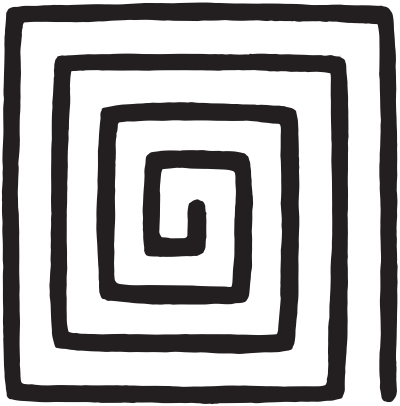

Where do art history and craft go to when they are alone?: The Sculpture of Tetsuya Yamada

"Yeah, I think it comes from there, actually," Yamada says, as he gestures across the table. He is pointing at the potter's wheel. We have spent the past three hours discussing the history of ceramics in Japan and the West and their respective art histories, focusing on the currents of modernism in ceramics that run through Tetsuya Yamada's work. After turning

towards the topic of pottery, we are discussing the possibilities of the potter's wheel. It's now inevitable that I have to use this as the starting point for our discussion. This is because it is true. It is not only true for Yamada, but it is true for quite possibly every ceramicist and sculptor of forms.

The apprehension with which many artists approach the potter's wheel reveals a hesitancy towards its place in art history. I assume this is because it is viewed as ultimately utilitarian, where its physical function is more important than its conceptual one. This idea cannot be further from the truth, and is one I hope to disprove in this essay.

The pottery wheel, like a bicycle, is a human-powered machine. Using the wheel is a full-body experience that allows the artist to fully realize their ideas through the simultaneous actions of the legs, hands, and head. From bottom to top, the feet control the speed, the hands the height and size of the form, and the head—from a conceptual perspective—devises what is to be made. Hailing from prehistory, the potter's wheel can be considered a device that not only increased human capacity for large-scale manufacturing, but augmented our ability to conceptualize space. Considered from this origin, the potter's wheel is not simply a tool to create bowls, cups, and vessels of

varying design and scale, but a tool for the creation of space that expands outwards. Or, as the anthropologist George Foster argued regarding the invention of the wheel, it is not an elaboration on any material form but the recognition of exploiting its centrifugal action[1].

While Foster was specifically exploring the physics inherent to the wheel and its mechanics, the revelations inherent to its movement oscillate between the centrifugal and centripetal forces, both completely temporal. That is, the space within the vessel is non-linear, seeming to expand outwards by force, while also receiving constant inward pressure,

in an eternally balanced movement. In discussion with Yamada, there are points in the creation of his work that oscillate between the practice of craft coming from the wheel and the push of art history that point inwards to the work. I will discuss four factors in relationship to Yamada's work, centrally positioning it in lineage to this tetrarchy:

a. The Mad Potter
b. 楽
c. Bird in Flight
d. The Stone

These four themes are both central and separate to Yamada's practice: they flow into and flow from within.

The Mad Potter

My own history with Yamada starts with pottery. The work of George Ohr, born 1857 in my hometown of Biloxi, Mississippi, was one of the first topics we connected over. While relatively unknown in the larger contemporary art world, the pottery of Ohr is renowned amongst ceramicists. As a self-promotional marketer and all-around crazed individual, Ohr became known as the "Mad Potter." By all accounts he was. But what does it mean to be mad? It is mere possession, or can it be a focused diligence?

Yamada's sensibility extends

outwards from the wheel with a focused reach. He digs into other areas of sculpture with the same formal cognition that is most central to him at the wheel. His drawings, bent wood, vectorial sculptures floating in space, and ceramic vessels all turn around a central idea of history and craft. Like Ohr, Yamada sets into the work with impassioned diligence and attention to its form. The pottery of both ceramicists begets a lightness. Ohr's vessels were extremely light, with thin walls. Yamada's work is equally attuned to the air and its breath-like qualities. The hollows of his vessels, the invitation to sit down on ceramic cushions—enabling the

viewer to lower themselves and stare around the exhibition space, seeing sculptures floating in the air—give a breathable lightness to the work, which in turn expresses an aspiration for pottery and ceramics to achieve the spatial qualities of sculpture.

While the works vary in material, form, and often times concept, what runs through each of them is their ability to expand outwards in that centrifugal fashion—either from the pottery wheel or each sculpture's own attention to its center. There is an intensity of oscillation, crazed and mad in some aspects, where the sculptures refer back to an area most central to them—whether it

be a history or material from which they take their lead—but there is also a coolness and hospitality to them that allows the viewer to see into the work's own idea of where it wants to go. It is not bound solely to that moment of history or material, and different vectors to the work—that is, areas of direction and collection—excel the work past its original conceit.

As such, Yamada always intends—like Ohr—to direct and control the work like a mad potter, driven to show that ceramics and pottery are inherently sculptural and formal from the start. Each vessel and work takes on these aspects but heralds back to the

support most central to all of them: the wheel, the agent which allows both form and concept to spiral outwards in growing intensity. Yet, Yamada controls this intensity and gives to it balance and delicateness, not letting the work spiral either out of his control or into that which elevates it to the threshold of an art object.

楽

In opposite regard to the wheel, the other history Yamada comes from, or at least must be in cognizant recognition of, is the history of Japanese ceramics, especially the

form of raku 楽. Historically, and continuing today, raku ware is all hand built and fired individually. It is a slower, but just as diligent, process than kiln firing. The only tool sometimes used is a spatula. The colors, from their beginnings, are most often either red or black or a combination of the two. Tradition is highly directive in how pieces should be made, and more often than not raku is primarily made into chawan 茶碗, (tea ware or specifically tea bowls). The family which makes these bowls goes back nearly 16 generations to its founder, Chojiro Tanaka, though some argue that the form of raku was directed by Sen no Rikyu, the founder of the first tea schools in

Japan. Regardless, Rikyu and Chojiro started a new wave of ceramics that continues today, and which has seen its popularity grow across the world with various shifts and new stylings depending on geography.

It is important to recognize this history, because while chawan existed before both Tanaka and Sen no Rikyu, its prevalence in tea gatherings and its historical relevance to both Japan and the world have helped direct how many see and envision ceramics from Japan. While there are various other stylings and legendary kilns which lend their own attributes to their pottery, it is perhaps raku that has achieved

the most renown globally, entailing a certain regard for what ceramics should or could look like.

Yamada is highly cognizant of this, and while it is where much of his history stems from—learning ceramics and pottery while growing up and studying in Japan—it is also something he sets his sights away from in terms of making his ware. But it is also undeniable that a person's biography informs their craft and their work. Like the wheel, or like the rounded vessel in hand, the body and its genetic coding are always central to how a vessel will ultimately be made or formed. Even looking past identity and its inflections into

painting or ceramics, while many artists hope to transcend their biography, it is not only difficult, but perhaps impossible. This is of course not a negative for any person, and Yamada—who also designs Noh theatre and creates *chawan* on the wheel—both accepts and propels his origins forward in his work.

In discussing two tea bowls before us by Yamada, he identifies multiple aspects of each bowl that draw from his histories as an artist from Japan: one bowl has a foot similar to Hagi ware, and is left mostly unglazed like Bizen ware. Another bowl—he notes—which is glazed and flattened more, is glazed with a technique that

he refers to as *Hiku*, or to be pulled. The glaze looks as if it has been pulled across the bowl in a flat stroke of a brush. This element also finds its origin in calligraphy, with a brush movement called *kasure* or "dried brush" technique, where traces of the brush's hairs are left in long streaks and flared movements. All of these techniques at once find confluence in Yamada's practice, influencing the way his ceramics and sculptures are made.

Whether the works are hand-built like raku or thrown on the wheel, each of them hearkens back to this prior knowledge and constitution.

Bird in Flight

But more than anything, Yamada looks to Brancusi and Duchamp as beacons to his practice. This eye towards modernist sculpture, a certain precise turn in the history of art where Dada met form and form became non-objective, is where Yamada most sets his sights. The *Morice* is at the center of this turn. The *Morice* is no certain person, just as it is no certain sculpture. It is a path between spirits that can only be recognized by those who share it. It is not quite a subjective path, as the object between the two spirits is shared and known to them alone, without either one needing to

acknowledge how or why.

As Arthur Danto laid out in an essay for Yamada in 2007, *Morice* was a type of a code name shared between Brancusi and Duchamp. It was their shared treatise of how they recognized, promoted, and adored one another and the work they produced. The *Morice*, in Danto's vision, was this kindred spirit shared between the two, though it could also be applied to others who shared a similar bond. More, a *Morice* was someone who was able to see past what art was doing at the time and see instead where it should go. It was this trajectory to elsewhere that the *Morice* was cognizant of, and if

it was a strong enough sense, then supposedly both Duchamp and Brancusi would recognize this in the newcomer and accept them into their encoded circle.

Yamada has figured that the *Morice* floats between identities. Indeed, the abundance of *Morice* sculptures speaks to this, as each is slightly changed in both its sculptural form and its pedestal format. None follow a simple pattern; all aim towards a certain goal. The goal is not precisely known, but that is okay. The number of *Morice* sculptures is not paired to anything, but can be any indefinite quantity, as far as Yamada takes it. Indeed, he has already taken it quite

a distance, playing with the form and the makeup of each sculpture, giving to each a separate vanity and ego, a separate identity to awake into. These sculptures rise high up from the floor, neatly balanced on their supports—an homage to both Brancusi and his apprentice Noguchi—which seem to support them just precisely enough that they do not fall over. Their identity hangs on a thread, just as it would be with any *Morice* who is so certain on the future.

The Bird in Flight, then, is this sculptural identity, tossed to the wind and let free but also without certain direction. It is there to just fly, to make, to do, without landing

or calling anywhere a home or roost. This is how, I believe, Yamada sees the canon of art history surrounding him, giving him that freedom to create and to be wherever his sights are set. With his skills and his craft, his know-how and his knowledge, he is able to make the most diligent and focused forms, working them upwards and flattening them downwards. The works I am attuned to the most are the ceramic floor cushions, which (as he said) allow visitors to sit down onto the work. Sitting down on these gives rise to everything else. The pottery and sculptures on hand are given an elevated profile, while the cool ceramic underneath reveals exactly what one is both sitting on and seeing

before them. It is a bodily experience with the ceramic work.

Sitting down on these ceramic cushions allows one to better see and trace the trajectory of flight between all the works on view. These ceramic cushions, then, reference the stone on which everything rests.

The Stone

Where do Art History and Craft go to when they are alone?

This question arises from the idea that Art History is not always taken with Craft and craftsmanship—

the ideas of de-skilling and dematerialization alone could support that statement—and that Craft and the Craftsman would be just as happy going it alone as well. But when they are together, when both do not so much as seek each other out as much as they fall into natural alignment, where do they go and what do they do with one another? If this were a world of magic, then Art History would be conjuring and channeling, bringing in spirits from the ether, while the Craftsman would be the animist, creating and controlling why and how things look the way they do. What would it then be like to be in the middle of these two magics?

I ask myself these questions as I stroll through the studio of Tetsuya Yamada. What came to me at first is the craft: with pots, and vessels, and seated cushions of ceramic, floating spheres of woodwork, and amongst them all, spiraling twine or drawn lines, I am looking at the creation of forms that can only come from a perspective that is highly attenuated towards technique. But, secondly, what Yamada most focuses on is the history that these forms come from and how they are perceived by the artist. It is obvious how highly central to art history many of these forms are, referencing Duchamp's urinal, Brancusi's *bird*, or Noguchi's crafted supports and pedestals. Or, on the

other hand, referencing Japanese ceramics and traditions of glazing, firing, hand-building (as opposed to wheel-throwing), all of these finding themselves into each of Yamada's works. I am left wondering, then, when Yamada steps back and lets the art history find the craft, where the two go on their own.

I imagine Art History and Craft sleeping together, resting together, going back to bed. The delineations that have separated them over generations falling away and letting the two find one another again. I believe this is Yamada's true goal in his work: letting Craft and Art History re-find one another. He is

focused and impassioned in his work, but he always allows the work to move past him and into a separate field. I am amazed at how he accomplishes this, how he just lets the work go off on its own. But in order for the work to find its fullest realization he knows it must be set free. He lets Craft walk with Art History, hand-in-hand, and find peace again together. But the question still remains: where do they go together?

This is the question left to the *Morice*, left to the artist like Yamada. While Duchamp may have been against using the artist's hand, he was not against using the craft of the mind to judge what may be an art object. And

Brancusi, who worshiped the material and art's making, was not against the craft of the spirit finding form in any medium. These two progenitors of the *Morice*, in fact the two progenitors of the majority of modernist sculpture, would find that art history and craft are always bound together in the path forward.

I believe that the two—Art History and Craft—go back to the source, to the stone, as the potter's wheel was originally called. On this stone there is always a path forward, and it is where both Brancusi and Duchamp always found their next object to create. The stone is always the best support, and the best resting place,

and it is on this stone—where one may sit—that the bird in flight can be seen, and one can trace the steps that Art History and Craft have left within each of the sculptures on display.

Alan Longino
9.22.22

[1]Foster, George M. The Potter's Wheel: An Analysis of Idea and Artifact in Invention, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Summer 1959) v. 15 n. 2, pp. 99-119.

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