

DANGEROUS BEAUTY

Keiko Fukazawa creates phenomenal artwork – with help from prison inmates



Keiko Fukazawa with her graffiti-inspired artwork.

by Kate Murray
photos by Michelle Falerne

When you hear the word “graffiti,” the images that pop into your head are certainly not pretty ones. For most, the word denotes negativity and goes hand in hand with gang culture.

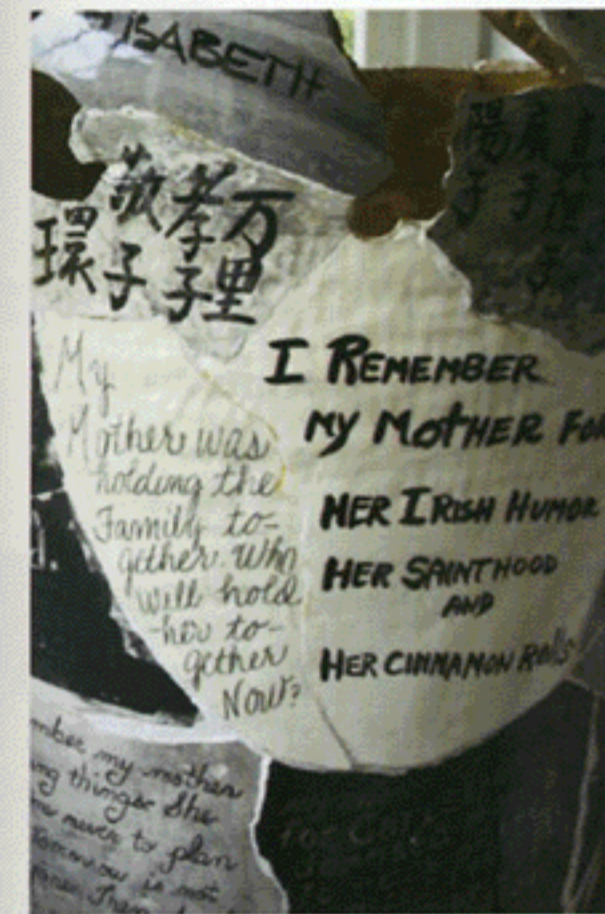
But to PCC ceramics instructor Keiko Fukazawa, graffiti is nothing short of beautiful – which is why she collaborates with inmates in minimum-security prisons to create astonishingly original ceramic pieces.

“To me, graffiti is a wonderful art form,” Fukazawa said. “How about using it in a more positive way?”

Because she does not have clearance to work directly with prisoners, Fukazawa first creates a piece on her own, typically an oversized bisqueware plate or a giant jug-like vessel. She then cracks her new creation with a hammer, letting it fall apart. Her husband, a parole officer, takes the pieces into the prisons, where the inmates are free to decorate them however they like.

Once she gets the pieces back, Fukazawa fills in the blank spots she had initially marked off for her own input, drawing on her Japanese background for inspiration. When every blank spot is covered, Fukazawa glues it all back together by following a pre-break diagram.

The results are spectacular. Decorated with everything from Swastikas to Fukazawa’s Japanese pop art, these pieces display a juxtaposition that is surprisingly beautiful. Each piece has a



color scheme specified by Fukazawa, resulting in three different series: a “Sometsuke” blue group, which resembles traditional blue-and-white chinaware; a very colorful, cartoonishly bright group; and what Fukazawa calls her “L.A. majolica” group, inspired by Italian Renaissance majolica but with a modern twist.

These color schemes unify the pieces, which, though beautiful, often have haunting messages. The designs are punctuated by seams where the pieces were once cracked, a feature that Fukazawa says is key to the art.

“[The cracks] are a sort of metaphor,” Fukazawa said. “The prisoners are breaking their old lifestyles of drugs, prostitution. The art represents that.”

Fukazawa’s interest in art began when she was a teenager living in Japan. This calling was nurtured by her mother, whose own artistic aspirations were suppressed by traditional Japanese gender roles.

When her mother was diagnosed with cancer, Fukazawa put her art on hold to take on her household responsibilities. One of these was cooking for her family.

“But this cooking led to ceramics,” Fukazawa said with a wide smile. “If you go to a Japanese restaurant, each meal has an individual plate. The Japanese appreciate ceramics.” She took ceramics classes, and in her spare time made bowls and plates for her family to use for food.

Fukazawa graduated from Musashino Art University in Tokyo, where, she says, she learned to create art in a traditional style. This was a good way to learn the basics but it didn’t fulfill her independent artistic spirit.

“I’m living in the 20th century,” Fukazawa had said to herself. “Why are we making tea bowls from the 15th century?”

After apprenticing under several ceramic art masters, Fukazawa moved to California to pursue modern art. Accepted at Otis Parson’s College, she presented her first show there. Her artwork quickly sold out.

After graduating, Fukazawa was offered a job teaching female inmates at the California Rehabilitation Center, a minimum-security prison. There she created her first collaborative artwork with prisoners, a black-and-white piece called “Exquisite Mothers.”

“I gave the broken pieces to these incarcerated ladies, and asked them to write about their mothers,” said Fukazawa, whose contribution about her own mother was written in Japanese.

Fukazawa’s career has since exploded. Her art is included in the permanent collections of high-profile institutions like LACMA and the California Arts Council. She has shown her artwork in over a hundred exhibitions and has taught ceramics at seven different colleges, most recently USC. She now teaches ceramics full-time at PCC.

“I learn from my students,” Fukazawa said. “Some people say teaching is draining, but I get energy from teaching students, because they’re highly motivated and interested in what they’re doing. I’m happy to work with them.”

As for her collaborative projects with prisoners, Fukazawa puts aside a percent-

age of her sales to give back to the inmates in the only way she can. Part of the earnings are donated to Youth at Risk, a program dedicated to less fortunate youths with dwindling opportunities. The rest is put toward a program Fukazawa hopes to establish with her husband, a halfway house to give inmates fresh out of prison a chance to reestablish their lives.

“I couldn’t have done this without these kids’ talent, time and dedication to my projects,” said Fukazawa. “I’m not promoting the gang lifestyle, but I believe that graffiti nowadays is a very interesting, beautiful art form. This is a positive way for these inmates to express themselves and display their talent.” ©

