

# UP FRONT



Designer Issey Miyake curates a groundbreaking Eastern show of Western vessels. Sarah Brownlee reports

## TOUCHING THINGS BY HAND

Exhibiting in Japan holds a special significance for London-based ceramist Jennifer Lee. 'For a living British potter to be showing in Japan at all is extraordinary,' she says. 'Japan has such a huge tradition of ceramics, and potters there are treated in a different light, often becoming National Treasures.'

Lee travelled to Tokyo earlier this year to meet with the exhibition curator (and of course fashion designer) Issey Miyake. A supporter of arts and crafts since the 70s, Miyake has always had a special place in his heart for the late ceramist Lucie Rie; by choosing to showcase Rie's work with Lee's and that of the extraordinary German woodturner Ernst Gamperl – under the title *U-Tsu-Wa (Vessels)* – he promises to inspire a new generation.

'When I was first introduced to Lucie's

work I was struck by the simplicity and utter beauty of it,' Miyake recalls, rather romantically. 'I was not only inspired but energised by her work. I had to meet her.' He curated his first Lucie Rie exhibition in Japan in 1989, and is confident that her exquisite bowls and characterful ceramic buttons will prove as enticing as ever. 'In a time when people want to return to artisan, hand-crafted works, Lucie's pieces are still relevant,' he says. 'There is a simplicity and modernity to them which transcends time and space – East and West.' He attributes the same qualities to Lee's work while commending her 'unique vision' and 'primitive working methods'. Lee herself points out that her use of coiling can be traced back to pots of the *Jomon* period, Japan's Neolithic.

Throughout history vessels (or *utsuwa*) have proved an 'essential tool in

everyday life' and in many cultures they have taken on a mystical or spiritual significance. In Japanese mythology and folk stories there are many examples of natural vessels (such as gourds or shells) from which new life emerges. The exhibition teaser refers to the vessels' ability to 'rouse our imaginations with a glimpse of the shape of the ancient earth,' but more simply, and perhaps just as profoundly, Miyake is complementing the aesthetic and tactile nature of work. 'It is still important in the age of mechanisation and mass production to create beautiful and touching things by hand,' he says. The assembled *utsuwa* (100 in total) certainly share an emotive, organic quality – whether the carefully sculpted forms of Rie's bowls and Lee's bespckled pots, or the cavernous specimens in Gamperl's repertoire.

Miyake has always had a special place in his heart for the ceramist Lucie Rie



Clockwise from left: bowl, 1968; beaker, 1956; vase 1970; bowl, 30s, all by Lucie Rie; '27/2008/200', Ernst Gamperl, 2008; 'bowl', Lucie Rie, 1979; buttons, Lucie Rie, 40s; polished granite, bronze

spots, coned rim, 1996, dark amber flashing emerging rim, 1993, rust sand grained, emerging rim, 1992, rust sand grained, emerging rim, 1992, all by Jennifer Lee

So how does a man of fashion turn his hand to displaying craft? Miyake argues that there are parallels between the two disciplines: 'Both have the ability to stir up powerful emotions in individuals and hopefully these emotions are joyful ones,' he says. Certainly, the setting for the exhibition, Tokyo's 21.21 Design Sight gallery, is fitting. Designed by legendary architect Tadao Ando, the building itself is quietly spectacular in a particularly Japanese way. Ando is also responsible for the exhibition design, while the catalogue is to be published under the visual direction of Kohei Sugiura. In short, it promises to be an exquisite showcase. 'I think my work will be shown like it's never been shown before,' says Lee. 'I really get that feeling, I don't know why.'

'U-Tsu-Wa: Lucie Rie, Jennifer Lee, Ernst Gamperl', directed by Issey Miyake, in association with Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany and the British Council, in co-operation with Goethe-Institut, shows at 21.21 Design Sight, Tokyo, from 13 February – 10 May, 2009. For details, see [Crafts.guide.www.2121designsight.jp](http://Crafts.guide.www.2121designsight.jp)