

# Kouzo Takeuchi

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Ishoken  
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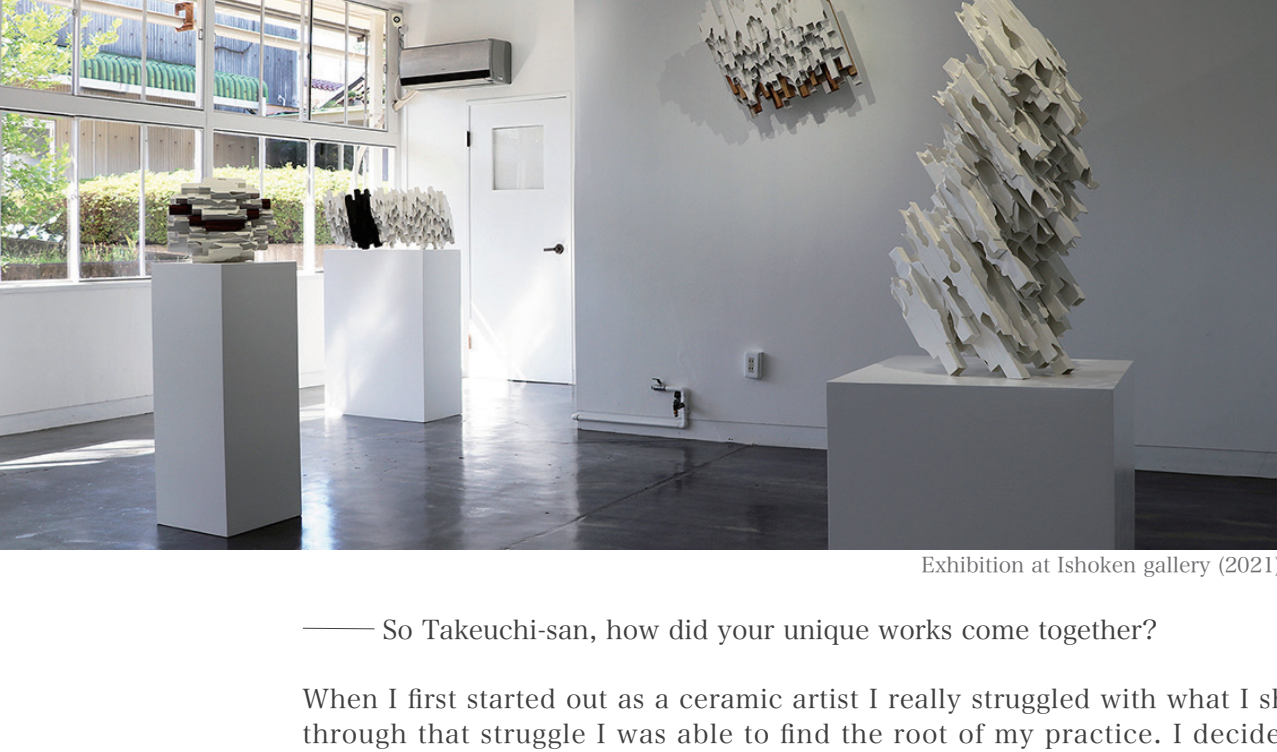
We interviewed Kouzo Takeuchi (Graduate of the 44th year of the Technical Course at Ishoken), who exhibited at the Ishoken gallery in October 2021.

— Your exhibition at the Ishoken gallery has just opened, so how do you feel about it?

It has been 18 years since I graduated from Ishoken so it was quite nostalgic. It was a good opportunity to look back and remember what I was thinking back then. Talking to the students reminded me about my time there.

— What was your thought process behind this exhibition?

My main aim for this show was to exhibit a wide range of my works throughout my career. It was a good opportunity to show my works to the current students and those who supported me in Tajimi. Also, I believe the timing was good since I felt that I had developed my practice to a certain standard, within myself. At the same time, it also gave me the chance to reflect upon my own practice.



Exhibition at Ishoken gallery (2021)

— So Takeuchi-san, how did your unique works come together?

When I first started out as a ceramic artist I really struggled with what I should express and through that struggle I was able to find the root of my practice. I decided to be honest to myself and just worked with what I know and like best. This always led me to geometric forms. I really like how they can stack and interlock. When I was making one of these geometric works at Ishoken, I had an accident. I dropped the work and I realized that the broken pieces also look interesting. It was a bit frightening at first but I started to break my work.

— “Breaking” one’s work is quite unique, isn’t it?

As I continued to work with this technique I was able to get nominated in competitions, and gradually the people around me told me how they liked it. On the other hand, some people would simply say that it is broken or they would compare my work with other artists. I started this endeavor to see how far my works could go, so other people’s comments didn’t bother me as much since I was more focused on my own standards. I feel that I was lucky to have my work break accidentally: the timing, my mental state and my preparations all came together and allowed me to discover my style.

— Which characteristics of clay are you most inspired by?

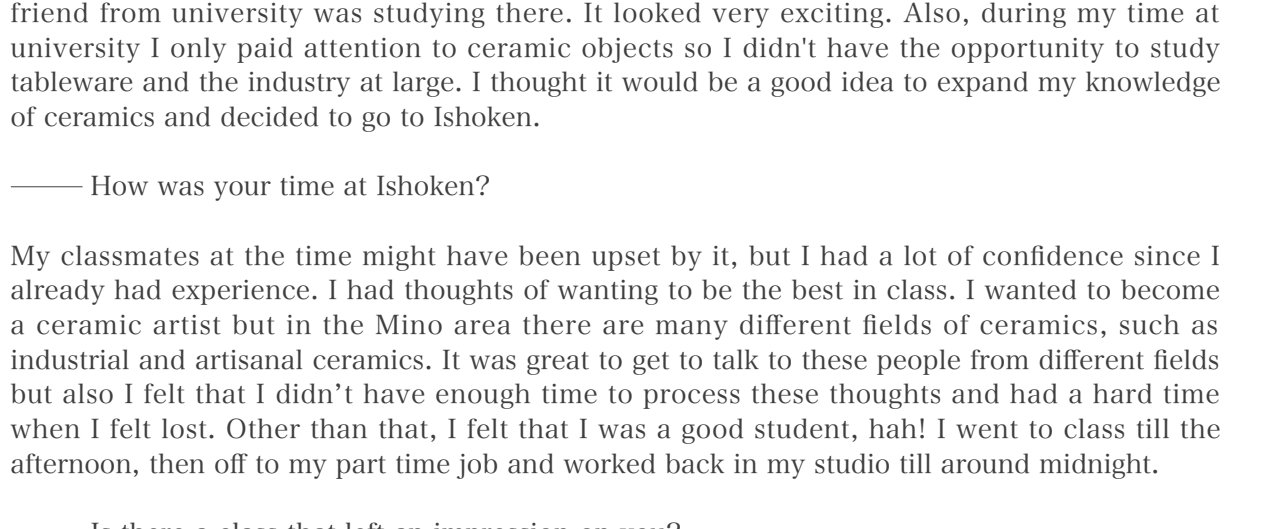
It’s more the process of firing rather than I feel drawn to. The fact the material has to leave the maker’s hand to be placed in the kiln makes it different from other materials. If we are talking about my white porcelain pieces, I am drawn to the feeling of tension that it can create. The texture from the broken shards brings out the materiality of the porcelain and creates tension. In the black series of work I’ve added sand on the surface of the glaze and after it is fired I sand back the glaze and remove the sand to create a pocketed glazed surface. I feel it is one of those interesting points that make you feel the depth of the material. Finally, my works with wood, glass and stone combined together with porcelain are made so the different materials contrast and accentuate the characteristics of each.

— How did you first get into ceramics?

At university I wanted to study design but I didn’t follow through, so I decided to take the Kogei (Japanese Craft) course instead. In the design course there was a lot of drawing of plans and these rarely became real products. On the other hand, in ceramics you can start making your ideas with your hands immediately. That was the fun part for me. There is no need to think about it on paper first, you can directly start making it.

— And that’s why you pursued ceramics?

Back in those days I went to many art galleries and there were a lot of contemporary ceramics exhibitions. The famous ceramic artists made massive ceramics objects and they all looked like superstars to me. Even at Osaka University of Art, there were more teachers working in the field of ceramic objects than tableware. I think I was purely fascinated.



Kouzo Takeuchi giving a class to students

— Why did you decide to come to Ishoken after graduating?

When I couldn’t find a way to continue ceramics, I went to have a look at Ishoken since my friend from university was studying there. It looked very exciting. Also, during my time at university I only paid attention to ceramic objects so I didn’t have the opportunity to study tableware and the industry at large. I thought it would be a good idea to expand my knowledge of ceramics and decided to go to Ishoken.

— How was your time at Ishoken?

My classmates at the time might have been upset by it, but I had a lot of confidence since I already had experience. I had thoughts of wanting to be the best in class. I wanted to become a ceramic artist but in the Mino area there are many different fields of ceramics, such as industrial and artisanal ceramics. It was great to get to talk to these people from different fields but also I felt that I didn’t have enough time to process these thoughts and had a hard time when I felt lost. Other than that, I felt that I was a good student, hah! I went to class till the afternoon, then off to my part time job and worked back in my studio till around midnight.

— Is there a class that left an impression on you?

Yes, the class that was run by Harumi Nakashima where he told us to draw 100 sketches. During that class he passionately said, “If you want to express something, draw it in any form. I know you must want to express something. Isn’t that the reason why you are here?” More than anything, those words hit me. My mates in my cohort were all passionate as well. We didn’t fight but we debated about many things everyday, as well as jokes around occasionally. It was fun and everything seemed so comfortable, those two years of only thinking about ceramics and my practice.

— What did you do after graduating?

I worked at a small ceramic factory while making my own work on the side. But I knew graduates around my age and friends that went straight into their own practice and made a living. “I wish I could do that too. No, I want to do it!” These thoughts built up inside me. There were many things I worried about, but the reason why I was able to make it this far was because of my close friends’ success. It allowed me to build confidence, or let’s say some kind of belief, that I could do it too.



[Modern Remains Meteorite] (2013)  
Wall work installed inside a retail shop in Tokyo

— From there you must have gradually been able to transition just to your practice.

For the first 10 to 15 years I tried to do everything I could. From making ceramic objects to tableware, I did anything that I was interested in that came my way. Even if I couldn’t really do the project, I tried to figure out how to make it work. But nothing really goes well on the first go.

— What’s the current pace of your practice?

I think it might have to do with my generation, but I brought my works to galleries and asked for exhibitions and did anything I could to get an opportunity. I think that is why I said, “yes” to everything. Three or four years ago I booked too many jobs at once and I couldn’t keep up. So these days I make sure to schedule my work. I have about three or four exhibitions a year, plus some group shows. Also in the last few years I have been getting commissions for large scale works so I have been scheduling with these factors in mind.

— What do you keep in mind when making your work?

There are a lot of aspects, but I feel that I always make sure I don’t stop working still I am satisfied. For better or worse, the exhibition at Ishoken gallery was postponed due to COVID so I had some extra time. This allowed me to make some extra additions. In any case, I always work hard until the very end. I think by doing this, I can grow and I am able to improve my work.

— What’s the secret to maintaining practice for so long?

As I pursue the same structural techniques in my practice, my work changes little by little. When I see this happening I feel that I am always seeking a new sensation, motivation and freshness. Especially when I’m working on bigger projects, I enjoy seeing how the work looks in new settings and experiencing new initiatives.

— How were you able to get many exhibitions overseas?

One of my biggest opportunities came my way about two or three years after I graduated from Ishoken. A gallery from the U.S. called Keiko Gallery contacted me after they saw my work exhibited at INAX. They told me, “Your work is interesting, it will do well in the U.S.”

— How was the response in the U.S.?

The response was not bad. I was excited by how the U.S. audiences would respond to my work and I was very confused at first. At the time I had not sold any pieces in Japan, but in the U.S. people bought my work. After talking to one of the people who purchased my work, I realized that in the U.S. market, people bought works based on their personal feelings and were willing to pay a high price. It felt like a totally different environment from what it was like in Japan back then.

— It seems like it was a good opportunity for you to exhibit overseas.

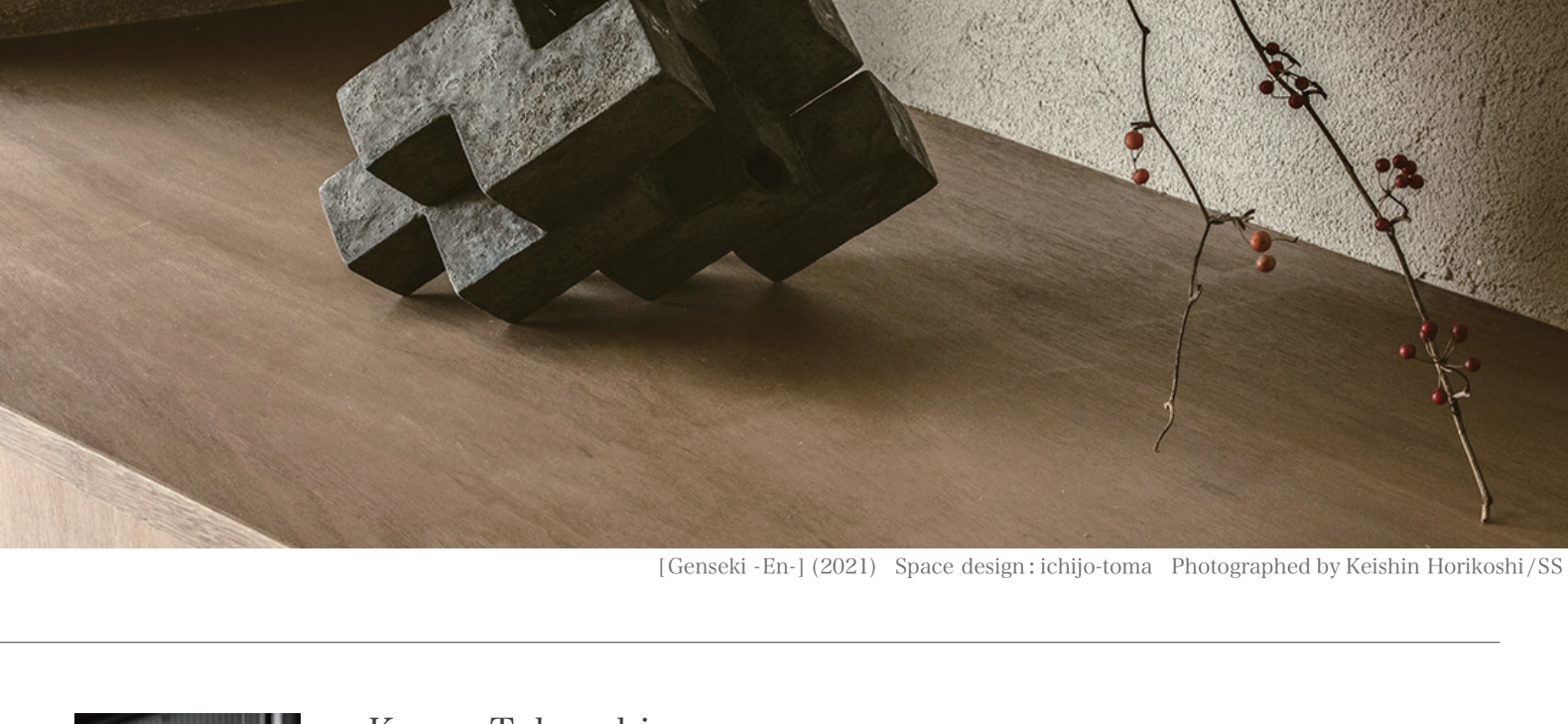
It was refreshing in a sense that people would see my work for what it is. It was comfortable to not feel judged in a strange way, like in Japan. I could ask freely, “What do you think?” In Japan, I would be disappointed when I was told, “It’s interesting but ...” Overseas it seems like if you are doing something interesting, people will connect to it. I was able to make many connections through my work. Also, I thought it would be cooler to say in Japan that I am famous overseas, ha! However, I had a hard time in terms of funding. At the time I had to pay for many expenses like transport and shipping. I made sure to work hard and save money so whenever I had the opportunity I could say yes and go.

— What’s your vision for the future?

I got into this outside art world by pursuing what interests me, so I would like to try something interesting outside of ceramics and push my boundaries. Since graduating university I just stuck to ceramics and I could never imagine that ceramics would take me to where I am now, so I am looking forward to where it will take me next.

— Is there anything you would like to pass on to the students?

I want to let them know that ceramics is fun. It all comes down to that. There are going to be many difficulties and parts where you need to put in a lot of effort but it is because of that it is fun in the end. Be positive and try hard. It should be fun because it is the decision you have made.



[Genseki -En-] (2021) Space design: ichijo-toma Photographed by Keishin Horikoshi/SS



## Kouzo Takeuchi

Born in Kato City, Hyogo Prefecture in 1977. He graduated from Osaka University of Arts, Department of Crafts, Ceramics Course in 2001, and graduated from the Tajimi City Ceramic Design Institute in 2003. He has exhibited across Japan and abroad, including solo exhibitions, special exhibitions, and art fairs. His works are in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Cernuschi Museum, and the Museum of Ceramic Art, Hyogo. His major awards include the 27th Chosan Award, the Contemporary Ceramic Art Exhibition Encouragement Award, and the Kobe Biennale Contemporary Ceramic Art Competition Encouragement Award.