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FLOURISHING IN CLAY

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The beauty of botanical shapes and textures, leaves and petals entwining and unfurling, is captured in Hitomi Hosono's works so evocatively that you think the porcelain forms may rustle in a breeze or yield to a fingertip touch. With each piece being a true labor of love, the artist explains her creative inspiration

One-of-a-kind works of art that begin as simple ceramic vessels formed by the warmth of the human hand and end covered in flowers, leaves, and branches that have been made with the precision and delicacy of miniature paintings – this is the iconic style of Hitomi Hosono, a Japanese ceramic artist based in London. Surely it takes only one glance for any observer of her works to be spellbound by the profound presence of plant forms that appear so imbued with life.

Hosono's botanical works, which made their debut in 2010 at the eminent TEFAF international art fair, held annually in the Netherlands, are now displayed in the permanent collections of many of the world's premier institutions. Especially noteworthy is her breathtaking *Large Feather Leaves Bowl*, which has been displayed in the British Museum's Japan gallery alongside such monuments of traditional Japanese art as *Jōmon* earthenware jars and *haniwa* figures. The entire surface of the thrown vessel is covered, inside and out, with porcelain leaves that appear to dance so gaily that you can almost hear them crinkling in a gust of wind. Hosono herself described the work as one

of the most fully engaged of her creations to date. "As I worked on it," she explains, "I imagined a wind rising from the earth and whispering across each light, feathery leaf.

"It took me almost a year to complete the piece, patiently and carefully performing each task by hand, from the creation and decoration of the reliefs to the time required to dry the vessel." These exquisitely detailed reliefs are the basis of Hosono's artistic style. They are known as "sprigs" among ceramists, and the technique of applying such decorative elements to a vessel to create a cameo effect is called "sprigging." The technique can be traced back to sixth-century Rome, but it was perfected through trial and error in the 1770s by Josiah Wedgwood, the founder of the famous British pottery company in his name. Hosono worked as an intern at Wedgwood in 2008 while studying for a master of art's degree at the UK's Royal College of Art, and from then, she rooted her work in the superb sprigging technique.

"In making the porcelain sprigs that are essential to my work, the most important thing is to create prototypical models that are one hundred per cent convincing. While

molding the clay based on sketches and such, I make shapes that fuse with my interpretation and imagination. Then I carve the fine details using many special tools, such as dental equipment that I've modified for my own purposes, and I bake the pieces in an oven." After that, Hosono makes casts of the finished models in latex, creates silicone molds from those, and takes another cast in plaster, from which the final porcelain sprigs are made and hand-carved to give a three-dimensional effect and add expression. What awaits her next is the painstaking process of attaching each of the hundreds of leaf or petal reliefs to the vessel, one by one. "I don't just line them up prettily to decorate the piece. But I take great care to attach each leaf and petal at random, overlapping them irregularly to give the impression that each is freely stirring in the breeze as real plants would in the natural world."

Hosono hails from the city of Kani in Japan's Gifu prefecture, close to one of the homes of the area's outstanding Mino ware ceramics. Her grandfather was a tile craftsman, which meant that Hosono was deeply familiar with ceramic art and craftsmanship

The ceramic artist Hitomi Hosono is seen here with *A Komorebi Tower*, one of her 2017 porcelain works (height 10.4 in), which is molded, carved, pierced, and hand-built, and also features gold-leaf details. The Japanese word *komorebi* is a term for the dappled light that is created when sunlight is filtered through a canopy of trees





from a young age. “We were farmers, so I always lived among rice paddies and mountains, surrounded by nature and flowers,” Hosono says softly, recalling her childhood. “That is why my works include such typically Japanese plants as chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms, *nazuna* (shepherd’s purse), and pine.” This is not to say that, in creating the reliefs that are the core of her work, Hosono merely captures forms as they exist in nature. Rather, she tells us that what she does is distill and interpret her encounters with the beautiful things from her childhood memories and past experiences in her own way and lets these influence her works.

After studying ceramics at a Japanese art college, Hosono attended art school in Denmark, then moved to the UK to continue her education at the Royal College of Art in 2007. She has been based in England ever since. “Much of the decor in English homes – the furniture, the exposed beams and such – traditionally consists of plant motifs. Everywhere you go, too, there are parks and

woods. I think the English people’s love of nature has permeated my life and exerts an enormous influence on my ceramic work,” she says. Hosono created *Large Wisteria Tower* (see above, left) after she was deeply moved by the sight of the wisteria-covered exterior walls of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. She wanted to capture the subtle

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way the wisteria blossoms peek out here and there from among the leaves. “I love the way the wisteria doesn’t bloom so wildly that it takes possession of the wall, but rather it fuses with what is already there and gently envelops it, blooming where it wants to.”

Hosono says she likes to stroll through woods and parks on free weekends, taking time to touch the plants she finds on the way.

“I must look a little strange to anyone who sees me,” she says with a laugh. “But the act of physically touching things is very important to me.” She says she is always thinking about how she can use clay to express what it feels like to touch petals, the soft swelling of the parts where buds form, the veins on the backs of leaves, and so forth. “I think

of it as my job to breathe into my materials, into my clay, the texture and scent of a plant and the thoughts and memories that come back to life when you touch it.” Conversely, there are also times when handling the clay gradually gives reality and three-dimensionality to images that have been vague until then.

“Seriously encountering the clay and conversing with it while working it with the hands, it tells us a great deal.” This is Hosono’s unique creative process, which is far from simply turning two-dimensional designs drawn on paper into clay shapes.

Having been baked in a kiln, porcelain objects are by nature unyielding still lifes, but Hosono sees herself as breathing a sense



Opposite: *Large Wisteria Tower* (left; height 17.3 in), made by Hosono in 2012, depicts blooms among abundant leaves. A *Pale Peach Cherry Blossom Box*, *Dancing Top*, 2015 (right; height 7.9 in), is an example of her works that include colored porcelain and gilded interiors in yellow, white, or red gold. Hosono says she likes the surprise that the

contrast creates. This page: the bushy leaves curling on *A Hawthorn Tower*, 2020 (top left; height 9.7 in), were attached from the top down; azalea flowers and daisies mingle on *A Tall Tsutsuji and English Daisy Box*, 2020 (top right; height 9 in); a detail of the flower-filled inside of *A Pine Tree and Mugiwara-giku Bowl*, 2019 (bottom right; height 5.9 in)

of light and air into her works and imbuing them with movement. Most of her works to date have been solid structures, thickly covered with reliefs, but from now on, she says, she wants to create things that feel more like a flow of flowers and plants that move with a life force. “In Japan, we have the expression, ‘The spirit resides within.’ I believe that living things such as flowers and trees possess a spirit within themselves just as humans do. I will be happy if people who see the works that I’ve created by interacting with nature can feel the grand spirit that the natural world possesses and the magnificent power that surges up from the earth.” ❖

Translated by Jay Rubin



HITOMI HOSONO APPEARS COURTESY OF ADRIAN SASSOON, LONDON