

Reversals and Excesses: The Pottery of Takeshi Yasuda

“A potter who thinks! What a concept!” from “Pushing Boundaries”, Ceramic: Art and Perception, no. 28, 1997

Before looking more closely at the work of Takeshi Yasuda, it is necessary to ask and try to answer a very simple yet complex question. What is a pot? How can a question be simple yet complex simultaneously? Well, this has to do with the very nature of pots, of all containers for that matter. Pots and containers cancel oppositions, reconcile differences, diffuse contradictions (in this spirit, I will contradict myself at times in this text) and destroy hierarchies. Containers bring opposite aspects together and they are bridges to experience. Pots are objects and they embody difference as continuity, not difference as rupture, which is a characteristic of images. In pots, we find in complete symbiosis the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, the top and the bottom, the front and the back, function and decoration, the visual and the tactile, image and object... In the particular case of ceramic pots, these seemingly different aspects and conceptual differences are fused together, literally.

Pots, and all containers, all share some very specific characteristics. This is particularly true for ceramic pots and by extension all ceramic things since containment is the central conceptual characteristic of ceramics, whether it takes the form of pottery and vessels, of brick and tiles and even, yes, of sculpture. Due to the particular physical properties of the materials used, ceramic objects are by necessity generated around a void, an empty interior space, a volume. It is my contention that the central operative concept of pottery (and again, of ceramics as a whole as well as all other craft practices) is containment, a specific characteristic of volumetric forms. These specific characteristics of containers are as follow: They are universal, since all cultures make pots and containers, whether they are ceramic or not; they are timeless, since, at the conceptual level (and I am dealing with ideas here, not stylistic or formal aspects) all pots are identical and conceptually constant (1) and their intrinsic nature is unchanging (a bowl is always a bowl). In the case of ceramics, this timelessness is reinforced by the physical nature of the materials, amazingly resistant to time since ceramic materials are intrinsically worthless, they are non-recyclable and they are very permanent once fused by heat. For these reasons alone, ceramics can be said to be the memory of humankind. Containers also imply rituals, through use and function obviously but also as markers in culture and for their very special social role in communities. Containers also change with context since, despite remaining conceptually constant, their role (and value) within culture is constantly changing and a cheap, crude peasant bowl from Korea can become a historically significant and priceless tea ceremony object in Japan or even more telling, a simple porcelain urinal can become a seminal art work of the 20th Century. And above all, pots and containers are ALWAYS about juxtaposition, by

bringing together contradictory aspects of form, of materials, of intents, of contents, of contexts and of concepts(2).

Most pots explore the technical aspects of technique (say, throwing or firing) and at most, the formal and stylistic aspects of technique, the kind of specific forms (of volume mostly and, more rarely unfortunately, of surface), produced by processes and techniques. Takeshi Yasuda's work explores the conceptual aspects of technique by an acute understanding of the experience of process. These conceptual aspects of technique and process are explored through function, obviously (that is, the potential aspect of form, in pottery through the creation of volume) but also through decoration, in the optical workings of surfaces in articulating form and volume. These conceptual aspects of technique and process create, through use and function, an EXPERIENCE for the viewer/user and one is always simultaneously both with a pot, yet another example of the reconciliation of differences present in containers. The importance of experience creates MEANING through a shared understanding of conceptualization between maker and user. This is clearly embodied in the obviously generous nature of Takeshi Yasuda's work. In this work, despite its essential reliance on the properties of materials and the workings of processes, ceramics is above all a cultural material, with social and historical properties and not only, as is so often the case, a simple physical material with specific properties and transformative qualities.

The work has a directness, a sensuality, a simplicity with a sense of excess reinforced by flexibility and fluidity. In the earlier work, the pieces, most notably plates, bowls, platters, plateaux, pitchers and buckets forms are all thrown generously, rather thickly, and with a clear definition and articulation of form with stressed markings from the hand, the tools (a variety of ribs) used to clarify rim, lip, base, spiral interior. In most cases, the piece is then cut from the wheel and literally picked up with both hands, by the thick wide rims of edges. This distorts the work, leaving clear finger marks resulting from the act (unusual, unexpected, almost violent, yet so logical) that took place. He took the idea from an unexperienced student who didn't know that one "couldn't" do that and it shows how amazingly open Takeshi Yasuda always remains to unexpected and accidental events. Other pieces (platters, plateaux, serving dishes) are either thrown upside down or again, their fat rim is pushed outward and down as far as possible to create forms reminiscent of inflated rubber inner tubes. Typically, he calls this process downward throwing and it represents a typical use of reversal and excess found in the work. These methods of working are characteristic of Takeshi Yasuda's work and give the objects a distinctive quality. But their effect is much more than purely formal and/or aesthetic or stylistic. They affect how we understand the work, their epistemology, and how we experience it, their phenomenology. Clay is always in a constant fight with gravity and the pull between the horizontal and the vertical. The strategies used by Takeshi Yasuda provide the objects with amazing elevation, lifting them from the ground, making them more aerial than earthbound, defying gravity. The most

effective elevation device is actually the actual picking up of the freshly thrown piece from the wheel head in the wet stage by gripping the rim with both hands. By this action, the object has been picked up by the maker (process) at the same place where it demands to be picked up by the user (function). This is also the place where handles are positioned. There is thus a direct connection and synchronicity between maker and user, between process and function in the simple act of lifting the object from where it rests, reinforcing the relation of process to experience, so central to this work. Other methods of elevation include “upside down” platters and plateaux with a variety of feet around the base (originally the rim of the thrown form), or again, the banging of the hand all around the base of the “bucket’ form, literally kicking the bucket, to distort the flatness of the base and turn straight into curve, and last but not least, the beads of glazes collecting underneath the feet of pieces fired on stilts so that the runny glaze can collect under the base of forms. This bead elevates the feet which seems visually to hover above ground. Thrown plate forms are also fitted over rings at the leather hard stage and their flat surface is then pushed down to create uplifted bowls, “sprung bottom bowls” taking the form from the horizontal (plate) to the vertical (bowl). He calls this method the A-19 for the name of the freeway he was traveling when he thought of the idea. And it is a very original idea, specially considering that it is not obvious to come up with a new way to make a bowl when bowls have been made for at least 15000 years.

Thus, in the work of Takeshi Yasuda many reversals take place; top becomes base and vice-versa, lips become feet, flat becomes round, plates become bowls, vase forms become platters. Rims, which usually act as frames, stable and clearly confining, here become edges, falling over, unstable, “over the top” literally, yet never metaphorically. The smooth rounded rim, especially on plateaux and platters with their shallow wells created by gravity in the drying and firing process (proof that while contesting gravity he is willing to use it) creates ambiguity and tension. We cannot know precisely where actions start and stop, or even visually guess the level of containment (say, water) possible by the piece. This positive ambiguity of border is reinforced by the runny glaze, sliding over the rim inside and outside the form.

The base of vessels is earth bound by gravity yet their top is reaching for the air. One is reminded of Bernard Leach admonitions to take special care of extremities, the base and rims of pots, and that everything else in between would naturally fall into place. The contestation of gravity present in Takeshi Yasuda’s work serves as a remainder on how we tend to be earthbound, physically and conceptually and how our mental organization of order would stress ground over floor, over table, over cup, over handle. What would happen if we were to reverse that hierarchical order? Handle, cup, table, floor, ground. Where and how things start and end is usually presented as crucial for our understanding of pots. In this work, that relationship of edges is much more ambiguous. We tend to read the extremities of vessels as frames and a frame defines a border where things stop and end, usually where the image contained by the frame stops and ends. But a rim or an edge is altogether

different than the borders and limits we find in images. The edges of vessels do not define where things stop and end but on the contrary, they define where things start and begin. This changes our psychological relationship and alter our experience of reality. Objects are thus perceived and experienced much differently than images, even at the purely optical, visual level. And these ways of experiencing are particularly acutely materialized in this work.

Yet another reversal takes place when volume becomes mass. Plateaux and platters are thrown upside down and, in the process of flipping them over, the emphasis on the interior (volume) is shifted to the exterior (mass) and the piece becomes visually solid. Pottery is conventionally articulated around volume and containment, around a clear definition between interior and exterior. Here, the relationship is reversed, contested and challenged. At times, the form as mass is itself ambiguous and completed only by use, when plateaux are stacked with food, the visual circular unit is completed; when flowers are arranged in the bucket, its handle makes the tri-dimensionality of the flowers more clear.

The handled bucket, with the distorted base I referred to earlier, seems to hold a special place in Takeshi Yasuda's work if only for the presence of the handle, the product of a rigorous brainstorming design process of permutations and elimination, exploring the potential of process to yield new forms. This design process form a significant part of the workshops and demonstrations Takeshi Yasuda conducts regularly all over the world. The bucket form is an example of how we usually experience things, how we tend to reduce objects to their bi-dimensional theoretical sign (images that negate form), where horizontality is reinforced in the usual viewpoint of profiles. This reduction of volume to flat profile creates a distrust of everyday, bodily experiences and we are trained to distrust that physical knowledge in aesthetic experience. This is reinforced by our habitual experience of objects through images in books and through photography. By looking at objects in a flat format, we think that they are perfect, symmetrical, balanced and ordered when the reality of things, especially handmade things, is far different. Yet we expect them to retain these qualities of perfection and in the process we tend to apply very inappropriate criteria in our appreciation.

This distrust of conventions and this reflection on experience is manifested as well through language. Takeshi Yasuda is precise and particular when he uses language. He insists on using "bucket" instead of "basket", since the term is more directly descriptive of the functional intent of the object. He also insists on the difference between platters (large flat plates) and plateaux (raised, upside-down forms with shallow wells). This emphasis on language is evident as well in his demonstration of brainstorming the potential of handles, by stressing how important it is to speak out loud about the process taking place, how essential that is to process. Language , consisting of complete sentences, has its own rules, its own powerful ability, yet single words or incomplete sentences can be more effective and closer to the actual

experience. How can we speak about objects, how do they interface with language? We live in a largely visual world and most of our cultural experiences are based on or mediated by images. And images are fictions, they instantly and logically imply a narrative, they lend themselves readily to language and to theory. Objects and things on the other hand “dissicate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of language at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences(3)”. In Takeshi Yasuda’s case, the incompleteness of the discourse is possibly another form of generosity, permitting meaning to be completed by the user and analysis to be open ended instead of doctrinaire and directed.

Yasuda’s objects are meant for the presentation of food or the display of flowers and bring forth the differences between Japanese tables where presentation is flat, horizontal, and Western tables where presentation tends towards height and verticality (think of wedding cakes). This awareness, cultural, formal, structural, and the tension between the horizontal and the vertical, between the gravity bound and the aerial, infuses and informs all his work. There are also connections to be made between the Japanese origins of Yasuda and his English place of residency. Both countries are islands with definite geographical boundaries, instead of man-made ones. Boundaries in his work are almost always ambiguous, specially at the passage between interior and exterior, and this formal confusion can even lead to semantic confusion as was the case when one piece was exhibited upside down in a show! That is sometimes the price to pay for challenging conventions, centuries old and quite rigid in the case of pottery. Yet, this ambiguity is a positive aspect of the work which redirects preconceived notions about pottery and in the process permits a new reassessment of its value and role as a place of experience.

The glazing of the early pieces deserves special mention as well. Influenced by SANSUI Tang ware of China, the glazing articulates the form through repetition, not mindless repetition but repetition that creates trust which comes from experience. These fluid patterns are rarely strictly for purely aesthetic, decorative purposes. The fluidity of the glaze, its runniness, is used for perceptual reasons, blurring the passage between interior and exterior, from horizontal to vertical, and brings to mind the fluidity of experience as well as the fluidity of time itself. The beads of glazes underneath the feet to raise the form from the horizontal plane, play a similar role, proof that nothing is arbitrary or gratuitous here. These effects are nonetheless not calculated, which would make them forced and awkward. On the contrary, they originate in a deep understanding of materials and processes, intuitively used to direct our perception as well as experience of these objects. As well, the glaze is picked up by texture, by impressed lines and raised dots on the handle and feet which attract the eye, providing visual and tactile grip, but also demanding and begging for touch- thus creating a movement from the aesthetic to the erotic. This sensual quality is reinforced by the drips, the folds, the stretching, the squeezing, as well as the “animal” feet and the organized vaguely symmetrical patterns, stable,

logical, becoming organic, changing uncontrollably, as they run freely all over the forms, despite being periodically stopped and collected by ridges and tracings, bringing some from of order to the potential chaos released. The balance of tensions is always taut, the equilibrium sustained by symmetry.

The reference to Tang Chinese ware in his use of blurred green and brown markings creates an historical connection with the past, with different cultures (a Japanese potter quoting China from England) but also establishes distance, temporal distance and a distance created by the switch from earthenware to stoneware, from China to England, from then to now. The forms of Takeshi Yasuda are original, idiosyncratic and unique, yet the glazing and colors are not. They are appropriated from a memory, a remembrance of things past. This borrowing is justified since it is conceptual rather than aesthetic or stylistic and it operates to direct our experience of the work and how we come to understand it. It's use is epistemological, rather than simply formal, a mistake so often made by appropriators of styles instead of concepts.

The following body of work, using clear glazed creamware (a very British material and one coming from the industrial world) dispenses completely with color, pattern and surface decoration, if we make exception for the traces of the throwing process, minimal and understated, left by the ribs used to smooth out the clay to a soft skin. Another notable difference in this work is that here the handles are projected, in movement, as if the gesture of attaching them was still in progress, incomplete. This potential incompleteness again implies a generosity for the user/viewer who may complete the process mentally or again through use. The superior edges are also thin and sharp, as if the maker had run out of material to complete the forms. This focuses our attention on these extremities and the thin, sharp line energises the wetness, fatness and roundness of the form, by contrast. In the creamware pieces, the lack of decoration brings forth the plasticity and expansion of the clay and glaze, the inherent beauty as well as classicism of the forms, similar to Wedgwood's uses of the material in previous times. Yet, despite the clear importance of the materials used, the processes employed and the strong personal nature of the work, what remains obvious in the work is that it manifests the importance of ideas, of concepts over the physical nature of materials. It places process and technique, tools and equipment in their proper perspective (something too rarely done unfortunately) and, most importantly, it places the maker in the more discreet position of his historical, largely anonymous, forebears.

In the work of the last few years and in the most recent pieces, extremes of process are used to create the final result. In one instance, porcelain is loosely thrown, very thinly, leaving all throwing marks (in sharp contrast with the previous smoothly tooled creamware), until the thrown form finally collapses on the wheel head. This collapsed piece is then repositioned upside down, and this restretches the form to a new elongated volumetric vessel form which will now retain its integrity after drying

(upside down) and firing (right side up). These flower vases have now a vertical energy and tension, organic and almost alive that is equally efficient whether they are presented empty or full of flowers.

The newest work explores yet again new processes and ways of making. Let me stress here that there isn't anything profoundly original and new in any of these processes used by Takeshi Yasuda. All, as is usually the case in the field of ceramics, have historical precedents. It is the WAY he uses them that is new and original. If previously, he was making particular use of the plasticity of clay, its "hydroplasticity" coming from the presence of water in the clay and in the forming stages, he is now exploring the "pyroplasticity" of ceramic materials subjected to maximum temperature in the kiln. Again here, the workings of gravity cause the clay to stretch, to collapse, to deform and to crack, all generally perceived as defects, errors and mistakes by ceramists historically. Yet these extremes of processes and reversals have great potential to generate exciting forms.

This work is groundbreaking and revolutionary not only through its amazingly varied, challenging and original relation to process but most importantly because it embodies altogether three new aspects of the very best of contemporary ceramics. It is transnational: it shows not only the unimportance of the personality of the maker but also and most importantly for the times we are living in, the unimportance of nations and countries when working within a universal and timeless format. This work is also transcultural by bringing together various cultures and various aspects of culture as universally shared. And it is as well trans-historical since, while deeply grounded in the present, it unites with the past, through the present, with the future. It becomes a compression of history. These are lessons that more potters need to ponder and absorb if pottery, now that its historical role has been replaced by other materials and processes, is to remain relevant today.

The work of Takeshi Yasuda is true conceptual art. Not only is pottery making for him a conceptual activity (how and why it is made) but using the pot becomes a conceptual activity as well (how and why it is used). This conscious, deliberate, cerebral approach to pottery making is not dry, rigid or didactic, quite the contrary. The work itself is ample proof that it leaves plenty of room for intuition and sensibility, for the accidental, for an intuitive experience. This is true from the viewpoint of the maker, the viewer and the user.

If Yasuda's pottery is the fusion of body and heat, it deserves to be for us a merging of senses and time. He has spent a long time with his work. It manifests a culmination of many years and considerable reflection. It deserves as much time to be experienced and appreciated. If certain objects must necessarily be part of everyday life, it is because they are too complex to be experienced by a single glance, though vision alone. They have to be lived with for a long time, in a fashion as intimate as possible in order to be apprehended fully. Usually, the simpler they seem, the more familiar they seem, the more effectively complex and foreign they

are. But who nowadays has 20 years of contemplation and experience to give to a bowl... This work reveals a whole new world of possibilities in the understanding of the potential of pots as actors in culture.

The surfaces in the pottery of Takeshi Yasuda are always generated by process, a series of largely accidental effects that nonetheless remain under the control of the maker. For Tang sansai wares, the applying of colors and the runniness of the glazes, for the creamware, the traces and markings of tools and for the torqued, collapsed and restretched porcelain vases, the finger marks of throwing. This reliance on process and on the properties of materials finds its present culmination in the deformities, warpings and cracks of the “pyroplastic” work. One remains in awe and in constant expectancy of where this investigation will take him next. May I suggest that Takeshi Yasuda be the first potter to be sent into space and to have a permanent studio on the surface of the moon. One wonders what kind of pots he would make in the absence of gravity (his old nemesis), while free floating in space where pressure, centrifugal force and hydrology would follow new and unfamiliar laws. Please someone reserve a space for him on the next launch.

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Notes

1- according to Paul Greenhalgh

2- these ideas are explored further in my article “The Space of Pottery: an Investigation of the Nature of Craft”, published by *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no.22, 1995, pp 44-47

3- Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, Spring 1986, vol.16, #1, pp 22-27.