

Pick of the Week: Kentaro Kawabata

Nonaka-Hill

by Catherine Yang | Jan 19, 2022



Kentaro Kawabata, Soos, 2015 Porcelain, sulfurized silver, platinum

To walk through Kentaro Kawabata's solo exhibition at Nonaka-Hill is to be constantly excited by original and unexpected forms around every corner. Working with porcelain clay, Kawabata creates an alchemical wonderland by amalgamating innovative materials into sculptures that range from graceful to awkward, otherworldly to earthy.

I was immediately drawn into the fine details of the works and his ability to transform porcelain by adding new materials to achieve a fascinating fusion of forms. His sculptures are each accented with bits of glass, stone, metal or sand worked into the surface of the porcelain at various stages of their production. The most striking effect is that of the pulverized stained glass which creates beautiful cascades of color when pressed into the white porcelain and melted in the kiln. Some works are glazed to a sheen while others are coated with silver and dipped into a sulphurated hot spring to achieve a matte iridescent varnish. Other works still are finished with a wash of oxidized silver that turns dry and brown, like rusting metal.

This latest series, titled Soos, is a play on the Japanese pronunciation of the word “source” as well as a reference to how Kawabata answered the SOS call for attention from his unfinished clay projects. All the sculptures are made from leftover clay from previous pieces that Kawabata felt compelled to recycle and give new life to. This sense of cyclical energy and renewed vivacity is abundantly clear in the way his forms masquerade as decorative objects or traditional sculptures but are revealed to be something else entirely upon closer inspection.

The works feel simultaneously improvisational and cohesive, clearly from the hand of a master with reverence for his craft and the courage to experiment. Knowing that the artist worked with his hands to crimp and manipulate the material, the works are (literally) imbued with a deeply personal touch. There is an unmistakable delicacy to the porcelain, but there is also an unprecedented roughness in the surface textures, fractured edges and gilded platinum studs hiding in the crevices, thus revealing a darker side of a traditionally exquisite material or perhaps of the artist himself.

I thought I was seeing the forms of serving bowls, deep sea coral or collectible trinkets, but I didn’t fully begin to appreciate Kawabata’s innovation until I discarded my own preconceived notions of what his sculptures should be. While they do recall organic shapes in flora and anatomy, in truth, his ceramics defy all characterization and are best seen as brand-new harmonies, whimsical and unique in their own right.

Nonaka-Hill
720 N Highland Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90038
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