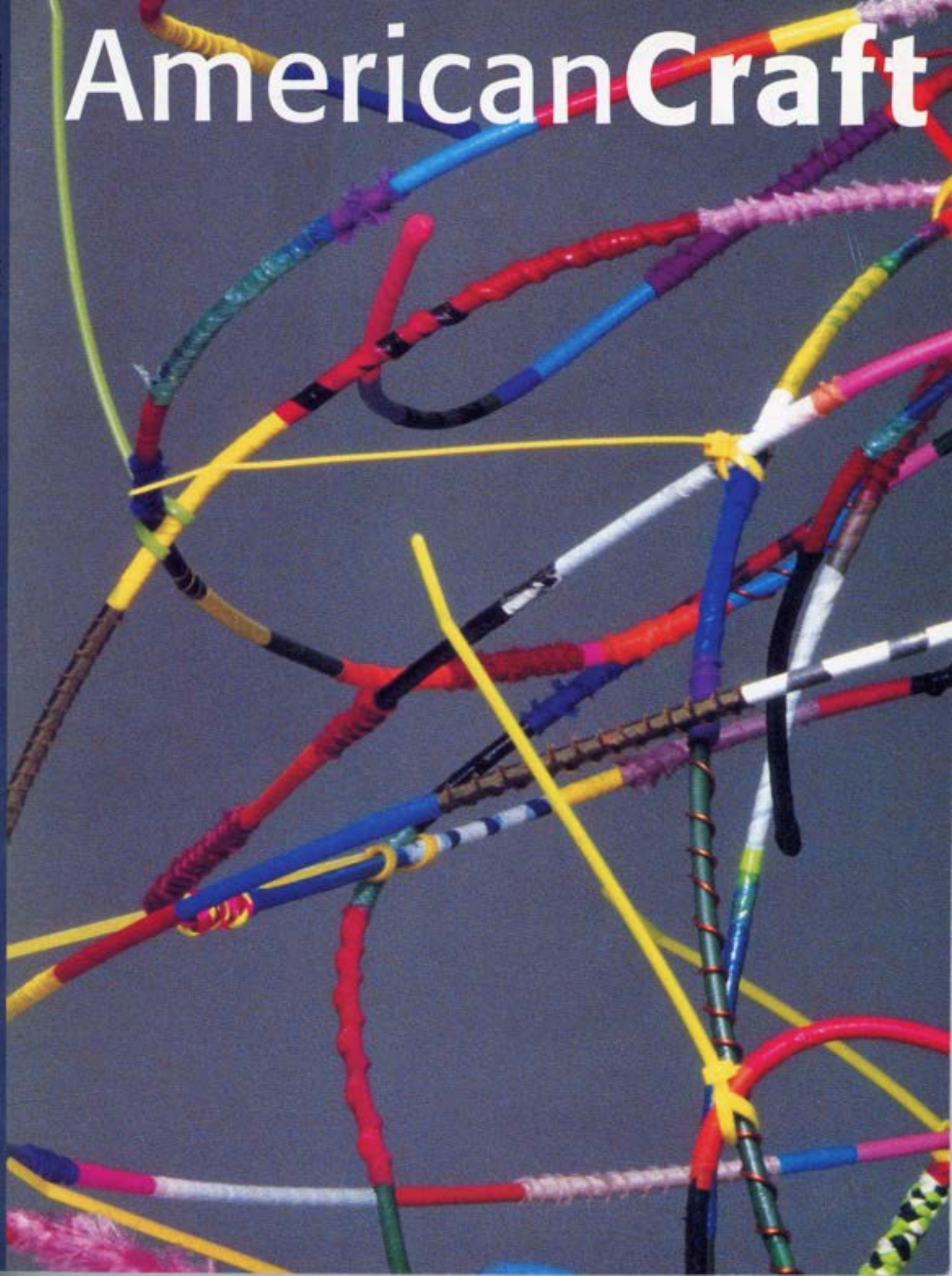


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COVER: *Bright Neck*, 1993, detail, wire, electrical tape, cable ties, 22 by 22 inches, by Gyöngy Laky. Story on page 78. Photograph © Tom Grota, courtesy of Brown/Grota Gallery.

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iCálido! Some Like It Warm

Putting blown glass aside, the Tucson Museum of Art sets forth the merits of warm glass techniques in an exhibition on national tour. *by Edward Lebow*

62

Naked Truth: The Figurative Sculpture of Esther Shimazu

The Hawaii artist is fond of saying that her ceramic figures are confident and happy being who they are "chunky bald and naked." *by Jo Lauria*

68

American Expressions

A recent exhibition in New Mexico points up the incredible diversity that exists today in Native American metalwork. *by Lane Coulter*

72

Gyöngy Laky: The Intelligent Hand

Her work is a frenzy of interconnections—curling twigs that seem to embrace themselves or a handful of sharp metallic angles that appear to bristle with electricity at every point of contact. *by Chori Santiago*

78

1997 American Craft Council Awards

The Council honors 19 for distinguished achievement.

84

Brave New Ceramics

The explosion of research into materials over the last few decades has produced what is known as "advanced ceramics," on display this past summer at Alfred University's International Museum of Ceramic Art. *by William Walker Jr*

95

PORTFOLIO

BUZZ COREN *Burnsville, NC*

BRYAN JAMES BOWERS *San Francisco, CA*

SONYA Y.S. CLARK *Baltimore, MD*

SUSAN BEINER *Detroit, MI*

LYNNE CALDWELL *Chapel Hill, NC*

SARAH OBRECHT *Gilbert, AZ*

98

CRAFT WORLD 8

FOCUS ON GLASS 110

BOOKS 28

Edward Lebow reviews *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand* by Malcolm McCullough

Sharon Fitzgerald reviews *A Communion of the Spirits: African-American Quilters, Preservers, and Their Stories* by Roland L. Freeman, *African American Visual Aesthetics: A Postmodernist View*, editor David C. Driskell, and *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* by Bell Hooks

Commissions 58

Gallery 112

Calendar 118

Advertising Index 125

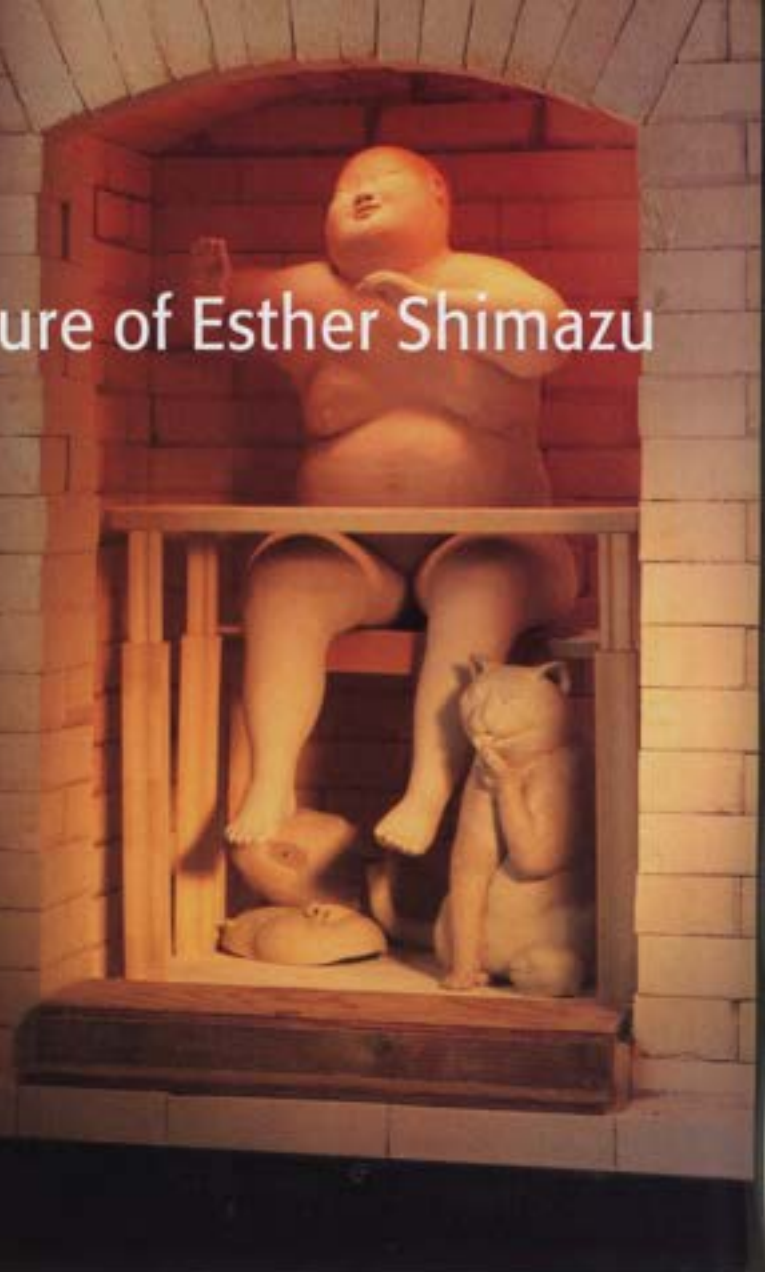
ACC Calendar 126

Photo Credits 126

Classified 127

American Craft Council News 128

Naked Truth: The Figurative Sculpture of Esther Shimazu



By JO LAURIA

Esther Shimazu's ceramic nudes affirm the primacy of personal vision. The artist is fond of saying that her figures are confident and happy being who they are: "They are chunky bald and naked, and don't care."

A third-generation Japanese-American and native of Honolulu, Shimazu is one of five sisters, all born within a seven-year span. She credits this rapid-fire succession of siblings as the motivation for the familial imagery in her work. By her own admission, her nudes are expressionistic statements about her background, culture and experience. Shimazu booby-traps us in the act of looking, forcing our perceptions to shift to accommodate her provocative style and the potent physicality of her work. Her nudes are not static, objectified representations of idealized Asian beauty—demure and resolved. Rather, this artist spars with us, presenting the raw truth of exposed flesh cascading into folds and undulating expanses articulating breast, belly and genitalia. Fortright and self-possessed, Shimazu's nudes challenge us to jettison our voyeurism.

Shimazu studied at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, earning B.F.A. and M.F.A. degrees in ceramics in 1980 and 1982, respectively. Following the demands of the curriculum, she ran the gauntlet of ceramic processes, becoming proficient at both wheel-thrown and sculptural work. But the wheel proved too confining for her expressive temperament, and she turned instead to hand-building figurative sculptures, treating them as if they were conjoined hollow and animated pots, each segment representing an anatomical part. Ineluctably, pots speak of the figure, borrowing nomenclature from human anatomy: lip, shoulder, belly, foot. Shimazu is comfortable exploiting this analogy—mindful of pottery's functional aspect, its potential for serving human needs.

Esther Shimazu in her Kailua, Hawaii, studio, 1995, holding *Scissorskick*, with *Coral Fish* and *Fat Cat* sitting in her gas-burning kiln, all work about to be fired.

The physicality of her nudes derives from their organic, bulbous volumes. In any well-formed pot, the center—or belly—is the essential volume. Shimazu goes to the well of traditional form and comes up with a full bucket: she makes the belly the focal point of every nude. Although they bear an aesthetic affinity to the pre-Columbian figurative pots of Nayarit and the lounging nudes of the French sculptor Gaston Lachaise, Shimazu's figures are rooted in and emblematic of Japanese culture and religion. *Hara* is the Japanese word that describes a person's belly—or center, the center of the soul, the center of balance and reference, the center of who you are (*hara-kiri*, the term for ritual suicide by disembowelment, literally means slitting the belly). Those who practice the Japanese martial art of aikido learn that the center of all unity and power resides in the *hara*. The protruding belly also suggests traditional Asian sculptures of Buddha, a reference reinforced by Shimazu's designation of the figures as "little deities."

The artist's own figure is the primary source of her personal exploration. Because she is the model, all the sculptures share common traits. Yet they are stylized portraits rather than strict self-portraiture; Shimazu's concern is not with the rigors of representation but with expressiveness. Her figures are deliberately bald and unclad, as if investing them with coiffures and clothing would impart too much information. She prefers them uncluttered, without cultural or social signifiers. Though female bodies predominate in her work, Shimazu produces the occasional male, almost always a boy. These resemble the females, except that they have broader shoulders and of course the attendant genitals.

The deliberate nakedness of the figures allows for smooth surfaces, which Shimazu treats rather reductively. Most often she applies a wash of brown oxides or commercial stains to the sanded bisque and then sands the figure after the high-fire process, further exposing and texturizing the surface to achieve a natural, skin-like unevenness. Sometimes she lets the clay reveal itself, preferring the warmth of the yellow stoneware to any applied coloring. The clay's richness is further enhanced by the reduction-firing atmosphere in the kiln which imparts a warm yellow-brown glow.

Mouths, hands and feet are of particular interest to Shimazu. Frequently the nudes are grinning, displaying perfectly articulated dentals. This act of "exposing one's teeth" is symbolic for the artist, for it is an act of defiance. It is considered ill-bred to bare one's pearly whites in public; traditional Japanese etiquette requires a young lady to hide her mouth behind her hands. So on every count Shimazu's females are bold-faced—naked and insolently beaming, tweaking social conventions while allowing the viewer a laugh at the commentary.

Shimazu renders hands and feet as though they were part of a notation and signage system. She empowers the appendages of her figures in a manner suggestive of the ancient "dancing Shiva" sculptures of Southeast Asia and the hula dances of her native Hawaii. The chubby feet and refined hands work together in a gestural scheme that implies an arrested moment in the choreography of personal narrative. In *Interrupted Nap*, 1996, the figure's fingers and toes alternately stretch and curl in rhythmic counterpoint, as if she were awakening from a satisfying dream-sleep.

Another strategy Shimazu employs with characteristic wit and aplomb is the placement of animals in company with human figures. She considers dogs and cats to be "almost as expressive as people" and revels in divining their essential character, especially their "playful naughtiness." Through physiognomy, posture and gesture, Shimazu defines what renders them truly dog- and cat-like; they are true to their nature, not mere mimes of human expectation. Shimazu's studio is a stone's throw from the beaches of the Pacific, and for her, fish represent a link to Hawaii's island history and the sustenance of its civilization. In her Fish Dream series, Shimazu has paired her nudes with fish that appear not typically aloof and strange but friendly—even intimate. In *Boy Holding Fish*, 1992, the fish is as cuddly as a teddy bear; in *Madame Fish*, 1996, the big blue fish lightly brushes the figure's jolly cheeks in what can only be described as a friendly nuzzle; and in *Fish Wish*, 1997, a school of fish circle and caress the woman.

Esther Shimazu's sculptures comment on a society that looks askance at naked, direct and guileless presentation and prefers the virtual over the real, image over object, artifice over honesty. Nude, bald and happy, her figures refuse to take life's concerns on the chin. Their brazen demeanor propels the viewer against the ropes, forcing engagement with the senses. ■

Jo Lauria is assistant curator in the Decorative Arts Department of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California.