Sergei Isupov

Article by David Jones
ONCE UPON A TIME, LONG AGO, MEN WERE MEN AND fired real kilns to an infernal white heat, melting Seger cones like ice creams on a summer day, or stripped to the waist, tore red-hot pots from the baking heart of raku kilns. I think that it must have been at the tail-end of the brave new world of 20th century expressionist neo-abstract, heroic, ceramics; on such a night as this, that Rick Hirsch, one of the doyennes of the Raku firing world, turned to me and, revisiting Michael Cardew’s distinction between city-slicker ceramics artists and the ‘mud and water men’ of country pottery, he stated: “There are just some potters who could never take the risk of putting their work in a Raku firing or an (expletive deleted) Anagama. Take Sergei Isupov for example.”

These were words that developed a strange new resonance when I arrived in July in Estonia for the Kohila 2010 woodfire symposium. For a potter it is not an obvious destination, as Estonia never has had its own ceramics-based culture. As a result of glaciation the country was left with minimal deposits of suitable clay (which are essentially in the brick industry); the rest was glaciated away during the last ice age. As a consequence, its craftsmen developed a tradition of utensils based on wood, even claiming to be the innovators of plywood and its technologies. Estonia is a tiny country with an ethnic population of only about one million, situated on the edge of the Baltic and perched perilously close to Sweden, Germany and Russia; all of which large powers have occupied the country in the last few centuries. Idiosyncratically, the ceramics lacuna that existed in its history has been partially filled by a hybrid Anagama kiln. It is administered and fired jointly by the Art Academy and the Ceramic Arts Association in nearby Tallinn.

In the 20th century the Estonian people have experienced two periods of (political) freedom and self-determination; in the second, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the freeing of the small states, anything seemed possible – including the building of an Asian-inspired Anagama kiln, which was constructed with overtones of a groundhog kiln. It is apparent that potters and clay artists turned to look outwards towards worlds and possibilities that had been previously closed; an age of risk, experimentation and innovation. The kiln was built using both financial and practical experience from America; the know-how was provided by Richard Spiller and David Stuempfe from North Carolina. He worked with the Tallinn-based kiln expert, Andres Allik, to build the kiln structure; Allik has supervised the vast majority of subsequent firings (and he guided the three firings of the symposium in which I participated).

Three extended firings in three weeks is a heavy workload, but we were prepared for that. The real surprise for me was while watching the first pieces emerge from the kiln; they were unmistakably made by Isupov. And moments later he arrived, grinning, with his new baby in his arms; he received his ‘kiln-gifts’ (the pieces cracked from the sudden pulses of flame on the smooth surfaces of his forms) with cheerful equanimity. As Hirsch had observed, there was a mighty price to pay if one devoted a week to making and decorating a single unique piece of ceramics and then risked all in a fire of unpredictability. Even though the disappointment at breakage was palpable, Isupov was full of bonhomie, delighting in the presence of his Estonian wife, his Estonian friends and young baby. And I was fascinated; I had never met this inscrutable maker of darkly surreal ceramics that have commanded both status and price in the market place. I was forced to confront my prejudices about potters and to consider what had possessed him to countermand the (intuitively correct) assertion by Hirsch; so what made Isupov risk all in a conflagration.

In my research for my book on the philosophies of firing, which examined the rationales utilised by potters and clay artists in their methodologies of firing, I had felt that I had confirmed the hypothesis, suggested by Hirsch: there are just some clay artists who would never see a benefit to their work of aleatoric, random firing qualities and, indeed, by looking at different ceramics one can see that there are different sensibilities at play and that the split between spontaneity and control was deeply embedded in most ceramic...
psyches. It is of course most profoundly ingrained in the distinction between designers and painters on clay and those who wish to co-operate with a kiln to do that painting for them.

Isupov was trained from a young age as a painter. He grew up in the Ukraine, a country dominated by a foreign, neighbour power, in the USSR. His narrative is that he had an extremely formal learning in school supported by the home: “If I wanted to go out to play, I had to complete five landscape drawings before my father would allow me out.” He maintains that it was this disciplined encouragement of his parents, alloyed to rigorous schooling, that helped him to develop the extraordinary facility that is manifest in his work today. It is a discipline that has paid handsomely as the remarkable hyper-realist technique can also be performed at great speed (so that he can get out to play still) and run or cycle before settling down in the studio. The main studio is in the US, near to his gallery which is run by Leslie Ferrin. He tells that he exchanged the intensity of pre-Glasnost education in the Ukraine and then in Estonia for the new disciplines exacted by ‘capital’ in the US. As he states: “America wants consistency.” They want the work that created the success. His recent sojourns in Estonia represent not just the attractions of escaping the US for extended holidays, but a rediscovery of those European roots that he intuitively feels might re-inform and re-vitalise his practice. He says that in the Soviet socialist worlds where he grew up and later prospered as a student, money was not so significant a motivator. “What is important is social things.” There is a sense of a social re-engagement in his presence in Estonia. He was ‘lured’ to the event by the reward of spending time with his friends from the Art Academy in Tallinn. Urmas Puhkan, was a contemporary during his studies in Tallinn and is now the head of the ceramics course at the Art Academy. Puhkan persuaded his old friend Isupov to join them for a month’s holiday and also to participate in the firing of the Kohila kiln. Isupov is quite clear about his work ethic: “For me a holiday is still a chance to work.” But he recognised the possibilities in this time free from making for the market: “I came to work – not to take something home – just to borrow space. It is about risk, but to find the benefits depends not so much on theory but on instinct.” And at this symposium Isupov met again the potter, a friend from student days, who was to become his wife. There is a sense of a social re-engagement in the new work. The subject matter seems to have moved towards an interaction, not a confrontation with the domestic, doubtless prompted by his new young family.

In his painted ceramics, Isupov articulates a strange world that hovers between reality and representation. The surface drawing subverts the ‘ceramic frame’ he has built. The three-dimensional form is strangely foreshortened and of a disconcerting scale; it is artificially flattened, drawing our attention to the unreality of the pieces. The decoration, by contrast, is deliberately hyper-realistic and evokes a roundedness, implying a similitude despite being a two-dimensional drawing. His pieces are essays in imitation and deception; they also embody their own critique (that the flat and the representational can not be the real) even if they are constructed and decorated by a deceiver as great as Isupov. Descartes knew he could not doubt God, even though he wondered about the existence of the great deceiver who might have tried to fool him in his perceptions. In our agnostic age Isupov emerges as the artist who sets up experiments to interrogate his own practice and its achievements. Placing the work in the Anagama is a significant testing of the artist, as well as the art, by fire.

And after the firing, the exhibiting. The space he
was offered is a floor in a medieval tower in the town walls of Tallinn, capital city of Estonia. Standing outside at the bottom you imagine that, any moment soon, Rapunzel will lower her long hair. So I feel that we ascend at our peril. The imagery in Isupov’s work is surreal (of an altered reality) and I have always known that this is a mind that I do not much wish to occupy. He spends too much time with succubi and incubi. (I know that they are only minor sorts of demon and not too frightening but to be immured in the Loewenschede tower with his nightmares might be just a little too disturbing.)

The exhibition was installed by Puhkan, his friend from student days. He has curated ritual concentric circles of the sculpted heads, which all seem strangely out of scale – either too large or too small. The heads face a large drawing that reminds us of Isupov and his Estonian wife, Kadri. Until she was spirited away to the US three years ago she was and still is a member of the small collective of Estonian clay artists who are Asuurkeramika and who rent the tower as their workshop. It is a medieval tower of the kind in which I imagine that, during the 18th century, August the Strong imprisoned the flighty young Böttger (who had, unwisely, tried to convince the king that he had the power to transmute base material into gold). Böttger’s alchemical experiments did not lead to the discovery of the philosopher’s stone but instead to the discovery of European porcelain in Dresden. Isupov now wears the mantle of the undisputed transmuter of porcelain into fabulous (in all senses of the word) sculpture. His incarcerations though are mainly of his own making (although he certainly had a fairly rigorous start).

When we finally ascend to see the exhibition, the main feature that I am aware of is actually the absence of implied horror that I had anticipated in the imagery; the demons are perhaps partially assuaged. Instead there is a softening of focus and the eye has turned to the domestic (in particular his own new small family) recording his surprise and extreme delight in becoming a father for the first time, in his 40s. It is now that the effect and influence of the Anagama kiln at Kohila becomes truly apparent. The pieces had been placed in the kiln (after extensive consultation with Allik, the kiln master) with great attention to the effect of fly ash onto the surfaces. It has given them a modelling as the flame licks through the tunnel. This serves to change the disconcerting flatness of the making and to ‘re-humanise’ the heads by providing yet another illusion of three-dimension-ality. The toasting flame and speckles of ash represent another sort of drawing on the surface that complements the two-dimensional drawing that sits on top of the frame provided by the ceramic canvas; and as the pieces are placed on wadding even his trademark drawing under the piece can be subtly affected.

The attention to an interactive firing (such as wood) represents a new kind of consideration for Isupov, from his normal electric kiln firing. Allik was aware of his own responsibilities when firing the Anagama: “The control from Isupov, in the making of the ceramics, is 99 percent and the firing necessarily takes some of that away.” (These reflections are born now of three years of association since Isupov first was tempted by the symposium in 2007.) As a kiln master Allik feels that he has about 60 to 70 percent control (an embodied skill nurtured through nearly 100 firings in this kiln alone).

Allik insightfully observed: “Electric firing gives a kind of distance, a scary effect, to Isupov’s work; with woodfiring, the faces are warmed and it is as if they have been formed by natural forces such as wind, rain or sun.”

Isupov’s new work suggests a re-evaluation. His original premise in being an artist was not to aim for verisimilitude, as he said: “Why do I need to re-create life if it is already there?” His work is not often comfortably placed in the domestic environment. Sergei Isupov is keenly aware of the disquieting nature of his work: “Decorative objects are to be lived with in the home; but my work is hard to live with, so it is more at home in the museum, or gallery where the disturbing is possible.” Perhaps he is searching for a new kind of reality within the oldest dwelling of ceramics, that is the home and we can now start to discover the artist becoming ‘real’ in the life that is symbolically depicted in the new work. This is a mantra that will return with him to the US. We can rest assured that there will be new risks and re-inventions and I have had a salutary lesson in not making assumptions about the ways in which remarkable artists might test themselves.

David Jones is a potter and writer. He is an academic, teaching at the University of Wolverhampton, UK. He is the author of Raku: Investigations Into Fire and Firing – Philosophies Within Contempo- rary Ceramic Practice. All quotes are from a series of conversations, based both on chance encounters and meetings between the author and Sergei Isupov in Tallinn, Estonia, in July 2010.