

WATER, SILENCE, ZERO

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Over the years, Mineo Mizuno has played a number of different roles-maker of tableware, designer at Franciscan China, and creator of gardens, as well as commercial and residential spaces. He emigrated to the U.S from Japan in 1966 at age 19 and studied with Ralph Bacerra at Chouinard Art Institute. His work has been shown extensively in California and Japan. For the past 40 years, he has been making precise and refined ceramic sculpture. He has always been an extremely prolific artist; older work includes meditations on tableware, a series involving screws and another variations on a peach form. He also made an extremely personal series consisting of a number of World-War-II-era vintage Japanese airplanes meant to commemorate the death of his father.

His work of the past decade is the outgrowth of an aesthetic that emphasizes irregularity, simplicity, and perishability. This extremely abstract work is elegantly minimal. As a consequence of their refinement, the beautiful surfaces project an emotional aloofness. Even though they don't invite touch, these sculptures are powerfully seductive and imaginative; they are visually and conceptually innovative. Forms and surfaces are perfectly mated. His use of color does more than decorate, it enhances the shape and bonds with it. Although some of his surfaces are complexly layered, thick, and textural, they never overwhelm the form nor seem excessive.

His objects are distinguished by a diverse use of glazes, extreme variations in scale, and an intense interest in the concept of nature. Chance comes into play as well; variation and the lucky accident are essential to him. Process is everything in so far as the surface and fabrication of these objects is concerned, with each piece in a series a modified or expanded version of a predecessor. Mizuno constantly experiments with glazes; he deliberately induces surface bubbling and carefully sands down the protruding domes of the bubbles. Color is extremely important to him and he uses the full range of possibilities from the bright and primary to dark or monochromatic. His glaze surfaces run the gamut from thick to runny, glossy to flat matte, opaque to transparent. The majority of his pieces require multiple glaze firings. Only the calligraphic pieces use one layer of clear glaze. Because of the different expansion rates of his glazes, Mizuno constantly adjusts the clay body.

Mizuno handbuilds his pieces using wide, thick coils and enormous quantities of clay; much of his work is extremely heavy, weighing between a few pounds to a half-ton. The large pieces have to be moved by forklift. Time is an important factor in his process of fabrication. After several months of drying, his pieces are halved, hollowed out, and rejoined with a thin seam of wet clay and then dried some more. Depending on the scale of the piece, they can require five days to bisque fire and glaze fired for several days in a gas kiln, with an extended period of cooling in the kiln. During firing, cracks form along the seams and down the sides, calling attention to the role of chance in his work. Mizuno often emphasizes these cracks in various ways, sometimes inlaying them with a color that emphasizes the fracture. Although he makes the glazes so they bubble, Mizuno uses a grinder to further work the surfaces, sometimes to simply minimize the amount of texture, sometimes to achieve a smooth surface.

Over the past eleven years, Mizuno has developed four distinct series of objects that share a preoccupation with the element of water, an interest that began with his calligraphic use of the word. Each group has a distinguishing name - *Mosses*, *Teardrops*, *Water Drops* and *Drops*; - all are handbuilt and carved. The groups are interrelated in terms of form and emphasis on surface; each group has distinctive variations in palette and glaze types. The *Mosses*, *Water Drops*, and *Drops* are large, oval or circular flattened-lozenge forms that range from one to four feet in diameter. The *Mosses* and *Water Drops* have holes carved or drilled into them. *Teardrops* and *Drops* demonstrate Mizuno's expert manipulation of color.

The *Teardrops* have a matte finish with flat, feathery striations of glazes over a base color; some are complexly monochromatic. The *Mosses* use a clear glaze to create a waterproof surface. Mizuno uses different sets of glazes for the *Water Drops*; some dramatically dark, thick, opaque, and runny; some are dark, luminous, and metallic. Many of the *Drops* are wildly chromatic; others are decorated with the same Japanese kanji written hundreds of times in delicate calligraphy. He

brushes on thousands of repeated symbols that stand for zero, silence or water on these pieces. The replications of the symbol evoke the feeling of meditation. Interrelated as they are, there are significant differences between the four groups of work. The *Drop* series, started in 2001, resemble puffed, symmetrical skipping stones that vary in height and circumference. Mizuno made these Drops in a range of sizes from palm-sized to six feet in diameter. They can be extremely colorful or dark and somber. Some are covered with his frequently-used calligraphic symbols. A series of three that have a blue glaze with delicate striations of yellow in center show Mizuno's habit of working in series of similar shapes and glazes but in differing sizes.

Mizuno's *Waterdrops* are flattened spherical forms, some with an irregularly shaped shallow holes which are sometimes filled with water. The *Waterdrops* were presented as an installation in Los Angeles at Samuel Freeman Gallery in 2009. Mizuno lined up five, evenly spaced, nearly identical graphite gray discs, each with a centered, white, irregularly shaped shallow depression. The forms are slightly rounded at the bottom so that they appear to be floating. This impression contrasts with their evident weight; they seem both massive and delicate. The satiny, reflective surfaces are slightly textured from bubbling in the glaze. Because they are so large and stone-like, they resemble large, flat boulders or enormous skipping stones.

The *Teardrops* vary in height but all are tall, elegantly tapered bottle shapes. Unlike the objects in the other series, this work has the elongated minimalism of a Brancusi. Almost all are flat matte and intensely saturated with color. Their surfaces consist of many brush-worked striations over a solid color of underglaze. Regardless of their varied and expressive surfaces, they are neither intimate nor playful; instead they are oddly severe and minimal with an aura of monumentality. Mizuno frequently exhibits the teardrops in groups, rather than as individual objects.

Mizuno began his most recent series, *Mosses*, in 2007. Inspired by traditional Japanese gardens, they pair horticulture with ceramics. The Mosses are either unglazed or coated with deliberately permeable glaze. They are poked with shallow holes and indentations he fills with different varieties of moss seedlings. In order to encourage growth, the tiny pieces of moss planted in the crevices are misted by a surprisingly sculptural spray mechanism. The moss ultimately grows into a glaze-like outer skin completely concealing its ceramic substrate. The *Mosses* are relatively lightweight, but absorb water, acting like a sponge to keep the roots moist between waterings. This absorptive quality keeps the temperature stable, acting as a heat-sink to keep the moss cool during the day and warm at night. The pieces are responsive to their environment, constantly growing and changing, dying and reviving. They are both grotesque and beautiful and represent Mizuno's surrender to materials that are not obedient to his will and can't be predicted or controlled. One of these pieces was recently exhibited at Pasadena's Armory for the Arts. The piece was continuously misted during the duration of the show. Mizuno has used the *Mosses* in the private gardens and in a few site-specific projects including one in 2012 at Cedar House, Storm King, the 500 acre sculpture park in up-state New York. There, he sited a number of the moss pieces around a grove of deciduous trees; the mosses are hardy in cold temperatures and he expects lichen will eventually start growing along with moss.

It's an oversimplification to consider Mizuno's work typically Japanese or simply Zen; the work is that and more, to limit it to obvious categories deprives him of the breadth of his originality and accomplishment. Mizuno is aware of the importance of his Japanese roots but they are his tools; his work goes beyond ethnicity and tradition. Mizuno's work seems to grow in complexity the longer you look at it, as the depth and density of the glazes slowly reveal themselves. His objects aren't about the environment or living in harmony with nature, what he makes is in a class by itself, a conundrum, a distortion, a meditation on nature versus the man made. Mizuno hasn't looked for an outcome that can be planned or assumed. Although he possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of clays and glazes, he pushes his materials to extremes, deliberately relinquishing control and courting the lucky accident. The unexpected crack, recalcitrant seedling, crawling glaze are all welcomed, used as an opportunity to further develop his work.

Mizuno is now at a turning point in his career. His recent move to New York has altered the nature of his work and how he thinks of himself as an artist. He no longer has a kiln and a large studio. He is nearly 70 and feels that making ceramics has become too arduous and impractical for him; he is now focusing on making photographs and videos. It will be interesting to see what Mizuno, with 40 years of object-making behind him, will make with materials that barely occupy space.