The Art of Hideaki Miyamura

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Experimentation is the systematic control of the known counterbalanced by wide open acceptance of the unknown. Though experimentation's first job is to test suppositions, its true power is not in proving preconceptions but revealing the unexpected and driving innovation. Experimentation often seeks something specific but unveils something mysterious. Artist Hideaki Miyamura has embraced these harmonic principles in his pottery; though driven by the pursuit of certain glaze finishes through controlled testing and the minimization of chance, he is, in the end, open to risk and guided by the mystical and spiritual power of giving life to hidden beauty. His process of throwing, glazing, and firing is as refined and complex as the artwork itself. His vessels are pristine, disarmingly simple, contemplative objects whose finishes reflect the panoply of the natural world—geologic phenomena, star-filled nights, undulating ocean waves, and fiery sunsets.

Hideaki Miyamura came into pottery not by serendipity but with great purpose, glimpsing a dream at a young age and actualizing it through a dogged commitment to education and practice, a tenacious spirit, and a disregard for the obstacles in his way. His story begins in the small Nigita province of Japan. His father was an architect who owned a construction business, and his mother, a fine cook, collected pottery in which to serve food to Hideaki, his brother, and sister. Miyamura's early life in Japan, both here and later as a potter's apprentice, remains in the fiber of his being but is geographically and culturally distant from Kensington, NH, where he now lives and works. His serene and secluded property houses a 1,200 square foot studio and a separate kiln building where Miyamura devotes his days to the technically demanding, creatively inspirational process of pottery, listening to soft jazz as he assiduously mixes his clay body, throws his vessels, concocts his glazes, and monitors his firings. Light-filled from enormous windows, the studio is tranquil and open but, even at rest, reverberates with the intensity that must inhabit it when the artist turns his immense focus and drive to his work.

Sculptural vessels in various states of doneness line the studio like sentinels guarding over the artist, who is a jovial, engaging, yet private man. If Miyamura's studio is symbolic of his current success as an artist-potter, it does not divulge the years and trials that have led the artist here, and contains only glimpses of his 26-year old self—the aspiring artist who, one day, was perusing a pottery book and came upon four photographs of Chinese Song Dynasty (950-1269) tea bowls glazed in a dark and lustrous tenmoku. Though much has changed in Miyamura's life since that time, he is still infused with the sense of awe and spurred by

the penchant for risk that this photographic encounter ignited, and still driven by the pursuit to create things as beautiful as, or even more beautiful than, what he saw in that book. As fellow potter Brother Thomas Bezanson wrote, "risking and dreaming are the primary acts of creativity." What was it about these four yohen tenmoku bowls, which the artist never even saw in person, to so inspire the trajectory of a man's life?

12th century Japanese Buddhist monks who were in China's Mt. Tianmu (Tenmoku in Japanese; Heavens' Eye in English) to study Zen Buddhism were given tea to forestall drowsiness during meditation. When the monks returned to Japan, they brought with them the seeds for the tea plants and the glazed earthenware bowls in which the tea was served (bowls which had actually been made at kilns many miles away from Mt. Tianmu but which they nonetheless termed tenmoku). Today's tea ceremony, an intricate art, is a nuanced and complex fusion of culturally significant rituals. The Japanese potters of today who make bowls for its use often devote years to its study in order to thoroughly understand the elevating role of the bowl and craft the vessel with this purpose in mind. The Japanese aesthetic of *yo no bi* (beauty through use) exemplified by the tea ceremony (and by Miyamura's mother's artful but functional pottery collection), may have been an integral part of the artist's upbringing and training, but it never fully resonated with his visionary mind. While Miyamura honors and respects those who take this path, his personal aesthetic celebrates the beauty of beauty (in fact, the shape of many of the works are so attenuated that they prevent functionality) and his interest lays in pottery's ability to be spiritual uplifting.

It was not the purpose of the vessels that so inspired him when Miyamura saw the images of the Song Dynasty tea bowls in that book. It was the glaze: yohen tenmoku. Yohen (*yo* meaning "kiln" *and hen* meaning "change"*)* refers to the natural ash glaze that develops on a pot during the firing and came to prominence during the Song Dynasty. It is especially notable in Bizen ware. An alternate meaning to the word *yo,* apropos to the glistening night-sky appearance of the glaze, is "stars." The word *tenmoku* also has a dual meaning, describing both shape (a tea bowl with an indented rim that can be glazed in any style) and coloration (an iron-saturated inky black). Molten iron in the *tenmoku* glaze shifts enigmatically on the clay body, sometimes combining in crystals, sometimes merging in oily spots, and sometimes melting in deep and glossy pools. Miyamura's unique combination of the two—often referred to in his oeuvre by its nickname "hare's fur glaze"—is defined by iridescence, shimmer, and tendril-like striations of brilliant blues, greens, and yellows.

At the time Miyamura encountered the ancient yohen tenmoku bowls, he was apprenticing with a potter near his home in Nigita, often working seven days a week. His first teacher was a master in red copper and celadon glazes, which thanks to the recent introduction of gas kilns had attained a high level of

sophistication, elegance, and popularity. Here, Miyamura acquired his basic skills and knowledge. But more importantly, it was here that he first discerned his true potential as a potter and discovered the creative yearning that would drive him to seek a more specialized education and propel him away from the commercial milieu. He sought a new master whose style most closely imitated the bowls he saw in the book. As it turns out, the secrets of the Song techniques have long been lost, the four bowls he saw in the book are its only surviving examples, and few contemporary potters have successfully imitated the glaze. He learned of a master potter, Shurei Miura, in Yamanashi, Japan, who specialized in tenmoku glazes. The moment that Miyamura picked up the phone to call Miura was decisive, one of those moments of risk Brother Thomas talks about when important life paths are launched in an instant.

Miyamura asked Miura if he was taking apprentices. Miura asked Miyamura if he could come the next day. It was a five-hour train ride from his home in Nigita and it meant leaving behind the life he knew with little money in his pocket, no real comprehension of the world he would enter, a fear of failure and of disappointing his family (who would have preferred he follow in his father's footsteps as his brother has done). Courageous and somewhat foolhardy, Miyamura was driven by the kernel of a dream and impelled to take the kind of risk that is only wise at an instinctual level. He embarked on that five-hour journey (a month later—he had to earn some money first) but he knew that vision and courage could only get him so far. Upon the foundation of his dream, he has layered education, practice, drive, experimentation, and an unrelenting commitment to perfecting the art of making beautiful things.

His new master Shurei Miura had studied Imari porcelain in Arita, which is known for white surfaces exquisitely decorated with organic motifs. Miyamura remembers being awestruck the first time he saw Miura throwing pots, describing him as a creature dancing effortlessly at the wheel, conjuring sculpture from the lifeless slab of porcelain. Though it was the search for the opalescent yohen tenmoku glaze that had brought Miyamura to Miura, he vowed that day to become as adept at throwing pots as his master. In the mornings he would help mix glazes and make test firings, while the afternoons were dedicated to throwing. In the first year he threw only sake cups, in the second year *yunomi* (teacups), and by the third year he was allowed to throw small vases. Competitive by nature, Miyamura would position himself aside his master and see if he could throw more vases, often completing 400 in a day. Even though Miyamura was furnished with a small apartment nearby, he spent most of time at the master's home during his rigorous six-year apprenticeship, working his daily routine in the studio, helping to care for the children, taking his meals with the family, and spending countless hours performing test glazes in search of the elusive yohen tenmoku. Though he finally did discover what he called "the iridescent glaze on a black background" in the fifth year of his apprenticeship, he has never ceased in his quest to, as he says, "explore Yohen Tenmoku glaze in harmony with new clay

bodies to further develop its unique potential as a form of cultural and spiritual communication," including developing a vivid purple version punctuated by wisps of fiery red and orange.

After six years of apprenticeship defined by rote repetition (during which he would often daydream of more creative pottery pursuits) and through many years making functional pieces in order to earn a living, Miyamura sought a way to disassociate from mass production and embrace and live the life of the artist. Many Japanese pottery studios are family businesses where children become involved with the production from a young age, preserving the traditions, methods, and styles of their forbears. Miyamura was not born into a pottery family; rather he was born to be an artist. The United States was an ideal location to pursue his calling. The Studio Pottery Movement of the 1920s and 1930s laid the groundwork for non-functional pottery artists to elevate beyond the craftsperson label. With the proliferation of industry came the fine artist's desire to guard against the brutalization of beauty and the homogenization of an overly mass-produced material cultural. Whereas traditional pottery production before this time, whether in Japan or in the major European houses, had been defined by a division of labor in which design, throwing, glaze production, and firing were the purview of a series of individuals, the new artist-potter made his own clay body, designed and threw his own pots, mixed his own glazes and applied them himself, and monitored the firing.

Though the climate in the United States was ostensibly hospitable when Miyamura immigrated here in 1989, finding his way was not easy. He had studied at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI in the early 1980s but was relatively unfamiliar with the language and culture. It was difficult to procure an affordable workspace and he moved a handful of time before settling in 2003 in Kensington. Additionally, the glazes that Miyamura had worked tirelessly to learn in Japan were difficult to replicate in America, where the porcelain bodies, the glaze elements, and the kilns were fundamentally different, forcing the artist to create his own porcelain mixture, rethink the elemental structure of the glazes, and adjust his firing techniques to accommodate new equipment. The meticulous but precise notes that Miyamura had taken during the test firings of his apprenticeship fill a surprising thin red notebook that he still consults to this day. Miyamura continues to treat every glaze and approach every firing with the same systematic attention to detail, filling many more notebooks over the years with his neat, Japanese handwriting.

The Song Dynasty tenmoku, once the inspirational benchmark, is now just one of several glazes in the repertoire of an artist whose style represents diverse cultural and aesthetic influences, and whose attention to shape rivals his mastery of glaze. Miyamura has stated, "I create my own interpretations of classical forms, while trying to achieve a clarity and simplicity of line. I am very conscious of the ways in which a form interacts with the space around it. I want my pieces to feel in balance with their environment, to feel as though they co-exist naturally with their surroundings." Miyamura's admiration for the clean-lined aesthetic

of many European porcelain houses is evident in his unfussy shapes and pristine finishes. For Miyamura, shape and glaze work in concert in the creation of captivatingly beautiful, spiritually transporting works of art. Smooth white surfaces form an ideal foil for the chemical elements of his glazes to migrate, circle, and merge.

Inside the hot kiln, the glaze flows slowly down the gently sloping shoulders of his vases, sometimes resulting in feathery streaks, other times in a glistening shimmer frozen in accentuated rivulets. Diminutive handles would never be used to lift the vase but offer geometric elements around which the glaze shines like well-burnished metallurgy. Miyamura often uses his fingers in the throwing process to create wave-like flutes, sometimes with a thick wale around the body of the vase, sometimes with thin ridges around the neck or top, sometimes with horizontal and vertical together in one vessel, but always finely trimmed and smoothly polished. Miyamura often combines roundness, flatness, ribbing, and protuberances in one piece to provide a stage on which a single glaze (or two or three complementary glazes) seamlessly dance together. Texture is created on the sleek vessels because the glaze provides a symphony of finishes—profound pools of subtle undertones pair with translucent areas of color where the porcelain is nearly visible, and glossy stretches dissolve into matte finishes like steam on a mirror.

Miyamura has mindfully developed a select number of glazes, all of which can be temperamental to work with but embody the limitless search for of awe-inspiring beauty that defines his process. Miyamura's signature gold glaze, developed after the artist moved to the United States, was the result of a small and unexpected patch that appeared during the testing phase of another glaze. This tiny spot motivated Miyamura to try to create a gold glaze, even though it was without precedent in ceramics and not something he had ever attempted to make before. Miyamura sought a gold that was not showy or overtly shiny (many of his test gold glazes came out too burnished or too dark); instead he envisioned a quiet yellow gold with a subtle aqua undertone, where only the thickest parts of the glaze that pool around the bottom exhibit an inky luster. Similarly, the peacock glaze resulted from Miyamura's inner vision that the blue hare's fur glaze, so capable of expressing a feather effect, could be made to form into sunbursts if another glaze were put on top. Not surprisingly, Miyamura took this notion and tested it diligently until he achieved success.

Another glaze that Miyamura employs, the crackle glaze results when a base material and a surface material cool at different rates and separate from one another. Though Miyamura's shapes are decidedly modern, his ivory and mahogany crackle glaze has an antiquarian feeling reminiscent of the 12th and 13th Chinese Song Dynasty crazed celadon pots produced in the Kuan kilns. The crystalline glaze Miyamura uses is primarily European in origin, and as glazes go not particularly old. Though the ancient Chinese oil-spot glazes of the Song Dynasty did contain small crystals, practitioners today believe this may have been unintentional. The accidental micro-crystals of the Song Dynasty pots pale in comparison to the purposeful macro-crystals of Miyamura's work. Miyamura's crystalline glazes are a high-gloss, high-style contemporary

version of historical works first popularized by the Sèvres porcelain factory and England's Royal Doulton. Sometimes, quartz-like white, silver, or gold crystals of varying sizes populate a white background that, like snow, is not pure white at all but reflects and absorbs the colors around it. Sometimes firework-like turquoise crystals explode on a glossy canary surface. Other times the mixture is a subtle starry-night of blacks and blues, and still other times marble-like green crystals look more mineral than porcelain.

The glossy, reflective finish of many of Miyamura's glazes—whether crystal, hare's fur, or gold—evoke the artist's personal interest in glass. Miyamura had at one time considered pursuing a career in glass-blowing but there were no masters or schools in Japan to teach the art. While researching the tenmoku glaze in the 1980s, Miyamura learned about Austrian Bohemian art glass manufacturer Leotz, which came into prominence during the Jugendstil period (aka Art Nouveau; 1890-1920) and which was known for its iridescent pieces (Miyamura's influence by the Art Nouveau/Jugendstil is theoretical as well as stylistic, as he too has eschewed the strict dictums of his art in favor of his own way of doing things). Miyamura envies the flexibility that glass artists have to create impossibly thin shapes, recalling the tendril-like necks of Italian glass master Lino Tagliapietra's gorgeous vessels. Still, the balance that glass artists achieve between substantial components and ethereal elements is reflected in many of Miyamura's vessels, in which the bulbous form gradually culminates into a waifish neck. Miyamura's knowledge of Italian glass art reflects his admiration for Italian culture, reverence for the Italian aesthetic, and respect for the Italian people's commitment to art and beauty (he has even painted the walls of one of his kiln rooms a warm Tuscan yellow).

Miyamura's interest in glass brings us full circle back to the notion of experimentation. To think that Miyamura would have been satisfied to unlock the secrets of the yohen tenmoku glaze would be to misjudge the nature of the artist: pioneering, driven to discovery, relentlessly seeking new expressions of beauty. Experimentation continues to be a bellwether for Miyamura as he pushes the scope of his knowledge and plies the traditional limitations of his medium. A visit to his studio reveals numerous trials in progress. In the lower-level storage area of the studio, he is using a glass-making technique called lampworking to fashion small glass rods into colorful knobs to use as the bolts for a wall-mounted installation of blue hare's fur plates. In another part of the studio tear-drop vases with truncated necks await the delivery of specially commissioned glass tubes from a lighting company, to be inserted as reflective elements. On yet another table, dark clay bodies, unglazed in the Bizen style (but without the ash) will be artfully combined with his more traditional glazed porcelain pieces. Time will tell whether these latest experiments will withstand Miyamura's critical scrutiny, or whether, like so many of his vessels (even those executed in his most tried-and-true methods), they will be shattered into oblivion for failing to perfectly fulfill the notions of beauty and spiritual connectivity that the artist ultimately strives to achieve.