

The infinite within the bounds of form

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July 2018

One day in late summer, I visited Mokichi Otsuka at his home in Yamanashi Prefecture. The evening cicadas called as a gentle breeze blew through the trees in the garden of his classical Japanese home, bringing with it a cool scent. The breeze blew past the translucent paper doors and into the room, creating a pleasant atmosphere. However, the moment I saw the lifelike, red, terracotta works, I was forced to pause. I asked myself, what country was I in? The sensation was strange.

After studying terracotta for five years (1994–1999) in Faenza, Italy, Otsuka became seriously ill. This brush with death took hold while traveling in Greece, he came across a statue of the goddess, Kore. Her gentle beauty seemed to encompass life, moving him deeply. Ever since, Otsuka has devoted himself to capturing the joy of life that resides within the divine woman's form. In contrast to the quiet, feminine form works of the Greco-Roman world, he also creates images of cats that can be said to be emblematic his work. Overflowing with life, they appear on the verge of standing up to walk.

Later, in Nepal in 2016, he again faced a life-threatening condition. Otsuka felt as if he were enshrouded in darkness deep under the earth, even as he was high in the mountains. As a result of this experience, he adopted the Asian philosophy of the harmonious coexistence of life and death. Subsequent to this, whether by chance or necessity, he began to make holes in the white inlay that covers all his works, and like the first cry of a newborn baby, this was the moment they came alive.

The unique individuality of his works brought about by these air holes results in them seemingly existing somewhere between East and West... sometimes even combining the two. They cannot be described as simply representing the pursuit of formative beauty or spiritual expression. The stippling is not applied as decoration--rather, it is his way of interacting with the form he has made, gently drilling the holes one by one to allow the light to pass as an act of devotion. Denial and affirmation, death and life, internal and external, dark and light—opposites mix and circulate through these air holes. Otsuka's works create a mysterious undulation, comprising of endless yearning for the beauty of life. Their eyes gaze upon emptiness, forever locked in physical surprise, poetic sentiment, and the laws of the universe.

This exhibition will be the first solo exhibition of Otsuka's work to be held in New York and will present new works that he has created both in Yamanashi and Faenza. These terracotta prayers created by Mokichi Otsuka will spread across the earth, eternally.

They remind me of this poem that I would like to dedicate to him:

The great is to be found in the small,
The infinite within the bounds of form,
And the eternal freedom of the soul in love.

Rabindranath Tagore (b. India 1861–1941)