

Sato Masayuki

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Ishoken
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We spoke to Masayuki Sato (graduate of the Ishoken 38th Design Course) whose work was exhibited at ishoken gallery in September 2022.

— Now that the exhibition has started, how do you feel?

First of all, I'm glad that I was able to exhibit everything safely. As for the exhibition itself, I took it on as a challenge. I was not quite sure what to expect or how it would turn out. Having a solo exhibition in Mino is a lot of pressure, especially since it's my first time showing my new style of work in such a big way.

— What was your thought process behind the works in this exhibition?

I was trying not to be too pretentious. Previously, my work used a different process where I developed a unique technique and made forms using slip. In this exhibition, I stopped using my old techniques and started to explore forms with my hands. Ceramics has the ability to bring out emotions and feelings from your subconsciousness so it felt embarrassing at times to let it all out. I could reflect on my works and examine them and rediscover my feelings about myself and parts of my works that I appreciate.



Exhibition at ishoken gallery

— What got you into ceramics in the first place?

At first, I just wanted to do art, and the only school that I got into from the art school entrance exam was Musashino Art University Junior College of Art and Design. At first I worked with all kinds of materials such as metals and plastics, and I only did a semester of ceramics there. More than anything I wanted to experience and explore new places, so I would work casual part-time jobs, then travel all across Japan and go find another job when I ran out of money and repeat that. After doing this for a while I got a bit lost and started to wonder what I was doing. It was around then when I was thinking about my future more seriously when I came across my friend who was firing a wood-fired kiln. There, I was able to work with clay for again after a long time. It was so fun that I decided that I should take ceramics seriously, so I looked into magazines for places to study ceramics. I applied to ceramics courses in Seto, Kyoto, and Ishoken but I wasn't accepted. Then suddenly, Nakashima Harumi sensei called me and asked if I wanted to join the design course at Ishoken instead.

— What was it like joining Ishoken?

At the time, there were many predecessors of local ceramic companies in Ishoken, and the first thing they would ask me was, "What are you doing here?" They were asking me why, because to them Ishoken wasn't a place for art, but in my mind, I came to Ishoken to make art.

— Are there any classes that particularly left an impression on you?

Nakashima Sensei "Sketching 100 Cylinders" class allowed me to see beyond my limits. Also ... I guess it wasn't technically a class, but in the second year, my classmates and I skipped class and went to see IAC conference that was held in Kyushu and Aichi. We camped out in a park and went to the conference without tickets. The conference was very inspirational, but I couldn't find a process or form that felt right until my graduation project.

— What did you do for your graduation project?

For my graduation project I worked on a piece using slip. The inspiration came when something that had poured on the floor when I was cleaning up. I felt that there was something interesting about the difference between the surface stuck to the floor and the visible surface, so I wondered if I could create a work that could show both the front and the back surfaces.

— I see how that leads into your practice after Ishoken. What were you thinking of doing after graduation?

I had a vague idea that I wanted to continue ceramics. Around May or June of my second year, I was called by Nakashima sensei and Maeda sensei and they semi-forced me to check out a ceramic factory. I ended up getting a job there. The work itself was good, but the most appealing point was that they supported my artistic practice. I had an area and a kiln where I could make my own artwork after hours. I also needed financial stability for me to continue my artistic practice so it helped me out financially.



Sato teaching

— What kind of work did you do at your place of employment?

I did tableware design. I worked at a place that specialized in using slabs. It was quite interesting because they only used slabs, and made everything in-house—from the molds to the final product. From that era more and more manufacturers in Mizunami started to create in-house design studios with graduates from Ishoken. However I came to understand the difficulty of design is that each decision you make influences the future of the company. On top of that, you start to realize that good designs don't necessarily sell well and the main focus becomes making items that sell. I learnt that simply designing something that you want is not always the answer. Another aspect that we had to think about was the workflow of the production process itself. It isn't a good design if you're not thinking about how it is going to be manufactured.

— You mentioned that you had the right environment for your artistic practice, but were you able to create your work right away?

No, I couldn't do it at first. I had a lot of design requests from clients through trade shows, so my head was always spinning with design ideas. On my days off I would go into town and look at exhibitions to get inspiration, that was about the most I could get in.

— So what inspired you to start creating works?

Competitions and art awards kept me going. Thanks to these awards I was able to create time and make pieces towards the goals. Also when my classmates from Ishoken started to win awards here and there, it really got me started. I kept making works hoping that someday I could win an award as well. I think I was able to do it because I wanted to make sculptural pieces and not tableware. If I wanted to make tableware I might have been pulled into the manufacturing world.

— How does your work now connect to your previous work made with slip?

I've been working with slip for about 20 years and the biggest change was that I finally stopped relying on the natural phenomena of slip. First, I was drawn to the ability to create forms through the water drying out from the slip, but eventually I felt restricted by having to rely on plaster moulds. I wanted to make a piece more freely. Something that is not restricted to the phenomena of slip and plaster. This led me to use coiling techniques, and then to my current work.

— How was trying hand coiling?

The biggest difference was the sense of freedom. Although, I continued working in porcelain. I had always been attracted to the material and I like how you can create sharp edges and subtle details. I feel like the material fits my personality.

— It seems like the motif of a "shell" is also used in your previous works.

Yes, it does look like that. If I look at my works objectively, I think I once like shells. I want to make forms to the traces and echoes of organisms that have existed once. That's why I like ruins and objects like that, those immutable things within one's subconscious.



[Water bones 05-8] (2005)

— On the exhibition text there was a quote from Director Nakashima Harumi, "Expose your true self." What do you think?

I wish I could be more true to myself and express that. I feel like I have difficulties doing so. There is always a part of me that ends up hiding my insecurities with clean design finishes.

— It will be interesting how you will overcome this issue.

I feel like the use of color in my work this time is a good example. I had made a series of works with only white porcelain and I was quite satisfied with it. However I got the urge to use color and there was a conflict within me, whether to constrain that urge or to go with it. I knew if I made my pieces in porcelain white I would be able to make a reasonable series. However, I felt that I would not be emotionally satisfied with it so I ended up using color.

— Is there anything else you consider in the making process?

I make sure that I just go to the studio because I hate the feeling of not making work. Then it's a matter of making sure that I am in the right mindset when I create work.

— What do you think is necessary in order to continue your practice?

I think the most important aspect is to make sure you have a studio space. I tell my students that they should try and continue no matter what. When you think about how to continue your practice and about what is necessary, it comes down to having an environment to make work. Then after that is to have a strong will to create a good community. I was fortunate to have a community of ceramic artists from Ishoken and through Nakashima Harumi and Maeda Tsuyoshi I was able to be part of the wider ceramic community.

— What attracts you, personally, to ceramics?

Ceramics is a very restricting material but I feel it's the one in which I can be most expressive. Also I find the final process of firing fascinating. The clay goes into the kiln and comes out in a different way.

— Do you have any goals in mind?

Through the exhibition I got a lot of feedback and I would like to attempt to make works that are closer to my true self. I want to not lean into design too much. I know it will be tempting since I will be showing my works to people but I would like to find a balance that I feel satisfied with.

— Is there anything you would like to tell the next generation of ceramic artists?

Please continue. You will feel like you can't find your own style or form but I do believe if you are true to yourself you will be able to find it. You may end up making pieces that look like other people's works but if you stick to it and you are being honest, your own style should form. This attitude is reflected in the work and the artist's individuality will come out through the details.



[Shell nest 22-09 (Jealousy)] (2022)



Sato Masayuki

Born in Niigata Prefecture in 1968. He graduated from Musashino Art University Junior College's Department of Crafts Design in Ceramics Course in 1993, and completed Tajimi City Pottery Design and Technical Center (Ishoken) in 1997. He is currently a professor at Kasama College of Ceramic Art. His works are in collections including the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art Gifu, Kikuchi Kanjitsu Memorial Tomo Museum, Ibaraki Ceramic Art Museum, and the Ushida Collection. Major awards include the 5th International Ceramics Competition Mino Ceramics Division Special Jury Prize and the Asahi Ceramic Arts Exhibition Newcomer Encouragement Award and the 1st Kikuchi Biennale Excellence Award.