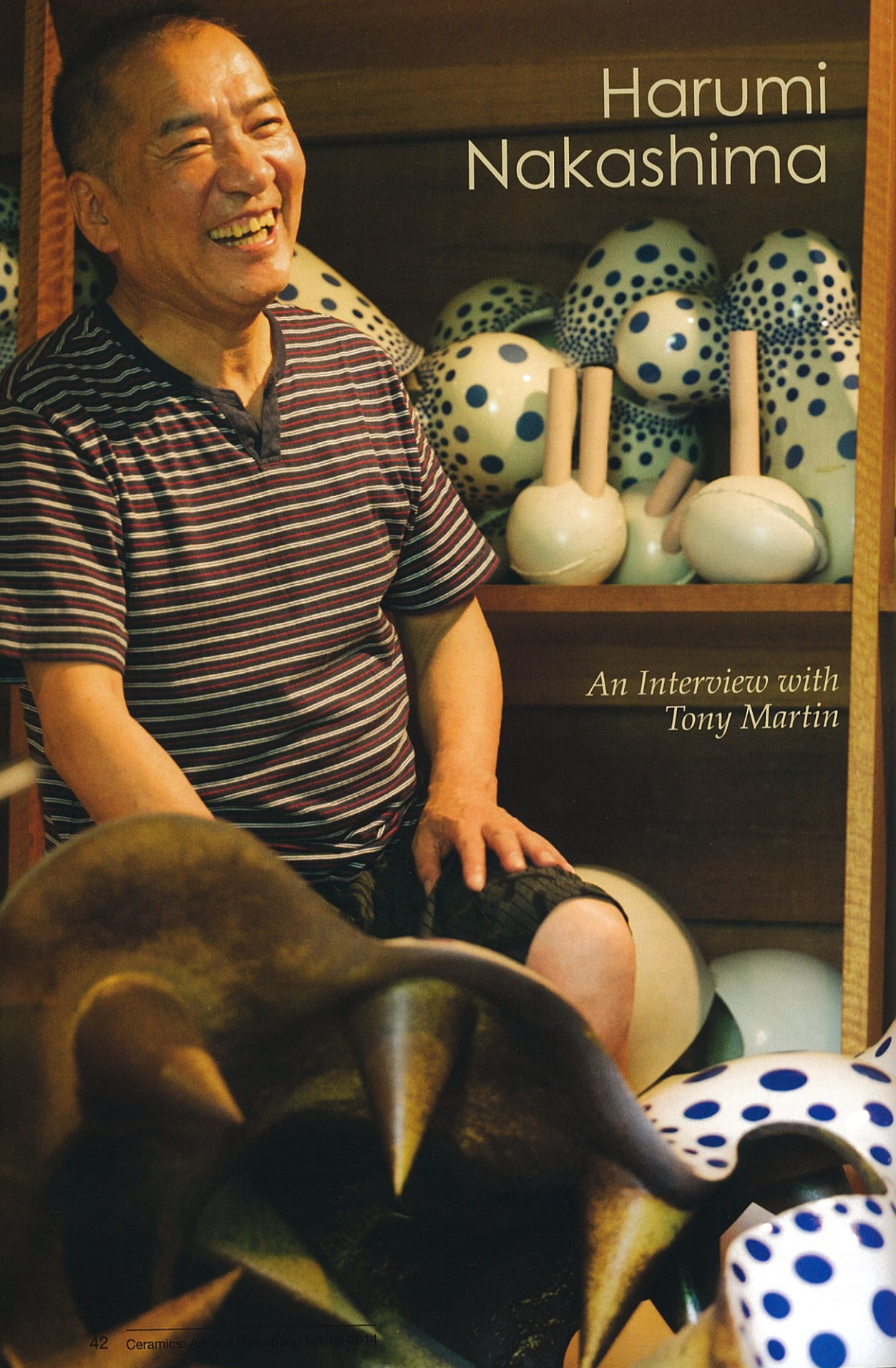


A photograph of Harumi Nakashima, a Japanese ceramicist, smiling and sitting in his studio. He is wearing a red and white striped polo shirt. Behind him is a wooden shelf filled with various ceramic vessels, including several white pots with blue polka dots and some with long, thin necks. In the foreground, a large, dark, abstract ceramic sculpture is partially visible.

Harumi Nakashima

*An Interview with
Tony Martin*



I TRAVELLED TO THE HOME AND STUDIO OF HARUMI Nakashima from the nearby port city of Nagoya, Japan. Wide, elevated freeways sweep over a seemingly endless industrial city scape. Thirty minutes on and the concrete grey of Japan's fourth-largest city is relieved by flashes of iridescent green rice paddies shoehorned into any available space. Another 45 minutes and the landscape changes to forested foothills dotted with tiny villages. Beguiling, gently curving roofs and cascading flower boxes crowd narrow lane-ways. Everywhere you look is shrouded in the verdant green of the oppressively hot, humid summers of central Japan.

Nakashima and his wife, Katsuko, welcome us warmly. Their spacious home is attached to a large studio, surrounded by a ceramic sculpture garden and flanked by a crystal clear stream. Inside is warm, glowing timber and understated Japanese simplicity. A staircase leads to small loft areas housing superbly crafted ceramic pieces made by Katsuko¹ and their daughter, Mio Takatsu². The immaculate workshop houses a large, state-of-the-art trolley kiln which, as we watch, is carefully rolled open – revealing some astonishing examples of Nakashima's handbuilt porcelain sculptures. Each highly complex piece, he explains, takes

three months to construct and another three months' sanding to achieve the faultless finish that he requires. A couple of almost completed pieces sit on a nearby bench with soft, seductive curves of nearly impossible perfection.

The quick tour is followed by a truly memorable meal at a local restaurant. Seemingly endless, superbly presented dishes are served by whisper quiet, kimono-clad attendants all accompanied by a never-ending flow of sake. The restaurant, flanked by a beautiful *koi* pond on one side and a fast flowing





stream on the other, is built on natural hot springs. Amid much laughter we are encouraged to enjoy a spot of nude bathing in one of the restaurant's private bathhouses between courses. When I decline the offer Nakashima reminds me, with much mirth, of the Japanese proverb that there can be no secrets between those who have bathed together. It is a loss I am resigned to live with. In fact I am far more worried about how I am going to be able to get to my feet with some shred of dignity as, having sat cross-legged on the floor for an extended period, I seemed to have lost all contact with my legs.

The interview takes place in a small, timber room crowded with dozens of ceramic pieces of varying size and vintage. Nodoka Murayama, who had been an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, Gifu for nine years, ably assists me by translating. Nakashima sits on a tiny three-legged stool next to the piece he has chosen as his favourite. It is a large, biomorphic shape, brilliant white on the outside with cobalt blue spots and a dark, threatening interior filled with large, conical shaped 'teeth'. I am instantly reminded of the mythical giant sandworms of Frank Herbert's *Dune*³.

Nakashima reminisces about his first contact with clay. His father worked in a brickworks and would bring home lumps of clay for his son to play with. It was a lifeline for a timid, sensitive young boy struggling to find friends and suffering from nightmares about war. From such humble beginnings came a fascination with clay, which developed, eventually, into the stellar career of one of Japan's most internationally recognised *avant-garde* ceramics artists. A member of the International

Academy of Ceramics, he is also a professor at the Aichi University of Education. Prestigious exhibitions and awards from across Japan and around the world have cemented his position as a renowned global artist.⁴ With an enthusiastic following of international collectors his reputation is assured. It is truly remarkable that, in a country where pottery is a revered, art form, where famous potters are accorded a level of adulation unheard of in the West and where closely guarded ceramics dynasties trace their lineage back for centuries, that a painfully shy son of a brick maker could achieve such international acclaim.

Nakashima's attention turns to his favourite piece. Within its bright exterior and ominous, dark interior lies a story of self-discovery and of personal epiphany. After finishing school he continued developing his love for clay through study at university. He had decided that his future lay in ceramic design. But these were times of upheaval in Japanese society. The insecure, timid young boy had become an angry young man who was drawn into the sometimes-violent student protest movements of the late 1960s. He was left confused and disappointed. But that was not his only source of confusion. Ceramic design was losing its lustre. The act of designing and making for someone else was no longer enough for the young man.

The turning point was dramatic. Nakashima and a friend walked into an exhibition being held in the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art of work by the Sodiesha group of ceramists. The Sodiesha group had formed in turbulent post-World War II Japan and actively rejected the conservative 'folk craft' or



Photo by Tatsuo Hayashi.

mingei movement so enthusiastically championed by Hamada and Bernard Leach. "They questioned virtually all conventions of ceramic material, form, decoration and function,"⁵ drawing inspiration from both Picasso and the European Surrealists. Nakashima was amazed, overwhelmed. Almost 40 years on, he throws his hands in the air, looking around wildly as he tries to convey the tempestuous emotion of that moment. Everything he believed about ceramics had been called into question. His life had been turned upside down.

But even as Nakashima describes the emotional roller coaster of the Sodiesha exhibition there is no suggestion of hesitation or loss. Rather it was a revelation of future possibilities, a release from centuries old traditions and expectations. It was, however, to take many years for him to understand the full impact of that day. Rather poetically he describes it (with a knowing smile to his wife) as like seeing a beautiful woman for the first time. You know immediately that you want her, must have her, but it is only many years later, when the relationship has grown and matured, that you fully understand the reasons why. Such was the effect of Sodiesha on his life.

The change in his art practice was immediate. He recalls that, from the next day, he began to make non-functional sculptural work. It was an exciting and



liberating time for the young artist. His work was freed to grapple with concept rather than function. As an example he points out some large 'handbag' type forms in the corner of the room where we sit – expressions of separation and loss inspired by Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.⁶

But the transformation of Nakashima was not yet complete. Even with a body of conceptual work dealing with issues such as industrialisation, environment and themes of pain and loss he was still deeply dissatisfied. There remained the feeling that he was attempting to represent other people's issues and concerns. What the intense young artist aspired to was a pure form of personal emotional expression. He is animated and impassioned as he speaks, tearing with both hands at his chest to illustrate his need to communicate, to express his innermost thoughts. His desire was "to present my heart to the world".⁷

Nakashima's quest for a way to communicate his feelings achieved fruition through the piece at his feet – his favourite. He points to several other pieces in the crowded room. They were, he told me, carefully planned. But his favourite, he said, running his hands over the silky smooth, undulating surface, was completely unplanned – a spontaneous expression of pent-up emotion. He had just started to make, with no plan or intent.⁸ He created an artwork that was smooth and attractive on the outside, glazed in the archetypal





blue and white of traditional Japanese ceramics. Venture into the gaping 'mouth', however, and you entered a world of jagged, sharp darkness and threatening shadows.

In a flash of recognition Nakashima realised that he had created a self-portrait of his 'heart'. A searing moment of honesty had laid his soul bare to the world. The smooth and urbane exterior masked a dark, dangerous and conflicted interior. With a sweep of his hand he indicates other sculptures surrounding him. "These could have been made from any material, even plastic. But this" he said, touching his favourite piece, "had to be made from clay. It has in it the sense of my life. It is me, my life, the outpouring of myself."⁹ It was an intensely powerful moment of self-realisation. What had begun as a spontaneous act of making had become a profound personal revelation. "When I am making this it is like looking inside of myself, opening myself up and pouring myself out and then realising 'So that is what is inside me.'"¹⁰ His pieces are "a private record. The work I am making now is about how I am feeling now— a personal recording of myself."¹¹

When he was young his favourite piece had made visible the discord between his personal and public personas. But with age and experience has come harmony, a 'pure spirit'.¹² "Now I am trying to include all my tomorrows in my work,"¹³ he says, quietly. His beautiful, elegant sculptures reflect his lived experience. They are not an attempt to make

the subjective into an object; rather they are a form of introspection, a personal window into his humanity. For Harumi Nakashima each new piece will forever remain a journey of self-discovery. For this generous, driven and complex artist the knowing is revealed through the act of making, the understanding comes from doing.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/aaa/nakashima/katsuko.html>.
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6. Hemingway, Ernest. 1954. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Scribner.
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- 8–13. Ibid.

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On-site translation (Japan) by Nodoka Murayama.
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