RAM
Racine Art Museum

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WELCOME HOME, TOSHIKO

The Toshiko Takaezu Archive Debuts at RAM

October 28, 2026 – January 31, 2027

"When working with clay, I take pleasure from the process as well as from the finished piece. Every once in a while—very seldom—I am in tune with the material and I hear music and it's like poetry. These are moments that make pottery truly beautiful for me."

"You are not an artist simply because you paint or sculpt or make pots that cannot be used. An artist is a poet in his or her own medium. And when an artist produces a good piece, that work has mystery, an unsaid quality; it is alive."

While unassuming in her disposition, Toshiko Takaezu (1922 – 2011) was a bona fide ceramic superstar. Takaezu created work—paintings, prints, fiber, and cast bronze, in addition to her well-known ceramic pieces of varying sizes—that embodied a poetic balance between art and life. She was admired for her creativity, willingness to share of her time and skills, and authenticity.

Born in Hawaii to Japanese immigrants, Takaezu eventually studied ceramics at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan with Majia Grotell (1899 – 1973). Grotell encouraged an approach to making that emphasized technical accomplishment and individual expression—tenets Takaezu adopted in her practice. Often described as blending principles of so-called Eastern and Western thought, Takaezu did spend some time in Japan, learning about her heritage, its pottery traditions, and approaches to holistically blending art and life.

Takaezu made work of all sizes. While a few shapes appealed to her, including rounds and tall slender closed-off forms in particular, she didn't shy away from notably large and small work. She created multi-part installations at a time when it was unusual within the ceramics field and, in so doing, further pushed the boundaries of the material. RAM's archive includes small bowls, toasting goblets, platters, two-foot-high closed forms, and large spheres, as well as multi-part installations including her most expansive grouping, the *Star Series*.

Takaezu was inspired by nature and the environment, noting the early influence of her home state, Hawaii. She combined this with an interest in surface and color—a rich blue becoming a signature tone (Makaha blue) but far from the only one she employed. She was an artist in tune with concepts of balance and harmony—interior/exterior, planning/unpredictability, calm/tense, large/small. The factors that contributed to the "Takaezu Mystique," a phrase coined by John Perrault in his essay for *Toshiko Takaezu: Heaven and Earth*, encompassed her character, working methods, aesthetic choices, and reputation as a teacher.

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While she was private about how exactly her work was glazed, it is often said that she used glaze like paint—brushing it, spraying it, and sometimes, pouring it. She found a closed neck form that she experimented with throughout her career. While not the only shape, it is one particularly associated with her works. Takaezu often created pieces with surfaces that reflected her touch, that made others want to touch. While the art world treats Takaezu's works as precious, Takaezu didn't. In fact, she advocated touching and holding as that is part of the sensual experience.

The interplay between exterior and interior was magnified by Takaezu's practice of dropping a small ball of clay into her forms before closing them off. The ball, wrapped in newspaper, would not meld to the interior. After the paper burned off and the clay hardened, the ball would make noise—not unlike a bell or rattle—when the form was moved, activating yet another sense. It is a tangible yet poetic reminder that space is being contained. Takaezu would use a potter's wheel or build with coils or slabs, or combine these techniques when scale and scope of the work demanded. She played with, and revered, the unpredictability of introducing her unfired pieces to the kiln.

Takaezu held a variety of different teaching positions in her lifetime, including a year-long stint at the University of Wisconsin–Madison while Harvey Littleton (then associated with clay not glass) went on sabbatical. She looked at teaching as both a way to guide students and a way to discover more of herself as an artist. Personal friend Joan Mondale said of Takaezu as a teacher: "Her students are in awe of her. She requires the students to be orderly in the workshop and she forbids idle chatter, conducting class as an honorable teacher in Japan would do." Takaezu would often have apprentices who would work closely with her as well as on their own with her guidance and influence. Her legacy is a complex mix of her work, the ideas she shared with others, and her aura. Takaezu had the capacity to inspire and motivate people, and making her own work did not detract from her empowering teaching style.

In the 1960s, when Takaezu taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art, a conversation about the boundaries between art and craft, or lack thereof, began to gain momentum. Takaezu, with her play between sculptural—closed forms, installations—and functional—bowls, vessels, garden seats—and her treatment of clay and its surfaces, was recognized as a leader in new approaches to the medium. Although she is applauded as someone who expanded how abstract art could be understood, Takaezu didn't set out to effect that change specifically. She didn't use her artwork to make statements about art or the world—as she noted, "there is no difference between your work, your cooking, and the garden." If the state of the world was impacting the artist in one way, it, holistically, impacted her in all ways and that included the content of her creativity.

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In 1969, her work was featured in *OBJECTS: USA*, the ground-breaking traveling exhibition that introduced a wide range of artists to audiences around the world. For the next four decades, Takaezu taught and worked in her studio—there seemed to be no separation between art and the "rest" of her life. While this seems very intense, the reality also has an endearing side. There are anecdotes about the volume of her production and how—in her later years—her home and studio were filled with work, crowded into all possible storage spaces, including the kitchen cabinets and oven.

Racine Art Museum (RAM) has been acquiring a range of pieces by Takaezu—from individual forms to multi-part installations—and establishing an archive (approximately 125 pieces—the largest holding of her works in the United States) that documents this significant artist who pushed the boundaries of clay in the late twentieth century. RAM's archive was built over time through the generosity of various donors, including the artist herself. By accounts of previous staff who worked with and befriended the artist, Takaezu was keen to support RAM, whom she saw as a valuable resource for the field as well as an engaging place to encounter artwork. She did so by donating works to RAM for the collection, including the *Star Series*, and works that should be sold to support the institution over time. Takeazu's relationship with longtime RAM benefactor Karen Johnson Boyd—which was fostered by their connection through Boyd's Perimeter Gallery—further encouraged her connection to what was happening at the museum. Takaezu not only represents RAM's commitment to amplifying diverse perspectives, she represents RAM's critical role in advocating for craft as a vital and evolving art form.