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The Process Behind Shio Kusaka's Elegant, and Whimsical, Pots

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Shio Kusaka (line 54), 2017 stoneware 25 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN FORREST COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GAGOSIAN

The Roman arm of the Gagosian Gallery is currently presenting new works by the Japanese-born Los Angeles-based ceramicist SHIO KUSAKA. It's her first solo exhibition with the gallery, although she has shown as a duo with her painter husband at Gagosian Hong Kong in 2015 ("Jonas Wood and SHIO KUSAKA: Blackwelder"). Featuring her largest vessels to date, Kusaka's pieces are glazed in pallid hues; the ensemble of pottery pieces is displayed on a curved wooden pedestal.

While Kusaka's exhibitions tend to feature a combination of abstraction and representation — she has introduced playful visual vignettes from basketballs to watermelons to raindrops, often inspired by books her kids love — this is the first show to focus exclusively on her abstract work (it's on view through May 26). Variations on the form of the vase are further diversified by the sinuous hand-etched lines that zig and zag across the contours, adding texture while embracing the irregularities of the material.

We spoke with the ceramicist about form versus function, and the unexpected resonances of her aesthetics and palette within an Italian setting.

The exhibition frames your work relative to “the grids of Agnes Martin, or the instruction-based wall drawings of Sol LeWitt” — how directly influential were these artists on your work? What other creative predecessors were formative on your practice?

I like Agnes Martin’s work though I don’t know much about what she was thinking. I like that she had her canvas on a table to draw straight lines rather than on a wall. She was very aware of the materials she was working with. Some people relate the body of work that I’m showing in Rome to Sol Lewitt. I see similarities in processes now, but I didn’t think about the connection until other people told me. I love Calder.

Your dinosaur pieces, while not part of this series, have such playfulness — how does that cohere with, or complement, your pieces that have a more restrained aesthetic?

I like working with forms. Pots are not flat so I like figuring out what feels natural as an object when I draw or carve images on the surface. I want my images of dinosaurs, witches, grids and lines to work with my forms. I kind of want those images to be there for the form and with the form. It’s a little bit different from when the image itself is the main thing. In the end it could be just that I make both dinosaur pots and line pots. There might not be anything more than that.

Your practice mixes drawing and sculpting. Do you see these as “separate” steps or practices? Do you do prep sketches of what you will draw or etch onto a ceramic piece before you start, or do you improvise?

I use a needle tool and sketch on the pots when I make dinosaur pots, witch pots and wood grain pots. Then I carve out the image. Carving is a little different from the original sketches. I skip this prep step and just carve lines directly when I make grid pots and line pots.

How do you decide between stoneware and porcelain?

Size and appearance. Porcelain can’t be too big so I use stoneware for the larger sizes. I also sometimes use stoneware for small pots when I am interested in working with specific earthy textures or color combinations. I use porcelain whenever I can. I love porcelain.

What is your rhythm of production? How long does an individual piece take? Do you consider certain pieces as part of a series or is each standalone?

Small pieces can be done in a week while large ones might take a month and a half. It has a lot to do with how long the pot needs to be dried before firing. The actual time making a pot is something between 30 minutes and two weeks. All my works are part of a series based on specific themes: grid, line, stripe, white, dinosaur, witch, wood, animal etc. I have gone back to a lot of these series more than once. I made dinosaur pots in 2013-’14 as well as in 2016-’17. I started making grid pots in 2009, and I still make them.

You’re showing in Rome, which has such a rich heritage of ancient pottery. Did that influence your selection at all?

This is the first time I did a show of just one style of work. All the works are titled either “line” or “square” or “triangle,” and made in the same manner. I felt comfortable having a clear order in Rome, and focusing on pots with geometry. I thought about Rome but not necessarily about

pots in Rome. The colors were a nice surprise. I used brand new pastel colors in yellow, blue, and pink, and didn't anticipate how well they would echo the faded yellow and pink buildings in Rome.

Do you see the items as aesthetic pieces exclusively, or are they conceived with function in mind as well?

I see both. I love it when my pots have their own space to be looked at or installed with paintings and sculptures. I also love it when people send me pictures of my pots with flowers inside.