

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery

Artists make so many mash-ups of painting, sculpture and drawing these days that when one turns up with work in a traditional form, it seems almost radical. Shio Kusaka is such an artist. No two of the carved ceramic vessels in her current exhibition at the Anton Kern Gallery are alike. Yet they don't stray very far from those of a typical potter. Then again, Kusaka, 38, is not trying to reinvent the wheel. "I like ceramics because it hasn't changed for a long time," she says. "And I think that's amazing, what people can do with the hands. It's the same, and still they make it new."

The most unexpected thing about Kusaka's vases and jugs is the sight of them at Kern's gallery. The dealer's usual fare runs to art with a highly conceptual bent, and to figurative paintings by artists like Jonas Wood, who happens to be married to Kusaka and whose

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painted interiors and still lifes occasionally include pots that look suspiciously like his wife's. In fact, Kusaka's works are sometimes inspired by Wood's painted ones. Or it goes the other way: she makes pots and he paints them.

That is not the only synergistic aspect of her show. Kern's wife is Nathalie Karg, a landscape designer whose Cumulus Studios commissions limited-edition functional objects by artists for inside the home and out – dinnerware by Cindy Sherman, bronze clothing hooks by Andrea Zittel, a stainless steel Ping-Pong table by Rirkrit Tiravanija, a rubber-tire backyard swing by Aaron Young, mushroom-shaped footstools by Rob Wynne – and dog bowls by Kusaka. Karg included them in a show of 150 functional artworks that she organized for the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery last month. Yet it wasn't Karg who introduced Kern to Kusaka's wares. He spotted them first, in Wood's paintings, and then in real life during a visit to the couple's home in Los Angeles. "I just liked them," Kern said with a shrug. "They're simple and beautiful, flirtatious and austere."

Flirtatious is exactly what they are. Narrow and squat, glazed black or matte white, incised with wavy nets or uneven vertical drips, nubby or smooth, angular or columnar, they insist on being touched, turned and examined in the hand – activities usually forbidden to viewers of art. At \$600 to \$1,000, they are also modestly priced, at least for work in a high-end gallery. Dispensing with shelves or pedestals typical for the display of such objects, Kusaka's works are arrayed in random groups on two trestle tables that run the length of the space. "Anything else would have made them look too much like pottery," she said. It's form she wants to emphasize, not function. It's sculpture she is making, not housewares.

Perhaps ceramics have become the new bronze. They are appearing in galleries everywhere now, and not just in shows by artists like Ken Price, Grayson Perry, Betty Woodman and Andrew Lord, pre-eminent artists of the medium. Jeff Koons made spectacular use of it 20 years ago with his "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" sculpture, but a younger generation that includes Sterling Ruby, Rebecca Warren and Jessica Jackson Hutchins has been taking molded clay to even more sublimely ridiculous lengths. No one would confuse their expressionistic works with the vases and mugs of the gift-shop realm. That is because none of these artists blur the boundaries between art and craft as Kusaka does. Her works stand firmly on their own as aesthetic statements. It's just that you can use them for flower arrangements, too.

"Shio Kusaka" continues through Aug. 20 at the [Anton Kern Gallery](#), 532 West 20th Street.

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