

Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay



Shinichi Sawada, *Untitled (169)*, 2020. Wood fired ceramic, 6 3/4 × 13 3/8 × 8 inches. Courtesy the artist, James Cohan, New York, and Jennifer Lauren Gallery, Manchester, UK. Photo courtesy Izzy Leung.

Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay is the artist's first solo museum exhibition in the United States. For more than two decades, Sawada—who is based in Japan's Shiga Prefecture—has produced a mesmerizing variety of alluring ceramic figures. Sawada's creatures are singular and inventive, existing somewhere between the natural world and the artist's imagination. The surfaces are significantly worked, with repeated linear patterns, horns, scales, teeth, bumps, protrusions, and often, multiple faces and eyes. These hybrid animals, insects, birds, and dragons have presence and personality far beyond their modest scale. And their infinite variances underscore Sawada's artistic breadth, originality, and creativity. *Agents of Clay* brings together a selection of works Sawada made between 2004 and 2021. The sculptures

are made in centuries-old Japanese tradition, fired in single-chamber anagama kilns, also known as cave kilns, fueled by wood fires that are stoked for days at a time. This particular kiln is next to a sheet metal cabin surrounded by nature in the mountains of the Shiga Prefecture, an area known for the Shigaraki ceramic ware, believed to originate in the 13th century and which is thought to have become prominent due to the presence of good clay. While Sawada's works appear in many different colors and surface textures there is no use of glaze. As elemental vapors circulate through the kiln and settle on the sculpture's surfaces, they create finishes that range from russet red, orange, and umber, to ashy white and deep, velvety black. It is the wood firing process that inherently creates such great variation.

Sawada makes his work with support from Nakayoshi Fukushima Welfare Association, which offers social and developmental assistance to a range of neurodivergent and disabled individuals. Sawada has nonspeaking autism, and has been engaged in many activities at Fukushima, from baking to textiles. But he began making ceramics in 2000, and with the assistance of the kiln master, Masaharu Iketani, has been prolifically creating objects in series, and revisiting certain characters, textures, and forms.

Sawada's work has been seen in many presentations across the world, but perhaps the most noteworthy was in the 2013 Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni. Titled *The Encyclopedic Palace*, the show featured Sawada's sculptures of, in Gioni's words, "imaginary beings... simultaneously familiar and strange," and propelled the artist's work onto a world stage, captivating new audiences.

This exhibition is co-organized by CAM and The Mint Museum. The accompanying catalog provides further insight into Sawada's work. Featuring an introduction by Jen Sudul Edwards, Ph.D., and a scholarly essay by independent curator, writer, and arts administrator of contemporary art and craft, Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy, Sawada's work is contextualized in the history of Japanese clay traditions and contemporary ceramics.

Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay is organized by Lisa Melandri, Executive Director, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and Jen Sudul Edwards, Ph.D., Chief Curator and Curator of Contemporary Art, The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC.

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**Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis**
3750 Washington Blvd
St. Louis, MO 63108
314.535.4660

Shinichi Sawada (b. 1982) lives and works in Japan's Shiga prefecture. Since 2000, he has attended Nakayoshi Fukushima, a social welfare facility that supports disabled people. In 2020, a solo exhibition of his work traveled from the Museum Lothar Fischer in Neumarkt to the Georg Kolbe Museum in Berlin. His work has featured prominently in major group exhibitions around the world, including *The Encyclopedic Palace* at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013 and *The Doors of Perception* at Frieze New York in 2019. His work is held in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions, including the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Halle Saint Pierre, Paris; and the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca.

Exhibition Catalog

Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay

64 pp, full color reproductions

Editors: Lisa Melandri and Jen Sudul Edwards, Ph.D.

Essay: Angelik Vizcarrondo-Laboy

Published by: Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and
The Mint Museum, Charlotte NC

Available for purchase at the CAM Shop where members receive at 10% discount.

Touch Pieces

Local clay artist Dan Barnett created a series of tiles that visitors can interact with in order to feel the surface of wood-fired ceramics. Available at the front desk.

Related Programs

Free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For a complete list of programs, please visit camstl.org

**In Conversation: Lisa Melandri with Angelik
Vizcarrondo-Laboy**

Thursday, January 23, 6:00 pm–7:00 pm

Learn More

Visit camstl.org for more information about *Shinichi Sawada: Agents of Clay*, including an **audio guide** by Lisa Melandri and **video** related to Sawada.



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Open until 8:00 pm Fri

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