



At Sokyo Gallery, we will present a two-person exhibition “Hige-san,” featuring the artist Yoichi Umetsu and the traditional craftsman Masumitsu Kanzaki, who heads the Marumasu Seito kiln in Shigaraki. This show presents the work of the artist and the artisan on equal footing, and explores the ways in which we differentiate “works of art” and “products.”

Yoichi Umetsu, Masumitsu Kanzaki | Hige-san

Exhibition Period: Thursday, December 14, 2023 - Wednesday, January 31, 2024

At Sokyo Gallery and Sokyo Annex

Sokyo Gallery: 381-2 Motomachi, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto

Sokyo Annex: 3F, SSS Building, 375 Ichinofunairi-cho, Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto

We will be closed during the following dates for summer holidays.

Closed: Saturday, December 23 - Monday, January 8

About the Exhibition (Text by Yoichi Umetsu)

This is a two-person show featuring Masumitsu Kanzaki, the head of the Marumasu Seito kiln in Shigaraki, and the artist Yoichi Umetsu. It differs somewhat from a typical two-person exhibition in that Kanzaki works as a craftsman (artisan) and Umetsu as a fine artist. As such, Kanzaki sees the things he creates as “products,” while Umetsu views his own creations as “works of art.” This raises the question: what is the difference between the two? This question seems to conceal another,

〒605-0089 京都市東山区古門前通大和大路東入ル元町 381-2

Sokyo Gallery 381-2 Motomachi, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto, Japan 605-0089

T: 075-746-4456 F: 075-746-4457 info@gallery-sokyo.jp www.gallery-sokyo.jp



fundamental question, namely “What does it mean for people to make things?” Even within the category of ceramics, there is a wide range of uses and ways of perceiving things, from everyday items and building materials to traditional crafts and art objects. While for “works of art” there tends to be a strong emphasis on uniqueness and originality, “products” too are not necessarily uniform or replaceable. Let us explore this idea further by examining the current situation in Shigaraki, where both Kanzaki and Umetsu are based.

Shigaraki is widely known as one of Japan’s leading pottery production areas, and is counted among the country’s Six Old Kilns. It is known for its high-quality clay, sourced from the ancient layer surrounding Lake Biwa, and for the extraordinary skill of its potters, which have led it to be known especially for large pieces. Another characteristic of Shigaraki ware is rustic charm that capitalizes on the natural qualities of the clay. Over time, Shigaraki has adapted to the needs of different eras, producing items ranging from pots to *tanuki* (raccoon dog) figurines, umbrella stands, orchid pots, flower vases, washbasins, and bathtubs. Early in the Showa era (1926-1989), Shigaraki produced 80% of the nation’s *hibachi* (charcoal braziers). Unlike other centers of ceramics production, Shigaraki still relies on artisans to create each piece by hand rather than on automated mass production. This use of local clay and artisanal craftsmanship underpins Shigaraki ware as a brand, and implies that while being “products,” the pieces also have the individual quirks and variations we associate with “works of art.”

Today, however, the supply of high-quality clay in Shigaraki is becoming depleted, making it increasingly difficult to use local materials. It seems that “Shigaraki ware” imbued with a grand narrative of “people, clay, and fire coming together” is becoming a thing of the past. Nonetheless, the artisans’ expertise, large kilns, and vast database of clays and glazes remain intact, attracting many creators from elsewhere in Japan and overseas to Shigaraki. Recently, growth in the number of contemporary artists has become particularly noticeable, and some of the infrastructure of Shigaraki’s pottery industry, which once focused on mass production, is now being readapted to creation of contemporary art. I (Umetsu) personally rent an area of Marumasa Seito as a workspace.

The title of this exhibition, *Hige-san*, literally means “Mr. Beard” and refers to a bearded artist. Historically, “Hige-san” was a somewhat pejorative term, indicating a dismissive stance toward the idea of the “artist.” In Shigaraki, proprietors of large *noborigama* (climbing kilns) and pottery workshops were more esteemed than individual ceramic artists who made whatever they liked. This hierarchy clearly still informs the present-day townscape of Shigaraki.



The current situation surrounding ceramics is quite complex. Traditionally, painting and sculpture were classified as “fine arts” while crafts such as pottery were classified as “applied arts,” but in recent years, the boundaries between and definitions of traditional crafts, contemporary crafts, and contemporary art have become increasingly blurred. Ceramics are now more often categorized based on the context in which they are presented and the community to which they belong, rather than on a formal distinction between “works of art” and “products.” As mentioned earlier, this exhibition features works by Kanzaki and Umetsu, but it aims to do more than just showcase their creations. Our hope is that by reinterpreting art and industry as two sides of one coin, we can gain some insight into profound questions such as “What does it mean to make things?” and “Who are the torchbearers of culture?”

For more information and images, please contact:

Mail: info@gallery-sokyo.jp / Tel: 075-746-4456

Sokyo Gallery | 381-2 Motomachi, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto 605-0089 Japan