

Breaking the Ceiling: Japanese Women in Clay December 7 – 28, 2019

Artist Talk: December 8th 2019 at Concord Academy

Essay by Maya Nishi and Louise Cort

At the beginning

Within the traditional world of ceramics in Japan lies a history of the various prohibitions women have encountered. At the same time, the truth of the essential roles women played within the world of traditional Japanese ceramics—said to be a society of men—when that world centered in households making pottery is becoming widely recognized.

Beginning in the 1950s, pioneer women artists began to assert their places within the flow of contemporary ceramics. Araki Takako (1921–2004), Mishima Kimiyo (1932–), Tsuboi Asuka (1932–) and others opened the way by pursuing their thirst to create and their undaunted determination to carry on.

Freely and flexibly

Those women of the pioneer generation and the women makers of a younger generation share in common a gentle spirit, free expression, and superb technique. Yet one major change is apparent. Compared to the women of the pioneer generation, with their “undaunted determination” essential to the task of escaping limitations and opening a place for their expression within the intensely male society of ceramics, the women artists of the present generation proceed steadily with a greater flexibility, lack of tension, and relaxed manner.

Nature and women artists

This exhibition introduces five women ceramic artists who continue on the path opened by the pioneers and are recognized at the forefront of their generation. They share a focus on drawing inspiration from the natural world and incorporating it in their work. They also draw upon exceptional technical skill and refined spirit to realize their generous and distinctive forms and surfaces.

Murata Aya

Turning to nature for her inspiration, Murata Aya (1979–) makes sculptural evocations of animals and plants. She begins by considering the overall form, then prepares her marbled clay mixture using an appropriate color scheme. She assembles numerous delicately-patterned cross-section slices of clay to shape the component parts.



Murata began ceramics in college after studying lacquer in high school. “I like things that seem grotesque and raw, that give the feeling of being alive,” she explains about her preoccupation with making images of “poisonous living creatures like tropical carnivorous plants or ocean creatures that survive as flesh-eaters.” It took her three years of experimentation to perfect her technique of forming components from clay into which she kneaded pigment, mastering the problems of cracking and breaking that often resulted from the varying requirements of shrinkage and firing temperatures.

Nakazato Hiroko

Although Nakazato Hiroko's (1966–) works bear the distinctive surfaces of unglazed high-fired stoneware, they convey at the same time a sense of the softness of raw clay. The muted tonalities created by layering colored clay and tinted glazes, while referencing natural shades, also reify the spirit of the work. Her distinctive pairings of open form and color, never evading the shapes of vessels, convey a comforting feeling of stability.



Ando Ikuko

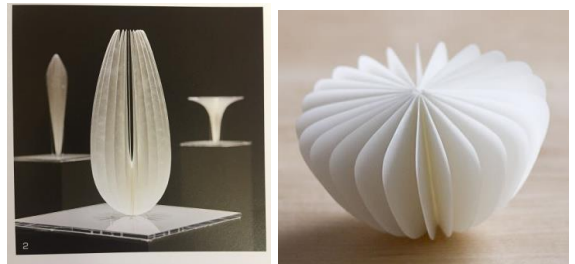
"Clay remembers a long flow of time that began eons before I was born," Ando Ikuko (1970–) believes. "I pursue the shapes that come into being between the clay and myself." The initial impression of simplicity in form and clay color belies her complex process of bisque-firing, glazing, high-firing, and glazing and high-firing again. Many of Ando's works make use of a mixture of commercial clay and hand-dug clay. Thus they embody a collaboration between the ancient clay and the maker.



Dewa Eri

Dewa Eri (1983–) constructs her amazingly thin and translucent porcelain slabs into three-dimensional objects. Rather than highlighting individual works, she prefers to create "scenery" with installations of multiple works. Artists as diverse as Maurice Utrillo, Andrew Wyeth, and Giorgio Morandi have served as her inspirations. Nature also inspires her, and she determines her forms by composing meticulous drawings of plants.

In a quest for translucent porcelain, Dewa rolls out her porcelain slabs thinner and thinner. She uses a needle to cut the outlines of the forms, fires the pieces at high temperature, and assembles them. Her handprints on the rolled slabs become the textures of the finished works, and they bring organic expression to the translucent slabs when light pierces them.



Morioka Kiyoko

Morioka Kiyoko's (1974–) works are based on traditional forms, yet they give an impression of extreme modernity. The lightness of her wheel-thrown vessels brings a shock. She has perfected her throwing technique because "clay and the potter's wheel are tools like my own limbs."

She believes: "The basic form of a vessel made by throwing is determined by its inner shape. Its shape derives from the inner curve, not the outer one. The shape consists of a tensioned relationship between inner and outer contours." Following this perception, she makes all her work on the potter's wheel. She fires them to a maximum temperature of 1300 degree C in reduction; sands them; follows with a second firing; then sands them again and polishes them with water-resistant sand paper. As a result, her finished vessels have zero water absorbency. The forms and proportions of her work convey a breathtaking beauty.

