

Contemporary Ceramics 1990: Seven Makers

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The theme of this exhibition at the Nakacho Konishi gallery is Japanese ceramics made in and around the year 1990. Entitled *1990 Clay Rush*, it features works by Koie Ryōji (1938-2020), Ogawa Machiko (b.1946), Fukami Sueharu (b.1947), Raku Jikinyū (b.1949), Kakurezaki Ryūichi (b.1950), Akiyama Yō (b.1953) and Inoue Masayuki (b.1957).

1990 was the second year after the change of Japan's era name from Shōwa to Heisei. Following the 'season of politics' of the 1960s and 1970s marked by student rioting and the campaign against the Japan-US Security Treaty, Japan entered a period of high-level consumption. The second half of the 1980s witnessed the rise of the bubble economy with soaring land and equity prices. This burst dramatically in 1990. Despite the collapse of the Nikkei share index, 1990 saw the purchase by Saitō Ryōei, the then Honorary Chairman of Daishowa Paper Manufacturing, of Van Gogh's portrait of Doctor Gachet for the world's record auction price of US \$82.5 million. Then, in 1991, the legendary Juliana's Tokyo discothèque opened its doors. The Japanese still felt they were in the middle of a boom. On the world stage, in the meantime, the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989 and in the following month the ending of the Cold War was announced, thus ending the long postwar tussle between the world's two leading powers. The wave of democratisation that began in Eastern Europe reached the multinational Soviet Union, which was dissolved in August 1991. The First Gulf War started in the same year, and in 1993 the European Union was established. The world order had undergone an unprecedented series of changes.

The eldest of the seven artists represented in the exhibition is Koie Ryōji, who was seven years old when the Second World War ended. Ogawa, Fukami, Raku and Kakurezaki were born immediately either side of, or during the 1947-1949 postwar baby boom. Akiyama and Inoue are both younger. All of the artists grew up during the time of Japan's rapid postwar economic recovery and amid the global tensions and upheavals wrought by the Cold War. Although they all experienced the changes in value systems that marked this period, the disparities in age between them would have meant they internalised these differently. Irrespective of differences in generation and artistic philosophy, each of these seven makers had by around 1990 established their own style of making, and had exhibited works that anticipated the path they would subsequently follow as a leader of contemporary Japanese ceramics. For Konishi Tetsuya, the owner of the Nakacho Konishi gallery, these seven artists, whom he has followed ever since, became prominent during the 1990s when he was a trainee at Mitochū Kōeki.

Koie Ryōji (1938-2020) was born in Tokoname in Aichi Prefecture. Although his family was not involved in ceramics in any way, he entered the kiln technology department of the Aichi Prefectural Tokoname High School, where he mastered the use of the potter's wheel. He furthered his technical knowledge and practical skills during his subsequent employment at the Japan Tile Block Manufacturing Company. Then, after spending time at the Tokoname Municipal Ceramics Research Institute, he launched his career as a ceramic artist in 1966.

In keeping with his axiom of 'vessels are everyday chat, 'objets' are formal discussion', Koei made vessels using his remarkable skills at the wheel alongside politically charged works like those from his Chernobyl Series shown at the Nakacho Konishi gallery. He studied the works of Ishiguro Munemaro, Kawakita Handeishi, Hamada Shōji, Yagi Kazuo and Terao Kōji, and during the 1960s travelled to Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka

to visit galleries and deepen his knowledge not only of ceramics but more broadly of contemporary art.

Koie regarded the turning point in his career as having come with his *Returning to Earth* of 1971. This involved making a mould from his own face and casting a series of masks that he installed in Sakae Park in the centre of Nagoya. He made the masks from pulverized glazed porcelain sanitary ware of the kind manufactured in Tokoname in large quantities. The masks in this first installation were not fired, but subsequently he produced a series of fired versions, thereby redefining and expanding the connotations of materials and firing. Then, proclaiming that 'the largest and most unforgivable form of firing that mankind has ever perpetrated is the nuclear bomb', he went on to make works with strongly anti-war and anti-nuclear messages using titles such as *Testimonies* and *NO MORE HIROSHIMA, NAGASAKI*. Another series on a similar theme is the *Chernobyl* series, which he made in 1989, three years after the catastrophe happened.

In parallel with works like these, Koie produced vessels in the making of which he used many different clays and techniques to give voice to the power of his materials. He often used expressions like 'clay is full of life' or 'clay laughs'. He travelled to many different parts of the world, where he produced ceramics using the local clays he encountered. Initially brought up in the ceramic-producing centre of Tokoname, Koie went on to be an individual maker whose work knew no geographical boundaries nor respected any kind of convention.

Ogawa Machiko (b.1946) is a maker of 'vessels' with no apparent functional purpose. Rather, they are conceptual forms resulting from her probing into the meaning and structure of the vessel. For her a 'vessel' is an object with 'an interior and exterior that meet at a rim' that can serve as a receptacle for water, food or human thoughts and emotions. Ogawa's 'vessels' start off as complete spheres. These are broken apart and shaped by the removal of sections of clay, split apart, squashed, and caused to fissure. The ragged forms undergo further distortion in the kiln. The rims that join the insides and outsides are thick and prominent. She first became interested in spheres and semi-spheres while a student of ceramics at Tokyo University of the Arts. When she subsequently accompanied her anthropologist husband, Kawada Junzō, to Africa, she became fascinated by local methods of paddling clay into spheres and by the natural shapes of the minerals she encountered. All of these have contributed to her particular aesthetic and the concept of the 'vessel' as an embodiment of the primordial power of clay. Given this background, one can understand why her interests extend from the exploration of pooling glazes reminiscent of water to crafting tea bowls that both challenge the meaning of utility and naturally occupy a position alongside her more monumental works.

Ogawa's ceramics are unique in that they are neither traditional vessels nor sculptures that seek to be viewed as contemporary art. She held her first solo exhibition in 1985 when she was 39 years old. Despite being a relatively late starter, she was selected the following year to participate in the *Seikimatsu no kishutachi* (Flagbearers for the approaching century) exhibition held at the Suntory Museum of Art. This led in turn to her solo exhibition at the Sōgetsu Art Museum in 1991, for which the works currently shown at the Nakacho Konishi gallery were made.

Fukami Sueharu (b.1947) has developed a unique way of using the high-pressure slip-casting method normally employed for mass production to create large-scale *qingbai*-glazed sculptural forms measuring in excess of one metre. When drying or being fired in a kiln, clay not only shrinks but can also warp and sag. High-pressure slip-casting maintains the porcelain clay at an even density without the need for human intervention. This minimises the risk of distortion and enables the firing of perfect forms. Fukami's innovative method of making allows the creation of highly distinctive shapes characterised by sharp lines and smooth surfaces covered in translucent pale blue glaze.

Fukami was born as the third son of a family of ceramic manufacturers in the Higashiyama area of Kyoto. He

studied at the Kyoto Municipal Institute of Industrial Technology and Culture and at the age of 20 had his work accepted into the annual Nitten exhibition. He subsequently showed at several important competitive ceramics exhibitions. His early work included *qingbai*-glazed jars and other vessel forms, and also sculptural works made from non-porcelain clay. In the course of looking for a path to follow, he encountered the ceramics of Carlo Zauli, whose large and dynamic sculptures were powerful explorations of the materiality of clay. This was in about 1973. Inspired by Zauli's example, Fukami looked beyond Japan's ceramic canon as a point of departure and sought to forge his own way forward. It was in 1980, when in search of a means to represent in ceramics the distant horizon, that he developed his hallmark method of making pared down, sharply profiled, slip-cast porcelain forms. In 1985 he won the Grand Prix at the Faenza International Ceramics Exhibition. His work went from strength to strength, becoming ever more sophisticated and perfectly executed. With his clear vision and strong creative ambition, Fukami sets his goals increasingly high, overcoming the unique challenges posed by his chosen way of making.

In October 1990, the *Tenmon* exhibition featuring the work of Raku Kichizaemon XV (b.1949) opened in the Kikuchi Guest House, which formerly occupied the land in central Tokyo on which the now stands. The exhibition was commissioned and organised by the Kandori Gallery, whose owner Kikuchi Tomo (1923-2016) was an important collector of contemporary Japanese ceramics and the founder of the Musée Tomo. The exhibition was six years in the making.

Tenmon (Questions to heaven) is the title of a poem in the ancient Chinese anthology *Chu Ci* (Songs of Chu) from the Warring States period (ended 221 B.C.). The poem consists of a series of questions about the origins of the universe, the structure of heaven, how the earth came into being, and various historical events. The works in the exhibition had an awe-inspiring quality born from the conflict in the artist's mind between his ambitions as an independent contemporary maker and the tradition of tea bowl making transmitted from father to son for over 400 years since the time of the Raku family's founder Chōjirō. Sculpted with a steel spatula, the distorted tea bowls were glazed in a combination of black, red, green and other colours. Disparaging comments were made about the sharpness of the trimmed mouth rims and the resemblance of the red glaze to dripping blood. Handling these tea bowls 30 years later, their distorted shapes and fiercely cut surfaces feel oddly comfortable to the hand, while one can sense the artist's resolve in the carving of their inner bases. When brightly lit with spotlights, the glazes look vivid and intense, while under fluorescent lighting they look muted. But if you imagine them being lit by natural light filtered through paper, you can apprehend the calculated intentionality with which they were made.

Tenmon was a lavish event held in a specially designed space into which even the outside approach from the gate of the Kikuchi Guest House to the building was incorporated. It lasted only ten days. It was a rare occasion on which the ambition of a young maker faced with the challenge of his own destiny fused with the passion of an organiser intent on supporting him and showing his work to best effect. That the exhibition took place at all was undoubtedly thanks to the economic boom enjoyed by Japan during the second half of the 1980s.

Raku Kichizaemon XV assumed the retired name of Jikinyū in 2019. To commemorate this, 19 of the works shown in the *Tenmon* exhibition are being shown at the Musée Tomo until 29 November 2020.

Kakurezaki Ryūichi (b.1950) is from the Gotō Islands in Nagasaki prefecture. He studied graphic design at Osaka University of Arts. After working as a graphic designer for two years, he moved to Bizen in 1976 to study ceramics. Rather than following the path established by Kaneshige Tōyō of making ceramics in the style of Momoyama period (1573-1615) Bizen wares, he developed his own distinctive style. His work quickly attracted attention and he was soon regarded as a flag-bearer of contemporary Bizen ceramics. *Phalanx* is the

title of a representative series or works from the early part of his career. They come in various shapes but, as suggested by the series title - a Greek word meaning a formation of heavy infantry armed with spears and shields - they resemble pieces of armour. In 1992 he held a solo exhibition entitled *Aka no phalanx* (Incandescent phalanx) at the Nihonbashi Mitsukoshi Department Store. The exhibition consisted of a single series of work shown on plinths and with lighting all specifically designed to create a closely integrated installation. Kakurezaki has used this formula ever since. Bizen wares have traditionally been appreciated for their rich clay colours and textures, and for the *yōhen* (kiln change) effects resulting from the use of wood-firing. In these early works, however, Kakurezaki seems to have been primarily interested in the sculptural aspect of their forms. Viewed with hindsight, one can think of them as belonging to an experimental phase when he tried not to be influenced by the qualities of his clay. Being aware of the diminishing availability of the usually preferred, finely textured, high quality *tatsuchi* (clay excavated from beneath paddy fields), Kakurezaki worked hard to improve his firing skills and to develop effective ways of using the coarser *yamatsuchi* (mountain clay) available in Bizen rather than *tatsuchi*. In this way he pioneered his own distinctive style of working.

A subsequent outcome of Kakurezaki's appetite for innovation has been his development of a material he calls *konkōdo*. This is a pulverised and compressed combination of clays ranging in quality from reject clay to *tatsuchi*. Because he combines rather than mixes the clays, their different colours and textures give a marbled effect when the *konkōdo* is fired. His work is presently in a new phase in which he keeps his forms relatively clean and simple in order to emphasise the qualities of *konkōdo* and the *yōhen* effects that emerge when it is fired.

Akiyama Yō (b.1953) studied ceramics at Kyoto City University of Arts during the 1970s. The professor of ceramics at that time was Yagi Kazuo. Even while continuing to work in ceramics after graduating in 1978, Akiyama sought to justify his involvement with clay. His discovery of the irregular way in which the surface of clay cracked and fissured led to his early large-scale works of the 1980s and early 1990s made of *kokutō* (black carbon-impregnated clay). The key to his method of making since this time has been the use of a burner to cause cylinders, cones and rings of clay to fissure as a result of the difference in drying rate between the surface and the interior of the clay.

The work entitled *Penepain 862* shown at the Nakacho Konishi gallery is the second of a series of works with this title that he made in 1986. It consists of pieces of clay made by applying a burner to clay cylinders and cones, and then flattening out and joining along their ragged edges the separate sections that have split apart. Penepain is a geological term referring to a low-relief plain formed on the earth's surface by long-term erosion. The reason he chose the low-firing *kokutō* method for these works may partly be due to its being a technique pioneered by his teacher Yagi Kazuo. More importantly, however, is the fact that if clay is fired to higher, stoneware temperatures, it loses its 'organic fluidity' and becomes like rock. *Penepain 862* stands 210 centimetres high. With its surface patterning directly facing the viewer, it reveals the magic quality of fired and fissured clay. While at this early stage this was as far as Akiyama progressed, one should regard this piece as a seminal manifestation of the young artist's creative vision.

Over time Akiyama's interests developed so that, in addition to using a burner on the exterior surfaces of cylinders and cones, he started to apply heat to the inner surfaces of clay rings of different diameters and thicknesses. In this case, he turned the fissured sections of clay inside out to reveal the rough texture of where the clay had split and torn apart. In 1993 Akiyama started firing to higher, stoneware temperatures and colouring the surfaces of his works with iron oxide derived from iron filings. Rather than firing a piece to a high temperature and effectively fixing it in time, he uses his iron oxide patination technique so that the work continues to evolve. If his career began with creating works of *kokutō* that involved making geometric shapes

and exploring the effects of fissuring, his recent work involves increasingly ambitious orchestrations of fissuring, assembling and firing. Ever more deeply ceramic in feeling, Akiyama's works are a combination of extreme mass and intense tactility that gives the sense that the clay is breathing from inside.

With respect to distinctive ways of making, the work of Inoue Masayuki (b.1957) is noteworthy. In the early part of his career, he threw vessel shapes on the wheel and then broke them into sections and shards. He reassembled these and then applied clay slips, glazes and overglaze decoration to their surfaces. His interest is not in producing ceramics of a conventional type, in relying on special types of clay, or in developing the tradition of a particular region. He has not invented any new techniques, nor does he pride himself on using superior technical skills. He regards each step in the making process as a 'material', his interest being to create forms that speak of ceramics as a conceptual practice.

Inoue entered Tama Art University to study oil painting. He learnt about clay and throwing on the wheel during ceramics classes given by Nakamura Kinpei. He was fascinated by how an amorphous piece of clay could be thrown into a shape, and at how quick it was to work on the wheel. At first he made jars and other vessel shapes, but there was a moment he came across some discarded shards in a corner of the workshop. He was intrigued by their broken edges and by how they had cracked. He started piling up shards and turning them into assemblages. This was the genesis of his particular way of throwing shapes on the wheel, breaking them apart and then reassembling them into abstract forms. Inoue's work is in essence a visual realisation of the inherent fragility and breakability of ceramics.

Inoue's conceptual approach is reflected in the way he entitles his works in order of venue where exhibited, year of making, and a number indicating the position of the work in the sequence of pieces made in that year. For example, the 'B-9110' of the piece shown at the Nakacho Konishi gallery means 'B for Gallery Ban', '91 for 1991' and '10 for tenth work made in 1991'. His way of treating each step in the making process as a 'material' does not invite the use of descriptive terms in his titles.

In the second half of the 1990s Inoue switched to making his assemblages from slab-built components. This is not essentially different from how he previously worked by creating parts from wheel-thrown forms and then reassembling them.

Inoue's work is a merging of his experience of using the multiple ceramic processes he conceptualises as 'materials' with his highly evolved understanding of structure.

It goes without saying that the ceramics of these seven artists are all very different. The use of 'clay' in the exhibition title brings to mind the term 'claywork' used in connection with many exhibitions of ceramics held during the 1980s and early 1990s. Right from the beginning, most of the output of these artists could not, however, be classified as 'claywork', while it is also the case that this term is rarely used nowadays in discussions about contemporary ceramics. While there is a need to revisit the background to why this should be and how 'claywork' should be defined, this exhibition at the Nakacho Konishi gallery does not set out to review this period by examining it through the lens of 'claywork'. Rather, its aim is to recapture the passion and energy which the word 'clay' invoked within the ceramic world of that time. Looking at the works made by these seven artists at a time when the range of interpretations of the meaning of ceramics had expanded enormously, it is interesting to reflect on when, how, where and why their engagement with clay began, and what position they adopted with respect to the changes taking place around them. It is also an opportunity to think about the different paths they have each followed during the last 30 years.

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