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# BORN OF THE EARTH

JAPANESE  
POTTERS  
SATORU  
AND KAYOKO  
HOSHINO  
ENGAGE IN  
A DIALOGUE  
WITH THIS  
MOST ANCIENT  
MEDIUM

BY DARRYL JINGWEN WEE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KO SASAKI



Kayoko, left, and Satoru Hoshino in their home studio. An experimental work by Satoru from 1991 hangs on the wall behind them.





IT'S AN OVERCAST, blustery day in late December when I board a rickety local train at the Kyoto station. I'm bound for the southwest shore of Lake Biwa, a short distance away, to visit the ceramicist Satoru Hoshino and his wife, Kayoko, also a well-known potter. The Hoshinos share a studio on the lower floor of their self-built house, which is perched elegantly on a steep slope overlooking the misty, atmospheric expanse of the lake, where many wealthy Kansai district residents own holiday homes.

When working on pieces, the two potters, who met while practicing their craft at the Fujihira Ceramic Studio in Kyoto in the early 1970s, rarely venture far from home and studio, preferring to concentrate their energies on the task at hand, in silence and without distraction. "We don't discuss our work with each other, but we do look over at each other from time to time, just to see what the other is making," says Kayoko. Of the pair, she is the more reserved. "I sometimes look up from my clay to ask her what she thinks of whatever it is I'm working on at the moment," Satoru tells me. "But we tend to work quite independently, each in our own half of the studio."

The Hoshinos' comfortable yet sparsely appointed living quarters are a concise reflection of the austere elegance of their life and work. A large, black relief from Satoru's early smoke-infused "Kokuto" (literally, Black Ceramic) series adorns one wall, while a suite of calligraphy exercises apparently copied in a tribute to the Song Dynasty calligrapher Huang Tingjian has been framed and hung in an inconspicuous location just under the rafters. "Calligraphy was never really a medium I warmed to until I saw Huang's *Biographies of Lian Po and*



Clockwise from top: Images of mountain landscapes, in which the artists find inspiration; shelves of Kayoko's works in progress; and the artist with one of her geometric pieces from 2011.



*Lin Xiangru* handscroll at the Metropolitan Museum during a recent visit to New York,” Satoru recounts. “His grasp of the cursive script was so unorthodox; it really challenged me.” The two have spent a fair amount of time in New York, where in 2006 they were artists in residence at Hunter College.

Over green tea and sweet persimmons that Kayoko had left to dry just outside the house, the artist tells me about the practical and logistical difficulties that have affected her recent output. “I use mostly white and red clays from Shigaraki, but the red clay that’s now available is no longer the same as it was before,” she says, with just the faintest tinge of fatalism in her voice. “It’s gradually changed in hue, and the way it behaves when it comes into contact with water, or while it’s drying, is not the same. This puzzled me for a while, but when I asked the supplier who had sold me the clay, he told me that the local source of the material had changed.”

Satoru chimes in to explain how this might affect a potter’s practice in Japan more directly than it would elsewhere in the world. “In the United States, potters tend to work from powder, mixing the clay themselves. But in Japan, potters work directly with clay that they’ve dug up themselves or acquired from a supplier who’s sourced it directly. Sources of good clay

are slowly drying up, like other natural resources.”

Kayoko’s sharply contoured, wedgelike ceramic objects, which are evocative of ceremonial implements from an ancient culture, have been collected by a number of prominent institutions in Europe and the United States, including the Met and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Their geometry stems from her deceptively simple tools: just lengths of tautly stretched wire that she uses to slice her clay and files to score its surface with finlike linear depressions. “When I fire my clay at a lower temperature, the glaze often becomes smooth and glossy, but at higher temperatures you can see tiny, silver, dew-like droplets precipitating on the surface,” she tells me. Picking up a smaller covered vessel of hers, Kayoko points out how the passage of time transforms the physical aspects of her work in different ways. “This I made many years ago, but you can see how the silver surface on the outside has tarnished, while the silver coating on the inside of the cover has kept its luster.”

For Kayoko, an intimate, almost bodily sense of empathy with her chosen material is essential in determining how a particular piece will eventually turn out. “I try to sense the volume and mass of the clay as I knead the three or four

Kayoko uses a metal file on the surface of a work in progress.



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varieties I use together in order to ensure an even hue and color throughout,” she tells me. “Folding and bending the clay helps me to perceive the particular character, quality, and energy of the material.” Although her forms are staunchly abstract, something of the surrounding landscape of Mount Horai inevitably seeps into her pieces. “I often go for a walk in the mountains around this area as a break between working sessions, and I often feel a longing to express the natural expansiveness and monumentality of the landscape in my work.”

It’s evident that chance and randomness also play a part, as Kayoko gestures toward some of her smaller pieces that resemble truncated bricks, pieced together in an angular fashion. “Some of these forms resulted from sheer chance when cutting the clay. I found that I could change their position, turning or flipping them around, and they would take on an entirely different appearance,” she notes.

Striking a dramatic contrast with Kayoko’s somber, granite-hued vessels are Satoru’s recent works, which



Clockwise from far left: Satoru prefers blue, green, and orange glazes on his ceramic forms; the artist rolls a clay coil to create a work; and a wooden comb is used to impart texture.

pulsate with a sense of raw life; they also represent a departure from his earlier smoke-infused pieces, executed when he was associated with the avant-garde, nonfunctional ceramic movement, Sodeisha. Lined up in a neat little colony in one corner of his half of the studio is “Spring Snow 12–13,” an ongoing series that has been shown at the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale in 2010, the Museion No. 1 gallery in Budapest in 2011, Joan B. Mirviss in New York in 2012, and the Watson Arts Centre in Canberra in 2013. The works comprise heavy coils of clay piled atop each other to create irregularly staggered formations. Imprinted with the marks of their maker’s hands, Satoru’s pieces evoke the febrile energy that shaped the clay.

When I comment on the vivid, somewhat artificial hues of their blue, green, and orange glazes, Satoru chuckles. “Do they look artificial? And not natural? When someone talks about a ‘natural’ style in the context of ceramics, I don’t think of the colors and forms found in nature,” he explains. “The lurid blues, copper greens, and oranges in this series, for example, may not mimic the natural hues of nature. But for me, they express the unconscious memories of the clay that lie dormant within. And as a matter of fact, the colors

**He realized the energy and life force he felt in the clay were the same ones that brought about the natural disaster that had assaulted his way of life.**

themselves are the result of all-natural glazes derived from wood or straw ash, sometimes mixed with some copper.”

Satoru’s current approach to his work seems to date from a momentous episode three decades ago, when he lost his studio in a landslide. Unnerved by the brutal force of nature that had upended his life, he realized that his chosen medium was not just a material but a manifestation of the power of nature itself; the energy and life force he felt in the clay were the same as those that brought about the natural disaster that had assaulted his way of life. Subsequently, he came to understand that clay was “a total system of life, with myself living within it.”

Seeing himself almost as a conduit to express the “fluid, mobile energy lying dormant in the clay,” Satoru insists that as he starts a piece, he has no direct or formal sense of the shape he will eventually create. “In a way, you could say that my work takes on a fortuitous form that emerges out of the

Satoru’s monumental works, including a broken spare of *Pre-Copernican Mud*, 1996, surround the artists’ Lake Biwa home.



space between the clay I use as a material and my own body,” he tells me. “I don’t have a particular shape in mind in the beginning—it comes from a certain collaborative confrontation between nature and human that expresses the dynamism of that natural energy.”

Satoru’s own description of his working process echoes the bold declarations of Gutai founder Jiro Yoshihara in his manifesto of 1956. As Yoshihara saw it, “Gutai art does not change the material but brings it to life.... In Gutai art the human spirit and the material reach out their hands to each other, even though they are otherwise opposed to each other. The material is not absorbed by the spirit. The spirit does not force the material into submission.”

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that curators have observed parallels between Satoru’s working process and that of key Gutai artists such as Kazuo Shiraga. In January 2015, New York gallerist Dominique Lévy invited curators Koichi Kawasaki and Alexandre Carel to put together a two-man exhibition titled “Body and Matter: The Art of Kazuo Shiraga and Satoru Hoshino.” Two generations apart, Hoshino and Shiraga never met, but certain formal parallels seem evident. As Carel noted during his own visit to Satoru’s studio, “I saw



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From top: Satoru’s conical white and copper-glazed coiled vessel *Spring Snow 11-11*, and a large globular pinched example, *Autumn 11-3*. Opposite, from top: Kayoko’s twisted teardrop-shaped *Cut Out 11-6*, and *Obuje: Object*. All four pieces were executed in 2011.

BOTH IMAGES: TOSHIHIRO SUZUKI AND JOAN B. MIRVISS LTD., NEW YORK



that he created his work by pushing and prodding the clay with his fingers, never allowing his mind to intervene in the relationship between body and matter. My mind went immediately to Shiraga's great painting performance, *Challenging Mud*, 1955. In both cases, rather than shaping and subsuming matter, the artists' bodies are subsumed by the base materiality of mud, dirt, and pigment."

Western audiences who might find themselves compelled to see something identifiably "Japanese" in his work may be heartened to know that Satoru himself does not think such generalizations of national character are entirely misguided. "I think potters abroad might, in order to achieve a certain gray like you see in Kayoko's work, add pigments like manganese to the clay in order to give it that color. But of course there are all sorts of grays, each one subtly different from the rest, and we'd prefer not to have to resort to such methods," says Satoru. "Ultimately, I think what makes both Kayoko's and my work Japanese is a particular desire to remain faithful to the natural, material feeling of the clay and its intrinsic attributes. This sense of a collaboration between nature and the human artist is something that I think is Japanese."

Recalling again that life-changing catastrophe that befell his former atelier, Satoru pauses before continuing. "I hope that a good artist's lifestyle and his working methods would intersect. Both my own worldview and current practice consist in respecting nature. If you ignore it, a disaster will happen." 田

