

A golden tea bowl with an enchanting lustre; an almost infectiously pop object, reminiscent of the work of Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol. The countless works produced by Takuro Kuwata exhibit a delicate balance amid their quirkiness, giving rise to new forms of aesthetic beauty. His appearance in the 'Fire and Clay' group exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in 2018 and the 2016 'From Tea Bowl' exhibition at London's Alison Jacques Gallery mean that Kuwata is today a leader of the contemporary Japanese ceramics scene. Yet he stands out in his uniqueness, owing to an intense commitment to his craft. In the 16th century, Sen no Rikyu took up the traditions of Murata Juko and perfected the tea ceremony as an artform. His concept of wabi-sabi aesthetics remains alive and well some 500 years later, but its essence has become ambiguous over time, limiting the value of ceramics and making it more rarefied. This is perhaps why Kuwata says that he wants people to 'discover the un-

# TAKURO KUWATA

INTERVIEW BY TAKUHITO KAWASHIMA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIKASHI SUZUKI

derlying value in ceramics themselves', and likely why he exhibits his work in the context of contemporary art—because he wants to go beyond the uncertain aesthetics of Japanese ceramics and express something more. Kuwata works out of a studio in the Mino area of Gifu Prefecture. The town is famous for having the largest production of ceramics in Japan, with its rich soil and an environment suited to clay. Kuwata, of course, is among the ceramicists active in the area, yet his studio is orderly and neat, not muddy and messy; it suggests a painter's studio, with everything from small pieces to nearly two-metre-tall ceramic sculptures arranged throughout. Visiting his home for the first time, I noticed a unique disconnect between Kuwata's work and his down-to-earth nature, while the countless pieces around his studio speak volumes about his internal life. They convey the sense that Takuro Kuwata is a true artist in pursuit of a redefinition of anarchism and innovation.

apartamento - Toki City





ALISON JACQUES



Top to bottom: Sky-slipped Gold-drips bowl; Red-yellow-slipped platinum-drop centerpillar; Red-slipped Gold-drips Stone-burst bowl; Green-slipped Platinum Kairagi Shino bowl.

Many of your works are tea bowls, or they line the shelves with other implements in your home that you've created. Do you regularly prepare traditional tea?

Yes, I do. When I make a tea bowl, I reach a point where I want to test it out by drinking some tea with it. I'm always really happy to finish a piece and want to try it out for myself. But I suppose I don't generally prepare tea outside of that context.

The actress Kirin Kiki was seen drinking out of one of your tea bowls on TV. Do you also take into account the weight and feel of these bowls for use in a tea ceremony?

Before I start the production process for a tea bowl, I consider how it should be held, where to place the lip of the cup, and so on. But I don't necessarily feel I need to test every finished piece myself. I guess you could say that I'm more interested in testing out and drinking from these creations when they turn out looking less like tea bowls.

We could say that elements like the *kairagi* glaze, *ishihase* finishes, and firing marks from the kiln are a different aesthetic from pure 'functional beauty'. After majoring in ceramics from an art college in Kyoto, you apprenticed under Mr Susumu Zaima, who creates traditional pottery, correct?

Correct. I learned the basics under him, like creating glazes and using the potter's wheel. I didn't produce any finished works there, but I would break pieces down and turn them back into clay. I did that over and over again.

You originally had an interest in product design. Did you find that basic sort of work tedious?

On the contrary: everything felt very fresh and new to me. While learning the ropes, I began to understand the remarks that Mr

Zaima would make, which was very rewarding. This deepened my interest in ceramics even further.

What triggered you to start thinking about incorporating aspects of the 'art object' in ceramics?

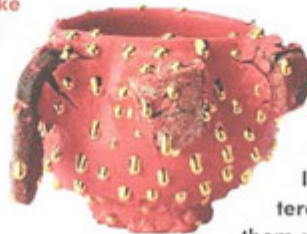
In Kyoto, where I went to school, there was an avant-garde ceramics group in the '50s called the Sodeisha, which centred around the ceramicist Kazuo Yagi. It meant that even at the art college I attended, ceramics were interpreted within the context of the art object, and the climate was quite welcoming of being both a ceramicist and an artist. That's why I don't generally think of ceramics and art as separate contexts. I've continued to create objects of no use ever since my student days, purely for aesthetic purposes. I think it's had a major impact on my work. Plus, as you mentioned, I was interested in design and paid attention to ceramics, like Arabia from Scandinavia. I'm not an expert in visual design, but I find it very attractive.

What caused you to take an interest in tea bowls as a mode of expression, given that they have an established hierarchy—what might be called a certain lack of freedom?

I've always had a particular interest in tea bowls. I guess I found them aesthetically pleasing, intuitively speaking. On the other hand, I was curious as to why they fetch such high prices, and why tea bowls alone seem to be treated in such a special way in Japanese ceramics.

So you decided to learn more about the subject?

I wouldn't call it systematic learning as such; I learned more about it as I worked with Mr Seizo Hayashiya. Mr Hayashiya was a frontrunner in the world of tea bowls and appraised items at the National Treasure level, or those designated as Important Cultural Properties; he wrote books about his findings.







ALISON JACQUES





**He was a true authority in the field of ceramics research and passed away in 2017. How did you get along with him?**

He came to Tajimi for a lecture, and I asked him if he'd mind taking a look at my tea bowls. I thought I'd be totally rejected, but he agreed right away, and we started getting to know each other.

**So Mr Hayashiya acknowledged the quality of your work.**

He would then regularly invite me to tea ceremonies at Kakiden Gallery in Shinjuku. This gave me a chance to see and experience tea bowls up close that were considered Important Cultural Properties, or similar designa-

of these implements. Once you understand this framework, you can then begin playing outside the lines. But at the time I'd completely ignored everything and was rambunctiously creating tea bowls without any knowledge. So the bowls I made in those days never appeared at Mr Hayashiya's tea ceremonies. He did approve of the concept though, saying there was room for people to practise that sort of tea style.

**He had a contemporary way of thinking.**

Yes, I'd say so. I asked him what my role could be in the world of the tea ceremony, and he gave me various suggestions. I started taking my work to his tea ceremonies so he could appraise it. Actually, taking part in tea ceremo-



As I witnessed these rare and precious works, my preconceptions about tea bowls began to wear away.

**He was quite liberal in his views about ceramics, going so far as to host tea ceremonies that brought together practitioners from different schools. Is there anything that stands out to you that you learned from him?**

He quite bluntly told me at one point, 'The works you make are not tea bowls'. The tea ceremony was something developed by historic tea practitioners like Sen no Rikyu and performed in a 4.5m tatami room, with implements installed throughout the room at specific intervals and strict rules that governed the size

and having my work looked at made me realise certain insights that I hadn't even taken into account before, like a bowl being too big.

**Simply taking part in those tea ceremonies allowed Mr Hayashiya to envision various possibilities for your work, then.**

Thanks to him, I learned about the way the culture had developed and the importance of understanding the underlying knowledge that had formed there. Once I'd learned and appreciated that, I was better positioned to think about colouring outside the lines.

**That's when your 'Tea Bowl' series began to really take shape, right? You name the majori-**

apartamento - Takuro Kuwata





ty of your works 'Tea Bowl', irrespective of size or appearance. This is starting to make sense, based on our conversation so far. It's quite interesting, isn't it? You studied ceramics in a liberal context at college and then mastered the foundations under Mr Zaima, then the tea ceremony under Mr Hayashiya. Do you remember when you held your first solo exhibition?

It was at a gallery in Minami Aoyama, in Minato-ku, Tokyo.

How was your work different then from how it is now?

My work today is totally different. My work then had a certain defined form with a bit of 'functional beauty' built in. It also had slight elements of the art object. Once I got my first solo exhibition, I started to appear in magazines here and there, and regional galleries in different places invited me out. But that didn't last very long.

Why was that?

My work started getting stranger. Or should I say, the assertions I was making became stronger. People were increasingly telling me I shouldn't put too much personal expression into them, since, at the end of the day, these are utensils. I'd bring them out to show people and they'd ask me what purpose they served or say they looked hard to cook with.

But you kept working on your signature style, unperturbed.

Well, no, it definitely got to me at times and depressed me, but I was gradually developing work that resembled what I do today, and I began to develop a signature style that was my own, which people took an interest in buying. But then I started getting people talking about the price: 'That other artist prices his work at such and such, so there's no way you could price yours like this'. And so on.

I see. I guess it didn't sit well with the thrifty Japanese mentality. People don't want to spend 50,000 yen on pottery.

I felt quite differently about it and really struggled.

Peter Voulkos, who produced work that went beyond the confines of ceramics and fine art, said that 'clay is like thick paint'. But in Japan, it seems that pottery is still seen as an everyday implement, and people do not fully appreciate it as art. Is this something you are deliberately trying to achieve—positioning your work as art?

Not in particular, no. But it stands to reason that it turns out that way, as I do like fine art.

I noticed that your tatami room has Yayoi Kusama's *Desire of Death* and tea bowls by Tom Sachs. It intrigued me, because this doesn't quite seem to fit the stereotype of a potter. Are there other works that have influenced you?

Yes, definitely. For example, when I first saw clothes by Comme des Garçons, I was inspired by the use of clothing materials. It got me curious about mashing up the clay and creating some kind of hulking form, then using primary colours. To me, this is a totally natural thought process. Yet for most people, the concept of ceramics tends to make them think of orthodox forms, like plates or tea bowls.

And you have misgivings about that?

Yes, I do. It's fine to have work like Oribe or Shigaraki ware, which might be analogous to classical music. But consider that we should also have things like techno, jazz, and hip-hop. Think about it: Oribe dates back to the Momoyama period, when people still rode around on horses. Bringing that into the present and acting like it's the only acceptable form of expression seems out of place.

Think about places like London, where you have very contemporary art appearing in traditional Western-style buildings that fit into the old streetscape. The juxtaposition is great



Top to bottom: Blue-slippered Gold-drips; Pink-slippered Gold-drips Stone-burst; Black-slippered Gold-drips bowl; Yellow-slippered Platinum Kairogi Shino bowl.













and it's something we should see more of in ceramics. Sometimes my work is criticised as being anti-ceramics, but I don't feel that way at all. I'm simply creating what I like, from a contemporary context.

**I noticed a sort of dissonance between your home and your studio. In your studio, there's work cluttered around the floor, while your home seems quite orderly, almost as if certain colours or tones have been matched.**

My studio and home are totally different, yes. It might have something to do with my temperament. If they were totally identical, I'd get tangled up and wouldn't be able to think straight. So my home has to be simple. I don't want to get too caught up in needless thinking at home, which is also why I keep my T-shirts and shoes all black and have everything in the same size. If I find I don't like the way my clothes fit, then I have to replace everything with a new size.

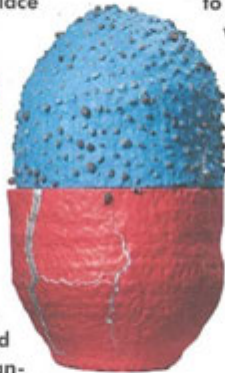
**That must be why you have a lot of items like Konstantin Grcic's Rival chair, the Kaari table, Baby Rocket stool, and other Artek works. We talked about how you pick your clothes. Do you have a similar approach to the tools in your home?** It's only intuitive, not deliberate, but I tend to pick up a lot of contemporary items. I'm also attracted to vintage stuff, but given the financial constraints, or my inability to coordinate all of that cohesively, I'd rather just pick up reproductions or designs that are easy and accessible for me. I picked up this simple stool when I went to Mexico recently. I guess I have a lot of chairs.

**My sense is that your lifestyle is not about surrounding yourself with things you love, like most people would, but subtractive—eliminating things that would disturb you.**

I agree with that. My home tends to change quite radically based on my tastes at any given time.

**It's a testament to how absorbed you are in your work. In 2018, you took part in the 'Fire and Clay' exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, in a group show with artists like Peter Voulkos and Sterling Ruby. Your works have become accepted in the wider world of art. What do you personally find appealing about art?**

It's difficult to express, but I like it when people are on the same wavelength as me, I suppose. When I had my first exhibition overseas, I met people who immediately got the essentials of my work and really picked up on it. I was on cloud nine. We were able to share a mutual understanding in a way that I hadn't been able to when I was working within the confines of the ceramics world. So I'd say that what I find attractive about working in a fine art context is that it lets people engage with ceramic vessels in a much broader sense of the word and in different contexts, rather than just as functional containers.



Top to bottom: Platinum Koiragi Shino bowl; Blue-slipped Platinum Koiragi Shino bowl; Red-sky-slipped Stone-burst Capsule; Black-slipped Gold Koiragi Shino bowl.

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