Michi: Distinctive Paths, Shared Affinity

Ayumi Horie's fox and bird plate, earthenware, slip, sgraffito decoration, glaze.

"The solidarity forged between ethnic identities in Asia and America (by Asians of American origin) reshapes the very contours of Asia and America, and the relation between the two." — *Pramod K. Nayar*

When I walk *into* a museum or gallery I often walk *through* it too casually, my cavalier consumption of art creating a satisfying illusion of ownership. Something like visual speed-reading, the voices of those works that speak most strongly to my sensibilities or

call to my curiosity will, I believe, rise distinctly through the apathy of feigned familiarity.

Unforgivably arrogant in sorting through the cacophony of a group show, I make discoveries by flirting with ignorance. But at no time has this approach served me more poorly than when seeing the exhibition "Michi: Distinctive Paths, Shared Affinity," when it was on view at Baltimore Clayworks.

Michi is a traveling exhibition (Baltimore Clayworks, University of Central Missouri Gallery of Art and Design for the 2016 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, Bowling Green State University, Carleton College) that brings together sixteen artists currently based in the continental US and Hawaii. Whether residing stateside for a few years or the progeny of long-ago arrivals, these artists are all of Japanese ancestry. The purpose of the exhibition, on the occasion of a number of anniversaries (75 years since Pearl Harbor, 76 years since Bernard Leach's A Potter's Book was first published, 50 years since the first NCECA conference, etc.), is to illuminate the influence of Japanese heritage upon each ceramic artist's work and, by inference, also the field.

Two of the exhibiting artists are also the show's curators: Yoshi Fujii, a Japanese potter who has been living in the US since 1996, and Juliane Shibata, a sculptor and fourth generation American with Japanese ancestry. For Fujii, who once actively avoided overt references to Japanese culture in his work, heritage allusions are bound to his not-so-distant memories of the homeland and to the immigrant's inevitable renegotiation of identity upon leaving it. Shibata, further removed from her Japanese roots, mines the deep past of her family history to produce a self-referential vocabulary that speaks to her seeking, and yearning for, connection. With the exhibit's boundaries very much defined by two different but connected people, we enter an open field.

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Patti Warashina's Catbox 13-F, 21 in. (55 cm) in height, earthenware, fired in an electric kiln, 2013.

Megumi Naitoh's composition with skulls, 22 in. (55 cm) in length, 3-D printed, cast, handbuilt porcelain and stoneware, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, Plexiglas, plywood, 2015.

Hiroshi Ogawa's ichirin zashi-vase, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, clay, wood fired for 5 days, 2015.

Shoji Satake, Japanese-born and Alaskan-raised, creates visual metaphors that integrate crafted, Japanesque emblems of idealized nature with rough-hewn references to the beauty of America's raw frontier landscapes. In a show where the

immigrant's story of location and relocation is central, Satake's dualistic sculptural work is summarily symbolic. Also an accomplished potter, Satake first came to know Japanese pottery traditions by way of the Leach lineage, studying with Marlene Jack, who herself had studied with Warren MacKenzie. Only afterward did Satake return to Japan to work with Hide Fujimoto in Shigaraki. Delving into such details, Satake's life story, even more than his work, quickly becomes a measure of the cultural interchanges, complex hybridizations, and tenacious interdependences that Michi is really about.

Born in 1940 and living in Washington State, Patti Warashina has her own memories of the Japanese immigrant's experience of WWII on the western US coast. This is an experience that meant internment for many. Sixty-five years later, in an interview with Doug Jeck, Warashina invoked the image of her grandmother selling pottery in Japan as a personal archetype. Yet, in the language that she often uses to speak about her heritage, there is a certain disavowal of its importance in her art. According to Warashina, her ancestry only exerts its influence sporadically and subliminally, its outlines only occasionally evident in elements of style and subject matter.

Megumi Naitoh, like Satake and Fujii, was born in Japan and educated in the US. Riffing off of European still-lives in the language of contemporary technology, Naitoh's most recent work foregrounds global culture rather than her specific heritage. This is not to say that anything about Naitoh's contribution to this show is reflective of Japanese culture or, alternately, that she is not close to it. More simply, it is the irrevocability and ubiquity of her Japanese identity that explain its absence in her work. Michi is a survey show, and this is one of the polarities to which this essentially ethnographic exhibition bends.

Shoji Satake's Oba No Hana, 14 in. (36 cm) in length, slip-cast, altered, and 3-D printed clay, 2015.

Michi's arc gives us a horizon, an overarching cultural context in which we are at times inclined to search for something obviously Japanese. Works like Naitoh's, which deny this, leave us grasping, scrounging, and falling back on comfortable but dangerous assumptions about cultures and people. Simultaneously, other works in the show flirt, however unintentionally, with popular perceptions of what is "Japan-easy," to both quote and embellish a term used by Yoshi Fujii to label cliches of Japanese culture. Michi, in this way, is flirtation at its best, offering something never intended and never fully realized but always on the edge of presence: a stereotype. Like a trapdoor between suggestion, expectation, and risk, there is a tension as arousing as the resulting revelation is profoundly banal: this is not a picture of Japanese art painted in broad strokes. Rather, this is a show about a small group of people whose personal stories and self-expressions have been loosely structured by a similarity. Or have they?

In effect, Michi is a bit too humble to answer this question unconditionally as even its accompanying curatorial statement goes barely beyond the broad signification of the exhibition's title. Fujii and Shibata do suggest that the participating artists share common ground "in terms of design, aesthetics, and concepts." Craftsmanship is also key, whether it manifests in Hiroe Hanazono's intimate and pristine porcelain dishes, the minimalist perfection of Keisuke Mizuno's sculpture, or the looser, grittier, and more monumental anagama-fired pottery made by Hiroshi Ogawa.

Juliane Shibata's Moonrise, 12 in. (32 cm) in height, stoneware, porcelain, slip, oxide wash, fired to cone 10 in reduction, 2015.

However, in a visually variegated show of "distinctive paths," a well-defined, "shared affinity" is confined to either broad generalizations or fleeting, variable truths to be decided between the viewer and the artists. To this end, Michi almost perfectly balances its guiding narrative with its focus on individuals. This position is emphasized in the accompanying artists' statements displayed prominently near each work. The statements confirm, contest, and add complexity to the show's core idea, greatly enriching it and inching closer to the real essence of culture: an aggregate of individual engagements with a shared past in the ever-changing present.

At a juncture between past and present, Michi offers exemplars of how, since the time Leach and Hamada visited the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, or even since the making of Jomon pottery, Japanese ceramics has prospered, evolved, and diversified. However, in bringing us up to date with a sampling of contemporary Japanese-American ceramics, the exhibition's emphasis is on the signatures of Japanese art and Japan's enduring influence. Yet, as some of its artists allude, Michi's story is as much about America's influence on Japanese and Japanese-American artists and their traditions as it is

about their tenacity. Michi, leaving this largely to implication, misses an opportunity for a more critical discourse, as it also does in largely ignoring the political subtext of colonialism, post-colonialism, racism, immigration, cultural appropriation, assimilation, and other contentious terrain. In neglecting these issues, Michi is, perhaps, a bit too understated.

What Michi does do well is to celebrate and explore Japanese culture and art. It does so in a way that, at least subtly, raises some interesting issues surrounding the insider's and outsider's understanding of, and grappling with, culture. Similarly, Michi, an exhibition as engineered as it was organic in its formulation, musters commendable strength in its modest size, the relatively small scale of its objects, and in its subversively gradual impact. Rich and thought provoking upon investigation but not blatantly provocative in its first impressions, the exhibition invites and rewards contemplation on many levels. This is not the approach I took upon my first viewing, but, if I may risk a generalization, Japanese ceramic art has long given us such lessons in quiet consideration.

Yoshi Fujii's sake set with tray. 9 in. (23 cm) in length, wheel-thrown and carved porcelain, slip trailing, gas reduction fired, 2015.

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