

About the Artist

Hisakazu Shimizu — Made in People

Shimizu's *Ice Cream Cup* (2001, cat. No.4) is a design in high-quality stainless steel inspired by the paper ice cream cup that was popular in the mid 1950s. There's a feeling of familiarity, but its original shape is not something that would not really be recognized as "something designed." The shape was probably decided more on the efficiency of filling in the ice cream in the factory, while the lid was also likely adopted with due consideration for the fact that it could be effectively sealed-on simply by pushing it down onto the top of the ice cream cup. *¹

When Shimizu's stainless steel piece was first put in front of me, I instantly thought for some reason that it was really an ice cream cup and automatically pulled up the lid with the same motion as I did when I was a child. All kinds of memories associated with cup ice cream come flooding back, like the color of the packaging it was in at that time, ideas I had about the ice cream that was stuck to the bottom of the lid, and the image of the evening sun during the last few days of summer vacation. Just then I noticed the small tab at the edge of the lid that I had just picked at but hadn't been aware of before. It was precisely because of this tab on the lid though that I could recognize the piece as an ice cream cup. Looking closely at the tab you see that it's well made. It seems to have been designed with equal thought given to the eater and the efficient use of paper. The small half-moon shape evokes the image of the soft ice cream and also symbolizes the close happiness that can be bought with just 100 yen. With this piece, Shimizu brings up "feelings" for those of us who have had the experience of pulling up that tab.

With that same line of thought, Shimizu published *Lovable Bad Designs*, introducing those "things" that we touch without realizing it, that are reflected in the corner of the eye, while also working to spread his ideas in the serial magazine column "Made in People."*² Many of his design masterpieces, including *Bread Bag-Closing Plate* and *SBO Backscreen*, seek to realize both production efficiency and user-friendliness. About them, Shimizu says, "Looking at them from a design standpoint, despite being truly modern in design in terms of function and shape, they quietly finish their life fulfilling the purpose for which they were created without attracting any attention."*³ It's an excavation of lovable designs.

Aside from these personal pursuits, Shimizu spends his days working in the design department at Canon Inc., where he continues to push the boundaries of industrial design with such products as the Canon IXY DIGITAL 600 compact digital camera (2005), winning numerous Good Design awards for his work.*⁴ While it may be difficult to discern whether

these two separate fields of activity, which generally seem to be at odds with each other, have any connection and are in fact carried out by the same designer, Shimizu asserts that there is no difference between the design work he does for Canon and his private work, except the “quantity.” That is certainly understandable since Canon digital cameras are marketed all over the world and used by all kinds of people—young and old, men and women alike. It’s the difference between something that has wide market appeal and an individual “one of a kind” piece.

The designs for Canon digital cameras are pitted against those of other manufacturers in a fiercely competitive marketplace. The process of designing a camera involves cooperation with the mechanics division and continuous revisions in the design room. Realizing a more compact body and a grip that fits well in the hand may require, for example, a new shaping method that creates a smooth form with a continuous curve from a cylinder. To achieve such a form, Shimizu relies on the feel in his own hand. Again and again, up to several hundred times, mock-ups are painted over using the latest techniques to achieve the perfect form and texture. The shaping method and an obsessiveness with details, from the paint finish to a single operation button, become the principals of the product’s functionality and “presence.” The pride is in the technical capability rather than the paint finish.*⁵

With this in mind, I’d like to make an evaluation of Shimizu’s personal pieces. What stands out first is the description of the materials. Many of the notations go as far as describing the surface finishing, such as the previously mentioned *Ice Cream Cup*, described as “18-8 stainless steel with mirror finish.” Shimizu looks at the cup and says “beautiful” as though it’s the work of someone else. The expression “when used in a formal setting” is also frequently used in the descriptions of redesigned works. Such unusual comments along with over-the-top combinations of materials and processing methods give the impression that Shimizu designed the pieces with the intention of putting them on stage. It is, in a manner of speaking, an assertion of Shimizu’s technical capabilities on the manufacturing side (Japan’s industrial design) and his pride in them. It is not redesigning by taking a shape with a nostalgic feeling, but rather redesigning with feelings of affection and pride toward the products and the traditions of industrial art from the standpoint of his own perception of the history of industrial design, which is shaped by his experiences working with the various divisions at Canon, and also through his work of uncovering lovable bad designs.

Added to his viewpoint from the manufacturer’s side are Shimizu’s “memories” and affection for products as a consumer, which he describes saying, “In my work as an industrial designer, I feel more of an affectionate attachment to this kind of trivial item than those that are considered to be “good design.”*⁶ In other words, the important point is the shared memories and fellow feeling of those (the manufacturer and the consumer) who look at the

object. The people in the column title “Made in People” can be interpreted as an image collectively and unknowingly created not only by nameless designers, but all of the people surrounding them, including the consumer. The designs created for Canon aim to attract the interest of people (consumers) through the straightforward, precise methods of industrial design, whereas his personal works focus on pride in and affinity with the objects themselves, which is based more on Shimizu’s own personal experiences. Needless to say, the foundation of these two activities rests firmly in qualities essential to product (industrial) designers; namely, a keen sense of memory and a sensitive, visual/tactile power of observation.

In recent years, Shimizu has developed away from a redesign approach with the release of seemingly unspecific works. He notes that “the good design seen on the streets today doesn’t really have the feeling of “design with courage,” but rather seems like “restrained design.”^{*7} He continues, saying, “Design with courage. That is to say, my policy is “If you can come up with a new idea, something will change”.^{*8} He carries on talking about the new pieces that he is releasing in his personal collection, saying “Go on the attack. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.” In fact, Shimizu’s works since the release of the *Regent* chair (2001, cat. No.5) have an “attack” posture, as if he’s making an aggressive drive in a certain direction. I take his words at face value however, since it seems too shortsighted to take them as meaning that the pieces are purely for his own sake. It would seem that it’s his current answer about what was learned about designing “things” from observation and consideration of the lovable bad designs. The lovable bad designs have an aesthetic cleanness of shape and an unheralded presence. It is only those people who recognize and appreciate the special qualities of those objects that are moved and feel a warm glow inside. He seems to be trying to make an abstract of those “things” and the feelings toward them. As a desirable method of use for the *Gold Ingot* (2005, cat. No. 9), which was designed as a paperweight, the suggestion is to “put in the fridge.” There’s the satisfaction of having a gold ingot in the house, and the joy of discovering it in such an undreamt-of place. Basically, Shimizu is attempting to recreate the circumstances of when he discovered the “lovable bad designs,” seeking to dig up the memories of the people who look at the gold ingot and share the image.

His recent work, *Mountain Range Table - Peak of Good Hope* (2006, cat. No. 10), shows further development. Shimizu comments on the piece, which has store-bought plastic animals placed on the slope of a mountain range that is made from fiber-reinforced plastic, saying, “This piece brings cheer to a relaxed and peaceful home. The mountain is rugged and harsh, but the cute animals that are headed up its slope stake their hope for the future on it.” It takes the shape of a table, but courageously does away with the traditional function of the table as something to put things on. When you think about it though, it’s possible that when the family gathers around that bizarre little table, it becomes a place for talking about life and

the future, so it could be said that it suggests a way to share “feelings” about things, acting as a mediator. It feels as though Shimizu’s lovable bad designs and the artist himself, who courageously carries out his design activities, are somehow reflected in those cute little animals that cheerfully make their way up the rigid mountain.

Haruko Itoh (Curator, Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum)

Notes

*1 Information on the history of the ice cream cup was provided by the Japan Ice Cream Association and LOTTE Ice Cream Co. Ltd.

*2 *Lovable Bad Designs*, Hisakazu Shimizu (Sangyou Kougekakuhon, 1997), and, the serial “Lovable Bad Designs” in *Lapita* (Shogakukan), June 1997 to March 1998 issues. “MADE IN PEOPLE-Appearance of Daily Life” and “MADE IN PEOPLE-Lovable Bad Design” in *AXIS* (AXIS Inc.), vol. 89-118, 2001-2005. For example, a father who has come home from work sits watching the baseball game on television with a beer in his hand. *Backscreen SBO* is the electronic scoreboard at the baseball field that flashes on the screen for just a moment. Shimizu does not introduce it from the point of view of being at the baseball field, but rather in a more familiar way, that is, the split second appearance on the television. (From the SABO STUDIO website)

*3 From Shimizu’s personal studio (SABO STUDIO) website.

*4 Please go to [*** \(website link\)](#) for more information about Shimizu’s Good Design awards.

*5 From the Canon Inc. website, Design Division.

*6-7 From the SABO STUDIO website.

*8 From the Canon Inc. website, Design Division.