NNB News : 2015 : 06 : 30 : Where freight trains once rumbled, artists fire up clay creations

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Where freight trains once rumbled, artists fire up clay creations
ST. PETERSBURG – The last locomotive passed through in 1967, but the 1926 brick depot that once helped connect the city to the rest of America is full of life.

Instead of freight cars and citrus, the old depot on the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue S and 22nd Street is home to working artists and art appreciators. The St. Petersburg Clay Co. renovated the freight depot in 2000, and the Morean Arts Center for Clay leases year-long studio spaces to six resident artists. A café is open Monday through Saturday.

In the café, there are old photos, model trains and a mural depicting an active train platform. There is also a poem written by the late Rosalie Peck, who grew up in Midtown, became the first black female student at St. Petersburg Junior College and later co-authored two books on the city’s black history with journalist Jon Wilson.

The poem is titled “Remembering 22nd Street: The Way We Were.” It describes the once-bustling street when it was the heart of the black community during decades of segregation:

“It will never be the same, but before our very eyes, it may breathe life again. It may survive and surprise.”
The depot sits alongside the Pinellas Trail, which follows the abandoned railroad corridor. The structure is unaltered, with high, sloping wooden ceilings and a large façade in the front.

In addition to the six studios, space is available for selling finished pieces to visitors, children’s summer camps, and large gatherings such as weddings and receptions.

Artist Kodi Thompson works on his final installation at the Center for Clay. He says that his time in the studio building his portfolio helped him get into graduate school for fine arts. The freight cars, caution cones, and brick wall piece that Thompson is working on in the photo are all made of ceramics.

All six resident artists teach classes. Non-professionals in the community can rent work space by the month, enjoy the friendly atmosphere, and use the variety of electric and gas kilns. They must supply their own clay.
Three times a year, in January, June, and October, a 21-foot outdoor Anagama kiln is fired up. The partially underground tunnel, built according to ancient Japanese techniques, is filled with burning wood to fire ceramic pieces.

Artists must envision the way that the flames, smoke and heat will move through the kiln and arrange pieces accordingly, with minimal space between works to avoid breakage. Here, artist Tyler Houston finishes glazing a piece he built to be put into the kiln.
Over 1,000 clay artworks are loaded into the kiln, which runs 24 hours a day for 12 days. Location in the kiln affects the finish on the pieces, ranging from ashy to glossy, since each work is touched in a unique way. The results are diverse, with an organic texture that cannot be achieved with modern techniques or duplicated.

Loading the kiln is a meticulous process that takes several hours and requires teamwork and planning. The Anagama kiln is truly a community project.

Kathleen Rumpf (not pictured) is a 63-year-old artist who says she
has five felonies stemming from her political activism for peace and justice.

“When the process is finished and the pieces come out of the kiln, it’s like the opening of a tomb,” she says. Members of the center form an assembly line to unload the finished works, carefully passing and admiring each piece one by one.
Temperatures are monitored and recorded regularly. They are expected to peak around 2200 degrees Fahrenheit. The wood that fuels the kiln is donated by tree trimming companies that have no use for their scraps. During breaks, the work crew enjoys smokes, beer and snacks.
Loretta Lamore monitors smoke within the kiln from the rear. When visibility increases, she yells, “In the damper!” That alerts the crew up front to gear up with protective gloves and masks so they can load more wood. Approximately every five minutes, she yells, “Stoke please!” That’s the signal for reloading.

About 45 seconds after wood is added, a flame can briefly be seen rising from the chimney.
One the kiln is done firing, the pieces need to cool down for several days before they can be unloaded and admired. Some will be sold, and some will be kept by the artists for personal use.