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CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE CERAMICS

Floating



Earth

Contemporary Japanese ceramicists are transforming an ancient art while staying plugged into tradition.

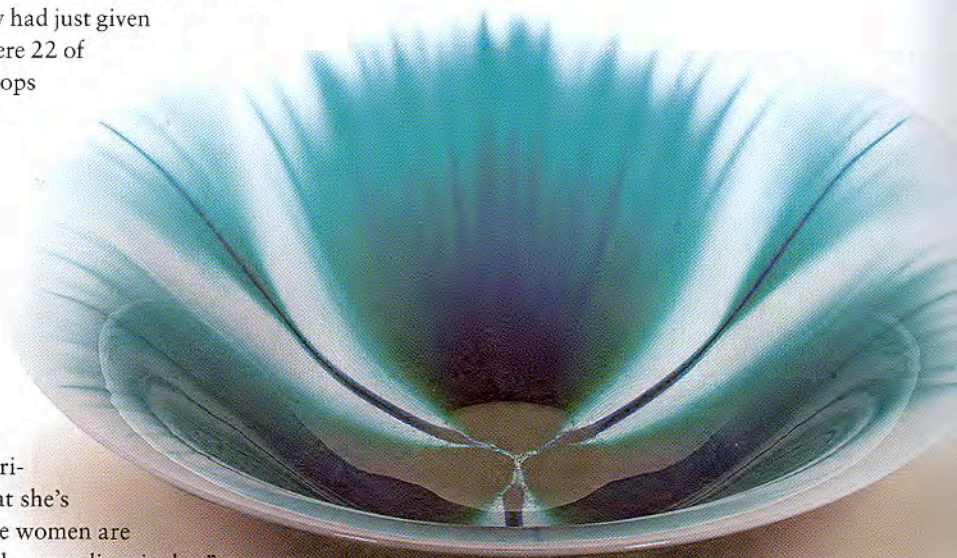
It wafts like smoke, or steam rising from the mouth

of a rider-in-waiting on a brutally cold winter morning. It drifts. It undulates. It swirls. It floats like a ballerina in mid-pirouette. It seems light and airy enough to melt away in seconds, and yet it weighs 30 pounds, very much a product of the earth, and it is the product of months of 17-hour days bent over a table, shaping coils of clay by hand and supporting the wet tendrils with armatures.

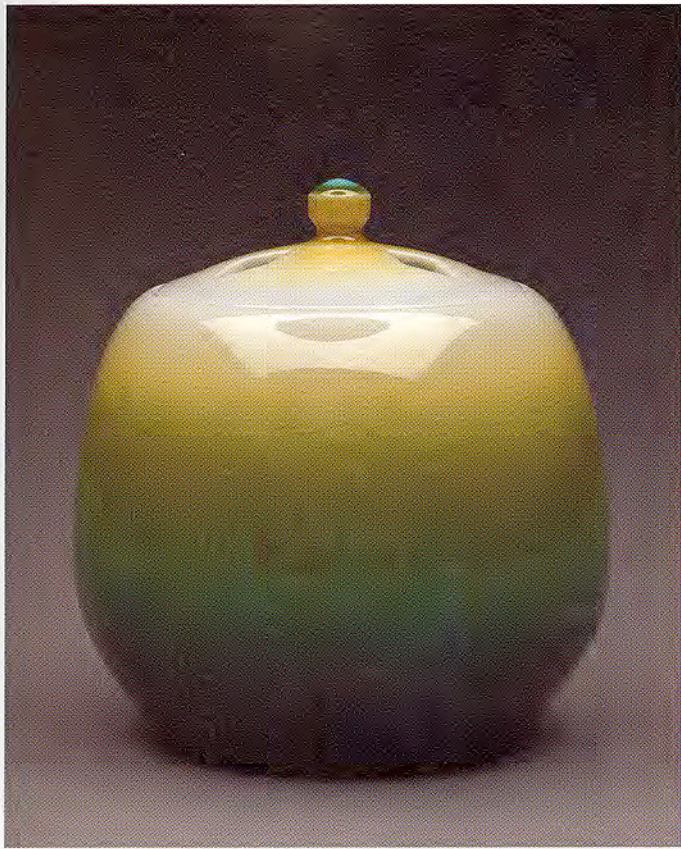
"It" is *Seraphim*, a 2015 work of stoneware with white slip-glaze by the 35-year-old Japanese artist Fujikasa Satoko. Manhattan dealer Joan Mirviss' first encounter with Satoko's art couldn't have been more dramatic. She was leading clients on a tour of the Hagi Urugami Museum in Hagi, Japan, in 2011 when a curator invited them to view a collection of pieces by a rising artist to whom they had just given a significant prize. He led the group into a large gallery where 22 of Satoko's ceramic sculptures were displayed against backdrops of black. "Collectively, truly, there was an exclamation in unison—'Oh My God,'" Mirviss recalls. "Then, 'Is it for sale? How do we get this?'"

Mirviss became Sakoto's exclusive agent in the United States and gave her her first solo stateside show last fall. All the pieces in it, *Seraphim* included, found buyers before they were loaded on a ship for the trip across the Pacific—a first for Mirviss, who has handled contemporary Japanese ceramics since 1984. From April 27 through May 27, she will devote a solo show to Fujino Sachiko, another Japanese artist who builds her alluring flower-like monochromatic works laboriously, by hand. "Neither woman is under any illusion that she's having a dialogue with the clay," Mirviss says. "Both these women are sculptors. Not potters, not ceramicists. They are sculptors whose medium is clay."

By Sheila Gibson Stoodley



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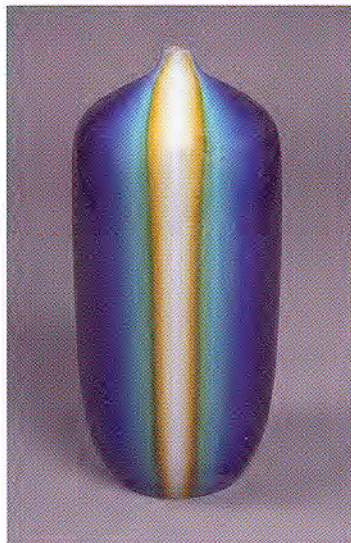


Previous spread, from left: Fujikasa Satoko, *Seraphim*, 2015, stoneware with white slip-glaze, 25 x 23 x 17 inches; Tokuda Yasokichi IV, *Sulcho*, 2013, porcelain with vivid colored glaze, 6 x 21 inches. This page, clockwise from left: Tokuda Yasokichi IV, *Saiyu Censer*, circa 2002, porcelain with polychrome glaze; Kaneta Masanao, *Water Jar for Tea Ceremony (Mizusashi)*, 2006, wood-fired glazed stoneware, Hagi ware, 7 x 8 x 8 inches; Tokuda Yasokichi III, *Jar Galaxy*, 2005, porcelain with vivid colored glaze, 12 x 5 inches.

Fujikasa and Fujino represent the cutting edge of a tradition with incredibly long and ancient roots; pottery shards discovered near Tokyo and carbon-dated in 1999 were revealed to be 16,000 years old. But old does not equal stale. Contemporary Japanese ceramic artists find inspiration in reinterpreting classic forms, such as the vessels of their culture's venerated tea ceremony, and they are finding inspiration in simply exploring what clay, and what the alchemy of the kiln, can do. The parade of dazzling delights resulting from their efforts proves that there's never been a better time to collect.

The Indianapolis Museum of Art is embracing the bounty with *Tradition Reborn: Contemporary Japanese Ceramics*, which opened in July of last year and will continue through July 17. The 24 works in the exhibition distill the talents of multiple generations of Japanese masters; at least one piece is credited to an 11th-generation potter. It also includes the works of seven artists who have earned the title of Living National Treasure from the Japanese government. Among them is Maeta Akihiro, who begins on the potter's wheel but relies on

his uniquely well-honed senses to hand-finish the shapes of his sleek, faceted white porcelain vessels. "How minimal can you get?" says John Teramoto, the IMA's curator of Asian art. "I'd call them objects of beauty." Elias Martin of Gallery FW in Chicago, which has handled Maeta's work for four years, explains the challenges that he faces with each piece: "His work is incredibly difficult [to create] as he strives to achieve a perfect form every single time. Simply creating a well-balanced form on the potter's wheel is a feat for a master, but Maeta goes one step further, adding graceful lines to his vessels that challenge tradition and the perception of the viewer."



Everything chosen for *Tradition Reborn* was made for a purpose. "The history of Japanese ceramic tradition is one of functional works," says Teramoto. "The idea of ceramics as sculpture, as abstract, as non-functional, dates from the early 20th century." That said, the definition of "functional" is fairly loose in certain cases. Teramoto says that *Wind*, a 2001 piece by the late Miyashita Zenji, is functional "only in the most tortured sense." Small holes at the

WALTERS ART MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPHY BY YANO MASAYA. IMAGE COURTESY OF JOAN B. MIRVIS LTD. ONISHI GALLERY, INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART. PURCHASED WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY TIM AND JODY GARRIGUS, 2001.137A-A-B. © TOKUDA YASOKICHI IV, INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART. GIFT OF JOHN AND CYNDE BARNES, 2008.349A-B. © KANETA MASANAO, ONISHI GALLERY

top of each side enable it to serve as a vase. Whether you thread a pair of cherry blossoms into those holes or you just stand back and glory in the gradations of Miyashita's thin layers of colored clay—which call to mind misty predawn landscapes—depends on where you were born and raised. Beatrice Chang, art director of the Dai Ichi Arts gallery in Manhattan, offers a variety of vases and tea vessels, but she suspects that her Western clients place them on shelves and pedestals rather than filling them with flowers or tea. “I think sculpture is a Western notion, not a Japanese notion. That also affects sales. The most popular pieces in Japan are functional wares,” she says, adding, “They [The Japanese] don't think it is not art because it is to be used.”



From left: Kawase Shinobu, *Seiji mizusashi*, celadon water jar, 2015, celadon-glazed porcelainous stoneware with lacquer cover, 7 x 8 inches; Suzuki Goro, *Oribe Vase*, 2002, 26 x 16 inches.

Dai Ichi's Asia Week exhibition, which runs from March 10–19, will feature a cheeky and charming porcelain tea bowl by Ueba Kasumi, a 37-year-old artist based in Kyoto. The tea bowl is one of the most storied and venerated forms in Japanese ceramics; it's not something you attempt until you're sure of your skills as a ceramic artist. Ueba's *Tea Bowl, Skull & Poppy* is a fresh take. “It's extremely interesting. Her tea bowl structure is so different. It's feminine and it's today. The traditional Japanese arts are all blended in this tea bowl,” Chang says, not-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD GOODBODY, IMAGE COURTESY OF JOAN B. MIRVISS LTD.; DAI ICHI ARTS

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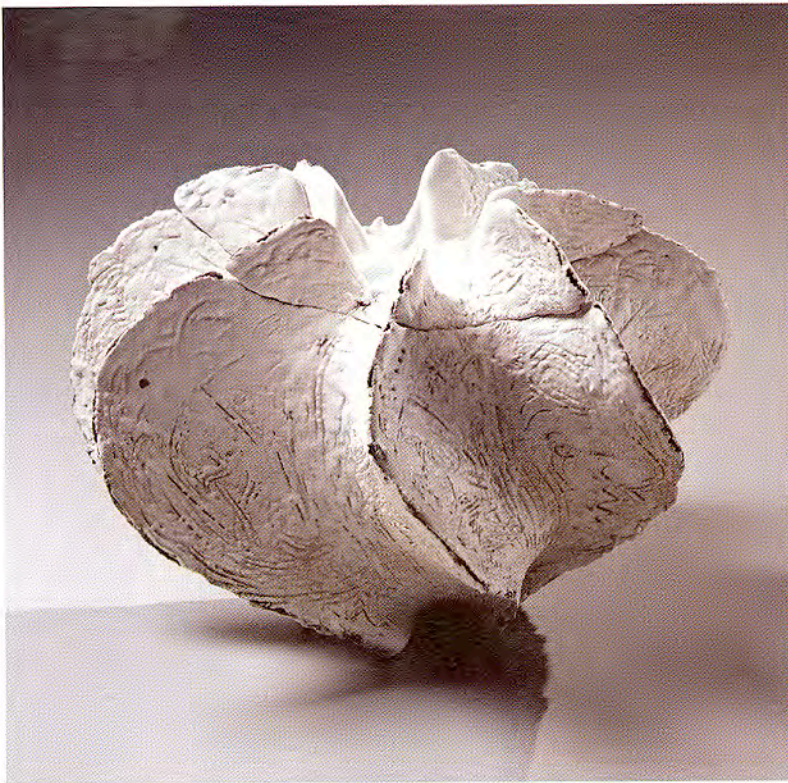
ing that the bow on its rim is a reference to Harajuku, a vibrant, female-driven subculture of Japanese street fashion, and its golden interior recalls the portable gold-decorated tea room commissioned by the 16th century ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Also on display at the Dai Ichi Arts Asia Week exhibition will be a spectacular vase by Suzuki Goro, who works in the puckish Oribe tradition of Japanese ceramics. He employs the characteristic Oribe green glaze to color a vase that seems as alive as any of the evergreens flourishing near his countryside studio. "Each spike is twisted, rolled, and attached on a cylin-

der body," Chang says. "The vase is full of energy. It's like a big tree growing."

Mirviss' Asia Week production, which opens on March 10 and continues through April 15, also spotlights a revered class of Japanese functional objects. "A Palette for Genius: Japanese Water Jars for the Tea Ceremony" features 48 pieces by more than 30 artists who focused their attentions on the *mizusashi* (water jar). Though not as celebrated as the tea bowl—only one *mizusashi* is needed for a tea ceremony, and the tea-drinkers do not typically hold it in their hands at any point—the ritual can't go ahead without



Tashima Etsuko, *Cornucopia 09-Y8*, 2009, stoneware, pigments, *pâte de verre* glass, 18 x 20 x 18 inches.



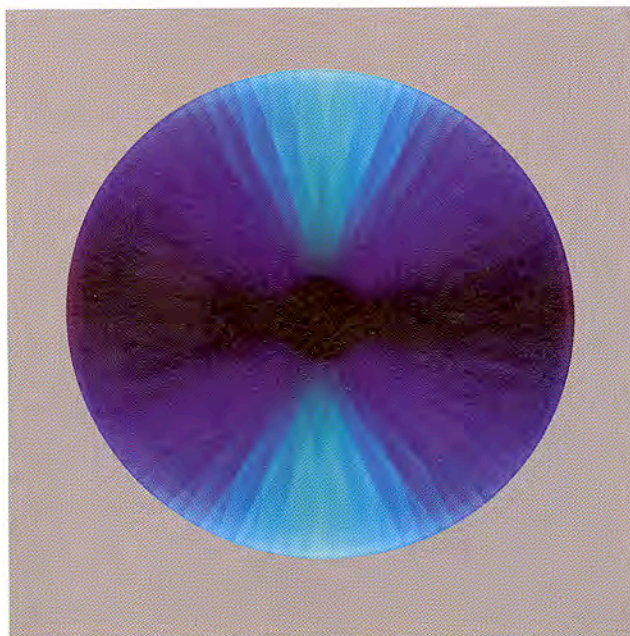
Clockwise from top left: Koike Shōko, *Mizusashi, shiro no katachi*; water jar "White Form," 2015, glazed stoneware with glass glaze, 8 x 11 x 10 inches; Miyashita Zenji, *Yoru to asa no aida: Between Night and Morning*, 2012, stoneware decorated with carved bandings of colored clay, 22 x 13 x 7 inches; Tokuda Yasokichi III, *Plate Senritsu (Melody)*, 1993, porcelain with vivid colored glaze (*yōsai*), 4 x 21 inches (diameter).

one. The range of interpretations on view includes Kawase Shinobu's 2015 celadon version with a black lacquer lid. The use of celadon glaze, which arose in the Sung Dynasty, and the choice of a black lacquer lid are perfectly historical, but the shape of the *mizusashi* is not. "If you took away its mouth, it would be very classical," says Mirviss. "He tweaks tradition by pulling the lip open like a calla lily. It's beautiful, but it references something classical." Koike Shōko made her *mizusashi* in the same year as Kawase, but achieves something far more radical than he does. Her innovative shape reimagines the water jar as a rugged white shell, which is at once a bracingly new idea and clearly in tune with the regard for nature that permeates Japanese culture.

In looking at the most innovative contemporary Japanese ceramics, one fact keeps jumping to the fore: a gratifyingly large number of the finest pieces are the handiwork of women. The shift has been a long time com-

ing, and it did not come easily or smoothly for its postwar pioneers. Tsuji Kyo, who died in 2008 and whose antiquity-inspired creations appear at Dai Ichi Arts, ultimately decided to lop the '-ko' off her given name of Kyoko because the suffix announced her gender to critics and judges. Matsuda Yuriko, born in 1943,

born in 1943, faced even more galling prejudice in her mid-20th century youth. She wasn't allowed near a wood-fired kiln, lest her womanhood somehow violate its Shinto sanctity. Undaunted, she learned to build her artworks by hand and skirted the taboo by firing them in gas-fueled kilns. From a studio near the quintessential Japanese landmark, Mount Fuji, she captured the mountain's portrait in a porcelain cone and painted to depict it in fall on one side and spring on the other, with blossom-laden trees jutting off of its sides. Even now, the patriarchy's barbs poke into the lives of female Japanese ceramic artists; if they are married, they can't yet legally open a bank account in





their maiden names, even if it's the name that they use professionally. (Mirviss says that Japanese women continue to fight this antiquated state of affairs.)

Mirviss represented “very, very few” women when she began dealing in ceramics more than 30 years ago. Things finally changed in the mid- to late 1990s, when artists such as Tsuji and Matsuda came into their own. Today, Japanese women are legion in the ceramics programs of the country’s art schools, and the gender barrier has turned into a gender advantage. “They’re not the sons

of sons. They can do what they want. They don’t have to make tea bowls like Grandpa,” Mirviss says. “Most of the creative work coming out of Japan is largely by women. They are doing things that their male counterparts are not doing.”

Maybe the strongest symbol of how powerfully the world of Japanese contemporary ceramics has been transformed is the tale of the two Tokuda Yasokichis—Tokuda Yasokichi III, the father and Living National Treasure honoree, and Tokuda Yasokichi IV, his daughter and the fourth generation of the family to carry that name. Tokuda Yasokichi III was and still is lauded for his contributions to colored glazes for ceramics, expanding the traditional five-hue palette of his father and grandfather to a spectrum of 250. His work, characterized by applying glazes to plates, jars, and other familiar forms of his design, is available through the San Diego, Calif., gallery Oriental Treas-



From top: Fujino Sachiko, *Henjō 14-5* (*Transformation 14-5*), 2014, stoneware with grayish-white matte glaze 13 x 16 x 18 inches; Ueba Kasumi, *Tea bowl - skull & poppy*, 3.3 x 5.7 x 6 inches.

sure Box, among others. Two pieces each by the father and the daughter appear as a foursome in *Tradition Reborn*.

Nana Onishi, founder and owner of the namesake Manhattan gallery, carries the work of both Tokuda Yasokichis. “She grew up in the studio, but he kept the family secrets from her. He didn’t want to pass them to her when he was active,” Onishi says. “She told me she asked him so many times. She wanted to make Tokuda Yasokichi ceramics. He would say, ‘You’re not ready.’ They were always fighting,” she says. “Just before he passed away—he was very sick—he called her to the hospital and told her where he kept those secrets in the house.”

The daughter’s first name had been Junko, but after her father’s death in 2009, she started proceedings to change her name to Tokuda Yasokichi IV, formally claiming the artistic mantle of her forefathers. “She uses the same techniques, but her work is more feminine. She uses more curv-



Clockwise from left: Matsuda Yuriko, Mt. Fuji san - Sakura, 2012, 17 x 15.3 x 6.6 inches; Suzuki Sansei, celadon globular jar, circa 1990-95, stoneware with crackled powder blue celadon glaze, 14 x 16 inches; Takeuchi Kozo, *Modern Remains, Incus*, 2014, 20 x 11 x 7.3 inches.

ing lines,” Onishi says. The dealer, who is roughly the same age as Tokuda, has convinced her to try new ways of making art. “I want to treat her work as contemporary art. I asked her for a wall piece, and she did it,” she says. “It’s something her father never did.”

The artwork, a 26-inch-diameter plate dubbed *Blood Moon*, departed from her father’s style in another obvious way by meditating on a single color, a radiant red. Onishi brought *Blood Moon* to the 2015 Scope Miami Beach fair, where it stirred interest. “She told me in the beginning that she wasn’t sure,” Onishi says. “She felt more comfortable putting more than three different colors [on it]. I said no, simple is better. Now she’s happy.”

