

## At Home and in the Studio with Shio Kusaka and Jonas Wood

For the Los Angeles ceramicist Shio Kusaka, art is a family affair.

The Japanese artist Shio Kusaka just opened a refined show of delicate, porcelain ceramics at Los Angeles's Blum & Poe gallery, but the clay figures most prominently visible at her nearby studio in Culver City told a different story: Various animal-like forms and abstract blobs cluttered a wooden work table, next to Nike sneaker cut-outs and a coiled pile resembling a certain emoji. "This was actually a poop head," Kusaka, 44, said with a laugh.

The credit for these pieces goes partly to the painter Jonas Wood, 39, who shares her studio space and also happens to be her husband. "We like hanging out and doing the clay together," Kusaka said, gesturing to the various animal-like forms and abstract figures made by their children, a six-year-old daughter named Momo and a four-year-old son named Kiki. (Their dog, Robot, not too far at her feet, is usually around, too.)

Art has long been a family affair: Wood and Kusaka's influence on each other's art has been so evident, their relationship was at the center of a Gagosian show in Hong Kong last year. Wood's paintings often feature Kusaka and her work, for example, while Kusaka reworks her patterns from his more abstract versions of hers, and incorporates some of his recurring motifs, like a basketball, which is almost omnipresent in their studio, appearing everywhere from Wood's paintings to Kusaka's rolling desk chair to a wallpaper Wood designed in the bathroom – not to mention a court and two hoops in their yard, where Kusaka also keeps her kiln.

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY



Jonas Wood, "Shio Shrine," 2010. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Courtesy Wood Kusaka Studios.  
Photographed by Joshua White.

"We both like imperfections in our own way," Kusaka said, explaining her own style and approach. "I always feel like for me and Jonas, it's kind of like a rolling stop sign. You're supposed to stop at the stop sign, but you only kind of stop. We are not really – or at least I am not – trying to make it wrong, but I am aware that I'm not right, too."

For Wood, that might mean a little off-ness when it comes to perspective, but for Kusaka, it's about making sure her pots aren't entirely round or symmetrical. "It's hard because as I keep doing it, I only get better," she said. While she's influenced by Chinese and Greek pottery, too, it's third- and fourth-century Japanese pottery from the Yayoi Period that has what she calls her "goal quality" in terms of looseness and curves. But she tries not to overthink it too much: "I make pots," she modestly told a group of journalists touring her show at Blum & Poe earlier that week.

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# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY



Installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo.

“I never thought I would be an artist at all,” she added, at her studio. Kusaka moved to San Francisco from Morioka, Japan at age 20, enrolled in business school, and worked an accounting job before heading to Colorado on a whim. She enrolled in community college, and, in need of another course so she didn’t have to head back to Japan, settled on Pottery 101, which she picked randomly from the school’s catalogue.

It stuck: She soon moved to Seattle for the University of Washington’s ceramics program, where, one day in the art library, she met Wood, who was then in the graduate painting program. A few years later, they married, moved to L.A., and settled on sharing a studio – a highly optimistic undertaking Kusaka laughingly described as “a terrible experience for both of us.” About five years ago, though, with much more space, they gave it another shot. Now, they spend most of their days in Culver City. “We drop the kids off and then come here,” Kusaka said, then clarified: “not together, but separately.”

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They alternate late nights at the studio, too, though babysitting also has its artistic merits: The idea to line up Kusaka's miniature animal figurines at Blum & Poe actually came from Momo, who did the same with her own figures back at home. Another room at the gallery has Momo's tiny handprints on it, too: A picture book she brought home one day was the inspiration behind Kusaka's new collection of dinosaur and landscape pots – large vessels that require two firings and a full month to dry.

“She's mellowed out right now, but she was really obsessed and would remember every single dinosaur's name and point out if I made a little mistake with the details,” Kusaka said with a smile. “She helps me a lot.”

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