

En Iwamura Glances and Echoes

Oct 25 — Dec 28, 2024 | Shanghai

Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to present En Iwamura's first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from October 25 to December 28, 2024.

One of the most inventive artists of his generation, Iwamura, who was born and brought up near Kyoto, has developed a singular approach to creating ceramic sculpture that has been influenced by his interests in Japanese cultural history and contemporary pop culture, his travels overseas, and his personal experiences as a relatively new, young father. Sophisticated, imbued with a sense of elegance that flows naturally from Japanese fine craftsmanship, and inescapably clever and fun, Iwamura's works rethink and reinvigorate the long, influential tradition of ceramic art from they have emerged.

On the road to developing his work's unique visual language and technical features, Iwamura first studied at the Kanazawa College of Art on the west-central coast of Japan. The city of Kanazawa is well known for its museums, handicrafts traditions, and well-preserved historic districts from the Edo period. There, the art school where Iwamura studied is renowned for its programs in crafts and the industrial arts, as well as in the fine arts. In Kanazawa, where Iwamura majored in crafts, the artist explored a wide range of art forms, materials, and art-making techniques.

Later, he earned a master's degree at Clemson University in the United States, where he focused on ceramic art, and further pursued his research and developed his ideas through artist's residencies in the U.S.A., China, France, and other places. After finishing his studies, he returned to Japan and settled in Shigaraki, in Shiga Prefecture, to the east of Kyoto. While Kyoto remains a bastion of many of Japan's fine-art and craft traditions, the Shigaraki area has long been known as a center for the production of ceramics, attracting artists and visitors from around the world to the museum, study programs, and special events of the Shigaraki Ceramic Sculptural Park. The region is home to many ceramic artists and pottery companies.

Surrounded by unspoiled nature and inspired by the area's rich ceramics history, Iwamura tapped into his appreciation of handcrafted pottery from Japan's ancient eras, including handmade vessels from the Jomon era (14,000 to 300 BCE) and terra cotta *haniwa* figures from the Kofun period (300 to 538 CE), as he began giving form to his vision of a new kind of sculpture. Centuries ago, cylindrical *haniwa* figurines, with their hollowed-out eyes and mouths, were placed on top of and next to tomb mounds. Seen from today's vantage point, their simple but surprisingly expressive forms appeal to Japanese pop culture's fascination with all things *kawaii* ("cute").

In his vividly colored ceramic sculptures, Iwamura employs textured surfaces evoking ancient Japanese pottery's handcrafted character while expanding and adapting the simple, modernist-feeling silhouettes of *haniwa* to create voluptuous, sensuous forms exuding an air of mystery and fun. His sculptures' faces may convey a sense of peacefulness, wonder, inquisitiveness, or contentment. Ranging in size from small to monumental, Iwamura's creations push the boundaries of ceramic art's potential as an expressive sculptural medium.

More recently, Iwamura has become a father for the first time. Watching his infant son play with building blocks and other simple toys, the artist says, has made him reexamine his understanding of the creative process and revel in the ways in which the composition of any new work emerges. He refers to “feeling the beauty” as his child’s building-blocks structures’ “colors and shapes come together” and “give shape to an artwork.”

With these observations — and considerable emotion — in mind, Iwamura has created the new works that will be featured in his debut solo exhibition at Almine Rech Shanghai. Among them, his signature use of color, texture, and energetic, irresistibly rotund form will feature strongly; so will his ongoing sense of experimentation with the elasticity of his art’s most basic and natural of materials: humble, durable, inexhaustibly expressive clay.

About his first solo exhibition at Almine Rech Shanghai, Iwamura notes, “I’m always very excited to be able to show my work for the first time in new countries and regions. Because I’m very interested in culture in all its diversity, I’m sincerely interested, too, in how my work will be received wherever it may be shown.”

With the gallery’s first-ever presentation of Iwamura’s work in China, this innovative creator representing the latest pioneering developments in one of his country’s most ancient crafts will have a high-profile opportunity to expand the reach of the deeply humanistic, resonant message of his magical art.

— Edward M. Gómez, critic, arts journalist and author