

Mihara Ken
The Power of Chance

Article by Jeffrey Hantover



*Kigen; Origin. 2007. Multi-fired stoneware. 37.5 x 48 x 46 cm.
Photography Kobayashi Tsunehiro.*

IN THE LAND OF SELF-HELP BOOKS AND TWELVE-STEP guides to self-mastery and human perfectibility and in a society whose cultural DNA is built upon faith in the mastery of nature and ourselves, Mihara Ken's work is a refreshing reminder of the reality and creative power of chance in life and art. The 50-year-old Japanese artist, whose work is in the collections among others of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and New Orleans Museum of Art, exhibited for the first time in the US in June, 2008, at Joan Mirviss's New York gallery and her booth at the Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Fair (SOFA). His work distills the best of Japanese aesthetics and, more than simply accepting, it embraces chance, inspiration unfettered by the straightjacket of traditional form, and the unpredictability of artistic creation.

There is a presence to Mihara's recent work that belies the simplicity of line and form – a 'silent monumentality' in its restraint, reserve and quiet palette (a kinship in clay to the photography of Walker Evans and the poetry of William Carlos Williams). Even a series of straight-forward photographs published in the August 2005 issue of *Honoho Geijutsu* documenting Mihara at work from simple clay coil to a vessel ready for firing conveys the sense of a serious artist deliberately creating art, of mind and hand working thoughtfully together. You expect to see a sign in the studio, 'Adult at Work.' Nothing that he says about his career, his firing technique, influences and artistic intention makes one doubt the arresting seriousness of his work.

Mihara was raised in Izumo, an old province of Japan now the eastern part of Shimane prefecture, 805 km (500 m) west of Tokyo, and known since ancient times as the home of the Shinto gods: it was here that they returned every October. The evocative gravitas of his work springs not simply from the clay of Izumo and the physical beauty of the landscape but from the spiritual ground where gods still reside.

Mihara does not come from a family of potters nor was he raised surrounded by the osmotic ceramic environment of Kyoto. He may be more open to the chance play of fire on clay because it was by chance that he became a ceramic artist – he joined a ceramics club while at university and "very much enjoyed the process of creating art with clay". He didn't study art but majored in civil engineering; it wasn't until 1981-82 when he was 23 that he studied with Shimane prefecture resident ceramist Funaki Kenji (b. 1927), a pupil of Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji. Perhaps an outsider to the world of Japanese ceramic culture, it took him longer to feel confident and trust his own intuition and inspiration and move away from the replication of traditional forms. By no means work of limited accomplishment, his production prior to his *Kigen* (A New Beginning) exhibition with Mirviss



Sekki: Sanaka. In the Midst. 2005 Multi-fired stoneware. 45.5 x 39 x 16.5 cm. Photography Richard Goodbody.

appears more stolid and studied, its form and colour more controlled and uniform – the play of ego and intention more obvious. In the recent work, he allows the fire and clay to speak. Paradoxically, becoming a servant of the fire, he becomes a greater master of the clay.

A multiple series of chance events shaped this movement towards a more self-confident and expressive art where imagination has freer rein. In the late 1990s he switched from using clay from the nearby Ishimi region to the local clay of Izumo. After a typhoon triggered a small landslide next to his studio in Izumo, he found this unexpected supply of raw clay with its high iron content had a unique texture when fired. It is difficult in a work of art to tease out the impact of one element from another, but for all of Mihara's eloquence about line and harmony it is the surface texture with its gradated palette that first engages the viewer. In the pebbled and powdery surface we see the artist's hand, feel the heat of the flame, and sense the passage of time. In Akiyama Yo's much larger and imposing pieces we feel in the presence of the excavated remnant of some ancient, even alien, civilisation. In Mihara, there is the sense of the past excavated and revealed but something more intimate – with its grey blue patina, an object brought to the surface from some ancient Mediterranean shipwreck.



*Kigen; Origin. 2007. Multi-fired stoneware.
47.5 x 29 x 16.5 cm. Photography: Kobayashi Tsunehiro.*



*Kigen; Origin. 2007. Multi-fired stoneware.
45 x 80 x 21 cm. Photography Kobayashi Tsunehiro.*

When lit and photographed against a dark background, some pieces have an even more primordial feeling, like the surface of a distant planet or moon taken in the blue light of outer space.

The look and feel of ancient earthenware is the product of a two-stage and more recently three-stage firing process. After a biscuit fire, Mihara pours a fire resistant slip over the piece and fires it again. The encasing clay protects the inner surface from the direct fire of the gas kiln, giving the piece its earthenware texture rather than a lustrous, smooth surface. A third firing brings out a richer range of colours not found in his earlier, more constrained work. While he strives intentionally for certain colour variations and attempts to match certain colours that he thinks work best with a particular form, Mihara celebrates the “high degree of chance and serendipity in any firing that is far beyond my control” and the “many wondrous surprises that transcend human effort”. He is not interested in trying to control all aspects of the firing process and remove any trace of chance and the mark of the potter’s hands as does the Kyoto artist Fukami Sueharu who chooses to express himself through the refinement of his exquisite celadon forms. For Mihara, technique is only a means: “what ultimately legitimises a work cannot be found in technique” but in the expression of the artist’s inner world.

Mihara was awarded the Kikuchi Foundation’s first International Research Grant in 2005, and here again opportunity intervened and opened for him a new world of inspiration. Mihara traveled for six months in Italy from Milan, south to Florence, Rome and then Sicily. He sought in his journey to “grasp the essence of Italian aesthetics.” This search for another culture’s essence seems a particular Japanese preoccupation as they have been adept at distilling and adopting the essence of a foreign culture whether it be French cuisine or retro Western fashion. He found that essence and inspiration not in the refined art of the museums but in the ‘raw’ and ‘untainted’ Sicilian landscape.

Most dramatically it opened his eyes to a broader and more evocative palette. Previously, he had considered the colouration of his pieces as “failures”. He had limited his palette “to accentuate the monotone silhouettes of my works”. Now he not only accepted but pursued these firing effects: “I could embrace these failures into my consciousness, and I naturally learnt to accept such a mind-state, along with new firings and forms.” His new methods of firing (adding a second glaze-firing) brought out the natural colours of the clay. Mihara listened more intently to the clay and his own imagination after his Italian trip.

In an unusual twist on East-West travel, the rougher landscape and extroverted culture of Catholic Sicily brought out a Zen openness and resignation: he was



Kigen; Origin. 2006. Multi-fired stoneware. 48 x 53 x 36.5 cm. Photography Richard Goodbody.

now willing to accept the unpredictability of the kiln, to break free from pre-conceptions and pre-existing forms, and “create works that were in line with the movements of my own heart”. Speaking further of the impact of his Italian travels Mihara says “my sensibilities shifted from a more spiritual plane to a more human level”. Sicily made him an offer he could not refuse: an offer that brought out the essence of Japanese aesthetics – beauty in the fallen blossom and the suggestive power of the imperfect and the perishable.

Although Mihara Ken was not, in 2005, a part of the Halsey and Alice North collection and consequently not in the exhibition based on it their collection at the

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Japan Society in New York, *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century*. It is now clear that any discussion of 21st century Japanese ceramics must include him. He joins as a younger but full partner in the multifaceted dialogue with the past begun by the Sodeisha artists and now carried forward by contemporary Japanese ceramists who freed from function explore the “wondrous surprises” of clay, fire and the human imagination.

Jeffrey Hantover is a writer living in New York. His novel, *The Jewel Trader of Pegu*, was published by William Morrow in 2008.