

the lab magazine

ART

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HIROYUKI HAMADA

anna griggs // hiroyuki hamada // the lab magazine

INTERVIEWED BY ANNA GRIGGS

Hiroykui Hamada is a sculptor. Born in Tokyo, Japan, he now lives and works in East Hampton, New York with his wife and two children. He is represented in New York by Lori Bookstein Fine Art.

THE LAB MAGAZINE—When and how did you first begin to make artwork?



#40, 40.5 x 32.5. x 2 inches, 1998-2002, enamel, oil, plaster, tar and wax

HIROYUKI HAMADA—I was already in college when I started. I liked making things as a kid but I guess I didn't really know what "art" was. It's sort of amazing that all the art classes that I had to take since I was in kindergarten failed me. Maybe visual art is not as narrowly defined as other forms of art. There might be more consensus in the difference between making some noise and writing a song, or between a description and a poem... Maybe I didn't grow up with lots of visual art around me... So it was pretty shocking to see my college teacher take a piece of paper, make marks on it, and the whole thing started animating with a wholeness, like having a life. So that got me into making art. I switched my major from psychology to art.

TLM—You started out as a painter and now your work is mostly sculptures. How did your focus from one medium to another shift over time?

HH—It's been a gradual change. Every time I make something it gives a momentum to a certain direction. For example, if I see variations in textures, that might make me interested in working with variations of the surface, eventually leading to a different shaped canvas or that could eventually lead to a 3D shape growing out of a 2D surface and so on. So it's really not like one day I decided to become a sculptor and I started learning from scratch. By the time I knew I was becoming a sculptor I already had some tools around, although, there were bigger jumps that I had to take, like learning about materials, technical know-how, and so on. There are other ways to grow of course, but I think I could make sure that I was guided by what the work needed that way, not by some irrelevant external things.

TLM—What other kinds of evolution have you seen happening in your work? What prompted those shifts?

HH—Well, that's a tough question because it pushes me to guess what works and what doesn't work. My belief about art is that the essential mechanism of the particular art work is always hidden from the artists or the viewers. For example, we can build the base structure or the back ground using existing techniques – such as balancing elements, working with contrast, color schemes, symmetry, repetition, rhythm and so on – but none of these things have anything to do with the lasting quality which truly moves us. And I don't even think about those things that much either. It's the structure of elements put together in a certain way so that the result can guide us to feel some sort of a basic essence about who we are with all the unknown parts attached to it. It's nothing we can really get to by a formula of any sort. I think that makes art so special to us. We can all tap into the unknown familiar place while also being who we are as humans.



#43, 37.5 x 24.5 x 9 inches, 1999-2003, enamel, oil, plaster, tar and wax

TLM—How do you see your work evolving in the future?

HH—I think it looks like I'm having more complexities in the work for now. It's sort of paralleling things outside of my studio – having a family, more responsibilities as a parent, adjusting to a fast-changing world, etc. Also, I do have more visual vocabularies at hand now than when I started out. But again, it's very hard to generalize about what I do.

TLM—What are you working on currently?

HH—I have a few pieces getting ready to be shown. It's a time when I'm starting to feel them as a group, starting to enjoy looking at them as pieces, and starting to feel anxious about the deadline! I have a show coming up in the fall. I don't really work for a specific show usually (I sort of think deadlines are not that healthy. They get in the way of decision making process) but the next show will have my new pieces that are somewhat bigger and a bit more complex, along with some smaller ones and possibly 2D works on papers. With the bigger ones I've been learning to work with resin since I want them to be a bit lighter and stronger. That's been fun. And the 2D works are also new. Many are done on the computer. I would do a pencil drawing, scan it, and work on it on the computer. I think this also comes from my interest in working with shapes faster.

TLM—Many of your sculptures' materials could come from a hardware store instead of an art supply shop – burlap, foam, tar, plaster. What draws you to these materials? How do the materials you use reflect or inform what you are expressing in your work?

HH—Well those things might not be designated as artists' materials but they are tested and used a lot to make things. They are good, solid things for my use. They are also more affordable too. I grew out of being a painter so I don't really mind not relying on the properties of the materials for the surface making. I make my own surface by painting, staining, texturizing, and so on, so I like using materials that allow me to work that way.

TLM—Your site suggests that you work on many of your sculptures for years at a time. What's your working process like? Could you walk our readers through the creative process, as it took place over several years, for one of your sculptures?

HH—I have a blog post which does exactly that. Please check it out – <http://hiroyukihamada.com/blog/2010/09/09/making-of-63/>. It follows the making process for #63.

TLM—After years of work, how do you know when a particular piece is "done"?

HH—That comes quite naturally, or it should. If I know what the work should do, I can call it done as soon as the work does what it should do. Most of the time it takes a while to realize what the work should do. I like my work to have a lasting quality, having layers of presence and meaning so that it can work on many levels. So, I might put it away for a while or I might suffer with it to see where it should go. Or I might conclude that it needs variations of a theme. But an art work to me is a functioning whole like an organism. The work is complete when it does what it does. So finishing the work is not a random decision for me.

TLM—Your pieces are numbered instead of titled by name; what's behind that decision?

HH—That comes from my wish that the work speaks through itself. I don't put any symbols, stories, or references to make the work speak so putting some recognizable name can defeat the purpose. Although I must say that some people do a great job naming their non-representational works.

TLM—What is most satisfying to you about your work as an artist, and what are your biggest challenges in doing so?

HH—I like appreciating the time when I'm finishing the work – the moment when things I've worked on for years come into focus and something new and special is born before me. I guess the challenge to get there is how I balance the time in my studio and the time outside of the studio. I'm sure other artists can relate to that.

For the past years or so I started to see things a bit differently about what goes on outside of the studio; mostly because of the Internet. In the studio, I strive to find fine balance in elements to see things being harmonized, opposing elements coexisting in meaningful ways, richness and warmth being born out of raw materials and so on. And I look at things outside of the studio – social issues, needless wars, unprecedented gap of wealth, abusiveness of the large corporations, colluding governments and so on – with the same eyes I use in my studio and they really bother me. Or maybe they bother me more because I'm a parent now... I don't know. In any case, I think more about what I am to our society as an individual and as an artist. What can artists do to contribute to people? What are our roles in bringing about positive social change? Those are very tough questions considering the fact that contemporary art has largely come out of the establishment, being supported by large corporations with neo-colonial tendencies. I think we live in a very difficult but also very special time. A time of a great change. Very much challenging but also very exciting, I think.



#59, 20 diameter x 36 inches, 2005-08, enamel, oil, plaster, tar and wax

TLM—Is your artwork expressive of who you are as an individual, or do you see a clear line between yourself and your work? Are people who've first become familiar with your work and then met you surprised by what you're like as a person?

HH—Ah, I have no clue. I would appreciate if someone asks that question to the viewers. But I can say that I do have a relationship with something or somewhere from which my work comes from. It might sound crazy but I feel that the work is guided by that something. I don't feel the direct presence regularly, but one time when I was feeling completely depleted of any will to do anything including the work, I felt that something lifted me up and put me to work in the studio as if to tell me that I still have a mission in life... It was an odd experience.

But at the same time, the work seems to parallel my life as well in some way. You know what, I just realized that this question is really interesting and makes me wonder many possibilities, but I just don't think I can answer it in any literal way. And it just makes my brain feel like short-circuiting. I will have to keep thinking about this...

TLM—You have a studio in the woods in East Hampton, where you reside. Does the natural environment around you have an influence on your artwork or your creative process, and if so in what ways?

HH—I think there are places that overlap between awesomeness of nature and work I do in the studio – the special quality that comes from the combination between the vast intricacies beyond our comprehension and oddly simple, recognizable familiarity. And perhaps that resides both in art and in nature. So yes, I feel good about being surrounded by nature.

TLM—I've read that your wife, Evan Harris, is a writer and that you met at an artists' colony. Do you and Evan see any resonances between one another's creative work?

HH—Well, I've always thought we share the root part of who we are – believing what art can do to make life worthwhile and what it means to the society and so on. It's very special to be with someone who digs deep and tries to see what's under everyday life. And when you feel like no one understands you, you have someone who does next to you. And that is something we can build on as we grow as people and as partners in life as well. Also, it's very special to witness and feel the magic she does with writing first hand and being able to discuss about it is quite special. We are not in the same field so it makes it even more mysterious and profound for me I think.

But I should also add that it can be a challenge also to coexist with someone who fights with the insecurity of recognition and achievement. And that goes to both of us of course. I think, this can be tough even for artists who are well aware that what should really count is your perception and your own sense of accomplishment. We are social beings, you know? It means a lot to share the work with others – especially others who you respect and care about. I have grown to trust myself and to be grounded on the confidence, but still, I realize I am being unreasonable sometimes. I've heard that some writer couples don't even share their own works because of possible conflicts. But I think challenge is necessary. They can always give us opportunities to grow and have broader perspective.

TLM—You have two young sons. Are your kids interested in the visual arts? How do they respond to your work? And has being a father had an impact on your art, or on your working process?

HH—They do lots of drawings and they've been playing with LEGO a lot. But I don't know if they understand what a work of art is fully. Like I said, I myself was quite old when I really understood it. It might be fun to have structured lessons for them to teach what visual elements are and what they can do. Or not. I do try to take them to shows and stuff but I could do more of that perhaps. I've been thinking that if we can really get into art at an earlier age that could be helpful in appreciating lots more things outside of art – cultivating our sensitivities to things with reverence, sense of awe, some sort of respect and humility in facing nature. I think many of us have lost this sense of awe and respect toward people, creatures, nature and so on. And this allows us to modify our environment in cruel and unusual ways or treat groups of people or cultures with senseless violence. As to being a father, I hope it has a good effect. It's not easy, you know, but it's certainly making me grow as a person – giving me more ways to appreciate, feel, and

empathize. I also feel I have less time today, as any parent can relate to, so it's a challenge to balance. Like anything else I guess.