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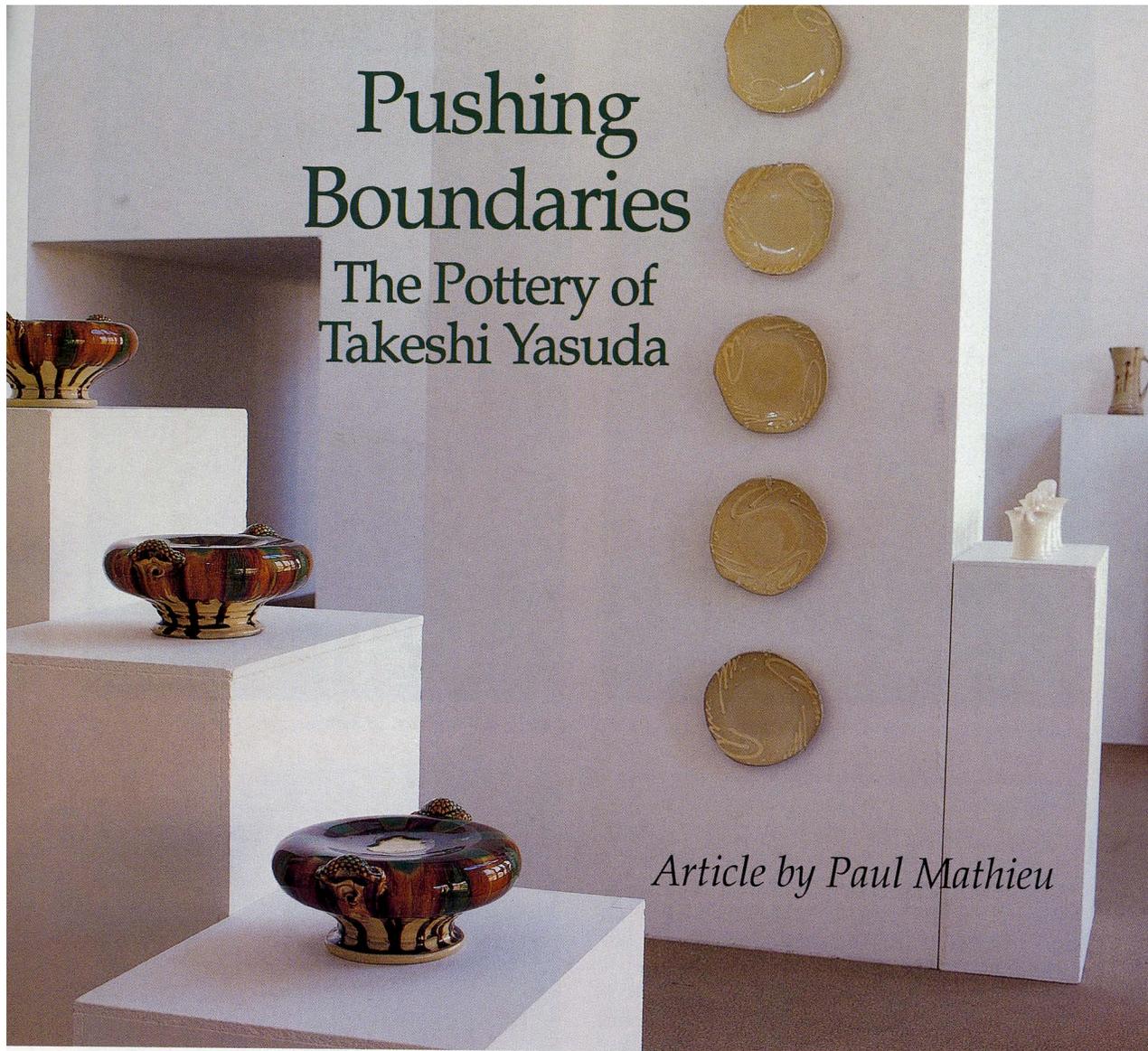
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# Pushing Boundaries

## The Pottery of Takeshi Yasuda



*Article by Paul Mathieu*

*Jugs, Dinner Plates and Tall Pillow Dishes. Oxidised stoneware*

I HAD BEEN FAMILIAR WITH THE WORK OF TAKESHI Yasuda for a number of years but had only experienced it from photographs in magazines and, frankly, I had given it little thought. When I came to see the actual work a few weeks ago, I liked it. I liked its directness, its sensuality, its simplicity with a sense of excess reinforced by flexibility and fluidity. Yasuda came to Canada and I attended his slide presentation and workshop. This experience made me aware of the facets of revelation contained in this work and has thus revealed to me a whole new world of possibilities in the understanding of the potential of pots as actors in culture.

A few words about process: The pieces, notably plates, bowls, platters, plateaux, and pitcher and bucket forms are thrown generously, rather thickly, and with clear definition and articulation of form and stressed markings from the hand, the tools (a variety

of ribs) used to clarify lip, base, spiral interior. In most cases, the piece is then cut from the wheel and literally picked-up, with both hands, by the thick wide rims or edges. This distorts the work, leaving clear finger marks resulting from the act (unusual, unexpected, almost violent, yet so logical) that took place. He took the idea from an inexperienced student who didn't know that one 'couldn't' do that. Other pieces (platters, plateaux, serving dishes) are either thrown upside down or their fat rim is pushed outward and down as far as possible to create forms reminiscent of inflated rubber inner tubes. Typically, he calls this process downward throwing.

These methods of working are characteristics of Takeshi Yasuda's work and give the objects a distinctive quality. But their effect is much more than purely formal and/or aesthetic. They affect how we understand the work, their epistemology. First of all, they



*Milk Jugs, Fish Pillow Plateaux on Feet. Oxidised stoneware. Inset: Bucket. Manganese on honey glaze*

provide the object with amazing elevation, lifting it from the ground, making it feel more aerial than earthbound, defying gravity. This is rather unusual for pots and for ceramics where gravity and horizontality play such a large role. The most effective 'elevation' device is the actual picking-up of the piece from the wheel in the wet stage by gripping the rim with both hands. By this action, the object has been picked-up by the maker (process) at the same place where it demands to be picked-up during use (function). This is also the place where handles, directing the touch, are positioned. There is thus a direct connection and synchronicity between maker and user, between process and function, in the simple act of lifting the object from where it rests. Other methods of elevation include 'upside down' platters and plateaux with a variety of feet around the base (originally the rim), or again, the banging with the hand all

around the base of the 'bucket' form, literally kicking the bucket, to distort the flatness of the base and turn straight to curve; and last but not least, the beads of glazes collecting underneath the feet of pieces fired on stilts so that the runny glaze can collect under the base of forms. This bead elevates the feet which then seem visually to hover above ground. Thrown plate forms are also fitted over rings at the leather hard stage and their flat surface is then pushed down to create uplifted bowls, 'sprung bottom bowls', taking the form from the horizontal to the vertical. He calls this method the A-19 for the name of the freeway he was travelling when he thought of the idea.

Thus, in the work of Takeshi Yasuda, many reversals take place: top becomes base and vice-versa, lips becomes feet, flat becomes round, plates become bowls, vase forms become platters. Rims, which usually act as frames, stable and clearly confining, here

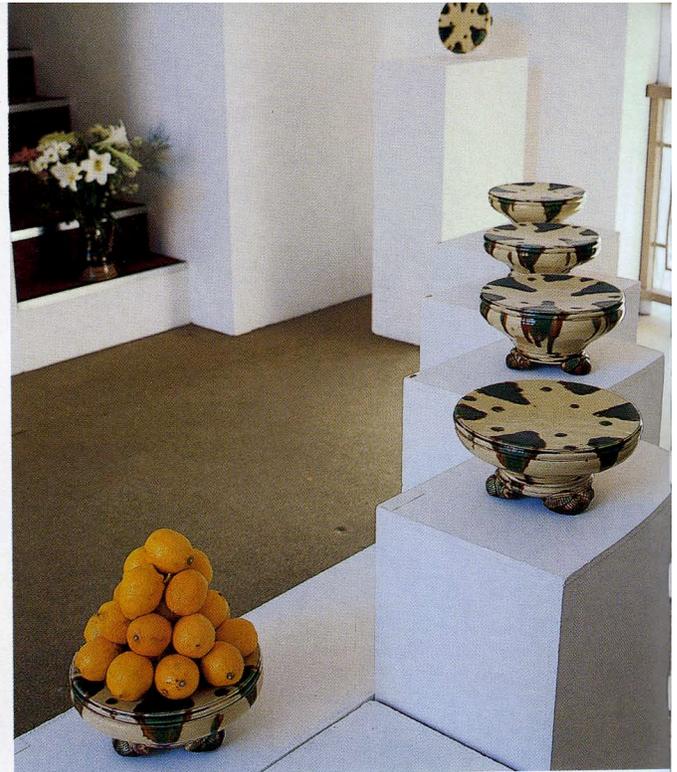


*Large Platters with Handles and Fat Rim Dishes with Horns. Oxidised stoneware*

become edges, falling over, unstable, 'over the top' literally, yet never metaphorically. The smooth rounded rim, specifically on the plateaux and platters with their shallow wells created by gravity in the drying and firing process (proof that while contesting gravity he is willing to use it) creates ambiguity and tension. We cannot know precisely where actions start and stop, or even visually guess the level of containment (say, water) possible by the piece. This positive ambiguity of border is reinforced by the runny glaze, sliding over the rim inside and outside the form.

He repeatedly mentioned gravity in his talk, stressing how we are earthbound, physically and conceptually, and how our mental organisation of order would stress ground over floor, over table, over cup, over handle. He suggests that we might think of reversing that order. Handle, cup, table, floor, ground.

Another reversal takes place when volume become mass, something I discussed with local potter D'Arcy Margesson who provided me with this insight, as did Gail Carney and Sally Michener elsewhere, all colleagues of mine at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Plateaux and platters are thrown upside down and, in the process of flipping them over, the emphasis on the interior (volume) is shifted to the exterior (mass) and the piece becomes visually solid. Pottery is conventionally articulated around volume and containment, around a clear definition between exterior and interior. Here, the relationship is reversed, contested and challenged. At times, the form as mass is itself ambiguous and completed only by



*Plateaux on three Feet. Oxidised stoneware*

use: when the plateaux are stacked with food, the visual circular unit is completed; when flowers are arranged in the bucket, its handle makes the tridimensionality of the flowers more clear.

The handled bucket, with the distorted base I referred to earlier, seems to hold a special place in Yasuda's work. He used it as an example of how we actually experience things, how we tend to reduce objects to their bi-dimensional theoretical sign (images that negate form), where horizontality is reinforced in the usual viewpoint of profiles. In this process, we "come to distrust our everyday experiences" and "we restrain ourselves to trust experience". He mentioned that the so-called function of a bucket is to carry water but the function of his bucket is, in my mind, to bring attention to experience, to challenge the "in-built distrust of the bodily experience we gain through use" and reminds us that "our bodies know objects much more than we give them credit for".

This distrust of conventions and this reflection on experience is manifested as well through language. Takeshi Yasuda is precise and particular when he uses language. He insists on using 'bucket' instead of 'basket', since this term is more directly descriptive of the functional intent of the object. He also insists on the difference between platters (large flat plates) and plateaux (raised, up-side-down forms with shallow wells). This emphasis on language was evident as well during his demonstration of brainstorming the potential of handles. He stressed how important it is

to speak-out-loud about the process taking place, how essential that is to progress. But he also said: "Language, consisting of complete sentences, has its own rules, its own powerful ability... while words or incomplete sentences are more effective, closer to the actual physical experience."

I wondered if I was missing something due to the use of a foreign language by a foreigner to that language. Now, I think not. The apparent incompleteness of the discourse is possibly another form of generosity, permitting the analysis to be open ended instead of doctrinaire and directed.

Yasuda's objects are meant for the presentation of food and he remarked on the difference between Japanese tables where presentation is flat, horizontal, and Western tables where presentation tends towards height and verticality (think of wedding cakes). This awareness, cultural, formal, structural, etc, and the tension between the horizontal and the vertical, between the gravity-bound and the aerial, infuses and informs all his work. There are also connections to be made between the Japanese origins of Yasuda and his English place of residency. Both countries are islands with definite geographical boundaries, instead of man-made ones (Yasuda teaches at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, a place where the problem of man-made boundaries is sadly too evident). Boundaries in his work are almost always ambiguous, specifically at the passage between interior and exterior, and this formal confusion can even lead to semantic confusion as was the case when one of his pieces was exhibited upside-down in a show. That is sometimes the price to pay for challenging conventions, centuries old and quite rigid in the case of pottery. Yet, this ambiguity is a positive aspect of the work which redirects preconceived notions about pottery and, in the process, permits a new reassessment of its value and role as a place of experience.

The glazing of the pieces deserves special mention as well. Influenced by *Sansai* Tang ware of China, the glazing articulates the form through repetition, not mindless repetition but repetition that creates trust which comes from experience. These patterns are rarely for purely aesthetic, decorative purposes. The fluidity of the glaze, its runniness, is used for perceptual reasons, blurring the passage between interior and exterior, from horizontal to vertical, and brings to mind the fluidity of experience as well as the fluidity of time itself. I repeat myself since this is so central to my understanding of the work. The beads of glazes underneath the feet to raise the form from the horizontal plane, play a similar role, proof that nothing is arbitrary or gratuitous here. As well, the glaze is picked up by texture, by impressed lines and raised dots on the handles and feet which attract the eye, providing visual and tactile grip, but also demanding



*Pillow Dishes and Sprung Bottom Bowls.*  
Oxidised stoneware

and begging for touch – thus creating a movement from the aesthetic to the erotic. This sensual quality is reinforced by the folds, the drips, the stretching, the squeezing, as well as the 'animal' feet and the organised vaguely symmetrical patterns, stable, logical, becoming organic, changing, uncontrollable, as they run freely all over the form, despite being periodically stopped and collected by ridges and tracings, bringing some form of order to the potential chaos released. The balance of tensions is always taut, the equilibrium sustained by symmetry.

The reference to Tang Chinese ware in his use of blurred green and brown markings creates an historical connection with the past, with different cultures (a Japanese potter quoting China from England) but also establishes distance, temporal distance and a distance created by the switch from earthenware to stoneware, from China to England, from then to now. The forms of Takeshi Yasuda are original, idiosyncratic and unique, yet the glazing and colours are not. They are appropriated from a memory, a remembrance of things past. This borrowing is justified since it is conceptual rather than aesthetic and it operates to direct our experience of the work and how we come to understand it. Its use is epistemological, rather than simply formal.

It seems to me that his work changed drastically when he began teaching. It became much more analytical and, in the process, more distinctive and individual, different from what seems to be a closer allegiance to tradition as embraced in the West by the



*Bowls with Handles. Creamware*

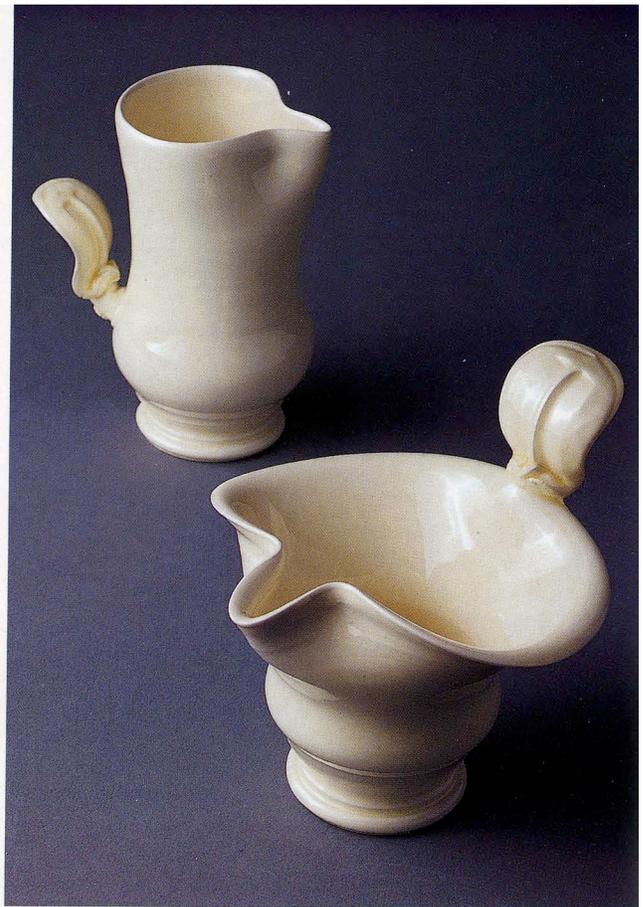


*Platter with Handles. Creamware*

followers of Bernard Leach. Recently he has been using clear glazed creamware as a material and I look forward to seeing how this will affect the forms and generate new types of thinking. Already, the rims are distinctly different, sharp and fine, in great contrast with the previous work.

The work of Takeshi Yasuda is true conceptual art; not only is pottery for him a conceptual activity (how and why it is made) but using the pots becomes a conceptual activity as well (how and why it is used). This conscious, deliberate, cerebral approach to pottery making is not dry, rigid or didactic, quite the contrary. The work itself is ample proof that it leaves plenty of room for intuition and sensibility, for an instinctive experience, to use a word he used. This is true from the viewpoint of the maker, the viewer and the user.

If Yasuda's pottery is the fusion of body and heat, it deserves to be for us a merging of senses and time. He has spent a long time with his work.



*Milk Jug and Sauce Boat. Creamware*

It manifests the culmination of many years and considerable reflection. It deserves as much time to be experienced and appreciated. If certain objects must necessarily be part of everyday life, it is because they are too complex to be experienced by a single glance, through vision only. They have to be lived with for a long time, in a fashion as intimate as possible in order to apprehend them. Usually, the simpler they seem, the more familiar they seem, the more effectively complex and foreign they are. But who nowadays has 20 years of contemplation and experience to give to a bowl? This workshop was a condensation of that time and permitted a richer, quicker understanding, something I could not have expected to be there to that degree before. Images and words, despite their own powerful ability, are insufficient here.

I need to say this again: this work has revealed to me a whole new world of possibilities in the understanding of the potential of pots as actors in culture.

A potter who thinks. What a concept.

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Paul Mathieu is a potter presently living in Vancouver, Canada, where he teaches at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. Photographs of Takeshi Yasuda's exhibition were taken at Christ's Hospital School, Horsham, UK, in 1996. The exhibition was curated and designed by Mike O'Connor. Photography by Graham Murell. Photography of creamware is by Takeshi Yasuda.