



Akio 2

## Akio Takamori: Equivalent

Contemporary audiences, accustomed to Conceptual art, Process-based work, or Relational Aesthetics, may question their relationship to Akio Takamori's work, but in fact they can choose from a wide menu of approaches. Always visually appealing and emotionally engaging, his pieces can be experienced as figural sculptures, sophisticated ceramics, and/or paintings on irregular surfaces; they function as psychologically potent intermediaries, negotiating between two or more cultures - Japanese and Western, male and female. His objects intervene in our space and act decisively yet deferentially, averting their eyes. For over 15 years Takamori has focused on creating substantial, mostly free-standing figures. Never life-sized, these presences usually stand three to four feet high but may be as small as one's forearm or occasionally take on giant scale - such as Seattle's outdoor installation *Three Women* (2006), cast aluminum figures that dwarf passersby. They may represent figures of extreme authority, such as monks, Bodhisattvas, empresses, or queens, but more often depict quotidian individuals: ordinary men, women, and children. *Equivalent* comprises eleven such familiar types, most of them standing quietly or even more peacefully sound asleep. In type, specific age, and the mood he or she projects, each alludes to an essential aspect of felt experience. Together they create a convincing community - a basic ensemble of society that allows the artist to provide insights into human nature and the ways of the world.

Over the thirty plus years of his distinguished career, Takamori has been celebrated for a variety of explorations. He first garnered acclaim for his unique "envelope" vessels, usually representing a couple making love but occasionally picturing childbirth and other aspects of sexuality. These works showcased not only his mastery of ceramics but also his bravura painting and drawing, which began to develop in counterpoint to the modeled form that supported them. Having achieved a considerable range both formally and expressively in vessel-based works, Takamori began to construct free-standing figures in the mid-1990s. The first characters - monochrome women in kimonos or dresses, students, a cat - took shape during a residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre at 's-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands in 1996. Lumpy and generalized in form, they exploit brushwork to adumbrate accessories and complex Japanese fabric patterns. This breakthrough not only opened up a broader range of subjects but also functioned fully as sculpture, enabling Takamori to engage freely in dialogue with art made in every medium, in addition to the more specialized discourse of ceramics. As he continued to explore making figures in the round, his subsequent series became at once more detailed and more precisely characterized. Alongside additional anonymous "types" remembered from Japan are quotations from historical photographs and famous paintings. The series, first exhibited as *Ensemble* in 2000, includes three-dimensional versions of famous characters out of Giorgione's *The Tempest*, Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, Goya's *Duchess of Alba*, and several Velazquez royal portraits, among other monuments of art history.

Takamori further explored individual free-standing figures in another recent series, *The Europeans* (2007-09). Experimenting with porcelain - a medium much more recalcitrant than his preferred stoneware - he produced rougher, less articulated figures. The artist shot detail photographs of each, originally planning to destroy the sculpture so that only the photographic record remained.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately he chose to exhibit each figure contemplating her or his portrait, emphasizing a radically different scale between the two versions of the same subject. Exploiting the camera's ability to isolate and frame specific aspects of a sculpture, Takamori enjoyed finding nuances within a sculpture's "personality"; he continues to explore this new working method actively, even producing many of the illustrations for this publication.

The themes of the current exhibition connect back to two strands of the artist's early works. The frank earthiness of the *Squatting Girl* and the erotic associations of the *Sleepers* depend on the comfortable, easy sexuality of the envelope vessels, begun over 25 years earlier. The range of characters derives its first adumbration in *The Village* (1976), a work monumental in conception if not scale. Created while still an undergraduate at the Kansas City Art Institute, the multipart work represents the town where he grew up, recreating its characteristic architecture and layout as an armature for an assortment of people. The characters include stock village types at work or leisure, as well as specific portraits, such as a man he remembered squatting on a straw mat to repair the villagers' umbrellas.<sup>2</sup> Its highly sketchy modeling is complemented by incised decoration and touches of local color.

When Takamori returned to the villagers of his childhood, he had a new way to construct figures in clay. These coil and slab-built bodies inhabit our space at a peculiar scale, neither monumental nor statuette. Their sturdy construction is at once architectural and an ideal surface to support his bravura painting. Information about the subject's expression, hands, fabrics, and drapery folds are often provided only in the painting. For example, the standing infant is essentially a nude, but multiple glazings add shoes, a translucent undershirt, and red mittens. The sensitive handling of facial features and variegated coloring provide a convincing sense of flesh. In contrast, his hair is barely sketched by a cap of gray wash with no attempt to detail texture or distinguish strands of hair. One of Takamori's photographs, which captures the three boys standing in a cluster, sharply reveals the differing personalities, precisely if efficiently captured by the artist. One wary and a little ill at ease, one assertive to the point of craftiness, and the baby a fairly uncanny image of guilelessness, they represent a sort of three ages of man narrowed to its origins in childhood, a subject of long-standing interest to him. (Although the anatomy is understated, the three modes and ages are also distinguished by which part of their trunk is thrust forward: chest, hips, or belly).

The figures' poses, while evoking naturalistic actions, are full of meaning - at once personal, sociological, and art historical. Five are *Sleepers*: Youthful or adult, fully clothed or nude, each evokes an individual in its close observation of the poses and inwardness of slumber. Four date from 2003, an earlier iteration of the subject, but *Sleeping Woman in Red Dress* (2012)

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with the author, August 31, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Edward Lebow, "It Takes A Village: The Ceramics of Akio Takamori," in Peter Held, ed., *Between Clouds of Memory: Akio Takamori, A Mid-Career Survey*. Exhibition catalogue from the Arizona State University Art Museum, Ceramics Research Center, Tempe, AZ, p. 36.

attests to the artist's ongoing fascination with the subject. Asleep - approximately one-third of our lives - we are truly alone and apart. Unlike the standing figures, which are exhibited in group, the *Sleepers* are solitary. Characteristically, Takamori expands the philosophical potential of the subject. "I was thinking about Asian students, who tend to be really quiet people, characterized by passivity, they avoid conflict."<sup>3</sup> He also remarks that like the Asian stereotype, "they also resist eye contact." Here then is a pertinent quality of this artist. Transposed from small Japanese villages to much more raucous U.S. studio art departments, he explored differences of social temperament and cultural norms. Whatever experience he encounters in his life, whether sensations of otherness, developmental landmarks, or familial milestones, becomes raw material for his creation of a personal iconography.

Less detached than the *Sleepers*, two additional poses proclaim their foreignness. *Woman in Kimono*, utterly self-contained in her folded posture, reads as stereotypically Japanese. In contrast to that figure's contemplative quietude, we encounter *Squatting Girl*, all angles and ungainliness, opened almost literally as well as formally. Takamori has recently created a substantial series of squatting sculptures, all women, evoking a "...childhood memory of witnessing a girl urinating."<sup>4</sup> For me, the uneasy force of these sculptures strongly recalled recent feminist works by Nancy Spero, Marina Abramovic, and Kiki Smith. All the specific works I recalled were in turn based on specific ancient traditions - a Balkan fertility ritual; the Sheela-na-gig of Irish Mediaeval church decoration, celebrated by such artists as Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith. A similarly earthy and solemn sense of purpose endows *Squatting Girl*.

His standing figures also assert their separateness from modern Western conventions. Although the full-length upright individual is perhaps the most common subject in figurative art, Takamori tweaks its detailing away from the traditional portrait. Unlike the *contrapposto* developed in the Renaissance to evoke a sense of naturalism, these figures are rooted with equal weight on each leg. Within the artist's world these standing figures represent basic consciousness and being-in-the-world, on one level, whereas the other figures grow increasingly private, both within and outside the conventions of art history. Yet they too glance away, declining to meet the viewer's gaze.

Takamori's figural works create a true hybrid between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art. Representation, formal expression, and mood derive equally from sculptural and painterly means, and often in a complex negotiation between the two. Formally we see the artist making ever more confident use of multiple layers and firings of glazing, and enjoying the collision of pattern upon pattern, the interplay of brushstroke and motif, happy accidents and painterly drips. At the same time, the overall shape sometimes grows more experimental, such as the radical blobs that compose the *Sleeping Woman in Red Dress*.

In virtually every detail, these new works build on the artist's extensive experience in humanist themes. The subjects convincingly suggest real people, observed in all their foibles: proud, shy, maladroit, detached, or confrontational. Each displays an intensely observed, particular pose, from the quiet lyricism of the *Sleeping Woman in Patterned Skirt* to the totemic aggressivity of *Squatting Girl*. This remarkable humanism is ultimately the great achievement of Takamori's work. The title of his current exhibition brings this complexity home. "The figures are dissimilar in gender, race, generation, age, scale, social and cultural background so I like the title of the exhibition to be equivalent to put them in the larger perspective."<sup>5</sup> Surrounded by theoretical approaches to culture, which explore the mechanics of the art market or focus on the overwhelming influence of media on our perceptions, Takamori reminds us of our primary connections to other people and thereby celebrates the endless complexity, richness, and potential of humanity.

Elizabeth A. Brown, Seattle, WA

---

3 Conversation with the author, September 18, 2012

4 Email correspondance, November 5, 2012

5 Email from the artist, October 11, 2012