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CERAMICS

A Wary Regard for Tradition

Given a centuries-old history of individual creative art in clay, where does the contemporary Japanese ceramist go from here?

BY LEILA PHILIP

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." So wrote T.S. Eliot in his classic essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot claimed that rather than existing in conflict with tradition, an individual artist gains significance only through strenuous engagement with it. Not surprisingly, Eliot's views remain controversial, but his belief seems strikingly relevant to the extraordinary show of Japanese contemporary ceramics recently on exhibit at New York's Japan Society. Titled "Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century," the show proposed a forward-looking, if not prophetic, consideration of where Japanese clay is going. Of the over 100 ceramic works displayed, nearly all were made since 1980 and more than half since 2000.

Japan, with its centuries-old traditions of ceramic connoisseurship and pottery-making, might seem an intimidating place for a ceramic artist to develop individual expression, but in fact potters have earned reputations as named, individual creative artists since at least the 16th century. Ceramic artists today, like Japanese artists in other traditional genres, have to overcome an international stereotype of being tied to the past rather than being innovative or original. This exhibition was meant to overturn that image by showing the ways in which they are forging unique and often surprising relationships to the history of their medium.

Yagi Kazuo: **A Cloud Remembered,** *1959, stoneware, 8⅞ by 8½ by 9¾ inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo SCALA/Art Resource, New York.*

Organized into six thematic groupings lucidly described in an essay in the exhibition booklet, the show opened with a look at the work of some participants in one of the avant-garde movements that sprang up following Japan's defeat in World War II: Sodeisha, literally the "Crawling Through Mud Society." Founded in 1948, partially in reaction to the prewar folkcrafts (Mingei) movement, Sodeisha attempted to revitalize Japanese ceramics by throwing off tradition. One of the main tenets was to create sculptural forms without the use of the potter's wheel, getting as far away as possible from the Mingei ideal of the anonymous production potter.

Most members of the group are represented by later, post-Sodeisha work, but that was not the case for Yagi Kazuo [names appear in Japanese order, family name first], who was among the most influential figures in postwar sculptural ceramics. One of the masterpieces of the show is Yagi's historic *A Cloud Remembered* (1959), on loan from New York's Museum of Modern Art. It is an eerie, twisted form, an ovoid volume that tapers into four sharp horns of clay, all pointing inward. The unglazed piece has a grotesque and haunting beauty, evoking consequences of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet even this overtly modern and political work shows traces of a traditional ceramic esthetic: it carries on a belief in the emotive power of unglazed clay surfaces first established by Murata Juko, a late 15th-century tea-ceremony practitioner.

Another Sodeisha founder, Suzuki Osamu, was represented by three later works. One piece, a 1998 unglazed stoneware vase, is carved into angular facets that rise up into a surprisingly long and narrow neck which twists slightly, creating a figural posture. Titled *Clay Image: The First Branch*, this work exemplifies the kind of abstract minimalist forms that are Suzuki's trademark. He calls these elegant works *deisho* or "clay images" but speaks of being inspired by ancient Jomon-period (10,000-300 B.C.) jars and the clay tomb figures called *haniwa* from 1,500 years ago.

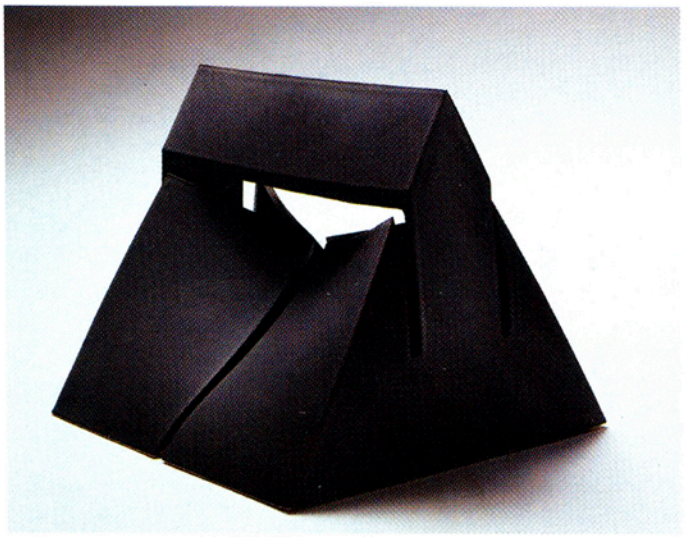
Another thematic grouping consisted of pieces by four contemporary artists who reinterpret some of Japan's most venerated ceramic traditions. Here the show considered the lasting influences of the "Six Ancient Kilns" of Japan: Tokoname, Tamba, Seto, Shigaraki, Eichizen and Bizen. A 2004 abstract vase by Tsujimura Shiro, famous in Japan for his theatrical approach to the making of tea-inspired wares, is particularly noteworthy. This rough hunk of wood-fired stoneware was, according to the artist, buried for 10 years before he allowed it to be viewed. Whether this burial was literal or metaphoric, the artist's self-imposed drama resonates.

An evocative 2001 vessel by Otani Shiro is formed of Shigaraki clay—its rich texture featuring flecks of feldspar and quartz—and decorated with the random imprint of seashells, evoking the old methods of using shells as stilts to keep pots from sticking to kiln shelves during firing. It was fired on its side, mimicking accident, and as a result silicates melted and ran in a direction seemingly contrary to gravity, creating patterns of diagonal lines. Otani illustrates his unapologetic interest in ceramic history by naming his piece *Burst Bag*, after a late 16th-century Iga-ware water jar that was revered by the tea masters for its spirited disfigurement. That piece, too, was warped and slumped by the fire.

"Contemporary Clay" traveled to the Japan Society from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The show was a labor of love for MFA curator Joe Earle and New York ceramic aficionados Alice and Halsey North, whose collection provided most of the pieces shown. At the Japan Society, however, the exhibition took on a new life, in part through the addition of several important works, including *A Cloud Remembered*. Perry Hu's elegant, well-lit installation unfolded as a series of quiet, deep-colored rooms divided by archways and, in some cases, window-sized openings in which ceramics were displayed. Although some pieces were behind glass, many were refreshingly out in the open, perched on shelves or pedestals of differing heights that allowed viewers to see them from a variety of angles and revealed their sculptural qualities.

In the "Porcelain Transformed" section were some of the most astounding pieces in the show: Fukami Sueharu's boxes and bladelike porcelain objects (all 2002). He is known for edges cast so thin that they seem to push the limits of what is possible. An intricate, architectural piece by Yoshikawa Masamichi titled *Gorgeous Effigy* (2003) was featured on the cover of the exhibition booklet. This low, boxy slab structure is distinguished by delicate pendant-shaped drops

Akiyama Yo: Metavoid 4, *2004, stoneware, 22 by 28¾ by 28⅜ inches. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*



Kiyomizu Rokubey VIII: Unit #89-8, *1989, stoneware, 11 by 12½ by 12½ inches. Collection Chan-Palay. Photo Richard P. Goodbody.*

of blue-green glaze along its lower edges. Most of the works in this section were influenced by architecture and modernism, participating in a contemporary design esthetic.

Another group of works, labeled "Individual Voices," might be called impudent. Matsuda Yuriko renders, in abstracted but recognizable form, the contours of a female's buttocks complete with feet tucked under them. Her 2004 work mocks traditional porcelain decoration by applying busy motifs in ocher and gold across sensuously curved brick-red surfaces. Mishima Kimiyo maximizes verisimilitude and illusion with her 1986 boxes and bundles that look like cardboard and paper rather than clay. Koie Ryoji was represented by a 2004 jar that plays on the traditional Oribe glazing pattern—a patchwork of rich olive greens, blacks and whites—and revels in the evocative possibilities of imperfection. He seems to have been included in this group not so much for this piece but because he is known in Japan for political works. Koie is also vocal on the dangers of virtuosity, criticizing artists who "do everything smoothly so therefore they don't convey feelings in their work."

In the final grouping, titled "Celebration of Clay," the focus was clearly on exploration of the sculptural, featuring works with little reference to traditional Japanese ceramic forms or surfaces. Here viewers walked around eerie, sea-creaturesque works by Katsumata Chieko in purples, yellows, whites and reds, including an 8½-inch-tall roundly fluted form with a raspy surface that intensifies from beige to brilliant yellow at the top (1998).

The show concluded with a powerful red hemispherical vessel (2006) by Ogawa Machiko, earthy and cracked, with ragged rims. It evokes the same insistence on sculptural form as the work featured at the start of the exhibition, Akiyama Yo's *Metavoid 4* ((2004). Large and enigmatic, *Metavoid 4* was dramatically lit in the darkened entry corridor. It is a carbon-impregnated cylinder, made from rings of clay about 2 feet in diameter and blow-torched to achieve a scorched and peeling surface. Akiyama, a third-generation artist who now teaches at Kyoto University, was a student of the Sodeisha founder Yagi.

In the catalogue, Ogawa sums up the paradox of much of the work when she says of her earthy half-globe, "What I create looks natural because I control the process carefully." Indeed, an impressive level of technical control characterizes the selections in this show, to the extent that other options, such as the expressive touch of the human hand that is characteristic of wheel-thrown pottery, have largely been excluded. Those seeking that aspect of ceramics would have been disappointed. Yet one would be hard pressed to find in America today a body of ceramic work of comparable conviction regarding meanings generated by tradition. Earle asserts that Japan still boasts one of the most vital ceramic cultures in the world. This exhibition made manifest that claim, while offering a refreshing perspective on the debate raised by "Tradition and the Individual Talent." □

"Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century" was organized by Joe Earle at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston [Oct. 7, 2005-July 9, 2006], and traveled in a revised form to the Japan Society Gallery, New York [Sept. 29, 2006-Jan. 21, 2007]. It was accompanied by a 102-page catalogue and a separate booklet with an essay.

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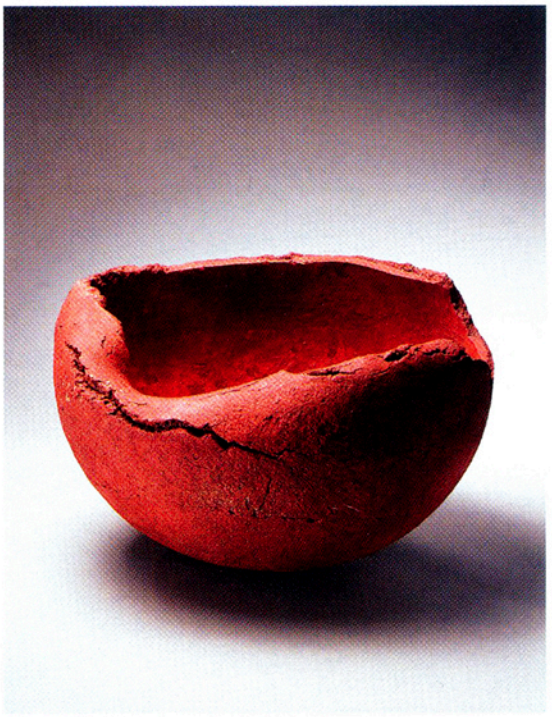

Ogawa Machiko: Vessel, *2006, stoneware, 10½ by 16½ by 15¼ inches. Above and below, photos Richard P. Goodbody, courtesy Halsey and Alice North.*

Matsuda Yuriko: The Prayer, *2004, porcelain, 13½ by 23¾ by 14 inches.*