



After selling most of their belongings and closing their Japanese studio,

HITOMI SHIBATA

(b. 1971 in Takamatsu, Japan) and her husband, Takuro, arrived at the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, in June 2005 with nothing but three suitcases, one cat, and each other. Settling in Seagrove from Shigaraki involved the risk-taking and appetite for unexpected surprises that is inherent in those ceramic artists with a taste for wood-fired work.

Twelve years later, Hitomi and her family are settled on a plot of land on Busbee Road in historic Seagrove. She makes bold, expressive pottery from wild North Carolina clays and handmade ash glazes in their studio. The works are sold in a nearby shop. The pots are finished in wood-fired kilns that she helped to construct, and the family lives in a modernist home on the site.

Intent on a career in clay, Hitomi graduated with a BEd (1994) and MEd (1996) in fine arts from Okayama University, both with a ceramics concentration. After graduation, the oldest pottery village in the country beckoned to her. “I met Takuro and we got married in Shigaraki,” Hitomi explains. “We were both young and poor and had the same dream: to establish a pottery studio in Shigaraki, hopefully with our own wood-fired kiln.” They founded Studio Touya—Japa-

nese for *pottery house*. Soon, the urge to see the world overwhelmed Hitomi. “I told Takuro ‘We should visit another country now. We have no children, no house, we have nothing. I think it is the right time.’” Friends she made at Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park assured her that American had a comprehensive ceramic arts community and crafts market. She was accepted into a one-year University of Massachusetts (Dartmouth) program in 2001 and a Rotary International scholarship made the trip possible. After a 3-month stay in Cambridge to brush up on their school English, Hitomi and her husband arrived at UMass. in September of 2001. It was a difficult time, but the year was a very good one for the Shibatas. They made many lifelong friends in Massachusetts and while Hitomi studied ceramic arts education, Takuro worked as a studio

potter and participated in a residency at the Peters Valley Craft Center in New Jersey. When the UMass program ended, both Shibatas visited Cub Creek Foundation in Appamatox, Virginia, where they helped build and fire wood kilns and made more good friends. From Appamatox, they reconnected with a couple they'd first met in Japan. They travelled by Greyhound bus to reunite with Seagrove-area potter David Stuempfle and his partner Nancy Gottovi. "There are small pottery or craft communities everywhere along the East Coast," Hitomi remembers, "but not like Seagrove. Nancy and David introduced us to local potters in their studios and we thought 'Wow! This is special. We've never, ever seen this kind of pottery community in the US.'" But it was 2003 and their visas were about to expire. It was time to go home and start a normal life in Shigaraki.

Two years later, in her new role as associate director of Central Parks NC in Star, North Carolina, Nancy Gottovi contacted Takuro Shibata about a position as director of STARworks Ceramics, an enterprise venture which the nonprofit organization was establishing to sell pottery materials to local potters and ultimately, to develop a clay factory in the state. "We were in our early 30s. We both had good jobs in ceramics research in Shigaraki, says Hitomi. "Takuro said 'I want to try. Three years [the length of a work visa]. Let's go.' But I had a problem. I had found a skinny stray cat in Shigaraki and refused to leave her behind." Her husband applied for the job and got it. The Japanese cat was microchipped, her vet records translated to English, and they were off.

While Takuro grew STARworks into the viable clay factory that it is today, Hitomi spent two years as the artist in residence at the NC Pottery Center. She managed the education building and studio space there, ran children's pottery programs, and helped set up installations and exhibitions for the state-run cultural center. "I really loved it!" Hitomi beams, enthused by the opportunity to teach ceramics. "Now I visit my boys' elementary school for workshops and all of the children see me and shout 'Ken's Mom is here! We get to make pots!'"

2007 was a banner year for Hitomi and her husband. They bought land on Busbee Road in Seagrove. Their elder son, Ken (the Japanese word for *wise*), was born. Two years later, their dream came true when another son, Tomo (the Japanese word for *good friends*) arrived. That same year, Hitomi and Takuro began constructing the

Japanese style, two-chambered Anagama wood-fired kiln of their dreams. In 2013, they began construction on a simple modernist home designed by Alaskan native Jacob Burke, a Master's student of revered Raleigh-based architect Frank Harmon. Working closely with Harmon and Burke, the Shibatas refused to be deterred by the frustrations of a language barrier and a challenging budget. With every setback, they threw themselves further into the task. "We just worked, one brick at a time. We believed we could do it all," Hitomi marvels. "And when we couldn't, friends stepped in to help, and we got it done."

Today, Studio Touya encompasses the old homestead the Shibatas lived in with their two boys while their new home was being built. It showcases the elegant functional and sculptural work of both potters. Recently, Hitomi and Estonian kiln builder Andres Allik finished building a smaller Bourry Box wood-fired kiln using 2,500 bricks. She uses the new kiln to single-handedly fire her work. Friend Steve Blankenberker helped her to find 200 bricks, with which she began her kiln. When she ran out of bricks, neighbor Ben Owen III appeared one day with enough used bricks to finish the kiln. "Ben is a wonderful neighbor and friend," says Hitomi. "And now he's building his kiln and of course we are going next door to help." Friends helping friends happens all the time in Seagrove, she explains. "Artists are very creative and supportive. When they get together, they can make things happen."

*Hitomi and Takuro
are a gift to the world.*

FRANK HARMON, FAIA

Studio Touya

4911 Busbee Road
Seagrove, North Carolina 27341
www.studiotouya.com

SATURDAY 10AM-4PM AND BY APPOINTMENT





PREVIOUS PAGE: The sculptural form entitled *Zero* is 23" high. The work was handbuilt using local clay, with local slips and red iron oxide, and was wood-fired. PAGES 112-114 feature multiple views of a form entitled *Jar*, which measures 17" x 17" x 15" high. The work was wheel-thrown using local clay. Unglazed, it was fired over four days in an Anagama kiln.



