

Profile

THROWING LIGHT

From the stillness of her LA studio, Shio Kusaka produces works filled with life and levity. Jennifer Piejko explores her work ahead of a new exhibition in dialogue with the sleek spaces of Neutra VDL. Photography by Max Farago.

Opposite
View of Shio Kusaka's
studio, Los Angeles,
November 2019.

The discovery, in 1884, of shards of historic pottery in the Yayoi neighborhood of present-day Tokyo lent the area's name to a whole 1,300 years (roughly 1,000 BCE to 300 AD) of Japanese civilization. Distinct from the ornate 'rope-patterned' styles that preceded them, the loosened shapes of Yayoi pots reflected a newly agrarian focus, prioritizing utility over décor, quickness over formalism. The ceramics that emerge from the light-filled Los Angeles studio of Shio Kusaka feel similarly more concerned with life and lightness than the burden of tradition. Kusaka's pots can incorporate everything: from the wondrous — dinosaurs! — to the quotidian sweetness of golden seed-studded strawberries.

Born in Morioka, Japan, Kusaka was inspired by the elegant dishes and cups that her grandmother used in traditional tea ceremonies, incorporating the ritual's moments of reflection into her own process. When Kusaka moved to Los Angeles in 2003, the city's thriving ceramic and crafts community allowed her to experiment with the shapes of clay as much as with the finishes she could use to adorn them.

Today, she shares a studio compound with her husband, the painter Jonas Wood, and though they maintain separate and distinct practices, the communal space produces evidence of a shared working life. Depictions of Kusaka's vessels often pop up in Wood's bold, graphic canvases and prints; Kusaka's

most playful forms sometimes literally take on the shapes of some of Wood's favourite motifs.

Meanwhile, the mischievous dinosaurs that appear to have wandered from science textbooks into Kusaka's studio testify to another familial influence: her young daughter Momo's infatuation with the creatures of the Jurassic era. In the studio, Kusaka's vessels are accompanied by a mini-menagerie of cheetahs, tigers, penguins and unicorns. Each one, naturally, is small enough to fit into a child's grip.

Fun and fantastic beasts aside, Kusaka is perhaps still most widely known for works in clay that evoke ancient vessels, whether Egyptian, Greek or Japanese in origin. Distinctively, hers are adorned — sparsely, but with sophistication — with abstracted grids and geometric outlines, recalling the paintings of Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. At the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Kusaka displayed 39 objects in clusters on a white pedestal, as if teasingly referencing American minimalism. The grids on her works are drawn tenderly by hand, a tactile sensitivity that also guides her application of serene color washes and soft paint splashes. Variety is king: works covered with organic lines and dots resembling Japan's Iron Age designs share a mantel with pots that, in contrast with their classical shapes, depict animals, beach balls, and fruit. Occasionally, the profusion is

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punctuated with glossy black: a visual void that emphasizes the rich array.

During Frieze Los Angeles 2020, Kusaka engages with another ripe, historical context, though one slightly more familiar to the city's East Siders: Richard Neutra's iconic VDL Studio and Residences. Overlooking the Silver Lake Reservoir, the building was begun in 1932 with a loan from a Dutch benefactor as a small family home for the architect. Its sharp modernist lines ushered in a new taste for elegant austerity. Over the years, it also served as a sometime studio for Neutra's practice, and after a disastrous fire, was rebuilt and expanded to become the complex we now know. For this setting, the artist has created pieces that will become part of the house, including planters for the outdoor spaces, dinnerware for the kitchen and works inspired by Neutra's modernist architecture. The parallels between Neutra and Kusaka's practice — stylish restraint, cultural exchange and the merging of work and family life — are clear. But, like the best guest at a house party, Kusaka's playful works will no doubt be bringing lightness and a sense of humor with them.

Jennifer Piejko is a writer and editor based in Los Angeles

