

# upfront

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Top: Works by Reid Ozaki

Middle: Rick Mahaffey's untitled sushi plate, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, slab-built dark stoneware with stamped decoration and feldspathic crawl glaze, reduction fired to Cone 10, 2006, \$15.

Bottom: Works by Colleen Gallagher



Works by Damian Grava on display amongst antique Chinese and Japanese country furniture; at Glenn Richards Asian Furnishings and Antiques, Seattle, Washington.

## review: Mingei Pottery as Installation Art: The Glenn Richards Annual Mingei Pottery Show

by Matthew Kangas

Who would have thought that something so humble and retro as wood-fired Japanese-style pottery could be viewed as installation art? Pre-eminent Seattle Asian antiques dealer John Fairman, owner of Honeychurch Antiques and Glenn Richards, an antique Asian country furniture showroom, got the idea in 1998.

The combination of anagama (literally “hole kiln”) wood-fired pottery set on specially selected pieces of antique Japanese and Chinese country furniture proved to be unbeatable. For the invitational, on view at Glenn Richards ([www.glennrichards.com](http://www.glennrichards.com)) through December 23, 2006, each invited artist chose examples from the store’s inventory and installed their own works on them. The contrasts were uncanny, unexpected and beautiful.

Fairman’s own background put him in the perfect position to curate such exhibitions. Raised in Hong Kong and Tokyo by parents who still operate a venerable gallery (Honeychurch Antiques, Hong Kong), Fairman studied in Japan in an exchange program at the Kansai School of Art at the age of seventeen before attending the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where he met and married his wife Laurie Van Dorn Fairman in 1977. Now John manages Honeychurch, while Laurie oversees Glenn Richards.

Soon after Fairman’s freshman year, he returned to Japan and spent two and a half years apprenticing as a potter to Seizan Takatori, one of the few women wood-fired pottery and tea ceremony experts. After transferring as a junior to the University of Washington School of Art in 1975, for the express purpose of studying with legendary ceramics giant Robert Sperry (1927–1998), Fairman received his B.F.A. in 1977.

“Pottery was my life then,” Fairman commented in an interview. Although he was Sperry’s teaching assistant and taught for five years at Seattle Pottery Supply, Fairman was encouraged

to stay in the U.S. and open a North American branch of the family firm.

When the larger branch in Seattle opened in 1997 as Glenn Richards (named for his stepfather, proprietor of the Hong Kong venue), Fairman sought ways to continue his love of anagama pottery while performing his familial duties for both sites. In 1999, he had the idea of inviting ten anagama potters (whom he found by scouting street fairs, pot shops, galleries and the huge annual Pacific Northwest Arts and Crafts Fair in nearby Bellevue, Washington) to exhibit work in the gallery. The results were visually stunning and opened a whole new dimension of pottery display: mingei pottery plus Asian antique furniture equaled contemporary installation art.

“The potters love it,” Fairman continued. “They get to show their work in the context of *mingei* (Japanese ‘everyday’ folk art) furniture. It’s more like Japan, where pottery is often set on antique tables or chests in exhibitions.

“There’s a huge tradition of Japanese-style pottery in the Northwest, partly thanks to Bob Sperry, the larger Japanese-American population and the area’s proximity to Japan.

“It was extremely well received from the beginning. At the first opening, there were 200–300 people all lined up buying

pots. Now there are 500–600 that show up the first night. After that, the show is up for two months, right through the holidays.” Fairman has only one rule: all pottery that is sold must be replaced with other work by the artists so that the exhibition looks full throughout the run. Among the original participants, local potters Peter Olsen, Rob Fornell and Reid Ozaki remain the core trio.

Drawing on his built-in clientele for Japanese chests, folding screens, tables and other material (which has gone well with the Japanese-influenced modern residential architecture of the Northwest since the 1960s), Fairman’s customers started looking at the



John Benn’s vase form, 33 in. (84 cm) in height, stoneware, tumblestacked in a wood-fire kiln, \$1500.

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beautiful anagama stoneware and porcelain pots and tableware and began collecting seriously.

"We brought a lot of new clients to the handmade ceramics market and, vice versa, people who came to look at the pots became clients for the antiques," Fairman added. Other Asian antiques stores such as Kobo Gallery and David Smith followed suit, creating a virtual citywide wood-fired ceramics festival each autumn. Only in Seattle.

Fairman continued, "It just exploded! The word got out with the potters. And the show was fun because of all the antique furniture. More and more potters wanted to get in, but I try to hold it to a dozen or so each year. We try to give new potters a shot because I don't want



Rob Fornell's "Tengu-yu Mizusashi (water container)," 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, coiled and pinched stoneware with matt glazes, fired to Cone 9 in reduction; at Glenn Richards Asian Furnishings and Antiques, Seattle, Washington.

the rest of them to get used to it. And it's not just wood-fired stuff anymore. There's also electric- and gas-fired work, and some new porcelain artists like Nana Kuo and Britt Dietrich."

Looking back, Fairman recalled, "Education has always been central for us." With his wife, Fairman has carefully trained staff to help explain periods, glazes and styles. "It's all about making the public appreciate why folk pottery is important. They have a thousand-year-old tradition to draw upon and learn from."

The twelve artists selected by the Fairmans for the 2006 holiday show brought a wide variety of approaches. With Hank Murrow (Eugene, Oregon), Sequoia Miller (Olympia, Washington), Reid Ozaki (Tacoma, Washington) and Robbie Lobell (Coupeville, Washington) doing handmade production tableware, viewers saw styles that ranged from the highly traditional such as Ozaki's, to the more contemporary such as Lobell's. Each artist selected the tables, shelves, bookcases and lacquer trays upon which to arrange his or her works.

Others, like Brian O'Neill (Bellingham, Washington) vacillate between traditional and modern forms. All of O'Neill's works use traditional firing and glazes, some even going so far as to resemble British modern ceramists Lucie Rie and Hans Coper with uncomfortably familiar results.

Richard Brandt (Portland, Oregon) began as a photographer in New York and turned to pottery after studying with Ah Leon at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. Brandt's work at Glenn Richards was covered in thick white glazes. Like Brandt, Fornell and

Richard Mahaffey (Tacoma, Washington) also challenge the unpredictable outcomes of the white glazes in anagama kilns: cracking, crazing, pitting and pooling. Mahaffey's installation set his white wares against dark Chinese rosewood bookcases; the effect was smashing.

This year, John and Laurie Fairman hope to expand into a white-cube exhibition space in the store's basement so both old and new pottery will be seen in a crisp, well-lit contemporary setting. It's all part of Fairman's lifelong project of educating clients, who come from all over the world, about Asian arts. Combined with the planned basement gallery and the upstairs inventory of hundreds of treasures, Glenn Richards has become a must-see site for connoisseurs of both new and old furniture, Asian and Asian-style arts, and traditional and contemporary ceramics.

**the author** *Matthew Kangas reviews frequently for the Seattle Times and Art in America. His latest book is Craft and Concept: The Rematerialization of the Art Object (Midmarch Arts), which includes some writings that originally appeared in Ceramics Monthly. His new book, Robert Sperry: Bright Abyss, is due out later this year.*

### Evolution—Nine with One

"Evolution—Nine with One," an exhibition of recent works by John Glick and nine of his former assistants, is on display through April 27 at Red Lodge Clay Center ([www.redlodgeclaycenter.com](http://www.redlodgeclaycenter.com)) in Red Lodge, Montana. Glick has been producing functional wares and sculptural pieces at his Plum Tree Pottery in Farmington Hills, Michigan, for more than forty years. About thirty years ago Glick started working with one new assistant each year. The nine former assistants featured alongside Glick are: Mark Cole (Lincoln, Nebraska); Mark Derby (New Orleans, Louisiana); Mary Engel (Athens, Georgia); Jennifer Everett (Gorham, Maine); Kristen Kieffer (Baldwinville, Massachusetts); Kirke Martin (Keedysville, Maryland); Tom Rohr (Pleasant Hill, Oregon), Curtis Stewardson (State College, Pennsylvania); and Paul Young (Dryden, Michigan).

"Since 1965, I have been offering assistantship opportunities at Plum Tree Pottery, although in the first third of my studio career I did not consistently have an assistant every year," said Glick. "I myself never found a way to become an assistant when I came into the pottery field. I have blended with my own philosophies what I took from



John Glick's teabowl, 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, with glazes, soda fired to Cone 10, \$100.