

Kawabata Kentaro

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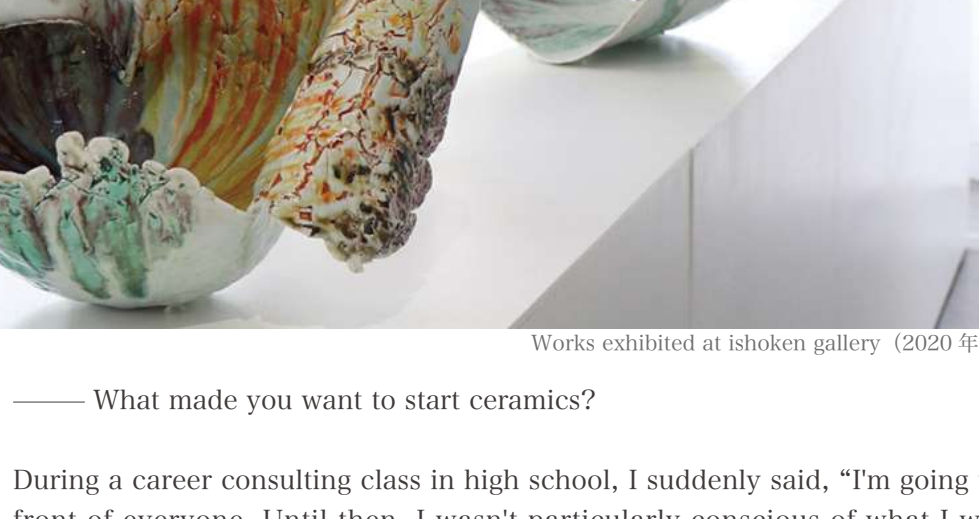
We interviewed Kentaro Kawabata (Graduate of the 41th year of the Technical Course at Ishoken) in 2021, who exhibited at the Ishoken gallery in September 2020.

— Thank you for exhibiting your works last year. Looking back now, how was the show?

It felt refreshing. Exhibiting your own pieces at the institution you graduated from in front of your juniors feels different from other exhibitions.

— What were your intentions in the exhibition?

Instead of showcasing one series like I usually do, I thought it would be better to show a variety of works so the students could see the transition between the works. Also by exhibiting a variety of works I thought I could encourage the students to have a wider perspective in their practice.



Works exhibited at ishoken gallery (2020年)

— What made you want to start ceramics?

During a career consulting class in high school, I suddenly said, "I'm going to do ceramics!" in front of everyone. Until then, I wasn't particularly conscious of what I wanted to do in the future. But that was the first time I ever expressed what I wanted to do in public, so I just went with it and started to look for ceramics schools.

— Wow, you must have been interested in ceramics before?

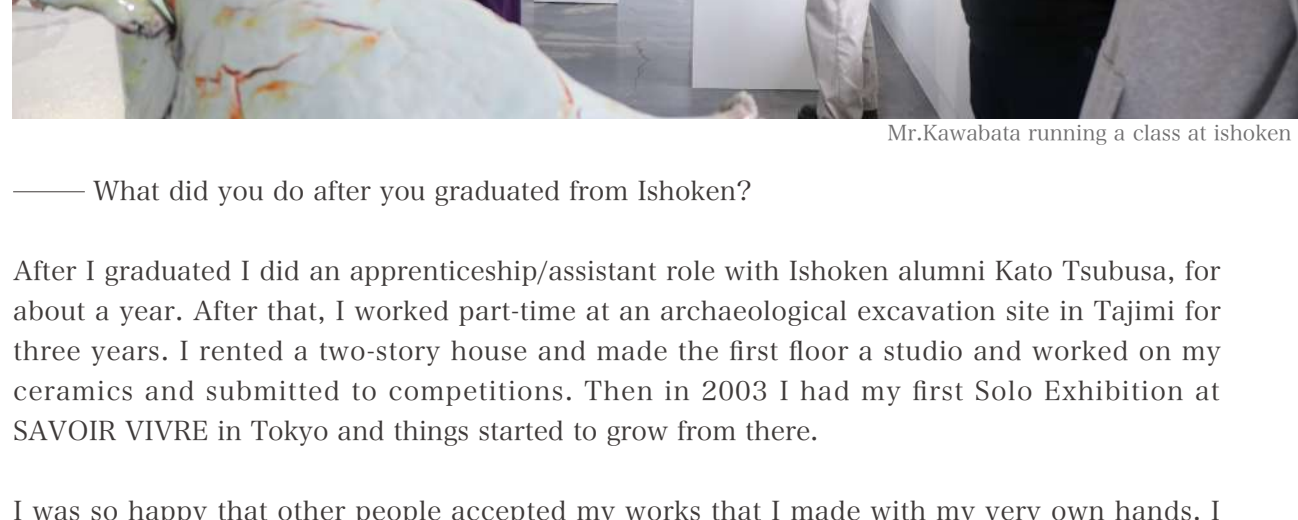
Hmm, not in particular. I didn't have a very strong impression of ceramics before. If I think about it, there was a time in elementary school when we went on an excursion to Mashiko. We did a pottery class and I didn't have enough time to finish it so they sent the completed piece by post later. Also...on a late night TV show they introduced a local bar/izakaya that was meant to relieve stress by throwing ceramics plates on the floor. That is about it. I really didn't know anything about ceramics. If I think about it now it was probably better that I didn't know too much.

— Does that mean you had never experienced ceramics until vocational ceramic school?

Yes. It took me about half a year to actually touch clay, since we did design classes first. When I touched clay for the first time, I thought, "so this is clay huh, nothing too special." The clay I used was terracotta; at the time it didn't leave a strong impression. But, I felt that I had to concentrate more at school since my parents allowed me to follow a career as a ceramicist. Many of the other students just came to class without any focus or direction. I felt that I was more motivated and enjoyed my time there. If I didn't choose ceramics, I might have been an electrician because I was in that line of work I was doing in high school.

— Why did you come to Ishoken after graduating from a vocational ceramic school?

When I was in the last year of the vocational ceramic school, I was in a similar situation to that time in high school. During a career consulting session the teacher said, "Why don't you continue with ceramics?" and I thought, "Yeah, why not." That's when I saw the Ishoken pamphlet and thought that I could have a try and went to visit the institution. When I visited it felt very rural to me but the staff kindly showed me the facilities and I left with a good impression. I applied in the last round of applications and just got in because someone dropped out at the last minute.



Mr.Kawabata running a class at ishoken

— What did you do after you graduated from Ishoken?

After I graduated I did an apprenticeship/assistant role with Ishoken alumni Kato Tsubasa, for about a year. After that, I worked part-time at an archaeological excavation site in Tajimi for three years. I rented a two-story house and made the first floor a studio and worked on my ceramics and submitted to competitions. Then in 2003 I had my first Solo Exhibition at SAVOIR VIVRE in Tokyo and things started to grow from there.

I was so happy that other people accepted my works that I made with my very own hands. I don't think I would've been able to continue to make ceramics if I had never had that experience. At first I was making tableware, but incrementally I shifted away from that and started to make the forms I wanted to make. As I started to make the shift, contemporary art galleries also started to show an interest in ceramics so I was able to transition into that world. The environment changed, the people interested in my works gradually changed and the way I thought about my works changed too.

— Is there something like a theme throughout your work?

There isn't a theme that runs throughout all my works, but I do consider themes for each series. I also think about it while I am making the works but it changes from time to time. When I start making one piece, there is a lot I start to realize and it changes. There is a theme when I start the making process, but as I continue it changes. When I am finished, I am not sure if I should make the works fit the theme I had at the beginning of the process or if I should fit the theme to what I have made in front of me. When I was in Ishoken we had to propose our concepts at the beginning of the year but by the time of the graduation exhibition it had changed a lot. But I do think that the premise didn't change too much.

— Did you get the idea to use glass when you were in Ishoken?

When I was a research student, some people went to buy special clay. I didn't have the money at the time so I wanted to find materials I could use in Ishoken. I had decided to work on my hand coiling techniques, so I was mixing in sand and stones and random bits I found. It felt like accumulating memories and when you put glaze over it the textures and the nuance of the clay would change and reappear after firing. Since glass is also a raw material used in glazes, I broke bottles and mixed it in with the clay. The color wasn't great since all I could find were brown beer bottles. After I graduated I got more colors at the local glass shop.

— How do you control the flow and colours of the glass?

I did many experiments with sizing and the way it is applied in the clay. Through these experiments I picked out the size and methods that worked.

— Do you have a finished form in mind when you start making?

I decide as I am making. Even when I make larger pieces I don't really have a final form in mind. For example, the bottom could be thin and it could get thicker as it gets higher and go off balance, but there should always be a way to finish up the form and balance it out.

— Is hand coiling with porcelain difficult?

The technique is not mentioned in books, so I had to figure it out by doing a lot of experiments. A lot of the time it didn't work out, but that's just part of the fun. Sometimes my work would crack, and I would just accept it. I started to realize it just depends on how you think about the crack.

— Do you mean that it depends on whether you like cracks?

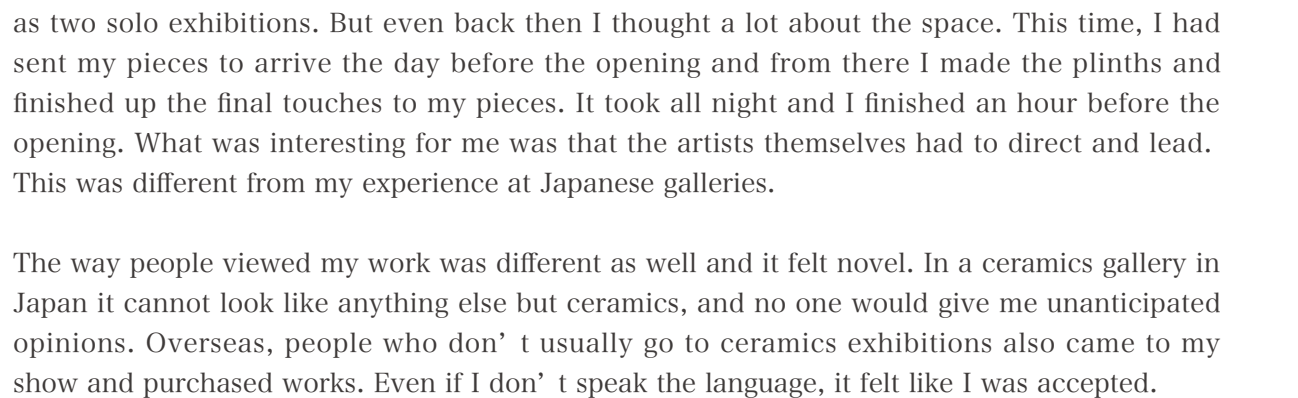
Yes, the feeling towards it changes as your experience builds up. I couldn't accept the cracks at first but I was fortunate enough to have the experience of having to accept the cracks many times. First, I was curious to see how cracked pieces would behave in the kiln, but as days went by observing the cracks everyday my perspective started to change. In the end, if I liked it, I would show it in an exhibition. Then, I would talk to the people who come to look at my work, and from there get feedback and it becomes inspiration for my next piece.

— How much of the firing process is calculated?

I am not fully calculating it. Before firing I have a vague idea of how it will warp in the kiln even if it has cracks in it. But at the same time, the porcelain has glass and bits and pieces mixed into it so is not always predictable. Even if the work collapses, I feel it is a piece of work that I have put in time and energy so when the final piece after firing is unpredictable or has collapsed, it still grows on me and I can feel that I can enjoy the cracks.

— When do you feel like making ceramics the most?

I know it's fun when you are working with the clay but when you are away from it for a while it becomes hard to get back into. I don't know if I am procrastinating and avoiding it, but it's so difficult and tough to start making again, even if I know I'll enjoy it when I do. A lot of tension and stress is released once I start working. That's when I think I am lucky that I have a way to release these stresses in life. Through my ceramics I am accepted into society and I can connect and relate to the world. I am very grateful that I am able to have my ceramic practice.



Works exhibited at entrance hall of ishoken (2020年)

— How many exhibitions do you have per year?

In the past I had more but these days it's three to four.

— I would like to know more about your current exhibition in America (at NonakaHill/Los Angeles, 2021/11/19~2022/1/29).

The exhibition is on for 2 months including days off. The space and the placement of the works and plinths were conceived together with the gallery. The lighting style and the positioning of the works seemed different to galleries that usually work with ceramics in Japan. The exhibition was made to enjoy spatial relationships.

— Is this the first time you've exhibited in a space like Nonaka Hill?

I actually did an exhibition there three years ago together with another artist. It was presented as two solo exhibitions. But even back then I thought a lot about the space. This time, I had sent my pieces to arrive the day before the opening and from there I made the plinths and finished up the final touches to my pieces. It took all night and I finished an hour before the opening. What was interesting for me was that the artists themselves had to direct and lead. This was different from my experience at Japanese galleries.

The way people viewed my work was different as well and it felt novel. In a ceramics gallery in Japan it cannot look like anything else but ceramics, and no one would give me unanticipated opinions. Overseas, people who don't usually go to ceramics exhibitions also came to my show and purchased works. Even if I don't speak the language, it felt like I was accepted.

— Finally, do you have a message for the students who are studying ceramics?

Ceramics must not be too difficult even if I can do it, haha. Hmm, a word to the students...I guess it's just getting into the zone. If you do, gradually you can feel yourself and your work changing and that can also become your motivation. That experience will eventually become what is fun or exciting.

At Mr.Kawabata's work place



Kawabata Kentaro

Born in Saitama Prefecture in 1976.
Kawabata first graduated from the Department of Crafts and Industrial Design, Tokyo Designers Academy in 1998, and then graduated from the Tajimi City Ceramic Design Institute (Ishoken) in 2000. Kawabata is known for this unique approach to porcelain where he expresses the soft and powerful nature of porcelain through the use of bright colored glass and glazes. Recently, he has been working on a series with recycled clay under the theme of vitality, and continues to stimulate audiences. Highlights of his major awards include the Paramita Ceramic Art Grand Prize Exhibition Grand Prize and the Mashiko Ceramic Art Exhibition Shoji Kamoda Award.