

Living Treasure: David Kuraoka

Judith van Praag

Upon entering Francine Seders Gallery, you're immediately confronted with four to five foot tall shapes, bronze replicas of pit-fired ceramics by David Kuraoka. The glossy objects seem hewn out of marble, then polished to a perfect sheen; their colors mottled, deep orange, rusty brown, combined with black and intense white.

Hawaii-born Kuraoka, 58, is a graduate of San Jose State College (he received his masters degree from 1970-71) professor of art, and head of the ceramics department at San Francisco State University.

Kuraoka borrows the open fire pit from Raku tradition. However, Raku wares are hand-formed rather than thrown on the wheel —which makes them very different from other kinds of Japanese ceramics— and Kuraoka first throws his vessels on the wheel, then shapes them further by hand, creating unique objects.

For each of the tall sculptures on the gallery's floor, he created huge "teacups", turning one over and pasting its rim onto the rim of the lower "cup". The result, huge "pods", of earthy and at the same time alien quality, topped with thick, black lids, the holes on the side sometimes inserted with clay marbles.

Kuraoka's process is highly involved; after the objects are shaped, have dried and are burnished, they're arranged neatly in a 4 foot deep and wide, 15 foot long trench on top of saw dust, covered with rock salt, copper carbonate and firewood; the wedding of heat and minerals creating the intriguing colors, reminiscent of the earth's own chemistry. A ceramics firing started on Friday evening will be ready on Sunday. After cooling, Kuraoka polishes each sculpture with a piece of rose quartz that fits easily in his hand.

Letting go of unique pieces can be painful to an artist. Kuraoka has come up with a method —compare a painter's reproductions in other media— which enables him to hold on to his original pieces, while creating a whole new line of work.

At a foundry in California, wax models are made of Kuraoka's

sculptures, then molds, after which bronzes are poured. Aided by a color photograph of the original clay sculpture, the artist directs a technician, who squirts oxides onto the heated metal objects, in order to copy the pit fire effects.

About sunlight proof qualities, Kuraoka, chuckling without a trace of self importance said, "We're doing research on that. White holds up better outdoors than other colors, perhaps because it resembles the color of bird droppings."

Research seems to be half the fun for this modern day alchemist. And he seems to thrive on technical difficulties.

"When teaching ceramics you face many problems in the studio, then you have to figure out what to do," the master said.

Beside the pit fired ceramics, Kuraoka's celadons, –the porcelain's signature pale, grayish green crackle a symbol of perfection– shown at Francine Seders in a variety of sizes and shapes, are a clear proof of the master's virtuosity in both modern and traditional art.

David Kuraoka is gregarious in sharing his knowledge, a natural teacher. During my visit to the gallery, ceramists fired off questions about temperatures, property of glazes, the difference between gas and electrical kilns.

"Fussy, you have to fuss over them," Kuraoka said of the celadons, "glazes are screened three times, everything has to be perfect. You also have to keep in account the shrinkage, a vessel will shrink 25 percent."

Objects of art don't have to be –some say, shouldn't be– useful. Once upon a time someone put dried flowers in one of Kuraoka's vessels, since then, he turns them over, using what was the bottom for the top, or –what's more radical?– closes them seamlessly in onto themselves. A pin point puncture secures the ceramic surprises from exploding. When fired and polished, the resulting sensually shaped fantasy fruits, "crystal balls" and giant marbles are alive with a fire that seems to come from within.

Songs by "Earth, Wind and Fire" came to my mind and may have played in Kuraoka's studio in the 70's.

"I was a hippy in the Bay Area, but then I went to Hawaii and I

was hailed as an artist, truly appreciated and wooed with studio space and money to pay for my projects," Kuraoka said.

In 1981, then 35-year-old Kuraoka was honored with "The Living Treasure Award of Hawaii". The artist still divides his time between homes and studios in the Bay Area and on the island. He often throws vessels in Hawaii, then carries them to the mainland on the plane –still wet, wrapped in plastic grocery bags.

A research grant from the University of Hawaii enabled Kuraoka to do extensive research on a puzzling problem: the cracking of tiles during firing time in electrical kilns. He discovered that the problem lies in the dramatic difference in temperature which occurs when the electrical oven is turned off. A gas oven cools gradually, but an electrical oven can go down 500 degrees Fahrenheit in just a few minutes. So now Kuraoka programs the electrical kiln to cool down more slowly, 50-100 degrees Fahrenheit every so many minutes. "Water", an assemblage of brightly glazed tiles is an example of electrically fired work. Also shown are tile assemblages "Shadows" and "Crossfire", clay slabs, the artist "drew" on with minerals –sprinkles of rock salt, lines of rusty wire, or hardware store copper mesh– resulting in one of a kind "mono prints".

The objects on the floor and pedestals may seem more complex than the clay slabs on the wall, but as the artist told me, what appears to be easy was more difficult to master. Simplicity as the ultimate challenge. There's something Zen about that notion, but what would you expect of a Living Treasure?

David Kuroaka November 5-28, 2004, 11-5, Tues-Sat, 1-5, Sun.
Francine Seders Gallery, 6703 Greenwood Avenue North, Seattle
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