

Unearthing Beauty

Pushing the Limits of Surface

by *Eric Serritella*



Stoneware teapot, 9 inches in height. The natural colorants from wood firing complements the surface textures.

Heating clay and stretching it to create texture is a technique used by potters for ages. I was immediately drawn to the technique during an artist residency in Taiwan a few years ago. Since then, I've experimented and developed a body of work I call "Opened Earth," in which I try to show the inner beauty, texture and earthiness of clay.

I prefer to gently influence the outcome and let natural interactions between variables proceed with their course. Beyond reveal-

ing the beautiful natural texture of clay, I'm also drawn to the challenge of spontaneous form development. After first heating the surface of the clay, variables such as clay type, level of moisture and wheel speed effect development of the fissures as the clay is stretched. The challenge is to spontaneously make a strong form as the clay is expanded. Unplanned caverns and canyons appear as the piece expands, and these in turn influence the form.

The "opened earth" technique utilizes sand or dried clay for natural



fissures and tools from around the studio for creating patterns. I work with slabs and on the wheel, adding color with glazes, slips and oxides, and using heat on the surface. With many variables involved, this is not an exacting process, but serves as a starting point.

Technique

Center a piece of clay 10–40% larger than you'd typically use for a piece to accommodate a thicker wall (the thicker the wall, the deeper the crev-

ice). My walls are usually between ½–1 inch thick. Throw to the desired height using as little water as possible—the drier the better. Straighten and even out the wall with a rib (figure 1). Apply silica sand or dry clay “powder” to the outside (figure 2). While sand and clay are not necessary, they help dry the outside and provide contrasting color and texture. Leave clay uncovered at the top for the lid gallery. Tip: Apply sand with clean dry hands.

With the wheel turning very slowly, apply heat to dry the outside (figure 3). I use a hand-held butane torch, although a heat gun or hair dryer works if you have patience. Be sure to dry the surface evenly from top to bottom. The drying time depends on the output of the heat source, size of the piece, moisture level of the clay, wall thickness, distance of the heat to the clay and wheel speed. It's very difficult to quantify the level of dryness needed to get a certain type of fissure with so many variables involved. If the surface is not dry enough, then the clay won't create fissures when expanded. If it's too dry, then the wall will crack all the way through. Once the outside surface starts to become matt and is no longer tacky to the touch, it's time to start expanding the form. Some steam will usually release from the inside of the pot.

Begin to push out the wall and shape the pot (figure 4). This is one of the fun challenges, as it's necessary to create the form one-handed. Touching the outside wall ruins the texture. If you find that the crevices are not starting to open as you expand the form, apply additional heat. It's much easier to further dry a pot than to take make a dry pot evenly moist again.

Finish the top rim with both hands (figure 5) and add a gallery for the lid.

Once the pot is leather hard, trim the bottom, if desired, and add a spout and handle (figure 6). Dry the pot slowly to avoid unwanted



Teapot, 6½ inches in height, fired unglazed to cone 6 in oxidation. The natural canyons reveal the beautiful hidden texture of clay.

cracking of the attachments due to the uneven wall thickness and clay moisture levels. If you're firing pieces with sand on them along with other pots in your kiln, be sure the pieces with sand are on the bottom. Sand pops off during firing and can stick to glazed pieces below or beside them. Vacuum out the kiln after each firing. Sand the fired piece with 200-grit silicon carbide sandpaper. This removes any surface sand that's soft and unstable, and removes that tacky feel of the unglazed clay.



Variations

After throwing your form, score the pot vertically or horizontally with a needle tool or other sharp tool (figure 7). (Note: I've omitted sand on this piece for a softer texture.) Heat the outside (figure 8), then expand the wall and finish the top (figure 9).

One of my favorite texture tools is a stiff wire brush for tight patterns that are great for many firing processes (figure 10). This tool creates shallower crevices and thinner walls. I usually use this tool without added sand.

Another patterning technique is to apply a random flowing design with

a combination of shallow surface texture and deep canyons (figure 11). Rib the outside and apply sand, then score with a combing tool or rib as the wheel turns slowly. Change the angle of the tool as you make strokes. A soft, wide stroke creates a combed pattern yielding a series of shallow fissures, while a deep sharp stroke becomes a canyon that opens large and wide (figure 12).

Many different tools, materials and household items can be used to impress patterns on Opened Earth pots (figure 13). I like two discarded wooden blocks I got from a Middle Eastern textile operation. The stretching of



the clay exaggerates the pattern they create on the surface. Press the pattern into the wall, supporting from the inside. Tip: If your clay is too wet from centering and opening, use a torch to dry the surface slightly and stiffen up the wall before impressing the pattern. This also helps keep the pattern-making tool from sticking in the clay.

Slab Work

The following example is for a sushi plate or teabowl tray, although heated and stretched slabs can also be manipulated to make bowls, mugs, teapots and other forms.

Pound out a slab 1–3 inches thick, using your hand or a mallet (figure 14). Impress a pattern into the clay (figure 15). Heat the top and sides, but not the underneath or bottom



Stoneware teabowl, 3 inches in height, with impressed patterns, wood fired.

surfaces (figure 16). Don't dry thick slabs as much as wheel-thrown cylinders because some elasticity should be left in the slab for stretching.

Stretch the clay by throwing it down on a solid surface. Throw the slab at an angle instead of straight down (figure 17). This causes the clay to pull and stretch. Rotate the piece to stretch it into the desired shape—in this case, a rectangle (figure 18).



CAUTION

Always work in a well-ventilated area when heating the clay, preferably with an exhaust or fan pulling the heated clay and torch fumes away from you. Also, exercise caution with an open flame. Remember that the tip of the torch will be very hot even after you turn off the flame.



Stoneware tray, 13 inches in length, unglazed and wood fired.