

## Ryo Toyonaga

Charles Cowles Gallery  
New York, New York

What are these forms that Ryo Toyonaga shapes with such precise obsession? Some appear to be vessels — they have knobs, spouts, or openings like a clitoris. And yet, their practical function is null. Some lie, writhing. Others stand, swimming eyeless through space. Their surfaces are animated with skins that pop, ooze, encrust, dissolve, giving way to multiplying protrusions. Is Toyonaga making images of sex, of birth, or of death?

“They are creatures that are living in the ocean of my sub-consciousness”, he says. “At first, I don’t see them, but I know they will emerge.” A close reader of Jung, he follows the forms as they arise from what he calls “the dark energy” within — a power that is both terrifying and humanizing.

Toyonaga’s works are funky and playful, too. They recall the hybrid monsters of Japanese TV animation films. These cartoon protagonists are composite images that evoke both human and post-apocalyptic life forms. He thinks of his organisms as “the collective memory of our biological origin, and maybe our future shape, too”.

Toyonaga is something of an outsider artist, in that he came to art-making in his twenties, as a kind of therapy, and never attended art school. He is hardly naïve to modern art. He vividly recalls the impact of Taro Okamoto’s giant, biomorphic *Tower of the Sun* and later discovered the work of Yayoi Kusama and Louise Bourgeois, both great sculptors on the fringe of biomorphic surrealism.

He enjoys clay’s plasticity, but fought against its essential resonance with Japanese culture. He is not concerned with media; more with the tools that best give form to the creatures that lurk in his rich psyche.

**Alexandra Munroe**

Untitled (2003), 17” x 24” x 12”, ceramic, resin, beeswax, pigment.



## Yiannes

Queens College Art Center  
New York, New York

The question, “How Greek is it?” lingers in the mind of most viewers who have confronted the energetic, bold, sculpture of Athens-born artist Yiannes. This question intimates more than a little audience anxiety about the attributes one is supposed to display in so self-aware a culture as ours. Having written on the classical implications of Asian art, I see a parallel in the respective positions of the Greek and Chinese artist, both of whom have a formidable esthetic history they can choose to use or deny. Classicisms of any order are displaced by a political sublime that tends to deal with contemporary social issues in an abstract or distanced manner.

Still, fending off identification with one’s own culture is a major decision. A number of artists have created work that distantly includes the past, in part because the past has so much to offer. Sculpture’s heritage, so great in Greece, enables an artist to indirectly suggest classical influences quite easily. If we say that the art of Yiannes reflects his childhood origins, we are praising his work as that of someone who has successfully faced the problem of influence.

Because of Yiannes’s ties to the old as well as the new, it proves hard to categorize him. What does come through, however, is the belief in art’s ability to redeem time. While his sculpture may well be situated metaphorically in classical Greece, he is too principled an artist merely to repeat the past. His classicism proves to be a profound opening that has given him the gift of speaking beyond the mere materials and forms of his esthetic. The question to be asked of this work is, not “How Greek is it?” but, “How humane is it?” Yiannes’ conviction is that we are meant to explore, as deeply as possible, the infinite depth of the human condition.

**Jonathan Goodman**

Still Life with Door Lock (1978-80), 15” x 13” x 8”, ceramic.



## Betty Woodman

Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York, New York

In her retrospective, Betty Woodman has brought forth a generous sampling of her ground breaking oeuvre. Her choices were, however, not always choice. The space itself was far too small and tall, leading to a lot of skying of pieces that would have looked better at eye-level. All of us who have followed Woodman’s genius through the years rejoiced at this precedent-breaking exhibit and I am sure that the museum’s stamp of approval has gained her new fans. A solo exhibition of contemporary ceramics in the Met, at last!

But if you missed this important exhibition, do not lament. The book is in many ways better. Arthur Danto’s essay is brilliant and philosophical. It is not just that the vessel is central to Woodman’s art — which of course it is — but that after a certain point she tends to present paired forms that interrelate. Danto ruminates, analyzes, and philosophizes to illuminating effect. As in his now classic cogitations on Warhol’s Brillo boxes, one is left surprised and wondering why no one had thought of his thesis before: Woodman’s vessel couples “talk” to each other.

On the other hand, Barry Schwabsky in his essay posits her work as a union of ceramics and painting. More recently, I have twice linked Woodman to Picasso. Schwabsky does so too and goes on to ask why Woodman’s Picasso-ness seems pertinent in ceramics but not in contemporary painting and sculpture. I don’t think it is because ceramics is behind the times but because contemporary painting and sculpture is in denial. Woodman coming at the cubist problematic from another tradition, that of ceramics, has unveiled the repressed. This late flowering of trans-cultural appropriation, multiple-points of view, and the collage aesthetic is just about as anti-minimalist and anti-Dada as one can get.

**John Perreault**

Japanese Lady (2005), 33” x 35” x 17 1/2”, glazed earthenware.

