

Q&A: Joan Mirviss

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Art dealer Joan Mirviss at the museum island of Naoshima in 2013. The pumpkin sculpture is by contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama (b 1929). A traveling exhibition of the artist's work remains at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, through May 14.

Few people inhabit their professional lives as beautifully as Joan Mirviss. The New York City dealer personifies the grace, refinement and subtle intelligence often associated with the Japanese art for which she is known. Over the past two decades, Mirviss, whose first specialty was antique paintings and woodblock prints, has broadened her inventory to include modern and contemporary Japanese clay, a medium she has done much to popularize worldwide with her focused exhibitions and catalogs by ceramic masters past and present. On the occasion of her 40th anniversary in the trade, Mirviss honors the artists and experts who have shaped her career.

What inspired your 40th anniversary show? What does it include?

Years ago, Khalil Rizk of the Chinese Porcelain Company published a book of masterworks he had sold through the years and held a celebratory event at the Frick

Collection. I wanted to do something similar, but all for sale. My goal was to have 40 works of art, half by living artists for whom I've had the honor of doing solo exhibitions. I persuaded each to create something fabulous or, if not, unearth a truly great piece not previously released for purchase. The remaining 20 objects are evenly divided between deceased masters of clay and antique Japanese art, half woodblock prints, half paintings. I ended up with 44 works in the show. Most are already spoken for, some by institutions.

Your favorite pieces?

That's really tricky. The smallest object is a sançai vase of about 1922 by Kawai Kanjiro, a very famous artist. It has a grasshopper on one side and a melon, a recurrent theme in Chinese art, on the other. It is perfection in terms of its balance of form, elegance of glazing and the beauty of the carving. A circa 1969 long-necked vase by Okabe Mineo, a great genius who stopped potting too young, is the most costly piece. He has only recently come to light in Japan. The cognoscenti are desperate to own his work. His masterful craquelure, the scale of which changes, reflects Song dynasty Chinese prototypes. I've written a number of books on surimono, privately commissioned deluxe prints. One of the nicest I've had is in this show. It has three crabs crawling around on a beach with beautiful, silvery waves. It is printed with embossing and silver-metal and oxidized-bronze pigments.

The history of Japanese art collecting is marked by cultural exchange. What piece exemplifies this synergy?

"Wind Direction," a 2016 unglazed stoneware sculpture by Fujikasa Satoko. In 2011, I took a group of clients on a tour of Japan that included the museum in Hagi, a ceramics center. With apologies for the youthfulness of the artist, the curator took us into a huge gallery, completely black with pinpoint lights on about 20 works by Fujikasa. My ten very acquisitive American guests let out a collective gasp and we ended up buying about half the show. In 2012, I sold "Flow" by Fujikasa to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it has never been off view. Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz, magnanimous collectors who were on that trip, donated a half-dozen Fujikasa pieces to American museums, which really raised her profile. We have more requests for her work than we can accommodate.

You observe that Japan is "all about relationships." What introductions have been pivotal for you?

There are so many. Miyeko Murase, the perfect sensei for me as a graduate student at Columbia University, was — and is — an objects person. Her students had the amazing opportunity to work on her publications on Mary Burke's unsurpassed collection. Ronin Gallery hired me when I was still a student to set up exhibits of ukiyo-e prints at antiques shows managed by Russell Carrell, who put me in the Winter Antiques Show 36 years ago. That was crucial. In Paris, where my husband and I lived between 1978 and 1981, I was blessed to meet Kusaka Chieko, a Chinese art expert who introduced me to Kikuchi Tomo and Koike Kimiyo. They in turn introduced me to many of the artists my gallery now represents, starting in 1984 with Kawase Shinobu. Kuroda Koji, a third-generation dealer with a fine eye, became a valued colleague. We collaborated at my gallery on several influential exhibitions of modern Japanese ceramics.

Why do contemporary Japanese ceramics resonate with American collectors?

When it comes to contemporary clay in the international playing field of art, Japan dominates. There is so much depth, range, tradition, skill and creativity. For a museum, it provides the opportunity to collect something that is the best in the world, something influencing artists in every country on the globe. It is affordable, available and impermeable to light. It can be exhibited in ways other media cannot.

Does brilliance or luck explain your anticipation of the broader market shift toward contemporary art?

It was really luck. I always loved contemporary ceramics, but as an antiques show dealer I had no vehicle for selling them. Things began changing in 1984 with the Smithsonian exhibition "Japanese Ceramics Today." I owe a great deal to the promoters Anna and Brian Haughton. Their International Asian Art Fair, launched in 1996, had no dateline. I always did a divided booth, half with antiques, half with contemporary ceramics. That's when Japanese clay really took off for me.

What's in your future?

Finding more wonderful work and bringing as yet undiscovered artists to America. One of the most gratifying parts of what I do now is help young artists advance their careers and provide exposure to established ceramists who are not yet well known in the West. We've just signed another multiyear lease on our gallery and have ceramics shows booked through the middle of 2019.

"Timeless Elegance in Japanese Art: Celebrating 40 Years," continues through April 14. Joan B. Mirviss Ltd is at 39 East 78th Street in New York City. For more information, 212-799-4021 or www.mirviss.com.



"Wind Direction" by Fujikasa Satoko (b 1980), 2016, unglazed stoneware, height 23½ inches.