

Award, PBS show celebrate Portland ceramic artist's influence on craft

By Eric RussellStaff Writer : 8-10 minutes : 11/17/2022



Portland-based ceramic artist Ayumi Horie will be honored Friday with the Maine Craft Association's Craft Artist Award. Next month, she'll be featured on the PBS show "Craft in America." *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Ceramic artist [Ayumi Horie](#) knows that many of the pots she shapes, paints and fires in her Portland studio end up displayed on shelves or encased in glass.

But that's not necessarily what she envisions when she's creating them.

"For me, the biggest compliment is when somebody uses a cup of mine every day, and it migrates to the front of the cupboard. It's not forgotten in a dark corner somewhere," she said. "As a culture, we've moved away from thinking about objects as talismans, but I think about what power they can have to shape someone's day or start somebody's day by giving them a little boost."

Horie's philosophical way of thinking about craft and the people who create it has raised her profile, here and nationally, beyond her artistic accomplishments, and she's being recognized for her role in lifting the voices and stories of underrepresented artists.

On Friday, Horie will accept the annual Craft Artist Award from the Maine Craft Association at an event at Mechanics Hall in Portland. And next month, she'll be featured in an episode of the long-running PBS documentary series "Craft in America," along with 12 other craft artists talking about the same theme: inspiration.

Horie was chosen for inclusion in the documentary in part for how she has used online platforms to pair "practical, usable ceramics combined with unapologetic activism," according to the show's creators.

Horie, 53, has been a [prolific studio artist](#) for the last 10 years in Maine. She's already well known for her "dry-throwing" technique, which preserves fingerprints and other imperfections in the clay, and for her sgraffito (or hand-scratched) drawings, often of animals, that convey a childlike playfulness and sometimes a broader social message.

Maine Voices Live with Ayumi Horie



In an interview last week from her studio, where she painted a bare cup while answering questions, Horie said she's moved into a new phase in her career. For one, she has two young children now, which means her time to create is more precious than ever. But she also has become increasingly confident in using her voice to elevate ideas and points of view that often have been missing in the craft community.

She is the board president at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle and recently launched a fellowship program through the Center for Craft in North Carolina.

“So much of how I spend my time is not just making pots but thinking about systems within craft,” she explained.

At Haystack, for instance, that’s meant conducting a global review of bylaws for the first time in fifteen years, with an emphasis on equity. Through the fellowship program, it’s about highlighting untold narratives in the history of craft.

“I’m finally at a point where I have some agency to change those systems for craft and ultimately for my kids’ futures,” she said.

CHANGING WORLD

Horie grew up in a Japanese American family in Lewiston-Auburn in the 1970s and ’80s, before the communities had much racial diversity. She also grew up queer, something she kept to herself until college.

“The weight of not being able to be oneself is a terrible burden to put on children and so part of my responsibility now is to be visible and normalize queerness and queer parenting,” she said.

She chose a college relatively close to home – Mount Holyoke in western Massachusetts – and then attended New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. For graduate school, she ventured further, to the University of Washington in Seattle, where she continued to study ceramics.

After graduate school, though, she found work as a photographer in Washington. She enjoyed it but it wasn’t entirely fulfilling, creatively.

“I wanted to contribute to the world in a way that was different than simply noticing things,” she said.

So, she went back to ceramics and started to build her style.

She embraced the internet early on as a way to promote her work to a wider audience.

“It always seemed like a wise move to put energy into a platform that didn’t have geographic boundaries,” she said. “Anytime you’re making something that’s kind of quirky and might have a limited audience, there are more people online who are able to support the choices that you make.”

The downside is that it’s harder for makers to stand out.

Horie, however, used her Instagram feed to create something called “Pots in Action,” where she invited other artists, often underrepresented artists, to share how their work was being used in real life. It was a way to lend visibility to her craft, she said, and highlight “what it means to live with something made by hand and how that’s different from a store-bought thing.”

She moved back to Maine 10 years ago, to be closer to relatives and to put down roots again in a place her family has been since the 1600s.

Horie said she and her wife, Chloe, and their two young children feel fortunate to live in Maine, which she said feels more diverse and accepting today than when she was growing up.

“But looking at politics today, we’re still living in a system in which there are few places where we can exist easily as a queer family,” she said.

She also has found Portland, and Maine overall, to be an accepting and collaborative arts community.



Horie sits among her creations in her home studio in Portland. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

BEYOND THE STUDIO

Since she’s moved back to Maine, Horie has solidified her studio ceramic work and has branched out in other areas, too.

She co-created with Elise Pepple something called Portland Brick, a collaborative public art project that repaired city sidewalks with bricks made from local clay stamped with memories in Portland’s India Street neighborhood.

In 2011, she helped organize “Handmade for Japan,” which raised more than \$100,000 for disaster relief following an earthquake and tsunami in Japan.

In 2015, she was awarded a \$50,000 fellowship from United States Artists, a grant-making organization that supports artists and encourages career development.

As president of the board of directors at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, which she first attended as a 19-year-old student and then returned later to teach, she led the search for [a new director, who starts in January](#).

Through Center for Craft in Asheville, North Carolina, she helped conceive and seed a grant to [create six fellowships for research supporting underrepresented narratives in craft](#), which, like most art forms in America has been shaped by a white European narrative. Horie called it a passion project, but it also has taken away some of her studio time.

When she does make time, she protects it fiercely.

“I value my alone time in the studio,” she said. “I’m naturally an introvert, so I crave that. And it’s the only time I get to myself in a lot of ways.”

The Maine Craft Association has been honoring individual artists since 2009 for “exceptional bodies of work or contributionsto the field,” and Horie has both.

“Ayumi’s work is world-renowned, her business acumen is highly creative and enviable, and her use of craft to make a positive impact spans her career. Craftspeople and organizations have benefited from her kindness and efforts including the Maine Crafts Association and the state of Maine,” former association director Sadie Bliss said.

As for the appearance on the PBS documentary “Craft in America,” Horie said she was humbled to be chosen. Asked to reflect on the theme of this year’s show – inspiration – she said she is inspired to create objects that can become a part of people’s lives. Now that she has young children, Horie also has become fascinated by the objects that draw them in.

In many ways, she said, a piece of pottery is perfect platform for delivering a message.

“Because we spend so much time cooking, eating, being around food ... the impact that a cup can have is really different than the impact that another object in your house can have,” she said. “And I think about the importance of having a family dinner or sharing around a table, to be part of that experience for people and families feels important to me.”

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