

Title; A research report that explores working with wild clay

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This essay explores the use of wild clay to create art. Wild clay is found in nature and is often used by artists to explore the relationship between us and nature. Clay is the “result of the gradual breaking down of rock into tiny particles containing alumina, silica and water, as well as impurities such as organic matter, iron, calcium, etc” (Levy, Shibata and Shibata, 2022, p.9). From the clays natural state also known as wild clay, it can be used in its current state or be processed commercially, creating a predictable result. “The term ‘wild clay’ we are speaking about clays that are not commercially available, all clay, after all, is indigenous to our planet” (Levy, Shibata and Shibata, 2022, p.7). Furthermore, clay is a naturally occurring material, there are significant differences between clay found in nature and manufactured clay which has been processed to be reliable, homogenous and predictable.

The artists in this study all use wild clay for some or all their work. While they are all similar in this approach, the focus will be on their differences. When discussing Maja Quille, the focus will be on her commitment to sustainability and human impact on nature. For artists Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, the focus shifts to different firing processes for wild clay and the chemical transformation of clay into ceramics. In analysing Matthew Blakely's work, the geological differences in the materials he

uses and the geographical connection to his work will be at the centre of the research. Wapner (2010) highlights “the world has not become an artificial entity; the otherness of nature is still very present” (Wapner, 2010, p.14). These artists show the presence of nature through their work.

This research is informed by key theoretical perspectives from Jane Bennett, Tim Ingold, and Glenn Adamson, who’s writing collectively reframes materials as active participants within creative practice rather than passive substances shaped solely by human intention. Jane Bennett’s concepts of things challenge the notion of inert materiality, proposing instead that matter possesses vitality and agency, a perspective that is particularly relevant when working with wild clay, whose impurities, variability, and responsiveness resist full control. Tim Ingold’s understanding of making as a process of correspondence between maker and material further supports this view, suggesting that craft emerges through attentive engagement with materials as they behave and unfold over time, rather than through domination or pre-determined outcomes. Glenn Adamson’s writing on craft and material intelligence emphasises the importance of embodied knowledge gained through sustained interaction with specific materials, positioning craft as a way of thinking through making. Together, these theorists provide a framework for understanding wild clay as a dynamic, relational material that carries geological, environmental, and cultural meaning, shaping both the process and outcome of ceramic practice.

Building on these ideas, wild clay can be understood not simply as a raw resource but as a collaborator shaped by geology, environment and human interaction. This framework supports an analysis of contemporary ceramic practices that prioritise local sourcing, traditional firing methods and responsiveness to material behaviour. Through this lens, the work of Maja Quille, Hitomi and Takuro Shibata and Matthew Blakely can be understood as approaches that recognise clay as an active material, emphasise environmental awareness, and generate meaning through place, process, and material transformation.

Maja Quille is a multi-disciplined artist who investigates and experiments with natural substances like geological clay alongside discarded waste, pollutants, and city debris. Some of her projects use clay from London's subsoil to consider 'techno fossils' and how human-made materials might imprint themselves on the earth for future ages. This is important to this investigation as it shows how pollution's effect on the environment will impact craft in the future, as well as showing a key example of an artist who works with wild clay in an impactful way.

Hitomi and Takuro Shibata's practice is guided by a deep reverence for natural materials, local clay, and the essence of place. They favour raw, unrefined clay and wood-firing techniques, allowing the materials -clay, ash, flame, and wood- to shape the outcome. The resulting pieces possess distinct character: subtle textures, earthy surfaces, and occasionally unpredictable effects, all hallmarks of wood-fired pottery that celebrates nature's variability rather than uniformity. For them, pottery goes beyond craft; it embodies a way of life and a connection to tradition, the land, and community. This practice directly supports the research focus on wild clay as it shows how the firing processes can embrace material unpredictability and environmental influence can impact the ceramic outcomes.

Matthew Blakely's ceramics grow directly from geology and place: he sources rocks, clays, and minerals from locations around the UK and refines them into the clay bodies and glazes he uses. He aims for the landscape's own mineral makeup and history to determine the colours and surfaces of his pots. Blakely fires much of his work in wood-fired kilns, often using locally sourced wood. He keeps his process as raw and direct as possible, refining materials only minimally and preparing his clays and glazes by hand, as part of his commitment to grounding his pottery in the natural world. This is important to this investigation as it shows how crucial how every process no matter how small is detrimental to the process of making.

Maja Quille explains how, as craft makers, we contribute to waste which subsequently impacts the environment, stating that "globally the majority of the objects that we create end up in a landfill"

(Quille, 2019). An artist who similarly recognises this is Fernando Casasempere. In his installation *Sedimentary Selves*, he displays every piece of discarded ceramic and glaze from his career. By transforming these remnants into art, he reduces his environmental waste. While artists such as Casasempere and Quille consider energy efficiency and emissions, they often overlook the long-term future of rejected materials.



Figure 1: *Sedimentary Selves* (Own photo, 2025)

As an artist passionate about nature, Quille undertook a project using found clay from her local area, reducing the need for transportation and lowering her carbon footprint. In her *London Clay* project, she sourced clay from an archaeological excavation near the River Thames. Under microscopic examination, the clay appeared as a “mixture of old and new, organic and manmade” (Quille, 2019). Once natural, it has altered, becoming polluted and contaminated, with Quille describing her work as showing “a world in flux, a mixture of man-made plastic glitter, ancient fossils and new organic material” (Quille, 2019). Bennett (2010) refers to an “uncanny nontime existing between the various moments of biographical or morphological time” (pp.53), which can be applied to this accumulation of contaminants over centuries of human activity. Bennett further argues that the modern period of ‘intense techno-scientific transformations’ contaminates the natural environment including the soil and clay.

The combination of artificial and natural elements creates instability and impurities, often leading to cracks or explosions during kiln firing, mirroring the unpredictability of nature itself. This causes the clay to behave unpredictably and behave as it likes something Adamson (2018) considers important. These flaws symbolise how humans spoil the environment and reflect Bennett's (2010) view of life as shaped by 'accidental, accumulated effects' from human and non-human forces. In contrast, Ingold (2013) argues that "materials do not, of themselves, stay in place or hold to the bounds of any form, and have an inherent tendency to run amok" (pp.17), suggesting material change, such as clay, can occur without human intervention.

Quille's kiln-fired pieces demonstrate how the man-made contamination leads to visible cracks, weaknesses and structural instability. Even without intent, humans place pressure on ecosystems and draw from environmental resources. As Wapner (2010) explains, "Nature facilitates human life by providing the biophysical requirements" (pp.22), linking human survival inextricably to environmental health. Similarly, Wackernagel, Rees and Testemale (1998) argue that "human society is a subsystem of the ecosphere, that human beings are embedded in nature" (pp.4). These physical flaws thus symbolise broader natural disruption. Overuse and contamination reduce the Earth's ability to sustain life (Napier, Napier and Tvrdon, 2000), with soil particularly affected due to its inability to recover quickly.

Seen in this context, the impurities in Quille's clay act as a microcosm of human environmental impact. Her work reveals how creative materials bear marks of ecological harm, encouraging reflection on the consequences of our presence. Quille's ceramics make this relationship visible, prompting us to consider not only the origins of our materials but the consequences of our presence on the planet.

Quille's contaminated clay project, embodies not only humans impact on clay, but also reflects the evolving purpose and function of ceramics. Clay has shifted from functional vessels to a medium for creative exploration, particularly following the studio pottery movement, which emphasised personal

craftsmanship. As ceramic knowledge spread through books, it became more accessible (Wild n Clay Ceramics, 2025). Quille's work aligns with this artistic use of clay; her before-and-after images are not functional but demonstrate how man-made materials alter ceramic processes.



Figure 2: *Before and After* (Quille, 2021)

Quille describes her practice as exploring “ways of breaking, dissecting, uncovering and redefining objects and patterns” (Lennon, 2022). In a sense her work explores the fragile balance between the industrial and the natural, order and entropy, the past and future, revealing how these opposing elements interconnect and transform one another. Her projects *Moments in Time* and *Future Fossils* combine waste materials with natural matter such as microplastics and urban debris. Previous research shows that domestic waste contaminates clay and soil (Barone et al., 1989), suggesting that London’s geology is shaped not only by natural processes but by pollution over time.

Hitomi and Takuro Shibata create ceramics and glazes using natural and found resources, emphasising a direct connection to locally sourced materials. Hitomi Shibata notes that while commercial clay can be easily ordered online, this convenience carries environmental costs and distances makers from understanding their materials (Levy, Shibata and Shibata, 2022). She values

pottery with meaningful origins and back stories, describing makers as “the big difference between the industry-processed, mass-produced, machine-made ceramic products and the hand-made, wild clay pots” (Levy, Shibata and Shibata, 2022, p.9). The Shibata’s primarily use wood firing rather than electric kilns, as the process is integral to their work, providing sustainable energy and a distinct sense of life to each piece (Shibata, 2019).

A comparable approach can be seen in the Hamada Family, a renowned Japanese pottery family known for using local materials. In *Handmade in Japan*, Yuko Matsuzaki emphasises the importance of local clay, while Shinsaku Hamada explains that craft was once collective and anonymous with the sole purpose to sell, whereas modern practice distinguishes between products and art (BBC, 2017). This philosophy aligns with the Mingei movement, founded by Yanagi Sōetsu in the 1920s, which celebrates the beauty of everyday objects made by anonymous craftsmen, emphasizing simplicity, utility and cultural heritage. Like the Shibata’s, the Hamada Family use traditional techniques such as foot wheels and climbing kilns known as Noborigama [Fig 3].



Figure 3: *Climbing Kiln* (Musubi Kiln, 2025)



Figure 4: *Downdraft Climbing Kiln* (Musubi Kiln, 2025)

Climbing kilns are staggered structures in which heat circulates through connected chambers, evenly firing stacked ceramics (Musubi Kiln, 2025). In wood-fired kilns, falling ash can form striking natural patterns onto unglazed clay, as seen in Shibata's wares [Fig 5]. As Ingold (2013) states, "Form arises through movement, and about the dynamic properties of materials" (pp.24) these traces of fire and ash reveal the dynamic path of heat that transformed the raw clay into finished pieces, which cannot be replicated in electric kilns.



Figure 5: *Whirlwind* (Shibata, Shibata, 2025)

Ceramic firing fundamentally transforms clay from a soft, soluble natural material into a hard, insoluble substance through significant physical and chemical change (Lesley, 2021). This process exemplifies how craft practice reshapes raw materials into objects that may be functional, aesthetic, or both (Leone, 2020). Keith Brymer Jones describes this transformation as a form of alchemy, suggesting that to work with clay is “to be a true alchemist, literally changing the physicality of the clay” (Bell, 2017, p.6). Clay’s enduring relevance within contemporary practice reflects what Anna Lerinder describes as its dual nature: “clay represents timelessness. It’s old and modern” (quoted in Bell, 2016, p.45). Together, these perspectives highlight the deep relationship between material and maker. As Adamson (2019) argues, meaningful craft practice requires direct engagement with materials, making material intelligence, the experiential knowledge of how to shape natural substances, an essential component of ceramic work.

Wood firing produces variable atmospheres that result in ash deposits, flashing, and reduction marks. These shifts affect the outcome, producing results that are far less controllable than those of an electric kiln, whose heating elements employ steady, regulated heat for consistent outcomes. The Shibatas’ use of the anagama kiln, a cave-like structure adapted from Chinese dragon kilns, sustains

high temperatures for several days and preserves ancestral firing traditions (Arteologic, 2022). As ash melts onto the clay, it forms natural glazes, producing organic, unpredictable surfaces.

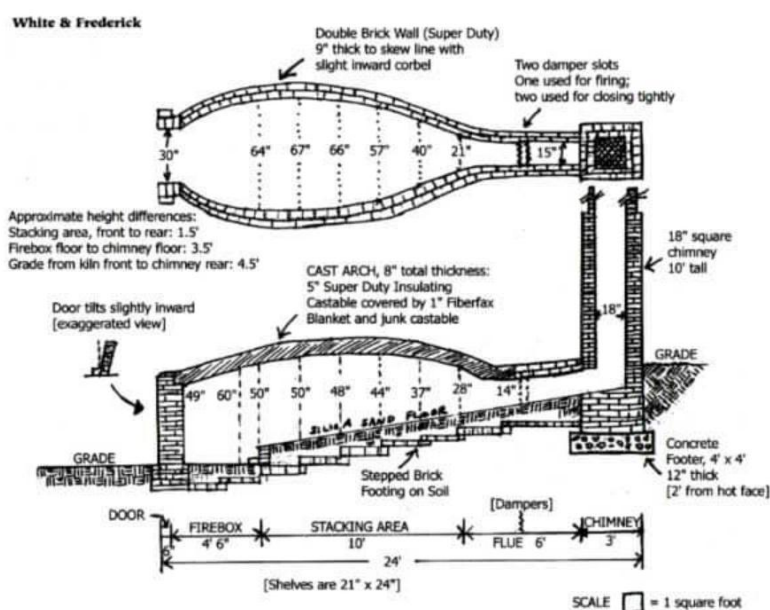


Figure 6: *Anagama Kiln* (Frederick, 2000)

These irregular atmospheres mirror the inherent variability of wild clay, requiring makers to relinquish full control and collaborate with material and processes. Embracing such unpredictability becomes a form of material intelligence, attune to the natural behaviours of clay and fire, and an acceptance that the outcome emerges from both human intention and the natural forces at play.

Kiln atmosphere shapes the final piece by driving chemical reactions: oxidising conditions create brighter colours, while reduction produces darker tones and distinctive effects. Historical ceramics techniques, such as the “red and black wares of the Americas, which were directly linked to the kiln atmosphere used during their production” (Jennings, 2025) owe their characteristics to both the surrounding geological conditions and the specific atmospheres in which they were fired.



Figure 7: *Small Lota-Shaped Jar* (Map Academy, 2023)

Their approach reflects a broader philosophy of craftsmanship: transforming raw materials through hands-on processes into functional and aesthetic objects, while preserving the story of the place and materials. Like the Hamada Family in Japan, they value traditional methods and the distinctive marks

created by natural firing processes, demonstrating how geological conditions and kiln atmospheres shape the final work. Ingold (2013) defines as Material Culture, using natural materials to create cultural objects. As Adamson (2018) suggests, no amount of design and planning can fully control natural variation. Their work exemplifies the meaningful relationship between clay, place, and process, demonstrating how engagement with wild clay fosters material understanding and artistic expression.

“Pottery is alchemy: the transformation, by fire, of earth and rock into something new” (Blakely, 2018).

Matthew Blakely follows the process of ceramics step by step from the raw materials to the finished product. The process starts with foraging the raw materials in various locations around the United Kingdom and then processing it for making ceramic creations. This process means he has a deeper connection to the pieces he creates. It also allows his pieces to reflect the geology and physiologically of the area. When describing his work, he says, “It can be seen as an artistic expression of the geology of earth. Pots represent our relationship with and dependency on the planet, making things for human use from the dug earth beneath our feet” (Blakely, 2018). This shows our deep connection with nature and how we are connected to the earth and place by what is just below us in nature. Many contemporary artists create with mined materials. This means that they do not know where it comes from and how it has been retrieved, if it is local or shipped in from another country. Within Blakely’s process, not only does he know where his materials have come from, he has collected it himself and takes an extensive amount of time processing it. “Crafted objects are by their very nature evocative of the way in which they were made” (Adamson, 2018, pp.169) he brings attention and appreciation to the countries we live in demonstrating the ceramic assets of the rocks and geology we have. Working in site specific locations he finds clay and rocks in which he processes into

the clay and glazes. Each pot he makes is unique to the area and to each other, with different natural colours resembling the different geological makeup of the rock and minerals of the area.

One of his projects was in Dartmoor which is predominately granite with a soft layer of sandstone and mudstone atop, also in some area's feldspar and quartz (Ashbourn, 2010). Granite is the predominant mineral in the region as granite intruded into Cornwall and Devon 280 million years ago because of hyperthermal activity which forced the granite upwards from the molten rock layer beneath. As it cooled, it allowed water in and other minerals to form, which is what gives Dartmoor its unique properties (Ashbourn, 2010). Granite is usually dark, but the other components in Dartmoor clay it gives it the unique colouring and slight metallic look. The Dartmoor small jar also has clear elements of sandstone, which is a lighter colour with an orange tone. This demonstrates how the properties of the natural environment transform into unique ceramics.



Figure 8: *Dartmoor small jar* (Blakely, N.d)

Blakley's pots also capture the time in which he made them. Time transforms the landscape; melting, erupting, compressing, and eroding leaving behind an intricate record of change and process. By drawing inspiration and using the pure natural materials from geological terrain, his work pays tribute to the natural landscape and the presence of time. This gives a deeper meaning to his work as a study of nature. "Nature is not simply a material substratum whose essential character we glean from study and observation; rather it is a repository of meaning" (Wapner, 2010, p.7).

Blakley's work is as natural as a clay form could be.

Blakely's work is about the notion of discovery and exploration. The definition of explore is "To travel through an unfamiliar area in order to learn about it" (Soanes & Hawker, 2008, p.349-350). By allowing himself to explore, Blakely allows himself to learn a greater deal about nature and his practice, creating a closer bond and meaning with his work. To explore is within human nature whether this being in the physical sense, or researching and investigating, learning intrinsically not only externally. Exploring is "the suspensive freedom that comes by walking, even a simple short stroll: throwing off the burden of cares, forgetting business for a time" (Gros, Howe & Harper, 2015, p.25). Exploring deeper into his practice, he is driven by what Riya (2023) describes as the unquenchable thirst of the human spirit to master in exploration. Through this desire for exploration, we can mould and shape the environment around us. A clear example of this is the 'desire path'; a term from architecture and urban planning referring to the informal trails formed by people's actual movement rather than the routes planned for them (Borneman, 2021). Without human desire for exploration, we would not have the knowledge and understanding that we do right now about the world around us, including the finding of and using natural clay for pottery. Adamson (2018) agrees that experience and experimentation is the best education for creative work. Slow living emphasizes mindfulness, intentionality, and taking time to engage deeply with the world around us. "At the heart of slow living is the mindset and practice of living mindfully and living an intentional life. From the food we eat to the things we buy" (Victoire, 2025, p.5). In today's fast-paced, technology-driven society, it reflects a desire to reconnect with nature and natural processes.

In creative practices like working with wild clay, this philosophy encourages observing and responding to the material's inherent qualities, allowing its textures, colours, and character to guide the artistic process.

Matthew Blakely's practice exemplifies wild clay as a site-specific, exploratory process, in which foraged materials are transformed through slow, hands-on making into ceramics that embody the geology, time, and landscape of their origin, reinforcing the deep connection between clay, place, and material intelligence central to this research.

Working with wild clay, as shown through the practices of artists like Maja Quille, Hitomi Shibata & Takuro Shibata, and Matthew Blakely, reveals a profound relationship between humans, materials, and nature. The impure and unpredictable wild clay resists predictability, carrying traces of geology, history, environment, and human impact. Compared with commercially processed clay, which is refined for uniformity and reliability, wild clay demands a different approach; one that values material intelligence, responsiveness, and acceptance of uncertainty.

Across the practices of Maja Quille, Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, and Matthew Blakely, clear similarities emerge despite their differing approaches. Each artist prioritises the commitment and importance of place, sourcing clay from the environment around them and allowing the material's natural characteristics. Such as impurities, mineral compositions, colours, textures and the kiln's unpredictable atmospheres which influence the outcome. Due to these factors each artist embraces the unpredictability and uniqueness in each outcome knowing it cannot be replaced or redone, truly each piece is one of a kind. The origin of the clay London subsoil for Maja Quille, Uk landscapes for Matthew Blakely and local geology for Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, grounding their work in specific geography rather than anonymous, mass-produced materials. All of them prioritise material intelligence, building deep, embodied knowledge of how the clay behaves at each stage, from raw earth to fired ceramic. And crucially by having this deeper philosophical sense to their work by using

wild clay, responsibly sourced or re-purposing urban waste, and acknowledging the environmental context of their materials each artist views clay not merely as a material, but as a conduit for exploring the connection to the natural world

Their differences, however, illuminate the versatility of wild clay. Quille's work exposes how human consumption and pollution permanently alter natural materials, using contamination as a visible metaphor for ecological disruption. The Shibata's' practice, rooted in tradition and community, highlights the ritualistic, alchemical nature of working with earth and fire; their wood-firing techniques amplify the unpredictability of wild clay, reinforcing a philosophy of coexistence with natural processes. Blakely, meanwhile, turns geology itself into artistic expression, allowing the mineral makeup of specific landscapes to determine the surfaces, colours, and meanings of his pots.

Their work also highlights shared themes of environmental awareness, symbolism, personal and material journeys, and a strong connection between the earth and the craft process. Quille's polluted London clay becomes a record of human intervention. The Shibata's' long firings and natural glazes capture the movement of ash, flame, and time. Blakely's pots embody the geological story of the land directly beneath his feet. All three, in different ways, treat clay as a living archive — a material that holds memory, place, and ecological narrative. Their relationship however difference similar in the way they embrace imperfection, responding and collaborating with the clay. As such, working with wild clay becomes a form of slow craft, resonating with philosophies of mindful creation, environmental awareness, and respect for the earth's processes.

Jane Bennett's theories provide a useful framework for understanding Maja Quille's engagement with contaminated London clay. Quille's work reveals clay not as an inert substance but as a lively assemblage of geological matter, urban debris, and human residue, where the material itself actively shapes the outcome of the work. This aligns with Bennett's argument that matter possesses agency and participates in events beyond human intention. Tim Ingold's concept of making as a process of correspondence is reflected in the practices of Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, whose use of wild clay

and wood-firing techniques requires continuous attentiveness to the behaviour of materials, fire, and atmosphere. Rather than controlling the outcome, they respond to unfolding processes, allowing clay and kiln conditions to guide the final form. Glenn Adamson's notion of material intelligence is most clearly embodied in Matthew Blakely's practice, which is grounded in prolonged, hands-on engagement with locally sourced geological materials. Through foraging, processing, and firing his own clays and glazes, Blakely develops an embodied understanding of material properties, demonstrating how craft knowledge emerges through sustained interaction with specific places and materials. Together, these aligned theories clarify how each artist's practice exemplifies a different yet interconnected way of thinking through wild clay as an active, place-based, and meaningful material. While Bennett, Ingold, and Adamson can be most clearly associated with aspects of Quille's, the Shibatas', and Blakely's work respectively, their ideas ultimately intersect across all three artists. Each artist engages with clay as a material possessing agency, requires an ongoing correspondence between maker and material, and depends upon material intelligence developed through sustained, place-based engagement, demonstrating how these theoretical frameworks collectively underpin contemporary wild clay practice.

These findings resonate deeply with my own practice. As someone inspired by cracks in rocks, the everchanging shapes within water, and the vastness of mountain landscapes, I am drawn to the natural rhythms and patterns found in the natural world around me. Wild clay's rawness mirrors the textures, colours and forms I observe in nature. Like Quille, I am fascinated by how natural materials carry the marks of human presence, and how these marks can be transformed into powerful artistic statements rather than be concealed.

My interest in alternative firing techniques, such as raku and saggar firing, particularly with natural materials such as seaweed, aligns me with artists like Hitomi and Takuro Shibata. Whose wood-firing methods reveal the dynamic interplay between material and flame. Their dedication encourages my own ambition to one day build a kiln, deepening my relationship with fire as a collaborator in the

creative process. With Blakely, I share an appreciation for exploration: moving slowly through landscapes, gathering inspiration from walking, looking, and learning directly from the environment.

Ultimately, this study has shown that wild clay is not only a material but a philosophy of practice. It embodies connection to land, respect for natural processes, and an openness to unpredictability.

Through the interconnected themes of environment, tradition, geology, and human impact, these artists demonstrate that clay carries both memory and meaning. Their work and my growing understanding of wild clay reveals that making with the earth is simultaneously an artistic act, an ecological dialogue, and a personal journey of discovery.

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Figures

Figure 1: Own photo. (2025) *Sedimentary Selves* [Photograph]

Figure 2: Quille, M. (2021). *Before and After*. Available at: <https://majaquille.com/london-clay> [Accessed 21 Apr. 2025].

Figure 3: Musubi Kiln (2025). *Climbing Kiln*. Available at: https://musubikiln.com/blogs/journal/the-enigmatic-science-of-japanese-climbing-kilns?srsItd=AfmBOoqv_EJEFkXpHlqSWTJ5yHCPAiGc3P2rlqvWcAdZxuTUbnawdD- [Accessed 23 Nov. 2025].

Figure 4: Musubi Kiln (2025). *Downdraft Climbing Kiln*. Available at: https://musubikiln.com/blogs/journal/the-enigmatic-science-of-japanese-climbing-kilns?srsItd=AfmBOoqv_EJEFkXpHlqSWTJ5yHCPAiGc3P2rlqvWcAdZxuTUbnawdD- [Accessed 23 Nov. 2025].

Figure 5: Shibata, T., Shibata, H. *Whirlwind*. Available at: <https://www.studiotouya.com/> [Accessed 8 Dec. 2025]

Figure 6: Frederick, W. (2000). *Anagama Kiln*. Available at: <https://artistpotters.com/> [Accessed 3 Dec. 2025].

Figure 7: Map Academy (2023). *Small Lota-Shaped Jar*. Available at: <https://mapacademy.io/article/black-and-red-ware/> [Accessed 3 Dec. 2025]

Figure 8: Blakely, M. (n.d.). *Dartmoor small jar*. Available at: <https://matthewblakely.co.uk/product/dartmoor-sphere/> [Accessed 6 Nov. 2025].