

Otani Workshop

*Autre,
Otani Workshop*

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OTANI WORKSHOP

Interview OLIVER KUPPER

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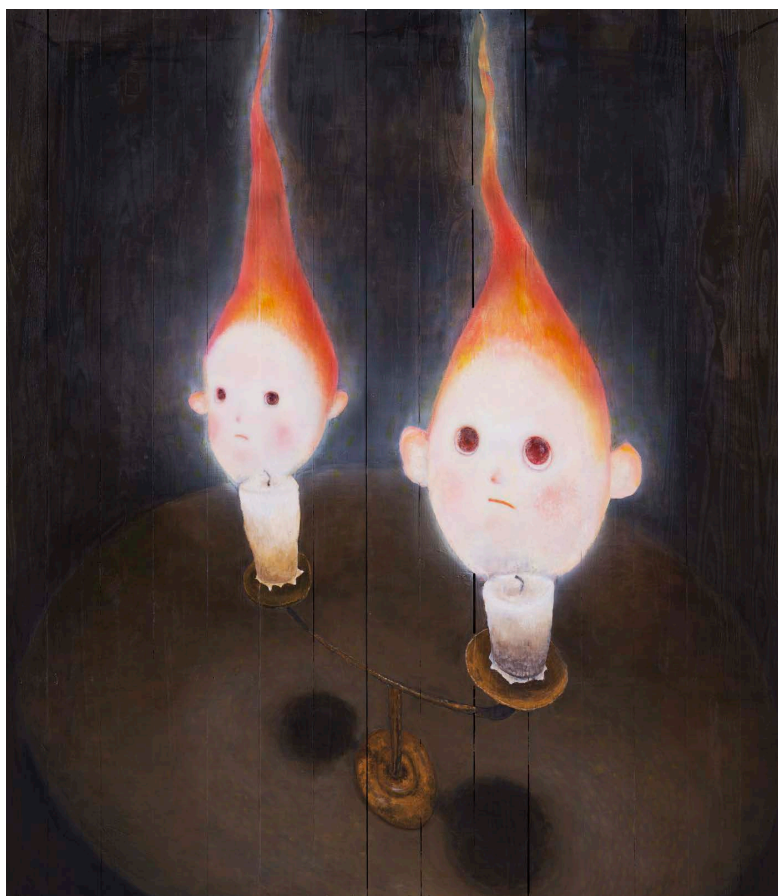
Otani Workshop is the nom de guerre of Japanese artist Shigeru Otani. Playful, dreamlike, and contemporary, Otani Workshop utilizes ancient techniques, locally sourced clay, metals, and wood, and allusions to the early funereal Tumulus period in Japan (300 to 538 AD) to produce his hyper-phantasmagorical sculptures. Working from a former roof tile factory on the island of Awaji, Otani Workshop—whose mentor is Takashi Murakami—is a vanguard of a new wave of Japanese ceramic artists. Otani Workshop's first solo exhibition in the United States will be on view at Perrotin Gallery in New York until December. The title of the presentation, *Narubekunaranare Narazarumonarubekenya Narareccho* (Be if you can, even if you don't have to be, let it be), is a spell the artist borrowed from a childhood picture book, but it might as well be an incantation for our new extraordinary zeitgeist.

OLIVER KUPPER Japan has a long tradition of sitting—from the tea ceremony to flower arranging—do you have a certain way that you sit when you are making ceramics, and can you talk about the tradition of sitting in Japanese culture?

OTANI WORKSHOP The way that one sits is important, but I don't have a particular way of sitting when I work as it is dependent on the size of the work I create. I often try sitting on different chairs to avoid being in a single posture for a long time, which hurts my waist. To quote Mr. Takashi Nakazato, a legendary Japanese ceramist who I met at an artist residency, "We should not bend our backs when using a potter's wheel." This still makes sense to me.

KUPPER You broke from tradition and took time off from school, sleeping in the bed of a truck, traveling, visiting museums and temples, what did you learn about yourself as an artist through this experience?

OTANI WORKSHOP I was astonished by the amount of great, canonical works created



throughout the West and East well before the idea of 'Modern Art' existed. Through this discovery, which was essential to my practice, I realized that categorizations of objects as 'art' are not inherently meaningful.

KUPPER You worked in Shigaraki, the Japanese capital of pottery, what did you learn from your experience there, and why do you think it was time to take up your own space?

OTANI WORKSHOP I learned everything about ceramics in Shigaraki—including basic techniques, materials, creative process, drying, and firing—as well as the difficulty and pleasure in creating art as a profession. In order to make



OPPOSITE PAGE: Otani Workshop, *Candle brother and sister*, 2020. Acrylic on board (78 3/4 x 69 5/8 x 1 3/4 inches / 200 x 176.8 x 4.5 cm) courtesy of the artist and Perrotin
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a living. I initially moved to Awaji Island to have a bigger space to create. As my practice evolved and grew beyond ceramics, I could not stay at my previous shared studio, which specialized in ceramics.

KUPPER Japan, particularly Awaji Island, has been the center of a lot of natural disasters, like typhoons and earthquakes, how has disaster played into the making of your artwork?

OTANI WORKSHOP As you mentioned, Japan has long been at the center of natural disasters. I believe such geographical and historical background is linked to our traditional views of nature, life, and death, which I have inherited, and are then instilled in my works.

KUPPER The idea of animism in Japan is very interesting, because it is a widely held belief that all things have a spirit, do you hope your sculptures have spiritual powers, like shrines?

OTANI WORKSHOP I am not sure I can say if my artworks hold similar spiritual powers to shrines, but yes, I hope my works have spirits of their own that are felt by viewers.

KUPPER If you could choose one spirit animal, what would it be?

OTANI WORKSHOP I am drawn to the bear. Not

the physical bear, but rather the bear that exists and is prevalent in our collective imagination.

KUPPER You mentioned once that a teacher introduced you to Giacometti and that made you want to become a sculptor—do you have any other influences that inspire your work?

OTANI WORKSHOP Yes, of course. My inspirations are vast, albeit a bit unorthodox. At the moment, I am thinking about traditional Italian

tomb that expresses life after death. So, in this sense, it is actually full of life rather than death. It is this meaning that inspires me.

KUPPER Your new show features some paintings, is this a new artistic expression or medium for you?

OTANI WORKSHOP Yes, painting is a new medium for me, and I have found that it allows me to explore new expressions that I wasn't able to with other mediums.



clay figures, historic Buddha statues, the faces of my family, as well as outsider art, among other things that I come across in my daily life.

KUPPER You mention that you are inspired by the Tumulus period in Japan, which is the burial era, and Haniwa tomb figures, but your work seems so full of life—what do you think about this dichotomy?

OTANI WORKSHOP Haniwa is a doll for the

KUPPER Do you have something in your mind that you have always wanted to make, but found it impossible?

OTANI WORKSHOP Oftentimes, I cannot initially accomplish the image I set out to create, but I get closer as I continue working. I hope to continue creating art in order to access something deeper, and more profound.

end



TOP IMAGE: Otani Workshop, *Quadruple sleeping child*, 2020. Ceramic (29 1/8 x 12 5/8 x 12 3/16 inches / 74 x 32 x 31 cm) courtesy of the artist and Perrotin ©Otani Workshop/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved

