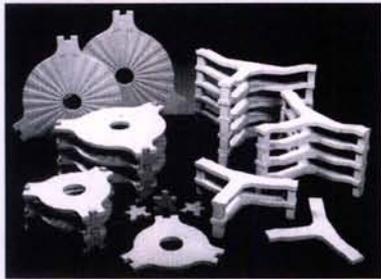


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## Comment

*Mud, Sweat and Tears* by Cliff Glover

Last year was to be a milestone. After ten years of struggling, I was finally paying my bills on time and saving enough money to hold me through the spring, when my sales usually dip to the same level as the winter solstice. I had three great Christmas shows lined up, enough extra bisqueware to fill my regular outlets, plus a few new wholesale accounts. The prospects of a healthy business, and perhaps even a vacation one day, looked good. Then, a week before Thanksgiving, my Idln blew up.

The experience was akin to pumping your brakes on black ice, only to see your car and your life slide into oblivion. The kiln was firing fine just a half hour before. Eight of the ten venturis under the kiln were burning a healthy blue in the foggy atmosphere, which is so common on the Mendocino coast. But when I finally returned to bump up the gas and light the middle two venturis, I saw flames shooting out the sides of the burners, and I knew that a major accident had happened. The realization, the shock, was enough to throw everything into slow motion, and I found myself repeating almost unconsciously, "Oh no, oh no, oh no..." as if that mantra would smooth over the queasy, helpless feeling that was now my stomach.

At first, I hoped that maybe only one pot had exploded, maybe a single shard had landed inside a single burner, much like an eight ball finds its way into the side pocket. That's what I wanted to see. But in my heart I knew there was more, that every burner had been filled three times over with the shards of my carefully laid pots, and that more damage was waiting for me once I turned off the gas and opened the door.

Inside, I saw that the weight of the collapsed arch had crushed the top third layer of kiln shelves and pots. Four of the new, wonderfully thin shelves I had recently bought to save my back were destroyed. Evidently, the right side of the arch had lifted up about 5 inches, which allowed 11 rows of K26 bricks to hang in midair before Newton's law took hold. The surface of the bricks that didn't col-

lapse looked like rotten end grain, pecked and pocked as they were by a shotgun of projectiles that were once my kiln shelves and livelihood. I looked over the mess, over the next few weeks of my life, then I quickly shut the door and waited for the depression to hit.

I have always believed that no one can save you from making mistakes, and that there is a quota of mistakes you must endure before achieving some professional success. Prior to the explosion, I thought I had gotten most of the basics out of the way. While living in Nevada, I had fired on one of the coldest days on record so I could discover ingenious ways to thaw a frozen propane tank while Cones 9 and 10 stubbornly waited for more heat. On the advice of its owner, I had once fired an electric kiln without relying on the kiln sitter, only to fall asleep while Cone II was puddling over. I have tried glazing raw, so I could witness sheets of Shaner Red fall off the greenware as it dried. I have rushed through mixing up a glaze, measuring out different oxides into a half-full bucket of virgin whiting. In short, I believe if you pot long enough, you'll make all the mistakes that everyone else has made in this blood sport.

As with all mishaps, we try to understand why this happens. Not just the small why, as in "Why did the flame go out, which led to a buildup of gas, which led to the explosion?" But the big WHY, as in "Why do you think it happened? What do you think IT is telling you about your life?" And if you don't ask yourself that big WHY?, then you can be sure the first friend you look to for sympathy will ask it for you.

While the better part of me knows I should be looking for some deep message about the explosion, about the meaning of life, the lesser part of me wants to get out a fly swatter. I know why IT happened. What IT is telling me is that I have to be more diligent about cleaning the burners before each firing. What IT is telling me is that if I drop a piece of wadding over the edge of a kiln shelf while loading, I damn well better find it before I start firing, even if it means tear-

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## Comment

ing the whole thing down and starting over. What IT is telling me is that a longer candling may be in order, especially if my pieces are loaded in the kiln soon after glazing. What IT is telling me is to find a job at Safeway.

I tried to put the explosion into perspective by thinking of all the world tragedies that made mine so insignificant. Hurricane Mitch had just torn through Central America, leaving in its wake more misery than anyone could imagine. There were wars in Bosnia, Somalia and the Middle East. But there is a tenaciousness to our own suffering, like pine pitch. You can rub it and rub it, but it just wont come off without mayonnaise. In my case, the lubricant was getting back to work.

My friend Pierrot has the same kiln I do, an Olsen 24, so I asked if I could borrow it for a couple of firings before Christmas. I would have understood if he refused, or was reluctant. But instead, he seemed outright glad to let me use it, perhaps figuring that lightning only strikes once. Or perhaps he thought I had actually learned some esoteric knowledge from my particular rite of passage. "Hey, Pierrot," I asked, "do you clean your burners before firing?" Like me, he usually just vacuumed them.

I did find that his burners weren't fitting properly. The intensity of the flames was uneven from burner to burner, so I took off all the venturis and stuck a needle down the jet holes to clean out the cobwebs and such. Then I loaded the kiln and candled it overnight with the two middle burners on a yellow flame. The next day, I saw that those burners were now firing poorly, and after taking them apart, a few chunks of carbon rolled out onto the concrete slab.

I picked them up and showed them to Pierrot, demonstrating my heightened prudence as well as the effects of propane on global warming. Later, I wondered why it happened and wondered whether another incident was lurking around the corner. The chunks of carbon were a problem not yet resolved. They were a reminder of things that could go wrong at any level.

As it was, the next firing proceeded without incident. The kiln reached temperature according to schedule and I

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## Comment

turned off the kiln before nightfall. I did incur more than the average number of losses, which under other circumstances would have sent me back to bed. But when they say “everything is relative,” they aren’t kidding. At this point, I willingly accepted any crumbs the kiln gods tossed out.

On the Clayart discussion forum on the Internet, I queried others for similar experiences and discovered that explosions are not that rare. For the most part, they happen during the initial lighting of the burners when someone inadvertently lets too much gas build up inside the kiln before ignition. However, there were a couple of interesting exceptions:

Louis Katz related one story about a student who wanted to reduce the kiln with mothballs (naphthalene) as it cooled. “The mothballs evaporated and collected until an explosive mixture with air was reached at the top of the kiln, where it was hot enough to ignite,” Katz explained. “Then it did. The door bowed out. Fortunately, it was a 2-cubic-foot kiln with a softbrick door and lots of holes.”

A second incident was told by Leslie Norton about a student who had a habit of throwing almost anything that would burn into the kiln along with the salt. “Shoes, banana peels, peanut shells, all sorts of things went into that kiln. But one firing I will never forget. It was raining and cold, there was a low fog, so you couldn’t see but about 20 feet. The salt

*As with most potters, I have come to accept accidents, consoling myself with any silver lining that reveals itself.*

fog was dense coming out of the stack, and it must have been about Cone 8.

“He reaches into an old Styrofoam ice chest that was half full of water and pulls out an old dead rat. He throws it into the kiln and BAM, the whole kiln seemed to grow, the sag came out of the arch and you could hear things falling over in the kiln (I don’t know why the kiln didn’t collapse, but it didn’t).

“He continued up to temperature and threw in the salt. When the kiln was opened, we found the bag wall had collapsed and most of the shelves had been blown over, but right in the middle of all

this chaos was the most beautiful pot I have ever seen.”

Although I wish Katz and Norton could have explained why my kiln blew up, I appreciated their responses. Now I’ll never use mothballs or road kill for reduction. And all that mythology about Chinese potters throwing pigs into their firings to improve their copper reds? Just a bunch of bunk. I’m sure they didn’t like rebuilding kilns any more than we do.

Still, my own kiln explosion remains unsolved, and I will have to live with that. As with most potters, I have come to accept accidents, consoling myself with any silver lining that reveals itself. In this case, I deepened a relationship with another fellow potter who so graciously lent me his kiln. I learned that many of my glazes work fine in an electric kiln, something I had not seriously considered before. And I came to accept the possibility that nothing I could have done would have prevented the explosion. In the end, I have to pick up the broken brick, mortar it back together and try again.

The author *Cliff Glover maintains a studio in Albion, California.*

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