

VENUS

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Press Release

Shinichi Sawada

February 24 - March 20, 2021

Opening: Wednesday, February 24th, 2021

Venus Over Manhattan

120 East 65th Street

New York, NY 10065



(New York, NY) - Thirty-eight year old **Shinichi Sawada** has kept the same schedule for nearly twenty years. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, he attends Nakayoshi Fukushikai, a social welfare facility in Japan's Shiga prefecture, where he spends the morning working at the in-house bakery, making bread. He spends the afternoons working with clay. Sawada first attended this facility, one of many similar institutions in Japan designed to support people with intellectual disabilities, when he was eighteen years old, shortly after he was diagnosed with autism. In the two decades since, his ceramic beasts - sometimes ghoulish, always fantastical, and deeply redolent of ancient mythologies still coursing through Japanese culture - have attracted the attention of critics and connoisseurs worldwide, notably after a presentation at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

Beginning February 24th, **Venus Over Manhattan** will present the first United States solo exhibition of Shinichi Sawada's ceramic sculptures. The showcase of thirty works follows a recent museum solo exhibition that traveled in fall 2020 from the Museum Lothar Fischer, in Neumarkt, Germany, to the George Kolbe Museum, Berlin. On view through late March, the Venus exhibition has been organized in collaboration with **Jennifer Lauren Gallery**, Manchester, UK, who has been with the artist for many years.

In conjunction with its presentation, Venus will publish a generously illustrated catalogue featuring new and recent writing on Sawada's art.

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The Nakayoshi Fukushikai facility where Shinichi Sawada practices his art, exists within Japan's expansive social welfare system and seeks to offer those it serves with the "most widely varied instruction possible, without pressure and excessively rigid rules, supported by volunteers in the fields of agriculture, education, medicine, psychology, literature, and art." When Sawada, who is mostly non-verbal, endeavored to pursue ceramics, he found such support in a team that was prepared to help him, including a ceramics facilitator named Mr. Masaharu Iketani, who has worked with Sawada from day one.

Sawada's sculptures constitute a bestiary of unreal creatures. His figures are striking for their combinations of natural and mythical attributes: a single sculpture may comprise the wings of a bird, the face of a dragon, and the claws of a lizard, but finally suggest the profile of an owl. Until 2015, he worked within a vocabulary of approximately fifteen creature motifs developed over the last two decades, with each sculpture entirely and quite obviously unique. Those who have seen Sawada at work report that he proceeds in the studio with an almost preternatural confidence, as though advancing toward the manifestation of a predetermined image. Each sculpture begins with a hollow cylindrical base, which Sawada builds out with appendages, plumage, and often more than one face. For many years, a signature element of his work was the presence of spikes that blanketed the surfaces of his forms. In recent years, Sawada has moved away from these sharp protuberances in favor of softer forms and elaborate faces, which he dresses with looped shapes that suggest strands of hair. His style began to change when another artist, Akio Kontani, joined the studio and their work seemed to inspire each other.

When Sawada began working with clay, Nakayoshi Fukushikai did not have a dedicated workshop for ceramics, or consistent access to a kiln. Later, the facility built a modest cabin in the forest, a few kilometers away, where Sawada and other artists now work on their sculptures. Clad in sheet metal and open to the environment, the facility is only used in the warmer months. The cabin accommodates two hand-built kilns, which produce either a blackened or a reddish brown finish, linked to their respective temperatures. The specific materials and firing process used in the workshop are similar to those of the millennia-old tradition of Shigaraki; Sawada uses the same clay, similar kilns, and the same firewood as his predecessors. Yet Sawada's art departs, in its unconstrained ornamentality, from those works' harmonious lines and pure, minimal forms. Nakayoshi Fukushikai lights each kiln only twice a year, due to the cost of the firewood, and the experienced labor required to monitor the three-day firing process, as well as the weeklong cooling process. Such infrequent firing contributes to the scarcity of Sawada's work, despite the artist's otherwise prolific working style.

In 2013, a large group of Sawada's works featured prominently in "The Encyclopedic Palace," the central exhibition at the 55th Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni. Speaking about his choice to include Sawada's works, Gioni explained that

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"they seem to contain so many variations of things I had seen before. I liked how they connected to centuries of imaginary beings (which immediately complicates any reductive reading of self-taught art as developing outside traditions and art history). [...] And I loved combination of the 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."

The presentation of Sawada's works at the Venice Biennale removed them from the context of "outsider art," and marked a significant development in the contextualization of work traditionally termed "self-taught" or "art brut". In the years since the Biennale presentation, Sawada's work has continued to complicate more conservative histories of artistic production. While operating within the conventions of traditional Japanese ceramic making, Sawada's work evokes and can be seen in rich relationship to many art historical precedents that draw on the fantastic. These include, as Gioni noted, "Borges's Book of Imaginary Beings, medieval bestiaries, and pre-Columbian sculpture."

Building on both personal observations and pure imagination, Sawada continues to accrue a body of work with layers of intrigue and inventive craftsmanship.

About the Artist

Shinichi Sawada (b. 1982) lives and works in Japan's Shiga prefecture. Since 2000, he has attended Nakayoshi Fukushikai, a social welfare facility that supports people with intellectual disabilities. In 2020, a solo exhibition of his work traveled from the Museum Lothar Fischer in Neumarkt, to the George Kolbe Museum in Berlin. His work has featured prominently in major group exhibitions around the world, including "The Encyclopedic Palace" at the 55th Venice Biennale, curated by Massimiliano Gioni, and "The Doors of Perception" at Frieze New York in 2019. His work is held in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions, including the Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne; the abcd collection, Paris; and Halle Saint Pierre, Paris.

About Jennifer Lauren Gallery

Jennifer Lauren Gallery (Manchester, U.K.) champions, exhibits and passionately shares voices from international self-taught, disabled and overlooked artists who create works outside the mainstream art world and art history. It aims to showcase undiscovered talents and evolving artists, as well as internationally recognized artists commonly seen as outsider artists, whose authentic, raw and honest work speaks for itself. Since 2017, the Gallery has worked closely with organizations, supported studios and communities working alongside artists, in order to promote new, dynamic artworks. <http://www.jenniferlaurengallery.com>

Venus Over Manhattan

120 East 65th Street
New York, NY 10065

Gallery Hours

Tuesday - Saturday, 10 am - 6 pm

To ensure the health and safety of staff and visitors, masks and social distancing will be required in accordance with public guidelines. Maximum of six people admitted at a time.

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For further information about the exhibition and availability, please contact the gallery at info@venusovermanhattan.com

Accessibility

Please note that the gallery is not wheelchair accessible at this time. The gallery is committed to the accessibility of our exhibitions, and a digital walk through is accessible on the gallery's website. This press release has also been translated into American Sign Language.

Image Credits

All artwork images by Shinichi Sawada (unless otherwise noted): © Shinichi Sawada, 2021. Courtesy of the artist, Venus Over Manhattan, New York, and Jennifer Lauren Gallery, Manchester.

Untitled (134), 2019. Wood fired ceramic;

9 1/2 x 6 3/4 x 6 3/4 in (24 x 17 x 17 cm)

Untitled (127), c. 2014. Wood fired ceramic; 14 5/8 x 7 1/8 x 6 1/4 in (37 x 18 x 16 cm)

Untitled (70), 2018. Wood fired ceramic;

6 1/4 x 6 1/4 x 5 1/8 in (16 x 16 x 13 cm)

Untitled (118), 2006-2010. Wood fired ceramic; 21 1/4 x 9 7/8 x 9 7/8 in (54 x 25 x 25 cm)

Shinichi Sawada working at the ceramics facility at Nakayoshi Fukushikai, Shiga Prefecture, Japan.

Courtesy the artist, Venus Over Manhattan, New

York, Jennifer Lauren Gallery, Manchester, and

Nakayoshi Fukushikai.