

Nanopublication — Post-Firing Surface Transformation through Hand-Sanding

by Arnaud Quercy [1] · QUIETNESS · 2024



MATERIAL PROCESS FIRST PERSON FIRST PERSON

TESTIMONY SCULPTURAL PRACTICE HIGH

Post-Firing Surface Transformation through Hand-Sanding

After high-temperature firing, I was unsatisfied with the surface quality of the piece. I decided to sand the entire sculpture by hand — an extreme physical undertaking, because fired terre petite chamotte achieves near-granite hardness. The process was so demanding and prolonged that it caused tendinitis in my arm. But the result justified the ordeal: a luminous, almost stone-like smoothness that is impossible to achieve through clay work or glazing alone. I then applied beeswax to protect the surface and give it its final matte warmth. The surface of QUIETNESS [2] is not a ceramic surface in the conventional sense — it is a surface born from treating fired clay as if it were marble or granite, worked by hand until the material yielded what I demanded of it. The material transformation mirrors the conceptual intention: raw clay becoming something that feels ancient, worn smooth by centuries rather than made yesterday.

CONTEXT

Terre petite chamotte (fine grog clay) is my standard clay body across all ceramic work. The grog particles — pre-fired ceramic ground into the clay — provide structural stability during firing but also make the fired result exceptionally hard. This hardness, which is an advantage for structural integrity, becomes a formidable obstacle when post-firing surface work is attempted.

Standard ceramic practice rarely involves extensive sanding of fired pieces. The conventional approach is to achieve the desired surface quality before or during firing — through slip application, burnishing of greenware, or glaze. My decision to sand the fired piece by hand was unconventional and physically punishing. The tendinitis was real and lasting — a direct physical consequence of the work inscribed in my body. This is embodied practice in its most literal sense: the sculpture's surface quality cost something physical to achieve.

The connection to the sculptural lineage claimed above is material as well as formal. Brancusi [4] was obsessive about surface — his endless polishing of bronze and marble was integral to the work's meaning, not mere finishing. In sanding fired chamotte to this degree, I find myself in a parallel situation: the surface is not decoration but substance, not finishing but making. The beeswax application is consistent with my ceramic practice. Applied warm to the sanded surface, it penetrates the porous ceramic, providing protection while maintaining the matte, warm quality that distinguishes my pieces from glazed ceramics. The combination of hand-sanding and beeswax produces a tactile quality closer to polished stone than to fired clay — reinforcing the archaic, votive character of the piece.

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