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Los Angeles, California

## FEATS OF CLAY

Ceramist Mineo Mizuno's Work is Grounded in his Japanese Heritage  
by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp for Art & Antiques, July 2008

Spanish-style stucco homes line the curving streets of Atwater, an older neighborhood on the east side of Los Angeles, but ceramic artist Mineo Mizuno lives in a 1965 modern house with sliding glass doors that open onto his own version of a Zen garden: circular concrete pavers surrounded by raked gravel and an array of his glazed brown ceramic domes, each the size of a giant tortoise. With close-cropped dark hair and dark-rimmed eyeglasses, Mizuno settles onto a low stone bench to take his mid-morning break. Minako, his wife and studio partner, brings him whisked green tea in one of his own tea bowls and a Japanese delicacy made of sweetened pink rice on his own black and white striped plate.

Mizuno, 63, is celebrated for his ability to challenge the conventions of the ceramic arts. At the far end of his courtyard, a monumental kiln of his own design contains one of his recent ceramic sculptures, an elongated teardrop shape weighing a few hundred pounds and standing 7 feet high, which is 2 feet taller than Mizuno himself. "It takes five days to dry in the kiln or the clay will crack," he says. The high-ceilinged studio adjacent to the house contains a half-dozen of these seductive sculptures striated with melting shades of blue, yellow, and green in an unusual matte finish. "I think that with a matte glaze, you really see the shape of the piece," he explains. For some time, Mizuno has been experimenting to perfect colors that will remain matte during the firing process, which is quite difficult to achieve. "Glaze is my thing," he asserts, and numerous samples of his special colors and techniques are neatly arranged on the studio wall. "I've been working a long time on these."

If Mizuno's work and lifestyle seem entirely at one with his Japanese background, it was not always so. Born in Gifu Prefecture in 1944, he never knew his father, who had been killed in World War II before Mizuno was born. In 1966, he came to Los Angeles to study at Chouinard Art Institute, which had a renowned ceramics program led by Ralph Bacerra. Yet much of his earliest work in clay drew on the movements of Pop and Process art as he attempted to avoid the stereotypical Japanese aesthetic. "I was trying so hard to not be Japanese," he explains.

After graduating, he was hired by Franciscan China in Glendale and spent a decade designing dinnerware. He made enough money to buy his current house but was unfulfilled and yearned to pursue sculpture. In 1987, he underwent an artist's mid-life crisis; he quit his job, divorced his American wife and moved to Omaha, Neb., for a six-month ceramics residency at Alternative Worksite, where he built large sculptures in clay. There he met Minako, who is also a ceramist.

For many years, he continued to create customized dinnerware for clients such as Vidal and Ronnie Sassoon and the famed sushi chef Hiro Nishimura, for whom he designed an entire restaurant in Los Angeles, including the dishes. However, his interest in sculpture prevailed. Recent works- ceramic lozenges glazed in the earthy tones and textures of enormous river rocks, as well as the elongated teardrops of dripping color- were shown in 2005 at the Patricia Faure Gallery (renamed Samuel Freeman in April) in Santa Monica's Bergamot Station, which represents his work.

Since his marriage to Minako, he has been exploring his heritage, speaking Japanese at home and sending their son to a Japanese school. Three years ago, he decided to explore the identity of his lost father, embedding the only existing photographs of the man into the wings and body of a fiberglass model of the Japanese Zero, which was among the planes used to attack Pearl Harbor. "It was a soul-searching experience," says Mizuno. That series was exhibited at LMAN Gallery in the Chinatown district of Los Angeles. The works were also included in a 2005 retrospective at the Long Beach Museum of Art titled "Crossing Boundaries." IN the catalogue, Harold Nelson, who was director of the museum at the time, wrote that Mizuno had "created new forms in clay that exist on equal footing with painting, sculpture, and architecture- forms that confound traditional categories and hierarchies- bringing together elements from each discipline into one integrated whole."

Most recently, having embraced his Japanese identity, Mizuno crossed a new boundary: integrating horticulture and ceramics. "I thought maybe I should go back to where I'm from," he says. "That is when this whole thing came out about landscape." Over the past six months, he has fired large ceramic mounds and ground tiny holes into them. He plants the indentations with tiny bits of moss that he collects on his morning bicycle ride into the Hollywood Hills. Then a Rube Goldberg-type contraption sprays them with mist so that bright emerald tufts emerge and slowly cover their ceramic support in a miniature landscape. "I enjoy that I'm still experimenting," he says. "That is the part I like."