

january

BIANNUAL

ISSUE 03

HIROYUKI HAMADA

Interview

Pouline Töpfer

In a sense, the artist Hiroyuki Hamada is unusual. He seems more interested in the common world around him than in the philosophy of his work or in pinning down meaning. He is remarkably unaffected. The bio on his website, for example, describes his life in just twenty-four words and makes no mention of his practice as a sculptor.

Hamada's art is unearthly but not confronting. The sculptures seem to be resting: peaceful, foreign intruders in forms that could be either natural or constructed. Though his work may seem ostensibly simplistic, upon close inspection the fine detail that Hamada employs in each piece is at once familiar and surprising. Contemplating the effect of a finished piece by Hamada, with its infinite meanings, suggests questions about the creative process and the artist's intentions.

We spoke to Hiroyuki Hamada about intuition, inspiration and influence.

INFINITE MEANINGS

JB

How did you experience the transition from Japan to the US at an early age? Do both culture influence you in your work?

HH

I'm sure they both affect the work. But the most significant thing to me is having two perspectives that help me to be objective in many ways. I really think experiencing more than one culture, especially in your formative years, is a great thing.



JB

So did you enjoy your childhood?

HH

I think I tried my best but things always got in the way, like learning about rules, thinking about consequences, working with others or just being an immature being. And by the time you are a little better, you are not a child anymore. It's a weird thing. I feel the pain for my children!

JB

You never give your work any titles, which lets the viewer use their imagination and almost allows your work to change shape and meaning constantly. Is this your intention?

HH

Yes. I want people to get something out of the visual quality without obvious associations to other things. It's so weird and fantastic to see how people from different places with different backgrounds can have connections to something I make. It tells me about the common ground we have and who we are as a species. I think it's such a hopeful thing.

JB

To me, your work embodies peacefulness. The first thought that came to mind in regards to this is Zen, which represent simplicity, nothingness, space, life, nature, etc. Are these terms relevant to your work?

HH

I think there is an aspect like that. But there are so many layers to a given work and I think how the work is described really depends on who, when, where and how you are asking.

JB

Is there simplicity and Zen in your personal life as well?

HH

I think my life is very much chaotic. Having a family with kids rather pushes you to the extreme. It's fun and meaningful to look into certain philosophical ideas to reflect on, but in real life, at least for now, it's as if I'm doing whatever makes sense to get through. It's like going fishing and your dinner actually depends on it. Your theories about the tides, weather and rigs count, but in the end whatever works, works. I might totally believe in a handmade rig that so and so makes, but in the end I might be stopping at a fish market on the way home. And I think that's OK.

JB

Are you religious?

HH

That depends on how you define it. I certainly think there are rules that are bigger than us humans, which guide us and decide how we end up, and I do have faith in them. But that's really not much to do with existing religions.

I do believe I have a constructive mission in my life. I know what I have achieved so far is the cumulative effect of people and events around me helping me out in spite of my lack of effectiveness and laziness. So I have an optimistic tendency at the core even if I might appear very pessimistic and depressive at times.

JB

You live in East Hampton, does the area influence your work in any way?



Hiroyuki Hamada, #63, 2006-10, Burlap, enamel, oil, plaster, resin, tar, wax and wood, 45 x 40 x 24 in.

HH

East Hampton is a place known to have some big-name artist associations (Jackson Pollock and de Kooning both had studios a few miles from my place.) It's a semi-suburban country environment as opposed to an illegal industrial sweatshop residence where I lived in New Jersey. Having children and having a wife has given me enormous opportunity to grow as a person. It's making my life much more complicated as a result also. It's a very interesting challenge and I think it gives more dimension and perspective to the work I do.

JB

Does family and environment influence you then, as an artist and a person?

HH

Yes absolutely, there is a lot of influence. We are amazingly complex beings-the combination of the path you've taken, the environment and its history, which pretty much includes everything around you: people, place, culture and its values. And you also cultivate your own principles to guide yourself. Also, as every parent with more than two kids would know, we have our own tendencies that we are born with. I have two sons and the differences they show are just amazing.

JB

How much do you trust your intuition in your work?

HH

I try to trust as much as I can. In fact much of my making process involves getting my mind to empty my usual thinking process. It's hard to describe. I like to say things visually without having obvious references, symbols or stories. So I try to feel my way around and if I notice

those external, indirect elements creeping in, I try and stay away from them. By the way, there is a very interesting book called *Blink*, by Malcolm Gladwell, which talks about complex decisions made by intuitive processes. Years of struggles in the studio certainly cultivates cumulative knowledge that can guide itself in exploring more. And of course that doesn't mean everything is automatic and easy. As soon as you think it cuts like butter you realize diving into a new field always requires more struggles through trials and errors.

JB

The reality of commercial environments muse challenge artists to be more than just creative and experimental beings; the corporate world requires organization, diplomacy and diligence, is this a challenge you have faced?

HH

Definitely. The mainstream art world is small and not too straightforward. It certainly pays to know how to get around. But I believe there are people out there who appreciate good work and enjoy sharing the experience. If you don't have the connections or skills to get around or lack the finance to do so, there is still a good chance your work can find its way out if it is significant. You do your best and there are people who can help you do the rest. The most important things is doing the good work. There is no point in getting it out if it's not good.

JB

In your eyes, what skills make a successful artist?

HH

To me being an artist is like being an explorer. You try to reach out to unknown territories with all you have and you come back to share what you find. So, I see the measure of success to be how much you can get out of who you are and how much you can put that out for others to see.

JB

How important is technological progress for your work?

HH

Technological progress is actually essential if we are talking about a more democratic appreciation of visual art. The technology of book making changed the meaning of stories among the masses, and the available technology of playback systems always correlates with what kind of music can be appreciated by people. There isn't a real chance for visual art to truly contribute to people as a whole until we have a means of easy access for all. While it's still limited in terms of fidelity (resolution, sense of scale, 3D quality and so on), the emergence of the internet and the proliferation of images through it have very much pushed us in a positive direction.

JB

Knowing that you started as a painter, how did you make the shift towards working on a much bigger scale in 3D?

HH

Actually my paintings were quite big by the time I was switching to objects, probably bigger in feel than some of the sculpture. But yes, it's been a challenge just as any new elements in the work bring along new problems. Working on different views and making sense as a whole is one thing, and clarifying the work by pulling and pushing the 3D shapes with painting on the surface is another. But it's all rewarding and fun as well.

JB

Has is been a conscious decision to concentrate on large-scale works? What effect are you trying to get out of it?

HH

The issue of scale certainly exists. Good size is often needed to involve your own presence when you stand in front of it. The right size can often enhance how you relate to the work in positive ways. But it only works if the work is doing what it is supposed to do. I don't get attracted to the size itself. In fact, if it does the same things, wouldn't it be better to be smaller? Also, the size of the studio has been affecting the size of the works. When I moved into a bigger space, the work got a bit bigger.

JB

Why do you think it is so hard to achieve simplicity and how would you define it?

HH

A simple expression of a complex idea requires a great deal of understanding to the materials, and the ability to demonstrate mastery by assembling it in a cohesive, meaningful manner. The trick here is that the essence of the mechanism of a complex idea in art is, without an exception, indescribable. How do we manage to put in a meaningful manner something you can't even pin down? It's so hard. But when it happens, it certainly echoes the mysterious presence of our deepest being in an unmistakable and profound way.

JB

In one way or another there is a sense of timeworn-ness or wabi-sabi in your work. Using different techniques, you create a certain character for each of your sculptures. What does momentariness mean to you?

HH

It's a word that's sort of lonesome and uneasy, but it also has calm weight and serenity as it's one of the fundamental truths we have. Have you seen the movie *Blade Runner*? It's like that beautiful scene where that replicant guy gives a speech about amazing things he saw in his life as he is about to die—'tears in rain'—did you see that? More than a few people who looked at my work made mention of implied time or history added with the finish I apply. It really isn't my conscious approach but it does work to create an extra dimension: the sense of time. Just as the work captures forms, gestures and so on, it might also capture momentary beauty in time.

JB

Are you a different person the moment you step into your studio, or do your private life and your work merge?

HH

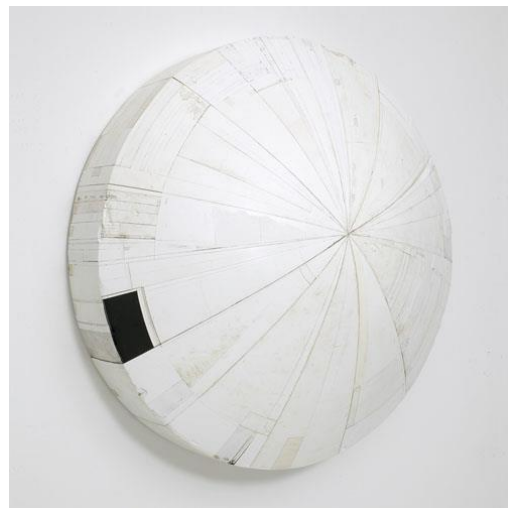
I think things merge mostly for the practical reasons in and out of my studio. I carry my sketchbook around in my bag quite often so I take my studio with me and I also do family stuff in my studio occasionally. But ultimately, there is a separation. I think we use a different part of our brains when we put things together visually. It's a constant struggle disciplining myself, drawing lines there and using my time more efficiently.

JB

Have you ever considered commissioned work?

HH

Not really. But I would certainly look into it if anybody wanted to commission something. So far I've been only working on things that are on the path my work naturally indicated. I do see



Hiroyuki Hamada, #53, 2005-08, Enamel, oil, plaster, tar and wax, 38 x 38 x 14 1/2 in

potential difficulty working with other minds but it's also not a new thing to work with outside elements. It's a routine process to let materials and process speak when they have to. And I believe working with that flow is a key for making a work with convincing presence.

JB

How do you feel about another artist directly taking influence from your work.

HH

It's really great. It says that the work has gone out to do good on its own. And that's on top of the fact that someone felt strongly enough to express something out of it.

JB

Your work is very personal. Could you imagine doing a collaboration with someone else? An artist, brand or film director?

HH

I'd love to try. I always sort of envy seeing people achieving more than what they can themselves by collaborations. Like you see in music, people with different instruments contribute their parts. Or in movies, you've got music, acting, script, director, all of them doing their parts to make something bigger. It would be nice to see magic happen by working with others.

JB

I know you were approached by Paris-based Damir Doma, whose Autumn/Winter 2011-12 collection was inspired by your work. What's the difference between making art and making fashion?



Hiroyuki Hamada, #55, 2005-08, Enamel, oil, plaster, tar and wax, 44 x 24 x 12 1/2 in

HH

I think it can be very similar, to the degree that they can be interchangeable. Maybe I could even say that making fashion is a variation of making art. There is huge variation in what you can call art. And any making process that results in an extra something that's got a voice of its own shares steps, methods and so on, which are recognizable to people in different fields. It would be nice to chat with him about that.

JB

Do you live in the moment or do you often wander off to the past or future?

HH

I know that wise people always say to appreciate the moment. And that totally makes sense, for appreciating what we have and making the best out of it should lead to real fulfillment. But, I think dreams are good too. How would our lives be today without dreams of people in the past? I think it's fun to imagine that our crazy dreams of today can change people's lives generations later. I guess I wander off a bit sometime and that's ok.