

# Flow #1

Fujikasa Satoko (Japanese, born 1980)

**Flow #1**, 2011

Stoneware with matte white slip

26 1/8 x 27 x 23 1/8 inches

Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Asian Art Council

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Fujikasa Satoko,\* at an early age, is winning accolades in her native Japan and in the United States as a rising star in the field of ceramics. Japan has a flourishing ceramics tradition, and more than 10,000 artisans make a living there as studio potters. The vast majority of these craftsmen create dishware for the dining table or cups and pitchers for drinking tea or saké—functional pieces that sell well to Japanese households. But for those who strive to be “clay artists”—whether they make functional, whimsical, or sculptural objects—the competition for gallery space and critical attention is severe. A famous master of ceramics can be a national celebrity in Japan, but the field is overwhelmingly dominated by men.

To understand how exceptional Fujikasa’s work is, it is important to know that pottery was historically exclusively a male occupation in Japan. In rural valleys where good clay could readily be dug from the ground, the men in the village would collaborate in ceramic production. The most skilled workers would shape the vessels on a wheel, while others dug up and mixed clay or chopped wood. A few times a year, the village kiln would be fired. A traditional *noborigama*, or climbing kiln, is constructed of brick and mud, with several chambers rising on a hillside slope. The kiln can accommodate a huge number of pots at one time, but one had to earn the right to have one’s works included. And because the kiln had to be fed with firewood continuously for several days, it required a heroic effort by a well-knit team of workers. The harsh, demanding nature of the work—as well as traditional prejudices—forbade women from approaching the kiln.

Change came slowly following World War II. New laws against air pollution forced potters living near cities to switch to gas or electric kilns, which were smaller and easy to operate. Suddenly, it became possible for potters to work alone, in a small studio. Furthermore, in response to a new constitution guaranteeing equal education for women, there were new opportunities for women to study the arts in formal settings, such as art colleges. Fujikasa is at the leading edge of the second generation of women ceramists in Japan.

Fujikasa studied ceramics at Tokyo University of the Arts, the most prestigious art university in Japan. For three years she followed the prescribed program, focused on the wheel, but it was only when she transferred to the sculpture department in her senior year that she began to find her own artistic voice. She went on for an M.A., and her thesis work, a large molded sculpture, won the first of many awards. Feeling that molds were not the best way to bring out the unique properties of clay, she switched to what has become her signature technique: she fashions her sculptures by kneading clay into coils and hand-building the form. As the work slowly grows, she carves it into the desired shape. In her hands, this most ancient method of forming clay leads to astonishing creations that appear lighter than air—as though they are embodiments of wind itself.

Fujikasa has said that her goal is to express nature’s vital force—the vitality of constant change—in her work. Her sources of inspiration vary widely: exhibitions of European Baroque painting that she saw as a child, videos of Loie Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance*, and photographs of Antelope Canyon in Arizona. The Portland Art Museum is proud to be home to *Flow #1*, one of Fujikasa’s most ambitious early works.

\*In Japan, the family name is given before the personal name.

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## DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

- Blind contour drawing activity: Take out a sheet of paper and a pencil. Spend 30 seconds looking at this poster's photograph of Fujikasa Satoko's sculpture *Flow #1*. Without looking away from the image, begin to sketch the sculpture. Do not lift your pencil or look down at your work as you sketch. Continue for one minute, then stop, look at your sketch, and compare it to the poster. What did you notice about the sculpture while you sketched it? What kinds of lines and shapes did you create? Did you move the pencil quickly or slowly? Why? Repeat this activity in front of the sculpture during a visit to the Portland Art Museum. Observe and draw the sculpture from different angles.
- Look closely at the image of Satoko's sculpture for 30 seconds. Write 10 words describing what you see. Observe for 30 seconds more. Use your imagination and write 10 more words describing the sculpture through senses other than sight. How do you think the sculpture would feel to the touch? Would the surface be rough or smooth, warm or cold? Would the sculpture be heavy or light? What sound would it make if you tapped it? How do you think it would smell or taste?
- In her sculptures, Fujikasa captures dynamic movement. She says, "It is through my intimate dialogue with my medium that I am able to express nature's fluid energy. Drawing from both the beauty and power of this world and the emotional response that they evoke, I hope to convey nature's life force in the mind of the viewer." What natural forces or elements does *Flow #1* evoke? How has Fujikasa created a sense of movement from a material—clay—that is now inert?
- Think of yourself as a dancer and position your body to form a similar shape as Fujikasa's sculpture. Change your position to form a different angle of the sculpture. Repeat, adding in additional shapes, moving as you imagine the *Flow* sculpture would move. What do you notice about how your body moves? Are some angles easier or more difficult to imitate?
- Watch the videos of Fujikasa working with clay to create her sculptures (above). Record each step in her process. *Flow #1* is over two feet tall and wide. Yet, the walls of this and other Fujikasa sculptures are extraordinarily thin, varying from two centimeters (about the size of two sugar cubes placed side-by-side) to three millimeters (about the size of two pennies, stacked). How does she transform the clay into such large, light forms? Investigate the chemistry and physics of this process. What happens to clay when it is moistened or air-dried or fired in the kiln?