

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Spirited Beings: Reincarnated

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By

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Dedication

I just want to give thanks to everyone who helped me achieve this goal, especially Lili. Thank you for helping me out when I needed it the most and for treating me like family.

... and to my luvs. Thank you for being there when I was in need.

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ABSTRACT

SPIRITED BEINGS: REINCARNATED

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My sculptures are products of my heritages' popular culture and ancient stories combined together to reveal the disconnect I feel from my roots. Japan's popular culture of animated cartoons and movies contain bits and pieces of its history and folklore of legendary and mythical creatures that were used to explain the unexplainable at a time when science was not a prevailing rationale.

Cute creatures with exaggerated heads are portrayed to reflect Japan's "kawaii" (super cute) trend that is being produced and marketed to the Japanese and American culture. The surface of the sculptures are rounded, smoothed, and sanded to a point of near perfection to emulate Japanese toys and Anime characters. I primarily use clay to create my sculptures to add a connection to the past where clay was the primary material of use before the age of metals began. Clay also allows me to easily manipulate the surface in both an additive and subtractive manner. The details, such as scales or fur, are representative of some of the Japanese designs, simple and extremely detailed. By utilizing the idea of kneeling and praying, the works exhibited are placed near the ground; forcing the viewer to crouch for a better experience.

Introduction

Heritage is defined as values, language, and customs that do not change with time. (Heritage Definition). Culture, stemming from heritage, is a set of traditions, beliefs and knowledge passed down from generation to generation to preserve and maintain a specific set of ideals, ever changing with the times (Hofstede).

Being born and raised in America, I never thought about my Japanese heritage. Though I am full blooded Japanese, as a fifth generation Japanese American born on my mother's side and first on my father's side, my parents never truly exposed me to my Japanese heritage. The Japanese culture that I did encounter daily throughout my childhood faded into an Americanized, pop culture-esque version of what I vaguely remember from my childhood. Cultural assimilation was largely responsible for this, as around the time of starting grade school, the Japanese culture of my childhood began blending with the American culture of that time. From my experience, this is typical as most Japanese Americans forget most of their heritage after being in America for more than one generation. Before my transition into grade school, I understood very little English and spoke Japanese. However, in order to pass school, my mother began speaking to me in English, while my father continued to only speak to me in Japanese. Cultural assimilation rapidly took place during the transition from Japanese to English, and my way of thinking quickly shifted from Japanese to American.

Looking back, I realize my very limited knowledge about Japanese heritage comes from the animated movies and cartoons I watched during my childhood and continue watching today. The majority of Japanese animation contains a wide array of information taken from Japan's history and ancient folklore that give a short cliff noted

version of the truth. Some stories are altered so much that the subjects within the original story become mere characters in the animation with a surface resemblance to the original creature, but with no story behind it. At one point the majority of my knowledge came from Japanese animators. The majority of my Japanese knowledge comes from the works of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, whose films not only contain references to mythological creatures, but also underlying messages meant to teach its viewers a lesson through the use of outside research I have conducted about Japan's mythological creatures.

Animation Films and TV

The Japanese culture creates many marketable items that include films, cartoons, toys, and games that can be seen as the popular culture of Japan. Through these novelties, the traditional Japanese culture yields to the consumer and thus becomes a thing of the past and forgotten to even native Japanese. These marketable popular culture items are keeping the forgotten traditions and stories alive within their modernized story lines. The works of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli are a prime example of how story lines contain such information. The Studio Ghibli animation, *Heisei-era Raccoon Dog War Pom Poko*, (1994) written and directed by Isao Takahata brings together many of Japan's folklore into one movie and it gives a brief history of Japan's industrialization. The movie revolves around the tanuki (raccoon dog) that live in the areas of development. In order to attempt to protect their home, the tanuki band together and perform shape shifting tricks to scare the humans working on their land. Not only is the tanuki a real animal of Japan, but the species did suffer from economic expansion and there is a myth that stated that these creatures, along with the fox and cat, possessed shape shifting powers used to play tricks on humans. Other animations contain hidden messages meant to teach its viewers ideal behaviors in relation to the environment and living creatures. In the 1984 film, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, Miyazaki created creatures that resemble giant insects that protect not only each other, but also the deteriorating earth in this post-apocalyptic movie. The story teaches its viewers that not everything is as it seems and that every living thing has a purpose in life. In Miyazaki's 1988 film, *My Neighbor Totoro*, he creates these furry forest creatures that are later revealed to be the keepers of the forest; spirits that help keep the forest alive, by planting seeds and helping

them grow. In the movie, the animation of pom-pom like creatures, a representation of living dust bunnies that come to inhabit areas that have become abandoned or left alone for a long period of time to collect dust, lends itself to the notion that the Japanese created beings to explain the unexplainable.

The animated television show, *Pokémon*, also draws from Japan's mythological creatures as basis for some of its pocket monsters. Though the show utilizes the mythological creatures, the Pokémon are just representations of the original in look and attributes with none of the original stories connected to the pocket monsters. As a result, they become only fictional characters in the animation, rather than a creature of great importance. The Pokémon named Kyukon, aka Ninetales (Figure 1), for instance, is taken from the Japanese legend kyubi-no-kitsune, nine-tailed fox (Figure 2); a fox that can live up to 1,000 years and with the accumulation of each tail, gains wisdom and supernatural abilities like shape shifting (Joly). Another example, the Pokémon Koiking, aka Magikarp (Figure 3), and its evolved adult form, Gyarados (Figure 4), are based on the Japanese koi fish myth. The myth stated that the koi fish (Koiking), after swimming upstream to the Dragon Gate on the Yellow River, would transform into a dragon (Gyarados) (Koi Pond Guide). Another example of a legend turned cartoon, is the Pokémon Hasubrero, aka Lombre (Figure 5), who is based on the Kappa (Figure 6) myth of a river sprite that causes mischief and drowns children and animals, but very polite. It was believed that if one encounters a Kappa and bows their head, this would cause the Kappa to return the gesture and bow. This resulted in the spilling of the water atop its head that gives it strength while away from its water dwelling, rendering it helpless, forcing it to bargain with its intended victim (Piggott).

Fushigi Yugi: The Mysterious Play by Yuu Watase is another animated series that employs Japan's mythological creatures as characters within its storyline. This story is about a high school girl who gets transported into an old Chinese book, *The Universe of the Four Gods*, where she must gather the seven celestial warriors to summon the beast god, Suzaku, and is then granted any three wishes; the seven celestial warriors, or stars, correlate with the star constellations that rule over the sky during a specific season. The mythical creatures that correspond to these celestial warriors are Suzaku, Seiryu, Genbu and Byakko, the four beast gods of the cardinal points. Though not much information is given about these beings, enough is presented to allow the viewer to have an idea of what the creatures are and what they represent.

In the next section, I will discuss my findings about the most common points about selected Japanese mythological creatures I uncovered during my research; for instance, the look, traits, and associations linked with each being. Associations like the four beast gods who are season-based and relate directly to their corresponding stars. The importance of the stars of each mythical creature is due to the moon's orbit in which only those specific stars are within the moon's radial path during the given season ("28 Star Deities," Schumacher).

Stories Behind Exhibited Pieces

Seiryu

Seiryu is the guardian beast god of the East and is portrayed as an eastern serpentine dragon with blue scales surrounded by clouds or water. Seiryu is linked to the season spring, the element wood, the planet Jupiter, the color blue/green, and controls the rain which supports and maintains. Within the body, Seiryu is associated to the liver and gall. In the imperial family, this creature is connected to the emperor. The seven stars of Seiryu are Su Boshi, Ami Boshi, Tomo Boshi, Soi Boshi, Nakago Boshi, Ashitare Boshi, and Mi Boshi (“Four Legendary Chinese Creatures,” Schumacher). (Figure 7, 8)

Seiryu’s modern depiction is of a blue serpentine dragon that emerges from the clouds in the previously discussed, *Fushigi Yugi*. In this animation, Seiryu’s character has a malevolent presence which is the opposite of what an eastern dragon traditionally represents. (Figure 9)

Suzaku

Suzaku, portrayed as a red bird with long and flowing radiant red-orange tail feathers, is the guardian beast god of the South. It is associated with the summer season, the element fire, knowledge, the planet Mars, the color red, and within the body the heart and large intestine. It is also associated with the empress within the imperial palace. Often depicted with the dragon, this pairing represents conflict and bliss, yin and yang. The seven stars of Suzaku are Chichiri Boshi, Tamahome Boshi, Nuriko Boshi, Hotohori

Boshi, Chiriko Boshi, Tasuki Boshi, and Mitsukake Boshi (“Four Legendary Chinese Creatures,” Schumacher). (Figure 10, 11)

In current stories, these associations are not always present. In *Fushigi Yugi*, Suzaku is a Vermillion bird with long red flowing sparkling peacock-like feathers and the guardian of the Southern region. While in the Pokémon series, the Pokémon Ho-Oh was created in Suzaku’s image; though the only reference this character has to the mythical creature is its name. (Figure 12)

Genbu

The guardian beast god of the North, Genbu, also known as the black warrior, is represented by a tortoise coupled with a snake. The reasoning behind this was the belief that there were no male tortoises; therefore, the female had to mate with a snake. Genbu is linked to the season of winter, the water element, the planet Mercury, the color black, and the kidneys and bladder in the body. It is also looked upon as a listener, always listening and completely versed in Buddha’s teachings. The seven stars of Genbu are Hikistu Boshi, Inami Boshi, Uruki Boshi, Tomite Boshi, Umiyame Boshi, Hatsui Boshi, and Namame Boshi (“Four Legendary Chinese Creatures,” Schumacher). (Figure 13, 14)

In *Fushigi Yugi*, Genbu is not an animated character, but rather only spoken about; stating that it was the beast god of the North. (Figure 15)

Byakko

Byakko is the white tiger beast god of the West. It corresponds with the autumn season, the metal element, the planet Venus, the color white, and the lungs and small

intestine. It was believed that Byakko was the guardian of Buddha's teachings, mankind, and the protector of the dead. The seven stars of Byakko are as follows, Tokaki Boshi, Tatara Boshi, Ekie Boshi, Subaru Boshi, Amefuri Boshi, Toroki Boshi, Kagasaki Boshi ("Four Legendary Chinese Creatures," Schumacher). (Figure 16, 17)

In *Fushigi Yugi*, Byakko is also not an animated character, but rather only spoken about; stating that it was the beast god of the West. (Figure 18)

Kirin

The Kirin is a mythical beast that has "the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, the hooves of a horse, a body covered with the scales of a fish, and a single horn" ("Four Legendary Chinese Creatures," Schumacher) (Figure 19). It was said that the Kirin would only appear with the birth or death of a benevolent person and it was so gentle in nature that it could walk over grass without crushing it. The gift it gave to China, through a sovereign named Fu Hsi, was the basis of China's writing system, the Pa Kua or eight trigrams (Owens).

Today, the most popular depiction of the Kirin is the mascot of Japan's Kirin beer company (Figure 20). Though it is depicted as its original description, consumers do not know that the creature is from ancient folklore due to their detachment from their heritage, thinking that it is simply a character created for the beer company.

While the above explanations of the beasts serve to give background to their history, the main focus of my work is to create visual depictions of them based on modern views today.

Process and Concept

I use sculpture as a device to discuss the current trend that Japan's myths and legends are in. Through the combination of knowledge of my Japanese heritage and my American sensibility, I am able to present these clay sculptures that, not only reflect the Japanese legend, but also the Americanized popular culture of Japan.

Clay as a material allows me to build in sections and assemble in a way that gives me a seamless connection. It permits me to use additive and subtractive methods when I am creating detail on each piece. By giving my creations big heads and eyes, I am emulating the "kawaii" (super cute) fashion of Japan's popular culture. The decision making for the positioning of each piece is intuitive at the time of creation, with the painting of the eyes looking up at the viewer being the only detail that is consistent throughout. I texturize from tail to crown of head, leaving the face and limbs free of texture to give attention to the smooth surface that is highlighted against the grain; this stylization causes the eyes of the piece to stand out. With the idea that the color gold represents value and preciousness, I utilize the use of a golden sclera to help draw the viewer in. I employ the color white to project a sense of purity and innocence within each piece to further reconnect them to their once sacred status. The color(s) chosen to decorate the body of the sculpture relates to the associated color of each creature; for instance, the color blue and a hint of green embellishes the body of *Seiryu, the Fierce Benevolent Ruler* (Figure 23) in response to its story. The use of non-ceramic items like steel rods and wire allow me to further detail the sculpture in more suitable ways than clay permits. This also includes the use of yarn and synthetic hair to a cute kitsch look.

The addition of eyelashes provides the figures with a child-like personality and mimics the eyes Japanese animators draw onto their characters.

I begin by creating a rounded solid basic geometric head structure of the creature and then judge the size relation for a suitable sized body. After creating the basic head, I add the eyes of the creature by first forming two similar sized balls of clay, then make sockets for the balls to rest in by gouging the main form, next I add two small pyramid-like pieces of clay to each eye, which become the caruncula of the eye, and lastly I form thin slabs to become the eyelids. My next step is the creation of the “muzzle.” To do this I construct the proper shape, and then add a tongue, and if necessary, teeth and gums are added. By attaching the completed muzzle to the head with eyes, I am able to center it without trouble. The next step is to hollow out the head, leaving about a half inch thickness and carving through to the inside of the mouth. Then I attach the head to the body, and finally assemble and join the limbs and tail. After the piece has setup, I begin to add the necessary detail to the body, whether it is additive or subtractive. When the sculpture is dry, I sand the face and other non-textured areas to produce a smooth flat surface. Once fired, I sand the non-textured areas to leave an even smoother exterior. To finish the surface, I employ the use of room temperature glaze and paint the pieces white, the eyes gold leafed with black pupils, the tongue a light shade of pink, and the textured areas of the body with a colored glazing medium.

The display unit consists of a low-rise wooden pedestal, a cushion, and a sculpture placed on top. The cushions located under each sculpture draws reference to the squared stiff red velvet material often used underneath the mass produced kitschy icons of the Japanese culture; like the Lucky Cat (Figure 21, 22). This material is usually

included with these items to not only give the piece its' own space, but to protect the surface from any damage that might occur when placing or moving the object. I chose to use stained wooden pedestals to exemplify the idea of simplicity that the Japanese often apply in their décor. The pedestals are used not only to lift the pieces, but to also enforce the small space around the form. The Japanese way of thinking is to keep the space that home displays occupy to a minimum in order to avoid cramped households; therefore, the size relation between the pedestal and the sculpture has been kept small to create a correlation with this. The pieces are placed on a low-rise pedestal to invoke a similar feeling to that of a sacred entity in a Japanese household in which one is almost forced to kneel to properly respect the icon. By instigating the viewer to crouch, I am creating an interaction between viewer and object. This interaction gives reference to the kneeling and bowing performed at a shrine in order to show respect for the deity.

Conclusion

Culture, heritage, and tradition are of great importance in my life, but with the course of time, things are lost and become difficult to regain. Though I want to believe that these things will always be around, if no one keeps these traditions alive, they will fade and become past memories, lost to future generations. These creatures once held great meaning and were, at one time, worshiped and sought after. Now, they have become mere fairytale characters who hold no meaning other than to keep the story moving. Through the methods I have utilized, I have prompted the viewer to question the meaning of the loss of heritage and solve these inquiries I put forth.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Pokémon Kyukon



Figure 2: Kyubi-no-kitsune

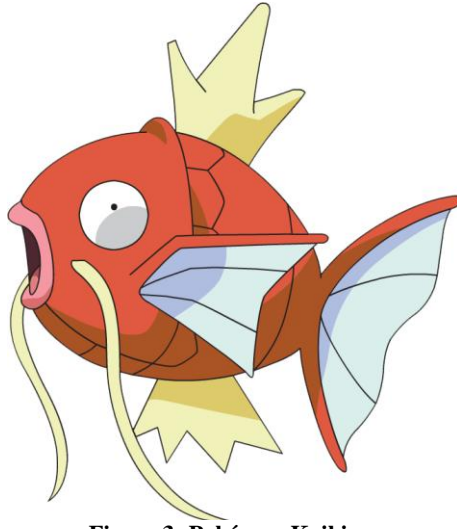


Figure 3: Pokémon Koiking



Figure 4: Pokémon Gyarados



Figure 5: Pokémon Hasubrero



Figure 6: Kappa

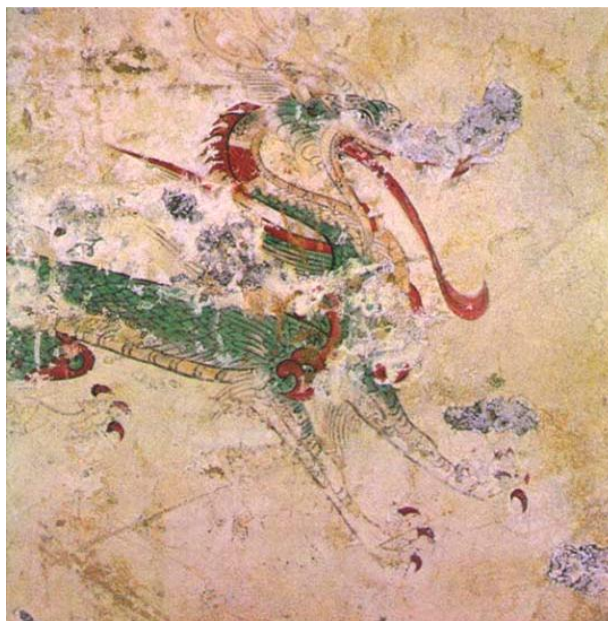


Figure 7: Seiryu, location Takamatsuzuka tomb



Figure 8: Seiryu, line drawing



Figure 9: Seiryu from Fushigi Yugi



Figure 10: Suzaku, location Takamatsuzuka tomb



Figure 11: Suzaku from Fushigi Yugi

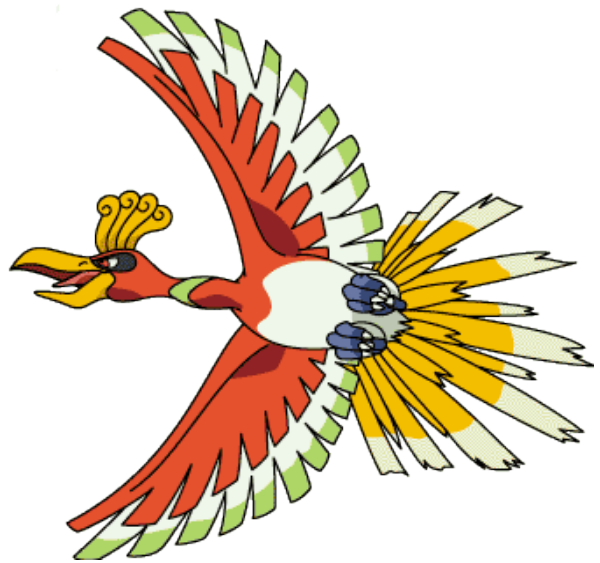


Figure 12: Pokemon Ho-Oh



Figure 13: Genbu, location Takamatsuzuka tomb



Figure 14: Genbu, line drawing



Figure 15: Genbu from Fushigi Yugi



Figure 16: Byakko, location Takamatsuzuka tomb



Figure 17: Byakko, line drawing



Figure 18: Byakko from Fushigi Yugi



FIG. 82.—THE KING. (From the *Rh Ya.*)

Figure 19: Kirin



Figure 20: Kirin beer logo



Figure 21: Lucky Cat 1



Figure 22: Lucky Cat 2



Figure 23: Seiryu, the Fierce Benevolent Ruler. Stoneware, rm temp glaze, steel, polyester fibers, fabric, wood. Sculpture: 22.9x38.2x37.5 cm. Cushion: 2.5x41.9x34.9 cm. Pedestal: 15.2x32x30cm. Overall: 40.1x32x30 cm. 2012.

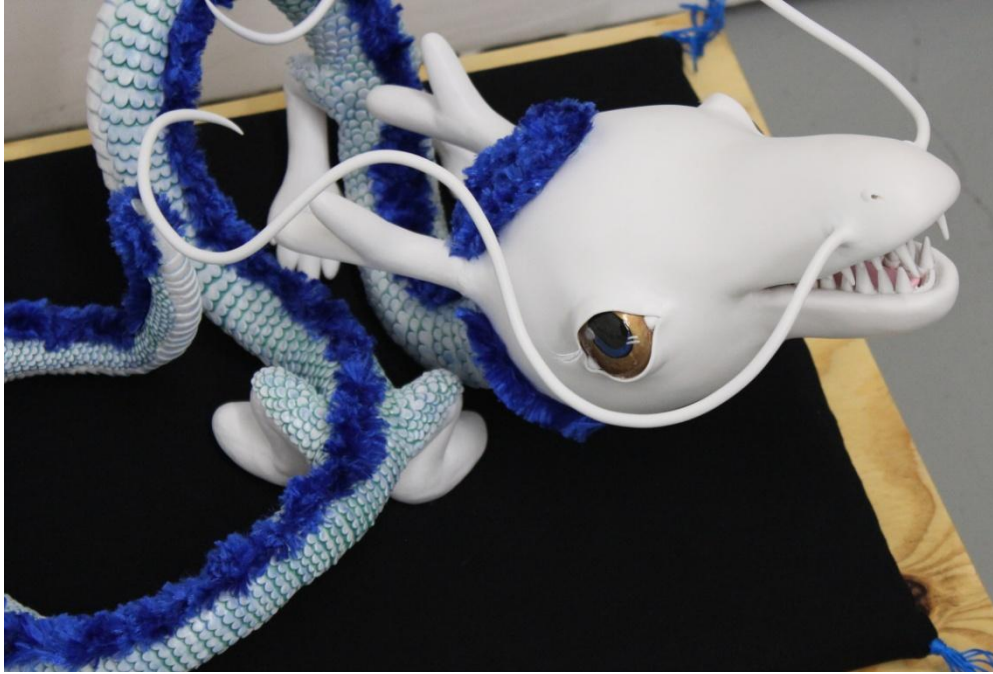


Figure 24: Seiryu, the Fierce Benevolent Ruler



Figure 25: Seiryu, the Fierce Benevolent Ruler (Detail)



**Figure 26: Suzaku, the Wise Radiant Sovereign. Stoneware, rm temp glaze, steel, hair, fabric, wood.
Sculpture: 43x38x33 cm. Pillow: 5.4x77x79 cm. Pedestal: 15.2x61x61 cm.
Overall: 60.8x77x79 cm. 2012.**



Figure 27: Figure 26: Suzaku, the Wise Radiant Sovereign



Figure 28: Figure 26: Suzaku, the Wise Radiant Sovereign (Detail)



**Figure 29: Genu, the Enlightened Warrior. Stoneware, rm temp glaze, steel, fabric, wood.
Sculpture: 26.2x33.5x29.6 cm. Cushion: 2.5x34.9x35.1 cm. Pedestal: 15.2x42.5x42.7 cm.
Overall: 46.4x42.5x42.7 cm. 2012**



Figure 30: Genbu, the Enlightened Warrior



Figure 31: Genbu, the Enlightened Warrior (Detail)



**Figure 32: Byakko, the Clairvoyant Sentry. Stoneware, rm temp glaze, cat whiskers, fabric, wood.
Sculpture: 20.9x33.9x30.8 cm. Cushion: 2.5x34.8x37.1 cm. Pedestal: 15.2x42.4x44.7 cm.
Overall: 38.1x42.4x44.7 cm. 2012.**



Figure 33: Byakko, the Clairvoyant Sentry

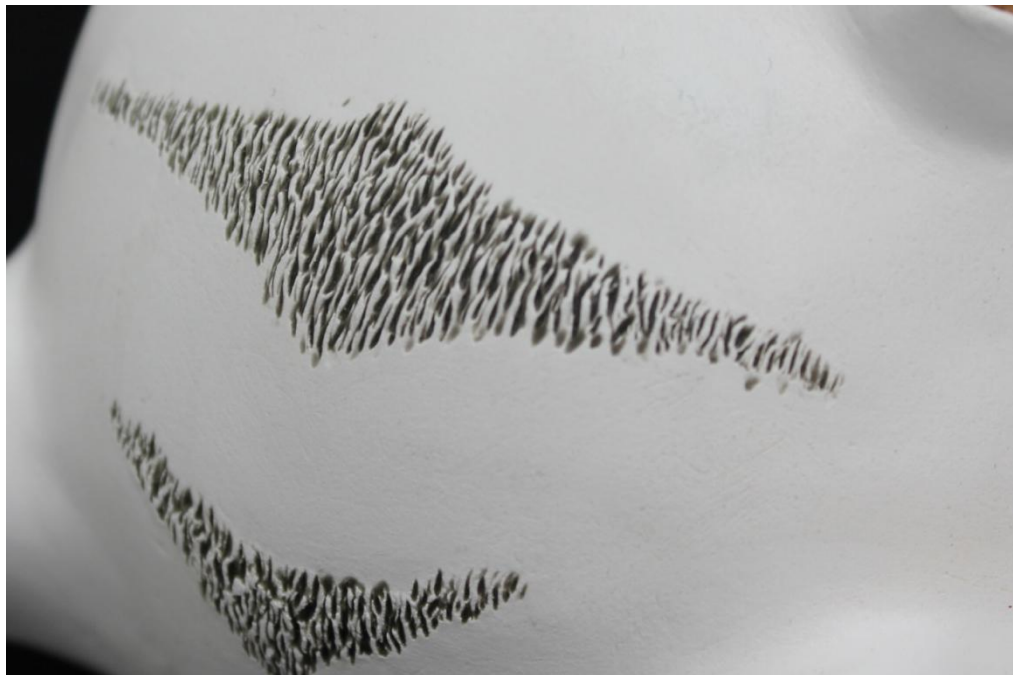


Figure 34: Byakko, the Clairvoyant Sentry (Detail)



Figure 35: Kirin, the Drunken Tranquil Master. Stoneware, rm temp glaze, synthetic fibers, fabric, wood. Sculpture: 38.8x21.2x23.2 cm. Cushion: 2.5x24.4x22.4 cm. Pedestal: 15.2x32x30 cm. Overall: 56x32x30 cm. 2012.



Figure 36: Kirin, the Drunken Tranquil Master



Figure 37: Kirin, the Drunken Tranquil Master (Detail)