



Clockwise from left: *Blue Princess*, 31 in. (79 cm) in height, stoneware with underglazes, 2009. Photo: Richard Nicol. *New Europeans*, 15 in. (38 cm) in height (taller), stoneware, underglazes, 2009. Photo: Richard Nicol. *Queen*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height (figure), 36 in. (91 cm) in height (photo), porcelain, underglaze, archival pigment ink-jet print, 2009. Photo: James Harris Gallery. *Writer*, 15½ in. (39 cm) in height (figure), 36 in. (91 cm) in height (photo), porcelain, underglaze, archival pigment ink-jet print, 2009. Photo: James Harris Gallery.

## Akio Takamori: Europeans

by Matthew Kangas

Akio Takamori's recent exhibition at James Harris Gallery ([www.jamesharrisgallery.com](http://www.jamesharrisgallery.com)) in Seattle, Washington, was a modest step forward and perhaps a giant step backward. Strangely, considering the Japanese-born Seattle artist's recent strengths have included juxtaposing Caucasian figures with Japanese ones, the new work mostly focuses on Northern European people alone. Gone are the savvy cross-cultural references between Old Master paintings and Asian peasants. Instead, clay portraits (averaging 15 inches high) of white people from Denmark and the Netherlands are presented individually on pedestals with adjacent, large-scale color photographs of the same sculpture. At the same time, six other larger female figures, averaging 34 inches high, (*Blue*, *Pink*, *Black* and *White Princesses*, *Doctor's Wife*, and *Dutch Mother*) appear without the corresponding ink-jet photographs that are printed on German paper.

All of the new works are the result of a 2009 residency at the International Ceramic Research Center in Skælskør, Denmark. While there, Takamori came across the work of Danish photographer Rigmor Mydtskov who took portraits of ordinary Danes in the 1960s and 1970s, and whose work inspired the photographs of his sculptures.

Compared to Takamori's previous work that involved slightly less than actual size figures assembled in groups, the diminutive scale of the Europeans is disappointing. Maybe the exhibition should have been re-titled, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." Although other critics praised the addition of the accompanying 36x24-inch photos as enriching the conceptual dimension of the artist's work (two versions of the same image are always grist for analysis and conversation), such a new development does nothing to temper the dullness of the portrait subjects. Who would have thought that the one American ceramic artist best poised to address East/West cultural dichotomies would fall back on boring white people?

Now figurines rather than sculptures, only one work, *New Europeans*, raises the older, more deeply serious issues of Takamori's previous artwork. A pregnant Danish woman stands beside an African woman replete with Islamic head scarf. I wish the entire show had addressed

this dilemma, how Denmark's liberal tolerance of racial and religious difference backfired after the publication of Copenhagen newspaper cartoons ridiculing the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Instead, Takamori should have taken a leaf from the 1920s German photographer August Sander. Bland, expressionless people from a wider variety of walks of life were photographed head-on in a kind of artless documentary style. Hauntingly prescient of restrictive Nazi racial laws, Sander's work now appears a last attempt to honor and chronicle ethnic diversity within pre-Hitler Germany.

Sadly, except for *New Europeans*, Takamori sidesteps such potentially rich and provocative possibilities. Blond women and men reappear over and over. *Teacher*, *Poet*, and *Writer* are older white people with various gestures such as folded arms, a hand beneath a chin, and hands clasped behind a back. They carry none of the cultural punch of Takamori's middle-period work. *Queen* and *Queen's Mother* are regal with floor-length orange gowns but, again, these summon up specters of Lladro and Royal Copenhagen souvenir figures given their size. The photographs add nothing. With the *Princesses* and *New Europeans* made of stoneware and the others executed in porcelain with underglaze, there are no technical breakthroughs either.

Consider this an interlude for Takamori rather than a transitional body of work. What with the presence of Islam in Europe, one can only recall more favorably Charles Krafft's decade-old blue-and-white delft-pattern machine guns commenting on the Bosnian War or his other works that are more in your face than Takamori's. With Krafft setting the bar that high, including the risk of offending plenty of people at the time, Takamori's new work seems unengaged and detached, surely a fantasy that cannot be sustained in his next body of work.

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