

## **Masaomi Yasunaga**

(Born 1982, Osaka Japan. Living and working in Iga, Mie Prefecture, Japan)

In a gesture which has little precedence, Masaomi Yasunaga removed clay from his ceramic forms, and builds his sculptures using glaze as the primary structural element. At Nonaka-Hill, the artist's first solo exhibition outside of Asia, Yasunaga presents numerous recent sculptures expressing a variety of vessel forms, placed on a bed of common gravel.

Yasunaga studied ceramics under Satoru Hoshino, a second-generation proponent of the avant-garde ceramic group, *Sodeisha* (in kanji, 走泥社 literally means, crawling through the mud). Founded in Kyoto in 1948, in the aftermath of WWII, Sodeisha broke away from long-established conventions of Japanese ceramics, resolving to create non-functional sculptural works. Continuing with this ethos, Yasunaga's sculptures of vessels may or may not be functional, and explore an instable boundary between functional and fine arts.

By sculpting in glaze, Yasunaga's works reimagine the use of ceramics' conventional materials. Glaze, most commonly used to apply color, luster and finish onto the surface of clay-built ceramics, responds to different variables and often produces unexpected outcomes. Unlike clay objects which maintain their original form when fired in the kiln, Yasunaga's glaze objects melt, so they must be buried in trays of sand, soil or rocks to retain their form. Once inside the kiln, the viscous molten glaze adheres to the surrounding earthen material. After firing and cooling, Yasunaga unburies his objects in a studio process which parallels the surprises of archeological excavation, and painstakingly removes the excess sand and rocks from the interstices of the objects. The resulting artworks range from smooth to heavily encrusted.

Yasunaga's presentation, which verges on camouflage, resembles the beds of stone from which the works emerge after the kiln. It also embraces the narratives which his objects conjure for most viewers; that the sculptures resemble artifacts excavated from the bottom of the ocean floor or buried underground amongst

ancient ruins. As such, these objects, imagined to have been lost for vast periods of time and now found, retain the global vessel styles and handiwork of imagined ceramics makers (other than Yasunaga) from eons before. Some objects seem whole, while others seem broken, arousing phenomenological thinking reflected in the artwork's titles, all which infer something that was, or is no longer; *Sai* (碎) means to break or collapse, *Tokeru Utsuwa* (溶ける器) translates to melting vessel, *Dakkaku* (脱穀) is defined as threshing, and *Hako No Kokkaku* (箱の骨格) signifies a skeleton.

Feeling that with new life or death, comes a moment when many things may change, Yasunaga responded to the passing of his grandmother ten years ago by incorporating her cremated bone remains into the glaze of his hand-crafted funerary urns. This gesture compelled him to appreciate the emotional and expressive potentials in ceramics. Three years ago, with the joy of the birth of his eldest son, Yasunaga began to hybridize his empty container forms with depictions of animals from around where he was born. Rendered in Yasunaga's earthen materials, these *Empty creatures* conjure associations to numerous histories and places, and collectively form an unlikely geologic menagerie.

Yasunaga's exploratory approach to ceramic making delves deeper than its experimentative application of materials, his sculptures give perspective to the human relationship to time.