

An Artist's Six-Decade-Long Love Affair With Clay

At 87, the sculptor and ceramist Megumi Yuasa is having his first solo exhibition in the U.S.

By Rose Courteau Photographs by Luisa Dörr

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The sculptor Megumi Yuasa, photographed in São Paulo, Brazil, on Dec. 17, 2025, with some of his works. From left, an untitled piece from the 2000s; “Paisagem” (circa 1979); “Sem Limites” (1997-2024); an untitled piece from the 1990s; “Tropical” (1980-2024); and an undated and untitled piece. Luisa Dörr

Growing up in São Paulo as the seventh of eight children, the Japanese Brazilian sculptor and ceramist Megumi Yuasa spent a lot of time in his backyard, where, from the age of 3, he dug up fresh clay and used it to sculpt small animals, trees and other objects. Now 87, Yuasa estimates that he's produced thousands of trees over the course of his life, ranging from two inches to seven feet tall. One, made last year from glazed ceramic, is currently on display at New York's Ortuzar gallery as part of his first U.S. solo show.

Yuasa, whose father was a Christian missionary and mother a midwife, was drawn to ceramics from an early age, but he didn't pursue the practice seriously until his mid-20s. He was working as a graphic designer when, in 1964, as the country was on the brink of a military coup, he was arrested for painting pro-communist graffiti. Though he was released after a few days, the incident, which coincided with an episode of clinical depression, cost him his job. Remembering his youthful hobby, he turned to clay for comfort. "I wanted to meet the child again," he says.

Soon after, he proposed to his childhood friend Naoko, now 86, and they moved to Goiânia, a city in central Brazil, far away from São Paulo's heightened political climate. The couple made their home on an abandoned ranch, where Yuasa built his first stone kiln and learned through trial and error. His early works were mostly terra cotta, but later he began incorporating glazes with unconventional elements like iron filings and rice husks. After Yuasa staged his first show in Goiânia in 1968, he and Naoko eventually returned to São Paulo, where he gained gallery representation and earned praise from one Brazilian newspaper for single-handedly "renewing the forms of ceramics." Exhibits in the 1975 and 1977 São Paulo Biennials followed.



An untitled, undated work by Yuasa made from acrylic on stone and glazed ceramic. Luisa Dörr

Despite that success, Yuasa was ambivalent about the idea of art as an individual endeavor. The couple left São Paulo in 1989 for the town of Itu about two hours northwest, where they planned to stay a few months while Megumi served as artist in residence at a tile factory. He began working with nine of the employees, helping them to cultivate their own creative practices, and months

turned to years: In the early '90s, the Yuasas bought land nearby where they and four other families built homes. They remained there for more than two decades, well after the factory closed down — long enough for Megumi and Naoko, who have no children of their own, to help raise a generation of kids. Periodically, Naoko would sell some of Megumi's pieces to pay for the group's living expenses but, he says, “we disappeared from the artistic scene. Community truly became my body of work.”

In 2015, craving a return to artistic life, they handed that property over to the remaining families and returned once more to São Paulo, where Megumi started teaching workshops. In 2018, the Brazilian artist and curator Rachel Hoshino enrolled in one of his classes; along with her husband, Tomás Cunzolo, who's now Yuasa's agent, she eventually persuaded him to join the São Paulo gallery Gomide & Co., where Yuasa would go on to have his first major solo show in some three decades in 2024. The following year, Gomide & Co. presented a selection of his sculptures and painted tiles at Frieze Los Angeles in collaboration with Ortuzar, which offered to represent him in the United States. The New York gallery also arranged a six-week residency for him at a studio in Queens last fall. Yuasa, who'd never been to the States and was reluctant to travel, was surprised to feel “very at home,” he says, and quickly produced 10 new works. The current show also includes older pieces like “Nuvem” (circa 1975), an abstract glazed ceramic-and-glass sculpture that evokes clouds and bridges — two of Yuasa's longstanding fixations. And, of course, there's a tree. As he says, “I'm the most repetitive artist.”

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