

Hijiki-Non-color: A "White" that Germinates

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I have been searching for what it means to be *mui-shizen* or, "as it is," the natural state, as it relates to traditional Japanese non-glaze ceramics. This is the ultimate manner of how a person should act as a person. The "way," so to speak. It was not something that could be replaced with terms like décor or technique, nor was it an idea either. Of course it cannot be defined as "nature worship," and to relate the "assertiveness" of being "as it is" to Japanese Buddhism would only trivialize its broadness. What lies at the core of being "as it is" will only ever lead to being "as it is." Even the long lasting tradition cannot impede on this.

What does the "non" in non-glaze ceramics signify? A world without absolutes. It becomes a world where the insecurities in the landscape of my heart are projected. The "non-color" (white) that I talk about, is the state where the unclean or contaminated come together with possibilities and the unknown. Here, color does not exist, a state for which I myself cannot even arrive at my own conclusion.

Color represents the nature of the people, and the sense of color is both spiritual and traditional. In Japan we relate to the color "white" as seen in the wood or Japanese cypress surface (called plain wood building) with which local shrines and mausoleums are made. That is what is considered the "white" found in nature, and is the material of the silk loom itself, and can be called a neutral color. The luster of the surface of the cypress wood dulls over time, and transforms into a "*shibumi*," or maturity. The richness of *shibumi* gives the piece its luster, which aligns with the "dull" coloration of the "white" of Japanese paper. This beauty of nature is best expressed in the spirit of "sado," or tea ceremony, and is reflected in the color palette of the spatial arrangements and equipment for that ceremony.

There are many words in the Japanese language to express chromatic changes. We say color "fades (*aseru*)," "dulls (*kusumu*)," "recedes (*nukeru*)," becomes "discolored (*shirachakeru*)," "ages (*jidai ga tsuku*)," or "earns prestige (*haku ga tsuku*)." These descriptions of the color fading are not meant to be negative but rather represent a view of life and death that personifies and takes pleasure in the fading colors. To relate it to one's own life and death is to confront being "as it is." "Non-color (white)" expresses this view of life. It becomes a creative process that aligns with nature, and, as much as this process allows, an elimination of excess. By prohibiting

additional elements (we call this *kinjiki*) we are able to acquire a sharpened view of life and death.

This “non-color (white)” will surely allow me to germinate. The expression of color and white themselves leads to introspection, which is a very Japanese spiritual tendency. It is something that has been very close to traditional Japanese aesthetics since long ago. In Japanese colored paintings, the idea of “shared space” does not relegate the areas such as margins, or pure areas in ink paintings (the paper or ground material itself), as merely the background or surface. It is seen as the relationship between the subject and others, an unintentional but assertive existence. Existence is not an independent occurrence, but by recognizing “otherness,” various “colors” are expressed. It is impossible to establish one’s existence without establishing others in relation to oneself.



“Non-color,” as a whole of the installation, (w)95.0 (d)53.0 (h)9.0 cm, stoneware with slip, with aluminum board and epoxy. Electric kiln, fired 1250 degrees C. in reduction. Exhibited at L'Alcora Ceramic Museum, Spain, June 26-September 6, 2015.

“Non-glaze ceramics” by traditional firing methods are called non-glazed because a glaze is not intentionally added. However, as an unmerited reward, the heat from the firing gives it a beautiful appearance, an exquisite color, that exceeds human finesse; this is natural wood-ash glaze. At times, the heat damages the ceramic, which is quite the opposite result. In the context

of Japanese traditional ceramics, these instances are accepted as non-standard “works of art” that don’t have a preliminary design. These become the fodder for “*mitate*,” or judgment, for “*sukisha*,” or those with refined but slightly eccentric tastes, and caters to their playful spirits. By making interpretations and judgments of unintentional natural results, we are able to see the possibilities of understanding works without a preliminary design. What traditional Japanese ceramic artisans refer to when they say “unglazed” is a return to the undifferentiated, chaotic situation between man and nature.

This resembles the state of when a person does not yet stand as person, a state in which they still connote nature, which is exactly the conflict that traditional Japanese ceramic arts harbors. It is nothing but the moment of hesitation one feels upon seeing no relation in the result between their own hard work and skill, and the fired piece. Furthermore, what should come under scrutiny now is the unpredictability of the materials, clay, and nature, which undermines the “self” that seeks to control the outcome. Even for an experienced potter, he/she can no longer create ceramics as he/she wants to. They are well aware that the inequality between the material and “self” does not lead to good results.

The ideal creative process would be that the work slowly takes shape, there being an equality, which should naturally exist, between the maker and the material. That process of repetition which has no end is the “way.” The only thing I can do is to ease these feelings of conflict through introspection with each piece, an expression of the “self,” that is made. To accept each case and interpret it accordingly. There is no actual goal in regards to what the introspection should lead to, and when it comes down to it, Japanese traditional ceramics is exceedingly about a certain format. In the traditional Japanese arts, even in the martial arts, it is not about being against each other, where strength and outcome (victory and defeat) are admonished and the opponent thought of as the enemy. To coexist with others becomes the ideal. In any case, the ultimate objective is to unify oneself with others by the movement of the body and efficient operation of it is the objective.

This lack of correlation between the skills of the “self” and the work made that exists in traditional Japanese ceramic arts is similar to the passivity of farmers and fishers experience through nature’s blessings and harvests. In a creative process that does not differentiate between the subject and other, we see the “self” that surmises the spirit of nature. It has been my own long, inner struggle to see the reward in the mercies of nature and to make further interpretations and expand my understanding. The beautiful decoration from firing, like fire change and fallen ash—the natural glaze— were things I interpreted in order to deceive my own consciousness. The lack of correlation between my skill and the work made, makes it difficult to grasp my own clear image. The unmerited reward given to the work, made by an unskilled person such as me, even irritated me.

This unsettled feeling inside me is what allows for my creative process to germinate. And to endlessly layer “white” provided the means to confirm this. A thorough understanding of “non-color” enabled me to move my hands and go back and forth between the physical and conceptual realms, and connect it to a re-creation of the shared spirit, or words. In order to express the conceptual realm, I must materialize it in the physical realm.

The thought structure behind traditional Japanese non-glazed ceramics is as such: at the top is the kiln (a spiritual existence to be feared and not taken for granted), next is the clay, the material (benevolence, and the universal power of nature), finally comes the person (the spirit, the maker). Thinking about the kiln in this relational structure, my frustration towards the unmerited results, I sever the memories and experiences that control me by repeating the “white,” which is life itself. The actions and behaviors accept the ceaseless doubts in the heart ridding it of all guilt and allowing the subject and other to be even more equalized.



"Non-color; Otherness (10-28-6)," as a whole of the installation, (w)122.0 –(d)75.0 –(h)13.5 cm, hand-built stoneware elements assembled over some threaded iron rod, non-glaze with slip, silicon tube, iron rod and epoxy, electric kiln, fired 1250 degrees C. in reduction. 8th Gyenggi International ceramic Biennale 2017, Rep. of Korea. Exhibited at Icheon World Ceramic Center 263, Gyeongchung-daero 2697 beongil, Icheon-si, Gyeonggi-do, 17379, Rep. of Korea. April 22- October 9, 2017.

"*Hijiki—Non-color*," which is created not by traditional ceramic processes, expresses "language." The composition of the work complies with the structure of language. These are the egg shapes and the apparatuses that link to them to conjoin them. The egg shapes symbolize the ideographic element of the Japanese language, the Chinese characters (*kanji*), or icons. The phonographic letters, *kana* (hiragana, katakana) are the links, which go unrepresented. This element recognizes the individual icon of the "others," and is provisionary and has potential for utility, but is separated and has no meaning. It cannot be interpreted, nor can it be ignored. It is material at odds.

The egg shape, the icon, is not simply meant to be an egg, per se. It is an egg as a conceptual entity. The egg, while being the very first form of life, signifies an ordinary shape and meaning, but is an infinite entity with deep potential. That egg shape, is the ideal pursued, so to speak, and is a fundamental message. The aforementioned combined images of the "two signs" respond to each other and are brought to the foreground, and are processed as information side by side. The images, while relating to one another, also question each other's "otherness." When the relating parts link together, the icons begin to subtly adjust. That is to say, they are unified.

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