

# American Arts

QUARTERLY

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*Winter 2010*



The Unbearable Vacuum of Kitsch

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Beauty as Symmetry

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Classicism and Language in Architecture

## Akio Takamori

Akio Takamori, a gifted and innovative American ceramic artist, exhibited two groups of large sculptures in fired clay, painted with underglazes, at Barry Friedman Ltd. in New York City this fall. The artist quoted iconic figures from art history in clever, poignant and formally inventive ways. The first group evoked the character of Alice, the archetypal girlchild, curious and adventurous, sculpted as a plump Velázquez Infanta with a precociously critical side-long glance. In the second group, this girl's head topped a young woman's body quoted from Roman statuary, a torso of Venus, with trimmed-off or missing arms. The figures are meant to represent the same young woman, before and after puberty. Rather than implying that every plump, overdressed little girl may develop into a goddess, they embody a more complex and fertile set of ideas about femininity, sexuality and art. All the figures have the round, enlarged heads, bulbous coiffures, and the swiftly brushed, dripping polychrome of Tang dynasty ceramic figures. The Alice costumes have brightly colored or strongly contrasting rows of braid, lace and ruffles, and some of the Venuses are draped with light strokes of white. There is a more remarkable and unsettling use of polychrome in the unnaturally red-stained "rosy" cheeks painted on all the faces, with a thin underglaze that has been allowed to leave collar- or hem-long drips. These run down the chests and bellies of the nude Venuses like bloodstains.

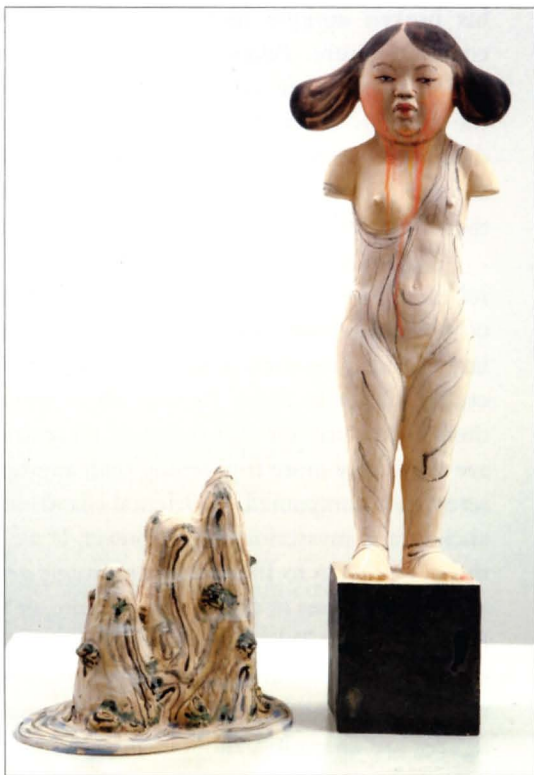
Takamori, born in Japan in 1950, was introduced to the paintings of Velázquez, Goya and Breughel in his father's art books and to some of the grislier facts of life and sexuality in his father's medical clinic, where patients came for treatment of venereal diseases and the effects of nuclear bombings. He studied modernist industrial design in art school and then became apprenticed to a family-run traditional Japanese folk art pottery. Moving to the United States to study, he received an M.F.A. from Alfred University and has won many awards. Takamori is now Professor of Art at the University of Washington in Seattle. In Takamori's art, figures from art history pop up like hedgehogs and flamingos in an *Alice in Wonderland* game of croquet, but are assimilated into play with an easy assurance. He has worked before with images of willful, omnipotent and potentially dangerous Queens and Duchesses from Goya and Velázquez. Here he portrays them as giant children, conflating the Red Queen with Alice. The figures are massive, with heavy lobes of dark hair that balance the volumes of their skirts and sleeves, but there is a lighthearted magic in the interplay of sculpting and painting, of painted form over abstract modeled form. In *Alice* (2009), the girl's proportions suggest both a Velázquez dwarf and Tenniel's illustrations, with their enlarged heads. The solid form of Alice's ruff is made delicate with painted folds. Her crossed bare feet behind her and her clasped hands in front are painted over simple oval, convex areas, and the result is deeply satisfying and

Akio Takamori  
*Venus and Island IV*, 2009  
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delightful. In her face, modeling and painting sometimes work together to exaggerate the forms of lips and nostrils, where deep folds are reinforced with dark lines. Sometimes paint alone carries the expression, as in the eyes, which are painted over simple mounds. The faces are subtle, quizzical and watchful, and seem wonderfully alive.

The figures of Venus have more subdued expressions. Their Japanese features, with whitened foreheads and red-stained cheeks, sit oddly on truncated torsos of the type of the Esquiline Venus or her sister in the Louvre, a pubescent girl's body with small, high breasts and a thick waist, following geometric proportions. Their pale buff clay is not perfectly smooth, and the grog and the uneven surface mimic the dimples and slight slump of flesh. Takamori has created a suggestive and refreshing synergy from Japanese erotic woodcuts, the swollen oval shapes of body and hair in Tang figures and the cool eroticism of the classical Venus.

Each *Venus* is paired with another sculpture, a cloud or an island wrapped in clouds. Greek islands go with Greek goddesses, rising from thigh-high water, although to these figures they are the size of toy islands or Chinese scholar's rocks. These islands wear playful collars or hats of cloud, and some lie curled close like pets. In *Venus and Island II* (2008), her island wears its painted rock-fall and foliage patterns like a printed kimono, and seems to exhale its cloud. Her head is the most plausibly fitted to its torso, and the torso is most exactly quoted from the classical original. She glances down as if to watch her island steaming away. In *Venus and Island IV* (2009), the island is clearly a scholar's rock, ringed with its traditional ripples, and a narrower version of these rippling lines indicates her drapery. She is also Buddha-like, standing straight with parted legs on a blackened pedestal. Her cheek paint runs down her chest and around her one exposed breast. The armlessness that Takamori takes from





his broken antique inspirations is more shocking here, in an otherwise complete figure. Takamori's interpretation of transparent classical drapery is interesting. It's not unlike the shallow rivulets of Aphrodite's wet gown from the *Ludovisi Throne* (fifth century B.C.), in Rome's Palazzo Altemps, but his drapery is painted onto the skin, rendered as the trails or signatures of stroking caresses. On several of the *Venus* figures, faint vertical stains of white follow their forms as gravity dictates, even continuing onto the pedestal.

Takamori's girls are more powerful than his women. His girls wear the robes of power and have arms and legs. His women live in their heads on top of defenseless bodies that must be worshipped but cannot be used, and these large heads give their bodies the proportions of childhood, not even adolescence. Insofar as these Venuses are sculptures of statues, of existing objects, their bodies are not vulnerable. If these are sculptures of living women, they are ultimately more frightening than anything in *Wonderland*. Yet in their meek serenity, accompanied by Oriental islands or wreathed in clouds, they evoke an ancient and mysterious erotic power. If we compare Takamori's variations on the Venus torso to Jim Dine's enormous green bronze enlargements of crude souvenir versions of the Venus de Milo, on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, we see how sensitively Takamori has translated a classical Greek form. He works from a confident personal connection to the timeless cult of Venus and the cultural resonance of the character of Alice to make sculptures that seem alive. His figures are charming, thought-provoking and formally satisfying new contributions to contemporary figurative sculpture.

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