

HIROYUMI SUZUKI

The featured artist

Dec,2022

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH HIROYUMI SUZUKI

We had an exclusive interview with Hiroyumi Suzuki, who continues to express new vessels with sophisticated techniques while preserving tradition for his solo exhibition to be held from December 2. We asked him about his training in Korea and his future outlook.



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Hiroyumi Suzuki

1981 Born in Sendai City, Japan

2005 Trained in Mungyeong and Gyeongju, Korea

2009 Established his own studio in Shigaraki

2010 First solo exhibition at Gallery Touen <Shigaraki>

Solo exhibition at Contemporary Ceramics Salon-Tosei <Osaka >

2011 Solo Exhibition at Anagama Ceramic Gallery, Tokyo

2012 Solo exhibition at Nagoya Mitsukoshi Sakae Art Salon

2013 Solo Exhibition at Yokohama Takashimaya Art Craft Salon,

2016 Moved his studio to Iga, Japan

Solo Exhibition at Kuroda Toen, Ginza, Tokyo.

■ How did you get started with ceramics?

I moved to Tokyo for college and went to a regular 4th grade college, not an art school. The first year or two went by so fast, so I decided I wanted to have a proper student life, and that's when I joined a pottery club. I don't know why it was the pottery club (laughs).

I found out later that there were about 13 senior artists who became professional artists from there, so it was a rather solid circle.

■ Please tell us how you came to train in Korea and your episodes in Korea.

My parents vehemently opposed my becoming a potter. My parents wanted me to get a job after graduating from a four-year university. My parents said, "If you have the guts to go overseas, we will accept you as long as you get train oversea. I was originally attracted to the indescribable coolness of Ido tea bowls, so I decided on Korea as my destination.

I didn't have any acquaintances or connections in Korea, so I went to a language school in Seoul and visited every gallery and tea ceremony utensil shop I could find to find an apprentice place. Looking back, I guess I was young (laughs).

In my various visits, I came across a work that had a shape and sense of balance that other artists did not have, so I asked him for a favor and managed to find the master who can train me. However, he was an old man who grew about 10,000 apple trees as a hobby, so I spent a lot of time tending to his apple trees (laughs).

If I were Korean and could stay indefinitely without a visa, it might have been nice place but I was limited in time and had to devote myself to training in ceramics, so it was hard. After much deliberation, I decided to change my apprenticeship. At that time, my colleague who was training with me told me, "Suzuki, you should work on the potter's wheel," and he introduced me to a new teacher.

The new teacher was a young man of about 36 years old at that time. Korea was very famous for the potter's wheel, and there was a pottery wheel skills competition, a kind of Olympics of the pottery wheel, and he was competing for the first or second place in the competition.

My training on the pottery wheel began with the instruction to make a jar from a 5-kilogram block of clay, and continued until it weighed 20 kilograms. It was interesting to start with a jar, whereas in Japan we would have started with a teacup or a rice bowl. Some of the way of pottery wheel have changed a little, but most of them are the same as they were back then.

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Before I went to Korea, I only knew how to make glazes by mixing grams of commercially available glazes, but in Korea, I learned how to make glazes using methods and ingredients that I had never known before. Even now, I sometimes use ingredients sent to me from Korea.



(Photo: Pottery wheel used by Mr. Suzuki)

■ How about Korean language?

I don't use Korean now, so it has dulled me, but I did eventually managed to speak it back then.

■ How did you get started in your pottery activities in Shigaraki after returning to Japan?

After returning to Japan, I visited Mino and Karatsu, and then went to Shigaraki, which I had visited when I was a student, to visit Mr. Kiyotsugu Sawa. There I was introduced to Sawa Katsunori-san, who said, "Come and join us. Katsunori-san continues to treat me very well. He also introduced me to his current studio in Iga.

■ You work in a variety of fields. Which is the most rewarding?

I have been working with Mishima, Kohiki, and Shigaraki for a long time and will continue to do so, but now I am especially enjoying testing glazes and decorative clays for Kohiki.

The difficult part of kohiki is, of course, matching the engobe, red clay, and other clay compatibilities, but also thinking about how the vessel will grow and how it will stain as it is used. Pottery grows with use, so even if it looks white when used, it will change from its initial color. It is not good if it just gets dirty, and it is very fun to think about how it can be beautifully changed while making it.

■ What are your thoughts on your work?

I hope to create vessels that will grow as they are used. I don't want the shape to be too assertive. It just there as it is without paying attention to it. But when it is gone, you would miss it. I want to make something like that, something that people will never get tired of. It is the same for flower vase or vessels.

However, the opposite is true for wood-fired. Iga is like "the Iga"; it's tough, streaked, and stands out. Wood-fired is a way of putting out the stress that I cannot express in Yi dynasty style.

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■Do you have any worries when you are making ceramics?

I am always struggling with this. If I exhibit at the same place every year, it would be rude to the gallery and the customers if I don't show some changes from last year, so I always struggle with how to show changes each time. I try to change the glaze or the shape of the piece so that it doesn't stand out, or I try to make a bowl out of a piece that I only made as a plate last year. I am still in the middle of the process, and I hope that the final product will be better, so I would like to do everything that is part of that process. Optimistically, I think it's better to make it all up as I go along than to think it through.

■What kind of soil do you use for each?

Shigaraki, Iga, and celadon are made of white clay that you bought from a clay shop when you were in Shigaraki. It is as if the clay was taken directly from the mountains. For Shino, I went with Yamaguchi Makoto san to dig up soil in Mino. For Kohiki and Mishima, I dig and use red clay from the mountains between Iga and Shigaraki. This is a little off topic, but a Korean boy is currently training with me through my collogue in Korea. When he first came, I used Korean to communicate with him, but he didn't learn any Japanese that way, so I tried to use Japanese for his sake even if he didn't understand, and now he has become a great interpreter.

■What is your manufacturing process?

Basically, we use the potter's wheel, and then we use the hand building- potter's wheel, which is a method of piling up strings of clay by hands and finally shaping them by turning the pottery wheel. I have five kilns in total: wood-fired kiln, two electric kilns, a kerosene kiln, and an inverted-flame wood-fired kiln. Shino and Ame-yu are fired in an electric kiln, but the rest are fired in a wood-fired kiln because the reduction rate becomes stronger and the color becomes deeper. However, if I am asked to complete a piece in a hurry, I use electricity or kerosene. The size of a wood-fired kiln often seen in Iga and Shigaraki is about 3.0-3.5m, but the wood-fired kiln I use is 5.5m and is much larger than ordinary ones so that there is space for wood to be piled from the side. Depending on the type of work, it can hold up to 1,000 pieces. The reason it is so large is because it rained while I was building the kiln, and the kiln I was halfway through building was submerged in water. I had to start over from scratch, and I was angry, so made it bigger (laughs). Because the kilns are larger, the firing time is longer, from four and a half to five days, and about 300 to 330 sets of firewood are used. Some pieces are pre-fired and some are not, but those that come in direct contact with the floor of the wood-fired kiln are pre-fired to avoid cracking due to the moisture on the floor. These are mostly large pieces such as vases and flower vases.



(Photo: Suzuki's wood-fired kiln)

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■Is there anything that has changed between then and now?

In the past, I used to use the pottery wheel for everything. Nowadays, however, I do pottery wheel work and slab building, and I think that the techniques have expanded.

In the past, Mishima was traditionally a round-shaped vessel with a pattern on it, but now I can express Mishima in new ways, such as by stamping seals on a square object like a ceramic box. Some seals are made by carving wood, and others are made directly from Korean molds of tea-sweets.



(Photo: Hand-carved stamps)



(Photo: Shelf on which seals are placed)

In terms of mentality, I used to have a hard time before an exhibition because I would get sick to my stomach and not be able to sleep. But now I have to sleep otherwise I can't work, and I've become more open-minded. In a good way (laughs). Of course, I do my best, but now I can think that it is still a work in progress.

■What do you want to challenge in the future?

Until now, Shigaraki has been limited to vases and flower vases, but I would like to make something different. I would like to make something like just firing solid clay or firing clay with something, or something unnecessarily heavy like a water pot, or something that no one would want.

I would like to make things that are a little playful.

Hiroyumi Suzuki's solo exhibition will be held from December 2 (Fri.) to December 24 (Sat.), 2022.

We look forward to seeing you at the gallery.