

Japan's Past Half-Century of Ceramics

By Matthew Gurewitsch

New York

For centuries, Japanese potters threw clay on the wheel, coaxed it into a cup or bowl, and fired it in the kiln. Refinements—glazes!—aside, that was that. Then the bomb fell on Hiroshima, and nothing could be taken for granted any more, not even this.

“Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century,” at the Japan Society through Jan. 21, illustrates the infinite new possibilities. Overarching themes? Given the premise, how could there be any? Still, the curator Joe Earle, based at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has found clusters of pieces that speak to each other. Even in the shell-shocked aftermath of cataclysm, nature and memory remain the wellsprings of creativity, generating affinities where one least expects them. Old forms may perish or they may not. New ones appear. Disciples find masters, the immemorial patterns of transmission take hold again, and life goes on, different and the same.

Drawing principally on the collection of Halsey and Alice North, who have al-

CONTEMPORARY CLAY

Japan Society
Through Jan. 21

ready given or promised many of the exhibits to the MFA, Mr. Earle mounted a first edition of this show at that institution. For New York, he has incorporated further loans from additional sources, virtually doubling the checklist to some 100 pieces. The earliest piece dates to 1958; the most recent came from the kiln this year. But overall the selection favors the very new. Three quarters of the material was produced since 1990; and over half postdates Y2K. The installation, designed by Perry Hu (whose work has also been seen at the Asia Society), unfolds in an elegant suite of chambers connected by arched passages and holes punched in the walls that allow certain objects to be seen among the objects first of one room, then of another. The effect is clean and graceful, with subliminal accents of Mykonos, perhaps, or of Santa Fe—cosmopolitan, rather than conventionally Japanese.

The first chamber—untitled—is occupied by a single large studio ceramic (the fancy term for a sculptural object made of clay): Akiyama Yo's “Metavoid 4” (2004), which strikes an apt, chaotic note.



Yagi Kazuo's 'A Cloud Remembered' (1959) casts a ghoulish spell.

Measuring about 22 by 29 by 28 inches, it resembles a warped length of a terracotta water main or a blasted chunk from the trunk of a hollow tree. A wall note explains in detail how the artist typically begins with rings of clay, burns their insides with a blowtorch, and then turns the rings inside out, exposing surfaces that are cracked and scorched.

Similarly iconic is Yagi Kazuo's abstract “A Cloud Remembered” (1959), casting a ghoulish spell in the second chamber. On loan from the Museum of Modern Art, it consists of a cracked, dented spheroid that tapers into four wicked spikes, which in turn close in on a smaller, more perfect sphere, whether to cradle or to cage it would be hard to say. In close proximity, a flower vase by Tsujimura Shiro, dated 2004, mimics a hunk of shattered concrete, not without a harsh beauty. A display case in the same room spotlights Suzuki Osamu (1926-2001), whose ceramics seem to hover on the threshold of representation, like found objects once worshipped as totems. His “Horse Form” (1982) looks less like an actual horse than a large hollow brick with a crooked mane, but one gets the idea. Yamada Hikaru (1923-2001) is represented by objects that bring to mind screens or shutters, some composed of golden shards suspended on vinyl line, some punctured with holes containing little black hemispheres. Surely it would have been more practical to realize these forms in a medium such as wood, but then, what is the avant garde for? Hayashi Yasuo—born in 1928, trained as a kamikaze pilot, and only spared the kamikaze pilot's fate by Japan's timely surrender—constructs dark, boxy shapes that play tricks with perspective, in quest of a fourth dimension. This group appears under the heading “Pioneers.”

A small ensemble of ceramics inspired by natural forms is a high point, as much for Koike Shoko's vessels, which mimic baroque seashells, as for the shapely urns of Sakiyami Takayuki, their surfaces raked as meticulously as the gravel in a Zen garden. A gallery of porcelains a few steps farther is no less spell-binding, though in a very different way, focusing the attention on virtuoso technique. Nesting bowls by Yagi Akira (son of Yagi Kazuo, of “A Cloud Remembered”) stop visitors in their tracks—especially the pale-blue glazed set of 22, ranging in diameter from 10 inches down to about an eighth of an inch, yet each one not only thrown on a wheel (the smallest with the aid of needle and magnifying glass) but also equipped with a proper foot.

The list of astonishments goes on: witty silk-screened stoneware by Mishima Kimiyo, reproducing such unlovely refuse as discarded newspapers and battered pineapple boxes; porcelain by Nagae Shigekazu, who articulates points and curves with the panache of the wildest glassblowers; Matsuda Yuriko's cheeky, gaudy body parts; Katsumata Chieko's simulacra of anemones, gourds and coral, vaguely toxic in hue.

Often, the surface alone is enough to dazzle, like chocolate butter cream on an ash-glazed jar by Nishihata Tadashi, like silver-misted quilted silk on Kondo Takahiro's “Galaxy,” like lace wrapped around the vessels of Kitamura Junko. Glazes range from rich, syrupy moss greens and ochre that evoke the Tang dynasty in China to jazzy brick-on-black designs that conjure up Keith Haring. Sometimes, the spatial form is paramount, as in Yoshikawa Masamichi's “Gorgeous Effigy,” which might double as the architectural model for the world's most inviting swimming pool; Fukami Suehara's porcelain containers—sassy riffs on the cube—are made to order for the dressing table of a 21st-century Cleopatra. There are little bottles that seem to whirl in place like dervishes. There is a box that conjures up oceans, sand dunes and mountain ranges on the outside and the glow of sunset on a vortex that nestles inside. Only tall people can see in without standing on tiptoe.

Some of the displays are shown in glass cases. A surprising number are protected only by signs saying not to touch. But whether the finish is rugged or satin-smooth, pottery is meant for the hand as much as for the eye. For the tactile experience, alas, we must become collectors ourselves, or cultivate them.

Mr. Gurewitsch writes for the Journal on the arts, culture and philanthropy.