



Joan Takayama-Ogawa

# CLIMATE CHANGE

by Victoria Woodard Harvey

Global warming's effect on the planet has been a driving theme in Joan Takayama-Ogawa's creative career for more than a quarter century. Her past work is best described as exquisitely crafted sculptures that fit into the Finish Fetish genre started in the 1960s California ceramics movement. Her work, featured in permanent collections at the Smithsonian, the deYoung Museum of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), as well as public collections in South Korea and the Netherlands, is often whimsical and clever, including humorous commentaries in response to historical events, national politics, and the natural world. In "Climate Change," a recent exhibition at The American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA) ([www.amoca.org](http://www.amoca.org)) in Pomona, California, she makes her most compelling statement yet with a series of monochromatic, illuminated sculptures that spotlight dire ecological warnings, calling for greater stewardship of the planet through sustainable practices. The message is gut punching, and the effects are hauntingly beautiful.

In a seminal sculpture titled *Plate Tectonics*, completed in 1992, Takayama-Ogawa called attention to the sudden decline of coral reefs due to global warming. As a college student studying geography, she was aware of scientists' early warnings long before they became a key issue in current geopolitics. It is an important work exemplifying her lifelong



*Climate Change* installation at the American Museum of Ceramic Art, in Pomona, California, 2017.

concern. Just as noteworthy, is an example of the foundational clay techniques she learned from the late Ralph Bacerra at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, California, where she is now a full-time professor.

The early wall sculpture demonstrates the idea that surface follows form, one of Bacerra's key design tenets. The piece is comprised of six interlocking geometric tiles featuring repeated patterns of continent forms and deep, circular well shapes carved into thick clay slabs. In a humorous but technically impressive twist, the sections are removable to function as a sushi platter with a set of plates. Their glazes are deep cobalt blue and copper green colors with brilliant, metallic gold lusters in a visually enticing play between two-dimensional surface design and three-dimensional volume. The sculpture also emphasizes "the importance of matching surface to volume through a deep understanding of glaze chemistry,"<sup>1</sup> for which Bacerra was known. It's worth noting that

Takayama-Ogawa and Bacerra made regular studio visits to Vivika and Otto Heino, his mentors during his student years, as well as the legendary Beatrice Wood in Ojai, California.

The influence of Bacerra impacted Takayama-Ogawa's aesthetic in many ways. Their works feature a dense pattern decoration with overglazes, and an expanded vocabulary of forms that include utilitarian vessels such as platters, lidded boxes, and teapots. In fact, a tea set by Takayama-Ogawa (c. 1990) so closely resembles Bacerra's it's hard to distinguish teacher from student, an ultimate homage. Takayama-Ogawa's work is set apart with unique forms and a consistent playfulness, such as the *Tea Bag* series of finely crafted, full-scale sized ladies' handbags. Her wit comes across in a recent series of cake slices on dessert plates crawling with snails, a commentary on the slow pace of political processes in Washington.

In light of this history, Takayama-Ogawa's aesthetic departure from enamel glazes to the stark monochromatism in *Climate*



1 *Palau Coral Reef*, 17 in. (43 cm) in height, earthenware, low-fire glazes, LED lights, fired to cone 06, 2015. 2 (Left to right) *Maldive Coral Reef*, 4 ft. 5 in. (1.4 m) in height, *Great Barrier Coral Reef*, 3 ft. 8 in. (1.1 m) in height, *American Samoa Coral Reef*, 4 ft. 3 in. (1.3 m) in height, *Coral Reef Wall Sculpture*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, earthenware, low-fire glazes, LED solar lights, fired to cone 06, 2016. All photos: Andrea Rubino.

Change makes a radical statement. As a child of Japanese-American parents who spoke openly about their relocation to internment camps during World War II, she is accustomed to making bold declarations and bringing attention to injustices. She also comes from a long lineage of ceramic artists going back to the 15th century. In this exhibition, her powerful voice and solid technical abilities come together in an attention-getting mix.

The three largest pieces in the gallery are tall totems of narrow columns and hollow, modular spheres in vertical stacks. Their surface textures are matte peaks and pits that resemble the stark terrain of a lifeless moonscape, with a pattern of cut holes emphasizing a sense of void left by corrosion. In contrast, out of the tops of two pieces emerge a more hopeful kind of life form, crowns of smooth, kelp-like shapes with embellishments like round urchins or snails, which are a common motif for Takayama-Ogawa. The sculptures look like the bleached remnants of a pre-warming lushness, and each bears the title of a coral reef in jeopardy, increasing the sense of urgency.

Two smaller, glazed pieces are simpler in form: ornate spheres atop short, shaped hollow bodies. They resemble traditional Japanese kokeshi dolls, inspired by the personal collection of the artist, and indeed they evoke a familiar, humanlike form that heightens the sense of intimacy. Another sculpture with three large, hanging globes suspended from the ceiling is reminiscent of the traditional paper lantern. This centuries-old object of Japanese culture is made modern here with a suspension system of super strong aircraft cable and grippers to suspend the clay forms, casting a soft pattern of light.

Many of the high-tech aspects that illuminate the sculptures, including remote-controlled LED puck lights and battery-powered bead wire, are inspired by Takayama-Ogawa's eclectic mix of students with backgrounds in lighting design, product design, and

graphic design, as well as engineering. As a teacher, she maintains an ongoing dialog with her students on topics of sustainability, water conservation, and renewable energy sources. "Millennials are very responsive to social change," she says, "and to [their relationship with] the planet." Although these sculptures highlight catastrophic loss, the artist provides the means for reversing looming threats with practical solutions to lessen energy consumption, an exemplary "walks the talk" lesson for art students and viewers alike.

Takayama-Ogawa's choice to fire low-temperature clay instead of porcelain is in part environmental, and her kilns are computer programmed to fire late at night when energy rates are lower. She modifies commercial low-fire glazes using raw materials, resulting in what she calls "fifty shades of white" (actually closer to one hundred shades, she admits.) Her somewhat obsessive commitment to glaze recipes pays off with a wide range of tonal subtleties that engage the eye of the viewer, even without the multicolor dazzle of her past work.

"I'll be staying with this [theme] for a very long time," she says. "It's one of the most important issues of our time." The encouraging message of this exhibition is that it's not too late to honor and preserve beauty—if we all take part by paying heed and creating solutions.

*Takayama-Ogawa's work was also recently included in a group exhibition at AMOCA: "We the People: Serving Notice," August 5–December 20, 2017.*

**the author** *Victoria Woodard Harvey is an artist, journalist, and essayist on trends in culture and the arts. She lives on the central coast of California and is a frequent contributor to Ceramics Monthly and other magazines.*

1 Jeanine Falino, "The Low Made High" essay in Ralph Bacerra: *Exquisite Beauty*, Jo Lauria, editor, 2015.