

# Masa Sasaki

## Shifting Form and Holding Wonder

by Erin Shafkind



A one-eyed alien being floats on the side of my mug. It stares wide eyed at me. Holding the handle as I look at the alien, I'm blinking, unable to give a wide-eyed stare back. I sip the last drop of coffee and see a little stamped body inside the bottom of the cup. I learn from Masa Sasaki that this is the alien's abductee. Perhaps by finishing my cup of coffee, my day starts by saving this figure from a perilous journey in the alien's grasp? Or perhaps I myself am on the journey with the alien—exploring new lands, discovering myself, gazing at the matte-black star near the lip of my mug, which contrasts the soft sheen of the white interior glaze. Sasaki is a surface-design master, having studied graphic design, painting, and ceramics in his undergraduate art program at Western Kentucky University. He creates stories through the surface decoration on his pottery; sometimes it feels like poetry with symbols, other times it's random dashes, shapes, numbers, and images. Either way—the patterns emerge, with matte surfaces next to shiny shapes and colorful contrasting distinctions. When I first saw his work, I fell in love with it and wanted some pieces for myself.

Sasaki embraces form and all of its details. He considers the foot, lip, handle, and surface. Everything gets his attention. He uses a variety of stamps, cookie cutters, and letterpress symbols to press into

*Blue Box with Curious Mind*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, 2019.



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the surfaces of the form. The foot of each piece always gets stamped, as does the mug handle and the inside of the form. An impression of a dragonfly stamp is filled with a matte underglaze as it connects to white-glazed dashes, which lead the eye to bigger dashes. Above those dashes are numbers. Sasaki shares with me these are related to his alien-status number; he is from Japan and lives and works in the US as a green-card holder (a permanent resident). The numbers on many of his works are segments of his alien ID number.

#### A Journey with Clay Unfolds

Sasaki was born in Japan and first came to the US as part of an exchange program to attend a high school in Idaho. He later studied at Western Kentucky University in the US as well. He's been living in Doraville, Georgia, within the Atlanta city limits, for the last 20 years with his partner and their rescue dogs Gigi and Yuki. His 500-square-foot basement studio has one electric kiln and two potter's wheels, one for porcelain and the other for stoneware. He fires to cone 6 in oxidation and uses Coleman Porcelain and Standard Ceramic 710 Dark Brown clay. He lives very close to his local clay supplier, Davens Ceramic Center, and to one of his galleries, Signature Contemporary Craft Gallery, which was the first to begin carrying his work a few years ago.

We spoke over Zoom while Sasaki sat in front of his grand piano (he is also a classically trained and practiced pianist). His gentle nature shone through the screen as he patiently revealed his processes and his love of patterns. Exploration and questions are part of how Sasaki approaches art making as the journey. The journey unfolds into patterns and processes, like writing notes on sheet music without the lines of the staff stamped into the clay, tumbling and bouncing around the outside of his pieces. While showing me a form, he shared the questions he asks himself, like "What can I do with this shape?" and "What direction can I take?" These creative inquiries are quintessential elements in the studio for Sasaki, a recognition that he doesn't know it all.

His interest in Bach and the iterations within the 32 *Goldberg Variations* reveal a connection with his art making as well. The repetitive juxtapositions, reversed themes, loopholes, turns, and returns are aspects of the *Goldberg Variations* that excite Sasaki, and he translates these into his pottery. He talks about his work like musical compositions. His form for a mini Ikebana (flower arrangement) is a version of the same form for a salt cellar, as well as a candle holder. He showed me another variation of this orb and talked about it as one of the virtuoso pieces that comprise the *Box with Curious Mind* series.

With these variations in mind, I am reminded of the Canadian Pianist Glenn Gould who recorded the *Goldberg Variations* twice, once in 1955 and again in 1981. Over the 25 years between the recordings, we are able to hear



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1 Orange condiment jar, 4 in. (10 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2021. 2 Orange garlic keeper, 6 in. (15 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2020. 3 Masa Sasaki in his studio, 2021. 4 Princess Fruit Bowl, 12 in. (30 cm) in diameter, porcelain, 2020.



variations upon variations. Writer Seth Colter Walls shared about the uplifting vivid nature of the 1955 performance in contrast with the somber maturity on display in 1981.

Shifts within the same form are common to Sasaki's making as well. He is deeply versed in the notes, the vocabulary of his symbols, and the forms. He'll throw a dozen uniform pieces and later cut, press, and attach other forms to create his many objects. He shared that while throwing porcelain, it is almost like playing the piano notes in Piano to Pianissimo (making very delicate, small, sensitive sounds with his fingers) as contrasted with the darker clay, which doesn't require that much sensitivity.

Sasaki's curiosity guides him as he works out shapes with his hands and mind, ever evolving; in this way, he's writing music with the forms, too. He'll throw several cylinders that may become mugs, sugar jars with recessed lids, or with more additions—like small orb feet and growing orb towers—they eventually become a *Box with a Curious Mind*. An orb may become a salt cellar by cutting it in two to make a lid and later pierced to become a lidded tea-candle holder. He is all about the journey, traveling in a sense while sitting in his

studio creating associations with the various simple forms that he'll turn into completed vessels.

Then Sasaki works on decoration and glazing. Here, his confidence in storytelling and design rings clear. Sometimes he'll punch through the clay with a stamp and see how much of the surface he can pierce before it breaks apart. These holes can serve to allow air flow in a garlic keeper and emit light for a lidded candle holder. He enjoys the activity, colors, and points of interest in creating a variety of decorative contrast.

Sasaki is a solo maker for now. When I asked whether he would ever want to employ assistants, he talked about really enjoying working on each piece and all the aspects of making the pots. He also appreciates the connections with a patron, and knowing that only his hands touch each piece gives him satisfaction with his intention and labor.

### Double Happiness

The character on the piece *Princess Fruit Bowl* (4) is the Chinese symbol for double happiness, which is common at weddings and means joy and happiness. Sasaki embeds some of his pieces with this Chinese symbol. When discussing his inspiration for doing so,



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5 *Orange Box with Curious Mind*, 13 in. (33 cm) in height, stoneware, 2020. 6 *Chartreuse Teapot with Curious Eye*, 7 in. (18 cm) in length, stoneware, 2020. 7 *Chartreuse One Eyed Alien Sugar Pot*, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, stoneware, 2021.



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Sasaki brought up the 2004 film “*What the Bleep Do We Know!?*” specifically the part discussing Masaru Emoto. Emoto ran experiments where he’d take music or recorded messages and play these near glasses of water, and then freeze the water and examine it under a microscope to observe the effects. While his results have not been replicated and are not scientifically supported, he proposed that soothing sounds and words like happiness, beauty, peace, and encouragement would help align the crystal formations in the ice, while harsh sounds and words would break up the crystals. Controversy over the study aside, Sasaki was inspired by the idea of linking quantum physics and consciousness.

#### Commitment to Creativity

Sasaki loves what he does and doesn’t feel like it’s work. There can be stress when filling orders and getting ready for a craft fair or exhibition, but he spoke about it feeling like “good stress.” He’s creating while in a personal state of bliss and joy, and bringing goodness into the world through his objects.

Sasaki has a small continuing side gig as well. He’s been interested in fashion for decades and, while seriously pursuing his ceramics career for the last five to six years, he also finds vintage Levi’s jeans and sells them to a retailer in Japan. Though his ceramic business is taking off, he knows the connection to fashion is still vital. In our conversation, we discussed links between fashion and pottery and how surface design is like clothing for pots. The surfaces of his pots wear the colors and patterns of his stories.

Sasaki is connected with all his creative outlets in a profoundly inspiring and limitless way that is relevant today. His functional art touches on melodies of joy, happiness, and stories of life. The variations push boundaries of making and Sasaki is uncompromising in his commitment to creativity.

Before I had spoken to Sasaki, I knew his work held whimsy and wonder. I appreciate that he uses his facility with symbols and their potential for multiple meanings to embed joy into what he makes. Working as a high school art teacher, I often share with students about trying to embed goodness into what we make. Long before I became a teacher, I worked in a bakery and would talk with coworkers about making bread while we were in a good mood versus a bad mood and the potential for baking love into the bread. Sasaki’s attraction to intentionality and infusing messages into objects is the same—as he composes both simple and virtuoso vessels of joy and beauty filled with potential to spread and share.

To see more of Sasaki’s work and find out about upcoming exhibitions, visit [masasasakiceramics.com](http://masasasakiceramics.com) and follow him on Instagram [@masasasakiceramics](https://www.instagram.com/masasasakiceramics).

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**8** Grey Tea Candle Jar with Bird Motif, 3½ in. (9 cm) in diameter, porcelain, 2020. **9** Blue One Eyed Alien Americano Cup and Saucer Set, to 5 in. (13 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2021. **10** Black Box with Curious Mind, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, 2019. **11** Purple Sugar Pot with Deer Motif, 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, stoneware, 2021.