

# Living Form

## TAKURO KUWATA, CERAMIC ARTIST

By Megan Garwood | 12th July 2016

Takuro Kuwata lives in Toki City, a mountainous region outside Tajimi City. This area is known as the largest producer of Japanese ceramics. Rich clay that composes strata of the region contributes to its legacy and is an artistic medium. Kuwata feels connected to this magical realm and occasionally incorporates clay that seeps from the earth to create ceramics. Most of the time, however, Kuwata uses a mix of fresh clay, dry clay remnants, and stones to form functional vessels that appear figuratively—and sometimes literally—on their heads.

At first glance, Kuwata's ceramic objects look modern, if not futuristic, but Kuwata actually derives these forms from tradition and history in a peculiar way. To him, contemporary aesthetic is traditional, insofar as evolution and change are a traditional part of history. His inspirations come not from past designs, but from previous advances, as well as the natural materials and technology found in the present.

Kuwata believes that balance is beauty. It hasn't always been this way. When he was younger he had a predilection for doing things to an extreme, being a bit rebellious, and stretching the rules. In high school, he would skip class to hip-hop dance or draw alone. Things changed once he started making *kōgei*. Since graduating from Kyoto Saga University of Arts, where he studied under a nurturing master, and making a path of his own, Kuwata has created a range of radical and delicate ceramics.

LIVING FORM met with Kuwata to discuss his practice, *kōgei*, and contemporary art. Fittingly, as Kuwata strives to reveal fun in his objects and life, our conversation also included some lighthearted digressions about carrots.



LF

Tell us about Toki City.

TK

There are many ceramics creators who live here, so there's a community with advanced techniques and knowledge. This area has produced ceramics for a long time. As far back as the 1500s, tea bowls were being made here. When you walk around the mountains, there are ruins of old kilns, which are called yama chawan, or "mountain tea bowls." It's rumored that one of those kilns was used to create famous tea bowls from that time, like the national treasure unohanagaki. When you walk through that part of the mountains, you might step on pieces of tea bowls from that period. The energy from the past remains here, and I feel the people's passion.

LF

How do you start your day?

TK

Well, I drink carrot juice. I have a specific ratio: one 300 milliliter pack of apple juice and one carrot. That's my breakfast. And when I'm able to make that juice every morning, then I feel like my life is going pretty well.

LF

Then what?

TK

I start work around 9:00 or 10:00 AM. I work until noon, eat a simple sandwich for lunch, tackle work some more by experimenting with material and technique, dinner, then start again. Sometimes I work until 11:00 PM.

LF

What do you do when you aren't at your studio?



TK

I go to exhibitions of old ceramics held in the vicinity or sometimes I go to the bakery. There's a bakery I like that uses natural yeast and bakes bread in a wood-fired oven. Then I go to the roadside rest areas to buy vegetables and come home. I used to run all day on energy drinks, smoking, and convenience food. Suddenly, I got worried about my diet and lifestyle and became extremely picky about what I put in my body. Now balance is key.

LF

You talk about balance a lot. How does it relate to your work?

TK

Resources and technique. At one point I came to the conclusion that we need convenient and inconvenient things—or more like primitive things. Without having both, I think one side collapses. I don't limit myself by saying that I can only use tools that I've created myself. I think it's hipper to have wooden ones that you've created yourself, but I'm not that rigid. I mean, plastic exists in this age so I think it's fine to use plastic. But then again, I use stones, wood, anything!

“Going in a completely different direction, growing, is one kind of tradition we don't always recognize”

LF

It sounds like you're as experimental with your tools as you are with material.

TK

Yes, even regarding my material, the primitive things I'm doing connect to advanced technology. Sometimes I just blend a few types of clay that I've purchased, but it's important to think about where the clay came from and what type of geologic circumstances produced it—instead of just using what you purchased without any knowledge. Your senses connect at a different place when you know the type of geology your clay came from. To think, there was an ocean here in the past, and because of it, this certain type of clay is available now.



LF

Some would say that your work is abstract, or at the very least deviates from ceramics' canon. Where do you find beauty in the abstract?

TK

It's what's natural, and it's timely. The past certainly influences the present. Yet materials are different now, and most everything else is different, too. When people strive to copy the past, it comes off as unnatural and things fall apart at some point. Even with carrots, we've been growing them since time unknown, but we create carrots of this age now. So the discussion on copying tea bowls from the past is similar to the discussion of the modern-day carrot production. For example, we were able to make certain kinds of carrots in the past but now the soil has changed and the tools have changed, thus we have a different colored carrot. I think that's fine. Going in a completely different direction, growing is one kind of tradition we don't always recognize.

LF

Are there other traditions you identify with?

TK

Japanese people make things their own. For example, tea bowls and tea culture were introduced to Japan from China. The tenmoku tea bowl, which is known for a sleek but difficult glazing process, is a Chinese-style tea bowl. At its introduction to Japan, it was symmetrical. It was made and used in Japan as the noblest tea bowl but times changed. In the late 1500s, a man named Sen no Rikyu altered chanoyu, or "way of tea," making it simpler, more honest, and more nuanced than before. After that each tea bowl had a distinct character. This change came about because something happened. They didn't want it nice and straight; they wanted it to be unique.

LF

How does this quality of Japanese culture translate to a foreign audience?

TK

That is difficult to say. When you take things outside Japan you have to try to make them accessible. There are many ways of viewing an object, and there are things that we immediately understand because of our culture and our background. Yes, we have become global, but there are still many misunderstandings that happen because of cultural differences. What would change if everyone shared those rules and exchanged knowledge?

LF

There seem to be many changes in the world of kōgei right now. Given the fluidity of the term, what do you consider yourself as someone who creates kōgei?

TK

I've actually been wondering what title would be most appropriate for me. I make ceramics, but some of my pieces are made only from stones without pottery clay. So it's weird to call me a ceramics artist when referring to my pieces that have been made only with stones. One thing that covers all my pieces is that they are fired.

LF

A firing artist?

TK

Yes, a firing creator!