

Partners in Profile

Amanda Chambers Artist United Kingdom

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Amanda Chambers is a British multi-disciplinary artist working in sculpture, ceramics, music, drawing, photography, and printmaking. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and an elected member of the Royal Society of Sculptors (MRSS), the Royal West of England Academy (RWA) Artist Network and Spike Island Associates. She regularly gives talks about her work and is currently a Guest Lecturer at the University of the West of England (UWE).

In October 2018, Amanda returned to Japan, after her first residency in 2017, to embark on a project inspired by the hibaku jumoku - “Hibaku-Jumoku, In search of Hiroshima’s ‘Survivor Trees’”. The work was produced and exhibited at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (SCCP). A piece from the exhibition is now held in the permanent collection at SCCC.

What attracted you to start making art with the hibaku jumoku?

The atomic bombing of Japan has always haunted me. My work often deals with human conflict, so I was drawn to Hiroshima, but I felt I needed a fresh perspective. Then I discovered a Japanese pottery technique called ‘Hidasuki’ - originally from Bizen - where straw is placed in between unfired vessels, in a wood kiln, to create an orange glaze. This inspired me to consider how natural materials might be used with clay to tell a story.

It was a wonderful moment discovering the ‘hibaku jumoku’, and how GLH was helping to raise awareness of them around the world. My overwhelming feeling was of gratitude, to have found a story so quietly powerful.

You visited Hiroshima last year before starting your residency in Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (SCCP). What was the most memorable moment(s) during that visit?

Yes, it was my first visit to Hiroshima and a wonderful trip. I only had one month to realise my project, so the schedule was very tight. I had 24 hours in the city, so I really made the most of my time. The Museum and the Peace Park were my main priorities before meeting Nassrine and Kenta from GLH the following day. But I was also determined to create some art work directly on-site too.

I managed this by making a small camera obscura. This handmade form of photography gave me a very personal way into the awe-inspiring atmosphere around the Genbaku Dome (Atomic Bomb Dome).



Camera Obscura of A-bomb Dome

Perhaps the most emotional moment came as I walked back through the empty park at twilight and stood for a moment watching the trees. Suddenly a bat flew up into the sky and began to flutter above a beautifully raised mound of earth. I then noticed a sign which explained that the mound was the resting place of the ashes of the victims.

How was making art with the hibaku jumoku at SCCC like? How did your peers and the local community receive your work with the hibaku jumoku?

It was my second visit to Shigaraki – one of the six historic pottery regions in Japan – and I was very excited to be back making work again at the international residency at SCCC. The studio is surrounded by pine forests, so it was a perfect, rural location to make work about the hibaku jumoku. I worked during the day testing various clays with the tree



Hibaku Weeping Willow (Yanagi)



Yanagi fired onto clay



Japanese “Ittekoji” Wood Kiln



Firing the Ittekoi Kiln

fibres and often finished by cycling into the woods to reflect on the process and to gather local materials such as sasa (bamboo).

Once I was happy with the final works (a series of clay drawings and sculptures) I began the firing process. A major highlight was using an outdoor Japanese 'Ittekoi' wood kiln for the first time. Handling the fibres from Hiroshima was very emotional because they represented something so precious in themselves. They were also a valuable talking point in the studio. Both my peers and the visiting public were interested, as they knew very little about the Hibaku-Jumoku story.

I was delighted to hear that some Japanese visitors who came to the final exhibition, had later phoned SCCP afterwards to find out more, which I gather is rare. I have since given several talks in the U.K. and found audiences really receptive to the story.



Tsubaki husks fired in an electric kiln, resembling the radiation sign

Your project was exhibited during the last week of October 2018 in Shigaraki. What was the concept of this project? Why did you choose those specific ways to express the hibaku jumoku?

The themes of survival, hope and resilience were at the heart of this project. I also felt it was particularly Japanese to allow nature to tell us something about ourselves.

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But I also felt that it was the Japanese people I was honouring with this work. My contact with Japan has changed my outlook on life, so I hoped the project mirrored the human story of survival and resilience shown in the aftermath of the bombing. In visual terms, the hibaku jumoku project was highly experimental. A lot of the finished works were fragile and impermanent, and this was an important connection to 'Wabi-Sabi' – the Japanese aesthetic philosophy that inspires my work.

The process was also unpredictable, and I enjoy this aspect of surprise when a work is encouraged to take on a life of its own. A good example was firing the Tsubaki (Camelia) husks. I was using an electric kiln and had no idea what the effect would be. But on slowly opening the lid, I saw the husks had reduced to ash, and had formed what looked like the symbol for radiation. Using a wood kiln was also essential to the project. It was a deliberate and symbolic act to bring actual fibres from the Hiroshima trees back to the

flames - to commemorate the conditions they had endured. Several pieces survived the process – one covered in straw emerged with a ghost like swirl of ash – reminding me of the river in Hiroshima. Another simple sculpture of tree stumps survived the most volatile area of the kiln – the fire box – and made it into the final show.

shoots from the blackened trees, needed to see hope somewhere. Today, projects like GLH provide a beacon, a positive message in a growing climate of uncertainty.

I believe art can also rise to the challenges we face and provide both a commentary and a spirit of optimism.



A simple sculpture of tree stumps survived the most volatile area of the kiln – the fire box

Is there a message you want to convey to your audience through your work?

Although my work often deals with conflict and loss there is an underlying message of hope. The survivors in Hiroshima who looked up at the green

Nature is universal. It has the extraordinary potential to connect us and cross-cultural boundaries. It has so much to tell us, so much we still don't know. It's not too late to start listening.

What does your connection with the hibaku jumoku, Green Legacy Hiroshima, and Hiroshima mean for you personally and professionally?

It is clear to me that I was looking for something – and not simply in the restless search as an artist. Coming to Japan and finding projects like the hibaku jumoku have in many ways restored my faith in humanity. I have also been challenged by it. Coming to the East has prompted a deeper critique on life in the West, so striking a new balance is my challenge right now.

Professionally, I would like to think this might be the start of a longer association with Hiroshima and the trees.



Straw ash