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POSTMODERN MEDITATIONS OF A CERAMIC SCULPTOR

By Scarlet Cheng, Special to the Times
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L.A. artist Mineo Mizuno's house is half dwelling, half studio, but everywhere are reminders of the Japanese tradition from which he hails- even if he has translated that tradition into a new idiom.

In a gravel garden behind his contemporary Atwater Village home, one of his 2-foot-wide ceramic "drops" sits beneath a pergola. Its white surface is covered with hundreds of shizuka- a Japanese character that means "silence" - applied with a calligraphic brush. It shimmers like a polished rock and has a jagged cavity on top- filled with water, as every so often a drop tumbles from above, creating a soft plopping sound before disappearing.

Although those occasional drips may look like remnants of a rainstorm, they're actually falling from a small pipe rigged discreetly overhead. Traditional Japanese gardens are graced with a hollowed-out stone filled with water, used for purification purposes, and this is Mizuno's update.

It's a prime example of his postmodern meditations, many of which are featured in two Southland exhibitions. His first major retrospective, "Crossing Boundaries: The Ceramic Sculpture of Mineo Mizuno," at the Long Beach Museum of Art and a show of his latest works at the Patricia Faure Gallery.

With nearly 50 works, the retrospective in Long Beach traces the major stages of his work over three decades- from oversize screws done in a Pop spirit from the early 1970s through series of painted plates, decorated urns and vases on pedestals, monolithic slabs and the bulbous drops, which are made in various sizes. The Faure Gallery features structures made with stainless-steel wire and three large drops with richly crackled textures that sit on the floor like giant tortoises about to crawl away.

Born in 1944 in central Japan's Gifu prefecture, Mizuno says he was a rebellious youth. It was a desire to start life anew, he says, that in 1965 brought him to Los Angeles, where he took up ceramics at the recommendation of a friend, Jun Kaneko. He studied at the Chouinard Art Institute under the legendary Ralph Bacerra.

"I studied painting and drawing too, but ceramics seemed the best for me," he says. "I really liked the material. I liked working with my hands."

From the beginning, he made objects in an unusual way, says Susan Peterson, founder of the ceramics department at Chouinard and an authority on American ceramics.

"He was very diligent, a very hard worker. That was the Japanese style," she says by phone from Arizona. "What stood out was that he was a composite of the traditional and the avant-garde."

In 1968, Mizuno became a designer for Interspace Corp., the holding company for the popular Franciscan line of dinnerware. He worked there for the next decade, producing conventional designs, but he also continued to make pieces of his own and had a one-man show at the David Stuart Gallery in 1973. Toward the end of his stint at Interspace, he made a series of gouged and cut-up dishes - his form of deconstruction.

Since then, he has produced occasional commissioned dinnerware- some of it is on display at the Long Beach show, and he has done place settings for his restaurateur friend Hiro Nishimura- but he has focused on creating fine art pieces.

When Deborah McLeod, co-director of the now-closed Janus Gallery, met him in 1983, she was duly impressed. "He had exceptional technical skill, an experimental point of view, and drop-dead gorgeous work in a deconstructivist sort of way," she writes for the museum catalogue.

Mizuno's studio is austere in its industrial sparseness and the neatness with which his works, even those in progress, are laid out. Yet much of his art reflects a sly humor and sometimes the unexpected zing of a Zen koan. He says the large screws he made in various colors and combinations in the '70s were not, as some believe, influenced by the oversize objects of Pop artist Claes Oldenburg.

"The word 'screw' is not only mechanical," he explains. "I was learning English, and everyone was teaching me the dirty words..." He's amused by multiple references. In this case, he also enjoyed making the objects- throwing them on the wheel rather than making a mold and affixing the spiraling coils onto each base by hand.

In the early '80s, he made slanted coffee cups as well as plates with such cups painted on them. Sometimes he placed a real cup on the edge as a tease.

"I love the trompe l'oeil pieces, they're very playful," says Hal Nelson, director of the Long Beach museum and curator of the retrospective. "Early on, he steps away from the functional form toward pictorial illusion. He explores the connections between clay ceramics and painting and sculpture."

Nelson points out two untitled works from 1988 made of parallel ceramic bars, one with an "X" painted across it, the other with an "O". "They read on the wall like a painting," he says.

Keenly aware of previous ceramic traditions, Mizuno enjoys borrowing shapes, glazes and presentations from the past. "His work often refers to ceramic traditions in the East and the West," Nelson says. There is, for example, his reiteration of the classical Greek vase in "Face" and in "Guard" as well as a reference to the Chinese tricolor glaze in "Dragon #2."

Like a Japanese garden, Mizuno's work is often a carefully orchestrated collaboration between artifice and nature, between the planned and the accidental.

Take the giant drops at the Faure Gallery, each 5 feet long and weighing half a ton. After he shapes them by hand, he lets them dry for several months. Then he cuts them in half and hollows out the insides to create a thinner wall, for even firing in the kiln. Finally, he "glues" them together again using wet clay and glazes them. During the firing process, cracks form along the seam as well as down the sides, but these become part of the beauty and singularity of each piece.

Furthermore, "Black Drop #3" exploits what is usually considered a flaw in the firing process- the bubbling that occurs when glazes don't blend properly or pieces are over-fired. Here, after experimenting with glaze combinations on smaller pieces, he deliberately induced surface bubbling. Afterward, he carefully sanded down the protruding domes of the bubbles, leaving their base.

A ceramist friend who came by the Faure show said to him, "I'm shocked that you've created something so beautiful by doing something you're not supposed to do."

Recalling that compliment, Mizuno quietly laughs.