

Noriko Masuda

by Heidi McKenzie



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Noriko Masuda's work is imbued with an innate sense of Japanese minimalism and sports crisp colors fashioned in bold, yet unostentatious, clean lines. There was a measured sense of industrial design in the fall 2014 launch of her line of handmade, slip-cast functional ware. The work was showcased in her first solo show, "Noriko Masuda Ceramics: St. Ives Collection" at Medalta in Alberta, Canada. True to the title, the thin bands of color—lime greens, brick reds, and saturated mustards—are inspired by the community of St. Ives in Cornwall, England, where iconic East/West potter, Bernard Leach set up his studio. Masuda confirms that her forms allude to a few eye-catching things found lying around Leach's studio. The series counts eight distinct shapes in eight different colors pitted against a bright white porcelain akin to the bone china she worked with while studying Ceramic Design at Staffordshire University in Stoke-on-Trent, England, where she completed her Master of Arts degree in 2013.

There's a poignant symmetry in the cartography of Masuda's voyage to Europe and return to Canada and Leach's voyage to Japan that informed his Western sensibilities. Masuda hails from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Settled amidst the Rocky Mountains, it is Canada's third largest city after Toronto and Montreal. Masuda's family is originally from Fukuroi, Japan, about three hours outside of Tokyo. When Masuda was a baby, her father opted to pursue an opportunity as a dental technician in Calgary, intending to stay a few years. Now, over three decades later, the family is firmly established in Canada. Masuda acknowledges both the pros and the cons of her hyphenated Japanese-Canadian status, "I think I still have a bit of immigrant mentality. I tend to feel like an outsider, always in the no-man's-land area. On the flip side, I try to think of it as a plus to be in the mix area where I can pick and choose the best parts of each culture." Masuda is proud of her heritage and in terms of its impact on her creative output, she clearly affirms that Japanese aesthetics are definitely a big part of how she works. The traces of her family's cultural heritage are reflected back through the lens of what it is to grow up in Canada, providing slim yet visible evidence of what it means to be part of the multi-cultural landscape of metropolitan Canadian artists.

Masuda recalls her instantaneous connection to clay: between grades three and four, her parents registered her for a summer clay class; she fell in love with the wheel immediately. During the completion of a bachelor's degree at the University of Calgary in Classics (majoring in Latin and Ancient Greek), Masuda returned to clay,



1 Teacups, *St. Ives Collection*, 3 in. (7 cm) in height, slip-cast bone china, underglaze, glaze. 2 Tapas dishes, *St. Ives Collection*, 4 in. (11 cm) in diameter, slip-cast bone china, underglaze, glaze. 3 Plaster models for the teapot from the *St. Ives Collection*. Photo: Luke Fandrich. 4 From left to right: plaster model for the ewer body and plaster molds for the teacup and spout from the *St. Ives Collection*. Photo: Luke Fandrich. 5 Ewers, *St. Ives Collection*, 4 in. (10 cm) in length, slip-cast bone china, underglaze, glaze.



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taking night classes at the North Mount Pleasant Arts Centre. Masuda credits the Centre's head ceramics instructor, the late Bob Reimer, with tipping the balance for her in terms of her deeply ingrained appreciation of form and aesthetics. After her undergraduate degree she enrolled in the Ceramic Distance Diploma Course jointly offered by the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, and Red Deer College in Red Deer, Alberta, Canada. The program folded during Masuda's tenure there. At the same time, the ripple effects of the economic downturn of 2008 caused her to lose her job. It was during these difficult next few years, as she was searching to reinvent herself and weighing her options, that Masuda realized that if she was going to have to struggle in the process of becoming, "why not struggle doing something I love."



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Masuda sought out Staffordshire University in Stoke-on-Trent, England, targeting its graduate program that is centered on industry and function, preferring to bank on the possibility of a career that favored the practical business side of ceramics. Masuda came to clay as a career after over a decade of working in her father's dental lab as a technician. It was there that she awakened in herself a sense of joy that surrounds the marriage between the precision of craftsmanship afforded in the making of crowns, bridges, and dentures, and the attention to detail and aesthetics that her clientele demanded. Masuda credits this work as instrumental in her decision to dedicate her second career to clay. "I see a lot of parallels between teeth and my pots." She elaborates, "The main point about making teeth is not to harm the patient. There has to be a balance between function and aesthetics." Masuda wants her work to be unobtrusive. She extrapolates that same sense of balance into the pots that she creates, striving to make what she



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6 Teacups, 3 in. (7 cm) in height, slip-cast bone china, glaze, platinum luster. 7 Teaset, *Denby Collection*, 5½ in. (14 cm) in length, wheel-thrown Denby stoneware, glaze. 8 Tenmoku teapots, 9 in. (24 cm) in length, slip-cast porcelain, tenmoku glaze. 9 Houses, 3 in. (8 cm) in height, slip-cast bone china, colored slip, glaze. 10 Ghost Salt Pigs, 4 in. (11 cm) in diameter, slip-cast bone china, glaze.

describes as, “almost invisible pots,” where her work seamlessly fits into its environment.

Notably, many of the positives for her slip-cast molds in the *St. Ives Collection* are fashioned using a lathe with plaster, a technique she honed during her time in Stoke-on-Trent. The graduate program at Staffordshire is closely affiliated with Wedgwood, and incorporates two design internships. Masuda ended up working at both ends of the cottage industry/mass-production spectrum. Her first internship was with the multi-national UK-based company Denby. She describes her time there as an artist residency more than an internship. She was the only person in the factory working by hand on a potter’s wheel. Her self-initiated task was to research the company’s archive catalogs and to create teapots using hand-made techniques that reference the historic work. While there she also researched some of the industrial production techniques.

Masuda’s second placement was with British-Japanese entrepreneur, Reiko Kaneko. Kaneko, a product designer and one-person outfit, had recently moved her business out of London to Stoke-on-Trent. Kaneko had very little knowledge of ceramic production techniques and Masuda was keen to learn the nuts and bolts of the ceramic retail business, so the apprenticeship proved to be mutually beneficial. Kaneko designs her pieces digitally and outsources their manufacture.

She seeks to provide products that are, in Masuda’s words, “quintessentially British,” and therefore chooses to work in

bone china. In Canada, Masuda has found it difficult to source the bone ash that bone china requires, and has opted for a tri-calcium phosphate-based porcelain clay body for her *St. Ives Collection*.

What really stands out for Masuda about her experiences in the UK is what she describes as the “sink or swim” ethos of the school at Staffordshire. “It’s totally self-directed. There is virtually no instruction. Everyone does their own thing and you’re lucky to talk to someone every once in a while.” Masuda found this to be the most difficult part of her learning, but ultimately the most rewarding. “It was probably a good thing. If I needed to figure something out, I had to, and I now have the confidence to know that I can figure anything out.”

Upon completing her degree at Staffordshire, Masuda crossed the pond back to Alberta and filled a one-year maternity leave position as a studio technician at Medalta in the Historic Clay District that is nestled within the 150-acre Canadian National Historic Site in Medicine Hat. The facility is fast becoming the new mecca for ceramic artists both nationally and internationally and boasts state-of-the-art ceramic technologies alongside original beehive kilns. Masuda participated in “Medalta’s South East Asian/South East Alberta” group exhibition in 2013 and in her 2014 solo exhibition. She is continuing to work part-time at Medalta and aiming toward getting her own product line up and running as a business. In doing so, Masuda is both carrying on the British tradition of marrying industry and function while rekindling the ceramic industry practice of Medalta’s historic past, firmly paving the way for a new generation of Canadian ceramic designer/makers in her wake.

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