

SHINICHI SAWADA

Working deep in the woods, this Japanese sculptor creates pieces that are unique and mysterious

MIZUE KOBAYASHI



Untitled (17), n.d., ceramic, 8 x 8 x 8 in. / 20 x 21 x 20 cm, photo: Andrew Hood

Shinichi Sawada works silently and calmly, his fingers moving with complete certainty and dexterity to create his distinctive clay sculptures. At 37, he is one of the most recognised *art brut* artists from Japan, but he himself does not grasp people's fascination with his work.

As a child, Sawada attended a special school for several years and was then enrolled at a boarding school in the city of Kusatsu – it was here that he was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. From the age of 18, he began to attend a local social welfare facility – an institution for people with mental disabilities called Nakayoshi Fukushikai, situated in Shiga Prefecture, western Japan. He went three or four

times a week and, although he lives with his parents, he still regularly goes to the centre today.

At first, Sawada tried his hand at Sashiko (a traditional form of Japanese embroidery) during his sessions at the institution – but it was pottery that drew him in. As the centre did not have a proper area for claywork, the head of the facility arranged for a small, sheet-metal cabin to be constructed deep in the woods, a few kilometres from the main buildings, in which Sawada and others could create. However, the cabin was, and still is, a very basic structure that can only be used in the warmer months as it has no real walls or doors – low temperatures prevent people from working there and also affect the clay.



Untitled (58), n.d., ceramic, 10 x 6 x 7.5 in. / 25 x 15 x 19 cm, photo: Ellie Walmsley

Sawada has a set routine on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. In the mornings, he works with others in the in-house bakery making bread and then selling and delivering the produce locally. Sometimes, he also helps out packing small electrical items. In the afternoons, he is driven over to the pottery cabin with Akio Kontani, another sculptor, and Iketani, the retired facilitator who has worked with Sawada since he first started coming to the institution.

Iketani built two large earthenware kilns in the cabin, but they are only lit twice a year due to the cost of the wood and the dedicated labour required to monitor and keep them at the right temperature continuously for three days and nights. One of the kilns

can be heated to 800 degrees, which gives the clay a black colour, while the larger kiln goes to 1,200 degrees, creating a reddish-brown hue with a slight sheen (the exact tone depends on the amount of ash that crystallises during the firing). After being fired the kilns take at least a week to cool down, and it is only then that the ceramics can be removed. All the artists who use the cabin need to have their work fired, so space in the two annual firings is shared out equally.

Sawada is a prolific artist. He takes four or five days to complete one of his ceramic creatures. Each is built around a cylindrical base, so it is hollow in the centre. Most have faces on more than one side and some have several faces stacked on top of one another giving the

this page: *Untitled (23)*, n.d., ceramic, 10 x 10 x 3.5 in. / 26 x 26 x 9 cm, photo: Andrew Hood
opposite: *Untitled (51)*, n.d., ceramic, 6 x 12 x 6 in. / 15 x 30 x 15 cm, photo: Ellie Walmsley









top: *Two paper cars*, 2017, paper, 1.5 x 2 x 5 in. / 4 x 6 x 12 cm (left), 2 x 2 x 6 in. / 6 x 6 x 16 cm (right), photos: Satoshi Takaishi



above: *Untitled (56)*, n.d., ceramic, 7 x 10 x 19 in. / 17 x 25 x 48 cm, photo: Ellie Walmsley
 opposite: *Untitled (41)*, n.d., ceramic, 8 x 15 x 7 in. / 21 x 38 x 18 cm, photo: Andrew Hood

creations a totem pole look. All the pieces are covered in little spikes – or “thorns” as some people describe them. These attachments have evolved over time, becoming denser and more rounded. Sawada applies them in quick succession, often laying them out in straight, orderly lines across the surface of the clay. He moves his delicate fingers – which are often described as ladylike – without hesitation, and works in silence, although a gentle tune on the stereo often plays in the background.

No-one knows who or what Sawada’s spiky creatures represent; due to the nature of his autism, the artist barely communicates verbally. He demonstrates such confidence and assuredness when he works that it seems that he has envisioned exactly how his final piece will look, despite having no visual references in front of him. He replicates one of around 15 different

creature motifs each time, but, as each piece is created entirely from memory, there are subtle differences that make each finished piece unique.

In 2013, his work featured in the 55th Venice Biennale in the Encyclopedic Palace. Curator Massimiliano Gioni says that he chose to include Sawada’s works because he had never seen anything like them before. He says, “Perhaps it is the opposite – I chose them as they seemed to contain so many variations of things I had seen before. I liked how they connected to centuries of depictions of imaginary beings (which immediately complicates any reductive reading of self-taught art as developing outside traditions and art history). I couldn’t help thinking of Borges’s book of imaginary beings, of medieval bestiaries and pre-Columbian sculpture. And I loved





above: *Untitled (53)*, n.d., ceramic, 8 x 13 x 7 in. / 20 x 34 x 18 cm, photo: Ellie Walmsley
 opposite: *Untitled (1)*, n.d., ceramic, 7 x 14.5 x 6 in. / 18 x 37 x 16 cm, photo: Andrew Hood



Shinichi Sawada working, c. 2007, photo: Satoshi Takaishi

All images courtesy: Jennifer Lauren Gallery

the combination of fidelity – realism, if you will – and freedom of imagination. They displayed a faith in the power of imagination, depicted with absolute precision, that I had rarely encountered before.”

Sawada’s work has evolved in recent years, moving towards a freer aesthetic. Since 2015, fellow sculptor Kontani has been working alongside him in the pottery cabin. At one point during this period, Sawada stopped attending for nine months – with his limited verbal communication, not even his family understood why. It is clear, however, that Kontani’s style of sculpting has had an effect on Sawada – his creations have altered to look remarkably similar to Kontani’s with less regimented spikes. In 2018, new works of the two artists were shown for the first time side-by-side in the “Art Brut Japonais II” show at the Halle Saint Pierre, Paris.

Alongside his ceramic sculptures, Sawada recently began to make cars from paper while at home with his family. He would work on them for around three hours after arriving home from the institution. Each car took three or four days to complete and includes intricate details such as seats, a speed gauge, door handles and wing mirrors, with some moving parts that replicate the motion on the real thing. Sawada’s parents recall that he did not use scissors for these pieces, but simply tore the paper with his hands. He made around 30 vehicles until one day he just stopped. Again, due to his lack of

communication, his parents do not know why. He appears to have a fond attachment to the cars and is protective of them; to date, he has only given permission for them to be shown at a [Japanese art brut exhibition in Nantes in 2018](#) and at the Halle Saint Pierre later that same year.

Conversely, Sawada’s ceramics work is currently in several collections, including the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne, the abcd collection in Paris, and the Dammann Collection in Switzerland. Back at the institution in Osaka, his work takes pride of place on shelves at the entrance where he places them once they have been taken from the kiln. Those who run the institution are keen for local government to know about the artwork that is created within their walls – they want external acknowledgement and recognition for their work and that of the artists. They are not concerned with *art brut* terminology – for them, labelling by the outside world is irrelevant and it is the art and the act of creation that are important. The same goes for Sawada as he continues to make his sculptures in the pottery cabin in the woods.

Mizue Kobayashi is a director specialising in Japanese *art brut* and was recently involved with the “Art Brut Japonais II” exhibition at the Halle Saint Pierre, Paris. She is based in Tokyo, Japan.