

Transcendent Clay



KONDŌ
A CENTURY
OF JAPANESE
CERAMIC ART

Eye of the Storm

KONDŌ TAKAHIRO IN CONTEXT

Glenn Adamson

Look into Kondō Takahiro's 2016 bowl entitled *Wave* [CAT. 39]. What do you see? First, quite likely, the sorcery of a master maker. The bowl has the specific form of a teabowl, or *chawan*. Its nearly spherical silhouette, floating serenely atop a low foot, was not thrown on the wheel but instead achieved through handbuilding, as in the venerated Raku tradition. The bowl is composed of three marbled clays in a range from black to white, an adaptation of the technique known as *nerikomi*. It also features Takahiro's instantly recognizable *ginteki* ("Silver Mist") glaze, a scattering of reflective beads that sit on the surface, bright bubbles on a storm-tossed sea. This prompts an association, confirmed by the bowl's title, to the tsunami that devastated Japan in 2011, an event that has haunted Takahiro's work since.¹ Viewed in this light, the bowl is a vessel for memory. It is full, even when not in use.

A lot to see, in a simple bowl. And admittedly, it is an unusual starting place for an exploration of Takahiro's practice. The Kondō family does not have a close association with tea culture; their occasional engagement with *chanoyu* ("tea-ceremony") formats is mostly focused on the *mizusashi* (fresh-water container), rather than the *chawan*. Yet many of the qualities of his work are present even in this modest object. It would be easy to assume, for example, that the bowl represents just another instance of incremental innovation within tradition, the dynamic that drives so much of Japanese contemporary craft. But that would be a mistake. Takahiro's motivations are much more capacious than that. A cosmopolitan figure who has often ventured abroad, he engages deeply, if also obliquely, with some of the most pressing issues in global art practice. To explore this theme—the ambition of the present essay—is to depart from the well-worn pathways of ceramic lore that have limited Takahiro's reputation and reception, to understand him properly as one of the most accomplished artists working today, anywhere, and in any discipline.

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Kondō Takahiro (b. 1958)
"Silver Mist" Bowl: "Wave"
2016
Courtesy of the Georgia
Museum of Art, University
of Georgia

We can begin, nonetheless, with the heart of the matter: clay. Takahiro handles his essential material in an unconventional manner, treating it not as the stable ground of an ancestral craft practice but as a volatile compound from which new ideas can emerge. This is implied in the *Wave* teabowl, with its whirling vortex in grayscale. It is still more explicit in a recent series of *Hakuji ōtsubo* (large white porcelain vessels), which—particularly at larger sizes—sometimes crack as they are drying, or even collapse under their own weight when they are fired in a *noborigama* (multichamber climbing kiln) located in Fukui Prefecture (near the ancient capital region) or the Tohoku region of northeastern Honshu [CAT. 57]. Takahiro's acceptance of apparently catastrophic failure could, again, be interpreted within a narrow, medium-specific framework, as an intentional assault on ceramic propriety. The gesture is far more interesting, however, if viewed as generative rather than destructive. Takahiro is encouraging the material to speak its own voice, in dialogue with his own.

This methodology, in which the natural behavior of drying and settling clay is deployed for its expressive potential, has been explored by other leading ceramists, among them Akiyama Yō (b. 1953), who, like Takahiro, is based in Kyoto [FIG. 16]; the Korean-American artist Steven Young Lee (b. 1975); and in Britain, Gareth Mason (b. 1965) [FIG. 17]. Conceptual precedents go back at least to the mid-twentieth century, when Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) reduced artistic gesture to its minimum state. His strategy of creation through disruption pointed the way for art of the 1960s, when artists associated with Japan's Mono-Ha and Gutai movements, and with American postminimalism or "process art," expanded the domain of artistic authorship, submerging their own formal intentions in the determinative operations of materiality itself.² These works inhabited a middle ground between form and the formless, initiating an ongoing investigation that most recently has been pursued by Anish Kapoor (b. 1954), Lynda Benglis (b. 1941), and Richard Deacon (b. 1949), among others [FIG. 18]. It is no coincidence that all of these artists have used clay, which in its raw earthen state seems like a stand-in for materiality yet is subject to such extraordinary transformation.

While Takahiro has occasionally touched on such primordial themes (as in the recent porcelains), he typically displays a more constructive approach, creating rigorous compositional frameworks in which to explore material behavior. In retrospect, his early work *Yin-Yang Direction* (1992) looks almost like a diagram of what was to come [CAT. 22]. Its intersecting vectors are made literal in later vessel works, which fold inward in inclined planes and incorporate cast glass in tectonic relations to his ceramic. The potential was fully realized in the imposing *Monoliths* that began populating Takahiro's output in 2005 [CATS. 33–38]. These vertical compositions inevitably recall the *Endless Columns* of Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), and share with those works the suggestion of radical extension, as if the sculpture before us had been sectioned out of an infinite (and therefore impossible) object [see FIG. 1, P. 92].³ Brancusi's works in this idiom were monolithic in their materials as well as their form, either hewn from wood or fabricated from metal. Takahiro's, however, feature interior contrast between ceramic and glass, and hence

57 [OPPOSITE TOP]
Kondō Takahiro
Large White Porcelain Vessel
(detail)
Photo: Mugyūda Hyōgo

FIG. 16 [OPPOSITE LEFT]
Akiyama Yō (b. 1953)
Untitled, MV-152
2015
Unglazed stoneware with
iron filings
9 × 20 ⁷/₈ × 19 ³/₄ in.
Chazen Museum of Art,
University of Wisconsin-
Madison; John H. Van Vleck
Endowment Fund purchase,
2015.37
Photo: Fukunaga Kazuo
© Akiyama Yo

FIG. 17 [OPPOSITE RIGHT]
Gareth Mason (b. 1965)
Horror Vacui
2016
Jingdezhen middle-white
porcelain, layered glazes,
and copper cable
29 × 34 × 26 in.
Courtesy of Jason Jacques
Gallery and the artist



between opacity and transparency, solidity and lightness. One such work, *Monolith: "Seismic Wave"* (2016), shares both its material palette and its trenchant theme with the Wave teabowl, adding a further suggestion of compression under a nigh unbearable weight [CAT. 38]. It is an intervention into the Brancusian typology, the four-square column knocked slantwise, and reinterpreted in materials—ceramic and glass—that are as fragile as they are obdurate. For Takahiro, materials "speak" as poets do, in ways that admit contradiction, and express the full range of human experience.

So far, the *ginteki* or "Silver Mist" glaze that is such a leitmotif of Kondō Takahiro's work has received only glancing mention here [CAT. 53]. According to the artist, however, this glaze has been fundamental to his work over the past two decades: "It's largely thanks to 'silver mist' that, starting in the year 2000, I could extend my practice to include pieces that were more sculptural in character."⁴ This claim may initially seem hard to understand. How is it that a glaze, a particular decorative technique, no matter how beautiful, could be the foundation for Takahiro's wide-ranging artistic explorations? *Monolith: "Seismic Wave"* hints at the answer. The sculpture's dichotomous internal structure is relieved—"graced," we might say—by the shimmering surface. A composition that might otherwise seem simply emphatic is rendered ethereal by the glaze. It's as though the monolith, like the one in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), were an alien visitor, of unclear import but undeniable power.



FIG. 19 [RIGHT]
Andy Warhol (1928–1987)
Diamond Dust Shoes
1980
Synthetic polymer
paint, diamond dust and
silkscreen ink on canvas
90 × 70 in.
© 2022 The Andy Warhol
Foundation for the Visual
Arts, Inc. / Licensed by
Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York

53 [OPPOSITE]
Kondō Takahiro
Reflection: TK Self-Portrait
(detail)

In other words, Takahiro's *ginteki* renders an object "special," limning it with an air of delicacy and refinement. This is a highly self-conscious effect. A clear precedent is found in the *Diamond Dust* series by Andy Warhol (1928–1987) of the early 1980s [FIG. 19]. As is typical for Warhol, these works are multivalent in their references—to advertising, to disco, and to the artist's own early career as an illustrator. But they have been understood above all in relation to the idea of value. The *Diamond Dust* paintings were made at a time when art in general, and Warhol's in particular, was undergoing an unprecedented wave of commodification. Their glittering surfaces (realized not with actual powdered diamond—although he did try that at first—but with ground glass) function like aesthetic quotation marks. They reflect a postmodern worldview in which appearances are what matter most, even when (or perhaps especially when) they are deceiving.

This is far from Takahiro's own perspective, of course, but it is telling that his *ginteki* is very like Warhol's diamond dust: spectacular and insubstantial, alluring and illusory. In addition to Takahiro's intensive materialism—and to some degree in tension with that aspect of his work—we can set him alongside other artists operating in the slipstream of Pop Art, for whom the charisma of the artwork is a primary subject. The obvious example is Damien Hirst (b. 1965), whose infamous artwork *For the Love of God* (2007) doubles down on the Warholian precedent [FIG. 20]. Actually, the multiplier is considerably higher than that, because the work incorporates real diamonds—8,601 of them—all set into a perfect platinum cast of a human skull. A great deal can be said about this work, and a great deal has, not least by Hirst himself.⁵ Here, suffice it to say that the work is to some degree a self-portrait, an emblem of its maker as the art world's ultimate brand and most outrageous provocateur (a role parodied in the sneering title, which was supposedly inspired by a comment from the artist's mother: "For the love of God, what will you do next?").

Silver droplets aren't cut diamonds, and Takahiro is no Hirst. There is little if any irony in his work, much less the sort of absurdist grandiosity of *For the Love of God*, or—to take another intriguing parallel—the *Big Clay* series (2008 and later) by Swiss conceptual artist Urs Fischer (b. 1973) [FIG. 21]. These are gigantic aluminum castings based on tiny bits of modeling clay, squeezed in Fischer's hand. His fingerprints end up hugely magnified, each fine whorl and ridge becoming a deep furrow in the sculpture's surface. This work is a joke about monumentality, abstraction, and the way that sculpture lands in public space (thereby becoming "plop art," as the architect James Wines memorably put it). Above all, it is a grotesque parody of the exalted status of the artist, which is brought to its absurdist extreme, as Fischer's slightest gesture is memorialized at vast scale and expense.

To the extent that *ginteki* serves as the signature motif in Takahiro's oeuvre, it can be read as a self-referential feature. If Hirst and Fischer are spin doctors, however, parlaying their own outsized personae into pageantry of the highest level, Takahiro's interest in the play of appearances is far subtler. He is not especially concerned with value in

FIG. 20 [RIGHT]
Damien Hirst (b. 1965)
For the Love of God
2007
Platinum, diamonds, and
human teeth
6 ³/₄ × 5 × 7 ¹/₂ in.
Photo: Prudence Cuming
Associates Ltd.
© Damien Hirst and Science
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London / ARS, NY 2022

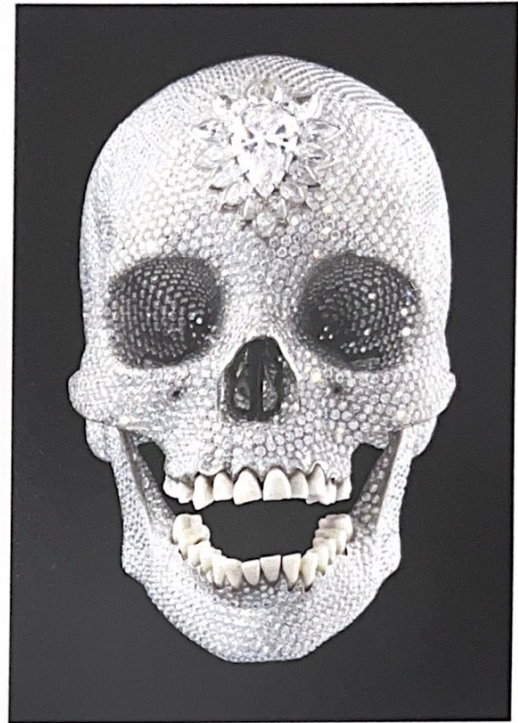
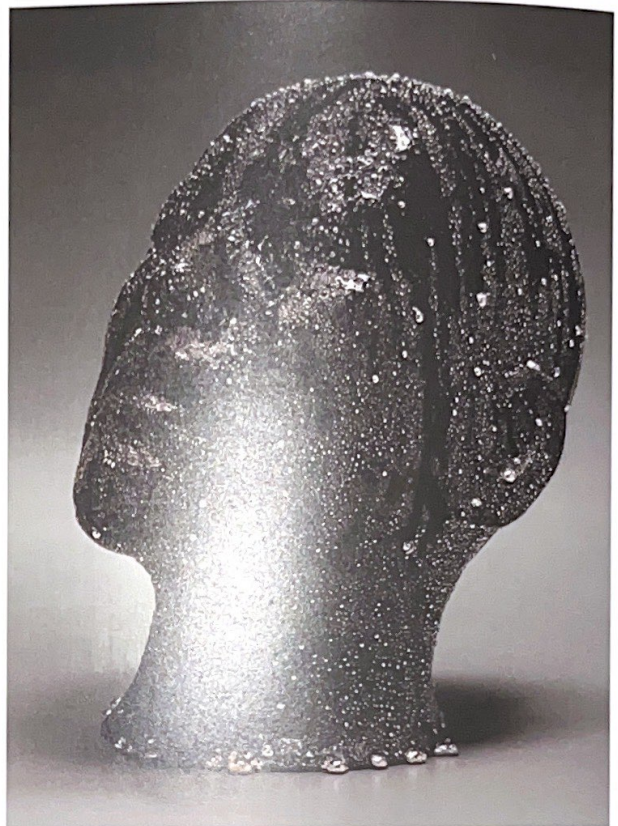
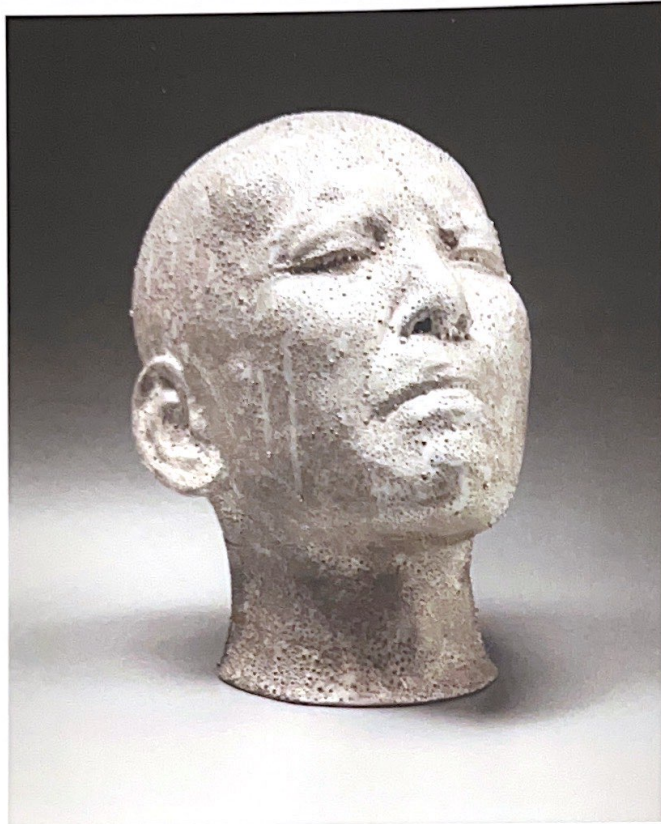


FIG. 21 [LEFT]
Urs Fischer (b. 1973)
Big Clay # 4
2013–2014
Cast aluminum, stainless
steel, stainless steel bolts, wax
coating, anchor bolts, stainless
steel washers, stainless steel
nuts, stainless steel lock
washers, PVC washers, copper
lightning rods
51 ³/₄ × 330 ³/₄ × 204 ³/₄ in.
Photo: Stefan Altenburger
© Urs Fischer; Courtesy of
the artist and Gagosian



50, 51, 52
 Kondō Takahiro (b. 1958)
Reflections: TK Self-Portraits
 2010

FIG. 22 [OPPOSITE]
 Kuwata Takurō (b. 1981)
Tea Bowl
 2021
 Porcelain, glaze, pigment,
 platinum, and steel
 21 ⁵/₈ × 21 ¹/₁₆ × 20 ¹/₁₆ in.
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Salon 94, New York
 © Takuro Kuwata

the strictly pecuniary sense, or in interrogating the market-driven logic of contemporary art. Warhol toyed with that theme, and Hirst and Fischer turned it into a spectator sport. Takahiro's attitude, by contrast, is revealed by his project *Inochi no utsuwa* (Vessels for Life), in which he simply gave away more than two thousand wood-fired teabowls to those affected by the 2011 tsunami [CAT. 46 ON PP. 68, 69]. This was a gesture of anti- rather than hyper-commodification, aligned to the socially inclusive relational aesthetics of a Felix Gonzales-Torres (1957–1996) or a Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961).⁶ Given these artistic commitments, it would clearly be incorrect to interpret "Silver Mist" as a cynical reflection on "added value" (as economists say). Rather, *ginteki* is conceptual in intent and effect: it enables Takahiro to *virtualize* his objects. It creates a surface that is so dazzling, so insistently externalized, that it challenges the familiar verities of the ceramic medium—its tactility, its historicism, its rootedness in use—offering another, more elusive set of values in their place. *Ginteki* is a special effect, more like water droplets than any real water droplets could be. It beguiles us in the way that CGI (computer-generated imagery) does, all the more so because it is thoroughly analog, hence that much more mysterious, with far greater staying power.





An interesting comparison can be made, in this respect, to the work of Takuro Kuwata (b. 1981)—perhaps the only ceramist in Japan who rivals Takahiro's ability to make physical artifacts that feel hyperreal [FIG. 22]. Kuwata is significantly younger, and his work reflects the sensibilities of a "born-digital" generation, with bright, suffused colors and motifs that sometimes recall computer glitches. Yet if anything, he is actually more concerned with the East Asian ceramic tradition than Takahiro is, exaggerating features like *kintsugi* (lacquer and gold repair) and glaze craquelure to highly theatrical, deconstructive effect. Kuwata's aesthetic has often been interpreted as dystopian, in the manner of certain science-fiction *manga* and *anime*. His work has even been related to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, although nothing about it is explicitly memorializing, as with Takahiro's elegies to the victims of the 2011 tsunami.⁷ Notwithstanding all of these important differences, Kuwata and Takahiro are kindred spirits in one very crucial respect: they are both making ceramics that appear to acknowledge the character of our technologically enabled, frictionless visual culture.

In this respect, their work can be viewed as a twenty-first-century update of the notion of "double presence" proposed by British ceramist Alison Britton (b. 1948) back in 1981: the postmodern condition in which "objects stand back and describe, or represent, themselves as well as being."⁸ That duality has now become an endless cascade, as life happens more and more online. Even intensively crafted, intensely palpable things perform as simulacra, in the sense in which Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) employed that term: as the historical priority of the original over its reproduction is reversed, the image comes to precede the object, reconditioning its ontology.⁹ This is the solution to the riddle posed earlier, about the foundational role that "Silver Mist" has had in Takahiro's work. It authorizes his forays into sculpture because it affirms their contemporaneity—to put it simply, the glaze looks stylistically in keeping with our digitized era, yet, somewhat paradoxically, also establishes a distance from any immediate context, by virtue of its seemingly magical, otherworldly surface. These are ceramics that anticipate their own mediation; artworks that, even when encountered in person, feel as though they are witnessed from a vast distance, inhabiting a dimension unto themselves.

This points to another crucial aspect of Takahiro's work: it is as much spiritual as it is sociological, occupying a realm that used to be the chief domain for sculpture, although it is little frequented by art nowadays. (Once we had gods; today we have the internet.) While the sacred is implicit throughout Takahiro's work, that propensity finds its ultimate incarnation in his *Reflection* and *Reduction* series, cast from his own head and body, respectively [CATS. 50–52, 54]. In these works, his likeness is abstracted—individual characteristics like hair and clothing are stripped away—and imbued with an intensity of affect, brought about partly by the casting process itself. This involves his face being temporarily submerged in malleable rubber, which is used to create a plaster form, which is then used to create a mold for slip-casting. This multistage journey into darkness and subsequent rebirth is indexed in some of the *Reflection* pieces by tightly closed eyes. In other cases, Takahiro has re-sculpted the plaster form so that his likeness gazes upward to the heavens, the eyes empty of irises or pupils, yet all-seeing.

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Kondō Takahiro (b. 1958)
Reduction: "Wave"
2017

All of these traits, and the cross-legged, meditative pose that Takahiro assumed for the *Reduction* sculptures, strongly encourage us to read these works in relation to Buddhism. Their status as self-portraits, however, means that they cannot be understood as religious sculptures, at least not in any ordinary sense. They are closest in spirit, perhaps, to *chinsō*—historic depictions of Zen monks, executed in carved wood and often surfaced with lacquer [FIG. 23]. Typically, these sculptures commemorated individuals who had played a role in founding a given monastery; they were placed in the monks' living quarters, manifesting a lineage stretching back in time to the historical Buddha himself. Takahiro, of course, is alive and well. What does it mean for him to place himself in such a role, supplanting that traditionally occupied by a venerated holy man, or even a divinity?

Hirst's diamond skull poses that same question, of course, even in its title—and answers it, too, with maximalist, gleeful irony. In Takahiro's case, matters are not quite so clear. The relation of his self-portraits to devotion is elastic and riddling, prompting thoughts of the *TV Buddhas* (1974 and later) of Nam June Paik (1932–2006), in which an eighteenth-century statue of the Buddha faces its own televised image in a closed loop of total self-awareness [FIG. 24], or Paik's earlier *Zen for TV* (1963), a monitor turned on its side and tuned to show a single glowing raster line, an electronic Barnett Newman, a technological degree-zero. Paik's video works are hilarious, in a way that Takahiro's literally straight-faced *Reflection* and *Reduction* series definitely are not. What they all have in common is a poignant yearning for transcendence, a sense that enlightenment is still there to be achieved but must be approached via new pathways. They are works about spirituality made in a secular era, icons for iconoclastic times.

The same can be said for *Lick and Lather* by Janine Antoni (b. 1964), for which the artist cast herself in chocolate and in soap [FIG. 25]. She then proceeded to lick away the surface of the chocolate busts, and take the soap versions into the bathtub with her, washing them partly away. In both cases her likeness is variably softened—blurred, we might say, an accelerated version of the gradual wear visible on ancient statuary. This is a manifestly feminist work, alluding to the economies of desire, of guilty pleasures and self-care, in which women find themselves socially located, and indeed are encouraged to see themselves. The comparison highlights an aspect of Takahiro's life-cast works that might otherwise go unnoticed: they are images of masculinity, which he treats as a fragile thing. This is particularly clear in the *Reduction* sculptures, which, as the title signifies, are slightly less than life size, due to contraction during kiln firing. The result is a "clay body" that is eerily under-scaled, communicating a vulnerability in keeping with the ascetic pose. Just as in Antoni's work, it's as if the artist were being subjected to some subtractive force, eroded under some unseen pressure, gradually disappearing from view.

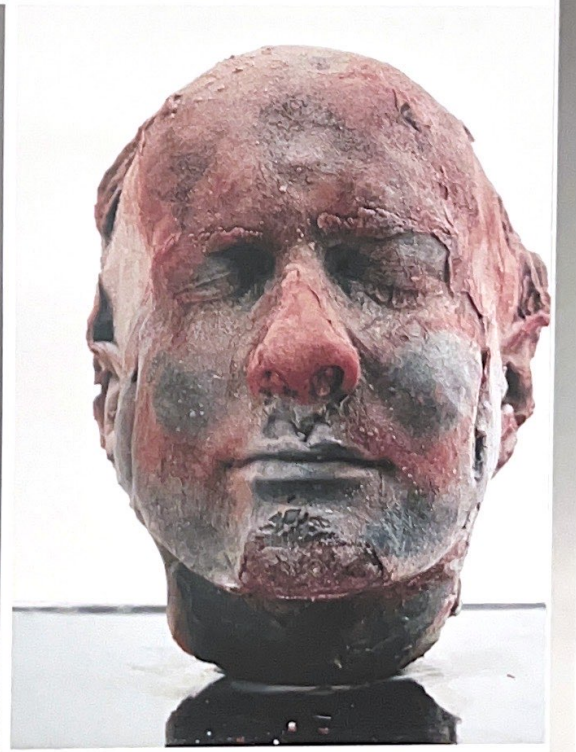
A final comparison, particularly intriguing, can be made between Takahiro's *Reflection* series and *Self* (1991) by Marc Quinn (b. 1964).¹⁰ *Self* is another life-cast of its maker's head, not in clay but in the artist's own blood (ten pints' worth), which must be kept perpetually frozen in order to retain its shape [FIG. 26]. The opposition with *Reflection*

FIG. 23 [OPPOSITE, TOP, LEFT]
Artist Unknown, Japan
Portrait Sculpture of a Zen Master
15th century
Lacquer on wood with inlaid crystal eyes
37 3/8 × 22 3/8 × 18 1/4 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Gift, 1963
Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Image source: Art Resource, NY

FIG. 24 [OPPOSITE, TOP, RIGHT]
Nam June Paik (1932–2006)
TV Buddha (detail)
1974
Photo: © Tate
© Nam June Paik Estate

FIG. 25 [OPPOSITE, BELOW, LEFT]
Janine Antoni (b. 1964)
Lick and Lather
1993
Chocolate and soap
24 × 16 × 13 in.
© Janine Antoni; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

FIG. 26 [OPPOSITE, BELOW, RIGHT]
Marc Quinn (b. 1964)
Self
1991
Blood (artist's), stainless steel, Perspex, and refrigeration equipment
81 7/8 × 24 3/4 × 24 3/4 in.
© Marc Quinn Studio



is diametric: Takahiro materializes the ideal of Buddhist meditation, Quinn uses a bodily substance central to the Christian tradition. Takahiro sets himself firmly in ancient craft, Quinn places his sanguinary self-portrait within a quasi-medical apparatus.

As this juxtaposition suggests, just as many divergences as convergences may be found between Takahiro and his international peers. We have seen this dynamic at play throughout the essay, and it is worth underlining, here, in conclusion. The point of placing Takahiro in a broader art historical context is not to somehow elevate his stature—to imply that resemblance is the same as relevance. Still less should we insist on a universalizing critical framework, in which all artists are treated the same. If it is instructive to situate Takahiro in relation to other well-known artists past and present—Brancusi, Warhol, Hirst, Antoni, Quinn, and the list could go on—that is only because it highlights what is particular about him, showing us just how incomparable he truly is.

In Takahiro we have a master craftsman, a gifted sculptor, and a conceptual artist all in one. This potent combination has allowed him to radically extend “Japanese ceramic art” without being contained by that category, or indeed any other. Confronting his work is a complex experience. To stand before it is to be alternately stirred and saddened; it can seem at once to invite deep encounter and to withdraw, discreetly, into its own psychic space. Give it enough time, though, and you may just find that our turbulent, interconnected world—swirling chaotically, faster than thought—makes just a little more sense. You may feel, just for a moment, that all you know is defined in relation to Kondō Takahiro’s art, as its still and sure center.

1

Takahiro first made teabowls of this type in 2011 in response to a request for new work from his London dealer Adrian Sassoon, on the occasion of the silver anniversary of The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Maastricht, Netherlands. Initially he referred to them as *Tsunami Bowls*, in reference to the recent disaster, but later shifted to the more open title *Wave*. He came to feel that the reference to the tsunami was too specific, as well as painful and possibly disrespectful to those affected.

2

See Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

3

See Anna Chave, *Constantin Brancusi: Shifting the Bases of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

4

Kondō Takahiro, "What is Ceramic Art?," in Kondō Takahiro, *Kondo Takahiro: Vessel–Body–Void* (Kyoto: Mitsumura Suiko Shoin, 2022), 290.

5

Damien Hirst et al., *For the Love of God: The Making of the Diamond Skull* (London: White Cube, 2007). The controversial nature of the work has always revolved around its value, with conflicting reports about the true cost of its manufacture and the degree to which it was ever actually sold. As a financial instrument, it appears to be akin to a stock option floated on the market, with majority ownership retained by Hirst and White Cube (his gallery at the time).

6

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réal, 2002); see also Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

7

David Stent, "Blue-Slipped Stone-Burst: Seeing Destructive Plasticity in Takuro Kuwata," *Journal of Modern Craft* 14, no. 1 (March 2021).

8

Alison Britton, in *The Maker's Eye* (London: Crafts Council, 1981), 16; reprinted in Britton, *Seeing Things: Collecting Writing on Art, Craft and Design* (London: Occasional Papers, 2013).

9

Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1981). See also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

10

The culmination of the movement was the exhibition "Sensation" at the Royal Academy, which included the first version of Quinn's *Self*. Norman Rosenthal et al., *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

56 [FOLLOWING PAGES]

Kondō Takahiro
Red Mist (detail)