

JANUARY 2016

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

FALLING FOR A FOLLY

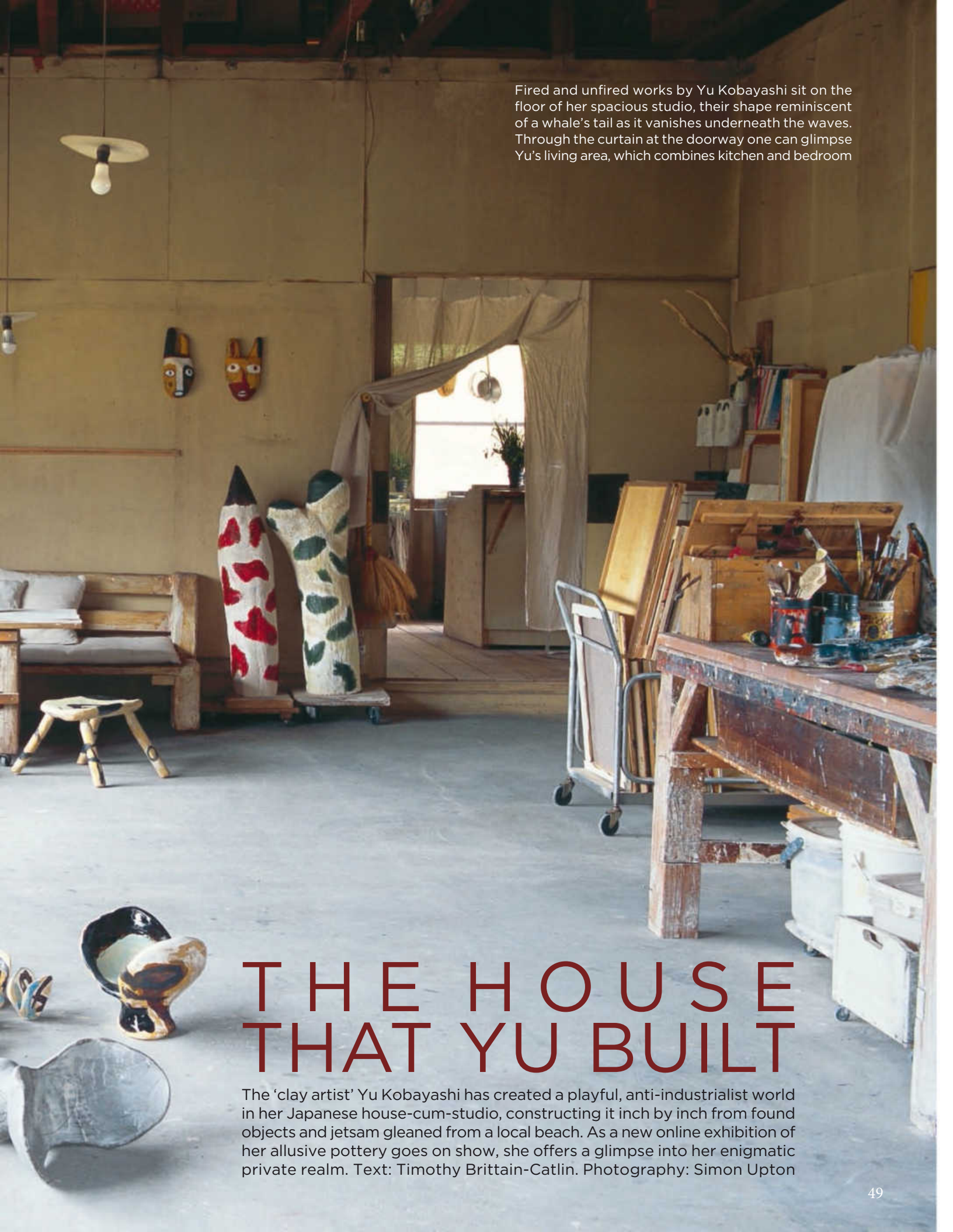
How love and elbow grease rescued a Gothick gem

SPAIN'S MASTER
OF ILLUSION

Conjuring a theatrical
palace from family ruin







Fired and unfired works by Yu Kobayashi sit on the floor of her spacious studio, their shape reminiscent of a whale's tail as it vanishes underneath the waves. Through the curtain at the doorway one can glimpse Yu's living area, which combines kitchen and bedroom

THE HOUSE THAT YU BUILT

The 'clay artist' Yu Kobayashi has created a playful, anti-industrialist world in her Japanese house-cum-studio, constructing it inch by inch from found objects and jetsam gleaned from a local beach. As a new online exhibition of her allusive pottery goes on show, she offers a glimpse into her enigmatic private realm. Text: Timothy Brittain-Catlin. Photography: Simon Upton



Top: a short walk from the house through a copse of Japanese black pine trees leads to Suruga Bay, where Yu goes every day to find objects to inspire her ceramics or to turn into furniture. Above left: Yu's love of North Africa can be seen in the style of the pieces standing against, and hanging on, the wall of the studio. She made all the furniture, the swing and the curtain herself from recycled materials. Above right: the shape of this cup, with its horn-like handle, is currently one of Yu's favourites



Top: a bough decorated in African tribal style stands next to another of Yu's homemade worktables – the white porcelain jars stored below it are part of Yu's glazing equipment. Above left: circles of wire hanging down the mullion of a window create a sculptural effect. The group of ceramics beneath them is called *We Had Dancing in the Holy Night*. Above right: on either side of the front door hang signs that Yu has picked up on her travels, including one for Route 2 from Saskatchewan in Canada



Top and opposite: in the kitchen area of the living room, Yu made the worktop and stools herself. The conical pot on the far wall's top shelf was designed for formal tea ceremonies and was given to the artist by a member of the Tuareg people on one of her expeditions to the Sahara. Above left: a mirror, showing a reflection of the door to the studio, stands against the living-room wall, while to its left is a homemade desk and (just out of shot) Yu's bed. Above right: more ceramics by Yu







At the other end of the living room from the kitchen is Yu's bed, with plenty of storage space beneath. The artist made the pendant wire lampshade and constructed the tower-like sculpture out of boxes that once contained gifts from friends

AROUND 15 years ago, the artist Yu Kobayashi moved from her home on the top of a ridge in a green-tea plantation to Makinohara, southwest of Tokyo. Here, with-in sight of Mount Fuji, she lives ‘just 160 footsteps from the beach’. A carpenter built the frame of the shed in which she both works and lives, and over time she has completed the rest of it, adding floors and inner walls; an attic, storage room and bed; tables, work surfaces and benches. There are just two main rooms: the barn-like potter’s studio and a living room, combining bedroom and kitchen. Everything in them she has made from recycled or natural materials she has found nearby.

Yu calls herself a ‘clay artist’, preferring that phrase to the more formal term ‘ceramicist’, though that shouldn’t blind us to the craftsmanship and professionalism she brings to her work: she is formally trained in ceramics and has full mastery of historical techniques and traditional glazes. She takes her inspiration from the forms and textures of natural, found objects then sets out to find ways to express these qualities in her clay creations. Every day she goes out into her garden or down to Suruga Bay to find timber, stones or whatever comes her way, and takes it home to work from or, indeed, with.

The resulting clay pieces are sinuous, organic-looking, tactile, fun. There are cups with huge ceramic loops for handles, spoons that are oversized or look like fish, fig-shaped vases, tiny sculptures of dogs, and daft, childlike ceramic crowns. Her bowls might as well be helmets. On the day we speak, she tells me, she has been gazing at the ‘clear white fleecy clouds outside the window, the shadow and light leaking into the room’ in search of a creative spark (she has a long memory for remarkable forms and often returns again and again to play with them in her work).

Over time, the whole of the cabin has become both her creation and her interpretation of the world around her. Her home is filled not only with her pottery but also with furniture and art installations made out of the flotsam and jetsam she gathers. The table in the living room, at which Yu writes, eats and draws, was made from pieces of wood picked up on her perambulations, as was a bookcase in her studio, which houses her collection of rare books. Dotted all around are workbenches, stools made of logs set on castors and wire sculptures of fish hanging from the rafters. A curious white, tower-shaped object on a chest opposite the bed is another of Yu’s creations, an installation constructed from five cardboard boxes, which originally contained gifts from friends. In the living room, a swing hangs from the ceiling, its bench and ropes gleaned from the beach. Meanwhile on the walls hang her large, bold paintings in a miscellany of styles from abstract to still life.

Mixed in with these local finds and creations are reminders of her travels in North Africa. She says she feels at home in the desert, calling it her ‘heartland’, and the sand-blown red colour of the outside walls and something of the style of her cabin reflect the houses she has seen there. The occasional splashes of yellow, mostly, but also red, artfully figuring in both her ceramics and her paintings, as well as in everyday things such as citrus fruits in a big glass jar, are fragments of memories from her travels. She has made a road sign marking the way to Timia, a village in the middle

of the Sahara, and has hung it beside the doors that screen her kiln. Next to the front door, a reminder of another one of her trips abroad, hangs a Route 2 road sign that she brought home from Saskatchewan province in Canada, where she had an exhibition of her work at the Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery in 2003.

Such witty touches – a sense of the absurd – are what attracted Samantha Allen, co-founder of the Shop Floor Project in Cumbria, to the artist. (The Shop Floor Project website is currently hosting an exhibition of Yu’s new work.) Samantha has captured Yu’s *asobigokoro* – which translates as ‘a sense of play’ – in a short online film accompanied with a narration and haunting music by Samantha’s curatorial assistant, the sound artist and composer Ryoko Akama. In one of the scenes, Yu is seen dabbling in the waves of Suruga Bay, taking delight in a piece of seaweed that she has found – yet another base metal from the natural world to be transformed into artistic gold.

It comes as no surprise that Samantha has become Yu’s champion in Britain. In 2004 Samantha undertook a residency at Sir John Soane’s Museum in London – working on a display of Hogarth’s works and filming the return of the *pasticcio* (a totem pole-like assemblage of architectural fragments) to the building’s Monument Court. There she became fascinated spending time surrounded by tiny objects that share themes, and living, as Yu does, amongst a strange and wonderful collection of works of art.

The simplicity and traditionalism of Yu’s cabin brings to mind Britain’s Arts and Crafts pioneers. Her driftwood furniture of tables, sofa, bed and workbenches, with its expressive rough junctions between surfaces and practical ledges and struts, echoes their defiant late 19th- and early 20th-century anti-industrialism. And, as in their homes, the warmth comes not only from the fire – Yu’s kiln stays on throughout the night in winter providing just enough heat – but also from the spirited colours of the paintings on the walls.

The integrated nature of Yu’s life and work is symbolised by the way she likes to group things, nearly always in pairs. You can see this in her garden, where even a jumble of watering cans achieves a pleasing balance. In the kitchen, jars and implements are neatly displayed above two little pairs of kitchen scales; and the tools she uses for her work are arranged in satisfying shapes, so that a series of coils of wire forms a neat chain hanging dead-centre down a window mullion. At one side of a table, there are two boots and two bins; alongside them a rough string of white found objects reminiscent of a bone necklace from Africa.

This is just the setting, of course, for the works of art themselves. These she places in groups of different forms but similar sizes: on a rack she has gathered together a set with wings or horns; in a small collection below the coils of wire are pieces that resemble birds, hands or something in between. At one point, as Samantha Allen’s film reveals, she hung a pair of curious white paper fish from the ceiling of the cabin: the sharp-eyed will also spot in one frame a little bird box that is still nestled high up in the rafters. You go on looking, you go on finding more. ‘Make for life,’ is how Yu puts it, quite simply ■

To view the online exhibition of new pieces by Yu Kobayashi, which include masks, ceramics and prints, visit theshopfloorproject.com



Top: a still-life painting Yu made of her own pots stands next to the sturdy worktable in the studio. The chimney from her kiln can be seen vanishing through the roof in the corner. Above left: corrugated-iron doors open to reveal the kiln, which burns through the night during the winter months. Above right: Yu Kobayashi stands in front of a playful sign she made which points the way to a village called Timia, an oasis in the middle of the Sahara that she has visited on her travels