

Junko Kiritani, 'Shukyoku', stoneware, unglazed, 38 x 25 x 23 cm. Gallery Alpha private collection (Japan)

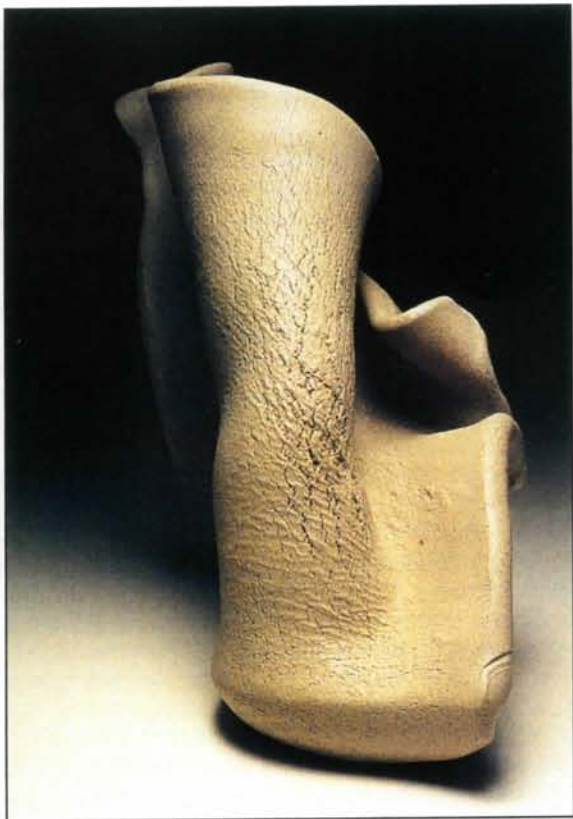
A DANCE OF SHUKYOKU

The works of Japanese ceramist Junko Kiritani aim at an expression of the emanation of the natural world, as seen and experienced in modern Japan. Text by Connie Dridan. Photography by Takeshi Fushikida and Tomonori Inoue.

THE history of Japanese ceramics dates back to Neolithic times, the first vessels being made by potters in the Jomon period from 5,000–300 BC. Those vessels seem quite contemporary in form and technique, the surface treatment texture red and the rims manipulated or corded (*Jomon* meaning cord marked, so named after the discovery of shards bearing cord marks, the people at this time being hunters, fishermen and gatherers). This showed their respect and intimacy with the material. I think it is “a love affair” that potters have with clay. Junko Kiritani has certainly showed this feeling for the material and its

'Shukyoku Pitcher' (for tea ceremony), stoneware, celadon glaze on the inside, 22 x 22 x 25 cm





'Shukyoku Pitcher' (for tea ceremony), stoneware, celadon glaze on the inside, 22 x 22 x 25 cm

limitations, knowing when to stop. The ancient form of Japanese pottery named *Sueki* is the source of Kiritani's inspiration. The clay in the work is textured, giving a tactile surface and inviting the viewer to touch, and in so doing, one is stimulated and feels a heartfelt response that prompts one to see the inside beauty of the glazed surface, thus experiencing the true expression of her work.

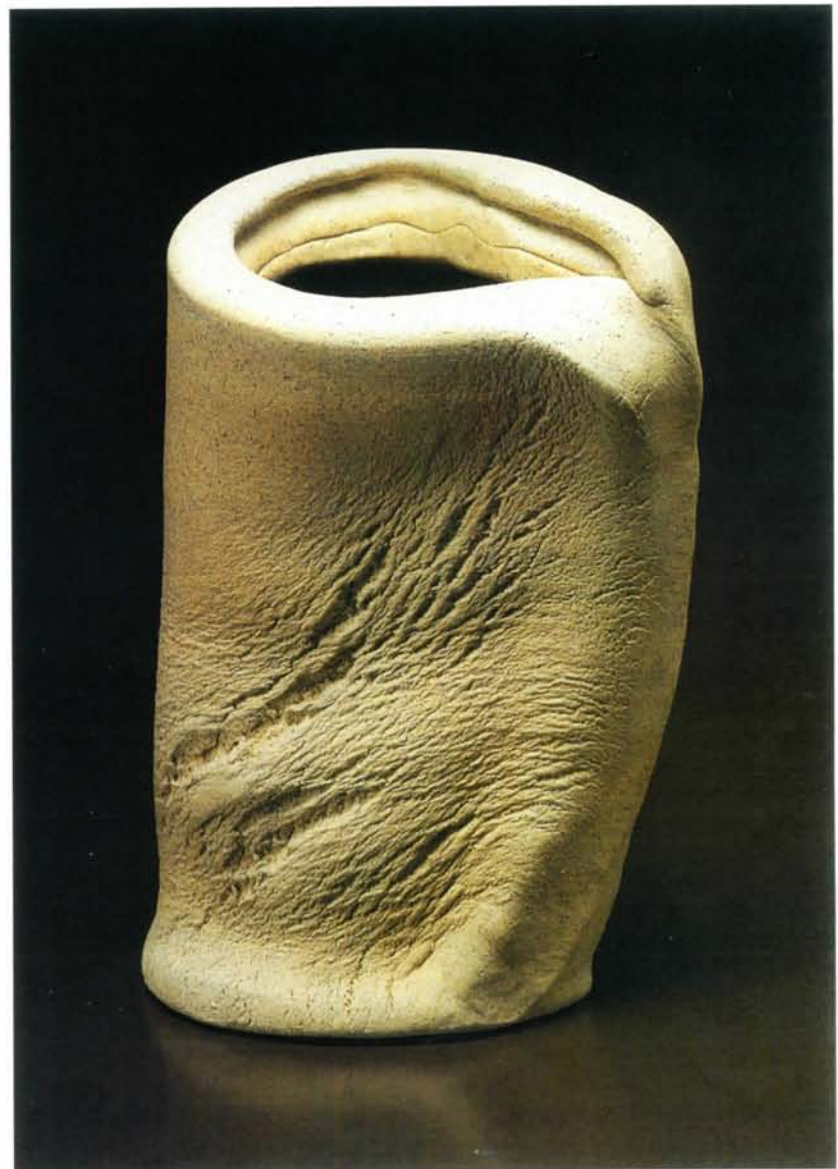
On encountering such a body of work, we are not only confronted with objects the eyes can see and research, but also those to which one's heart can respond. But if we come only with knowledge, we may not see the real beauty and spirituality being offered. Seeing is a born faculty, whereas knowledge is acquired. The late Soetsu Yanagi, a famous Japanese philosopher and collector – who, with Leach and Hamada, initiated The Mingeikan (Folk Craft Museum) in Tokyo – was the first to fully explore the traditional and contemporary Japanese appreciation of "objects born, not made". In his book *The Unknown Craftsman* he gives three pieces of advice about seeing and knowing: 'First put aside the desire to judge immediately; acquire the habit of just looking. Second, do not treat the object as an art object for the intellect. Third, just be ready to receive, passively, without interposing yourself. If you can void your mind of all intellectualisation, like a clear mirror that simply reflects, all the better. This non-conceptualism – the Zen state of *mushin* (no mind) – may seem to represent a negative attitude, but from it springs the true ability to contact things directly and positively.'

So often in ceramics we see only skilful techniques and nothing else. Such works lack spiritual, human qualities and presence with the peace and harmony of nature. In Kiritani's works there is this human quality and presence, a feeling of being involved with nature, and her stance between East and West is a

'Shukyoku Vase', stoneware, with celadon glaze on the inside, 35 x 20 cm. Private collection, Sanford Paris (USA)



'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1996, stoneware, unglazed, 27 x 38 x 39 cm





'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1998, stoneware, unglazed, 47 x 47 x 28 cm



'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1996, stoneware, unglazed, 28 x 39 x 38 cm



true balance, not a measured middle. There is an awareness of what surrounds her in life and nature. It is sensual, tactile and yes – stately. It does remind one of the beautifully controlled movements of the kimono-clad dancers, figures that were painted by Ukiyo-e artists such as Eizen, Utamaro and others. Kiritani wants to maintain her optimism towards world harmony, peace, love and a global appreciation of our surroundings. We know that she has been deeply moved and impressed by the richness and vastness of the Australian continent with its geological forces and movements over the aeons. Kiritani has made this the theme for her recent work, and in so doing has discovered the truthful essence of the Australian landscape. The following quote, from an unknown source, was given to me by Graeme Wilkie, a well-known Australian ceramist: 'Truth is in the discovery not in the discovered and to discovery there is no beginning and no end.'

Junko Kiritani was born in Tokyo in 1937. During her long career she has achieved widespread acclaim for her work. Ohno, a master of ceramic art in Japan, wrote recently that Kiritani, who is lauded at various art exhibitions, has a technique which is now highly regarded by many professionals. I would like to follow her progressive works, blooming with her affection and devotion to clay. She is a ceramic artist with a technique called *Shukyoku* (fault lines) that uses no surface glaze. She expresses her own interpretation of ceramic art, emphasising feelings of the magnitude and movement of clay. For the first time, her theme is tableware – including dishes, plates and bowls. No glaze at all is used on the exterior and very little on the inside. Although functional tableware, it is impossible not to recognise these pieces as works of art.

Kiritani has been pursuing her art through her *Shukyoku* series, subtitled *Hirakarerumono* (to be

'Wind', 1992, stoneware, unglazed, 31 x 11 x 12 cm. Shown in the exhibition "100 Modern Sculptors", Japan

opened), expressing her self-motivated art form, including her environment, in a manner which relates to cubism. Her method involves curving a clay slab of waves as if covering a cave. This representation of complex wave patterns and the gentle movement of water suggests the versatility of clay. Ohno was impressed with her understanding of change, not from a theoretical viewpoint, but from her natural desire. Hiroshi Ogawa, art critic and Professor at Chuo University, in an article about Kiritani's work, titled "The Art of Creating Artless Surfaces", writes: 'It's essential to understand, first of all, that women have entered the field of ceramic arts in Japan only in the last 40 years of its nearly 1,000 years of history. Moreover, while making pottery is and has been women's work in many agricultural civilisations, in Japan pottery was, until recently, made solely by men. One reason for male predominance of the craft was prejudice; abhorrence of letting women, who are regarded as impure, approach the kiln which was regarded as a sacred space. Another reason we talk about ceramics as an art comes from the world of tea ceremony, which was the main setting for the appreciation of works of art. From the 15th century on, men dominated the tea ceremony, and particularly those from the warrior caste.'

After World War II, those obstacles were removed and women began to enter the ceramic arts, where they now display remarkable talent. They contribute to expanding the expressive possibilities of ceramics, making use of their abilities without the repetitions imposed by the apprenticeship system, or without being bound to apprenticeship or traditional technical constraints. Kiritani, with her development of highly original techniques, is an excellent example. First she prepares a thick rectangular slab of clay weighing about 10 kg. Then she grips two edges and distorts the slab severely. As a result, patterns of

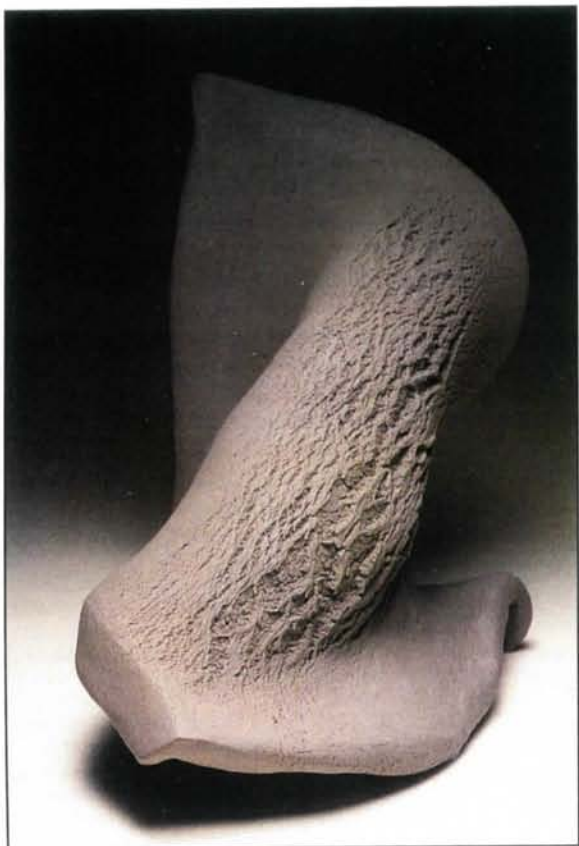
'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1996, stoneware, unglazed, 43 x 28 x 39 cm. Gunji Keino private collection

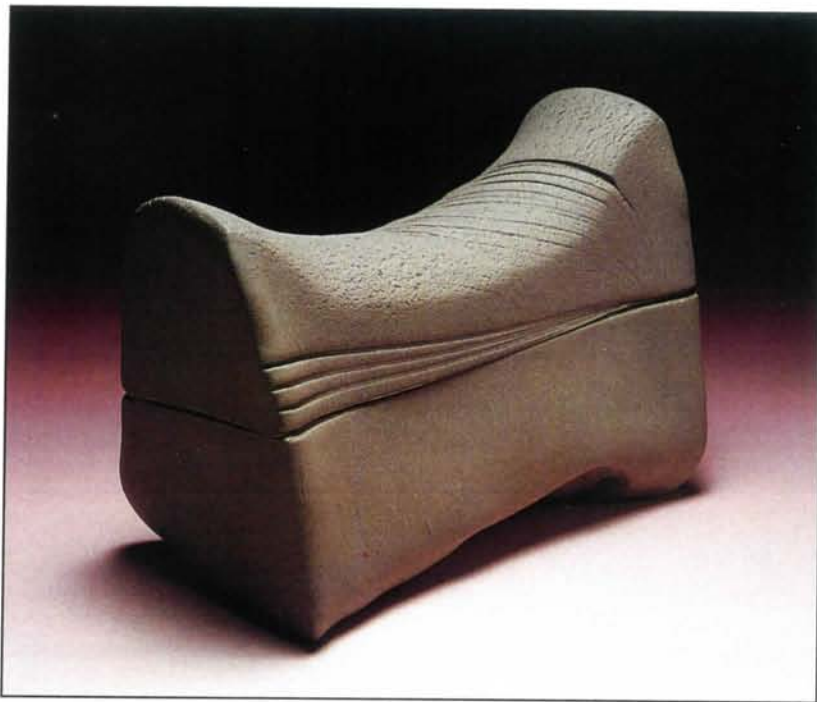


'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1996, stoneware, unglazed, 43 x 28 x 39 cm. Collection: Gunji Keino

'Shukyoku Sculpture', 1996, stoneware, unglazed, 38 x 25 x 33 cm. Don Quixote private collection

'Shukyoku Flat Pot' (for tea ceremony), stoneware, tenmoku glaze on the inside, 27 x 27 x 8 cm. Collection: Gunji Keino





'Himehako for Soul', 1986, stoneware box, celadon glaze inside, 37 x 20 x 29 cm. Jyoji Kimura private collection (Japan)

Top right: 'Shukyoku Vase', 1998, stoneware, celadon glaze inside, 35 x 23 x 23 cm



fine stretch lines are generated in the surface of the clay. She then bends the slab and joins the edges so that the fissured surface is outside, creating a cylindrical form. At this stage the object may be too thick for firing, so excess clay is scooped out until the desired thickness is achieved to form a vase or jar. To finish her work, a celadon or tenmoku glaze is applied thickly to the interior. Rarely a thin decoration is considered for the exterior. Usually the tex-

tured surface is sufficient and remains untouched. Thus her work is obverse of wheel-thrown or coiled-built ceramics.

It is clear that Kiritani intends to place maximum emphasis on getting across the natural qualities and feel of the clay in the exterior of her work. The surface textures she creates in this unique fashion she calls "perturbations" or "folds", names she uses sometimes as titles for her works. Her use of terms from astronomy and geology guide our reading of her style as an artist. Her intention to express her awe and affection for the natural world within forms that occur randomly, yet transcend human design, results in objects that contain an extraordinary concentration of physical energy and time.

Note however, that while the effects she creates depend on chance, they are not just an attempt to replicate natural events, but are the result of her careful manipulation of the clay. They express the intrinsic interaction of her body and the clay. Hers is not a reliance on the accidental, to which some Japanese artists are prone, but rather an accidental and natural quality achieved through intellectual calculation. She achieves the unpretentious by careful and inspired manipulation.

Kiritani has made some murals, but she is mainly known for her vessels; objects that are to be held and touched. It is intriguing to wonder how a wider audience, who do not have a tradition of unglazed ceramics, accept her work. In this world filled with chemical products, technology, slickness, overrefinement and soullessness, we look with hope to possibilities in the salutary shock of simple intimacy with nature and unknown sensations.

Connie Dridan

Connie Dridan is a ceramist who has travelled extensively in Japan and South Korea. She is a freelance curator of cultural exchange exhibitions between Japan and Australia.

Kiritani Junko has exhibited in many leading galleries in Japan and overseas. She recently held successful exhibitions in the Convent Gallery, Daylesford, Victoria; East West Art, Melbourne; and Quadrivium, Level 2, Sth Queen Victoria Building, George St, Sydney. Ph: (02) 9264 8222. She has acquired awards in several international exhibitions including Chunichi International Ceramic Art Exhibition, Nagoya in 1978; Issue-kai Exhibition, Nihon Togei Exhibition in 1968; Nihon Gendai Kogei Exhibition. She joined "To To-kai" and studied under Ryu Nagumo.

'Shukyoku Box', 1998, unglazed stoneware, celadon glaze inside, 38 x 18 x 25 cm



'Hirakare Rumono', 1990, unglazed stoneware, 48 x 40 x 30 cm. Yaesu Book Center Collection (Japan)

