

“What is the relationship between ceramics and contemporary art?”

Kaikai Kiki Gallery
3.8. – 30.8.2017

The main reason for the prevalence of blue and white ceramics is that porcelain and cobalt pigment have compatible firing temperatures, meaning wares need to be fired only once. But in the context of this exhibition, curated by the artist Takashi Murakami, this colour combination conjured up myriad referents, signalling a long history fraught with everything from alchemy to imperialism. Take Lee Ufan’s *From Line* (1976), in which a rich blue brushstroke the texture of sand runs down the centre of a sheet of paper. The piece was exhibited here amongst works of Delftware – the result of Dutch attempts to produce earthenware facsimiles of blue and white porcelain, which was not manufactured in Europe until an alchemist in Meissen, Germany, finally figured out how to make “white gold” in 1709. As with Delftware, this early European porcelain was often painted with blue landscapes, be they Chinese, Japanese or some vague – but unmistakably Oriental – amalgamation that was proudly displayed as a status symbol and proof of imperial reach.

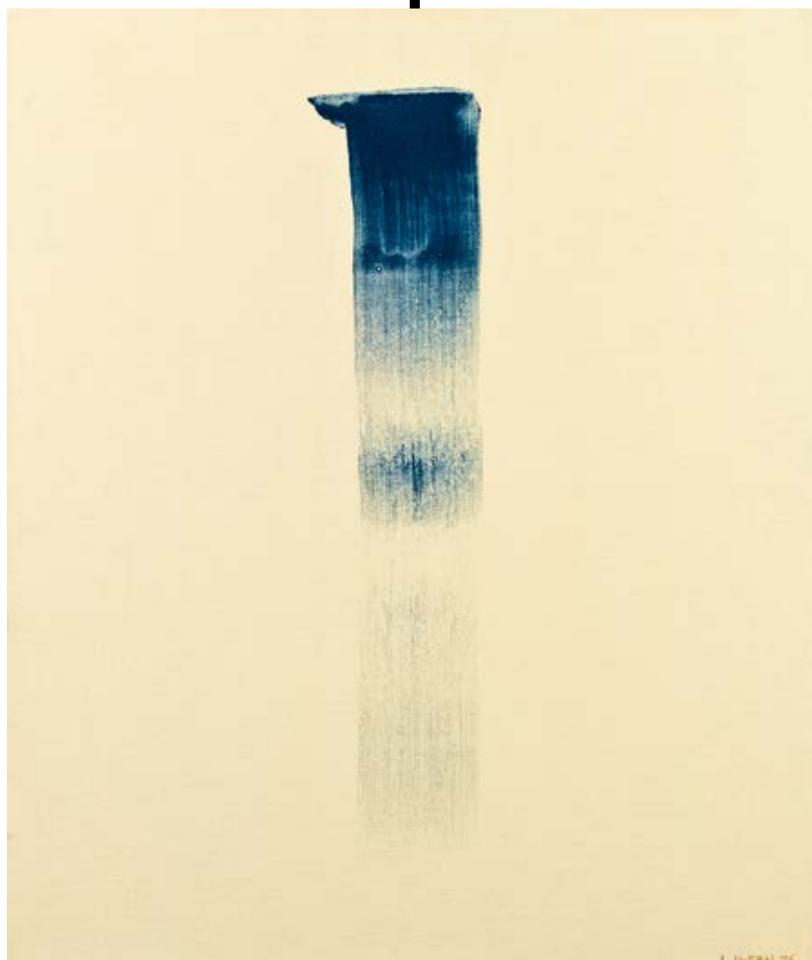
Such historical background ties together some of the threads of this unusual exhibition, which gathered a selection of recent works by contemporary Japanese artists and an array of historical ceramics from across Asia and Europe. It appeared to speculate on rather than answer the open-ended question of its title, suggesting certain interesting parallels. Then as now, ceramics bypasses distinctions between high and low, variously situated between decorative, utilitarian and art object. If this speaks to Murakami’s own practice of ignoring distinctions between fine art and luxury commerce, as he traverses mediums and collaborates with the likes of Louis Vuitton or Kanye West, that’s not all: as in the longer history of ceramics in East–West relations, he

intentionally employs aesthetics that are recognizably “Oriental” in order to garner cultural and financial capital in the West that can then be imported back to Japan. Specifically, his work draws from aesthetics from Japanese visual culture, such as anime, and incorporates them into high art.

The exhibition addresses more than the global exchanges that have taken place in the histories of ceramics and

sabi, which is based in the acceptance of imperfection, as evident in their asymmetry, roughness, simplicity and modesty.

There was one pairing that maybe came closest to answering to the question in Murakami’s title: Kodai Nakahara’s *Anice* (1991–92), a scantily-clad anime character, was displayed next to two nude Han Dynasty figures (China, 206 BC–220 AD). Together, the slender



aesthetics, however. The nine works by Masanobu Ando in the show – which have titles like *Distorted Ball of Air* or *Disk of Air* (2017) – at first glance bring to mind Richard Serra’s monumental sheet-metal works. But just as the Dutch tried to make earthenware look like porcelain, the artist convincingly disguises ceramics as steel. Ando considers the works an investigation of the Japanese aesthetic tradition of *wabi*

and similarly sized figurative sculptures summed up ceramics’ precarious position. Spanning millennia, these works together obviate the opposition between what Murakami calls “lifestyle crafts” and contemporary art, revealing the material as both contemporary *and* timeless, as art *and* utilitarian.

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