

## ZOOM Gallery Talk

### *SHIGARAKI: Contemporary Artists on an Ancient Tradition*

Event date: February 23, 2023

Organized and hosted by Joan B Mirviss LTD, New York

#### Panelists

Peter Callas, artist

Hitomi and Takuro Shibata, artists

Ōtani Shirō, artist

Natsu Oyobe, Curator of Asian Art, University of Michigan Museum of Art, MI  
with Louise Cort, Curator Emerita of Ceramics, Freer | Sackler, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, DC

Moderated by Joan Mirviss

*Due to a lack of time, the panelists were unable to answer questions submitted through Q&A during the live event. They answered those questions afterward and we present them here below:*

Q: Bertold Brecht is quoted as saying, “Tradition is tending the fire, not worshipping the ashes.” I wonder if the panelists could speak to the evolution and adaptations they see that have kept the fire alive from this ancient tradition.

I wonder what Louise sees as America’s role in tending this fire?

*Simon Levin, artist, Minnesota*

*From Louise Cort:*

A: Hi Simon. I’m glad you listened in and love that Brecht quote. From the perspective of Shigaraki, the fire was kept alive over centuries as the community of potters was able to continue to serve new requirements for ceramics. In the process of doing so, they gradually moved from single-chamber kilns to larger and larger multichamber climbing kilns, which reach their maximum size in the early 20th century when *hibachi* used for heating became the chief products. Sadly, those magnificent kilns did not serve modern needs – they were just too big. Factory shifted over to gas-fired kilns while workshops such as Rakusai built smaller climbing kilns (as Peter Callas showed) for their personal use and no longer rented space in the big climbing kilns. Kilns changed further in the 1970s when individual potters began building *anagama* — not just for more manageable size but also for the perceived

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superiority of firing effects. Ōtani-san was among them, and Furutani Michio must have been invaluable in supplying technical insight to the new kiln builders.

Some potters from outside Japan managed to find niches to study in Shigaraki in the 1960s and 1970s, but the creation of the Shigaraki Ceramic Park in the 1990s opened up new space for foreign potters as well as potters from elsewhere in Japan to get in close contact with Shigaraki materials and technology. Potters who have studied there — far from just Americans — and chosen to see the subtleties of which of a woodfired kiln is capable have carried those insights around the world. The Logbook played a role in transmitting information about who was doing what where. Outside Japan, the perception of wood firing has evolved from the early Australian style fire fests to highly nuanced use of the kiln's capacity to reach specific aesthetic goals.

Q: My Shigaraki artist friends say quality Shigaraki clay is becoming scarce. Is this true?  
*Phyllis Savage, artist, Colorado*

*From Ōtani Shirō:*

ご視聴ありがとうございました。👐👐👐

以前の様な信楽の地から取れる粘土はもうほとんどありません。100%無いに近い状態です。今でも信楽粘土として市販されていますが材料は殆ど信楽外からの粘土でそれを調合しかつての信楽粘土に近いものになっています。

(以前捨てていた粘土を混ぜているのもあるようです。)

A: Thank you very much for watching.

Shigaraki clay that used to be found here is now no longer available. Almost 100% of it is gone. Right now, you see some shops carrying “Shigaraki Clay,” but the ingredients are not from Shigaraki – instead they blend and compose a clay that is similar to Shigaraki clay. (I have also heard that some people mix leftover Shigaraki clay with other clay.)

*From Hitomi Shibata:*

A: It is true that the availability of “quality Shigaraki clay” has been decreasing over the years. The reasons for this include strict environmental and wildlife restrictions, lack of labor, economic difficulties, and a shrinking pottery market. The issue has been a concern for decades in Shigaraki, and efforts have been made by the Shigaraki Research Institute, Shigaraki Clay Guild and clay companies to stabilize the clay supply and improve its quality. It's important to note that while historic old Shigaraki clays may be harder to find, there are

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still many skilled potters in the area who continue to produce beautiful and unique works using a variety of Shigaraki clays.

Q: Why has there never been a Living National Treasure from Shigaraki?

*Phyllis Savage, artist, Colorado*

*From Natsu Oyobe:*

A: This is a good question, and the reasons could be multiple. One is probably that the early LNT figures like Kaneshige Tōyō (Bizen) and Arakawa Toyozō (Shino) were supported by patrons like Kawakita Handeishi and scholars like Koyama Fujio (both of them were excellent potters themselves); Hamada Shōji (Mingei ware) was close to the influential philosopher and the theoretical leader of the Mingei Movement, Yanagi Sōetsu. These early ties still carry on in later years, as the LNT system emphasizes on continuities of traditional art forms and the materials and techniques associated with them. Also, Shigaraki's modern history as a production site of every-day wares and cute figurines (like *hibachi* and *tanuki* statues) might have made the LNT committee not to take the ware seriously. Lastly, as Peter mentioned in his talk, unfortunate incidents like the early death of Furutani Michio is another reason.

Q: Could you please elaborate on the length of your firings and amount of wood used?

*Jared Pfeiffer, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse*

*From Peter Callas:*

A: Hi Jared.

Length of your firings.

An Anagama kiln uses a lot of wood but when you the wood ash makes a natural glaze which is a good thing. Remember a hillside kiln is usually semi-subterranean and when properly insulated the number of days you fire equates to the number of cooling days. Three days up three down. I fire for eight days and the kiln cools in eight days. The logic is...the longer you fire, the more heat transfers into the brick, which in turn takes longer to dissipate. Since I fire raw clay, it takes about three days to reach bisque.

Two factors there.

- 1) My work is stacked very close to the door so temperature rise must be very slow to avoid pieces cracking or blowing up.

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- 2) When you want heavy ash, you must pace your firing. Going to high heat in a day is doable but it does not favor heavy accumulation of ash and the kiln will cool too fast. Both will diminish end results. Time it takes to burn the wood is unavoidable hence long firings.
- 3) As far as wood used. It is a curiosity that three days firing equates to three cords of wood. Six day firings, six cords. I fire for eight days and use eight cords. One cord per day seems to be the rule of thumb.
- 4) I have found pine wood (not any other evergreen tree) is best for color.

Q: I am not a professional potter, but I do it as a hobby. What is the most important and motivating factor for me to enjoy it?

*Kaz Uchiyama*

*From Ōtani Shirō:*

日本でも趣味で作陶している方は沢山おられます。まず興味のあるワークショップに参加され陶芸の基礎的な知識や技術を学ぶことが大切だと思います。同好会を作りみんなで楽しく陶芸を楽しむのも良いかと思えます。又いろいろな陶産地を回って見聞を広めるのも良いでしょう。

作品を売って生活費を稼ぐ心配はないのでプロには思いつかない技法や形を実験するのも面白いし段々とのめり込むようになってきます。

結局大事な要素は楽しんで作陶する事でしょう。信楽の陶芸の森でも毎年陶芸市がありますが沢山アマチュアのグループがブースを持っています。自分の作品を他人からお金をもらって使って頂くのもステップアップになるでしょう、

A: Many people in Japan enjoy pottery as a hobby. I would recommend that you participate in a workshop that interests you and learn basic skills and knowledge. It might be good to join a club or association, and you can enjoy and learn with others. Or, you can explore ceramic production areas. You do not have to worry about making a living, so I think it is enjoyable to experiment with new methods or forms.

At Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, there is “ceramic market” every year, and I see many amateur potters selling at booths. Selling your work might be a good next step.

*From Peter Callas:*

A: Several factors.

It is a communal effort so to enjoy it there needs to be an active crew of 4-6 people depending on the size of kiln and length of firing. Short shifts ensure mentally sharp stokers

as the heat from the kiln will be exhausting and the stoking labor intensive. Division of labor is paramount!

To enjoy it I recommend looking at the kiln results to see if they are attractive. It is a lot of work and if the kiln master cannot deliver the results you want, you will not enjoy it. Also, weather is important. In Japan they usually fire in the fall. Air is dry and this favors both good color and pleasant conditions. Summertime firings which are popular in the US are not recommended as humidity will be an issue. It is much like painting outside. Best done in the fall to avoid seasonal problems.

Lastly, find good clay. No matter who is in charge of the firing, bad clay yields bad results.

*From Hitomi Shibata:*

A: The most important factor for enjoying pottery as a hobby is likely personal fulfillment and enjoyment. Additionally, the creative aspect of pottery allows for self-expression and the ability to create something unique and beautiful. In terms of motivation, setting goals for yourself can be helpful. For example, you might set a goal to create a certain number of pieces within a specific timeframe, or to try a new technique or style. This can provide a sense of purpose and motivation to continue practicing and improving. Continued learning and exposure to other artists and techniques can also be beneficial. This can help to broaden your skills and perspectives and provide inspiration for new ideas and approaches to your work.

Q: Did you encounter difficulties in getting all these historical works for your exhibition? Especially loans from large museums – were there notable challenges?

*From Natsu Oyobe:*

A: It was especially challenging to borrow them because we negotiated with the lending institutions during the pandemic. I actually wanted to bring more historic jars from a few other museums, but some museums decided to put a moratorium on loans because they laid-off staff members and processing loans takes lots of time. In other cases, the shipping costs were too expensive (again, due to the pandemic) and I had to give up, especially for those from the West Coast.

But, I have to say that the three jars (from the Cleveland, the Met, and the DIA) were the top three I wanted to get for the show. I am greatly thankful to those institutions. They were very generous.

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Q: Are there similarities between wild clay and Shigaraki clay? Are there comparisons to be made? Does [Shigaraki clay] only exist in Shigaraki?

*Judith Schwartz, ceramics scholar and writer*

*From Takuro Shibata:*

A: Generally speaking, North Carolina clay is older than Shigaraki clay, so I feel it is finer and more plastic. Additionally, there are more colorful raw clays available in NC, which distinguishes it from Shigaraki.

When I look at the analysis data for Kinose, one of the Shigaraki clays, it appears to contain a good amount of Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, potash, soda, and a small amount of iron. This clay can produce beautiful orange flashing in a wood kiln. When compared to Michfield, one of the Seagrove, NC clays, it is quite different. Michfield is high in silica, has less Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, and contains less soda and potash than Shigaraki clay, meaning it does not flash in a wood kiln. However, it creates a beautiful salt glaze when fired with salt.

I believe that Shigaraki clay can only be found in Shigaraki. While we may find some similarities in certain characteristics in NC clay, it is not the same. Both clays are equally unique, and it is up to the artist to use them in a way that brings out their individual beauty.

Q: I would like to know what Shigaraki artists think about Shigaraki tradition after Edo period – specifically, various glazed ware.

*Ai Fukunaga, curator, MFA Boston*

*From Ōtani Shirō:*

信楽は以前からその時代に適応した製品を作ってきました。江戸時代中期頃までは焼き締めを中心に製造していましたが甕や摺鉢以外容器の場合湿気や水漏れの欠点を防ぐため当然釉薬を使用したと思われます。信楽は焼き締めにとらわれず消費地のニーズに合わせ又新しい製法や製品を作り続けた結果今まで生き延びて来たと思います。茶陶の世界での信楽は信楽土の持つ性質を生かされた物が(基本的には焼き締め)信楽として記録されています(茶会の会記)

私が作家としての初期には北欧のクラフトに憧れて物を作っていました。

ある研究会を主宰しているデザイナーの先生より信楽には信楽にしか無い土味のある焼き締めの作品を作ったら良いとのアドバイスをいただき今まで余り好きでなかった薪窯を使用して作品を作り出すような

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になりその頃から伝統工芸展に出品注目されるようになり火色の美しさを再発見をした様な経緯があります。現在の信楽は 狸 植木鉢 食器等 焼成方法もいろいろ いわゆる“かやくごはん”みたいな産地です。

江戸時代も現在もある意味では同じです。以前信楽ってなんだろうと言うテーマで話し合った事があります。結局信楽で焼けたものは全て信楽焼きと言う事で明確な定義は出来なかったのです。

A: *Shigaraki-yaki* has adapted to the needs of different time periods. Until the mid-Edo period, Shigaraki's main style was *yakishime*, but it developed to include the use of glazes to counter the effects of humidity, or water leakage.

I think Shigaraki has survived because it has been creating new works or new styles to meet changing demands.

As a young artist, I used to be attracted to Scandinavian-style craft and I did not like *yakishime*-style works. One of my teachers, who was a designer, advised me to make some *yakishime*-style work using Shigaraki clay, and so I started making such work using a wood-fire kiln. Since then, my work has been featured at traditional *kōgei* exhibitions, and I discovered the beauty of 'flame-colored' work.

Currently, Shigaraki is famous for *tanuki*, plant pots, and tableware... and we utilize many different firing methods; it is like *kayakugohan* (mixed rice). Ultimately, if it's fired in Shigaraki, it is a *Shigaraki-yaki* – there is not a strict definition.

Q: Were many American artists initially attracted to Bizen ware, when it came to wood-firing? And if so, how did Bizen function as a 'gateway' to wood-firing tradition in Japanese ceramics? Was it because of their more open policy? Was there more traction among American women artists, as Kazuko Todate writes in the *Clay as Soft Power* catalog? What could account for the 'switch' to Shigaraki?

*From Louise Cort:*

A: As American and other ceramic artists sought to learn in Japan in the 1960s-1970s, some went to Bizen, others elsewhere around the country (Tanba, Tokoname, Echizen, Mashiko, Kyoto...), including to potters not associated with one of the big historical centers. But everyone had to find their own niche. Access to Bizen was helped however by Kaneshige Toyo's visits to the US (Michigan, California). The "traditional" Bizen firing that Kaneshige helped revive, with its particular clay and long, long firing time, was not easy to

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export. Bizen certainly was no more welcoming to women potters than anywhere else. I knew one woman who tried to study there in the 1970s and nearly went mad.

Q: Peter, could you repeat the name of your favorite wood-fire clay available in the US?  
*David Provan, artist*

*From Peter Callas:*

A: I choose to use high silica clay as it favors glass. Kaolin clays do not but can be ok for flashing. Look for gray clay as that is usually high in silica. I would stay away from Gold art clay (substitute Roseville), gold art is a high sulfur clay and has not given me favorable results in the past. Also use clays that are not 325 mesh. The coarser the clay the stronger it will be to withstand high heat. Fine grain clays tend to burn and over fire, which is a bad thing. I use hand-dug clays which are 60 mesh.

Q: I am trying to find who invited Toshiko Takaesu to the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in 1993. I wonder if Otani-sensei invited her?  
*Ai Fukunaga, curator, MFA Boston*

*From Ōtani Shirō:*

Toshiko Takaesu さんを陶芸の森にしたのは私です。  
私が州立ニューヨーク大学ニューパルツ校の招待作家として初めてニューパルツに行った時、教授の家で歓迎パーティが有りその時 Toshiko さんが来てくれていました。それ以来度々NYC に行くと電話がありお昼ご飯を食べにおいでと誘っていただき大変親しくして頂きました。多分 6~7 回はお伺いしたと思います。そんな事からどうしても信楽に招待したく当時陶芸の森に深く関わっていたので選考委員会に推薦し実現しました。1993 年サンデゴの NCECA 参加した時一緒に信楽に来て頂きました。

A: Yes, I invited Toshiko Takaesu-san to Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park.  
When I first went to SUNY at New Paltz as a guest artist, I met Toshiko-san for the first time at an opening party. Since then, whenever I went to New York City, she invited me for lunch or dinner, and we became good friends. I think we met 6-7 times.  
That is why I really wanted to invite her to Shigaraki, and I recommended her to their committee. In 1993, together we participated in NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) in San Diego, California, and she came to Shigaraki afterwards.



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Q: To what cultural propensities do you attribute to the development of the "anagama aesthetic" from the perspective of Japan's history? How did this unique aesthetic come to be?

*Brice Dehnert, Sugar Maples Center for the Creative Arts, New York*

*From Natsu Oyobe:*

A: What you mean by the "anagama aesthetic" is a wood-fired, unglazed ware aesthetic, I think a big part of it is the development of *wabi-sabi* aesthetics during the 16th century. Tea practitioners like Murata Shukō, Takeno Jōō and Sen no Rikyū saw the beauty in wares of Shigaraki and Bizen, which were originally used for storing and cooking in farming communities. By Rikyū's time tea practitioners commissioned local potters to create wares specifically used for *chanoyu* (tea ceremony). They revolutionized the standard of beauty, from perfection to imperfection, ostentatious to simple, symmetry to asymmetry, etc. In the tea history afterwards, making and using unglazed wares lived alongside with glazed wares, but it was in modern times that they were recognized again with renewed interest. In the early part of the 20th century, seeking an individualist approach, potters like Kaneshige Tōyō (Bizen), Ueda Naokata and Takahashi Rakusai (both Shigaraki) tried to create unglazed tea wares of late Muromachi/Momoyama period styles that speak to modern times.

Q: I was honored that Shiro Otani's Anagama was the first Anagama kiln I ever fired. It has led to a lifetime of anagama kiln firing and building. I was wondering why he chose to build the kiln out of soft brick?

*Simon Levin, artist, Minnesota*

*From Ōtani Shirō:*

私のワークショップを受けた方かどうかわかりませんが私が窯を作った時はソフトブロックを使った記憶はありません。もしその時使ったとしたら複雑な構造の部分に少し使ったかもしれませぬ。又以後窯が一部破損して修理された時柔らかいレンガが使われた可能性もあります。薪窯には一般的にソフトレンガは使いませぬ。何故ならソフトレンガは蓄熱性がないからです。使う場合は込み入った隅っこの形に合わせるのがイージーだからです。

A: I am not sure if Simon Levin san was at my workshop, but when I built the anagama kiln, I did not use soft brick. If soft brick was used, it was only for small sections that had complicated structure. Or, it was used when the kiln needed a repair after many years. In

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general, we do not use soft brick when we build wood-fired kilns because soft brick does not have heat resistance. However, it is easy for soft brick to fill out the corners of a kiln.

Q: Kiln dimensions: 1/3 firebox top 2/3 chamber?

*Sim Taylor, artist*

A:

