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Laying the Foundation for a New Tradition (Review of Japan Society Exhibition)

by Urmila Mohan

Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century provides an overview of modern Japanese ceramic art following World War II. This exhibition, currently on display at the Japan Society Gallery, was first organized for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in 2005 and is based on pieces from the collection of Halsey and Alice North. Curator Joe Earle significantly expanded his original selection to include the North's most recent acquisitions.

The work exhibited ranges from the functional to the sculptural, the traditional to the modern. Some of the artists featured belonged to groups or were affiliated with salons and organizations while others belonged to a lineage of potters and ceramic artists. The common factor is that (with a few exceptions) they worked in or were affiliated with the city of Kyoto. Kyoto is considered the birthplace of many Japanese artistic traditions and is also a trendsetter, forever on the cutting edge of Japanese aesthetics.

When dealing with such diversity, the best approach may be to view the works in the exhibit as part of a continuum with each generation of artists adding to and shaping the vocabulary of what we call 'contemporary' Japanese ceramics. The manner in which the exhibition has been designed helps reinforce this sense of a continuum. In contrast to the show in Boston where the works were exhibited in one large room, the work at the Japan Society Gallery is divided into six sections. The theme of the exhibit gradually reveals itself as the viewer moves through this series of spaces. Section One introduces the innovators, Section Two looks at works created at ancient regional stoneware kilns and Section Three focuses on artists who draw inspiration from natural forms and processes. Section Four features recent achievements in porcelain, Section Five introduces pieces by the most individual artists and Section Six takes us back to Kyoto, showing how later generations have built on the successes of the postwar pioneers. The architecture of the gallery forms a perfect backdrop for the work with the scenic interlude of a small rest area overlooking the bamboo in the main quadrangle.

Section 1: Pioneers

The exhibition centers on the artists from the Sodeisha and Shikokai movements and those who were influenced by them. The Sodeisha (translated variously as "The Society of Running Mud" or "The Crawling Through Mud Association") was a legendary, avant-garde ceramic movement founded by Yagi Kazuo (1918-1979). With Yagi as its leader, the art group had such core members as Suzuki Osamu and Yamada Hikaru. Sodeisha was extremely important in that it was the first group to openly contest the concept of functionality within Japanese ceramic art. Osamu's 'Horse Form' is an abstract, minimalist hand built form and Hikaru's 'Disappearing Jar' demonstrates the artist's distancing of himself from the vessel tradition. Yagi's 'A Cloud Remembered' (on loan from the Museum of Modern Art) uses thrown, altered forms in an entirely sculptural manner.

The Shikokai (Society of Four Harvests), a smaller and less influential group was founded by Uno Sango (1922-1980) who tried to elevate ceramic art into a Western conception of fine art. The group included Hayashi Yasuo whose 'No Sound C' is a black and grey trompe l'oeil 'box' coil built from stoneware with an illusionary three dimensional surface, a concept derived from his wartime experience of flying.

Also included in this section is an artist who studied in Kyoto but belonged to neither of these groups. Kuriki Tatsusuke's 'KT88 Flat Vase with Silver and Green Design' reflects his sense of control and conservative education from giants like Kondo Yuzo and Tomimoto Kenkichi. Both Yuzo and Kenkichi are revered for liberating Japanese porcelain decoration, especially blue-and-white, from the heavily Chinese styles prevalent during the Meiji era (1868-1912).



Yagi Kazuo. A Cloud Remembered, 1959. Stoneware, 8 7/8 x 8 x 9 1/2 in (22.6 x 21.5 x 24.8 cm) on wood base. MoMA, New York. Digital image © The MoMA/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

## Section 2: Revisiting the Old Kilns

The inheritance and reinterpretation of ceramic traditions, is an underlying theme in Section 2, focusing on artists connected to ancient Japanese stoneware production sites. Some artists use traditional techniques of firing, materials, and glazes along with variations on classic forms while others use the same techniques to create modern sculptural works.

Mori Togaku, Kakurezaki Ryuichi and Kaneshige Kosuke are three artists whose work is connected to the Bizen tradition. Mori Togaku comes from a long line of potters active in the Bizen district since the end of the sixteenth century. His *'Platter'* is made of slabbed stoneware with rice straw soaked in salt water placed across the center. During the firing the salt vaporizes leaving orange-red streaks creating a superb, contemporary example of traditional Bizen pottery. Kakurezaki studied under Living National Treasure Isezaki Jun (whose *'Flower Vessel'* is also displayed), but moved in a different direction from his teacher by creating practical tableware that can also be viewed as sculpture. His shapes (the *'Sound of the Core'* series) are created by carving and trimming combined with the traditional Bizen firing. For Kaneshige, the Bizen tradition seems almost incidental to his production. *'Saint's Garments'* uses hand modeled parts, wheel thrown elements and refined local clay, unlike the coarser Shigaraki clay used by his father Kaneshige Toyo.

Ceramics connected with the tea ceremony have inspired artists like Tsujimura Shiro to create his own *'Ido chawan'* (a type of Korean stoneware vessel used in Japan as a prized tea bowl) style bowl as well as re-creations of Iga (an unglazed, high-fire ware favored by Momoyama tea masters). His *'Faceted Flower Vase'* is an almost solid block of Shigaraki clay that was fired in an anagama kiln. Tsujimura left the vase buried for ten years before excavating it in 2003. Another artist who still uses wood-firing techniques is Kato Yasukage, part of the Kato family of traditional potters. His *'Pleated Flower Bowl with Shino Glaze'* was made for a ceremony marking the artist's appointment as the fourteenth head of the family.

Otani Shiro and Nishihata Tadashi, the son of a Tanba potter have built successfully on techniques created centuries ago, preserving their craft inheritance without being overwhelmed by tradition. Otani experimented tirelessly with the coarse Shigaraki clay and unpredictable firing processes, using these difficulties to his advantage. *'Shigaraki Flower Container: Burst Bag'* was originally a perfectly formed vessel that took on a broken, aesthetically pleasing disfigurement during the firing. Tadashi's *'Ash-Glazed Jar'* combines the functional and sculptural, to create a powerful, faceted surface with extremely subtle glaze formations.

## Section 3: Natural Forms

As the title indicates, the three artists exhibited in this section are inspired by elements from nature. An artist from Shigaraki, one of Japan's longest established centers of ceramic production, Kohyama Yasuhisa uses ancient material and technologies to create sculpture with a modern sensibility. *'Wind'* was made by building, sculpting and carving coiled clay and is featured on the cover of the catalog accompanying the show. Koike Shoko was one of the first women studio potters to make a living from her work. She is strongly influenced by marine and organic forms and her two *'Shell Vessels'* are made from layers of Shigaraki clay with two layers of glaze painted on and the design raked in. Sakiyama Takayuki is one of the few artists in the show not from Kyoto or one of the big ceramic centers in Japan. Inspired by the sea and the coast of the Izu Peninsula, his ceramic vase *'Listening to the Waves'* suggests a gently rippling ocean or sandy beach and is also reminiscent of contemporary Japanese basketry.

## Section 4: Porcelain Transformed

The historical importance and significance of porcelain in Japanese, Chinese and Korean ceramics has warranted a separate section in the exhibition focusing solely on contemporary works in porcelain. The works include those of Kawase Shinobu, Miyanaga Tozan III, Kondo Takahiro, Yagi Akira, Takenaka Ko, Fukami Sueharu, and Yoshikawa Masamichi.

Born into a family that made highly decorated porcelain, Kawase started experimenting with celadon glazes early in his life. The *'Celadon Flower-Shaped Plate'* demonstrates the thin walls, subtle hues and immaculate shape that have made his work enormously popular internationally. Also part of a ceramics family, Miyanaga Tozan III studied under giants like Yagi Kazuo and Tsuji Shindo. The influence of both these teachers is seen in *'Rain Is'*, an abstract sculpture of three asymmetrical triangles. Grandson of Living National Treasure Kondo Yuzo, Kondo Takahiro's innovative 'silver drops' decorative technique is featured in the sculpture *'Galaxy'*.



Tsujimura Shiro. Iga-ware faceted flower vase 2004. Stoneware, 22 in x 6 in x 7 in (57.1 x 16.5 x 17.8 cm). Photo by Richard P Goodbody. Courtesy Halsey and Alice North.

Interestingly, no obvious stylistic similarity can be seen between the work of Yagi Kazuo and his son Yagi Akira. The latter has created a unique identity for himself with pieces like *'Nesting Bowls with Black Glaze,'* a series of ten covered bowls arranged in a spiral, in size order. Takenaka Ko draws inspiration from ancient forms and techniques but manages to create works like the *'Large Faceted Jar,'* whose serenity sets it apart from its Korean antecedents.

Another type of continuity is seen in the sculptures of Fukami Sueharu. Born into a Kyoto pottery family, Fukami works in seihakuji or pale blue-green celadon glazed porcelain. Constantly refining his shapes, his works like the *'Imaging the Box'* series are noted for their technical perfection and usage of traditional Japanese shapes like sweeping temple roofs and Samurai helmets. In direct contrast is the work of Yoshikawa Masamichi whose robust and sculptural treatment of porcelain and the glaze calls to mind the Korean ceramics of the Joseon period and Chinese pottery buildings of the Tang dynasty. His ceramic model of a house *'Gorgeous Effigy'* is a brilliant merging of technique and concept, with carefully controlled glaze drips around the base.

Two more works have been added to the New York show to enhance our understanding of contemporary porcelain. Created at different time periods and through very different techniques, Nagae Shigekazu's *'Sliced Form 05'* and Kato Kiyoyuki's *'Porcelain 83-A, 83-B and 88'* present porcelain in its most elementary state, plain and unglazed. Shigekazu's ethereal sculpture combines the mold technique with the use of weights and supports during firing while Kiyoyuki creates extremely delicate, paper thin, porcelain tubes with carefully placed perforations. The simplicity of the works are echoed in their straight forward titles, which refer to the years in which they were made along with the material or form.

### Section 5: Individual Voices

This section deals with the works of artists who defy neat classification and includes Wada Morihiro, Matsudo Yuriko, Koie Ryoji and Mishima Kimiyo. Wada's *'Brilliance and Mystery'* combines a powerful handling of the clay body with wax resist cum engraving decoration. Tomimoto Kenkichi's student Matsudo Yuriko subverts porcelain decoration by using it on female body parts. *'The Prayer'* is based on Man Ray's photograph *La Priere* (1930) and shows the backside of a female form supported by her hands.

Born in Tokoname, one of Japan's oldest pottery centers, Koie makes powerfully expressive objects from traditional tea wares to explicitly political works. The exuberant personality of its maker is reflected in *'Oribe-Style Jar,'* a piece fired on its side so that the glaze ran down from several directions towards what is now the front of the jar. As the only artist in the exhibit to use a hyper-realistic style, Mishima Kimiyo uses clay with silk-screening and transfer paper to create *'Pineapple Box.'* This sculpture uses the illusion of 'cardboard' to depict the excessive waste generated by industrial societies.



"Pineapple Box" by Mishima Kimiyo

### Section 6: Celebrating Clay

The groups Sodeisha and Shikokai influenced a whole generation of Japanese ceramic artists. This final section deals with the legacy of Yagi Kazuo's work by reviewing the work of artists who live or have lived in Kyoto. Kazuo's students included Takiguchi Kazuo and Akiyama Yo. Takiguchi Kazuo's sculpture *'A428'* shows the influence of Yagi's emphasis on the nature of clay and uses pulleys and slabbed clay to create a balloon shaped form. Akiyama Yo's *'Metavoid 4'* sculpture is a subversion of the use of the wheel; the form being constructed from thrown, flat rings of clay, hardened with a blow torch, and turned inside out. This piece is considered so important that it has been displayed separately at the entrance to the exhibit, almost like a work symbolic of the entire theme of the exhibit.

Of the seven female artists in the exhibit, four have been exhibited in this final section and include Kitamura Junko, Kishi Eiko, Katsumata Chieko, and Ogawa Machiko. Kitamura Junko uses the discipline from her early exposure to traditional crafts like dyeing and weaving to painstakingly create slip inlay patterns on thrown forms. *'Double-Walled Vessel'* uses white slip inlay to create an exquisite, lacelike pattern over a solid gray shape. Kishi Eiko also has a diverse background having studied dyeing, painting, and art history before realizing her vocation in clay. Her *'Vessel with Inlaid Multi-Color Glazes'* has a surface that looks like cut stone which on closer inspection turns out to be a mosaic of tiny colored inlays. Katsumata Chieko whose education and training took place almost entirely in France, is inspired by marine forms. Instead of painting directly on the vessel, she creates works like *'Coral Sculpture'* by covering the vessel with a piece of cloth before applying the color in order not to leave traces of brushwork.



Katsumata Chieko  
Untitled  
2005  
Stoneware,  
11 x 14 5/8



Artists like Miyashita Zenji were central figures in the Nitten Organization, the most popular of the arts organizations in Japan. His *'Ocean Cube'* consciously rejects wheel-based ceramic traditions with ambiguous decorations evoking landscapes. His mentor Kiyomizu Kubey is represented in the exhibition with *'Black-glazed Vase for a Single Flower.'* Kiyomizu's son, Kiyomizu Rokubey VIII is, like his father, also inspired by architecture. *'Unit #89-8'* is a masterful use of slabs of clay, cut, joined and arranged to create an architectural form. Although a student of Tomimoto Kenkichi, Morino Taimei moved away from his early training with masters specializing in functional vessel forms to create hand built sculptures like *'Green Screen: Verdant Reflections,'* an example of his signature piece wall screens.

x 13 in (28.6  
x 37.1 x  
34.3 cm).  
Collection  
Chan-Palay.  
Photo by  
Richard P  
Goodbody.

In the same section of the exhibition is a singular, autobiographical piece titled *'Footprints of the Buddha'* by Kondo Yutaka. This sculpture consists of two rectangular black stone-like shapes with contrasting white slip inlay of words. Kondo tells his life story and the places he visited through the arrangement of words in the symbolic Buddha's feet pattern.


### Closing Thoughts

For a viewer who has seen this exhibition, Contemporary Clay can be an uplifting experience, almost overwhelming in the variety and virtuosity of the work. While it does a good job of presenting a collection of excellent ceramic work, it provides little critical insight into what the term 'contemporary' means and by implication what constitutes tradition.

Tradition for the Japanese potter did not only mean techniques and glazes but included the structure of the society in which this work was created and the factors that influenced the stability of this society. The Mingei or Folk movement of the 1920s was born in response to the threat of industrialization and its perceived negative effects on not just Japanese arts and crafts but the national identity as a whole. Similarly the formation of Sodeisha (and the personal history of its founder Yagi Kazuo) is intimately connected with events that took place during World War II.

Accompanying this dazzling array of ceramic work is the underlying subtext of the political history of Japan, the destruction and reconstruction of a nation and its identity, and the resulting re-evaluation as well as ongoing debate on what constituted 'Japanese tradition.' Other than a brief introduction, the show does little by way of addressing these issues assuming perhaps that the audience would be able to fill in the gaps. It fails to connect the work (or the artists) to their socio-cultural environment – the organizations, groups, and salons that hold sway in the Japanese art world; the importance of student-teacher patronage; the inheritance of lineage in potter families and the role of women in Japanese contemporary ceramics. This becomes especially important as the works themselves are mostly abstract. While artists like Koie Ryoji have created more explicitly political works dealing with Hiroshima and 9/11, these or similar works are noticeably absent, leaving one to question whether these objects are more representative of the collectors' taste rather than indicative of the trends in contemporary Japanese ceramics. The exhibit provides a great aesthetic experience and introduction to post World War Japanese ceramic art. However a viewer like me would have benefited from a deeper analysis of the relationship between the avant-garde and the mainstream, the traditional and the contemporary, an issue integral to the theme of the show.

Some sixty years after the establishment of Shikokai and Sodeisha, what was once considered radical has been accepted and honored by the Japanese and American ceramic art world. Sodeisha has now grown into an important annual exhibition salon, ironically not unlike the larger salons that Yagi Kazuo and his father rebelled against. The success of Sodeisha and the positive reception of contemporary Japanese ceramics demonstrate that what was once radical and marginalized can become the standard for creativity, creating a new tradition.

Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century is currently open and remains through January 21, 2007 at the Japan Society Gallery; 212.832.1155. Japan Society Gallery is among the premier institutions in the U.S. for the exhibition, research and publication of Japanese art. A catalog of the show is also available. 



Alice & Halsey North whose collection is on display at the Japan Society. Ceramics by (left to right, top): Yagi Kazuo, Morino Hiroaki, Taimei, Yagi Akira. (left to right, bottom): Kondo Takahiro, Wada Morihiro, Suzuki Osamu, Kuriki Tatsusuke, Takiguchi Kazuo. Photo by Kenji Takigami Brooklyn, NY

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