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## Katzen Arts Center shows from Japan, Norway reflect different artistic visions

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In an age of globalism, is there any such thing as national art?

Judging by a pair of exhibitions at the American University Museum, the answer is a resounding yes. The foreign imports -- one coming from Japan, the other from Norway -- could not be less alike. "Soaring Voices: Recent Ceramics by Women of Japan" and "Norse Soul: The Legacy of Edvard Munch, Social Democracy, Old Myths, Anarchy and Death Longings" are as different from each other as sushi is from lutefisk.

Let's start with the lutefisk.

"Norse Soul" is part of "Norway Comes to Washington," an ongoing, area-wide celebration of Norwegian culture that includes the upcoming National Gallery of Art show "Edvard Munch: Master Prints" (opening July 31 in the East Building). Featuring just four artists, it is idiosyncratic and far from representative of Norwegian culture. Two of the artists, Marianne Heske and Marthe Thorshaug, contribute one video each. The late painter Arne Ekeland (1908-94) is represented by work from the mid-1930s through the early 1990s. Covering a variety of styles and themes, he's hard to pin down. Of the four, Bjarne Melgaard makes the strongest impression. He also leaves the strangest aftertaste.

Incorporating violent, often sadomasochistic imagery, references to hard drugs and an obsession with the phallus that makes gay porn look coy, Melgaard's paintings, drawings and mixed-media works betray the artist's fascination with the culture and aesthetic of death metal. (Known in Norway as "black metal," the musical subculture is infamous there for its alleged role in a series of church arsons in the 1990s.) If Munch were alive today and the lead singer of a headbanger band -- call them Eddie and the Screamers -- its album covers might look something like Melgaard's pictures.

During a recent visit to the exhibit, a father was seen shooing his young son away from the artist's "Chemical Diary," a wall-size installation of drawings, most of which have inscriptions that can't be printed in a family newspaper. Yes, they're in English. One of the drawings has what looks like a real knife sticking out of it.

Presumably, there's a critique of something -- bourgeois convention? -- somewhere in there. But Melgaard offers no solutions, only an incoherent rant.

Compared with that, "Soaring Voices" is a choir of angels.

Featuring 87 works by 25 women, the show offers an overview of work by contemporary Japanese clay artists. With the exception of Takako Araki and Kimiyo Mishima, whose work mimics the look of paper -- Bibles, crumpled newspapers, a stack of manga comic books, all in clay -- most of the artists dwell in the realm of the biomorphic. Their works celebrate the curve of the human body, sea forms, well-worn rocks and exotic plants.

It's subtle, self-effacing stuff. Pierced with holes, Yasuko Sakurai's baskets, for instance, call more attention to the play of shadows they cast than to the clay itself. The floral inspired work of Kyoko Tokumaru, on the other hand, is otherworldly, a bouquet of bizarre shoots and tendrils.

Is one show better than the other? That's really a matter of taste. As art around the world begins to lose its accent, becoming more homogenous, what's best about the pairing is almost not the work itself but the varied intensity -- from a whisper to a scream -- of its voices.

*SOARING VOICES: RECENT CERAMICS BY WOMEN OF JAPAN* Through Aug. 15.  
*NORSE SOUL: THE LEGACY OF EDVARD MUNCH, SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, OLD MYTHS, ANARCHY AND DEATH LONGINGS.* Through Oct. 17. Both at the [American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center](http://www.american.edu/museum), 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW. 202-885-1300. <http://www.american.edu/museum>. Hours: Open Tuesday-Sunday 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission: Free.