

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

HIROYUKI HAMADA

Growing up in the suburbs of Tokyo, Hiroyuki Hamada had no idea he was destined to become an artist. "I always enjoyed making things," he said, "but everything changed when I realized I was an artist." Speaking from his East Hampton studio last week, he took some time to reflect on the life of the artist and on the mutability of aesthetics, rituals and raising kids. His most recent exhibit at Swarthmore College's List Gallery in Pennsylvania closed just weeks ago.

"Hiroyuki's art is definitely a journey toward a universal language," said Andrea Packard, Director of List Gallery. The show, a selection of wall pieces, freestanding sculptures and works on artist-made pedestals was met with unambiguous zeal from not only the college but the broader community as well. "I think that he's very good at creating works that speak differently to different people," she continued. "One person might see the work in terms of formalist or minimalist idioms, another would see elements of Japanese culture, Buddhism or the language of technology. One of the most powerful things about his work is that it is multivalent in its associations."

Indeed, Hamada's art deftly moves among associations on numerous levels, and the concept of elasticity is one of its strengths. "I'm sort of working behind my brain to get wherever I'm headed," the artist said. Ironically, the black ovoid clinging to his studio wall (#66) looks conspicuously like a human head. And then it looks like a giant moon rock polished to a soft shine as if handled for decades. Hamada's art is filled with things that look like other things. And then you blink, and suddenly they look just like themselves.

Contemplative, illusory and mutable, his imagery as well as his approach is plastic in nature. Beehives, throat lozenges, Lifesavers and torpedo silhouettes fill the studio, their surfaces variously pocked and dimpled, honed to a glossy sheen or stacked into subcontinents that cleave to shared edges. Rubbing resins, wax and pigment into smoothed and sanded layers of plaster, Hamada transforms basic construction materials into something that swells with spirit and consciousness. It feels, in fact, like a pulse might lurk beneath the finished surface of each object instead of the structural foam, burlap and plaster the artist claims to be there. In spite of such contradictions, Hamada's work achieves a synthesis throughout that is resonant -- even tribal in its homogeneity.

"I was a rebellious kid," he mused. "I guess I was mad about life's imperfections. I was angry." The voyage from there to here has been a fascinating one.

Hamada moved to the United States fresh out of high school. He didn't much care for the Japanese suburbs, but, at odds with his parents, he was reluctant to move abroad when his father, who worked in the steel industry, relocated the family to West Virginia. "I was just

hanging around, so my father said 'come with us.' I didn't really have anything else going on, so I did."

The young rebel didn't speak English, so he enrolled in the local community college. Learning a new language was a revelation. "If everyone on earth had to learn one another's language, all our problems would be solved," he mused.

Hamada suffered a conversion, a propitious one, you might say, during this period. "I had a teacher who was a painter," he said. "Before that, I never knew you could be an artist. The idea that you could put things together on paper and make something significant – something that could move you – that changed everything for me. At a certain point, it just became so obvious that I was a visual artist."

Three years later when his family returned to Japan, he decided to stay stateside. Reflecting on the past, he said, "It seemed like a good idea to live here." He paused. "But...maybe they abandoned me."

The young artist soldiered on. He matriculated through graduate school and then embarked on a series of residencies at venerated artist's colonies such as Skowhegan, the Edward Albee Foundation and the MacDowell Colony. He met his wife, the writer Evan Harris, at MacDowell. "I commuted between New Jersey and East Hampton until she finally asked me to move in." The couple now shares the joys as well as the exhaustion of two young children.

Back in the studio, concoctions of Damar varnish, turpentine, roofing tar and melted wax line worktables. Curls of painter's tape cascade over the sides like bright waterfalls. Other than blue tape and a single bucket filled with plastic Easter eggs, the studio is resolutely devoid of color. "Kids..." he said, looking down at the mound of broken eggshells. We continued to wind through racks of electric drills, sanders, slabs of foam and power cords.

A work in progress, "#56," hangs quietly on the far wall of the studio. Incised lines filled with oily pigment define the frontal plane as Herringbone patterns weave across its surface. One of his signature marks, concentric circles gently drilled into plaster, dot the surface like tiny crop circles. In other works, pencil thin lines glide like birds in formation, swaying in mathematical warps as if guided by a giant, elliptical compass. The preciseness is uncanny, and it lends a machine-age quality to the work, as if parts were discovered in an abandoned airplane hanger and buffed to a shine after years of neglect.

Another work, "#61", is a meditation on linearity interrupted by a chocolate brown horizon. Shaped into an egg-shaped cranium, the upper half is covered with larvae-like buds that proliferate like cocoa beans run amok. Its bottom half, a testament to self-discipline, is segmented into geometric ribs that straddle a central spine. They flay outward like inverted frets, each segment incised into plaster and then saturated with resin. Sinking into the surface, Hamada's lines mark their surface much the way a tattoo impregnates human skin. They exude a sense of permanence and immutability.

And there lies the proverbial rub. The humanness of this work is undeniable, not only because of certain anthropomorphic qualities but because the pieces exude a fragmented yet genuine pathos. They exist outside of realism or abstraction – separate from divinity but at the same time contemplative, even devotional. “I’m not nationalistic at all,” said Hamada. “I have no strong allegiance to any country.” And yet, his works exude Zen-ness as if just rolled in a dust bath of pure Buddha-nature.

Like all interesting artists, Hamada is one in a long chain of antecedents. Chief among his are the Romanian artist, Constantin Brancusi, who shook things up early in the last century with his “Endless Columns” and pedestal constructions. Hamada’s roots are not only situated alongside the late artist, but astride a long legacy that ranges from Cycladic idols to African sculpture; from Hindu architecture to Inuit homes. Distinctly minimalist, his works roll over and over, switching from the ritualistic to the discretely urbane. What resembles a Buddhist pillow transforms into a Bayer aspirin. A facial façade mutates into a beetle, a seedpod or a chrome dome. A prayer tablet shape-shifts into a bathtub. And so on. In their own way, Hamada’s works, *sotto voce* as they are, are exquisitely playful, bubbling with life and animation.

Working with an austere palette – one that is hard wrought as opposed to selected – Hamada derives his pigmentation from nature. Ivory, white, asphaltum black and earthy browns make up his color chart. Striking a balance between what is seen and what is remembered, the artist’s course marks its transitions in subtle turns as if following in the path of an ever-widening spiral. “Some people do things because they like it,” he said, “some because they’re good at it. I’m lucky because maybe I have a little bit of both.”

In deed, that is lucky enough.

Janet Goleas