

# Soaring at the MACC

## Making the Scene

October 25, 2012 - Rick Chatenever

The Maui Arts & Cultural Center just built a bridge over the Pacific Ocean. It's made of clay.

Soaring Voices, Recent Ceramics by Women from Japan opened last weekend and continues through Jan. 6 in the MACC's Schaefer International Gallery.

Years in the making, featuring 25 artistic masters spanning three generations, the show is a game changer in a bunch of different games.

Gallery visitors are greeted by two pieces by that seem to be growing out of the lavender entry portal. They are botanical wonders. Having recently spent most of a day digging out a tree stump, I was awed by how organic these intertwined roots, shoots, leaves and tendrils appear. They almost make you forget they're made out of clay.

The pieces capture a primal life force. Noticing the structural similarities between parts of plants and organs of animals, spiritual thoughts may arise. It's hard to escape a sense of a divine architect, or engineer, behind it all.

It's also hard to remember that all the works in this remarkable exhibit are in the same medium: clay.

Some artists turn it into paper, silkscreening type - from the Bible to comic strips - onto razor-thin surfaces.

Others emboss its surfaces with precious metals, or tiny rice-like particles, or minutely embossed designs. Some meld it with glass, or stretch their humble medium in directions that earn the exhibit's title: Soaring.

Clay is the most unforgiving of media, artist George Allan explained to me at the exhibit opening. The works on view not only stretch our perceptions of concepts we usually take for granted - like gravity, for instance - but also reflect the huge risks taken by the artists. Not only in their originality, but then in the glazing and firing processes, when anything might happen.

The exhibit, which concludes its U.S. tour with Maui before going home, stands not only as an artistic milestone, but a cultural breakthrough as well. The mere acknowledgment of its contributors as artists in their own right breaks a mold going back centuries, in which women were anonymous and thankless helpers, invisible in an artistic realm ruled by men, in a society ruled by men.

Many of the artists, along with curator Maya Nishi, flew in from Japan for the Maui opening. They were beaming and seeming adrenalized at the opening reception - not just by the response to their creative accomplishments, but by the freedom and nurturing atmosphere of Maui that's so taken for granted here, we don't even notice it.

Not to be mistaken for pottery, these works don't try or pretend to be functional. Their scale is breathtaking. Considering the challenges of firing, not to mention the risks of shipping, just getting to see them feels like a blessing.

They aren't pottery, they are statements, successful experiments by daring innovators elevating humble clay to high art.

The exhibit has previously shown in museum spaces across the U.S., and the MACC engagement kicks Schaefer Gallery into that exalted company. Gallery director Neida Bangerter and her staff rise to that challenge with the same spirit as the show's artists. They bring a new sense of scale and proportion to Schaefer.

The pieces feel like they're filling the space with their energy. There's room to interact with each work, but they also interact with each other - and with gallery visitors - in layered visions, like stage sets or movie scenes.

Besides the fact that admission is free, Schaefer Gallery has long been an incredibly valuable resource for Maui. Soaring Voices ratchets it up a notch - you don't just observe this world-class art, you experience it in a place deep inside yourself as it takes your own spirit soaring.

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