

Akio Takamori: The Laughing Monks

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NORTH GALLERIES

A conversation with exhibiting artist Akio Takamori

Akio, what can you tell us about the characters of Kanzan and Jittoku, the Laughing Monks?

AKIO TAKAMORI: Kanzan and Jittoku, the Laughing Monks, have been a favorite subject in Chinese and Japanese painting as early as the 13th century. I saw these paintings as a child and have always been attracted to these characters. They are very mysterious and almost scary with their irrational and eccentric appearances. Later I learned that they were a poet-recluse and a temple dishwasher. They are usually depicted with ragged clothing and tangled hair, grimacing or laughing wildly. They were very wise, but very unpretentious. Because of their otherworldly behavior, they were regarded as incarnations of the bodhisattva. The ambiguity of these characters appealed to me.

Why did you choose to make sculptures of them?

AT: They look like big babies and old men at the same time. In Buddhism, young children and very old people are recognized for their close distance to the other world. They are closer

to entering and leaving this realm. They also share the similarities of clumsy physical functions and lack of language. Both heavily depend on others to survive. My most recent work was about babies, then observing my own father's gradual mental and physical decline as the result of aging and Alzheimer's, I was thinking about old people. My perception of my father, and my relationship to him, changed as I was confronted with his innocence and vulnerability. His basic goodness as a human being—his sense of humor, his considerate nature, his sense of appreciation for beauty—remained even after his intellect and capacity for speech declined.

The seated monks are paired with ceramic vessels you chose from the Henry's collections. Did you learn anything new about the Henry's ceramics collections?

AT: When I first was learning about the Henry collections about 10 years ago, I was surprised to find the Henry has such a diverse collection of functional ceramics. It's not what I think of when I think of the Henry. I wanted these objects to look like they are

This exhibition is one of an occasional series wherein artists with varying perspectives explore the resources of the Henry Art Gallery collections. At the same time it complements the artist's mid-career survey at the Tacoma Art Museum, *Between Clouds of Memory: The Ceramic Art of Akio Takamori*, which runs until October 8, 2006.



being used, though I realize I couldn't fill them with water in the museum setting. Kanzan and Jittoku are seated at a table, using the vessels. They're having a drinking party in the gallery.

The standing monks are paired with pictures of children. What connection are you making between this subject matter and the laughing monks?

AT: Like the monks, these can be simultaneously charming or cute and scary. The Nan Goldin photograph is not easy to look at, and I knew that in choosing this work, and also others in the exhibition. When young kids are playing Barbies, or GI Joes, or whatever—they pretend and become those characters. The doll becomes a stand-in for the child. I am hoping that visitors to this exhibition will allow themselves to step into the characters of Kanzan and Jittoku, and imagine how they might experience these works of art. I have created this particular environment for the monks, and I would like viewers to experience how they perceive the world.

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