



Left: Akio Takamori. *Alice in Red and Yellow*. 2009. Stoneware with underglazes. 40 x 33 x 20 in. (101.6 x 83.8 x 50.8 cm)
 Right: Sergei Isupov. *Schoolboy*. 2008. Stoneware, stain and glaze.

Transplanted and Transformed

New Directions in the Journeys of Akio Takamori and Sergei Isupov

WE HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS OF SUPERSTARS. BE THEY actors or artists, when they succeed at their craft they transfix and transform us all. We applaud their sensitivity, their insights, their skills. They cause us to think differently, feel more passionately – indeed, they change our very core perceptions. Happily, the exhibitions of Akio Takamori, *Alice/Venus* at the Barry Friedman Gallery (September – October, 2009) and Sergei Isupov, *Androgyny* (April – August, 2009) at the Mesa Art Center, are prime examples of two artists that superbly succeed at their craft.

Article by Judith Schwartz

These exhibitions, which featured figurative pieces, were viewed within spacious and prestigious venues that seemed to enhance their impact. While each artist has had a stellar career spanning years of prolific exposure, the works in these new installations were larger in scale, more complex in form and surface and far more evolved. Each artist has, in his own way, moved on from earlier themes to deal with deeper philosophical issues, with Takamori seeming to have become more relaxed and introspective and Isupov, more meticulous and introspective.

Their works deal with universal themes of maturation



Akio Takamori. *Alice in Black Dress*. 2009. Stoneware with underglazes. 31 x 25 x 21 in. (78.7 x 63.5 x 53.3 cm)



Akio Takamori. *Little Alice*. 2009. Stoneware with underglazes. 32 x 16 x 15 in. (81.3 x 40.6 x 38.1 cm)

and the complexity of knowing oneself. Each artist strives for the expression of personal intent using a distinctly different style: Takamori, with loose billowy puffs of clay seeming to encapsulate air and adorned with soft brush strokes and incised fluid lines and Isupov, with larger-than-life busts that constitute grand canvases upon which are laid meticulously-drawn, painted and carved caricatures representing cross sections of humanity.

Both are transplanted artists, born in countries with rich cultural heritages, who have chosen to make careers in the US. In so doing, each has sought to find a means for integrating cultural diversity in a form that gains acceptance in his adopted land. Takamori and Isupov have not only been transplanted, overcoming the initial isolation associated with the learning of a new language, or the loss that proximity of family and friends brings, but they have used these obstacles to inform their work and to transform their perceptions and ours as well.

AKIO TAKAMORI

Alice/Venus is Takamori's first solo exhibition at the Barry Friedman Gallery. Perhaps this new gallery, with its cavernous rooms, elegant light and airy space, enabled the artist to consider new possibilities. If so, his work has never looked more inspired.

The large primary viewing room enabled Takamori to

place each theme – *Alice* and *Venus* – in its own space. On the *Alice* side were seven large-scale figures with rotund Asian heads juxtaposed on bodies wearing western European costumes. Adolescent girls with Tang Dynasty hairstyles juxtaposed against Renaissance dresses that reference the Queen of Hearts and *Alice* in the coming-of-age story of *Alice in Wonderland*.

On the *Venus* side of the gallery there were seven more works, with the juxtaposition of East and West again being made explicit. The Asian girls, now portrayed as *Venus*, are post-pubescent, standing nude or partially draped, towering over island mountains, as foamy clouds float by; the islands emerge from water reminiscent of Japanese *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints (a Buddhist word that means 'sad world'). In fact, both the *Alice* and *Venus* faces wear almost the same expression – one of sadness and longing with rosy cheeks dripping red underglaze down their faces and on to their necks and bodies. The eyes look away, seemingly disappointed and filled with melancholy as though trapped in some world that transcends time and place.

Takamori moves us from the familiar to the unfamiliar using contrasting scale and cultural identities. *Alice* is both a doll and a queen, a child trying to enter adulthood. *Venus* stands looming over a homeland, engulfing it but with her head in the clouds. This play of contrasts, the big



Akio Takamori. *Venus + Island 2*. 2008. Stoneware with underglazes. *Venus*: 27 x 12 x 8 in. (68.6 x 30.5 x 20.3 cm)
Island: 19 x 27 x 12 in. (48.3 x 68.6 x 30.5 cm)



Akio Takamori. *Venus in Clouds 1*. 2009 Stoneware with underglazes. 38 x 24 x 13 in. (96.5 x 61 x 33 cm)

with the small, light with shadows, nudity with elaborate dress – all add to the sense of metamorphosis, change and transformation. One can feel the hesitant emergence of adulthood and yet a longing for the past, a nostalgia for a distant home from which one has been displaced.

Perhaps *Alice/Venus* reflect Takamori's mental state; juxtaposition of regality and humility, whimsy and solemnity, solidarity and unity – all things people must balance in their lives. *Alice* is not a just a girl who is trying to fit into adulthood or an unknown Western culture but she is a girl who is trying to remain human while going through a transformation.

The *Venus* components were, by far, the most satisfying works in the show, particularly *Venus in Clouds 1* and *Venus + Island in Clouds 2*. In these works, the clouds float by, enveloping *Venus*' body, front, back and literally hovering around her. The white puffs act to fill voids between body and land mass but they do much more. They create a dreamy atmosphere that feels moist and windswept. By objectifying the clouds, Takamori graphically lures the viewer into a three-dimensional space and we drift with the wind into the seduction.

Much has been written about Takamori's childhood, growing up on Kyushu, the southern most island of Japan and his subsequent journey to the Kansas City Art Institute

and then his significant breakthrough at the European Keramik Work Centre (EKWC) in 'sHertogenbosch in the Netherlands. Readers who want in-depth details should see *Between Clouds and Memory*, edited by Peter Held, a catalogue published for Takamori's mid-career survey exhibition in 2005 at Arizona State University.¹

SERGEI ISUPOV

Sergei Isupov is a transplanted artist as well but, unlike Takamori, he obtained his formal academic artistic training before coming to the US, first at the Ukrainian State Art School in Kiev and then at the Art Institute of Tallinn in Estonia. Although born in the 1960s, after the years of the most severe Soviet repression, the training at these schools were not without party control. There was slim opportunity for artistic individuality and Isupov, bridling under such constraints, was able eventually to immigrate to the US in the early 1980s.

When we think about the rich history of Russian literature, classical music, dance and particularly the *avant-garde* movements of Constructivism and Futurism, we can begin to understand the energy and vigour driving Isupov to assimilate his heritage with the dynamism America had to offer. The result is a splendid unleashing of the human psyche. Like Takamori, one foot is securely planted within each culture, drawing on the best of the heritage to bring a fresh



Sergei Isupov. *Androgyny Heads*. 2008. Ceramic.

illumination and to appeal to an American audience.

Isupov's recent relocation to a spacious studio in Massachusetts prompted a shift in form and content and when the opportunity to show at the Mesa Art Center presented itself, the catalyst was there to challenge the artist to move in new directions. As his studio grew so did his kiln and, with that, a technical shift from porcelain to stoneware. This material shift enabled Isupov to mentally streamline his previous complex tabletop forms into the grand elegant egg-shaped forms seen in the *Androgyny* series.

Where previous figuration relied on multiple protuberances enabling obsessive surface detail with fetish finishes that seduced the viewer, the new work became simpler but with a dynamism not shown previously. These larger-than-life size portraits are caricatures, exaggerations of every man and every woman: bi-gender headshots.

Who are these people, what do they do, think and feel? After all, heads are what we typically see on TV and in the ubiquitous cars that pass us by. Isupov presents these heads as symbols of our time, isolated, secluded, solitary. They appear different and alone. There is an eeriness about them. Their scale is so large there is a seductive quality, forcing us to go deeper into the personalities of his chosen subjects.

The exhibition at the Mesa Art Center, Isupov's first solo museum setting, could not have shown the work in a better light, with its spacious gallery rooms and high ceilings. There were 20 sculptures all told, with drawings interspersed among them. Each sculpture was mounted on an over scaled pedestal so that the eyes of the figures either looked down upon or confronted the viewer head on. As previously mentioned, although simpler in form, the surfaces are completely and meticulously nuanced. He,

in fact, uses a museum ploy of mirrors that are normally set to peer behind an object, but in this instance beneath, so the fully decorated underside of the sculptures can be viewed as if revealing a secret for us all to share.

We are faced with the task of peering into the souls of these works. Using titles such as *Invisible Man*, *Party Dress*, *Bride*, *Warmhearted* and *Schoolboy* we are forced to examine people we think we know but, under Isupov's prodding, never truly stop to consider fully. Like the 19th century phrenologist who minutely surveyed every bump on the skull, Isupov asks us to examine the inner self, the darkness within, to peer beyond the obvious to the most secret.

Probably the most powerful works are those whose surfaces are tattoo-like, tenacious and meticulously carved and painted gestures. *A History of Lovers* is a prime example. The skin is pockmarked and painted a vivid matt blue while the ears, lips and eyebrows are a glossy red. The eyes drip with male and female bodies suggesting that the mind's eye is capable of revealing more about relationships and ourselves. An icon-like face is painted where the third eye is thought to be and the back shows two figures swimming toward each other. The mirrored under side reveals more of the inner world narrative. *Busker* is handled in a similar fashion: matt blue pockmarked skin and eyes dripping tears of figures and a drawing on the third eye. The shape of the head reveals another ethnicity, almost Buddha-like or Egyptian. Again, the back and underside continue the enigmatic dialogue that is symbolic; we can only let our imaginations fill in the voids.

In the catalogue essay, Sonya Bekkerman links this work to "ancient and indigenous art traditions where social status, class, religious orientation, ethnicity and internal



Sergei Isupov. *Busker*. 2009. Stoneware, stain and glaze. 28 x 22.5 x 12 in.)

states are communicated through tattooed skin".²

Recent developments in ceramic sculpture have given lofty praise to what might be described as a 'sloppy clay' aesthetic. A heated debate has ensued about the merit of those who use clay in an unschooled fashion. Ken Johnson, for example, in a *New York Times* review of Ron Nagel's work, described it as the difference between the "raw" and the "cooked" schools of working. By "raw", Johnson points to the work of Peter Voukos, Andrew Lord and Rebecca Warren whose loose handling of the material seemingly forfeits craftsmanship "in the interest of enhanced formal effect and conceptual hipness" versus the "cooked" or refined and painstaking detail as seen, for example, in the work of Ken Price and Kathy Butterly, who "uses extremely refined techniques to create works of idiosyncratic beauty and fantasy".³

A half century ago, similar debates arose with words like "dirty and clean"⁴; the "dirty" referring to the way Robert Arneson handled his scatological objects and the "clean" to Claus Oldenburg's handling of similar objects. Glen Adamson has discussed similar issues but has extended the analogy to using objects such as the "figurine" and the "maquette" where the figurine is labelled "over refined" and the maquette "unfinished".⁵

Amidst all of this discussion, it is comforting to see new work presented from two seasoned practitioners who convey an assured mastery of the material and who are able to coax and massage the medium into emotional and enlightened windows of meaning. Both Takamori and Isupov are very much part of the 'cooked' school: refined, finished, developed, elegant, polished and skilled.

There are infinite ways to handle the complexities of this



Top: Sergei Isupov. *Renaissance Lovers* (Right: *A History of Lovers*).

Sergei Isupov. *Busker* (Detail).



difficult and intricate medium. Each artist has to find his way of conveying meaning and intent, a way appropriate and consistent with his idiosyncratic manner of delivery.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peter Held, ed. *Between Clouds of Memory: Akio Takamori, a Mid-Career Survey*. Arizona: Arizona State University. 2005.
2. Sonya Bekkerman. "Sergei Isupov Androgyny", Mesa Art Center, 10 April-2 August, 2009. p 6.
3. Ken Johnson. "Ron Nagel", *New York Times*. 1 May, 2009.
4. Plagens, P. *Sunshine Muse*. New York: Praeger. 1974. p 89.
5. Glenn Adamson. "Making a Mess: Ceramic Sculpture Now", Tenth Annual Dorothy Wilson Perkins Lecture, Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred University, 20 November, 2008.

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All Sergei Isupov images are courtesy of the artist and Ferrin Gallery.