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[ART REVIEW](#)

‘Hands & Earth: Perspectives on Japanese Contemporary Ceramics’ Review: A Kiln-Fired Culture

An exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art spotlights ceramic works of the past century that speak to Japan’s traditional style and technique.



Hashimoto Machiko’s ‘Shining Moment’ (2012)

PHOTO: HASHIMOTO MACHIKO/DOUG BAKER, SOKYO GALLERY

By Lee Lawrence

Katonah, N.Y.

In Kato Tsubusa’s 3-foot-tall sculpture, “Object,” you can feel the ceramist stretching, slicing and pinching the thick slabs of white porcelaneous clay that rise into a soaring, ragged peak—and

sense the slow pouring of pale celadon glaze so that it flows down the sides and pools at the base like melted snow. In Maeta Akihiro's white porcelain pot, however, the artist's hand is invisible. After shaping the small mouth, tapering the base, flaring and faceting the body, the artist ran a blade over the surface, erasing all traces of his fingers and palm. The result is a work whose heft and purity of form exude calm.

Such contrasts abound in "Hands & Earth: Perspectives on Japanese Contemporary Ceramics"—and so do affinities, subtle connections and jaw-dropping displays of mastery. Of the 35 ceramists featured, seven have been deemed Living National Treasures, many have received prestigious awards, and all have met with critical success.

Hands & Earth: Perspectives on
Japanese Contemporary Ceramics
Katonah Museum of Art
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This is not intended as a comprehensive overview of Japan's ceramics scene. There's no bling, no playfulness, no manga or anime imagery. That's because the show, which originated at the Lowe Art Museum in Miami and is currently on view at the Katonah Museum of Art, draws its 41 works from the private collection of Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz, who have acquired ceramics they deem "clearly Japanese, clearly contemporary, and that spoke to a traditional style and technique in Japan," as Mr. Horvitz states in the catalog. (The exhibition will travel to the University of Georgia on June 12, 2021, and the Crocker Museum on Jan. 22, 2022.)

A number of the artists come from a long line of potters, some stretching back to the late 16th century, when Koreans—captured by Japanese invading forces—revolutionized the field. They introduced porcelain production along with, among other things, kilns that allowed for more control during firings, a number of glazing techniques, and an appreciation for slight asymmetries and imperfections. This coincided with the codification of the tea ceremony, which prized rustic ceramics over the refined and polished wares adopted from China. In the 1920s, ceramists reprised this preference with the *mingei*, or folk craft, movement, whose influence comes through in a number of pieces as does an ongoing fascination with historical glazes and experiments with porcelain. The works span about eight decades starting in 1937, with almost half made between 2010 and 2016.

The show opens windows into this history through its selection, groupings and labels. A small bowl by Miwa Kyusetsu XI, for example, sports a thick ash glaze he dubbed Oni (Devil) because it crawls during firing, leaving random fissures that reveal the coarse clay body beneath. It is his answer to the even and smooth Hime (Princess) of his forefathers at the Hagi kilns. In “Fall Wind-Eye,” Kino Satoshi threw a vessel on the wheel and then deconstructed it into ribbons of porcelain that he shaped to swoop and meet in a circle. Using a compressor, he covered every millimeter with a celadon glaze, as noted in the label.



Kondo Takahiro's 'Jishinha (Seismic Wave)' (2016)

PHOTO: KONDO TAKAHIRO/THOMAS SVAB/JOAN B. MIRVISS

That orange-peel texture of a squat, lidded jar by Kato Yasukage? Shino glaze. The rough, pebbly skin with baked-in striations of Tsujimura Kai's large pot? Natural ash-glaze on stoneware. As for the silvery beading on Kondo Takahiro's towerlike "Jishinha (Seismic Wave)": a metallic glaze of Mr. Kondo's devising. And just how much creative freedom is there within a given glaze? Lots. On Nakagawa Jinenbo's platter, the Chosen (Korean) Karatsu glaze creates a feathery white area bisected by a streak of speckled dark brown. These are the result of juxtaposing a rice straw ash glaze and a high-iron ash glaze. In the hands of Maruta Munehiko, the brown glaze is velvet-deep and the white creamy as it encircles his pot's neck and trails down to the shoulder like a silk scarf. Where dark and light intermingle, the fire has added streaks of blue.

This installation departs from the catalog, most notably by doing away with the "Women & Nature" grouping and, instead, placing those four female artists where they rightfully belong: alongside other living ceramists making "Non-Traditional Forms."

Also worth noting is the fact that labels in this section make no reference to the vessel shapes of, say, Hashimoto Machiko's "Shining Moment," a large, bloom-shaped work that captures the strength and delicacy of petals; or Sakiyama Takayuki's "Choto; Listening to Waves," a swirling mass whose form evokes a whirlpool's energy while its surface recalls rippling sand.

Nor are there references to forms in the other groupings—"Modern Interpretations of Traditional Regional Ceramics," "Modern Uses of Traditional Glazes," and "On the Shoulders of Giants"—where functional vessels predominate. We automatically take in that Nakagawa's bold zigzag design cuts across a platter just as Shimizu Uichi's subtly veined iron-glaze covers a vase. But if we want to confirm that the Kato jar is a vessel used to store water for the tea ceremony, the label offers no help.

Throughout, labels simply refer to each work by the name its maker gave it or the moniker "Untitled"—and if there is a more concise way to express the Japanese perspective on art and craft, namely that neither is inherently better than the other, I can't think of it.

—*Ms. Lawrence writes about Asian and Islamic art for the Journal.*

Editors' note: The Katonah Museum of Art is closed for maintenance until Tuesday.

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