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HUMANISTIC RETURN: THE SPIRITUAL ORIGIN OF CERAMIC ART

2018 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale

BY SHAO TING-JU, curator of the 2018 Taiwan Ceramic Biennale



The inherent link between humanity and soil is what gives people the ability to manipulate and sculpt clay. Despite their harsh living conditions, early humans did not just use clay for mere survival, when they picked up clay, a primeval substance from the earth, and put it through fire, water and air to make figurines, they were responding and connecting to their rituals and cultures. They were exploring their spirituality and their links to the rest of the universe. In our journeys toward the unknown, humanity has always remained innovative and curious. At the same time, life's exploration is bundled with uncertainties that have driven humans toward philosophy, religion, music or art.

PREFACE

The two world wars plunged societies into turmoil and exhausted minds and bodies. With their infrastructures in ruin, few nations could afford to contemplate the future of ceramic art. Japan and the US managed to do so. In this evolving time, artists created works that reflected those changes and spiritual pursuits. Contemporary ceramic art began in this milieu, initiated by the Japan and US.

After Japan lost WW II, new ideas and movements emerged from the ashes. Artists found more freedom of expression. Hayashi Yasuo, who turned 90 in 2018, is one of the few pioneering ceramists of Japan still living. He is a living witness to the history of Japan's contemporary ceramic art.

Hayashi's Cloud, created when he was 20, was deemed to be a challenge to folk ceramics. It is considered one of the premier objects of Japan.* Hayashi's career has several stages. In the 1960s, he sculpted geometric works and continued to simplify them. In the 1980s, he focused on optical illusions.

In 1948, Yagi Kazuo founded the Sodeisha, a group essential to Japan's modern ceramics movement. His 1954 piece, *Mr. Samsa's Walk*, is an assemblage of hand-thrown tubes that resembles a wheel. It bridged a gap between pottery and sculpture. Peter Voulkos focused on the art of pottery and decoration before he had had a profound impact by abstract expressionist painters, by 1954, when working in Los Angeles. Instead of traditional pottery, he worked on the instinctual and spontaneous expressions of raw clay, for revolutionary ceramics of a new era.

SPIRITUAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN POST-WAR ASIA AND THE WEST

In a time of changes, many Western ceramic artists came into contact with Eastern ceramics and cultures. Raku had its origin in Japan around 1625 and was used as ceremonial teaware. Paul Soldner's approach to raku, however, was unrestrained in its expressions. Despite its Japanese origin, American raku became the core of Soldner's career. Richard Notkin works reinterpret Yixing ware, which originated from Jiangsu, China. Most of his works are closely linked to social, political, economic and environmental issues. Miura Hiroko, curator at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, confirmed that Imari and Kutani ware of Japan influenced Ralph Bacerra as well as Escher's

Yasuo Hayashi - **Delta Wave 6** - 1996 51 × 44.5 × 18.6 cm



geometric patterns. Adrian Saxe, Miura Hiroko found that Saxe adopted postmodern techniques. He combined the form of fruits, such as gourds from Asia, with Western decorations. Margareta Daepf seeks vessels' universal form. Her two series featured in this exhibition are based on narrow Chinese alleys (hutongs) and Islamic patterns. Bouke de Vries's *The Goddess of the Fragments* is a statuette of Guanyin (goddess of mercy) covered with shattered pieces of 18th and 19th century Chinese porcelains.

SELF-SCRUTINY OF LOCAL CULTURES

After the 1960s, the economies of other nations improved. Many Asian artists received their higher education in the West. There were other Asian ceramists who remained entrenched in their cultures, and continued to explore their heritage. Those who studied in the West sometimes also looked back upon their homelands for sources of inspiration. Kaneko Jun is known for his colossal Dango and big head sculptures. Even though he relocated to the US when he was young, he has always remained true to Shinto philosophy and trusted his intuitions. Takamori Akio's "envelope vessels" were inspired by ukiyo-e woodblock designer Utamaro. After 1996, his attention shifted to postwar Japanese commoners and historic figures.

Chen Cheng-hsun incorporates in his works the classical philosophy based on the Five Elements after he returned from Spain to Taiwan. Shigematsu Ayumi has been researching Japan's prehistoric Jōmon pottery in the past few years. Lu Bin has long paid attention to modernization in his country. He uses Buddhist scriptures to

Matsumoto Hideo - *Subterranean Cathedral in rice field* - 2011, 216 x 120 x 120 cm



Akiyama Yo - *Metavoid 24* - 2013, 44 x 92 x 88 cm photo Seiji Toyonaga

point out the ephemerality of worldly possessions. Lee In-chin's overlapping of the containers is an expansion of their space and a re-interpretation of the functional aspects of the pieces.

Yang Yuan-tai takes inspiration from nature and mindful reflections. His humble pieces show an upbringing that gave him a strong connection to the land. Winnie Yang's vessels are not bound by traditions; they nevertheless incorporate traditional wood-firing techniques. Returning to Taiwan after studying in Japan, Liou Chen-chou says clay is how he shows his appreciation for his motherland's nature. Yao Ke-hung: "To question the links between humans and land; and the works are even more significant for their value for art appreciation".

CONCERNS OVER THE ALIENATION OF PEOPLE FROM THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The global village in the 21st century faces the undeniable effects of climate change, persistence of terrorism and dominance of digital media. Advanced technology propels humanity into high-speed pursuits of materialistic comforts and stimulations. We often dismiss the spiritual power that has borne within it our beliefs. And we also lose the ability to accept ourselves or others. Artists are also participating members of their communities, so they naturally have opinions and personal insights to offer on topics like the environment, history and cultures. Their concerns for the rest of the world help them to document the current situations. Jason Walker depicts a new awareness introduced by technology that redefines the links between humanity and nature. Ryan Mitchell uses damaged heads of Bodhisattvas to reflect on human damage to nature, cultures, and history in their evolution and violence. Maeng Wook-jae examines the line between humanity and their environment and the relationship between nature and civilizations. Miyamoto Ruriko and Katherine Sandnas gathered materials from sites of the Japanese attack on Pearl

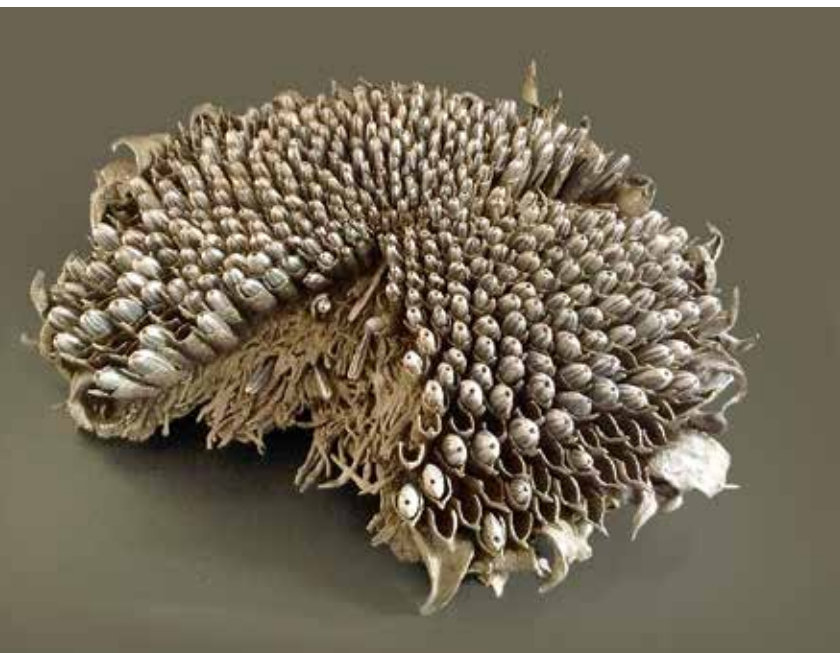
Ryan Mitchell - *Kai Fang* - 2017, 60 x 60 cm





Tip Toland - African Child with Albinism 1
2014, 76.2 x 71.1 x 50.8 cm - Traver Gallery

Sugiura Yasuyoshi - Decaying Sunflower Seed
2017, 52 x 45 x 15 cm



Harbor and the US bombings of Hiroshima and collaborated to create five clay books, which are ruminations on history. Matsumoto Hideo made castings of bottles that form a sanctuary, which is a homage to the water resources that irrigate the rice paddies of Asia. Kosmas Ballis expresses concerns over human impacts, also praises the birth of a new era. Tip Toland records human frailties and flaws with warmth, humour, empathy and acceptance. Vulnerable and marginalised people tend to be Toland's subjects.

AN ENERGETIC EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE BODY AND CLAY

Ceramic artists work with natural materials from the ground. Their bodies have immediate and primal dialogues with clay. One approach conspicuously reflects the vitality of the exchange between the material and the artist. The latter approach requires humble and quiet hours of sculpting, integrating the creative spirit and thoughts.

Nara Yoshitomo lived through the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and lost loved ones. He understands the impermanence of physical matters, as only the intangible survives all.

Hoshino Satoru's works are covered with tactile marks, like the first glow of the cosmos. Hsu Yung-hsu uses his senses, touch and pain to interact with ceramics and the world, and to make his works. Inazaki Eriko carefully arranged frozen landscape is an imaginative work that took months to finish.

Nathalie Doyen constructs organic forms as if these hidden forms were done with needles. It is a hypnotic exercise of imagination. Su Shu-mei makes hand building of steel bars, her processes are like meditative practices. Tsai Tsung-lung let the power of traditional wood-fired kiln rekindle his inner light during those late nights he spent tending to the kiln. Akiyama Yo exhibits landscapes with clay that resemble geological crusts and tectonic movements in cross-section. He reveals the majesty and fragility hidden in these ancient lands.

ACCLAIMS FOR LIFE-GIVING NATURE

This part of the exhibition is a group of floral-themed works, which are the celebratory bouquets we dedicate to Life. They symbolize the grace and mystery of nature and life. They also signify how life is ephemeral. Humans' journey on this planet is a continual process of replacements, transformations, extinctions and rebirths. Nature witnesses these ceaseless cycles of life.

Michel Gouéry made castings of objects from his collections and his friends' faces. He then put them together to construct a Tree of Life. Tajima Etsuko uses clay with glass, she creates incredible petals that reflect the bustling richness of life. Liao Jui-chang uses organic shapes as a metaphor for the relationships between nature, environment and the artist: Paula Murray makes leaf-shaped porcelain containers that record the inner strength of humans and the interactions between people. Hsu Mei-yueh's work transformed the essence of mankind and conveyed these wordless images lyrically. Sugiura Yasuyoshi has made tenfold enlargements of plants to remind people of the powerful symbiosis between mankind and nature.

Artists work with clay, a timeless material that has remained unchanged since early humans picked it up.



Yao Keh Hong - *Moving Direction of the Land Block in Legend* - 1993, 48 x 22 x 15 cm
Collection of New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum

What are the roles and goals of artists today? The sociocultural evolution of humans led to the emergence of cultures and societies. Whether it is tribal cohesion or international diplomacy, group dynamics influence all in-group members, and these interactions lead to improvements.

The evolution into homo sapiens led to another level of awareness and empathy. Humanity has always had a shared experience. And artists make work not just to express their personal feelings, but they are interpreting what touches the spirit of the collective experience. They are also reaching into the depths of the human spirit and quickening the pulses of life. Their works reflect themselves and society.

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* Todate Kazuko, "The First Handmade Object"
The Kyoto Shimbun (newspaper), May 26, 2016
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Photo: New Taipei City Yingge Ceramic Museum
<http://public.ceramics.ntpc.gov.tw/biennale/en/index.html>

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Paula Murray - *You Are Me* - 2016, 350 x 350 x 100 cm *photo David Barbour*

