Hall, Kenji. "Blemished Beauties." *Crafts* (Autumn/Winter 2022): 98–113.

Blemished beauties

Farmer, fisherman and ceramicist Kazunori Hamana has a passion for patina. *Kenji Hall* drops by his coastal atelier in Japan. Photography by *Noboru Murata*

There is a type of old, blemished object that the Japanese ceramic artist Kazunori Hamana just can't resist. This might be an age-worn urn with a chipped rim, or a wooden folk-art figurine whose rough contours predate industrial processes. What other people might dismiss as hopelessly damaged goods are, for Hamana, worth holding on to. For every patch of dulled patina or missing piece, he imagines a story.

At his two-storey beach house in Isumi, a sleepy coastal city two hours east of Tokyo, Hamana's collection of antique Okinawan *Panari-yaki* pots, tribal masks, wooden figurines and Okinawan *shisa* lion statues fill every recessed nook, shelf, windowsill and corner of floor-space. He prefers these old and tarnished items – some dating back to the 17th century at least – over shinier, newer objects. To the 52-year-old Hamana, they are evidence that the ravaging effects of time, weather and use can unlock extraordinary beauty.

'Cracks and blemishes are the essence of what it means to be human,' Hamana says, when we meet on a muggy, overcast day in late August at the house overlooking the Pacific Ocean that is his atelier. Hamana is known for hand-crafting large earthenware pots with roughly-hewn, washed-out surfaces, abstract markings and bulging proportions. His work has a rustic quality that evokes found objects: terracotta artefacts dug up from the ground or seashells tossed onto a beach. Their size – typically around half a metre tall and 70 centimetres wide – asymmetrical shapes and thin, lopsided rims make them seem, paradoxically, both heavy and fragile; some look as if they're about to tip over. Hamana has taken a craft that's undergone refinements in Japan over 12,000 years and returned it to its roots, to make something that reflects our human vulnerabilities and flaws.

Shinichiro Nakahara, founder of Tokyo-based design firm Landscape Products and president of the Conran Shop in Japan, first visited Hamana's studio in 2012. 'Japanese ceramics tend to be small. Hamana's sculptural approach, the large scale and dynamism of his work, and the fact that he was making ceramic vessels that seemed to convey a deeper meaning – I'd never seen anything like it before. It's not easy to accomplish,' says Nakahara, who organised Hamana's first exhibition in Tokyo and was, along with artist Takashi Murakami, an early champion of his pots.

Hamana's art has been showcased in solo shows at high-profile galleries, including Blum & Poe in Los Angeles and New York, and Pierre Marie Giraud in Brussels. Despite his rising status as a sculptor, Hamana sidesteps such labels. 'I'm not a contemporary artist. I have never thought of myself as one,' he says. Making pots is a chance to confront himself; to explore what it means to be human. Pots are like people, he says. 'When you look at them you can't see what's inside. No matter how long you and I sit here and talk, we have no idea what each other is really like.' He turns and gestures at several of his pots scattered around the wooden balcony outside. 'They're mysterious.'

PREVIOUS PAGES: the artist's antique-filled living room at his seaside studio
LEFT: Kazunori Hamana in his kitchen/studio, displaying antique Japanese knives and pans alongside pots in progress
OVERLEAF: ceramic works are stored outside, where they gain a weathered patina

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Hamana cites artist-designer Isamu Noguchi and painter Cy Twombly among his influences. Yet when he talks about his own work, he uses the prosaic Japanese term *tsubo* – an all-purpose pot, the kind you might fill with grains, pickled plums or the ashes of a deceased loved one. To him, a *tsubo* isn't so much an art form as an extension of his way of living out here, near the sea, forests and mountains: 'What I do isn't that different from what our ancient ancestors did during the Jōmon Period [Japan's Neolithic age, stretching back to 13,000 BCE] when they made clay into pots to store seeds, cook or carry things in. They made these universal items linking their environment to their way of life.'

Hamana's own lifestyle is a throwback to a simpler time. He commutes to his seaside atelier from a farmhouse surrounded by forest nearby, where he lives with his partner, the artist Yukiko Kuroda. In winter, he keeps the place warm with only a wood-burning stove. Most mornings, he rises at dawn – between 4.30 and 5am in the summer – and eats the brown rice that he grows on a half-hectare plot next to the house, along with seaweed, pickles, vegetables from his or his neighbours' gardens, and leftovers from the night before. When he bathes in his hinoki cypress-wood tub, he burns wood scraps to heat the water. To quench his thirst while working, he sips sour plum juice, which he makes by diluting a homemade syrup. If he has time, he might net a few fish along the seawall below his atelier.

As an artist whose work is in demand, Hamana has exhibition deadlines to meet and gallerists to appease. But at the moment, his rice field is a far bigger concern. He's

LEFT: ceramics, antique objects and a painting by Yu Kobayashi in the living room
ABOVE: Hamana also finds time to farm organic rice

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BELOW: Hamana constructs pots through a slow process of coiling. Covering pieces with cloth keeps them damp enough to work on. Earlier works by the artist can be seen on top of the cupboards

spent spring and summer pulling weeds, getting attacked by horse flies, and looking after his crop. In two days, he needs to finish the harvest before a storm has the chance to topple the plants. ‘People tell me it’s cheaper and easier to buy rice,’ he says. ‘What’s fun about that kind of instant gratification? The emotional payoff far outweighs the difficulty. Why does everyone want the easy way out? That’s so boring.’

For as long as he can remember, Hamana had imagined himself one day living by the sea and farming. As a child, he was eager to escape Amagasaki, an industrial city bordering Osaka in western Japan, where he grew up. He hated its lack of greenery, the smog and the frequent public-safety warnings to stay indoors with the windows shut. ‘The air carried the stench of nearby factories and the rivers had no fish,’ he says. ‘I had a book showing life in the countryside and I flipped through its pages until it fell apart. I was envious of people who lived amid nature and I wondered why my hometown was so polluted.’

That feeling fuelled his interest in farming, which led him to enrol in an agricultural high school, despite his parents’ hopes for him to pursue a white-collar career. He became obsessed with the staples of American fashion – Levi’s and leather trainers – and decided to continue his studies in the US. Living there at a time of escalating trade friction between Tokyo and Washington and the West’s growing fascination with Japan was eye-opening for Hamana: he encountered Americans who knew more about his country than he did.

When Hamana returned home in his early 20s, he was determined to educate himself about Japanese films, food and fashion. He started making money selling his collection of Levi’s and trainers at flea markets in Osaka and Tokyo. Later, he opened his own shop, Blues, in Tokyo’s Harajuku neighbourhood, which he filled with dead stock trainers and vintage American clothing from regular buying trips to the US. Business was booming and before long he bought the seaside house in Isumi, partly to live near the mountains and ocean, partly to be closer to the airport. ‘In Japan, nobody values beachside properties. I thought, I’m in luck!’ he says. When the market collapsed, he closed the shop, retreated to Isumi and made anchovy paste from local fishing boats’ herring hauls.

Pottery was something that Hamana stumbled into in his early forties, a decade ago. He picked up the basics from a free class taught by volunteers at the nearby community centre, but when they insisted that he make petite, pretty things, and he continued to produce large pieces, they asked him to leave. He taught himself the rest: how to mix his own glazes from bronze, cobalt or manganese, which clay worked best for him, and how to embrace the unexpected changes that occurred in the kiln.

When I visit Hamana’s atelier, he is finishing three *tsubo* at what used to be his dining table. Standing here, he can look out of the wall of windows at the sea, which today is a muddy turquoise beneath a pewter sky. The din of bugs, birds and surf comes in through his open doors. Three days earlier, he began forming the clay – sourced from Shiga prefecture, in western Japan – into coils and smoothing the ridges between each

layer. He used to make a design sketch first but things often didn't go to plan; besides, he never set out to make a product for profit. This, he says, is the same reason he won't hire an assistant.

As I watch, he reaches into the cavity of one *tsubo* to press on the semi-hardened clay, reinforcing or warping the unevenly textured walls. These imperfections appeal to admirers of his work, I say, which I quickly worry could be misinterpreted as a criticism of his technique. Hamana doesn't take offence.

'I set out to make something organic and unstable,' he says. Like the trunk of a tree, with its ridged bark and patches of moss, or his grandfather's wrinkled hands, or the deformed tattoos on the loose, wrinkled skin of the elderly military veterans he remembers seeing in San Diego. 'If it's too perfect, it becomes an artificial thing lacking depth. Look at the glass of that window next to you. It's all straight, clean lines, industrial. For me, there's no beauty in that.'

Once the *tsubo* have been painted or scratched and glazed, Hamana leaves them to dry for a week. They are then fired in a gas kiln that reaches 1,250°C roughly 12 hours later. Finally, he exposes the *tsubo* to rain, snow, sun, heat, cold and salty sea air, out on the balcony of his atelier or in the garden of a centuries-old wooden home he owns in the nearby countryside. Cracks form and colours fade, adding layers of *okuyuki*, or depth. 'I'm not sure what happens chemically to ceramics left outside for months, but they gradually start to look like antiques. I also do it because there's nowhere to keep them indoors,' he says.

TOP: Hamana's favourite 1970s trainers and antiques from China and Okinawa
RIGHT: a collaborative piece by Hamana and Yukiko Kuroda

LEFT: Hamana relaxing in his living room with his cat, Ui
ABOVE: balls made from his own brown rice and handmade salted plums

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ABOVE: a broken *tsubo* mended by Yukiko Kuroda, shown at Blum & Poe LA in 2021
TOP RIGHT: bags of clay from Shigaraki and another painting by his favourite artist Yu Kobayashi

Occasionally, accidents happen: a *tsubo* collapses in on itself in the kiln or shatters when it slips out of Hamana’s hands. In 2017, a friend of Hamana’s brought Yukiko Kuroda, a master mender, around to see whether she could piece together these *tsubo* with lacquer, using the traditional *kintsugi* technique. That meeting spawned an artistic and personal partnership, in which Kuroda reconstructed Hamana’s broken *tsubo* using gold or silver lacquer. Their work – including a pieced-together *tsubo* that had rolled off Hamana’s balcony when a powerful typhoon struck in 2019 and shattered – was exhibited last year at Blum & Poe’s gallery in Los Angeles.

With each of his prized antiques, Hamana thinks about the ‘cycle of human activity that it represents’. That ability to sympathise with other people’s lived experience is, in his mind, what elevates an object beyond the ordinary. ‘Maybe someone sees my *tsubo* and imagines the wind blowing into here, the cries of cicadas, the waves and the childlike joy – and maybe some anxiety – I had in creating art that connected me to my surroundings,’ he says. He’s thankful that art collectors want to buy his *tsubo*. ‘But what matters more to me is the process of confronting myself. It’s not egoism or selfishness.’ He pauses. ‘Self-love, maybe?’