

The Heart of the Matter

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There is a water dropper, or *suiteki*, by Shin Fujihira that so closely evokes a heart it nearly seems to beat [Photo No.0381]. This heart is not the honeyed pink of Cupid's arsenal, but in its deep-veined blush—coaxed from red cinnabar—it rises into the territory of a muscle, a working tool at the very center of aliveness.

This heart that I find in Fujihira's work was perhaps outside the artist's intention but, once imagined, now exists. For those of us in the West, it is in some ways a gift that little is written in English on this Japanese master of clay. While the plot points of his biography are known, the impact of his work is free from the weight of words. Instead, the eye, the hand, and indeed, the heart, can lead the way.

Accolades are not needed to know that Fujihira was a maestro—this can be seen in the universe of his forms. His material command need not be detailed in prose. It is shown in the tenderness of a budding spout or understood in the clay bodies he has pinched and smoothed to a satisfying plumpness, or sharpened just enough to become steps that lead to another place. The majesty of his cinnabar glazes are cooled by cobalt or celadon. To take it all in requires an extra breath.

It is clear Shin Fujihira was driven by a rich inner life, perhaps cultivated during his years of illness as a young man. His figures—animal and human—are captured not only in the positive space of clay, but also in their presence, which extends out into the air around them. The implied roar of an open-mouthed tiger, the fable of a windswept girl who is nearly lifted up and carried away.

But, it is Fujihira's functional works that seem to be at the heart of his practice. The *chawan* and incense burners of the tea ceremony, the water droppers used to release the calligrapher's ink all come alive in the hand.

Fujihira inherited the material legacy of Kyoto's famed Gojozaka area where his family was among generations of potters who have known clay not only in their hands but in their bones. In his youth, Fujihira absorbed its depth, observing the oneness between hand and clay of *mingei* master Kanjiro Kawai. Clearly the artist cradled these traditions, but his forms chart a path somewhere new.

To make his work Fujihira eschewed the potter's wheel and instead used only his hands, pinching Kyoto's clay between them. While we may never know for sure, this methodical

pinching suggests a desire to reach beyond what we know and into what we feel. The tools he created are in service of their rituals—*suiteki*, tea bowls, incense burners—portals to release the most interior self found within the gesture of calligraphy, the bitter tang of tea.

Now the artist's spirit has come to New York, taking his rightful place within the beating heart of the city's boundless cultural impulses. Fujihira's world is now known in ours.