



Ishoken  
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# Yuichi Yanai

柳井 友一

We interviewed Yuichi Yanai (the 53th technical course graduate) who exhibited at Ishoken Gallery in 2018, when he ran a class for our students in 2020.

— You've been looking over the 2nd years at Ishoken this year. How is the class going?

I have designed an assignment called, "Vessels for Chefs" with the intention to push the boundaries of the students. I want them to think about "the vessels" from different angles and achieve higher standards for themselves. I was thinking it would be interesting if a friend of mine who is a professional chef could plate the final works. By taking the assignment this far, I hope that the students would want to polish up their works and skills and pay closer attention to finer details.



Mr. Yanai running a class at ishoken

— You had an exhibition with us at Ishoken Gallery two years ago. How was that experience?

It was a great opportunity for me, I was able to look back at my past work and sort out the trajectories I took throughout the years. It's been eight years since I graduated from Ishoken and I have worked on many series of works. In the show I decided to narrow down my work and exhibited mostly my porcelain works that felt the closest to me.

— Is that the porcelain works that also won an award at the International Ceramic Competition Mino?

That's right. The International Ceramics Competition Mino was a very big deal for me. I wanted to test my abilities to see how far my artistic expression would take me and I wanted my work to be seen. Competitions in general are a good opportunity for young artists to be assessed on a even playing field, while getting exposure. I also was able to set a goal and focus on my work. During this process I realized that I was enjoying unexpected results and strengths that came into place as I had set my mind to my goal.

— Where did you get your inspiration for your work?

The white porcelain forms are inspired by the undulations of the earth, so I have named them "Landscape Ware". I use scenery in nature as a resource and I am particularly interested in the lines created when forms collide with each other in nature. Most tableware is designed for certain dishes and cuisines and they often start to look alike. Therefore, I started to think that it could be interesting if there can be tableware designed without food in mind. Once the forms are made then I take them to chefs and challenge their preconceptions. The process of plating often starts with "How can we plate this?" and then they create dishes around my designs.

— How did you get into ceramics?

After graduating from university, I worked at an electronic manufacturer as a designer for five years. While designing industrial products for the company I started to have doubts about consumerist culture with fast product lifecycles. That was when I discovered ceramics as a material that could be refined to a product that could last a lifetime.

— Why did you choose ceramics?

Ceramics is a primitive material that is familiar to everyone and has been loved through out the centuries. I also have been drawn into the process of firing; it is like a Pandora's box. Once the firing starts you can no longer intervene, I often calculate the movement of the clay in the kiln but sometimes the firing gives me unexpected results. It is these results that make me love the material and craft.

— Why did you decide to enroll into Ishoken?

I came across ceramics as I started to have doubts about the design sector I was working in and started to seek different options. At the age of 27, I had a strong urge to peruse ceramics further, so I started to look for schools. This is when I found Ishoken and I decided to enroll. Also the resumes of the graduates from Ishoken made the school appealing.

— How did you spend your time at Ishoken?

The course I enrolled in had 10 students and there were a few that had previous experience. I had close to none, so I always felt behind everyone. I wanted to catch up to the others so after after class I worked part-time at a mass production ceramic manufacture while learning the basics of ceramic manufacturing. I also threwon the wheel at home and even went into Ishoken early to mix glazes. Since I quit work and came to Ishoken, I remember that I was hungry to learn everything. Overall, I really enjoyed learning and working hard together with my classmates.

— What have you been doing since graduating from Ishoken?

After graduating from Ishoken, I was able to join the Kanazawa Utatsuyama Kogei Kobo. After my experience there, I started to prepare my own studio. This is when I met Tatsuya Uemachi (co-owners of Secca). We both had similar visions. He also wanted to create new dining experiences so we though it would be interesting to work together and setup Secca.

— What kind of company is Secca?

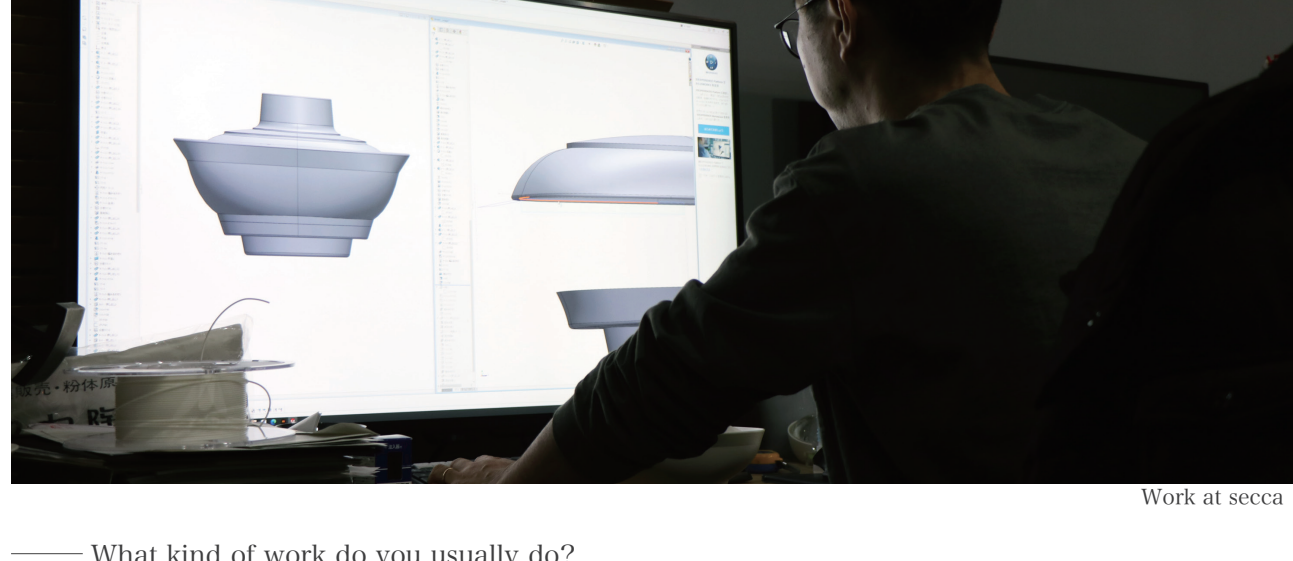
Secca is a design company of craft practitioners that utilizes both traditional craft techniques and new technologies. We are located in Kanazawa, a city famous for its crafts and food. We emphasize traditional craft knowledge and techniques and recreate products to meet the demands of today. We live in an age where well-designed products are the norm. At Secca we attempt to bring in tradition, culture and the acknowledgment of environmental concerns by "story telling" through our designs.

— What do you pay attention to when creating your work?

I am always conscious of the quality of the overall finish. This makes it hard for me to create pieces half-heartedly. Another point I keep in mind when designing, is that I make sure not to look at the students at Ishoken to do the same. I have become I look for new sources of inspiration from different fields. I personally get inspiration from textures in nature. Rather than just imitating your predecessors, I try to understand their thought processes and the essence behind their practice. Then I see if this knowledge can be transferred to today. I also try to eliminate processes that are inefficient when done by hand. Air vacuum pug mills these days do an excellent job of wedging the clay evenly. These eliminations allow me to spend more time on processes that require the hand, such as sculpting fine details.



Works exhibited at ishoken gallery (2018)



Work at secca

— What kind of work do you usually do?

I work mainly on small scale mass production tableware, specifically for professional chefs. We pay close attention to details that mass production manufacturers can not imitate. Other than this line of work, I also make a range of art pieces that include, tea ceremony pieces, sake sets, and objects. These I make myself from start to finish. Restaurant owners and chefs often come over to our studio for meetings. This is when we show sample pieces, sketches, models, and use CAD software. Custom-made design takes more time, money because they usually include branding. As a base, we work on small batch manufacturing but also try to expand into new areas.

— How do you separate your personal projects from work with Secca?

Personally, I feel there its no strong boundary between my own works and work at Secca. The one thing that is different could be the process. When pieces are made through Secca it is a group effort. The studio is organized in away that each staff member has a different job like in a production line. I am also part of the line working as Secca. However, when it comes to my own work I design and make the pieces myself, but sign the pieces off as Yuichi Yanai from Secca and still include the studio name.

— Does your personal and Secca work affect each other?

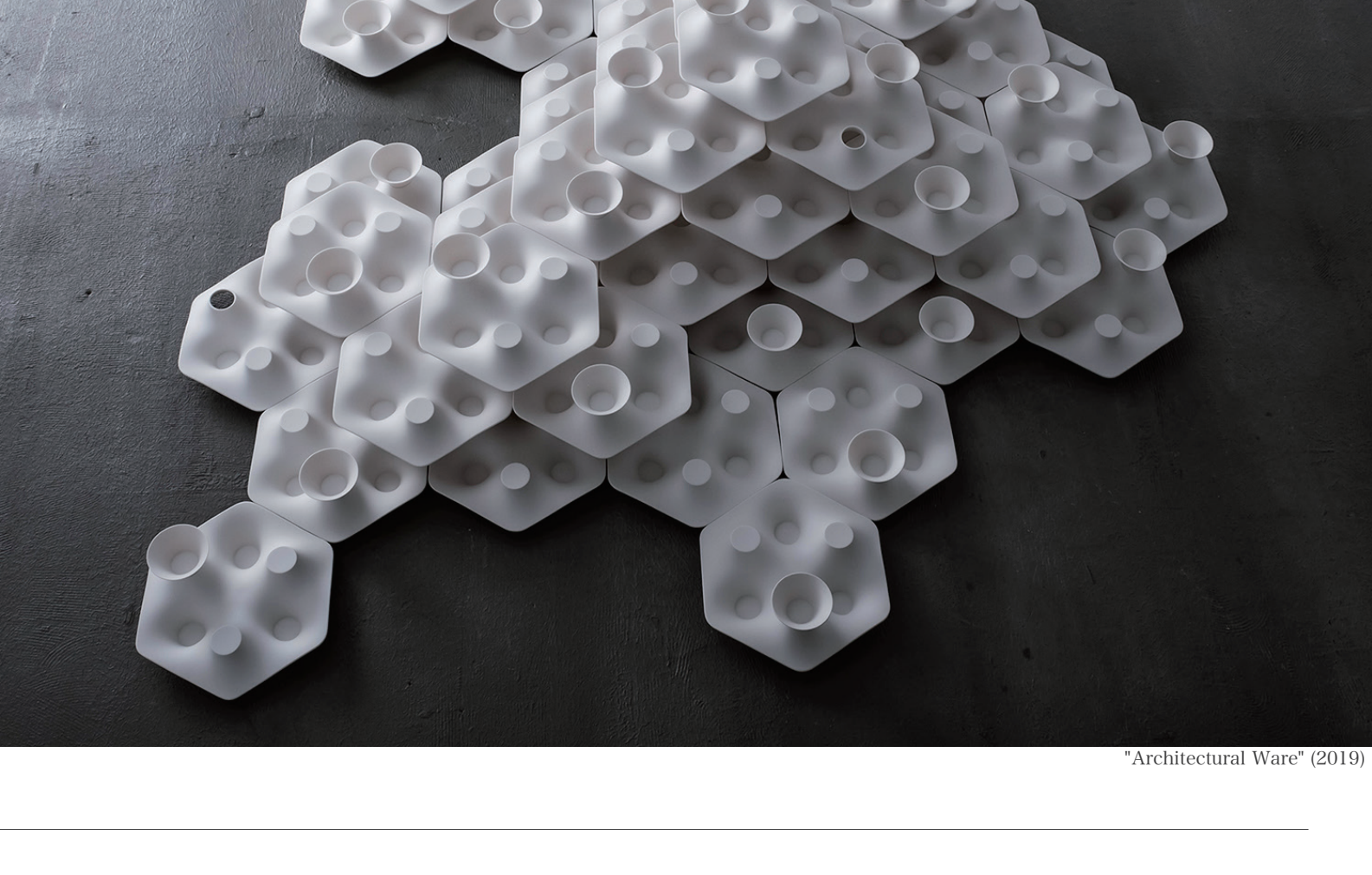
Yes, they do. When I am working with chefs I often found that there were limitations to ceramics and started to use different materials. When it comes to my personal work, naturally I found myself thinking of combinations of other materials with ceramics. Since, Secca has the facilities and is open to experimentation it has allowed me to experiment with new ideas and broaden my capacity as an artist.

— Do you have any plans for the future?

I would like to work on pieces that remain relevant throughout history. I want people and chefs who use my tableware to treat them with care so they can be used for several generations. I am always thinking about how ceramics can remain relevant. As for Secca, we want to evolve the dining experience. This is why we have started to branch out into different materials. Especially, in this day and age, living with COVID has heavily affected the restaurant industry. We are also trying to evolve as an organization to adapt to the changing world around us. I am taking this terrible situation as a challenge for us to change and I believe it is necessary step for us.

— Finally, what would you like to say people learning ceramics?

Please continue ceramics without giving up. If you stop then it ends. However even if you do stop, your experience with the material can lead you to new possibilities and ideas. The knowledge might become useful in your next job and become an important factor about yourself. Either ways is good. Experiences don't go to waste. The important thing is just to try.



"Architectural Ware" (2019)



## Yuichi Yanai

He grew up in an environment surrounded by nature, his was father a DIY enthusiast, his mother precision sewer, and his grandmother was a lacquer artist of Buddhist altars. At an early age, he was influenced by the crafts and nature around him. He aspired to be a designer in high school and studied product design at Kanazawa College of Art.In 2012, he studied ceramic art at the Tajimi City Ceramic Design Institute, and then completed the Kanazawa Utatsuyama Crafts Studio. Currently he is a co-owner of Secca and leads the production of the workshop. He has achieved a Gold award at the International Ceramics Exhibition Mino Ceramics in the design category and has won other domestic and international awards.