



YOUR DEEPEST MIND

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
ALEX MATISSE

THE MOON SINKS LOWER IN THE GATHERING CLOUDS, AND THE FLAME SLOWLY WORKS ITS WAY FARTHER AND FARTHER BACK INTO THE KILN.

Some days the work is maddening; others, it is a delight, the clay springing from the wheel head effortlessly, as though it could not wait to be turned to its final form. Still others, the clay stays obstinately close to the wheel, falling back down when it is worked too hard; tired and wet, retiring to a growing pile of slumped pots in the corner of the splash pan.

It was the spring of 2006 when my blue Vanagon wheezed up the last pitch of Early's Mountain, North Carolina. At the crest, a sign read, "Welcome to the Big Sandy Mush Community." I rode the brakes the rest of the way down. As I passed the old Fords and Dodges with their diesel engines grinding up out of the bottom land, their drivers still waved at the passing cars; not so much a wave, perhaps, as one crooked pointer finger, raised from the top of the steering wheel, above a cracked dashboard. After winding through fields of silage and tobacco, I arrived at the Jones Pottery where for two years I was to work under the watchful eye of Matt Jones, learning his craft.

Matt's introduction to clay was similar to my own. Just a decade prior, at a small college in Indiana, Matt somehow ended up in a pottery class. From Earlham College, he went to apprentice with a Connecticut potter, Todd Piker, who introduced him to the family of potters of which we are now all a part. After two-and-a-half years with Todd, Matt and his wife Christine moved down to North Carolina to work for Mark Hewitt, another potter who, like Todd, fires a large wood-burning kiln. Mark and Todd had worked with the same potter in England, Michael Cardew, who made pots in the English country tradition, not unlike the folk potters of North Carolina. Matt worked for Mark for six months before leaving to find the land he now lives on with Christine and their two children, Linden and Sara Frances.

The pottery, or workshop, is simple. A dirt floor keeps it both cool and dust free, two small windows sit on either side of the door, and below them two potters wheels, the plastic splash pans replaced with wood. Behind the

workshop lies an enormous pile of bluish-gray clay, dug with a backhoe from a tobacco field on the other side of Early's Mountain. Matt thinks it should last him 30 years, and it probably will. At the far end of the workshop, under a peak-roofed tin shed lies the kiln, like a giant egg cut in half, dug into the hillside.

Potting is a work of extremes. For a few crazy months we work like mad, filling the ware racks with pots, preparing the kiln to accept them, and performing the countless other chores required to keep the pottery in order. The firing approaches with a week of backbreaking, painstaking work. The loading takes time and mental strain as each pot is placed into the kiln, each one raised off the kiln shelves or floor with a chalky white mixture of alumina hydrate, china clay, and sawdust, called wadding. After four or five days, the kiln is full and the door is carefully bricked up, the cracks filled with clay and sand.

Overnight, a small fire dances at the feet of the pots on the very front ranks to make sure all residual moisture is evaporated. Then the

[Please subscribe to read more...](#)

