

### Exhibition Information

As with cultural, and specifically contemporary cultural art anywhere in the world, it is difficult to define what exactly characterizes “Japanese ceramics.” Within this broad genre, artists are variously working more or less in harmony with, or referencing conventional traditions; reinterpreting foreign, particularly Korean and Chinese forms; and defying the usefulness of such ceramics by creating works that stand alone as sculpture. The objects in the exhibition *Contemporary Clay* demonstrate the diversity in technique, inspiration and form present in ceramic artwork created in Japan in the past two decades.

In this grouping of artwork, one sees a wide array of forms. Some pieces in the exhibition appear miraculously devoid of all discernable traces of natural occurrence or human manipulation. The artists associated with such works seem to pride themselves on the very precise effects that they are able to achieve despite the rather volatile and unpredictable process of forming, glazing and firing a work in clay. On the other hand, there are also pieces in the exhibition that are extremely organic and rough, which do not deny the ground from which the clay they are made of originally came. These artists appear to relish the “accidents” that shape form or decoration in the complex physical and chemical processes of creation that occur between slab or wheel, to glaze and **kiln** [***anagama kiln***].

Aside from this sheer variety of form and methods of creation, an interesting issue that arises from the juxtaposition of objects in *Contemporary Clay* is the distinction between “studio” ceramics and “functional” ceramics. In many Western cultures, pottery is still often considered a craft, rather than a form of fine art. Japanese artists face a similar tension, however it is somewhat mitigated by the long-respected fine ceramic craft tradition in the country. The generally widespread, centuries-old national patronage of and interest in ceramics has its roots in the popularity and importance of the arts of ***ikebana*** (flower arranging) and ***chanoyu*** (tea ceremony). For centuries, ceramic artists have created highly refined and expressive commissions for practical objects. These predominately included vessels such as ***chawan***, ***chaire*** (tea caddy), ***hanaire*** and ***mizusashi*** (water container).

Thus, in Japan, the definition of ceramics as beautiful and artistically-crafted objects was not particularly foreign. Rather, artists during the post-World War II period struggled to free the aesthetics of ceramic arts from their useful forms. In other words, artists of this period sought to assert the value of ceramic objects as works of art alone; without any definable practical functions. It was a group of ceramic artists during this period, the ***Sodeisha***, which challenged the conventional Japanese definitions of ceramics, and began a dialogue that has culminated in the objects contained in the present exhibition.

### Bibliography

Baekeland, Frederick & Moes, Robert. *Modern Japanese Ceramics in American Collections*. Japan Society, Inc., New York, 1993.

Earle, Joe. *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century*. MFA Publications, Boston, 2005.



Faulkner, Rupert. *Japanese Studio Crafts: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*. The University of Philadelphia Press, Philadelphia, 1995.

Honolulu Academy of Arts, *Yakimono: 4000 Years of Japanese Ceramics*. Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, 2005.

Wilson, Richard L. *Inside Japanese Ceramics: Primer of Materials, Techniques and Traditions*. Weatherhill, New York, 1999.