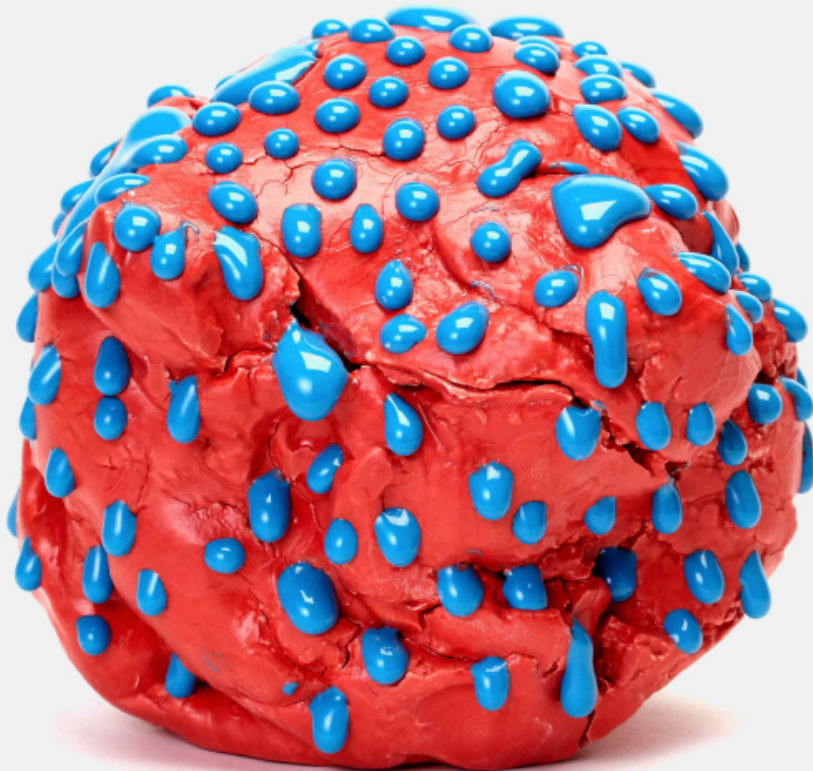


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# KALEIDOSCOPE



TAKURO KUWATA

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BY JEFFREY USLIP

Takuro Kuwata updates traditional Japanese ceramics with explosive results. Known primarily for his material innovations in clay, Kuwata repurposes construction and glazing techniques to relinquish authorial control over material and introduce aleatory operations that favor experimentation. By inserting large stones inside his vessels, Kuwata encourages his objects to rupture, burst and literally explode during firing as their form comes into being. While this technique, known as *ishi-haze* or “stone explosion,” customarily employs small stones in tea ceramics, Kuwata uses oversized rocks to obliterate his forms as they expand in the kiln.

Kuwata’s objects pay homage to the sculptural masters that preceded him, notably Susumu Zaima, under whom the artist apprenticed, and Toyozo Arakawa, the celebrated Japanese ceramist who pioneered the cracking glaze known as *Shino-yu*. Kuwata’s version of *Shino-yu* innovates the original; through the excessive application of glaze, Kuwata creates encrusted vessels with cacophonous surfaces and jagged exteriors. Kuwata’s work is also in dialogue with Western ceramic trajectories; his use of reflective silver and gold metallic glaze recalls the work of sculptor Beatrice Wood, who unified metal alloys to achieve polychromatic lusterware.

Born in Hiroshima, yet generationally removed from the aftermath of World War II, Kuwata’s sculpture offers a contemporary view of postwar Japanese anxiety. His work, while not explicitly engaged with national issues of destruction, provides an aesthetic correlation to Japan’s recent natural and social disasters. In works such as *Red-slipped stone-burst washtub* (2013), the artist encases a large stone in a cylindrical mass of clay; as the stone swells under the intense heat of the kiln,

Takuro Kuwata (Japanese, b. 1961) lives and works in Toki City, Japan. He is represented by Salon 94, New York; Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo; and Pierre Marie Girard, Brussels.

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Image:  
*Untitled*, 2013  
Courtesy of Salon 94,  
New York

the clay surrounding the stone violently cracks creating deep fractures. The sculpture’s physically broken surface visually recalls Japan’s traumatized topography following a series of devastating earthquakes, including Tohoku in 2011, Miyagi in 2005 and Hokkaidō in 1993. These cataclysmic events offer material and conceptual correlations to Kuwata’s practice; shattering surfaces allegorize the widespread destruction following the frequency of earthquakes across the island nation.

Kuwata’s sculptures simultaneously inspire wonder and emit ominous signals. The artist’s “drip bowls,” for example, have been described as having “beads of gold glaze ‘condensing’ on the [object’s] exterior.” However, upon closer inspection, the glazed droplets appear to be emerging from within, as if emanating gilded sweat. Moreover, many of Kuwata’s ceramic vessels appear crushed, scabbed, mangled and deformed. *Platinum Ishihaze post* (2012) is impaled by a cylindrical rock and the once pristine form of *Nasu-Shiobara yellow stone-burst square* (2011) is entirely smashed by the velocity of a falling stone. The boulder flowing from *Gold decorated stone-burst ball* (2013) serves as an aesthetic harbinger for the eruption of Mount Ontake that would occur the following year. The natural world plays an active role in the artist’s practice, engendering beauty through destruction.

The artist’s nimble shifting between the aesthetic and the abject imbues his objects with a haunting quality, allowing his sculptures to engage a duality where forces work against one another to create aesthetic accord. Stones erupt clay enclosures, glazes fragment, and edges crumble. By literally and conceptually creating ceramic bombs, Kuwata disquiets our notions of Japanese art after the atomic age. ☪

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