



MARGARET HUNTER
raku
mallorca 2014

Raku Sculptures

Mallorca 2014

My eighteen month work residency in Mallorca during 2013/2014 stimulated me in various ways. The vibrant and contrasting landscape provided continuous motivation; the informal location of my atelier among orange trees and wild flowers was a stark contrast with my Berlin atelier situated on a former military camp on the outskirts of the city.

In Mallorca, I was based in the Sa Taronja Cultural Association in Andratx where I took part in a short course about **raku** fired ceramics. I was intrigued by the process and the results; it was the impetus that led to the group of ceramic sculptures in this catalogue. At the end of the document I describe the **raku** process and the experience of firing these pieces.





Algaida

35 x 15 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze, silver glaze



Andratx

29 x 30 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze, silver glaze



Artá

20 x 9 x 16 cm

raku: Manises glaze



Montuiri

46 x 26 x 27 cm

raku: engobe, glaze, scratched lines, silver glaze



Tramuntana

39 x 27 x 4 cm

raku: crackle glaze, manganese oxide lines



Cabrera

32 x 14 x 4 cm

gas fired kiln: green glaze, manganese oxide lines



Ariany

42 x 26 x 2 cm

raku: engobe, dark blue glaze



Muro

24 x 12 x 13 cm

raku: crackle glaze



Santanyi

39 x 29 x 3 cm

raku: crackle glaze, Manises glaze



Deià

10 x 7.5 x 6 cm

raku: manganese oxide underglaze, crackle glaze

The Raku Process



Raku originated in Japan around the 16th century and inspired various western adaptations of the process. It is traditionally characterised by being hand built rather than thrown, with pieces removed from the kiln while still glowing hot.

Contemporary potters then developed the technique of placing the ware in a container filled with combustible material immediately after removal from the hot kiln. One of the resulting effects is often a crackled surface such as that achieved on one of my pieces shown above. Another effect is that as a dramatic and almost alchemic process, the results can be totally unpredictable. This both excited and scared me!



I felt fascinated and challenged by this unpredictable process, which also offers the possibility to scratch into the surface of the object exposing black lines similar to my charcoal drawing. Intrigued by my first modest results, I wanted to make more!

However, I realised that the techniques involved in moulding with **raku** clay were a step in an entirely different direction from the often life-size wood sculptures such as those shown above, which I had regularly been making since the early nineties mainly using my electric chain saw. Nonetheless, with a solo exhibition coming up at aquabitArt in Berlin in November 2014, I decided to produce a small body of **raku** ceramics.



Initially I joined a small group in the atelier of Mallorcan ceramicist, Ruben Cano in Llucmajor. Even the drive into the rural middle of the island was enjoyable. Away from the tourist parts along the south east coast where I was living, there was the feeling of being in real Spain.

In Ruben's atelier I felt myself in comfortable isolation. I was able to concentrate on working with the clay using ideas from my small preparatory drawings. The rhythm of Spanish conversation that I couldn't understand in the background further enhanced the feeling of new experiences and working with natural materials in a stimulating environment.

The Raku Process



As with my drawings, paintings and sculptures, the ideas I developed were figurative.

The method I used to produce my figures required joining and shaping tiles of clay together, approximately twelve millimeters thick. Enlarging the sheets enabled me also to develop some drawing ideas into wall reliefs.

Therefore my drawing *Possibilities* was used as the model for the ceramic plaque *Santanyi*. In the sculpture *Algaida* I combined three-dimensional with two-dimensional forms, so that the two heads in relief are conjoined with the three dimensional torso.



Over a period of a few months, this collection of work developed. The pieces took on their finished forms requiring time to dry to a light grey in the air until their initial "biscuit" firing in a kiln.

This contrasted with my experiences of the grain and colour of wood as it emerges during work on my wooden sculptures and with the contrasts of charcoal on paper or paint on canvas.

However, throughout the production of these ceramics forms I had in mind the drama and uncertainty of colour and pattern that would emerge from their firing!



There was excitement and apprehension as the day finally arrived when we planned to glaze and fire the work. We started early. Ruben prepared his atelier for the process including assembling his special **raku** oven on the roof terrace of his lovely Mallorcan home.

As the oven gradually built up to the necessary 900°C, I set to work glazing each piece. Ruben advised on some of the glaze effects but admitted that, as already mentioned, the **raku** process is unpredictable often experimental. In an email just before the firing day, he had reminded (one might say warned) me that whatever the outcomes, we must love the pieces because "they are all our daughters"!

The Raku Process



The **raku** kiln is fairly small but is loaded with as many pieces as possible for each firing to make good use of the heat build-up. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that pieces do not touch each other, which would damage the glaze. It took nearly two hours to bring each group to the required very high temperature and during this time I was busy glazing the next pieces. This meant that I had to work fast and the day turned into a long one with only a short break for a barbecue lunch with a glass of splendid Spanish red wine to sustain us!



The completion of each firing was dramatic! Ruben carefully lifted each red-hot piece out of the kiln. A key part of the process is that the pieces are immediately placed into combustible material. In this case a metal container of wood chippings, which spontaneously burst into flames. The container was covered and the objects allowed to 'smoke'. After ten minutes or so, the container was opened to reveal charred objects. At this point my heart sank, concerned that all was lost as I observed the blackened work with pieces of soot and burnt residue sticking to the sculptures.



As the sculpture were first placed in water to cool, they were still covered in charred material; somewhat mystically, *Andratx* appeared to be gazing back at us from the murky water! But following cleaning the results were totally unexpected. After the uncertainty of giving up my hard worked clay sculptures to the elements of earth, fire and water I was fascinated, profoundly relieved and delighted by the results. **Raku** is an unpredictable dramatic process, almost alchemic in the mysterious, always surprising results that occur. For me it was a challenging, exciting and rewarding experience.