HORSE HAIR RAKU
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Horse hair raku pottery is a technique developed and practiced by Native American artisans in the American Southwest, particularly artists from the Navajo Nation, but also by the Pueblo peoples. I wanted to learn how the process worked in its most basic application because the surface looked so unfamiliar to me.

My first goal was to create a suitable raku body, one that was sturdy enough to resist the thermal shock of the raku firing process and would fire a light color to complement the markings from the horse hair. I used a modified version of the Wayne Higby Throwing Raku recipe that originally called for AP Green Fire Clay, which is no longer mined, and then threw my forms. Once the pieces had dried to just past the leather-hard stage, I trimmed the feet and used the potter’s wheel to begin burnishing the pieces. I read that a smooth clay surface accepts the markings best. Another method of achieving a polished surface is by mixing terra sigillata and applying it to the surface either by brush or spray, then polishing with a cloth or even your fingers. I used a rubber rib and the back of my thumbnail to polish my pieces until they were smooth and shiny. They were then bisque-fired to make them stronger. For the raku process, I kept the pieces isolated in their own outdoor raku kiln so that they could be accessed easily. Once the gas was turned off and the barrel lifted, I used tongs to maneuver the pieces onto the pieces of broken kiln shelves I had set aside. From there, while the pieces were still hot, I began draping my horse hairs over the surface. The carbon from the burning hair leaves a black stain on the clay. At first the pieces were too hot, and the hair burned away without leaving marks, but after a few short moments the temperature was ideal to accept the hair. I worked until the pieces were too cool to properly singe the horse hair, although the pieces were still far too hot to touch. Once the pieces had cooled completely, I could brush the remaining hairs away, revealing the carbon markings left behind. In order to seal the pieces and preserve the stains, I painted floor wax onto the surfaces.

I appreciate that there is a more intimate connection involved in this process than in other firing methods, from the careful burnishing of the unfired clay to the spontaneous decoration of a piece while it is still hot. Preserving the memory of organic material through carbon, an essence of life, feels like a special way to celebrate the natural world. I would like to experiment with other organic materials, such as feathers or flowers, to see what markings they might leave.

Excellent