

# SAMUEL FREEMAN

Los Angeles, California

## ZERO AND THE DROP OF WATER

By Rosanna Albertini, for NYArts, Sept/Oct 2003

Opening nights in Chinatown sometimes sink into a diffuse sense of displacement, with art galleries buzzing like hives in silent neighborhoods that blend into the fluid flatness of the freeways. Yet, in the dim light of Chung King Road, the model airplanes in the windows at LMAN Gallery surprise the strolling visitor. They are Mineo Mizuno's ceramic reproductions of the Japanese World War II fighter ZERO. These model war tools are entirely covered with a crowd of small images of a man in a suit over the propeller, the wheels, the tail, the wings; there is no window, no glimpse into the cockpit. The flying machine, made into a symbol by the tragic end of the war, in Mineo's hands becomes a form, as though a coat of memory, a sort of skin, had crystallized in the ZERO's shape.

Mineo seems to be in love with silence, and not for lack of English. He allows little of his story to unfold, and gives little explanation. "I saw a ZERO at the Santa Monica airport, it was so beautiful; there were ten thousand in Japan, all destroyed." Mineo's ZERO hides in its three-dimensional surface all the human stories of the war, stories and experiences mostly held in secrecy by those who were there. The little sculpture recalls a defeat, but honors its memory. "Learning is needed," writes a samurai of old "but the point is not to become its slave." A few years ago in Japan, artist Katsushige Nakahashi also remade a ZERO type 52, connecting with tape and bubble wrap 13,000 micro pictures of the model. (It has been displayed in Super Flat, 2001, at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) at Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles) The plane looked like an enormous green lizard flat on the ground. The artist carried it through the city under his arm for a long walk, at the end of which the ZERO was burned, and the ritual of destruction once more repeated: a Japanese story.

In another permutation, Zero hour is the time at which military operations are to begin — a daring name, Zero, based upon the idea of realities that do not exist yet, as they have not been realized, or realities that have been annihilated. Perhaps in becoming an American artist, Mineo Mizuno has found the way to build a more personal link to his home culture, to find respite from dismay. Zero for Mineo, in both word and image, is both tangible and unknowable. This interest in zero started about ten years ago, when Mineo Mizuno stopped making pots and plates, and large-scale sculptures in ceramic or fiberglass began to grow instead in his studio. Geometric columns in ceramic as tall as a person glow with brightly colored textures, as if a fire had melted their surface from inside. Some large curved pieces are being prepared for the kiln, pieces that resist comparison with natural or architectural forms. There is rather a human scale to each of them, somehow human but without literal figuration.

One of the pieces, a flat large oval with a hole in the center, has been entirely painted with a Japanese character repeated uncountable times, the sign that means "zero." I asked Kazuo Eto, my gardener and a reader of ancient Japanese poetry, to read the sign in a picture of the art piece. "Zero, yes," he told me, "but almost nobody can read it now, it's a very old sign." These words spread by Mineo on his sculpture are a pleasurable text, the kind which stops in the eyes, making itself free from historical time or meaning and creating a text that would have pleased Roland Barthes. It is as if, for lack of a more clear way to say it, the painted language opened the door to a different perception, a physical understanding.