

The World of Ting-Ju

SHAO

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Big bulging shoulders and a rather small head for its body size. The prototypical figure has no eyes, mouth, or nose on its face to show expression. Within the various spaces created by Ting-Ju Shao, this large, powerful figure takes on the role of a messenger to our modern times. Regarding this figure, Shao says, "I show the toes of my ceramic figures to show the innocence of human being (when people take off their shoes, it is as if there is nothing to hide), and I make the heads so small to underscore the fact that modern people are too smart and tricky for their own good - I shrink their heads to bring them down to size."

When we go back and trace Shao's works in the past, we can see that she has been sending out her own messages through a variety of scenes, using these distinctive clay figures. Jo Lauria, the former curator of Los Angeles County Museum, describes Shao's works as resembling a visual drama. As such, we can learn much about her succinct and experienced skills of scene construction from the many illustrations she has worked on as an illustrator. Her focus on the narrative, having the figures serve as the main characters and constructing various settings around them is, in a sense, a very characteristic style for a contemporary ceramist. The centrality of the narrative style as key tool of expression has been integral to Shao's work since her initial period as an artist, her ubiquitous figures having appeared in the early 1990's. These seemingly comical figures weave out a broad range of issues that cast a shadow on modern society, including the destruction of the natural environment; mass media and society; the insatiable desires of mankind; life and death; the relationship between individuals and groups within society; and the isolation felt by individuals. These themes represent some of the many diametrically opposed forces that exist deep within society and our daily lives.

Various ceramic techniques and materials have been used in her different pieces corresponding to the theme addressed. For example, for the piece, "Dream Fragments Between illusion and reality", the busts without the head are made using glass and clay and are arranged in an alternating pattern. The bust made of glass makes the soul seem as if it were transparent, and the piece made of clay portrays clearly the curves of a face and makes one think of a physical being. By arranging these contrasting media next to each other, the transparent glass expresses the inner side of human beings, the mind, and the earthenware, with its presence, gives an impression of the body.

Shao has also used many different kinds of materials to create her own unique space. Those spaces are made so that wood, metals, and strings come together in such a way that the colors and the texture of each material blend well with the clay. In one of them, "Between Freedom and Confinement. Only the Heart Can Free the Mind from Mortality", a human figure placed in the center holds taut strings with its left and right hands, and below, inside the cage on which the figure is sitting on, is a heart. The tension of the taut strings precisely expresses the balance of the strings. It shows that, in one life, true enrichment of the mind will never be complete regardless of which idea - "freedom" or "constraint" - prevails. Capturing two extremes in a state of balance, such "freedom" and "constraint," is a central theme in her unique construction of ideas.

Furthermore, although Shao has made the figures mostly by hand-building in the past, she began experimenting with making figures with molds from around the time she worked on her pieces at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Shiga Prefecture in the year 2002. She began using this method in full scale in her most recent works. In one of them, "What's Wrong?" a high degree of

precision is achieved by using molds. In this work ten white figures have stopped for an instant and have turned around to look back at a lone figure in brown. This lone figure is looking up at the sky in such a way that says, "What's wrong?" It is a message sent out to our modern society, which condemns an individual who strays from the group and does something different. Also, in another of her recent works, in which a human figure is placed inside a circular object that looks like a Ferris wheel, "Your Majesty, where are you going?", all of the figures are created using the molding method. The title speaks with full irony to the made-in-a-mold human beings of today who may, perhaps, be meaning to be moving forward but are not reaching any certain destination. In ceramics, a "mold" is a tool that allows us to mass produce things of the exact same shape. By forming the shapes using molds, Shao depicts those in our society who have lost their distinct characteristics as individuals, as well as those many people who have lost their vitality. Her message regarding the uniformed indoctrination and social tendencies of today is expressed strongly in her recent works.

Moreover, in the installation piece exhibited at the Gallery Maronie in Japan in 2002, "The Seventy-Seven Gentle Warnings", she portrays seventy seven birds facing human beings. The birds are not artificially but wood-fired in the manner of Shigaraki ware - baptized by the natural flame and shaped into powerful and strong birds. The birds in this piece take on the role of nature and give out a warning to the humans threatening nature. People of today tend to think that there is nothing they can not control, but her work shows us the need to realize that we are living in and are supported by nature. Furthermore, in her most recent work, "Living in the generosity of time, do we know who is near the finishing line?", twelve birds

each hold a string in their mouths, which leads to the spider-web-like shape in the center of the piece, in the middle of which a human figure lies. The 12 birds are balancing the strings and are, together, supporting one human figure. The birds represented in this work have wide beaks and rather small wings, and their eyes are round and have a cute appearance, perhaps to express the inner kindness of birds since they are being used as a symbol of nature. In contrast with the gentle gaze of the birds, the human is represented as being in a critical condition, in which it would suffer grave consequences should the natural cycle be disturbed even slightly. This work shows that today our present condition vis-à-vis nature is being maintained amidst an extremely fragile balance. As the birds represent nature in her works, there are other symbols that appear in her works. A chair represents status and greed, and stairs, position. Furthermore, each piece of work she creates in which the dwarf-like human figures are moving about on big, bulging hand and feet also reminds us that we are only shuffling about in a place that is truly beyond the power of human beings.

One of Shao's impressive works, "A Heart Far Flung in the Corridor of Time", is one of the early pieces among her ceramic works. In this piece, a slightly red heart is embedded in the body of a large human figure. Here we see the interlocking themes of Mind and Soul beginning to take form in her works. In the piece she created the following year in 1992, "The Mind Dictates How the Form Undulates", a big human figure is manipulating a marionette. The marionette symbolizes the Body, and Shao is expressing through her work that humans are driven by the Mind. This piece of work was the one in which she first started portraying the idea that the mind controls the body, and that the balance between the two makes up a human being.

Shao's works, which seem to magically reenact a passage from a story and have titles that are like an epic poem strewn with polished words, first originated by revealing the twin concepts of Body and Mind. She began portraying the inspirational themes that delved into the inner aspects of human beings through ceramics, all the while executing her work with a humorous touch.