



Esther
Shimazu

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Front Cover Art

For Bear, For Cat

2015, stoneware, porcelain, epoxy putty, 6" x 5.5" x 8.75"

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Featuring

"Esther Shimazu: Molding the Human Spirit" by John Seed

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Esther Shimazu

Molding the Human Spirit

BY JOHN SEED

Esther Shimazu, a Japanese American ceramicist born and raised in Honolulu, is a master in capturing the human spirit in clay. Her hollow stoneware figures—pudgy male and female nudes—are jolly souls who love life and lack self-consciousness. They come across as eccentric and likeable, rather like the woman who molded them.

Shimazu's Japanese grandparents were Japanese citizens who came to Maui to work in its sugar fields. She grew up on Oahu, the fourth of six children of bracket generation parents who spoke both English and Japanese. Her father was a member of the notable mostly Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team that fought in World War II. With assistance from the GI Bill, her father became the first member of his family to go to college, becoming a structural and civil engineer. Shimazu, who admires her parents greatly, describes their influence on her life this way; "My dad could draw and had originally wanted to be an architect and Mom is a great storyteller and in some other time and place, who knows what she could have done. Both worked insanely hard to give us safe and comfortable lives."



Tiger 2 Rabbit
2011, stoneware, porcelain
16" x 15" x 15"

Growing up in Manoa Valley, in a diverse, mostly Asian university neighborhood, the Shimazu siblings were close in age and each strove to find his or her own way. Encouraged to be creative, they spent hours drawing on old blueprint paper unrolled on the floor and explored different outlets. Early on Esther claimed clay: “It was mine,” she recalls, “my refuge, my favorite thing.” Since she was getting good grades and not being at all wild, she was allowed to follow her interest in ceramics: “Nobody stopped me – I suspect they thought that eventually I would just get married.”

When it came time for college, she started out at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, just a mile and a half away, but Shimazu found that through a national student exchange program she could study out of state. “Let’s go to Massachusetts,” she decided, and when she got there she liked it. In the end, she stayed five years, first completing her BFA and then an MFA in Ceramics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Upon her return to Hawai’i Shimazu held what she remembers as a “series of oddball jobs.” Finally she settled in as a pottery and jewelry specialist in the army craft shop system. She continued to make sculpture on the side, as a kind of glorified hobby, and exhibited her work, mainly in non-profit shows. In 1993, a decade after completing her MFA, a game-changer came along in the form of the First Biennial of the newly opened Contemporary Museum of Honolulu.

Through that exhibit, Shimazu caught the eye of California-based dealer and figurative ceramics aficionado John Natsoulas who offered

to represent her. In 1995 she was able to leave her civil service job and found her way towards national exposure and patronage. An undiscovered talent who was more than ready to blossom, Shimazu has supported herself as a full-time ceramic artist ever since.

“I like problem solving and capturing moments, I guess,” says Shimazu. As her art developed, one of the consistent problems she faced was how to resolve and hybridize all of the various cultures, influences and artistic styles she had been exposed to. “At the University of Hawai’i it was largely Mingei pottery; at U Mass, it was still mostly pottery plus more Abstract Expressionism: I just wanted to make people and critters. They let me blunder about on my own to figure out how.” The artistic tradition of nudity, which struck Shimazu as “basic and unavoidable,” was another essential element in the mix.

Observant but also practical, Shimazu wants her characters to be seen for what they are, ceramic pots: such an essential part of her background and education. Her forms are literally hollow vessels with shoulders, feet and bellies that reflect Shimazu’s “nerdy” interest in biology and history. She is interested in great sculptural traditions, many involving movement and spirit, and especially Japanese netsuke that—as Shimazu has noted—are often very funny. Taking her subjects from contemporary life and fusing them with the satirical lightness and loving detail of the netsuke tradition, Shimazu touches on an under-appreciated side of Japanese personal expression.



Must Get Closer
2015, stoneware, porcelain
12.5" x 4.5" x 4.5"

Shimazu's sculpture *Must Get Closer* features a soft, androgynous figure who looks upwards in forbearance as a dog leans against her. The idea came from a chance remark that Shimazu heard: a man muttering "must get closer" towards a large, ardent dog sitting at his feet. The image is affectionate, funny and even a bit erotic. "Plus," Shimazu comments, "It's a way to stabilize the tiny-footed figure and who doesn't like dogs?"

Pastiche shows an Asian Adam and Eve squeezed onto a tiny stoneware loveseat. A beautiful and phallic serpent leaps from the horned man's loins towards an apple clutched by the woman as she leans back in sexual anticipation brandishing a cigar. There is no shame in this tableau only giddy joy and the sense that there is an easily available dirty joke being told with wry, universal humor. The sheer skill of Shimazu's ability as a manipulator of clay is on view: there isn't another artist around who molds fingers, toes, nipples and other bodily details with such tenderness.

Pastiche
2015, stoneware, porcelain
9.5" x 9.5" x 8"





Waking Dream
2015, stoneware, porcelain,
5.75" x 13" x 7"

Shimazu's technical virtuosity also shines in *Waking Dream* in which a rotund female nude sprawls with a book and her cat on a patterned spread and pillow. There is a conversation going on with art history here: Titian's Venuses come to mind, as does their punning use of symbols. The cat in Shimazu's sculpture has something to say about the nude woman's reverie and its likely sexual nature, but is also a stunning formal element that adds companionship and humor to the image.

For the time being Shimazu is very busy developing her imagery and following her own course as an artist. "I don't do commissions often," she notes. "I love clay's organic quality and sometimes things just go one way and change the whole look of what I am doing." Her works rely on drawing her viewers close to each work, where they can appreciate the details and idiosyncrasies. "I want people to smile, look closer and appreciate every damned detail," is how she puts it. Those who do won't be disappointed, and who couldn't possibly smile at Esther Shimazu's spirited and funny visions?



Cat Demon Makes Her Getaway
2014, stoneware, porcelain
22" x 14" x 13"

PLATES

SELECTED WORKS



Hanging With The Blue Dog

2003, stoneware, porcelain, 13.5" x 16" x 14"



Spotty Cat

2005, stoneware, porcelain, 9" x 6.5" x 3.5"



Do As I Say, Not As I Do

2007, stoneware, porcelain, 11.25" x 8" x 9.5"



Yowza
2008, stoneware



Let Me Tell You

2008, stoneware, porcelain, 4.5" x 5" x 5"



Troublemaker

2008, stoneware, porcelain, stainless steel, epoxy putty 12.5" x 6.5" x 6.5"



Snow and Water Fan

2008, stoneware, porcelain, 11.75" x 11" x 9"



Strawberry Guava

2008, stoneware, porcelain, 14.75" x 12.25" x 14.25"



Adrift

2009, stoneware, 36" x 20" x 25"



Talk tabby

2009, ceramic, 7" x 11" x 8"



But Wait, There's More

2009, stoneware, porcelain, 13.5" x 11.5" x 12"



Scapular Spotty Dog

2009, stoneware, porcelain, stainless steel, epoxy, putty, 19.75" x 12" x 12"



Merperson

2009, stoneware, porcelain, 10.5" x 17" x 7"



Yoo-hoo

2009, stoneware, porcelain, 8" x 9" x 5"



Cool Green

2010, stoneware, porcelain, 7.5" x 15" x 5.5"



Come Sit by Me

2010, stoneware, porcelain, 13" x 10" x 10"



Spotty Bitch

2010, stoneware, porcelain, 9.5" x 8" x 8"



Chunky Dog Buster

2011, stoneware, porcelain, 11.25" x 9" x 11.5"



Fire Horse

2011, stoneware, porcelain, 13.75" x 15.5" x 5.5"



Lap Happy

2011, stoneware, porcelain, 11.5" x 6.5" x 8.5"



Year of the Rabbit

2011, stoneware, porcelain, 9" x 4.25" x 6"



Tiger 2 Rabbit

2011, stoneware, porcelain, 16" x 15" x 15"



Fish Daze

2012, stoneware, porcelain, 10" x 13" x 9"



Mabel

2013, stoneware, porcelain, 13" x 12" x 9"



Vanilla Float

2013, stoneware, porcelain, 14.5" x 5.5".x 3"



Primary Head

2013, stoneware, porcelain, 8" x 5" x 4.5"



Grow Your Own

2013, stoneware, porcelain, 13" x 6.5" x 7.5"



Be Cool

2013, stoneware, porcelain, 8.5" x 4.25" x 3.5"



Ice Blue

2014, ceramic, 8.75" x 18" x 6.5"



Shall We

2014, ceramic, 6.25" x 8" x 5"



Gertie, the Growler
2014, ceramic, 12.5" x 8" x 8"



Sweet Spot

2014, stoneware, porcelain, 12.5" x 12.5" x 12.5"



Cat Demon Makes Her Getaway
2014, stoneware, porcelain, 22" x 14" x 13"



Fancy That

2014, stoneware, porcelain, 19" x 13" x 11"



Listen

2014, stoneware, porcelain, 15.5" x 13.5" x 13"



Look

2014, stoneware, porcelain, 15.5" x 16" x 11"



Tiny World

2015, ceramic, 20.5" x 10.5" x 11.5"



After All That

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 15.5" x 8.5" x 9"



Not What I Heard

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 15" x 11" x 7.75"



Get You Later

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 12" x 8" x 9"



Listen Before You Leap

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 18.5" x 8.5" x 4"



Now That You Mention
2015, stoneware, porcelain, 7" x 17.5" x 6.5"



Whoopsie

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 7.5" x 3" x 3.75"



Must Get Closer

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 12.5" x 4.5" x 4.5"



Pillows

2015, stoneware, porcelain, epoxy putty, steel, 5.75" x 11.5" x 4.5"



For Bear, For Cat

2015, stoneware, porcelain, epoxy putty, 6" x 5.5" x 8.75"



Pastiche

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 9.5" x 9.5" x 8"



Waking Dream

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 5.75" x 13" x 7"



Scoots

2015, stoneware, porcelain, 11" x 7.25" x 7.5"



How Kind

2016, stoneware, porcelain, 16.5" x 19" x 15"



Just Us

2016, stoneware, porcelain, 6" x 7.75" x 7"



Oh My Yes

2016, stoneware, porcelain, 8" x 7.75" x 6"



Which Way

2016, stoneware, porcelain, 13" x 5" x 14"

