

DRIPPING WITH UNDERSTANDING

by Kylie Gusset

I am driven by a sense of crisis that in the world of ceramics and contemporary art scenes around the world, there is an apparent, rampant imitation of my work going on and that they are seemingly very well-received. I feel strong discomfort with this phenomenon and the urge to do something about it.

Excerpt from an Instagram post @takurokuwata, 24 November 2019

For this knowledge issue of the Journal, it makes sense to cover copying. As creative people working with mud, the concept of two people making work that might be seen as being a copy of each other's is not unusual. When collecting for my Instagram account @noticingceramics, I look for three images of ceramics that have something in common, and often the similarities are striking. One problem I've encountered is that when egos and commerce are involved, the issue of copying can become rather heated.

Takuro Kuwata, from Japan, is well known for creating left of field tea bowls. He offers a nod to history with a traditional shape, then completely pushes the bowls to their limits. Hardcore colours and/or metallics? Check. Glazes that look like they came from the future with oversized blobs and cracks? Check. Experimentation with form? Check.



Takuro Kuwata, *untitled*, 2014, porcelain, stone, h.17.5cm, w.23cm, d.15cm
Photo: courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York; @takurokuwata

When I was researching this article, two names kept coming up: Nick Weddell (@nicks_ceramics) and Brian Rochefort (@energygloop). Both are featured in the upcoming book *Special Effects Glazes* by Linda Bloomfield. Nick weighs in:

Takuro Kuwata is a teacher to me; someone who, upon reaching the end of their path, did not stop moving but lay down bricks to further their way and allow others to cover more ground before having to forge their own. I feel nothing but respect and admiration for his example and I will not deny his influence on my work. However, I earnestly feel that my work is not a copy of his.

I make my work as joyfully ridiculous as possible on most days, and to me that joy often appears as thick, absurd, colourful glass absolutely piled on a little cup that I can carry around as if that's a perfectly normal thing to do. Maybe Takuro is going after the same thing or, as his historical examples suggest, maybe he is cultivating and accentuating quirky and often accidental material behaviors. I am not certain, but what I do feel more certain about is that anyone who is blatantly copying Takuro Kuwata is not receiving a lot of exposure or success as far as I know. If Takuro and Garth are referring to anybody who may be characterised as 'gloop-users'... well, I disagree. I think we have each our own distinct voice, even if when you squint really hard they might look similar.

If anyone creates work which is cracked, coloured and/or features glazes in a similar manner to his, does that similarity mean that the other person is copying Kuwata's work and is therefore in the wrong, especially keeping in mind that the process of experimentation becoming a tradition is so deeply rooted in Japanese ceramics? Art critic, historian, dealer, curator, and gallerist Garth Clark has published online his open letter to Kuwata¹, praising him as "one of the most impressive new voices in 21st century ceramics." There's a wealth of, as Clark puts it, "Ceramic pasta and bubble gum/cake icing glazing", and he positions Kuwata as an innovator in this glaze field, who has spawned a bevy of 'copycats'. Clark has long engaged with both Takuro Kuwata and ceramic artist Brian Rochefort in his writing and curation, so I'm wondering: where do we draw the line in terms of conflicts of interest? Who gets to decide whose work came first or is more influential?

There are ceramic artists who have been in the industry longer than Kuwata who are making work that fits Garth's glaze description, and they can absolutely back their work up with their inspirations and concepts. For example, Tessa Eastman, who said as part of an Instagram post on her approach to her practice:

As a ceramic artist who has worked in clay for more than 20 years, I explore how my sculpture forms dialogues, generating an atmosphere of congruence and conflict that enhances the unique persona of each piece ... I treat the often-overlooked detail of bone, cloud, crystal and microscopic structures as a starting point to develop pieces which possess a curious ambiguity.

Then there are those who do not deny being influenced. Kazuhito Kawai is a Japanese-based ceramicist who heroically took on the task of responding to my questions in English:

I'm making my works as like painting or modelling sculptures.
To me the works are kind of documentations of my struggle or existence.
I try to express myself with using melting glaze and vivid colours.
I know some people feel some similarities between my works and Kuwata's works.
It's only phenomena to me. Only surface things. Just technical things. Vivid colors, melting glaze.

We can also go back to Garth Clark who recently posted on Instagram: "Kazuhito Kawai took all the glaze porn, put it together and made it his own."

When I brought up copying with Philippa Taylor, a Melbourne-based ceramicist whose work has been copied, her response was to focus on her own work. Her way of dealing with copiers? She makes more technically difficult and nuanced work that is going to be harder to copy.

Maleny-based Shannon Garson frequently teaches ceramics, which brings a whole new dimension to copying. Often teachers use their own work methods and techniques to teach, so it's not surprising to see a collection of 'teacher knock-offs'. Shannon says: "When you're learning, there's nothing wrong with copying. That's how you learn. Copy to learn, but don't sell."

As UK-based Linda Bloomfield summed it up in an email when I asked her thoughts on copying: "Each artist has their own specialty; it's not just about the glaze technique, it's what they do with it and the ideas behind it that matter."

So the question I'll leave you with is: what ideas do you have behind what you make that matter?

¹ Garth Clark, 'Garth Clark's Open Letter to Takuro Kuwata', 14 January 2020, *Cfile.Daily*, accessible online: cfileonline.org/pov-garth-clarks-open-letter-to-takuro-kuwata/

Takuro Kuwata, *untitled*
detail, 2014, porcelain stone
h.17.5cm, w.23cm, d.15cm
Photo: courtesy of the artist and
Salon 94, New York
@takurokuwata

