

Esther Shimazu

b.1957, Honolulu, Hawai'i, lives in Kailua, O'ahu
exhibited in *Biennial I*

Cool Ox, 2011

hand-built stoneware, porcelain

This was part of a Chinese zodiac series. I thought about each animal in terms of my favorite people who were born in those years, plus any folk or literary references that came to mind. The Ox meant Grandma Masako, my mother's mother. The running (or not) joke was that she was an ox and more apt to move slowly, as compared to her husband, a flashier horse. A complete load of hooley. So the horse piece was red and galloping and the ox is cool blue and walking. The rider is pressed close and listening. Although I never knew my *issei* grandparents well due to language and distance (they were all on Maui and I was a Honolulu-born Japanese school dropout), from what I could tell, Masako was the feistiest and funniest and the best source of stories. I feel like these qualities have passed on into my work on clay.

Esther Shimazu

Yellow and Loving It, 2008

hand-built ceramic, stoneware, porcelain

Courtesy of John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis,
California

ESTHER SHIMAZU

*Born 1957 in Honolulu
Lives in Kailua, Oahu*

Esther Shimazu's affinity for working in clay developed early in her life. She recalls being interested in ceramics since her first art experience with clay in a kindergarten class. Her response to the material was immediate and intense; she admits to pestering her teachers about the fact that students were taught ceramics only once a year, and always anxiously looked forward to the next time she would be allowed to work in clay. Early on, Shimazu began to supplement school art sessions with after-school and summer classes in ceramics offered through the Honolulu Parks and Recreation Department. She continued to follow and expand her interest in clay throughout her elementary, high school and college years, receiving bachelor and master of fine arts degrees in ceramics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1980 and 1982, respectively.

It was while in college that Shimazu decided to pursue a sculptural direction in her ceramics. She was not comfortable doing functional forms, as the kind of precision and focus required in throwing clay on the potter's wheel did not suit her sensibility and expressive needs. Shimazu prefers making handbuilt sculptural works. She enjoys solving the visual and technical problems involved in creating objects that exist in space, having to think about how a sculpture looks and works from all angles. The potential for asymmetry and disproportion in sculpture appeals to her, as does the responsive nature of the material—the chance to shape, stretch and alter the clay at will.

It was also in college that Shimazu arrived at what has become her signature form—the rotund, androgynous, part baby/part sumo wrestler, nude figures with Asian features. A class that required her to do a self-portrait every week gave her practice in observing and recording nuances of facial characteristics. Also, as one of only a small number of Asian-Americans on campus, Shimazu felt a heightened consciousness of her identity and began doing her figures both as an evocation of her cultural background and as a kind of fulfillment of a need for symbolic companionship and extended family. Today, although Shimazu doesn't model her figures' faces after herself or other individuals, she acknowledges that sometimes when a work is completed it resembles someone she knows.

In the recent works created for this exhibition, Shimazu has dramatically increased the scale of her figures as a means of providing a new challenge to tackle. In an intensive process that takes several days for each figure, Shimazu manipulates slabs of clay, sometimes shaping sections over forms and then further cutting, tailoring, and modeling the separate parts of the body. The pieces, which have remarkably thin walls, making Shimazu's works unexpectedly light in weight, are then assembled and the tiny details—eyes, teeth, nostrils, lips, fingernails, toenails—added. Shimazu delights in this step, articulating each tiny nail and tooth by hand and carefully putting it in place. The eyes are always left as open slits, for Shimazu feels creating eyes would be too realistic and change the character of the works. The figures are bald and otherwise hairless—Shimazu confesses she she doesn't have the patience for doing hair. Recently, Shimazu has been sanding the works

to give them a smoother surface, which she covers with an iron oxide wash and then wipes off, leaving a subtle coloration in the skin and residues in the crevices and folds which heighten shadows and help define volume. Shimazu avoids using much color, except in objects the figures sometimes hold, and shuns heavy or shiny glazes in order to retain a quiet softness in the works.

Shimazu refers to these new works as her "functional figures," and each one holds a container with a specific use, or the figure itself is transformed into serving as a vessel. Humor is always a part of Shimazu's work, and in these figures the artist pokes fun at herself, satirizing her own aversion to making functional pots by turning the whole notion of a container into a grand sculptural conceit. With their unselfconscious nakedness and insouciant demeanor, Shimazu's figures make us smile and realize how ridiculous the world can sometimes be. It is their particular charm and genius to allow us to laugh at them, and by extension, at ourselves.

