

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Wallpaper*
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Playful clay: Shio Kusaka's vibrant vessels arrive at LA's Blum & Poe



'A baseball swing is a very finely tuned instrument,' Reggie Jackson once said of his greatest asset on the ball field. 'It is repetition, and more repetition, then a little more after that.' The same might be said about the touch of a great ceramicist. While LA-based potter Shio Kusaka is almost self-deprecating to a fault about her own talent, she is effusive about the skills that have been honed by her assistants over the past few years. In short, they got so good at making larger pots – Kusaka focuses on more petite, asymmetrical vessels that show her hand in their construction – she asked them to start making traditional Japanese, Chinese, Greek and Cypriot forms.

When the wheel was invented, people all over the world tried to make a perfect circle, she explains. 'That was their goal but [some] people couldn't do it because of their skill. But I like that feeling where it's off,' says Kusaka. 'It's very different than making it off on purpose. That's an expression. I grew up with that in Japan. I get shy from that and shy from the perfect form.'

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Over the years, Kusaka has carved and painted her unintentionally off vessels to mimic the shape and feel of strawberries, the grids of Agnes Martin paintings, or dinosaurs from the pages of her children's books, which made a splash at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. 'I was doing my forms, strawberries, and when I thought a Greek pot could be a strawberry... it really opened me up,' she says.

That expansion is on full display tomorrow night at LA's Blum & Poe, where Kusaka will unveil 75 new works that range from constellations of her iconic white porcelain vessels, which she's been making for years, to a traditional Japanese stoneware pot painted with brown rainbows, and every colour and form in between. The show begins (or ends, depending on which entrance you fancy) with Kusaka's 'summer section', that features two large Greek strawberry vessels, a watermelon, two beach balls, and a pair of bikini clad women — taken from 'tacky Venice Beach postcards' from the 1980s that she found in the bathroom of the studio she shares with her husband, painter Jonas Wood — carved onto a tall black Japanese urn. 'I wanted to do butterflies,' says Kusaka. 'I don't like drawing people.'

Proceeding from there — along a plywood runway of sorts that is topped with pink Formica, a nod to the buildings along Wilshire Boulevard — Kusaka investigates her geometric abstractions on super-sized vessels. These curve around a corner toward the delicate pairing of a stovepiped stoneware pot and a white gourd-like Cypriot form. The pink road terminates in this gallery, with a forest of pots that mimic the grains of plywood and Wood's paintings.

In the adjoining gallery she gets whimsical with a procession of tiny porcelain animal figurines — cheetahs, tigers, dinosaurs, penguins, unicorns, and a few stoneware baboons — which she's been making for years with her children. 'When I'm with my kids I make these things,' she says. 'My son loves to smash them, so if I like them I have to save them. The installation I stole from my daughter, she likes to line them up in the house.'

Her daughter also influenced the final sequence, which is also taken from her dinosaur books; but this time, Kusaka decided to replicate the fight scenes. 'I was skipping those pages when I started, I didn't need the drama, I just liked the images of the dinosaurs and the landscapes,' she says. 'But by skipping them I was really aware of those scenes.'

While the bloody battles spilling out from these pots adds a grave coda to the installation, it does so on a pretty pink plinth. 'I want to make happy work,' concludes Kusaka. 'I like happy shows.'

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