

Press Release

Masaomi Yasunaga *Clouds in the Distance*

15 November – January 2024
67 Lisson Street, London

Opening: 14 November, 6 – 8pm

Lisson Gallery opens the first exhibition in London by the experimental Japanese sculptor, Masaomi Yasunaga. Presenting a new body of work that deftly fuses ancient ceramic methods with novel explorations, the exhibition serves as an introduction for UK audiences to Yasunaga's highly adventurous, innovative practice. Created by the artist in his studio in Iga-shi, Mie Prefecture, Japan, the show features over 80 works across the galleries, spanning from large-scale biomorphic sculptures to intricate, miniature vessels.

Yasunaga was a student of the Japanese artist, Satoru Hoshino who trained under Kazuo Yagi, a founder of the post-war art movement, Sodeisha, or the 'Crawling through Mud Association'. The avant-garde ethos of the Sodeisha group, who rejected craft-based Mingei precedents and challenged conventional art traditions in Japan including the introduction of non-functional ceramics, was highly influential for generations to come. Yasunaga, the third generation to engage with the principles of Sodeisha, however chose to adopt glaze as his primary material rather than clay, often combining it with raw elements – feldspar, whole rocks, metal or glass powders – before burying the forms in layers of sand and kaolin, then firing them. Once the sculptures are cooled, they are excavated from their beds in a process resembling archaeological exhumation. The resulting forms appear organically shaped by the natural forces rather than artistic artifice. As the material undergoes physical changes caused by the intense heat of the kiln, this potentially destructive process enacts what Yasunaga describes as: "melting the material and letting gravity take hold of its shape once again, eradicating the ego along the way".

Fire is at the core of Yasunaga's creative exploration both physically and conceptually – each work is given its unique patina through the alchemical transformations that are implanted in them by the intense heat of the kiln. As Yasunaga states: "the ultimate goal of my art is not self-expression but what's left of self, after being filtered through fire." The artist's profound understanding of the power of fire – its value and its destructive force – have developed through experience. Yasunaga suffered the catastrophic consequences of fire a couple of years ago when his outdoor kiln spread to a wildfire, and he lost much of his own work. Despite this, Yasunaga describes how beauty can be discovered in the most uncontrollable situations, referring to the process of his sculptures transitioning in the fire, evolving from something artificial to natural, and yielding a beauty that is perfectly pure.

Clouds in the Distance at Lisson Gallery – including a selection of abstractly shaped vessels incorporating materials from copper to granite, kaolin, glass, silica, brass, brick, silver leaf and gold leaf – has a profound sentimentality to it, as a spiritual re-unification for the artist with his grandfather who passed away this summer. Drawing inspiration from the Sodeisha group's prioritisation of form over function, Yasunaga is liberated from crafting artworks purely for purpose, rather creating vessels that are rooted in existential and emotional significance. In one room, Yasunaga creates an immersive, L-shaped installation raised off the ground, where a thick mound of raw, powdered clay serves as a bed for a collection of sculptures to be displayed, experienced as if just recently unearthed. Evoking past ruins and relics, these works – through their journey of creation and as final sculptures – explore the process of remembrance and the desire for nostalgia. As Yasunaga witnessed his own grief and the transition of a loved one from near to a seemingly far, unreachable destination, he reflected on the boundaries of our existence and understanding, and appreciated his creative practice as a way in which to connect with something beyond our reach, like a child reaching out to touch the clouds in the sky. Echoing this in his artistic techniques – where the kiln is a time machine and fire filters what remains – these new works are not only a re-evaluation of the very history of ceramic forms but also a re-consideration of Yasunaga's own relationship with time, space and memory.

About the artist

Masaomi Yasunaga was a student of Satoru Hoshino, a coterie of the avant-garde ceramic group Sodeisha: a post-war (1940s – 1990s) movement that questioned the mandate of functionality within the ceramic medium and pioneered a new sculptural philosophy. Translated as ‘‘Crawling through Mud Association’’, artists of Sodeisha rebelled against the prevalent ceramic traditions in Japan to create existentially and emotionally driven artworks. Yasunaga extends the legacy of Sodeisha group’s experimental ethos by focusing on the process of creation, centred around the sculptural form rather than the functional use of the object. Inspired by his upbringing within Japan’s Catholic minority and ensuing appreciation for aesthetics of Western origin, Yasunaga honours a global range of vessel forms and ritual objects. With titles referencing physical states of being — *empty, melting, fused, molted, shedding, skeleton, flesh and bone* — the artist evokes nature’s physicality into earthenware, eliciting an emotional connection with the viewer.

Masaomi Yasunaga (born 1982) lives and works in Iga-shi, Mie Prefecture, Japan. He holds a Masters Degree in Environmental Design from Osaka Sangyo University. Recent solo exhibitions include Masaomi Yasunaga at Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles (2023), Masaomi Yasunaga at , Masaomi Yasunaga at (Como), Masaomi Yasunaga at Lisson Gallery, New York, NY, USA (2022); Masaomi Yasunaga at Lisson Gallery, East Hampton, NY, USA (2021); Empty Parade at wad Café, Osaka, Japan (2020); To things that exist, to things that don’t exist at gallery YDS, Kyoto, Japan (2020); Empty Landscape at Libby Leshgold Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (2020); Masaomi Yasunaga at Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2019); Masaomi Yasunaga: A Shadow of the Eternity at Utsuwakan, Kyoto, Japan (2019); Memory of Orient at Gallery Utsuwa Note, Kawagoe, Saitama, Japan (2018); Masaomi Yasunaga Exhibition at Garb Domingo, Okinawa, Japan (2017); and arid landscapes at pramata, Tokyo, Japan (2017). Selected group exhibitions include Sterling Ruby and Masaomi Yasunaga at Nonaka- Hill, Los Angeles, CA, USA.

Masaomi Yasunaga’s work is included in the permanent collections of the Ariana Museum, Geneva, Switzerland and The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, USA.

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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