

1 Flower sketches by Hitomi Hosono, pen on paper, 2013 2 *Black Wisteria Box*, porcelain, black stain, gold interior, 2012, H10.5cm

Caught in the Act

Hitomi Hosono's carved porcelain sculptures are precise and inventive, writes Kimberley Chandler.

Watching Hitomi Hosono at work is like watching the slow and methodical processes of an archaeologist. She sits quietly, carefully observing the material, and carves instinctively into the clay surface, mindful of the minute differences her mark making creates. Slowly the sculpture reveals itself: the unknown is gradually made known. 'It's a process of revealing,' she asserts.

FLORAL ABSTRACTION Hosono's carved porcelain sculptures are instantly recognisable, and have caught the attention of gallerists and collectors since she graduated from the Royal College of Art, London, in 2009. Highly detailed and realistic, they depict flora in all its forms. 'In my mind, nature has everything we are looking for: it is an incredible resource,' she explains. When we meet, Hosono is fresh in the wake of winning the *Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon Prize 2013*, which enabled her to stage a solo exhibition at London's St Pancras Renaissance Hotel's Chambers Club. 'It was a perfect fit for me,' she says, and it's easy to see why. The newly restored Victorian building is in the Art Nouveau style, inspired by natural forms and structures; 'that strange decorative disease', as Walter Crane described it.¹ Hosono's sculptures, with their flora-inspired forms and restless detail, are the perfect complement. Among them are porcelain towers, boxes, and bowls, whose heavily decorated surfaces replicate the intricacy and fascination of nature – wisteria leaves that fold and curl, chrysanthemums like heavy-lidded eyes, and delicate droplets of water. While Hosono is most known for her unglazed white pieces, she has also experimented with black, using porcelain mixed with oxides. 'Although I learnt about glazes at high school,' she explains, 'I prefer not to use them, as it doesn't

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allow the work to speak. I want people to see the detail without any distraction.' Several of her pieces, such as the *Shirakawa Bowl*, comprise a beautiful, gilded interior space, in either gold or white gold: 'I like the element of surprise that this contrast creates,' she explains.

NATURE AND NURTURE Hosono's work speaks of quiet reflection. She likes to spend time with nature, drawing and recording the flora she encounters, while building composite structures in her mind. She grew up in Japan's Gifu Prefecture, where her family owns a rice farm, and speaks reverentially of the landscape, its beauty and diversity. She has never been able to fully escape its clutches. 'My work feels like a return to my origins,' Hosono says proudly.

Yet there is also more to Hosono's work than meets the eye. While the botanical ornament is carefully rendered, there is a universal quality to them: the surface of *Dew Drop Bowl*, for example, resembles a thriving water fern, but also the delicacy of Japanese maples. 'It's difficult to identify where my ideas

come from,' explains Hosono. 'I realised that the leaves look like those from a tree in my hometown, rather than those I'm looking at. So, something comes in when I'm working, some memory.' While drawing or carving, she is continually processing, evaluating, and fabricating; here, recollection and reality coincide. Her sculptures are, therefore, not about place or a particular geography, but about our experience of nature in the wider sense. 'I always allow these memories to come in,' she says. 'I don't like to refuse them.' Interestingly, Hosono's work is often compared to the black and white photographs of German artist Karl Blossfeldt, which were coolly objective in scope. Hers, however, are arguably abstracted and universal. They imply rather than reveal, and herein lies their strength.

Heavily decorated surfaces replicate the intricacy and fascination of nature



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THE CREATIVE TURN Hosono occupies an arguably privileged position. She is represented by art dealer Adrian Sassoon, which gives some idea about the work's reception. When asked about the commercial context within which she operates, she says, 'I took a decision to work on more high-end pieces. They are expensive, because they are labour-intensive and take so much time to make. I chose to do this kind of work, as I wanted to do everything myself, rather than work with industry and have to make compromises.' It is a curious turn of events, given that her practice was undeniably shaped by the opportunity to work with industry at Wedgwood while studying at the Royal College of Art.

Hosono's intricate sculptures are built up using layers of applied ornament on the surface of her vessels. 'My brief was to create something new using traditional techniques, and I was immediately drawn to the sprigs.' However, unlike Wedgwood's Jasperware where the sprigs are supplemental, Hosono's idea was to make them integral to the overall design: they define the sculpture, rather than simply decorate it. 'The idea had been sown; this was the start for me. I really liked the idea of covering a whole surface with something'

Hosono describes how she first translates her flora drawings into plasticine models, which she casts in plaster to create moulds. She presses clay into the moulds to form sprigs, and carefully applies



3 Large Feather Leaves Bowl (interior detail), porcelain, 2013, Ø39cm

4 Large Feather Leaves Bowl, porcelain, 2013, H46cm



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Here, recollection and reality coincide

these in several layers to a base form, which has been thrown on the wheel. She then delicately builds her sculptures, merging the sections through more carving. 'I work in porcelain from Stoke-on-Trent,' Hosono tells me, 'which is important, as it's so smooth'; however, as the detail doesn't always transfer, she often has to carve into the sprigs using precision dentists' tools. She modifies these using masking tape, their delicate handles transformed for maximum grip. And just like an archaeologist, her most trusted tools are her eyes. 'I don't wear glasses when I'm working, but there's an eye chart on the wall by the door, just to keep a check,' she says, pointing to several lines of hand-drawn letters a few metres away.

A HIGHER STATE Hosono inadvertently describes a mode of working that popular psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms 'flow': a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in activity.² She speaks of effortless control, of the intense pleasure of making, and her desire to overcome the material. There is a productive tension between her and her sculptures, some of which take up to six or seven months to complete. 'It's a bit like an obsession; other people can't understand why I do it. I can often be working on a piece for four or five months, but I'm quite happy when I'm carving.' Since each one must be carefully nurtured, this has a direct

5 *Snow Cherry Blossom*, porcelain and gold leaf, 2013, H13cm **6** *Dew Drop Bowl*, porcelain and gold leaf, 2013, Ø28cm
7 *Black Wisteria Tower*, porcelain and black stain, 2012, H43cm

Notes 1 Walter Crane, quoted in Mario Amaya, *Art Nouveau* (Studio Vista Limited, 1966), p6 **2** Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990)

Forthcoming Exhibitions *The Salon: Art + Design* (stand: Adrian Sassoön), Park Avenue Armory, New York, USA, 14-18 November 2013; TEFAF Maastricht (stand: Adrian Sassoön), Maastricht, Netherlands, 14-23 March 2014

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She speaks of effortless control, of the intense pleasure of making, and her desire to overcome the material

effect on the number of new pieces Hosono can commit to. 'I have to make a judgement about what I can realistically make in any given time frame, but the curator very often understands that.' And an inevitable result of this sustained relationship is the painful goodbye. Hosono laughs, 'It's like, "You've spent every day in the studio with me, and now you're leaving!"'

With Hosono, there's a constant sense of duality: of fantasy and image, of disclosure and concealment, creating work that is both minimalist and ornate. With the skill of an archaeologist she brings forth the detail, and yet there is alchemy in her art. 'Clay is a material that I really like working with,' she says. 'It's very tactile and expressive, and allows whatever is in my head to be instantly visualised.' Whether Hosono's a conjurer or specialist, the veracity of detail speaks for itself. 