

Visual delight



Beth Williamson visits Takuro Kuwata's latest show at the Mead Gallery and discovers surface textures and colours that challenge tradition

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Untitled*, 2016, porcelain, stone, glaze, pigment, steel, gold, lacquer, H293 x W135 x D139cm
RIGHT: Takuro Kuwata, *Tea Bowl Punk* installation, 2025
RIGHT, BELOW: *Untitled*, 2022

Takuro Kuwata has come a long way from the traditional ceramic training of his youth. After graduating in Ceramic Arts from Kyoto Saga Art College in 2001, he studied with master potter Susumu Zaima in 2002. Then, in 2007, he graduated from the Tajimi City Pottery Design and Technical Center. Now, he works in his studio at the heart of Japanese ceramics in the Mino region of Gifu Prefecture.

No longer satisfied with the process of making the tea bowl, or chawan, Kuwata did not abandon his traditional training and skills but put them to new and inventive purposes. Beginning with the tea bowl, he closes the form, denies its function, and moves on from that point. The functional craft of the tea bowl is challenged as he develops new aesthetic artistic forms.

After inclusion in half a dozen major exhibitions, it was the presence of his work in *Strange Clay*, 2022, at the Hayward Gallery in London that really brought his work to wider attention. Now, *Tea Bowl Punk* at the Mead Gallery in Coventry shows the whole range of his work across media and scale from 2015 to the present day.

VIBRANT DISPLAY

Entering the space at the Mead Gallery feels like walking into a secret garden. It is as if we have crossed a threshold into a reconfigured world where sherbet-coloured glazes adorn almost three-metre-high objects and small cups alike. Yet, much of what we see seems familiar. After all, the history of the tea bowl and the Japanese tea ceremony provide a foundation for Kuwata's artistic practice.

Traditional techniques infused with experimental processes make for thrilling visual encounters. While there are glimpses of his early interest in shino and oribe ware, there is no immediate understanding with Kuwata's work.

The large space of the Mead Gallery allows for complete freedom and the work is given room to breathe, placed directly on the floor or the wall, except for *Cup installation*, 2025, where broken ceramic cups are piled up on a wooden base as a lesson in learning from failure. Objects are nicely grouped together, enabling more meaningful engagement to take place. Look around the gallery and it is the wabi-sabi philosophy of finding beauty in imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness that shines through.

There are many elements at play here as Kuwata approaches his materials at the interstice of tradition and contemporariness, seriousness and humour, intuition and responsiveness, growth and decay, simplicity and complexity, independence and referentiality, surface

and depth, control and spontaneity. The dilemmas within his work are made more complex still as these objects do not deny their origins but instead evolve from them.

UNPREDICTABLE PROCESSES

It is in close observation that the range of traditional Japanese ceramic techniques in these contemporary objects becomes clear. The cracked surfaces of kairagi (a 'sharkskin' glaze) are pushed beyond normal limits by Kuwata, using new materials in works such as two separate examples of *Chawan*, 2022, made from aluminium, urethane and platinum leaf. In his clay works, he also deploys the kairagi-shino method of firing to create objects that seem to emerge from within, like a seed bursting from its pod.

In other objects, his use of ishihaze is explosive. The technique traditionally allowed for small stones in the clay to erupt on the surface of an object once fired. Kuwata loads the clay with these stones so that they explode unpredictably creating a lava-like finish that can be seen on many pieces in this show. This willingness to trust to chance is evident also in his use of a thick feldspar glaze that runs and drips as it pleases.

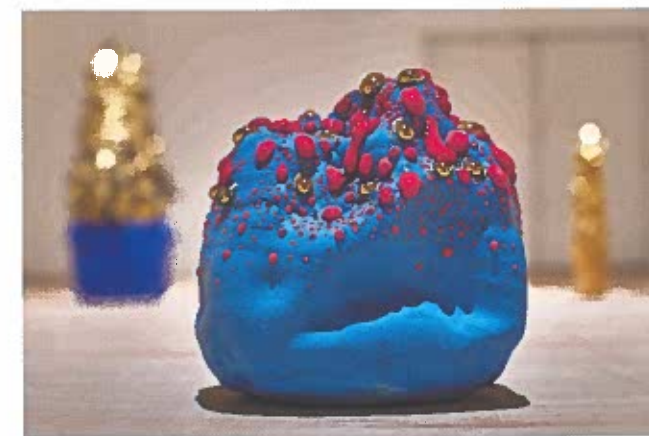
In another technique, learnt from his apprenticeship with Zaima, Kuwata uses tenteki, applying dots of glaze

on a ceramic surface so the work appears to be sweating. In everything from the small amoeboid *Untitled*, 2020, in pale aquamarine with red dots, to the spikey yellow *Untitled*, 2025, with blue dots, this technique imbues the objects with life, almost as if they are breathing.

Kuwata deploys these techniques with reverence and humour. In a new work made for the University of Warwick's historic ceramic collection, he dots the surface with a series in the shape of a square, mimicking the metal studs found on clothing in the punk era, and gesturing to the exhibition title. As he explains, the engaging range of finishes on this piece required firing in both wood-fired and electric kilns.

HISTORIC & CONTEMPORARY

The university's historic collection of ceramics has a place in this exhibition too as pieces were selected to include and sit alongside Kuwata's work. The ceramics are part of a wider art collection founded in 1965, with the ceramic component coming in 1978 along with the merger with Coventry College of Education. It is without fuss or commentary that the convergences and divergences between different studio pottery traditions (think Hans Coper, Mary Rogers and Ian Auld, for instance) and Kuwata's work is revealed. His simultaneous presence in the



historic collection and the contemporary exhibition space perfectly illustrates his position between the long traditions of Japanese ceramics and the vibrancy of the contemporary moment. Neither thing precludes the other. ■

Takuro Kuwata: Tea Bowl Punk, until 15 March, Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, University of Warwick. *Artists in Conversation: Making Ceramics Today*, Aaron Angell, Renee So and Joanne Masding in conversation with Alun Graves, 10 February, 6.30–7.30pm, tickets: £6; warwickartscentre.co.uk



Images, courtesy of Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre and Alison Jacques, photos by Luke Pickering