



## Birds on a Log

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Geoffrey K. Nicastro uses wood-fired stoneware, wood and cement to make bird forms. He explains this series of sculptures

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Left: **Soda Bird**. Soda-fired stoneware.  
61 x 17.5 x 17.5 cm.



Right: **Diamond Bird**. Wood-fired stoneware.  
81 x 7.5 x 10 cm.

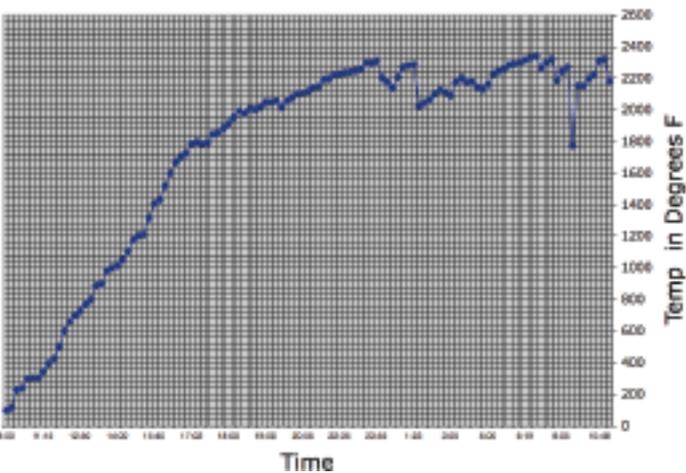
OUR REACTION TO FORM, space and line in the real world is un-touchable by any single language. To describe a specific work with words, the complexity of the idea comes out and the writing reveals the ineffectiveness of words to describe ideas made simple in sculpture. However Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) puts sculpture into words. “Simplicity is complexity explained and complexity is simplicity described” he wrote.

The reason for creating the complex language of art is to assist humans in communicating portions of this wholeness called life that is not possible with this broken dictionary-based language. That said, this statement is an attempt to use the hobbled English language to describe a cross section of the content I encompass in my Bird sculptures.

Clay is the medium I choose to use for much of my work. Reasons range from its historical connections, to its fantastic pliability and its solid connection to fire. In terms of language, pottery is a foundation, the grammar and syntax of the sculpture world. Using clay allows me to keep the connection to pottery fresh and use it as a guide for making formal decisions of a basic form from which to start. Clay will never offer a suggestion of form, so ‘traditional pottery’ forms become a starting point. Much the same way a stone sculptor must discern what lies within the stone, a basic pottery form becomes the hiding place for my next work.

My first Bird in this series started as a quest to explore ‘Classical Greek’ pottery. I have been struck by the lift and sleekness of the forms. The original intention of many of these forms was to contain life. The lift created in these forms is what man has agreed to mean the lifting of the spirit, written as a dictionary of shapes passed on to all cultures. In many cases pots were designed to contain the actual remains of the deceased, others to carry the riches of this world to the afterlife. Both the actual form and process to create these forms has contributed to the Bird series. The process for creating these forms is ‘additive’,

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The act of making one of these sculptures is an end in itself:

- Lifting and handling of the moist clay, with all of smells and sensations.
  - Handling it wet, then leatherhard to bone dry.
- The sounds when paddling, scraping, and carving these hollow forms.
  - Searching for a form that works and flows.
- The practice of remaining open to see the form as it develops and not be blinded by my mental vision.
  - Collecting and chopping the wood, and tending a raging fire.
- Finding and manipulating materials to build pedestals.
- And forcing myself to share in words where my sculpture comes from.

All of this is my studio practice. When it is going well, I feel as free as a bird and ideas soar, propelled by awareness, body and mind. As my sculptures sell they leave me memories reminiscent of sightings of the ever-fascinating bird. Hopefully the sculpture will create a space for the mind to flow freely in its new home.

meaning parts are stacked up to create one form. This enables me to make critical decisions as the forms develops, and gives me the room to alter an amphora, krater, lebes gamekos or loutrophorus to become the foundation for a new bird. It is from here that I look on for more clues of how to put this fantastic language of art to use.

The bird has come into my vocabulary of form through a number of avenues. Borderless beings, birds breach all boundaries: air, land, water, politics; and exist at all social levels from flying garbage to emblems of strength. Birds are mesmerising and constantly remind us to interact with the living world graciously, as to a close friend. The nature of non-human life, its complexities and indescribable impact when related



**Amphora.** Wood-fired stoneware. 68.5 x 30.5 x 28 cm.



Left: **Sparrow.** Wood-fired stoneware. 58.5 x 17.5 x 17.5 cm.

Right:?????? need caption.

to in the moment, is the crux of what I try to describe when representing nature. A 'realist' rendition is not available because of the inherent impossibility of capturing the complexity of a living entity. So I explore and experiment like a mad scientist in my studio trying to get clay, wood and fire to come together as a bird.

Often, I look into the established art world to see work that resonates with and inspires my work. It provides me with a dictionary of shapes. Brancusi's Bird sculptures are a profound influence when it comes to the flow and transitions between lines around the form. Connecting lines from the base to the beak gives the eye a flight path that flows like a breeze. Wings describe shapes in the air that carry the form. Free association is always a part of my work, if two seemingly unrelated thoughts come together I will explore their potential. As my shapes develop I do not try to disguise the 'bomb' and 'head' forms. An earlier series of mine called *Inert Ordinance Awards* feeds into these bird sculptures both as homage to the many birds destroyed in wars, and the connection of the free and boundless mind that can create such tools of destruction with the intention of freedom.

The surface on my ceramics is about connecting the fire, that turns clay to

stone, to the form. The birds are dressed in a natural ash glaze from the wood burnt to bring them to temperature. The ash is applied by the airflow that pulls the flames past the sculpture. The birds gather their beauty through the bright sun gathered in trees and returned as flame, ash and fast moving hot air. Although the wood I collect is all 'rescued' I am still aware of the deforestation involved when burning two thirds of a cord in a firing. In collecting wood I consider the source and use discarded scraps from the local lumber yard and fallen trees from friends properties in the area. Choosing wood firing connects me to the destruction involved in creating. The process requires I spend at least 26 hours outdoors tending the fire every five to 10 minutes, witness to both the sun and moon rising and setting. Gas and electricity can cloak the labour and destruction involved in firing ceramics where woodfiring reveals it.

I built my 12 cu ft wood kiln following the fast fire design in Fred Olsen's kiln book. It is made from hard bricks from an old salt kiln I dismantled. The firing schedule is a constant learning process. As my experience grows I have learnt to candle the kiln for 2 consecutive days before the firing, where I will bring the kiln up to 180–200 degrees and let the fire go out. Once I am confident my work is dry I begin my firing and ramp the kiln to cone 11 in about 13 hours. Once I have achieved temperature the decorating begins. The kiln is fired through a series of stalls and climbs from cone seven to 12. I will stir up as much ash as possible, using combination of wood stuffs that create fly ash, such as big chunks of bark, and disturbing the coal beds with a metal rake. The rewards seem to relate to the amount of time I spend decorating. So far the kiln has seen a 21 hour, 23 hour, 24 hour and a 26 hour firing, each firing netting more desirable results.

*Right: Spade Bird. 2007. Wood-fired stoneware.*

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Geoffery Nicastro is a ceramic artist from Santa Cruz, US.

