

ALL THAT GLITTERS: JAPANESE CERAMICS IN THE GOLDEN AGE

By Jeffrey Hantover

Cultural curmudgeons may decry the decline of civilization, but walk into Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) exhibition, "Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century," and even the most dyspeptic critic is bound to be humbled before this pinnacle of Japanese ceramic artistry.

The stars have aligned: artists in their 50s and 60s are reaching full creative maturity, younger artists are not resting on their commercial laurels, and museums globally are entering the field and expanding their holdings.

The MFA show primarily showcases the personal taste of Halsey and Alice North, New York collectors and passionate proselytizers who have been acquiring Japanese ceramics for two decades. There are only 60 pieces by 37 artists in the show—few functional wares, no *mingei* folk art and none of the large sculptural works increasingly commissioned by the Japanese government and corporations for public spaces—yet the exhibition is striking in its expressive range. As Joan Mirviss, one of the preeminent international dealers in the field who helped the Norths build their collection of over 1000 pieces, comments, "You don't need an art history degree to appreciate contemporary Japanese ceramics." With its tactile magnetism, the work, in Mirviss's words "begs to be touched" but never begs to be liked. When Joe Earle, chair of the Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa department at the MFA, first met the Norths in 2000, he was surprised to find that the MFA "had almost next to nothing" in contemporary Japanese ceramics. When Mirviss began dealing in Japanese ceramics in 1983, only six American museums actively collected the work; now there are over 40.

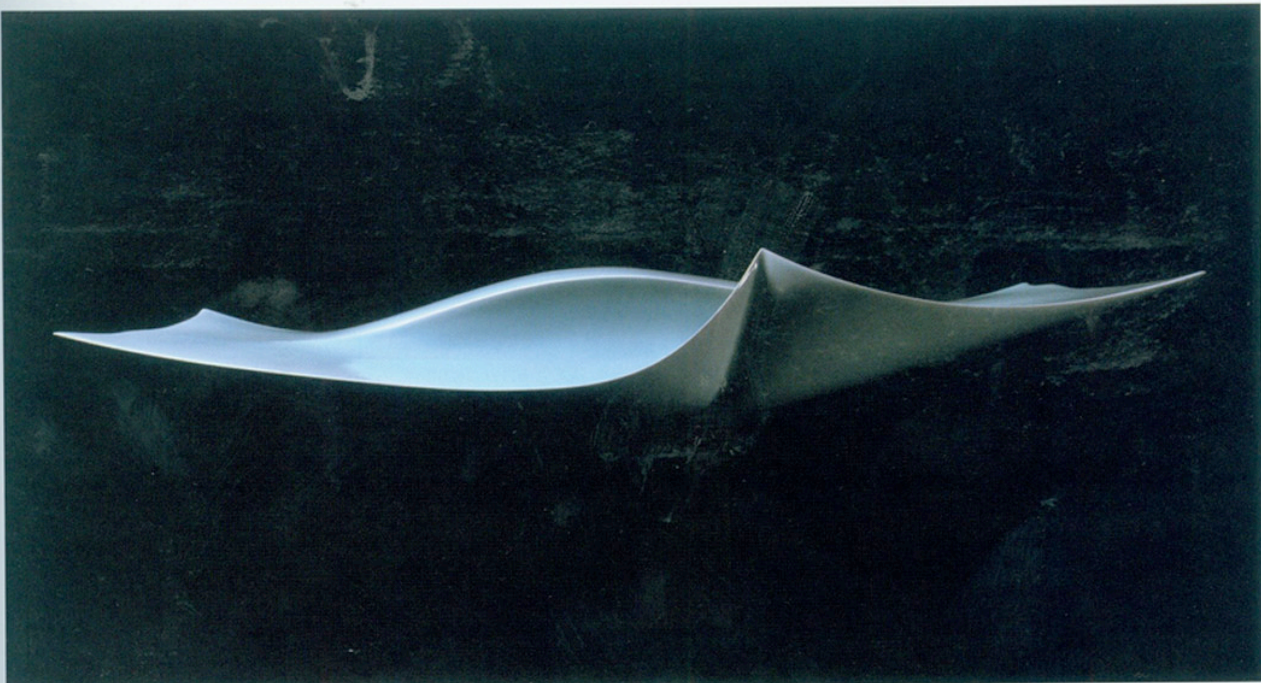
To understand why Japanese ceramics are so good now, it is essential to listen to the sophisticated dialogue that contemporary

Japanese ceramicists carry on with tradition. Formed in 1948 by three young Kyoto potters—Yagi Kazuo, Yamada Hikaru and Suzuki Osamu (all represented in the show)—the *Sōdeisha* group sought over the next four decades to liberate Japanese ceramics from 400 years of tradition. Louise Curt, curator of ceramics at the Freer and Sackler Galleries at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., has charted "the relentless intellectual and technical process" by which *Sōdeisha* breached the boundaries of convention in material, form, decoration and function to become "the center point for the development of abstract, sculptural ceramics within Japan."

Expression, not function, was paramount for *Sōdeisha* and its followers. Their artistic liberation movement turned away from blind dependence on the wheel and the "symmetrical sensitivity" it dictated. Japanese art potters closed the "mouth of the vessel" making works with multiple openings or no openings at all. Despite their appearance, their bowls and vases are intended to hold space rather than tea or flowers. Takiguchi Kazuo's piece at the MFA appears to be exhaling the air captured inside, and Yagi Akira's nesting boxes and bowls are virtuoso objects of admiration. Contemporary Japanese ceramic artists push the boundaries of what clay can do but are not deaf to the Japanese past. Yoshikawa Masamichi's works play on Chinese Han-dynasty houses. Fukami Saeharu's relations pay homage to the Japanese sword, Kitamura Junko's intricate designs echo traditional Kyoto textile and lacquer



■ Satojima Takayuki — *Chōka: The Echo of the Waves* (2010) Stoneware, 5.5" x 11" x 12.5". Photo by Richard P. Goodbody. Courtesy Joan B. Mirviss, Ltd.



decoration and Kohyama Yasuhisa's *Wind* (2004) emulates the look of medieval natural ash stoneware while suggesting the sweeping wings of the ancient Greek *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. Contemporary Japanese ceramics are never deliberately ugly: even Mishima Kimiyo's discarded newspaper and battered cardboard box are done with consummate skill. The heirs of *Sōdeisha* retain a respect for discipline and fine craftsmanship even as they jettison traditional forms and processes. For Halsey North, contemporary artists have reached the summit of creative expression because they have "the technical basis from which to fly and soar."

While *mingei* potters hew to traditional techniques, contemporary artists are constantly experimenting. Over the past 20 years Fukami has adapted an industrial technique of slip casting that uses a compressor to inject liquid clay into moulds. Through multiple firings, glazing with a spray gun and repeated smoothing with sandpaper, cloths and brushes, he has tried to erase all traces of the potter's hand from his razor-sharp celadon forms.

In works totally opposite in appearance to Fukami's, Akiyama Yō also hides his hand behind a virtuoso veil of technical skill. A student of Yagi Kazuo, he blowtorches flat rings of clay, turns them inside out, treats their cracked and scoured surfaces with vinegar and iron filings and fires them in a gas kiln: his pieces appear to be the product of cataclysmic nature—the ruins of some ancient or alien civilization.

Despite rebellious manifestos and the primacy of the abstract, contemporary Japanese ceramic masters display an intriguing reverence for the forms and forces of nature. However fascinating these artistic influences, in the end you return to the work. From humble clay comes work that elicits the awe and "ahs" of great art.

Contemporary Clay runs at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from October 7, 2005 through July 9, 2006.

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Clockwise from Top ■ Fukami Sueharu — *Sora ni* (1997) Porcelain with blue-white (*seihakuji*) glaze, 16" (h) x 51" (l). Photo by Takashi Hatakeyama. Courtesy Joan B. Mirviss, Ltd.
 ■ Akiyama Yō — *Metavoid 4* (2004) Thrown, gas-burned, cut, folded and slip-assembled clay, 22" x 28" x 28 3/8". Courtesy the artist and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. ■ Katsumata Chieko — *Coral Sculpture* (2005) Stoneware, 8 11/16" x 11" x 9". Collection of Halsey and Alice North, New York, NY. Photo by Richard P. Goodbody. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.