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RAM Showcase: Bodies

March 12, 2025 – February 21, 2026

The human figure is often used to tell stories, symbolize existence, and represent the human condition. Featuring works from RAM's collection, *RAM Showcase: Bodies* reflects people's desire to study, analyze, and respond to the human body as form and content. Made from clay or washi paper, the works included in this exhibition underscore the enduring artistic interest in the body as subject.

All of the works in this exhibition were made by artists of color—a significant fact that adds layers to the subject matter and ways it is depicted. This distinction is critical for some contemporary artists of color, as their work adds narratives to art histories that generally marginalized or excluded them.

Individually, the artists represented in *RAM Showcase: Bodies* explore a wide range of issues, including social and cultural dynamics, the sensual body, emotions, the connection between human beings and animals, history, and relationships between duality and otherness. Sometimes self-portraits, sometimes not, the subjects portrayed are envisioned or recorded through flat, drawn images or sculpted forms and reflect vibrant voices and engaging perspectives.

Kyoko Hazama

"My work is very personal. Each piece fulfills a feeling of emptiness that is inside me. Making my work is a way of seeking peace. Human figures are always female forms because they are symbolic self-portraits. The animals that accompany the human figures are symbols of generosity embracing all."

Self-taught Japanese artist Kyoko Hazama (1971–) creates sculptures by layering washi paper around wire armatures. Embracing the translucent properties of washi paper, she achieves color variation by layering multiple thin strips over each other and allowing color to build. Hazama's subject matter often takes the form of doll-like children in the presence of wild animals, finding inspiration in the facial expressions of animated cartoon characters or traditional Japanese folk art dolls. Arts writer Scott Rothstein notes in the July 2009 issue of *American Craft Magazine*, *"Her pieces, usually women or lifelike animals, are no more than 12 inches high. She presents what is familiar, only to surprise the viewer with an inexplicable element in the work. A kangaroo stands quietly while being lassoed by a young woman. A black crow wears a headdress in the shape of a swan's head [...]"*

R|A|M

Her work is included in the collection of the Museum of Art and Design, New York, New York, and in 2014, Hazama presented a solo exhibition at the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens, Delray, Florida. She is represented at RAM by two works which were recently acquired using the Windgate Foundation Contemporary Craft Acquisition Grant.

Explore:



[mobilia-gallery.com/
artists/kyoko-hazama](http://mobilia-gallery.com/artists/kyoko-hazama)

Read:



[scott-rothstein.
squarespace.com/
kyoko-okubo-hazama/](http://scott-rothstein.squarespace.com/kyoko-okubo-hazama/)

Kelly and Kyle Phelps

Twin ceramic artists Kyle and Kelly Phelps (1972–) use their collaborative practice to explore themes of identity, labor, and human connection, with a particular focus on the American blue-collar working experience. Drawing inspiration from the community they grew up in, their work delves into the material and emotional aspects of manual labor, often incorporating found tools and industrial materials that the brothers collect from their travels around the Rust Belt combined with their expressive ceramic figures. Both brothers currently work as professors of Ceramics and Sculpture at different universities in Ohio. They note, *“Our favorite or most important contribution to the ceramics world is the fact that we are both teaching courses as Full Professors in Ceramics and Sculpture. Just being people of color and being visible to students is an important contribution. It’s important especially for students to see that there are ceramists of color in the ceramic world.”*

Kyle and Kelly Phelps are included in various collections both public and private including the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, Texas; the Asheville Art Museum, North Carolina; and the personal collection of actor Morgan Freeman. They are represented at RAM by one work recently acquired using the Windgate Foundation Contemporary Craft Acquisition Grant. However, this is not the first time that the Phelps brothers have been in RAM’s galleries—in 2015, the artists were featured in a RAM exhibition titled *All in the Family: Featuring Kyle and Kelly Phelps*, which showcased loaned work.

Explore:



[ramart.org/exhibit/
all-in-the-family](http://ramart.org/exhibit/all-in-the-family)

Watch:



youtu.be/Jk3cqeoLQK0

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Esther Shimazu

"I greatly prefer the fluid lines and rounded abstraction of the body over the more realistic Hellenistic and European traditions. There are several adorable fat guys like Ganesh (the Hindu elephant-headed god) and Hotei (the Japanese god of happiness and prosperity who carries a bag holding his possessions and perhaps treats for children); both have bulging, exposed bellies and benevolent intentions. The native Hawaiian ideal of beauty is pretty hefty as well. We don't wear as much clothing here (in Hawaii). Bodies are everywhere."

Ceramic artist Esther Shimazu (1957–) is best known for her figurative, hand-built sculptures which typically depict bald, nude women. Finding inspiration in her Japanese heritage, Shimazu chooses to focus on creating depictions of Asian women and sometimes incorporates cultural elements such as folding fans. After individually constructing the different elements of the sculpture and connecting them together, color is added using slips, oxides, and occasionally, airbrushing.

In 1980, Shimazu completed her BFA at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and in 1982, went on to earn her MFA. In 1995, Shimazu was awarded an Individual Artist Fellowship Award from the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. Shimazu's work is exhibited both nationally and internationally, especially in her home state of Hawaii. She is included in various museum collections including the St. Louis Art Museum, Missouri; the Berkeley Art Museum, California; and The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii. She is represented in RAM's collection by seven works.

Explore:



estershimazu.com

Watch:



youtu.be/OXkx3FY4MnA

Watch:



youtu.be/1UhiC03AC6c

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Kevin Snipes

Kevin Snipes (1963–) combines his love of creating unconventional pottery with a desire to draw on everything that he makes. As an African-American ceramic artist, Snipes notes that people often expect Black figures to populate his work. To deal with this expectation on his own terms, he investigates the concepts of duality and otherness, using the multiple sides of his pieces as metaphors for differing perspectives. About this aspect of his work, Snipes states, *“The stories I tell are open-ended investigations of difference and otherness. They are ways in which I can explore the underlying emotional and psychological issues of discrimination. I am interested in what happens when people who are different come together. One aspect of my work is that the narratives I portray encompass different sides, so that every side of the piece is the front side, or protagonist.”*

Snipes received a BFA in ceramics and drawing from the Cleveland Institute of Art, Ohio, in 1994 and an MFA in ceramics at the University of Florida, Gainesville, in 2013. He has exhibited throughout the US and internationally. He has served as a visiting artist at institutions such as Harvard and Rhode Island School of Design. RAM has three pieces by Snipes in the collection to-date.

Explore:



kevinSnipes.com

Watch:



youtu.be/lcsw0GcX4P0

Watch:



youtu.be/KT7ex_X-4q8

Akio Takamori

Noted Japanese ceramic sculptor Akio Takamori (1950 – 2017) created work that addresses relationships and the human body depicted through everyday people, historical characters, animals, mythological figures, and unidentified lovers. While Takamori would sometimes root his forms in functionality—creating objects like teapots or bowls—he would also create freestanding figurative work of individuals or vessel shapes with interrelated figures. Takamori was very familiar with Western historical painting while also taking influence from Japanese erotic woodcuts. He combined that knowledge with an awareness of human anatomy learned during a childhood spent around his father’s medical practice, where he encountered patients suffering from venereal disease or the effects of nuclear bombing and nurses who shared stories that blended human bodies with supernatural powers.

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Early in his art career, Takamori was working as production pottery apprentice in Koishiwara, Japan where he met Ken Ferguson, the head of the Kansas City Art Institute's ceramics program, who encouraged him to further his ceramics education in the United States. Takamori studied with Ken Ferguson for four years in Kansas City before completing his MFA in 1978 at Alfred University, New York. In 1988, he moved to Washington, and in 1993, began teaching ceramics at the University of Washington, Seattle where he worked for over 20 years.

Takamori's work is included in several notable collections, including the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, New York; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England; and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC. He is represented in RAM's collection by nine works, six of which are teapots.

Watch:



youtu.be/R1swTEqrLoY

Read:



cascadepbs.org/2017/10/akio-takamori-seattle-ceramics-artist-university-of-washington

Kukuli Velarde

Peruvian-American artist Kukuli Velarde (1962–) addresses the complexities of colonization and identity in her ceramic work. She focuses on Latin American history as a point of reference, describing it as “the reality with which I am familiar.” RAM has three works from Velarde in its collection. Two of them are from the same series, *Plunder Me, Baby*—a title that suggests subversion, aggression, wariness, and playfulness as well as self-awareness. Further thoughts by the artist on the work in the series illuminate the intensity of her message: *“They are awakened and they are aware of being watched. They may be very well taken care of, as exotic animals in a zoological entertainment center, but they are trapped, estranged of context and stripped of all meaning. Each is titled with pejorative names, the same ones you, and many like you and I have endured because of our indigenous ancestry. They all have my face for I had to become each of them to reclaim ownership and to take the name calling with defiance. They show in their attitudes and gestures the rebellious spirit that should never abandon our hearts. Not anymore passive pawns of their own history they are us.”*

Watch:



youtu.be/K5Payy7KoaM

Watch:



youtu.be/TJeBBC48Ars



Women Artists at RAM

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM's collection are women. This percentage—which is consistently increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum's holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist. The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Kyoko Hazama, Esther Shimazu, and Kukuli Velarde