A few days before Japanese artists Otani Workshop, Yuji Ueda, and Kazunori Hamana flew into New York to discuss their group show at the Blum & Poe gallery in Los Angeles (running through April 9, 2016) curated by Takashi Murakami, the ground floor of NeueHouse Madison Square turned into a gallery of its own, with enormous pieces by each ceramicist displayed next to each other. The work, although stylistically different, is a testament to the organic nature of the Japanese ceramic work, as all three artists have an appreciation for the raw materiality of clay and the way that it can be maleated artistically. Ahead of their conversation at NeueHouse with Murakami and Tim Blum, we sat down with the ceramicists, where they talked to us about the importance and the beauty of the natural world.

NJ: How did the collaboration between all of you come about and what has working together been like?

Takashi Murakami: I first chose Otani Workshop around four or five years ago, when he was working with Yoshitomo Nara. I went to a gallery and bought some of his ceramics since I thought his pieces were very
gripping, and at the time I was opening a ceramic gallery, which is why I invited him to be a part of it. He introduced me to this guy, Yuji Ueda, whom I knew was a very good ceramic artist, but I didn't like his pieces because they confused me and were very abstract. However he was very highly recommended to me, and he is the best. Western people have a good reaction to Japanese art, and Ueda's art falls under that.

One day I went to his show and he served me Japanese tea from his grandfather's tea farm, which was very nice and very sweet. When I drank the tea everything changed. The combination of the taste of the tea and his work's abstraction...I hated his piece, but hate is kind of the opposite of love.

About three years ago I saw Mr. Hamana's work in a blog, and then a friend of mine, a Turkish guy who was a gallerist in Tokyo, chose a very unique piece by Mr. Hamana, so I called him to ask who the artist was. I ended up buying the piece and then invited him to my gallery, which he was very interested in. In the '80s he was in the sneaker business in Japan, importing Nike Air Jordan's and other popular shoes, which made him a very successful businessman. But he got very tired of this business and went back to the countryside, where he started making ceramics. His career is very interesting and his pieces are very good.

What I like is that these three guys are outsiders in the Japanese ceramic scene, so it was great to have them all in my gallery. Mr. Tim Blum, from Blum & Poe, came to my gallery and chose the three of them to make a show in Los Angeles first, and then here.

**NJ:** What do you admire the most about each other's work?

**Kazunori Hamana:** I think what we can each do is probably limited because we are all working with clay. In a sense, our works are all similar, because even though the style might be different, they are organic and focused on the material. If you attempt to change something in the material, it will become artificial, and we are all interested in its nature.

**NJ:** How do you think the influence of Japan makes your work different than that of other artists?

**Otani Workshop:** I can only see things from the Japanese point of view because I'm Japanese, but from my perspective American ceramic artists' work, concept, color, and shape seem very strong and distinct. So
perhaps my own work seems a little bit ambiguous in comparison, and that might be Japanese in nature.

**NJ:** What do you consider your greatest achievement?

**OW:** I actually went to art school at the Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts in Naha, but my hometown is close to a traditional ceramic production area, which is why I sort of, by default, started getting involved in ceramics. I always wanted to somehow make art involved in what I am doing, so in that sense the fact that Takashi found me and now I’m able to show in New York is an accomplishment.

**KH:** As Takashi explained, I have had so many different jobs and careers, and I’ve also lived in so many different locations, so I have a background that has allowed me to establish a very solid foundation for what I’m doing right now. I wouldn’t call myself a ceramicist, in the sense that I wouldn’t make a plate when someone asked me to make a plate, but I’m actually facing more of a larger question – almost as large as “What is life?” or “What does it mean to live?” I feel that right now I’m finally standing at the starting point of the quest to start exploring that, so that is an accomplishment.

**Yuji Ueda:** My family is involved in tea farming, like Takashi explained. Since Takashi’s bar and coffee shop is handling our tea, they are introducing tea and soil, which is a parallel to my work, which deals with clay and soil. So both tea and my work are being introduced to wider audiences of people, and for me that is an accomplishment.

*Photography by Samantha Nandez*
If you were able to work with any artist, alive or dead, who would it be?

Cy Twombly, because I have a lot of great respect for him.

I agree that Cy Twombly would be amazing to work with, but he'd probably be very difficult (laughs).

Without Takashi getting involved and meeting us it would have been difficult to come to the attention of a wider audience, so it was a great thing that we met Takashi.

Which historical figure do you most identify with?

Maybe The Monk Iku, because of his thought process of gradually getting closer to a zen state.

The town I am from is famous for their Shigaraki ceramics, but it’s also the hometown for Koga Ninjas, who were aristocracy in the 9th century.

What do you want your work to say to the viewer?

Photography by Samantha Nandez
OW: This is difficult, but maybe in the appearance and the texture of the piece itself I want people to feel the presence of something.

KH: A bottle, for example, has a utilitarian purpose of holding something in it, but when I’m making something that looks like a vase I’m not thinking of making a vase to hold flowers. Of course, you can put a flower in it and use it as a vase, but it is not made specifically for that purpose. Not everything has to be categorized, and although this is fine, I feel like in this present society we over-categorize. I’m constantly asking the questions, “What is necessary? What is unnecessary? Is what you consider unnecessary really unnecessary?” The intention of my work is to partly digest this and then present it in my own way.

NJ: What do you think is the most important thing a person can achieve in their life?

KH: For me it would be to be myself, and live like myself. If each person can shine in their own way I think that’s very interesting. I believe achieving happiness is important – not just to oneself, but to the people around you. Of course, when things are tough, things are tough, but there is a sense of satisfaction in succeeding through that. Doing your best is the best thing to do.

NJ: What is the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?

OW: I can’t pinpoint a specific thing, but nature that includes us as human beings.

YU: I was born and grew up between mountains in a hilly part of Japan, so when I first saw the ocean it was an amazing experience.

KH: The sky.

*Portrait Photography: Manolo Campion for NeueJournal.*