After a few briefing phone calls and emails from the Tokoname Studio in Japan, I went to meet Yoshikawa Masamichi at Adelaide Airport as his Japanese/English language interpreter for the ceramic master classes he was giving at the 2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale, ‘Subversive Clay’. This four day international ceramics event aimed, according to the official organisers, at “exploring clay as a medium capable of challenging artistic, social and cultural issues through investigation across traditions and new experimentations.” I remember well the excitement with which we all awaited for Yoshikawa and the other ceramic artists to arrive from around the world.

From his deep voice and honorific Japanese briefing over the phone, I half expected 'Yoshikawa Sensei' to be dressed as a tea ceremony master, wearing an indigo kimono and geta. Instead, he came towards me in his Issey Miyake jacket and jeans, observing me quietly with amusement. There was something both traditional and avant garde about this internationally famous Japanese ceramic artist who put me at ease at once by smilingly saying, “Call me Masamichi – not sensei!” We drove to the artist-in-residence studios at the Jam Factory and the ceramics creation and lectures that Masamichi referred to as “the ceremony of art and life” began the next day.

In our encounters over the next four days, Masamichi took workshop participants fragmentarily through the history of Japanese contemporary ceramics, in particular recognizing the influences of China and Korea. In the contemporary spectrum, he made frequent mention of the visual arts dialogue between Japan, New York and Paris, including his own work held in collections in Lausanne and London. During both the ceramic workshop master classes at the Jam Factory, and theoretical lectures at the University of South Australia, Yoshikawa made reference to the visualisation both of the natural world and of ancient imaginary worlds, as existing key conceptualization elements in the creative process of his life as a ceramic artist.

The power of sensory consciousness was woven into a narrative by Yoshikawa in relating the first time, as an art student, he touched a shard of ancient pottery during an archeological dig. He described the experience of touching the shard as being physically connected, in that moment, with the reverberations of an ancient voice: the voice of the one who had made that clay vessel, in either the Yayoi or Jomon eras. Later in the master classes, Yoshikawa referred to the impressions of lines and points made with sharp instruments into the ancient clay, each impression made over a thousand years ago and representing a moment in the life of its creator. This paralleled Yoshikawa’s own creative process, alive in the impression of each of his fingerprints on the asymmetrical surface of a tea bowl.

When beginning to create maketo (the Japanese term for ‘object ceramics’, or ceramics that have non-utilitarian shapes), we were told to begin by imagining a castle or ruin, either visited or seen in a dream. As we prepared slabs of clay, with size and thickness of our own choice, Yoshikawa spoke intermittently in a quiet monologue while he created his own castle along with ourselves. The imaginative possibilities he offered encouraged each person to conjure their own sculptural castle from the slab of clay. The list of potential works-in-creation included objects that might be found in an archeological dig in Egypt, a memory of a castle on a hill in Greece or Italy, a hacienda in a desert in Mexico: a diverse range of possibilities, roaming over the world.

Yoshikawa taught through a strongly historical dialogue, making reference to the linked arts of ikebana, chado (the way of tea) and ceramics. He spoke of the defining moment in Japanese socio-political history in the late 16th century represented by the tea master and philosopher Sen no Rikkyu, and the highly symbolic place of chado and the ceramics used as interlinked ceremonial art forms within the then radically shifting philosophical climate of Japan.

Yoshikawa frequently spoke of the creation of ceramics as a ceremony, a rite in the life of the ceramic artist. The philosophy of Zen, and its poetic symbolism imbued in ceramics used traditionally for tea ceremony, is manifested in the political statement of ‘freedom of art’ expressed in the contemporary world of the avant garde. The power of art, of avant garde ceramics in Japan, as both subversion and regeneration of tradition, was perfectly embodied in this Triennale with its theme, ‘Subversive Clay’, where ceramists from Asia and globally presented contemporary works from a range of cultural sources.

Yoshikawa urged participants to “create without preconception” – a creative maxim I have heard applied to the choreography of the avant garde Japanese dance world of buto. The work of one participant whose clay fell down in a heap through imbalance during the sculptural process, was reconfigured by Yoshikawa as representing an opening lotus bud. This vessel was then left to dry as it was, following Yoshikawa's visualization that it would be perfect as an ikebana vase, with its imaginary pool of water in the base and the open mouth of a lotus from which a reed would spring.

The drifting, gliding, shifting plates of ice of either the North or South Poles of our imagination, were used as a metaphor by Yoshikawa to describe his frequent use of a pale icy blue celadon glaze. The translation of the term ‘celadon’ into Japanese is seihakuji, or 'blue white glaze'. Through the translation of this and other Japanese terminology, Yoshikawa discussed the multidimensional evolution of ceramics in Japan, including the influence of Chinese and Korean traditions, not just through ceramic practices but also through the media of literature and language.
Yoshikawa described the breadth of his own practice, including his signature use of underglaze blue porcelain wares, for work as diverse as a very large tile wall mural/sculpture installation in Nagoya Airport, and an enigmatic sake bottle now at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

I think that no workshop participant will ever forget Yoshikawa’s emotive description of how he created the ceramic installation and mural commissioned by the new Nagoya Airport. After describing the difficulties of deadlines, works exploding in the kiln, and then kilns being shaved internally to fit several large ceramic globes, Yoshikawa told us about the day he flew through the airport himself to return to Japan, some months after the completion and opening of the installation.

Yoshikawa showed us some photographs of the ceramic globes in the foreground of the ceramic wall mural, and we could see the scale of the composition when viewed in relation to the children clambering on top of these sculptural works. On that day, returning from ceramics related business in Korea and seeing the children physically interacting in this way with the work, Yoshikawa claimed that he instantly knew as an artist that he had created “real art”.

One aspect of Yoshikawa’s workshop lecture was his presentation of a video which showed a series of photographs of his various compositions, accompanied by his own live dialogue in the darkened lecture room. His account of the influences on his own creative process was accompanied by a range of music including the sound track from the seventies film Easy Rider, accompanied by photos of himself and friends on motor bikes, acting pretty wild themselves, back then in those days.

After the workshops ended, Yoshikawa Masamichi returned to Japan to continue lecturing in design at Nagoya Art University. Packing an oil painting that depicted a glimpse of Australian gum trees somewhere, he said that he strongly wished to come again soon, to see more of the country. In the meantime, he has left us with a few pieces in the permanent collection of the Australian National Gallery, the Art Gallery of South Australia and, of course, a few unglazed pieces at the Jam Factory studio that he created daily from 4 am onwards, before each workshop.

On our last day we were driving along a beach in Adelaide where the wild surf crashed onto the sand through the windswept rain. Flecks of foam flew into the air and Masamichi said quietly, “The beauty of Australia’s wild nature is an environment for great art which celebrates life. For something new.”

Dr Wendy Ella Wright, poet and translator, graduated B.A. from the Comparative Culture Department of Sophia University in Tokyo. Wright is now a Visiting Fellow at the Japan Centre of ANU where she is writing a book on translation of ancient and contemporary Japanese poetry and other ephemera.