And he reacts like any good citizen when he sees a dirty man in wrinkled clothes sleeping on the ground.

“I will never be like them”.

He's smoked his cigarette to the nub. It's an expensive habit—most homeless look for discarded, half-finished fags but he won't pick them off the street—the telltale dents might give him away.

“I still drink too much, he says sadly. A bad habit I brought with me... When I drink I remember the bars we used to go to after work—the camaraderie, the

mama-sans, the swirling smoke, and lots of noise and warmth. It was always warm in there. I never noticed it at the time, but looking back...”

He can't get another job, despite his expensive clothes. He's not trained for anything else. Stores won't take him because they want young women, and he's overqualified. In some ways the suit is as much a deterrent as if he wore old rags.

And he has expenses. A haircut once a week. The barber doesn't know his situation, even after all these years. He never asks for a discount, and always pays in cash.

The cigarettes are a prop, of course. I am a prop too—a one-time actor on his stage, there only for a single scene. The play: that he is a successful businessman taking a lunchtime stroll in the sun. Only he never gets up to go back to work.

But the suit—that's more than just a prop. It's his dignity—his face.

He's rubbing the same spot over and over with his thumb. It's fraying more each time.

“One day,” he says, still rubbing, “It will be destroyed. And then everything will be over.” ●

“Ancient Fires to a Humane Future” (continued from page 9)



Koie Ryoji, the recipient of two Oribe awards, working in the Saint John's University pottery studio.

Global Harmony Platter—In 1995, the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City Committee asked Bresnahan to create two platters to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan. Each vessel bears an inscription on the bottom: waka-style poem by Father Neal Lawrence, who had been sent to Nagasaki and Hiroshima after the bombings to view the devastation first hand.



Richard Bresnahan stoking the final chamber of the first kiln he built at Saint John's University.