

GUILD GALLERY



AKIKO HIRAI

平井明子

CONTAINER AND CONTENT



ROMAN AND WILLIAMS GUILD GALLERY
THREE TWO ONE CANAL ST, NEW YORK, NY 10013
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ABOUT THE ARTIST

AKIKO HIRAI 平井明子
B. 1970 SHIZUOKA, JAPAN

Born in Shizuoka, Japan, Hirai received her Ceramics degree from the University of Westminster in 2001, and from Central Saint Martins in 2003. She initially studied cognitive psychology in Japan and worked at a homeless shelter upon first arriving in London. That experience led her to the therapeutic and expressive effects of ceramics.

Rooted in her appreciation for handmade objects she used daily growing up, Hirai became enmeshed in the language of clay, soon deciding she did not wish to be a part of the industrial aspect of mass produced works. Instead, Hirai has chosen to focus her work on the individuality of her pieces made by hand and on the wheel, a reflection and tradition of her Japanese culture.

Hirai's work honors imperfection, chance and nature—from her formation of the clay and ash, to the marks gathered during her firing process. Through many experiments with plants and earth she has developed her own tools of alkalization, firing, and glazing - the specifics of the acidity and minerals in the soil being particular to the surface of the final pot.

The Poppy Pod Vases are thrown on a wheel using a unique blend of Raku clay. Once dried, she uses her fingers to achieve the perfect balance between rough and refined, creating a vessel that exudes warmth and invites touch. The dust of ash on porcelain gives the final breath of earth and fire, begetting a unique object that is both historical and natural in its use of materials and technique.

The Moon Jars are an extreme study of the beauty of balance through imperfection. Inspired by the Moon Jars of Korea which embrace cracks, stains, and chips from years of use, Hirai intentionally recreates the “history and experiences” by formulating chemical reactions between the glaze and ash. Her technique has evolved since her first Moon Jars in 2003, pushing the boundary of completion and collapse, allowing the imperfections to become evidence of the unstable and unpredictable nature of clay and fire itself.

HIRAI in her studio at The Chocolate Factory N16 in Stoke Newington, London May 2021.



COVER IMAGE: "CARBON AND WHITE", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H24.5 X 19.5 IN, AHMJ5-5



AKIKO HIRAI HAND BUILDS EACH POPPY POD THROUGH A SERIES OF COILS.



AKIKO HIRAI IN HER STUDIO, THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY N16 IN STOKE NEWINGTON, LONDON MAY 2021.



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CURRICULUM VITAE

EDUCATION

2002-2003	BA (HONS) CERAMIC DESIGN LONDON INSTITUTE CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS SCHOOL OF GRAPHICS AND INDUSTRIAL DESIGN (UNIVERSITY ARTS LONDON)	LONDON
2000-2002	UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER BA(HONS) CERAMICS 1ST AND 2ND YEAR	HARROW
1989-1993	AICHI GAKUIN UNIVERSITY BACHELOR OF LETTERS FACULTY OF LETTERS DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY MAJOR: COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY	AICHI, JAPAN

2012-2015	HEAD OF CERAMICS AT KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA COLLEGE	LONDON
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EXPERIENCE

EXHIBITIONS	2021 MARCH	GOLDMARK GALLERY	UPPINGHAM
	2020 JUNE	NEW CRAFTSMAN	ST. IVES
	2020 JUNE	FLOW	LONDON
	2020 JUNE	TESTE: ART FAIR IN SWITZERLAND	SWITZERLAND
	2020 OCTOBER	CPA GALLERY	LONDON
	2020 JANUARY	TESTE: ART GENEVA	SWITZERLAND
	2020 FEBRUARY	SUMMERSET HOUSE	LONDON
	2020 FEBRUARY	THE FUTURE PERFECT: MESS	LOS ANGELES
	2020 JANUARY	THE FUTURE PERFECT: MESS	SAN FRANCISCO
	2019 NOVEMBER	THE FUTURE PERFECT: MESS	NEW YORK
	2019 NOVEMBER	MAUD AND MABEL: TRACE OF SCENT	LONDON
	2019 OCTOBER	BEAUX ARTS	BATH
	2019 JUNE	LOEWE CRAFT FOUNDATION	TOKYO
	2019 MAY	SLADERS YARD	BRIDPORT
	2019 MARCH	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY: UNDER THE CHERRY TREE	EDINBURGH
	2018 OCTOBER	CPA: ONOMATOPOEIA	LONDON
	2018 JULY	FLOW GALLERY	LONDON
	2018 JUNE	URCH FRONT MANOR SCULPTURE SHOW	WILTSHIRE
	2018 MAY	ST. PETER'S CHURCH: SOUND OF SILENCE	CAMBRIDGE
	2018 MAY	NEW CRAFTSMAN	ST. IVES



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EXHIBITIONS

Cont'd.

2017 SEPTEMBER	TASTE GALLERY: TRESOR	SWIZERLAND
2017 JUNE	TASTE GALLERY: MOON STRUCK	SWIZERLAND
2017 JUNE	SLADERS YARD	BRIDPORT
2017 MARCH	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY: IN PRAISE OF SHADOW	EDINBURGH
2016 NOVEMBER	CPA GALLERY: GETEMONO	LONDON
2016 OCTOBER	LYNNE STROVER GALLERY	CAMBRIDGE
2016 AUGUST	NATIONAL CRAFT GALLERY	IRELAND
2016 MAY	NEW CRAFTSMAN	ST. IVES
2016 FEBRUARY	FLOW GALLERY: KISARAGI	LONDON
2015 OCTOBER	BEAUX ARTS BATH	BATH
2015 JULY	GALERIE DU DON	FRANCE
2015 MARCH	SLADERS YARD	BRIDPORT
2015 MARCH	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY: BRITISH STUDIO POTTERY	EDINBURGH
2015 FEBRUARY	OXFORD CERAMICS	OXFORD
2015 JANUARY	NEW ASHGATE GALLERY	FURNHAM
2013 NOVEMBER	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY: AKIKO HIRAI STILL LIFE	EDINBURGH
2013 SEPTEMBER	MR. KETLEY	AUSTRALIA
2013 JUNE	KOREAN CULTURAL CENTRE: MOON JAR	LONDON
2013 JUNE	KERAMIEKCENTRUM TIENDSCHUUR: YOUNG CLAY	HOLLAND
2013 FEBRUARY	CPA GALLERY: AKIKO HIRAI 10 YEARS ON	LONDON
2011 JANUARY	CPA GALLERY: THROUGH 50	LONDON
2009 JANUARY	JAPANESE EMBASSY: INSIGHT BEAUTY	LONDON
2006 APRIL	THE HILL HOUSE: ART FROM JAPAN	SCOTLAND

MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

2014	KERAMIKMUSEUM WESTERWALD WESTERWALD CERAMIC MUSEUM	GERMANY
2018	FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM	CAMBRIDGE
2019	NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IRELAND	DUBLIN
2019	VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM	LONDON
2020	THE EVERSON MUSEUM OF ART IN	SYRACUSE, NY
2021	HEPWORTH WAKEFIELD	U.K.



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"UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H21 X D18 IN, AHMJ31

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CONTAINER AND CONTENT

WORDS BY
CHRISTINE COULSON
NOVELIST

Can we hold a place? Cup a landscape in our hands and feel the very stuff of it? Akiko Hirai's Poppy Pods swell with a force that feels like it might actually burst the hard, cracked surface of each vessel. It is the potential of an ancient seed. The energy of a still-tight bloom. The thing that will beget the next thing and the thing after that and the thing after that, until what stretches before us is no less than everything our eye can grasp. Every leaf and branch and patch of dirt. Every thing that crawls and grows from the smallest bud to the mightiest mountain. Every. Thing. Contained in this one elegant form, promising no less than the whole world.

If the pod form holds life, Hirai's Moon Jars seem to trace life's accretions and ravages. These vessels sit in some eternal in-between, not fully developed, not completely broken. They tumble with memory: traces of movement, smudges of color, the lumps and scrapes of the artist's making, the clay's folding, the fire's heat. Their surfaces writhe with energy, graffitied with a kind of three-dimensional writing, like the cratered scars of a wound or the deep creases of ordinary age. They feel excavated. Found. Ghosts that pulse with impermanence—shifting, building, dissolving into the quiet stillness of something freshly, silently, remembered.

Working with Raku clay, Akiko Hirai has been pursuing the pod form since 2014 when she was first inspired by poppies growing near her home in England. The rough clay is thrown on a wheel, then sculpted, and covered in a whitening porcelain powder that promotes the fragile web of fractures across its surface. Before the final firing, Hirai applies ash to the pods. For this exhibition, the source of the ash (Japan, England and America) echoes the collaboration of a Japanese artist working in Britain and exhibiting in New York.

Hirai cites a traditional 18th-century Korean Moon Jar in the British Museum as her inspiration for her own experimentation with the Moon Jar form. Admiring the imperfections of that early porcelain example, she has spent the last 18 years pushing the clay to its limits in the shaping and firing of these pots, a process she sees as one of survival and strengthening. While her materials stay the same, the alchemy of her production shifts the outcome changing the color, texture, and scale.



LEFT "PURITY", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, AHMJ51
RIGHT "UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, AHPP61

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ARTIST STATEMENT

I make pots that are slightly off. I make pots that have broken rims. They have crooked lines, irregularities and asymmetry, but I do not call these imperfections. There are two different measurements in aesthetics that we commonly use: one is absolute and the other is relative. Absolute measurements see things as complete in their own right, while relative measurements see things in relation to their environment. Sometimes they show opposite connotations or are ambivalent, yet both are correct within their context. In absolute measurements, containers can exist without contents, but in relative measurements they cannot. In this exhibition I have made two types of containers: one withholds and the other releases its contents. The initial request was to make vases, so basically both types of object are supposed to be real containers. In fact, I often put tree branches in my Moon jars. However, my intention was also to make abstract containers and contents, so that they are slightly impractical.



LEFT "UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, AHPP62
RIGHT "PURITY", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, AHMJ51

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LEFT TO RIGHT, "UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, AHPP62
"PURITY", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, AHMJ51,
"UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, AHPP61

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DETAIL, "UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H25 X D21 IN, AHMJ52



"UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H25 X D21 IN, AHMJ52



"HYDRIC EXPLOSION ", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H29.5 X D27.5 IN, AHMJ54



"HYDRIC EXPLOSION ", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H29.5 X D27.5 IN, AHMJ54



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"UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, H15 X D21 IN, AHPP53

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DETAIL, "UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, H24.5 X D20.4 IN, AHPP61



DETAIL, "UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, H24.5 X D20.4 IN, AHPP61



"UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, H15 X D21 IN, AHPP53



DETAIL, "UNTITLED ", 2021, STONEWARE, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, H15 X D21 IN, AHPP53



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"UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, TRANSPARENT GLAZE AND WOOD ASH, VARIABLE DIMENSIONS, AHPPG3

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MOON JAR IN PROGRESS.

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AKIKO HIRAI HAND BUILDS EACH POPPY POD THROUGH A SERIES OF COILS.



CO-FOUNDER ROBIN STANDEFER VISITING ARTIST AKIKO HIRAI IN HER STUDIO SEPTEMBER 2021.



TREE ASH FORMS THE FINAL LAYER OF TEXTURE.



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FROM THE ARTIST

WORDS BY
AKIKO HIRAI

THE PODS

The word “pod” is a kind of onomatopoeia.

The Pod pops, the seeds pop out, fall in a flowerpot,
The seeds sprout, grow back into a pod, packed full of seeds again.

There is a Japanese expression ポーン pronounced a bit like “paw”. This phrase is used when something round, like a ball, bounces and jumps into the air. It begins with “po”. We need to use our mouth instantaneously in order to pronounce the “p” sound: the word has to pop out. Pods are also protective containers - over time they weather and discolour while the contents remain intact. You touch and feel these weathered shelters, and something is growing inside, but maybe it is growing only inside your mind.

Kabuki actors who play female roles are often said to look more feminine than real women. This is because they are idealised women in a male actor’s imagination. Our imagination subsidises what we cannot see and creates something more than is actually there. That something may not even exist, proving concealment is a good trick for creating something beautiful. All you have to do is create abstract trigger points, certain types of texture, density, or outline.

THE MOON

The word “moon” is a mellow word. Fifteen days to wax and fifteen days to wane. The moon does not bounce, even though it is round. There is so much slowness in the word “moon”, you have to close your mouth to pronounce the “m”. “Moon” is holding the word in your mouth.

Moon in Japanese is 月, pronounced “tsuki”. It is said that it comes from つぐ pronounced “tsugu” meaning “to connect and continue” and 尽く pronounced “tsuku” meaning “to be ended” or “to become empty”: it comes from the combination of these word, wax and wane. The word itself does not have a circular sound, yet the meaning forms a circular shape. The moon waxes and wanes endlessly. It is both infinite and enclosed.

My Moon originates from the antique Korean Moon Jar in a collection at the British Museum in London: it has iron speckles, either from a lack of clay purifying technology, or because during the firing clean fuel was not available. There are some water stains from the pin holes on the glaze, and a small chip on the rim. There is a joining mark, as it is made from two porcelain pieces: porcelain does not like joints. Again, I don’t call these imperfections. There are always good reasons why things happen, and events may leave marks on an object, but that does not mean the object is damaged. These marks can be very pleasant, it all depends on how you look at it. My Moon has become more extreme over the years. Everyone has events in their life, we have layers and layers of experience and the marks from these events create us.

The antonym of “like” is not “dislike”, it is “indifference”. Our life holds things, and when it becomes full it tips over. When things get static, you become numb and indifferent. You should empty the container and it will be filled up again.



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KOTODAMA AND ARTEFACTS

There is a Japanese word 言霊 pronounced “Kotodama”. The direct translation of this word is “the spirit or soul of words” originated from Shinto. It is believed that written or spoken words have the independent ability to influence our physical world, and this comes true once a word is vocalised or visualised. “Kotodama” is a superstition, yet similar words can be seen in religious texts worldwide, such as in the Old and New Testament.

We know that words can be very manipulative.

Some cognitive scientists say that human consciousness is a simulation of our future actions, predicted by our experience of the past. This is in both the individual and the species, our direct past, and our epigenetic experience. Language is created from common human experience and carries a protocol, so that when we use words our mind searches for both meaning and context within our vocabulary, matching it with a similar situation and provoking actual bodily sensations. These sensations are prepared reactions and make us act in a particular way. This process is also true when it happens the other way round, as with biofeedback. Thus, the concept of Kotodama is not entirely superstitious nor spiritual. Language holds Kotodama, and I believe that some objects have Kotodama, like a good book. Good writing has good flow, and some writing is incredibly stylish and well structured. I also love the use of vocabulary in good books, meaning content comes to mind effortlessly and expands and is open ended. In contrast, bad writing is hard to read, even if it means to say something profound; but that is another issue. I occasionally come across very well written texts that leave me with nothing, and when I find something like this I get the feeling that I have read something meaningful, yet cannot remember what it was. I think this is partly due to my lack of ability to comprehend the texts - the content may be too complex and difficult. Another cause can be that the text is ostentatious. If it is a combination of the two, that is the worst. In the case of ostentatiousness, there is no space for Kotodama to grow in the container. There have been occasions when I have made pots without Kotodama, and various reasons why this happened. Inherently I like making things with clay, so I am able to enjoy the process of making for a while, but when I have to do it repetitively it becomes laborious, and I am unhappy with the outcome.

Handmade objects have an interesting language: they reflect thoughts that we are not even aware of. For example, when I ask a student to make an animal figure, it often resembles the maker.

You do not need to try to grow Kotodama into your objects when you have freedom of expression, it will sneak in even when you do not want it to. Making objects with Kotodama is the equivalent of making language that shares your perceptual experience. It is a pleasure to imagine that the Kotodama from my pots is floating around, landing on someone’s head and playing with their thoughts.

Your Moon is not mine, and my Moon is not yours, but my Moon can become your Moon, it is the same Moon after all.

SOMETHING ABOUT WOOD ASH

I like to use wood ash to decorate my pots. In the old days, ceramic glazes were made with wood ash and straw or husk ash. Straw ash was used as flax, and husk ash was used as a glass former and stabiliser and was usually mixed with feldspar. Wood ash that naturally lands on pots in a wood-fired kiln has commonly been used as a natural decoration. The positioning of pots in the kiln, and the length of firing, may be the only controllable factor: ultimately, beauty comes from spontaneity. My way of using wood ash is slightly more intentional, but the mineral and metal content, which produces colours in the wood ash, is hard to predict. You can ruin a whole batch of pots if you do not test it. I usually try a few adjustments, adding ingredients and modifying the firing cycle in order to tweak mother nature’s colours. I do not add metal oxide to produce colours in my glazes, the colour usually come from the mineral and metal content in the raw materials if the wood ash used comes from the soil where the wood grew up.

This may just be my romantic imagination, but I think if we have a “friendly” relationship with the earth we live on we will get warm, welcoming feelings from the colours that are produced from the soil, perhaps because our intuition comes from our unconscious mind, skimming through our past, even things that appear to be irrelevant. We probably know more than we think we do.

For this exhibition the owner of the Guild Robin and Stephan, the coordinator Akari sent me wood ash: they burned tree branches from their garden. In order to get even a handful of wood ash a huge amount of wood needs to be burned for a long time, so huge thanks to Robin, Akari and Miya, who liaised between London and New York, and all the other people who helped me to realise this exhibition.

– AKIKO HIRAI



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"UNTITLED", 2021, STONEWARE, PORCELAIN SLIP, PAPER FIBER, WOOD ASH AND WHITE GLAZE, H22 X D19.5 IN, AHMJ33

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MODERN FIRINGS

GENTLE WOMAN
ISSUE NO 23

INTERVIEW
CRISTINA RUIZ

PORTRAITS
ANTON GOTTLÖB

AKIKO HIRAI is the name to drop in ceramics: her vessels bewitch collectors with their rough clay and intriguing glaze “veils”. A psychologist be training, Akiko, 51, discovered pots could be as expressive as people. Based in London, she ships internationally –and often: the moon jars in her recent JW Anderson show sold out in a single day.

CRISTINA: In art originality is highly prized and to describe something as derivative is insulting. But in ceramics ancient forms are repeated through centuries. So where does innovation come from?

AKIKO: In the old days we only learned about material’s form experience. Now we understand all the components and have more control over what we’re making. So the innovation is in understanding the science and how clay interacts with the elements that nature contributes. For example, I use wood ash to make glazes. All these ashes are different because the plants they’re made from grow in different soils. Some are alkalized, some are more acidic and some contain certain types of minerals. These may be really tiny differences, but they change the final pot.

C: And this experimentation is a crucial component of your work?

A: Yes. Although my techniques are all very basic, there are thousands of materials that can be combined in different ways, I love the process of firing them, which is where the real experimentation happens. If you use a white glaze on an object and you fire it in an electric kiln it becomes white, very static. But if you fire the same white glaze in a gas kiln with a reduced atmosphere, less oxygen, it becomes blue. This plate has an ash glaze on it and contains no coloured material – the pink comes from the carbon trapped inside. It’s called carbon-trapped pink. If it had been fired in an electric kiln it would have just been white.

C: The process sounds quite expressive, in fact.

A: It’s spontaneous because you’re making things by hand and you can actually project your own feelings onto it. When you’re feeling a bit more energetic, your finger is much stronger and the pressure you apply is stronger. It’s interesting. You can sometimes see if a pot was made by an older person or a younger one.

C: Really? What’s the difference?

A: It’s about how the pressure is applied. There’s a tea bowl maker in Japan, the Raku family, which is now into its 15th generation of makers. I saw a bowl made by Keinyu, who was a maker from the 11th generation. It was made when he was 70 (he died at age 85 in 1886) and another he made when he was younger. The looseness of the pot he made in old age is really noticeable.

C: Are all the objects you make meant to be used?

A: Yes, including the larger pieces, which I would use to hold a big tree branch. When I making a pot I think: OK, what would I put in that pot? How would I use it? So making ceramics is one process, and then, when the pieces are bought by someone who uses them, they start a new life.

C: So we, the public, complete your work?

A: Yes.



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- C: That's interesting, because in the last few years we've seen the rise of Edmund de Waal, who makes beautiful ceramics which he displays in vitrines. They are meant to be looked at, not used.
- A: It's another way of expressing yourself through ceramics. I don't disagree with what he is doing – in fact, I find Edmund de Waal's ceramics very beautiful – but I don't actually place the pots myself like he does.
- C: I've seen pictures of your work where your ceramics are displayed on shelves or mantelpieces as objects to look at but not to use.
- A: That's also OK. But the final work is done by the people who buy my works. They can place my work where they want it to be, decide what the background is, how they want the shadows to fall. They can use these components as material to make their own display.
- C: We're sitting here in your studio surrounded by your ceramics, from sake bowls to massive moon jars. You've said you were greatly by an 18th-century Korean moon jar at the British Museum. What about it appealed?
- A: It's just a very, very simple form, but what I was attracted to are its small imperfections. It was donated to the museum by the British potter Lucie Rie. There is a little chip on the rim and some iron spots. Moon jar are supposed to be very pure, but because of its age and also the time it was made, when the purification of materials wasn't that great, these impurities have left their mark. So you can see the ageing process and the making process in the jar. I like how time changes object; that imperfection makes the pot even more beautiful.
- C: Is this the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi? This idea of capturing and almost celebrating imperfection?
- A: Yeah, I say imperfection because it's easy for people to understand. But that's not quite accurate; imperfection is an interaction between the object and the outside world. So when I am making things or when people are using them, something is happening to the pot. Imperfection happens when the object interacts with the outside world and that leaves a mark.
- C: So it's more like a history?
- A: Yes. When a pot breaks, that's also part of its history. When something is hit, if it doesn't break, it strains the object. By breaking, the object releases energy. That means it's actually balancing itself. Imperfection is a mark of the balancing process. I like modern pots, but what I really love about ancient pots is that they carry the marks of their history.
- C: Do you think your won pots will be more beautiful 500 years from now?
- A: If they survive that long. If they don't, they are not meant to.
- C: Where did you learn about ceramics? In Japan?
- A: I came to London in 1996 to visit my younger sister, Toshiko, who was here studying photography. The following year, I went to work at a homeless hostel in Northampton. I wasn't thinking of doing ceramics, but a lot of Japanese people are naturally interested in pottery. We appreciate handmade pots. They are widely available more cheaply in Japan, and everyone buys them. When I was a child our tableware included quite a few handmade things which we used every day. Also, my grandmother was a teacher of the tea ceremony.
- C: It must have been stressful to work with the homeless.
- A: In some ways working in the hostel was crazy. I was so naïve and a bit stupid too. I just thought, OK, I will see the real Britain. When I did my first pottery course it was really restful, like meditating. You just focus on making things. This was when I returned to London in 1998, at City and Islington College. And I found making shapes quite easy from the beginning. I wanted to continue after that short course. Eventually I found another teacher – I would go to his studio in West Hampstead – who thought I should take ceramics more seriously and helped me get into the University of Westminster. I started the course in September 2001.
- C: How did your parents react when you moved to Britain to become a ceramicist?
- A: When I moved here, they didn't think that I would stay forever. They didn't like it when I started doing ceramics. Now they have kind of given up thinking I'll return to Japan, but they're still not happy. For them – my father is a civil servant, my mother didn't go out to work –



GUILD GALLERY

ceramics is not a proper job. If my grandparents were still alive, they would appreciate it. They paid for my final year at university here.

C: You transferred from Westminster to Central Saint Martins in your second year. Why?

A: Ceramics was taught as part of the industrial design course at Saint Martins, and I thought I wanted to be involved in the ceramics industry—it seemed to be very difficult to make a living as a studio potter. But while I was there I realize I didn't want to design things for mass production. But to make one-off, individual pieces that reflect my Japanese culture. Industrial design takes all the individuality out of the object making objects by hand put it back in.

C: It must be incredibly comforting to have so many collectors supporting you.

A: Many have been with me from the beginning, a long, long time. I still have a collector who first bought my work from Broadway Market. English ceramics collectors are usually very, very eccentric, and I really enjoy spending time with them. When you go to a ceramics fair, all the serious guys carry "I love pots" tote bags, and while they're queuing to get in they're looking at the pots the way women look at clothes, taking so much time to examine all the details. They know so much about ceramics; it's quite stimulating talking with them. And if they're really happy or excited by something I've made, I feel understood. That is really rewarding.

**“I LIKE HOW TIME
CHANGES OBJECTS;
THAT IMPERFECTION
MAKES THE POT EVEN
MORE BEAUTIFUL.”**

C: And what was it like after you graduated from Saint Martins?

A: For the first two years I was extremely poor, because I only had money from selling my stuff at Broadway Market in East London. The third year I started making money, not just surviving. And then I also got a teaching job at a Kensington and Chelsea College and a technician's job at the same time. Eventually, in 2012, I became the head of the ceramics department. I enjoyed teaching and learned a lot from it, but in the end it was holding me back. My income has doubled since I stopped because I am able to produce more for galleries and spend less time traveling from my studio in Stoke Newington to Chelsea. I found it really hard to quit teaching because I knew my parents would not approve. Even though I am older now, my parents' disapproval is still like a curse.

C: Is ceramics a sociable profession?

A: I don't have a lot of social interaction during the day when I work in my studio. My landlord here is a painter, and he comes to this complex every day, and there are other artists working in their own spaces, so even though I live alone I'm not completely isolated. My husband lives in a village in Suffolk. We've been married 10 years, but we've never lived together because he's a weaver and he needs space. We take long walks in Suffolk, which I enjoy. But I wouldn't live there.



GUILD GALLERY

ABOUT GUILD GALLERY

We are proud to introduce Guild Gallery, a new space that celebrates the making of art objects by contemporary masters, drawing upon the millenia-long history of the decorative arts. Located on Canal Street—that vibrant, propulsive stretch of New York City’s rising art scene—Guild Gallery will open in November, with a series of exhibitions representing a dozen artists.

Guild Gallery is the natural extension of Roman and Williams Guild, on the corner of Howard and Mercer. When we opened the doors of the Guild nearly four years ago, this was the realization of a decades-long dream: to create a living organism of people, objects and furnishings—an eclectic world, a modern-day guild of the senses.

We designed the Guild as a place to showcase the furniture that we make alongside the work of artisans we most admire for their skill and dedication to technique. We wanted to emphasize the everyday functionality of remarkably formed items and to emphasize the significance of living with very beautiful things while valuing the utility of expert crafted pieces.

Guild Gallery is the next stage of evolution in this dialogue. Now, we intend to build on our commitment to help people appreciate the artistry in design as we celebrate individual makers. While the Guild celebrates a beauty that derives from function, the Gallery focuses purely on form. Whereas the Guild is all about an eclectic mix, the Gallery will spotlight the object, artist, and process.

Initially, we will represent a group of twelve remarkable artists, makers of extraordinary art objects and furniture—sculptors and other creators whose medium might be ceramic, glass or wood. Our selection process has been intense; we value all the makers and designers we represent at the Guild, and choosing just twelve required us to consider their works in ways we hadn’t before, looking harder and deepening our understanding of the pieces and the artists who made them.

We call them “artists” because that’s who they are. The Guild was founded on the principle that art and craft are not mutually exclusive entities. Think of classical Grecian urns, crafted as functional objects that nonetheless engage with movement, line, and color. So, too, the contemporary works that we show at the Gallery experiment with line, form, and material, fusing the ancient and the modern through traditional techniques and references to a millenia-old lineage. But these are living pieces, made by living artists. We want to introduce you to artists who are working today, so that you can follow their trajectories and understand their work as an ongoing, organic narrative, as collectors or even just as enthusiasts.

These works are living pieces, not just because you can—should—live with them, but also because they are made with materials that feel alive, like wood from trees or gloriously malleable clay. This is a guiding principle of everything we do in our own design practice and, by extension, at Guild Gallery. The wooden pedestals on which we will display the works are of our own invention. This is a venue designed to support the rigor and discipline of the artists as they fashion their materials, to honor the human scale of their works. Guild is a gallery that embraces warmth, purity and focus.



GUILD GALLERY

ABOUT GUILD GALLERY

Cont'd.

These are pieces that are meant to be communed with, in our homes. So while key pieces by an individual artist are displayed at the Canal Street Guild Gallery to be fully appreciated as works of art in their own right, others will be seen at the Guild on Howard and Mercer, just a stone's throw away, interacting with other objects and furnishings, as it might be in your home. Thus we hope to foster connoisseurship, eliciting meaning and nuance from the works, but also demonstrate how they might be lived with.

Guild Gallery opens in November with a show of works by Japanese-born, London-based ceramist Akiko Hirai. Hirai's forms investigate texture and participate in a passionate conversation about the science of traditional and modern pottery. We invite you to explore Hirai's work at Guild Gallery, to ponder the power of exchange across cultures and countries, the techniques traded, exchanged and appropriated. Objects like these contain profound stories about nature, culture, domesticity and craft.

We greatly look forward to introducing you to all the artists with whom we are fortunate enough to work.

– *ROBIN STANDEFER and STEPHEN ALESCH*

