

THE FRENCH CONNECTION: FIVE JAPANESE WOMEN CERAMISTS AND THEIR PASSION FOR FRANCE

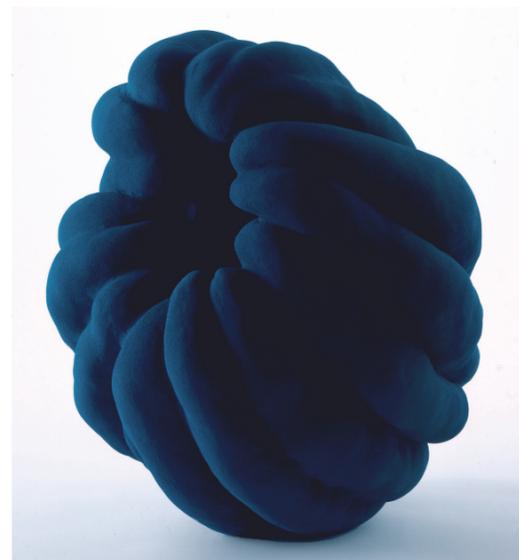
An exhibition at the Joan Mirviss Gallery in New York explores the dramatically increasing importance of Japanese women artists on the global stage.

by Nami Hoppin

The women artists in this stunning exhibition demonstrate the role of women in the current ascendancy of contemporary Japanese ceramics around the world. It focuses on how their relationships to France have influenced and enabled the five artists who are show-cased in this exhibition to find their unique voices. Stifled at one time or another by Japan's restrictive view on the role of women and the lack of freedoms with regard to their career choices, especially in the arena of ceramics, these committed female artists have successfully overturned such national limitations by choosing to train, study, and work abroad, particularly in Paris. By maintaining professional and personal contacts with both countries, they have managed to succeed in ways unavailable to their male colleagues. The artists, Futamura Yoshimi, Katsumata Chieko,

Nagasawa Setsuko, Ogawa Machiko and Sakurai Yasuko, have each come to this life-style via varied routes, some working exclusively in France while others have studios in both countries and still another works exclusively in Kyoto after years of working in Limoges. Spanning two generations, these artists reflect the changes occurring both in Japan and in the field of ceramics internationally. All are clearly pioneers, especially when viewed from an historical perspective.

These five women are masters of their medium. Perhaps because they are women artists in the overtly masculine world of Japanese clay, they are able to shed the heavy mantle of tradition and explore the art of clay in startling new and independent ways, with a special eloquence and strength dramatically and uniquely their own. These women are not merely confronting tradition but are



Katsumata Chieko, Biomorphic sculpture in the shape of an akoda pumpkin, 2009, Stoneware with blue glaze 16 1/8 x 10 5/8 x 13 inches, Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY. Photography by Saiki Taku



Nagasawa Setsuko, Cylindrical geometric form, 2008
Smoke-infused orange and terra-cotta clays
8 7/8 x 8 7/8 x 17 1/4 inches
Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY
Photography by Alexei Vassiliev



Ogawa Machiko, Curved torn vessel with dripping glaze, 2008
Porcelain and stoneware with white glaze, 9 1/2 x 22 x 13 inches
Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY, Photography by Richard Goodbody

rather seeking to expose the very essence of clay, exploiting its flexibility and suppleness in arresting ways. Some of these artists flaunt the limitations of their medium and perceive it as a challenge while others defy it altogether. As a result, they are in the vanguard of the development of Japanese ceramics in what is certainly one of this medium's richest and most diverse periods in its long history. (The oldest ceramics in the history of the world were made in Japan, making it the culture with the longest history of molding clay on the planet).

Women have traditionally played only a minor role in Japan's long history in clay. Many male ceramists, particularly eldest sons, begin their ceramic education at a young age at the knees of their fathers, as the next in a long line of potters working in a particular tradition. Until quite recently, this line of succession was unavailable to women. In part this has been due to the view that ceramics are the embodiment of the quasi-religious Asian belief in the five fundamental elements of life: water, earth, metal, wood and fire. Since women were long considered to be impure, they were not permitted to even touch a kiln. Hence, over the past few centuries, their role fell to that of organizer and administrator of her husbands' or fathers' studios—very distant from the art of creation.

Only with the post-war generation did women begin to challenge these circumscribed roles and social barriers, and begin to emerge as independent artists. In fact, nowhere in the field of Japanese art has there been as dramatic a change as the recent shift actually in favor of Japanese women ceramists in this historically male-dominated field. Emerging from centuries of obscurity and isolation, today's female masters of clay are challenging the supremacy of their male contemporaries as luminaries and independent creative talents.

Given the formality of the ceramics tradition in Japan, the relative openness characteristic of the French art world and its lack of gender bias, France holds great allure for many Japanese women artists. Of the five women participating in this show, each has emerged from a distinct background. They have all traveled diverse roads through their training and artistic development, often eschewing by choice or necessity the more traditional routes open to their male counterparts. They have worked and studied at such major French ceramic manufactories as Sevres and Limoges. Each has made France a major component in her artistic evolution and life, where they sought the fair and open training that has ultimately led to international recognition.

Shown together for the first time, these groundbreaking ceramists featured in this exhibition stand on the world stage, with their works entering major museum collections around the globe.

Joan B. Mirviss has been a distinguished expert in Japanese art, specializing in prints, paintings, screens and ceramics for more than thirty-five years. She is the leading Western dealer in the field of



futamura-1.jpg, Futamura Yoshimi Vasque, 2011, Glazed stoneware and porcelain, 13 3/4 x 18 x 17 inches
Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY, Photography by Richard Goodbody

modern and contemporary Japanese ceramics, and from her New York gallery on Madison Avenue, JOAN B MIRVISS LTD exclusively represents the top Japanese clay artists. As a widely published, and highly respected specialist in her field, Mirviss has advised and built collections for many museums,

major private collectors, and corporations. Japan's Foremost Female Ceramic Artists is on View in New York at Joan B. Mirviss LTD, 39 West 78th Street, from June 7 – August 3, 2012. ♦
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Sakurai Yasuko, Oval and Vertical Oval, 2010
Perforated unglazed porcelain, L: 10 1/4 x 14 1/2 x 10 5/8 inches; R: 14 3/4 x 8/14 inches
Courtesy of Joan B Mirviss, Ltd., NY, Photography by Imamura Yuji