Pixilated Pictures

Barbara Rizza Mellin explains the techniques of Megumi Naitoh's ceramic mosaics

Top: Bitmapped character series: **Marie.**
Above: Bitmapped character series: **Steve.**

THE MUSE OF creative inspiration can come from a variety of sources and often when you least expect it. Ceramist Megumi Naitoh found inspiration for her latest project while visiting the Worcester (Massachusetts) Museum of Art to view the 2001 exhibition *The Lost City of Antioch*, which featured phenomenal mosaics taken from that ancient city of the Roman Empire. Naitoh, originally from Tokyo and currently living just outside Boston, had long been fascinated with Roman and Byzantine mosaics. While at the museum, she also viewed an exhibition of the work of contemporary artist Chuck Close, whose enormous close-up portraits consist of small, individual blocks of lines and colour. Naitoh not only saw the connection between the two exhibits but also realised the potential for her own creative expression. She took the blended concept even further by reinterpreting it for the computer age of her own generation.

Just as those ancient mosaics reflected the everyday life of Roman citizens, so also Naitoh wanted to deal with everyday elements of modern life, which is now dominated with things digital and computerised. "Online activity has become a large part of our daily lives," says Naitoh. "Many of us go on line regularly." Furthermore, Naitoh wanted to find a way to "articulate our relationship to technology".

An exhibition titled *Bitmapped* held this spring (2007) at the Fuller Museum of Craft in Brockton, Massachusetts, reveals Naitoh's creative evolution – an evolution that combines the ancient with the avant-garde, the traditional with the technological.

The first works she created in this series of digitally inspired pieces "references historical applications of mosaics", says Naitoh, and thus are fairly large, approximately 1.2 m (4 ft) square. Since the ancient mosaics covered walls, floors and ceilings, her tile creations, reasoned Naitoh, should also have an architectural presence. Eventually, Naitoh's creative evolution would lead to a decrease in size and an increase in abstraction.

The large pictures in her wall-sized mosaics are portraits, recognisable but with an illustrative comic book quality. There exists a "funny relationship between people and technology." says Naitoh. The portraits themselves are distorted in scale with large heads and small bodies much like cartoon characters or Anime creations. Word text such as 'snap' on one picture and illustrative elements like the large blue tear drops or sight/light radiating from eyes on others further give the works a comic book feel.

"We create the technology, and yet technology controls our lives," says Naitoh. That "tension created by technology" is also something the artist wanted to explore in these works. Naitoh starts with digital photographs of her friends, and then after a labour-intensive and time-consuming process, places their pixilated caricatures in the centre of her clay grids. She also adds black lines and circle shapes, like the lines and circles on a circuit board, around the images. To further establish the technological connection, she borders the pictures with a row of small 'circuit boards' along the top and bottom and keeps the background colour 'circuit-board green'.

Naitoh's process for making the finished artwork in this exhibition combines elements of the old and the new and reflects an evolution in her own creative process. First, as mentioned above, Naitoh takes a digital picture of a friend or colleague. Then she downloads it and processes the photograph on her computer using Photoshop to pixilate the image. Once she has broken down the face into the tiny dots that make up computer pixels, she separates the colours into files of cyan, magenta, yellow and black – the standard CMYK breakdown of computer images. From this cutting-edge technology, she returns, in the next steps, to the tradition of handmade crafts as she creates silkscreens that are the negatives of the individual colour pages, four screens in all. Next she rolls out a thin slab of clay on which she will apply the silk screen stencils. Like an inkjet printer, she then applies up to 25 layers of paint through the silk screens on to the clay, the multiple layers giving a more saturated final colour. Naitoh actually uses six colours, adding an extra value of red


Step 1: a digital photograph is taken and opened in Adobe Photoshop.
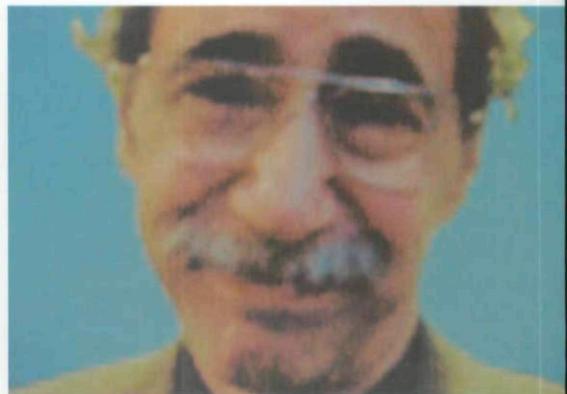
Step 2: The image is placed on a blue background.
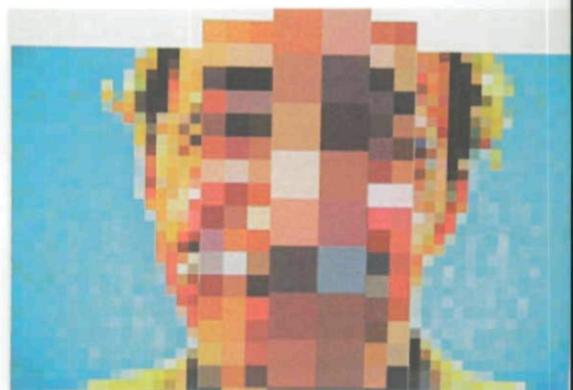

Step 3. The image is pixilated.
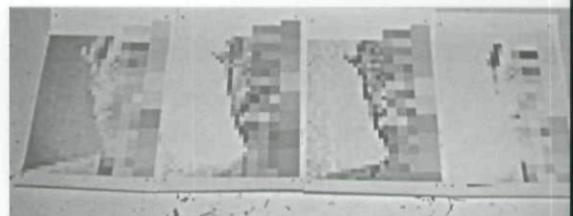
Step 4. The colours of the image are separated in CMYK and printed in black and white halftones. These are used to make silkscreens using photo emulsion.

Step 5. Placing the stencils on the clay.

Step 6. The image screened on the clay.
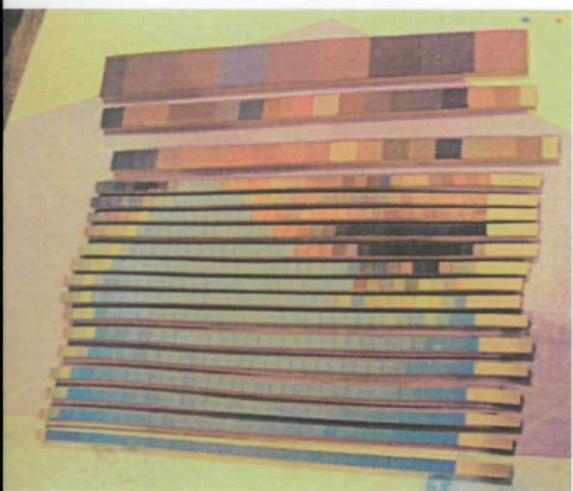
Step 7. The clay is sliced into small squares of various sizes.

and an extra black to the CMYK base, in order to create richer tones. However, the process doesn't end here. With the portrait image clearly visible, Naitoh slices the clay into small squares of various sizes. Then, she bisque fires the shapes and glazes them. Next, she glaze fires the pieces, and finally reassembles the components, like an ancient Roman artisan, into a grid. Naitoh uses an adhesive to secure the glazed tiles to a solid surface. She often uses plexiglass because it doesn't warp and, being non-organic, resists mould and other problems. The result is an image simultaneously reminiscent of ancient mosaics and evocative of a computer printout.

The more Naitoh explored the concept, the more she realised that the whole purpose of mosaics has changed. In fact, in many ways, she feels it is the opposite today of its original intention. The Romans used their glazed tile mosaics to reveal something about themselves and their way of life, she says. However, we tend to pixilate images to hide identities and conceal realities. You can easily see what Naitoh means if you watch a TV newscast in which images of people's faces or sexually explicit features are obscured by digitally created colour mosaics that allow the viewers to get the idea without actually seeing the reality. "I am intrigued by the contrast of (mosaic's) connotation in the Roman era and in contemporary society," she says. It is that paradox that has inspired her to create this body of work.

Naitoh further considered our apparent modern-day compulsion to stay connected while at the same time concealing who we are. "Many of us probably have more than a couple of online identities: to blog, to shop, to pay bills, maybe to place an ad," she says. "The current phenomena of *MySpace* and *YouTube* remind us of our strong desire to reach people, yet we are fearful to reveal our identity."

The second iteration of the series focuses on this dichotomy, as well as the computer screen itself. Using the same process that starts with downloading digital photographs to a computer, moves on to creating silkscreens and ends with reassembled glazed ceramic tiles, Naitoh creates portraits that disguise the subjects' true identities. "By pixilation and abstraction of the portrait," Naitoh explains, she "visually expresses the anonymity." It might seem that the obfuscated pictures presented in varied colour hues would be disturbing, but instead, they actually appear familiar and ultimately interesting, supporting Naitoh's thesis about the recognition of such images. The pictures in this series are only slightly larger than a computer screen and always horizontal as a computer monitor would be.

The titles of these works also reflect the evolution of the concept. Where the larger works are titled with the person's name, the computer-sized pictures are labelled only with the person's initial and the actual file number, just at it would appear on the computer, thus maintaining the subject's

anonymity. For the sake of creative variety, these portraits are often three-quarter-views and placed off-centre with various (rather than uniform) sized tiles creating the finished image.

The latest version of the evolutionary process takes the concept to another level and an even smaller presentation. Naitoh considered other places where modern images and identity coincided and thought of cell phones, Blackberrys and PDAs. She finally settled on the iPhone as her model and created her tile mosaics in the exact size and vertical orientation of these hand-held devices. "It was a challenge," she admits, " to fit the image into such a small format." Naitoh feels the results, with their centred, but unrecognisable face images, have some of the attributes of computer game characters, as well as a generic quality. Like a computer icon or a thumbnail, the portraits come into sharper focus as the viewer steps backwards.

With these works of art, Naitoh has managed to reinterpret an ancient media and technique and to bring its appeal into the 21st century in a way that registers with contemporary audiences. Chuck Close once said, "Painters drop crumbs along the trail, Hansel and Gretel style, for people to pick up if they want to." Naitoh has not only picked up the crumbs of his inspiration but also mixed them in an ancient Roman bowl to produce digitally gridded creations of her own, perhaps to inspire the next generation.

Step 8. The squares are glazed and fired and the components are reassembled.
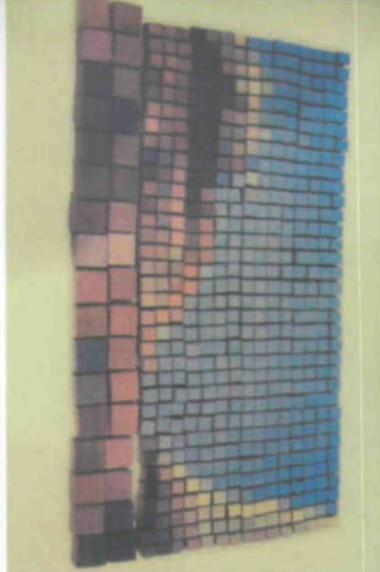
Final mosaic assembled. **T2069**.

Megumi Naitoh with **N1068** *mosaic.*