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Los Angeles, California



Currents: The Ceramic and Video Art of Mineo Mizuno

By Meher McArthur



Still from *East River (Winter)*, 2015, by Mineo Mizuno.

In ceramics, all five of the basic elements of life – water, earth, fire, metal and air – come into play. In the work of Mineo Mizuno, a Japanese ceramic artist who now lives in Brooklyn but has spend most of his long career living and working in Los Angeles, it is water of all the elements that has informed his work most profoundly, particularly in recent years. From his Teardrop series of monumental polychrome-glazed vases to his Drops, resembling droplets of dew with a small, scooped-out cavity at the top to catch and hold water, he has been evoking the various qualities and functions of water through form, texture and color. In his more recent Moss series, for which he carved tiny holes into the surface of large dewdrop forms and filled them with locally gathered moss, water played a literal role in the installations, being sprayed from sprinklers hung above the works to moisten the seeds. As moss sprouted over the surface of the already stone-like ceramic forms, the water brings the vessels to life, blurring lines between art and nature.



A work from the Moss series, from the exhibition *Co-existence*, 2009, by Mineo Mizuno, ceramic and moss.

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In his newest body of work (featured in the elegant exhibition Current at Samuel Freeman Gallery April 11- May 16, 2015), Mizuno takes this fascination with water in a new direction, in part dictated by recent transitions in his own life. In a cross-media dialog between the most ancient of art forms and one of the most modern, Mizuno explores the light effects, fluidity and surface textures of water by pairing hand-modeled, unglazed porcelain vessels and video footage of bodies of water. His quirky porcelain vases, with their tall, paper-thin bodies and their oddly-placed ears and seaweed-like fringes, are part container for liquid and part Seussian fantasy, deliberately left unglazed so that each fingerprint and split in the clay is clearly pronounced. Juxtaposing these vessels with vessels traveling along the East River, filmed from his apartment in Brooklyn, and other bodies of water he has recently observed in California and in Japan, he challenges his audience to consider the varied and vital roles of water in our lives, at once a life-giving liquid, a transportation channel, and a medium that can both purify our bodies and soothe our souls.

Mizuno was born in 1944 in Tajimi in Japan's Gifu prefecture into a family that worked in tile making. Having no interest in following this path, he traveled to the United States in at age 19 to study art and enrolled in Los Angeles' Chouinard Art Institute (which was later merged into the California Institute of Arts, or CalArts), originally intending to focus on drawing and painting. While there, however, he was unexpectedly drawn to the ceramics that were being created by American artists. In the late 1960s, he studied for a while with Ralph Bacerra (1938-2008), who is known for his geometrically complex and technically challenging forms and vivid use of contrasting colors, achieved through a multi-staged process of overglazing. Although Bacerra himself drew some influence from Japanese and Chinese ceramic decoration, Mizuno initially attempted to distance himself from any Japanese or Chinese aesthetic or style by focusing on tight, refined, pop-inspired work, both as a student and upon graduation. "I came here to learn something different," he explains with a smile, remembering how little interest he had as a young artist in his own country's artistic traditions.



Mineo Mizuno, Screw, 1973. Glazed ceramic 2.75 x 7 x 2.75in.

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Many of his earlier works feature bright decorative schemes and quirky forms, including peaches and screws. The Screw series from the early 1970s originally grew out of his frustration with not being able to communicate well in English and thinking, "Screw them/it!" These works are among his most playful, including screw forms coated with celadon and exotic monochrome glazes, or dishes and bowls decorated with the screw motif in underglaze pigment. In 2003, in honor of his father, a Zero pilot who died in World War II, Mizuno created a series of large Fiberglas models of these planes, a highly personal project made more so by giving them names like "Zero and Tomi," for his own son Tomi. Ironically, despite his earlier reluctance to follow his family's tile business in Japan, in 1968 he joined the local dinnerware and tile company Franciscan Ceramics (by then part of a larger company called Interpace) as a designer and designed tableware for the company until 1977.



Teardrop Red, 2010, h. 61 x dia. 19 inches.

For the next few decades, while continuing to design tableware, Mizuno also explored form, scale and color, drawing from many cultural sources to create ceramic sculptures that have gained international acclaim from critics, fellow ceramicists, private collectors and museums, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, which own his work. He has also worked as a garden and interior designer of commercial and residential spaces. Though originally resistant to learning from his own culture, Mizuno gradually became drawn to the various ceramic traditions of Japan, an influence that he credits in part to his marriage 25 years ago to Minako, also a ceramic artist. With her as his personal partner and artistic assistant, he started speaking Japanese again and began paying more attention to their shared cultural and artistic heritage. "In particular," he explains, "I used to always be looking for perfection in my glazes. I experimented over and over to get them perfect. But in Japanese ceramics, accidents in firing sometimes produce the best glazes. I started to like this aspect of Japanese ceramics."

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Small Drop "Zero" by Mineo Mizuno, 2011, Ceramic, 4 1/2" x 8 1/2".

And the result of this blending of cultural influences in his work has been breathtaking. In the last decade or so, his monumental Teardrops, a series of sleek, tall vases embellished with a full spectrum of polychrome glazes with a matte finish, have been particularly notable. Though featuring much of the drama and color of his early works, these works also exhibit the grace and elegance of Japan's ancient Bizen ware flower vessels, which have long been used to adorn simple tearooms. These majestic, human-height vessels also have a solidity that is born of the wisdom and self-knowledge earned from years of experimentation, and when displayed as a group, they urge us to pay attention to the vital role of ceramics in our lives and culture. Many of his Waterdrops series of huge round stone-like sculptures are embellished with calligraphy, with the Japanese character for "zero" written thousands of times over the surface, a reference to Zen "nothingness" or the "Zero bomber" again perhaps.

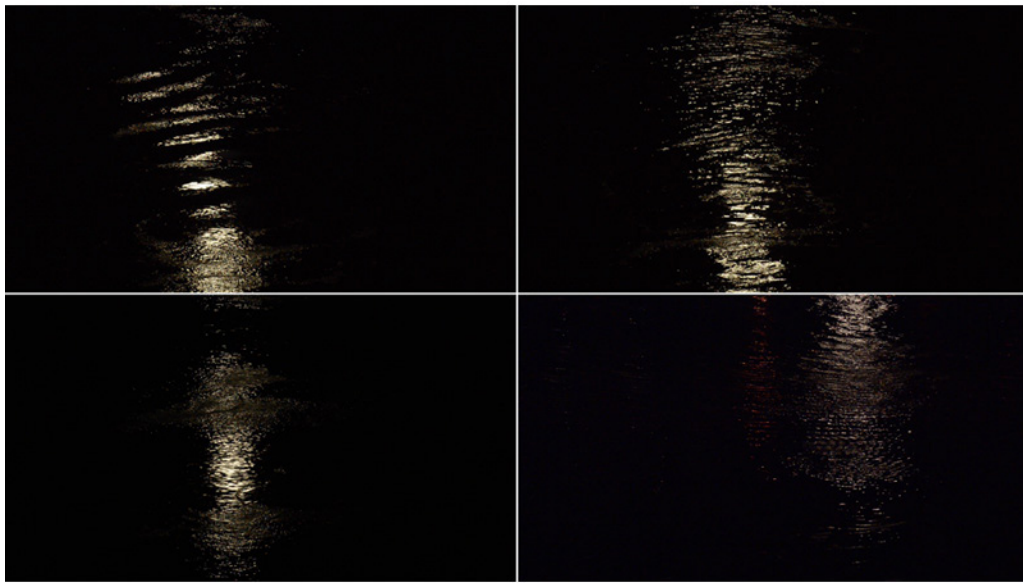


Vessels, unglazed porcelain, 2015, by Mineo Mizuno.

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“Mizuno’s an incredible artist,” enthuses acclaimed Long Beach-based architect Kelly McLeod. She and her husband Steve have been supporters and collectors of Mizuno’s work for many years, and Mizuno built and fired his new series of porcelain vessels at a studio on their Northern California ranch. “It’s been so much fun to know him over the decades and to see the different phases his work has gone through. In particular, I love his connection with nature and his interpretation of it in his work.” McLeod is particularly moved by the images of water from the places he has lived that he brings together in his new video work. “I love the tug boats on the river in New York, the Japanese waterfall and the pond in the Sierra foothills.”



Stills from the East River (Full Moon), 2015, Mineo Mizuno.

Now living in Brooklyn, thousands of miles from Japan and even from Southern California, Mizuno has by no means departed from his path as a ceramic innovator. Just as water can always adapt to its environment while carrying along with it whatever it has acquired on its journey, Mizuno has adapted to his new life and work in New York without constant access to a kiln, with a poetic fluidity, creating work that continues to push the boundaries and our expectations of ceramics. When we gaze at his haunting film of the East River during the full moon, the reflection of the moon momentarily morphs into one of his porcelain vases swaying on the rippled surface of the river. In these new works, of both clay and cellulose, Mizuno is able to powerfully reflect the transformational energy and cleansing nature of water in his own personal and creative life.