



Crow's Japanese Ceramicists Indulge in Visual, Conceptual Acrobatics

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Many of the twenty-six works by twenty-five artists on display in *Soaring Voices: Recent Ceramics by Women from Japan* at the Crow Collection of Asian Art excel with dazzling sculptural acrobatics, mixing materials, textures, and color, and drawing inspiration from organic forms. They are virtuosic shapes, often engaged with conceptual blurring.

The exhibition's centerpiece is Etsuko Tashima's *Co Cornucopia 03-III*, 2003, a Sperm Whale white bloom that looks like sea foliage torn from the underwater sand and frozen in stone and glass. Chieko Katsumata's *French Pumpkin*, 2002 plays more directly with its biomorphic references, forming a bulbous, gourd shape that bulges out and folds back in on itself, drawing our



Chieko Katsumata, 'French Pumpkin,' 2002, stoneware. Photo © Taku Saiki

attention simultaneously to surface and volume. At the piece's heart, a vortex, and peering into this unseen space, the light-less interior seems as materially present as the piece's velvety texture.



Kiyoko Koyama, 'Shigaraki Large Cylinder with Faced Design,' 1973, stoneware. Photo © Kensei Sugimoto

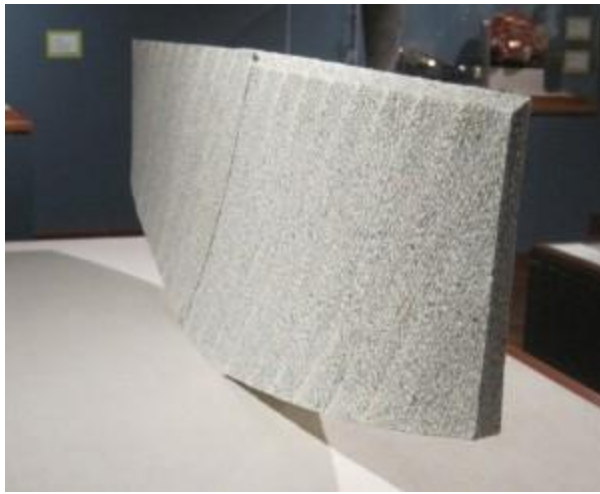
Even when these ceramicists consider more traditional forms – the functional objects that rooted their craft to the everyday for millennia – the relationship between the artistic and the functional is strained. Kiyoko Koyama's vase, *Shigaraki Large Cylinder with Faced Design*, 1973, is a wood-fired vessel fused to a brick of clay that was its base in the kiln, the finished piece similarly fusing sculptural and functional elements. A trio of bowls by Fuku Fukumoto (*Moon Shadow*, 2003) sit in each other, but lest you mistake these objects for the most exquisite salad containers you've ever laid eyes on, notice how the center of each bowl gives way to a perfect circular hole. The bowls' uselessness focuses

our attention back to the white and colored surfaces which delight in the interplay of colors and shadow, and the way the white interior surface catches the gallery light. Nanako Kaji's *Touching the Earth Series, Measuring the Distance*, 2006 isn't a pot at all, but rather the seeming remnants of a kiln accident, exploded shards of clay reconstructed into a kind of craggy, abstract landscape.

These conceptual commentaries on form and function are most sublimely realized on the Crow's mezzanine, where Kimiyo Mishima's installation uses clay and porcelain to create a kind of stage set filled with discarded street debris. There are posters, stacks of newspapers, crumpled bits of paper, cardboard boxes, wrapped bottles, books – all covered with silkscreen prints, often displaying red, bold Japanese type. Half the fun here is simply gawking at the work's illusory quality, how easily each object cloaks its substantive identity by taking on the guise of cheaper, discarded materials: paper, glass, and cardboard. Along with its reflections on the clutter of advertising and pop imagery, with this monumentalizing of the mundane in stone, Mishima manages to get at similar formal concerns exhibited by the artists downstairs, though with a playfulness and ingenuity that exceeds the other efforts.



Kimiyo Mishima, Installation shot (Photo by Jonathan Cross)



Eiko Kishi, 'Noh Form,' 2007, Stoneware inlaid with colored stones (Photo by Jonathan Cross)

Despite the bounty of jaw dropping skill and functional blurring, the most striking object in this exhibition avoids these art-asserting approaches to ceramics. Eiko Kishi's *Noh Form*, 2007 is a three dimensional, plane, a wide, wing-stretched shape, whose pebbly, slightly incandescent surface is interrupted by the delicate inlay of colored stones. Along the top of the object, Kishi has sculpted two rimmed lips, which lift ever so slightly off the rest of the

form, gliding toward their meeting point in the center. Here our minds are freed from the deciphering of intellectual games.

Instead we lose ourselves in this quiet, windswept thing – the subtle drama and textural narrative, the stunning beauty that seems hidden in plain view.



Figure Eiko Kishi, 'Noh Form,' 2007, Stoneware inlaid with colored stones (Photo by Jonathan Cross)

Main image: Etsuko Tashima, Cornucopia 03-III, 2003, stoneware and glass, Photo © Taku Saiki