

Abstract Expressionism and High-Temperature Color Glazed Ceramics: A Dialogue Between Gesture and Fire

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Abstract Expressionism, particularly its action painting branch, foregrounds the physical gesture, the energy of the artist's movement, and the spontaneous interaction of paint. High-temperature color glazed ceramics, by contrast, rely on the unpredictable reaction of metallic oxides, fluxes, and kiln atmosphere to generate rich, flowing surfaces. This paper draws a parallel between the gestural immediacy of Abstract Expressionism and the fluid transformations of high-temperature glazes. By analyzing the work of contemporary ceramic artists who deliberately employ dripping, splashing, and layered pouring of glazes, the study demonstrates how the "controlled accident" of glaze flow can produce an aesthetic of energetic mark-making comparable to Pollock or de Kooning. The paper also explores how the kiln's fire acts as a co-author, redefining the relationship between artist, material, and chance. The integration of action-painting principles into high-temperature glaze art expands ceramic practice beyond traditional decoration into the realm of expressive abstract art.

Keywords: Abstract Expressionism, high-temperature glaze, gesture, action painting, ceramic abstraction

Introduction

Abstract Expressionism emerged in post-World War II America, with artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline rejecting premeditated composition in favor of direct, energetic application of paint. Pollock's "drip" paintings—created by pouring and splashing industrial paint onto canvas laid on the floor—celebrated the physical act as integral to the artwork. Simultaneously, a very different tradition was evolving in Chinese ceramic art: high-temperature color glazes (e.g., copper red, celadon, kiln-transmutation glazes) where the artist applies metal-oxide slips onto clay, and the kiln fire produces liquid, flowing patterns beyond human control. At first glance, the two appear unrelated—one celebrates the artist's gestural authorship, and the other celebrates surrender to natural forces. However, this paper argues that a fertile dialogue exists. The action painter's spontaneous drip and the glaze artist's poured slip both engage with fluid dynamics, chance, and the temporal trace of making. When contemporary ceramicists consciously adopt action-painting methods—splashing glazes, tilting slabs to let colors run, layering contrasting suspensions—they create abstract compositions that fuse human gesture with the fire's alchemy, opening a new chapter in ceramic abstraction.

Core Concepts of Abstract Expressionism (Action Painting)

Gesture as Content

In action painting, the painter's body movements—dripping, flinging, sweeping—become the subject. The

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visible trajectory of the hand, the speed of the stroke, and the accumulation of layers record a specific moment of creative energy. There is no preparatory sketch; the act itself generates the form.

All-Over Composition and Rejection of Hierarchy

Unlike traditional Western painting with a focal point, action painting typically distributes marks evenly across the entire picture surface. Every area is equally important, creating a field of energetic incident.

Embrace of Accident

While the painter initiates the gesture, the flow of liquid paint (its viscosity, the pull of gravity, the absorbency of the canvas) introduces unforeseen effects. Rather than correcting these accidents, Abstract Expressionism embraces them as part of the work's vitality.

High-Temperature Color Glaze as a Medium of Fluidity

The Liquid Nature of Glaze at High Temperatures

At temperatures above 1,200 °C, glaze becomes a molten liquid, its viscosity determined by the silica-to-alumina ratio and the presence of fluxes. On a vertical vase or on a tilted slab, gravity pulls the glaze downward, creating streaks, rivulets, and pooling. Thick layers may crawl; adjacent glazes may repel or blend. These fluid behaviors are dynamic and time-dependent, freezing only when the kiln cools.

Color Development and Chemical Chance

Metallic oxides—iron, copper, cobalt, titanium—react with kiln atmosphere (oxidation or reduction) and with each other. A copper glaze may fire red in reduction but green in oxidation; iron can turn yellow, brown, or even blue under specific conditions. The exact outcome is never fully predictable, giving each firing a unique signature.

The Artist as Catalyst, Not Controller

Traditional ceramic decorators seek precise control over lines and color placement. But high-temperature glaze artists learn to cooperate with the kiln, adjusting variables (glaze composition, application thickness, placement in the kiln) to influence rather than determine the final look. This acceptance of partial surrender resonates strongly with Abstract Expressionism.

Convergences: Gesture, Pouring, and Fire

Direct Pouring and Splashing of Glaze on Bisque

Contemporary ceramic artists have begun treating flat or three-dimensional ceramic forms as “canvases” for action. Instead of painting with a brush, they mix glazes to a desired consistency and then pour, splash, or flick them from containers directly onto the clay surface. The clay body may be tilted to encourage directional runs. After drying, the piece is fired. The resulting surface shows evidence of the pour—splatter drops, sinuous rivulets, overlapping puddles. This technique directly echoes Pollock's method, but with the crucial difference that the colors emerge from the fire rather than being visible immediately. The artist must imagine the final interplay of melt and color.

Layered Opposing Glazes

In action painting, overlapping layers of contrasting colors create depth and tension. Similarly, by applying a base glaze, then a second or third glaze with different flow characteristics and expansion coefficients, the

ceramic artist can produce dynamic “interlayer” effects. For instance, a stable matt glaze covered by a fluid glossy glaze may cause the upper layer to break into islands, reminiscent of de Kooning’s aggressive reworking. Or a high-iron glaze beneath a high-cobalt glaze may cause mutual invasion during firing, producing swirling composites.

All-Over Abstraction on Curved Surfaces

Traditional ceramic decoration tends to respect the vessel’s form, using bands, panels, or centered motifs. Abstract Expressionist influence encourages covering the entire surface with non-hierarchical marks: splatters, streaks, and pools that ignore the vase’s conventional orientation. The viewer rotates the piece, discovering continuous abstraction without beginning or end. This “all-over” treatment transforms the three-dimensional ceramic object into a field of pure glaze gesture.

The Kiln as Co-author

Perhaps the most profound link between the two fields is the attitude toward the non-human. For Pollock, gravity and the rheology of enamel paint were collaborators. For the high-temperature glaze artist, the kiln’s atmosphere, temperature curve, and cooling rate are co-authors. The final piece is a dialogue: The artist’s pouring gesture initiates the form, and then the fire modifies, disrupts, and enhances it. Sometimes a “failed” gesture becomes a magnificent accidental detail. This humility before material forces, combined with the assertion of human action, defines the expressive power of gestural glaze art.

Contemporary Practices and Future Directions

Case Studies

Chinese artist Bai Ming has created series where he pours celadon and copper-red glazes over large slabs, tilting them to produce landscape-like flows that yet remain entirely abstract. Korean artist Shin Sang-ho uses iron glazes splashed onto round moon jars, firing them in traditional wood kilns; the ash and flame produce gestural markings that recall calligraphy but are also spontaneous. These examples show that action-based glazing is not just a Western import but resonates with East Asian concepts of naturalness (*ziran*).

Technical Adaptations

To reduce unwanted adhesion to kiln shelves, artists use kiln wash or prop pieces on stilts. For vertical vases, multiple thin applications with drying between can control running. For deliberate running, thick applications on smooth slip promote flow. Temperature can be held at peak to allow more movement, or reduced quickly to freeze the glaze in a specific state.

Dialogues With Other Media

High-temperature glaze gestural works can be displayed alongside video documentation of the pouring process or sound recordings of the kiln firing, further emphasizing the event-like nature of the art. Such interdisciplinary presentations bring the gestural glaze work into the realm of contemporary installation, bridging craft and fine art.

Conclusion

Abstract Expressionism and high-temperature color glazed ceramics, despite their different historical and material origins, share a deep affinity: Both celebrate the fluid gesture, the embrace of accident, and the revelation of process as content. By directly translating action-painting methods—pouring, splashing, tilting—into the

medium of fusible glazes, contemporary ceramic artists create works that are simultaneously humanly expressive and fire-forged. This dialogue enriches ceramic art, moving it from the decorative periphery toward the center of abstract art discourse. Moreover, it offers a meaningful cross-cultural model: the spontaneity of post-war American painting meeting the ancient Chinese tradition of high-fired glazes, producing a new, globally resonant visual language. As more artists experiment with controlled kiln interventions and hybrid techniques, the field of gestural ceramic abstraction will undoubtedly continue to expand.

References

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Figure 1. Huang Mingyang's Artworks: Running Horse I.



Figure 2. Huang Mingyang's Artworks: Running Horse II.