



I first encountered Shio Kusaka's pots in 2008, at a small shop in Venice, California, a few blocks from the Pacific Ocean. The shop, Tortoise, sells only Japanese objects, from furniture to books to tea towels, all highly refined and expertly selected. On this particular day a large wooden table on the back patio displayed a dense accumulation of pots. Bone white or charcoal black, many of these vessels evoked teacups, flowerpots, or vases, though many others defied such simple classification. Utterly familiar, yet remarkably idiosyncratic, I was quickly compelled to examine each and every one of these pots, holding many aloft for more intimate inspection, noting their weight and subtle shifts in glazing or decoration by rotating them with my hand. Surrounded by exquisitely designed objects (Noguchi's paper, Akari lights, Yanagi's flatware, and a lot of nice ceramics), Shio's pots at once claimed a position within this cultural tradition and simultaneously ventured, however quietly at first glance, beyond the assumed

boundaries of that heritage. I left that day with seven pots, several of which I begrudgingly gave away as gifts.

I begin with this anecdotal account for several reasons. First, to admit at the very outset that I'm writing this introduction to an artist's work not from the aloof position of disinterested observer, but as a dedicated fan, without the benefit (or good manners) of critical distance. Shio's pots reside in my home and my office, and I look at them every day. In this sense, visiting one of her exhibitions is a bit like meeting long-lost members of a well-known family.

Second, and more importantly, my first encounter with Shio's pots was a profound one—at least if my ability to remember the experience with near-photographic detail is a useful measure of profundity. It was the rarest kind of encounter, particularly for those of us who look at art on a daily basis and do so as a "job." We are prone to visual exhaustion: I am not exaggerating when I confide that this inaugural experience of Shio's pots, in this relatively humble context, actually reminds me of my very first trips to the museum, my first wide-eyed encounters with paintings by Van Gogh, Pollock, and Johns (to name three high school favorites), and the first time I stepped on one of Carl Andre's lead "rugs," knowingly. Such intense, vivid memories withstand many years of active looking, along with the more than-occasional boredom and cynicism that grows ever so gradually, like a tough visual callous—not to mention lots of bad art. It is important to note that such expe-



(INSTALLATION VIEW, TORTOISE), 2008.

riences (we're talking about the sublime, I think) evade hierarchies or simple categorical imperatives—which might help explain why one's experience of a three-inch piece of white rope nailed to the wall by Richard Tuttle could be placed alongside one's encounter with the vast, inhuman design of St. Peter's Basilica, at least for this viewer: regardless of scale, both changed how I see the world. Shio's pots, whether singularly or ganged, have likewise helped me realize that this encounter is *the thing*, the experience that makes people who care deeply about art remember why they (we) care about it in the first place.



(PLANTER WITH A PLANT), 2008.

Shio's show, on that Venice patio, was titled "Irregulars," and I initially took the title to mean *inferior*—like the "seconds" that are not quite perfect, sold by Heath ceramics, buyer beware. But, as suggested above, there was little about the show that seemed inferior to this viewer. Indeed, Shio's pots are often marked by asymmetries, subtle or explicit, in form or surface or both; an otherwise even glaze is marked

by a seemingly errant drip or dulling abrasion; the rim of a vessel might droop into a flabby lip, not unlike a crocheted turtleneck sweater with its neck flipped inside out. Irregularity, if that is indeed the right word, might be found most readily in Shio's sense of line, which is evident in both the form of her pots as well as in the patterns that cover them—a line that is as idiosyncratic as it is instantly recognizable. See, for example, the way a stately black pot is incised with alternating triangles, more or less regular but not quite touching, that simultaneously insinuate and deny one's reading of a diagonal grid pattern [Plate 9]. (In my head, I am also prone to comparing this idiosyncratic, yet instantly recognizable line to one properly belonging to Guston, to Martin, to Tuttle—but none of these are the same, even if there is a similar effect.) In this sense, Shio's irregularity is remarkably regular.

But, in that first encounter, there is no available metric of "regularity," the opposing category implied in the show's title. Taken as a group, as they are most often displayed, it would be impossible to choose one single pot as the standard gauge of regularity, like the control in a scientific experiment, for if one of these pots is irregular, they all are. No two pots are exactly alike—Morandi's endless variations on his otherwise-hermetic tabletop arrangement come to mind. Yet no single pot is an outlier, either; each new pot expands the contours of the available territory of what identifies and defines a pot by Shio Kusaka.

The tabletop is the artist's preferred method of display, and exhibitions in New York, London, Los Angeles, and elsewhere have revealed a surprising variety of possible arrangements. For a show at greengrassi in London in 2011, nearly 70 pots—mostly white with notable punctuation marks of inky black, on the surface or as the interior—were distributed as a discernible square that re-emphasized the shape of the large table upon which they were displayed. (The table, designed for the installation, was notched to accommodate two columns—less a necessity than a humorous concession to the architectural container.) But within the square any sense of a rigid grid dissolved into a more fluid arrangement of individual objects, with apparent regularity giving way to seeming irregularity. A similar sense of order—that is, an order that becomes disorder—might describe any number of individual pots by the artist in which a grid incrementally goes awry, particularly as the square grid lines wrap around a conical or spherical vessel [Plate 8]. Patterning is nearly universal, as Gombrich aptly demonstrates, but Shio's approach to pattern is pointed and singular.¹

Occasionally smaller groupings, or denser arrangements, become evident within the whole. In an exhibition at Blum and Poe in Los Angeles, in early 2012, Shio arranged approximately 50 pots on a long plinth—a solid, white volume that ran parallel to the gallery in which it was situated. (Again, the display incorporated a structural column at one extremity, despite an abun-

dance of negative space.) These clusters within the larger group might suggest another sense of order, or several, but each smaller grouping feels provisional rather than overdetermined: While certain traits unite pots—say a blushing pink color inside one vessel that marries the stripes of its neighbor—these fledgling gangs tend to emphasize difference over similarity, more like a momentary comingling of strangers than a family reunion, to adapt my earlier metaphor: A broad, wide-mouthed pot, matte gray with horizontal, graphite-like striations and a solid black interior, sits next to a glossy white pot of nearly the same size, with the slightest indentation be-



(INSTALLATION VIEW, greengrassi). 2011.



(GROUP VIEW). 2011.

low the rim—all details emphasizing difference; the large, glossy white pot abuts a trio of smaller pots that includes a thin, slightly wavering cylinder of matte white; a conical volume partially glazed in teal; and a shiny, white vase with a spherical bottom riddled with black dots. The arrangement contains multitudes, flaunts them.

Shio's pots tend to deflect language—perversely appealing to this writer—and yet, perhaps, they parallel its syntactical structure: A single pot might act like a word, conjured from a limited alphabet that becomes seemingly endless in combination, while a cluster of these pots intimates the structure of a sentence, and a table full of them suggests an essay—one written on the topic of irregularity and its rich variety.

Two pots by Shio are in my immediate view, neighbors atop a low bookcase in front of my living room window. Together, the two pots could hardly be less alike: one tall, raw-matte and terracotta, calling to mind a distended flower pot; the other short and squat, a semiglossy white, decorated with the phrase "DUNKIN' DONUTS" in familiar pink and tangerine letters. Different as they are in outward appearance, both vessels call to mind an expectation of function—an expectation familiar to most artists working with ceramics: The former vessel, given its material characteristics and its thickened rim, calls to mind a pot readily available from Home Depot and seen on millions of porches and patios, yet is uncharacteristically skinny; the latter quotes the Styrofoam coffee cups from the popular donut chain, but materially and proportionally has nothing in common with the original.

Shio's pots unequivocally offer the potential for use—and, truth be told, I've used a few of my own, on brief occasions—but don't fuss over their functionality. Artists who choose ceramics as their medium are overly burdened with questions of utility and design, one should wonder why paint on a rectangular canvas should be more worthy of our consideration, *a priori*, than glaze applied to a thrown porcelain pot—particularly given the categorical permissiveness of "art" in the present moment? (Sure, there are

plenty of awful ceramics that hardly qualify as art, but I've seen my share of terrible paintings, too.) Rather than further exhausting a tired line of "either/or" thinking, I'd like to take the middle ground and argue that Shio's pots are always functional *and* always abstract, and further, such terms are not mutually exclusive but, in the case of her pots, mutually sympathetic. The complex volumes of these pots (cylindrical, spherical, conical, and so on) provide an opportunity for equally complex surface articulation, with the artist frequently adapting and renewing familiar patterns (stripes, grids, zigzags) in the process. And the imagined use-value of a pot immediately gives the thing scale, with the form of the vessel—often inflected with a sense of the vernacular, folk, the familiar—providing a graspable point of entry to a viewer: literally, something to fill—with meaning, if nothing else.² Tactility is frequently rewarded; a relation to the body is always implied.

Just as a terracotta flower pot and a Dunkin' Donuts cup coexist casually in my living room, it would not be difficult to imagine one or more pots by Shio perfectly at home in the collection of nearly any comprehensive museum, spot-lit in a vitrine amid the utilitarian storage jars of the Yayoi period, or the gently ornamented Chizou stoneware of the Northern Song dynasty, or the endearing Chomo beer-drinking vessels of Peru. Then again, it would not be unexpected to find her pots situated in a gallery devoted to work of the not-so-distant past or the very

present—next to, let's say, a spare, abstract painting by John McLaughlin, or a florescent ceramic blob by Ken Price, or a chest of drawers by Roy McMakin. Shio's itinerary, from her Japanese upbringing, to her education in Seattle, to her eventual arrival in Los Angeles where she now lives and works, might allow us to extend and redefine that curious category known as "West Coast Abstraction."

The viability of both of these possibilities reminds me of André Malraux's provocative notion of the *Musée Imaginaire*, sometimes translated as "museum without walls," which acknowledges the historicity of objects, and welcomes the widest array of them into the mind's eye, where they may interact according to ever-evolving principles of order. "A Romanesque crucifix was not regarded by its contemporaries as a work of sculpture; nor Cimbabue's *Madonna* as a picture. Even Pheidias' *Pallas Athene* was not, primarily, a statue," Malraux cautions, nearly omniscient in his purview.

"So vital is the part played by the art museum in our approach to works of art to-day that we find it difficult to realize that no museums exist, none has ever existed, in lands where the civilization of modern Europe is, or was, unknown; and that, even amongst us, they have existed for barely two hundred years. They bulked so large in the nineteenth century and are so much part of our lives to-day that we forget they have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art."¹

More than a half-century after Malraux wrote these words, Shio is keenly aware of the residual effects of this "wholly new attitude," not to mention the vicissitudes and increasingly global reach of contemporary art. Her pots quietly claim the long-view. Made in the present, on a potter's wheel in Los Angeles, they acknowledge the past but emphatically belong to the future—and an ever-expanding *Musée Imaginaire*.

¹ See E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1979).

² I am indebted to Michael Fried's understanding of the way in which readymade handles function in Anthony Caro's tabletop sculptures, bridging the perceived gap between utility and abstraction. See "Caro's Abstractness" and "Anthony Caro's Table Sculptures, 1966-77," both in Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

³ André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 13-14.

LIST OF PLATES

1. UNTITLED, 2011, PORCELAIN, 9¼ x 6¼ x 6¼ IN.
2. (STRIPE 31), 2011, PORCELAIN, 6¼ x 5½ x 5½ IN.