

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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ARTIST SHIO KUSAKA'S MESMERIZING CERAMIC POTTERY

The artist's poetic, seductive vessels step into the spotlight at the 2014
Whitney Biennial

Text by Rob Haskell | Photography by Dave Lauridsen



Ceramist Shio Kusaka in her Los Angeles Studio. Kusaka is represented in the U.S.
by Anton Kern Gallery, Shane Campbell Gallery, and Blum & Poe.

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Growing up in Japan, Shio Kusaka had little interest in art. But her grandmother led traditional tea ceremonies, and those rituals helped guide Kusaka, many years later, toward making ceramics. "After being served, you spend time observing—the cup, the spoon," explains the artist, perched in the vast Los Angeles studio she shares with her husband, painter Jonas Wood. "This taught me to stop and look."

Kusaka has asked something similar of visitors to New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, where 39 of her porcelain and stoneware vessels are exhibited in the 2014 Biennial. It's a breakthrough for the artist, whose work draws rhapsodic whispers from admiring critics and collectors but had yet to command such a big stage.



A work in progress.

It wasn't until after studying accounting in California and living for a stint in Colorado that Kusaka tried her hand at pottery. She went on to get a BFA at the University of Washington, where she toyed with an array of different media, finally returning to clay while assisting L.A.-based sculptor Charles Ray.

At first she focused on form, finishing porcelain in just clear or white glazes. Then, inspired by the artist Agnes Martin as well as by the subtle motifs of Japanese Iron Age ceramics, Kusaka began to apply patterns—painted, incised, or both. Her work soon caught the attention of Shane Campbell, Wood's Chicago dealer, who offered her a show. The Anton Kern Gallery in New York, Greengrassi in London, and Blum & Poe in L.A. followed.

Her installations combine dozens of one-of-a-kind ceramics in quiet but arresting vignettes. "Shio employs the prosaic yet historical clay pot but plays with the idea of difference in repetition," says Biennial cocurator Michelle Grabner.

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Three 2013 vessels. Photo courtesy of the artist

Kusaka's most recent pieces include urns with dinosaurs and jaguar spots, the former borrowing from her daughter's Jurassic fixation and the latter from her own love of 1980s fashion. Wood's work, too, offers material. "He puts my pots in his paintings and I copy his versions," she says. In their studio is a Wood portrait of NBA great Larry Bird, which might call into question the couple's creative synergy—until Kusaka pulls out a vessel carved and glazed to resemble a basketball. "This," she notes, "is not for the Biennial."

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