

The Effect of Sound in the Ceramic Works of Toshiko Takaezu

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the effect of sound in the ceramic works of Toshiko Takaezu (高江洲 敏子, 1922–2011) who is a Nisei American contemporary ceramic artist. Subsequently, the paper attempts to suggest new evaluations of Toshiko Takaezu. She is credited with being a part of the modern ceramic movement inspired by abstract expressionism in the postwar United States. The main characteristics of her ceramic works are their form and glaze; however, the sound element is an accessory feature that has received only incidental attention. Her art tends to be valued in terms of blending the East and West, which is related to the mysteries of the East, in another words, orientalism. In this paper, the author suggests new evaluations of Takaezu's art, not as a blending of the East and West, by examining the sound elements in her ceramics from phenomenological, historical, and aesthetic perspectives. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section introduces Toshiko Takaezu's evaluations in the U.S. In the second section the author describes the sound elements of 'closed forms' that are the signature forms of her ceramic works, and then examines their sound effects from the viewer's experience perspective, artistic trends, and the order of five senses. In the third section, the author suggests new historical and aesthetic evaluations of Takaezu's art. There are three points of the new evaluations: Firstly, she was ahead of artistic trends. Secondly, her art offered the delight of 'game-like play.' Thirdly, she challenged the traditional hierarchies of the five senses.

Keywords: ceramic movement; East and West; abstract expressionism; artistic trends: game-like enjoyment; five senses order

1. Introduction of Toshiko Takaezu

Toshiko Takaezu (1922–2011) is a Nisei American contemporary ceramic artist and, educator, born in Hawaii. Her Parents were agricultural immigrants from Okinawa. She was first exposed to ceramics when she began working in a commercial pottery factory. Recognized by her instructors, such as Carl Massa and Claude Horan, she studied ceramics, sculpture, design, and weaving at the University of Hawaii. To further her education, she left Hawaii and studied ceramics, weaving, and sculpture at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hill, Michigan, where she learned to discover her own voice from Maija Grotell, a prominent Finnish immigrant potter. Takaezu distinguished herself during her studies, receiving many awards (1). She also taught ceramics at universities, such as Cleveland institute of Art and Princeton University, for many years. She is known for her 'closed forms,' which are the ceramic works of sculptural round pots with closed tops. While ordinary ceramic pots are meant to hold something inside, her work is shaped like a pot, but the mouth is almost closed with a small air hole at the top, so nothing can be put inside. Her pots are not for practical use, but for artistic value.

Takaezu received numerous awards and honors (2), and her works are collected in major museums, and a lot of exhibitions have been held throughout the U.S. However, she is not renowned in Japan, despite two retrospectives in 1995, 2010 (3).

There are two main evaluations of her art. One is, ‘who holds a significant place in the World War II craft movement in the United States,’ and the other is ‘Takaezu has blended her Japanese heritage with a Western aesthetic to create dynamic works in clay, fiber, paint, and bronze.’ (4) The latter is often in other words, ‘blended Japanese Zen Buddhism with American abstract expressionism (5)’.

The history of American ceramics has been relatively short since the founding of the country, as if one did not consider the history of the Native Americans. Contemporary ceramics have always been influenced by many foreign trends and countries, such as William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the pottery that emigrated from Europe in 1930s, Bernard Leach, and Japanese potters such as Shoji Hamada in the early 1950s. In the middle of the 1950s the World War II ceramic movement occurred. James Jensen describes this as follows:

Along with Peter Voulkos and a number of other ceramic artists who emerged from the postwar years of the 1950s and 1960s, Takaezu has been instrumental in moving ceramics beyond its historical ties to the concept of function and into the realm of sculpture, transforming clay from something associated only with utilitarian objects to something that could be meaningful, capable of embodying abstract ideas (6).

Peter Voulkos’s change was largely triggered by teaching a summer course at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1953, where he became acquainted with avant-garde artists such as Josef Albers, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, and led by M.C. Richards, he met abstract expressionist painters such as Franz Kline in New York (7).

In this movement, Voulkos et al focused mainly on form, free, and abstract forms. After forming large jars and bowls on the potter’s wheel, Voulkos crushed and twisted to create sculptural forms. These productions were accompanied by wild and spontaneous gestures and were often compared and considered to be influenced by Pollock’s action paintings.

As for Takaezu, her ‘closed forms’ are sculptural enough, but she focused rather on glazing, free, and abstract. Her rich, diverse, and multilayered glazing was highly acclaimed. She described herself as painting in three dimensions; This was possible because of the nearly spherical, closed-mouth form. She was often compared and considered to be influenced by abstract expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko, Krantz Kline, and Helen Frankenthaler.

Regarding the detailed features of closed forms, as mentioned before, they are round or ovoid organic sculptural forms, with a closed mouth at the top, sometimes spherical or cylindrical. They have been created from 1958 until her death, in various sizes, shapes, and arrangements (sometimes grouping in installations). However, the most distinctive feature is the rich expression of glazes in colors and brushstrokes. (Colors: austere, tropical, metallic, Brushstrokes: calligraphic, free-flowing, multilayered)



Figure1: 'Closed Form', Date : 1960s, Medium: Glazed Porcelain
Dimensions : Height- 7 inches x Diameter - 6 inches (17.8 x 15 cm)
[<https://www.toshikotakaezufoundation.org/artwork/>]2023.



Figure2: Takaazu with her Moons : Photo Credit by Hiro
[<https://www.toshikotakaezufoundation.org/artwork/>]2023

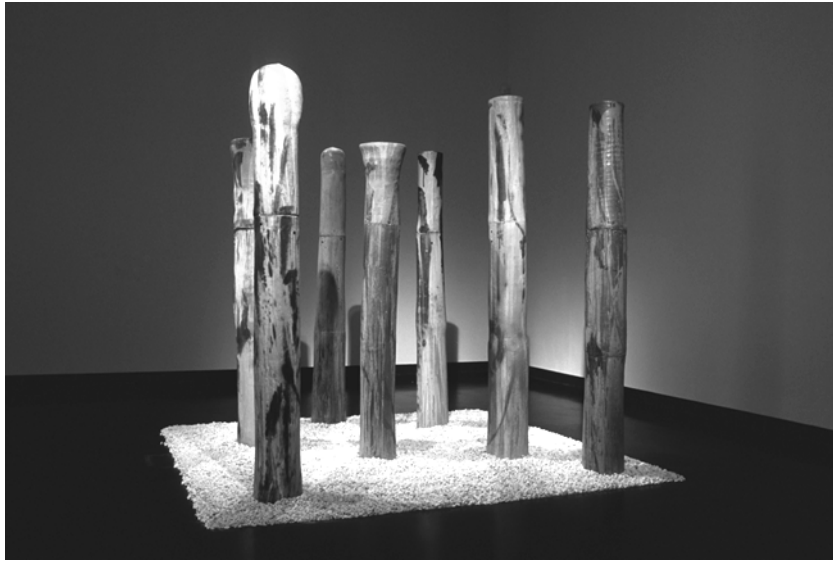


Figure3 : 'Homage to Devastation Forest (Tree Man Forest)'
Date : 1982 – 1987, Medium : Glazed stoneware
Dimensions : 98 H x 121 x 121 inches as installed (249 x 307 x 307 cm)
[<https://www.toshikotakaezuffoundation.org/artwork/>]2023.



Figure4 : Takaezu walking amongst the Star Series. Photo credit : Tom Grotta, 1998
[<https://www.toshikotakaezuffoundation.org/artwork/>]2023.

2. Sound elements of 'closed forms'

Since around 1960, Takaezu has installed devices inside many of her closed-form works that produce a rattling sound when shaken. She called it a bell. She explains the origin of this device as follows:

This grew out of mistake. I was trimming the top of a pot, and a piece fell in. When the clay is soft, it gets stuck, so you are not aware that it has gone in. However, it does not get stuck and it is loose. I fired a piece, and suddenly there was a sound. I thought, 'Why not take advantage of the mistake?' So, now, I make bead-round balls and put them in (8).

Closed-form sounds are described as bell-like, subtle rustling, and coastal. Regarding the possibility of making sounds, Takaezu explains that almost all works have sounds in them (9). However, there are cases in which closed forms have no sound because clay beads are stuck inside, or larger works do not have sound in them because they cannot be lifted and shaken. The interpretations of the sound elements in closed forms have much to do with those of the closed forms themselves.

The most important thing is in the darkness of the works, which is not exposed to our eyes.

This remark Takaezu mentioned about the closed forms several times has a strong influence on critics and researchers. Therefore, sound in a closed form is often realized, suggesting the existence of an internal dark space. This idea often led to Asian Mysteries, or Orientalism. Critics and researchers have two types of interpretations. One is related to Asian Mysteries. For the example, closed-form sounds are evaluated as Zen- Buddhism concepts such as ‘Void’(Halser,2012) (10), the poetic nature associated with Zen or the tea ceremony (Gedeon,2001) (11), answers to cosmic questions to all of nature (Jensen,1993) (12), the ancient Asian tradition of using sound for meditation and prayer (Shield,2011) (13), evoking an invisible universe, somewhere between the East and the West (Dufie,1995) (14) .

On the other hand, there are also a few interpretations of them in a sense different from Orientalism. For example, a symbol of life, a creation... giving life to the pot, likened to a womb (Lynn,1990) (15). and the further development of 20th century art’s attempts to put the sense of hearing into visual objects, such as sound objects, by Harry Bertolia (Shield,2011) (16) .

The author does not reject any of these interpretations. However, other unnoticed interpretations exist. The author focuses on the experience of the researcher, Carrie Liu, because of having had similar experiences. This is the experience of shaking the closed form with the collector and listening to sounds together. Carrie Liu writes as follows:

It was a secret enjoyment, an intimate relationship with the work. [...]With Anne’s permission, I picked up the form and shook it to hear the rattle sounds. The jingle brought immediate delight to us both. Later that day, we found ourselves standing in front of a large closed form, about five feet in height. We looked at each other and wondered with a laugh whether it would rattle if we could even manage to lift it. I am glad to have shared those moments of joy and laughter in appreciation of this artist.(17)

The author thinks there are two key points of this experience. One is that enjoyment is amplified when viewers listen to the sound not alone, but with others. Sound also develops empathy in those who listen together. In other words, the artwork helps to build intimate relationships among people who listen to the sound with each other. Secondly, you cannot know whether there is a sound until you shake; It, giving the viewer a sense of play - a game-like excitement. These two key points indicate that Takaezu’s art contained elements of empathy, catalyst, and play. In other words, her art has instrumental aesthetic value. As mentioned previously, Takaezu was influenced by abstract expressionist paintings. In terms of artistic trend, abstract expressionism belongs to modernism. Modernism seeks artistic autonomy and aesthetic value. However, as mentioned earlier, Takaezu’s art focuses on instrumental aesthetic value, which differs from modernist art. Therefore, in terms of artistic trends, the author considers Takaezu art to be close to postmodernism and relational art. Post-modernism is said to have occurred at the end of 70s and relational art around the 90s. Considering that Takaezu began her sound device in 1960, it can be said that she was ahead of these artistic trends. This is the first point suggested by the author.

As second point that mentioned previously, her artwork offers game-like pleasure. Regarding artworks that offer the sense of play, Isamu Noguchi’s playground equipment works, like ‘Black

slide mountain' could be pointed out. These works involved the tactile sense. This paper discusses Takaezu's ideas on the tactile sense. However, Noguchi's playground works did not offer the same game-like enjoyment as Takaezu's, who did not know if it made a sound until you touched it. This was a unique effect of her work. This is the second point suggested by the author.

As for the tactile sense mentioned previously, Takaezu explained that she put sound in a closed form because she wanted people to touch her work. She placed great emphasis on the tactile aspects of her ceramic works and the sound was intended to invite the viewer into a tactile experience. Originally, ceramics were something to be touched and used, but ironically, the tactile aesthetic value of ceramics became limited when they became a pure art form, such as sculpture, in the post-World War II ceramic movement. Garth Clark describes the situation as follows:

Contemporary American ceramics has progressed from the anonymity of the craft shop to the critical spotlight of the museum and the art gallery. Its aesthetic concerns have become the focus of serious scholarly attention. (18)

Artworks exhibited and collected in art galleries and museums should not be touched upon without permission for reasons of protection. Regarding the order of the senses, she said that the first was sight, second was touch, and third was hearing, although she said that the integration of all these senses was more important than their order. However, her order differs from the pecking order of the five senses in Western philosophy since Aristotle's time, wherein the first was sight, the second, hearing, and the third, touch. Traditionally in the West, the idea that the spirit is noble and the body is barbaric has persisted. This is reflected in art: the high status of painting and sculpture, and the low status of craft. However, contemporary art has been challenging traditional notions of art, and the hierarchies of the five senses had already been shaken in the post-World War II era when avant-garde art was on the rise. However, this can not be completely ruled out. Therefore, the author believes that Takaezu challenged the traditional hierarchy of the five senses by asserting the tactile aesthetics of ceramics as pure art in a sophisticated manner to touch it to listen to the sound inside. In other words, this is a sophisticated objection to the traditional five-sense hierarchy. This is the third point suggested by the authors.

3. Conclusion

This paper examines the sound elements in the ceramic works by Toshiko Takaezu phenomenologically, historically, and aesthetically. The author suggests three new points about the evaluation of Takaezu's artworks. First, her artworks were ahead of the artistic trends of postmodernism and relational art by increasing empathy and acting as catalysts for building human relationships. Second, her artworks offered the delight of game-like 'play,' which is a unique effect of artworks. Third, she emphasizes the tactile aesthetics of ceramics and challenges the traditional hierarchy of the five senses in a sophisticated manner. Moreover, all three points were made possible by the intervention of sound; therefore, all of these can be realized as sound effects of her ceramic works.

Notes

1. Takaezu received the best clay student award at Cranbrook in 1952. (Jeffrey Spahn, "Chronology," in *In the language of silence: the Art of Toshiko Takaezu*, ed. Peter Held (North Carolina :The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 146.)
2. Dickinson Arts Award, Dickinson College (1983), Living Treasure Award, Hawaii (1987),

Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, University of Hawaii (1993), Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts, Princeton University (1996), Legends Award, Watershed Center for Arts presented at SOFA Chicago (2009), etc. (Spahn, “Selected Grants and awards,” 152.)

3. 1995: Toshiko Takaezu: Retrospective, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan; The Gallery of the City of Naha, Okinawa, Japan; Takaoka Museum, Takaoka, Japan; Seto Ceramics Museum, Nagoya, Japan. 2010: In Memory of My Parents: An Exhibition by Takaezu Toshiko, Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum, Naha City, Okinawa
4. Paul J. Smith, “Toshiko Takaezu: Six Decades,” in *In the language of silence the Art of Toshiko Takaezu*, ed. Peter Held, (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 13.
5. However, some critics deny her association with abstract expressionism, for example, John Perreau, as follows:

Although her glaze-painting strategies may be mistaken for American Expressionism, she is not an Action Painter on clay, in the same way that Voulkos can be seen as an Abstract Expressionist with clay.

(“Toshiko Takaezu: Truth in Clay,” in *Toshiko Takaezu: Heaven and Earth*, (Wisconsin: Rasine Art Museum, 2005), 8.)
6. James Jensen, “The Sculpture Forms of Toshiko Takaezu,” in *Toshiko Takaezu Retrospective*, (Kyoto: The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 1995), 21.
7. Masago Shimizu, “Chronology”, in *Contemporary American Ceramics [1950–1990]: A Survey of American Objects and Vessels* (Aichi: Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum, 2002), 173.
8. Richard Polsky, “The Reminiscences of Toshiko Takaezu (1995, 110–112.),” in Toshiko Takaezu papers, Sumithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/toshiko-takaezu-papers-8483/series-3/box-8-folder-10>
9. Gerry Williams, “Oral history interview with Toshiko Takaezu, 2003 June 16,” in Toshiko Takaezu papers, Sumithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/toshiko-takaezu-papers-8483/more-information>
10. Krystal Reiko Hauseur, *Crafted Abstraction: Three Nisei Artists and the American Studio Craft Movement: Ruth Asawa, Kay Sekimachi, and Toshiko Takaezu* (University of California, Irvine ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 2011), 187.
11. Lucinda H. Gedeon, “Introduction,” in *Toshiko Takaezu* (New York, Neuberger Museum of Art, 2001), 3.
12. James Jensen and Jennifer Saville, ‘Toshiko Takaezu: Listening to Clay’, Toshiko Takaezu (Hawaii: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1993), 9.
13. Scott A. Shields, “Echoes of the Earth”, in *Echoes of the Earth: Ceramics by Toshiko Takaezu* (California: Crocker Art Museum, 2007), 13.
14. Owen Duffy, “Toshiko Takaezu James Cohan, New York 15April–7May”, *Art Review*, (summer, 2022): 93.

15. Vanessa Lynn, "Rounder than Round: The Closed Forms of Toshiko Takaezu." *American Ceramics*, (8:4, 1990): 22.
16. Scott A. Shields. "Echoes of the Earth", in *Echoes of the Earth: Ceramics by Toshiko Takaezu* (California: Crocker Art Museum, 2007), 13.
17. Cary Y. Liu, "Presence and Remembrance: The art of Toshiko Takaezu", *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University*, Vol.68, (2009): 47.
18. Garth Clark, "Introduction", in *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1987):9.

Author Biography

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