

# THE VILCEK FOUNDATION

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## PRESS RELEASE

### **Ryo Toyonaga: Mephistophelean**

**March 18 - May 15, 2009**

**Location: 167 East 73<sup>rd</sup> Street**

**New York, NY 10021**

**Hours: Wednesday - Saturday, 12 - 6 PM,**

**and by appointment.**

**Opening: March 12, 2009, 5 - 8 PM**

**Installation by: Tow Studios**

**Curator: Midori Yamamura**

**Press contact: Sharu Mundell-Williams**

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**New York, January 15, 2009** - "Mephistophelean," an exhibit of 18 nightmarish works by the Japanese-born sculptor Ryo Toyonaga, is the latest cultural event to be presented by the Vilcek Foundation as part of its mission to focus public attention on the contributions of immigrants to the United States. On view at the Foundation's New York City headquarters - 167 East 73rd Street - beginning March 18, 2009, the exhibit will highlight Toyonaga's ceramic-based sculptures created between 1991 and 2003.

"Toyonaga's works...recall the hybrid monsters of Japanese TV animation films," wrote Guggenheim curator Alexandra Munroe in the catalog for Toyonaga's 2006 exhibition at the Charles Cowles Gallery. Of his creations, the artist explains, "I hope to express the timeless connection and friction between man and nature. It is a consequence of this approach that the images I perceive and interpret in my art are often of the monsters that inevitably feed on this conflict."

Toyonaga may be considered as a refugee from abundance, an emigrant from a painless society. The artist grew up during Japan's economic boom period in the 1970s, and first became aware he had no sense of personal fulfillment when, as a university student, he traveled to India. After his graduation from Shinshū University, majoring in psychology, in 1986, Toyonaga moved to New York City, where his feelings of psychological dislocation forced him to reexamine his life. A few years later, he found clay to be the perfect medium with which to express his deepest and most earnest feelings, as well as to challenge his limitations. Between 1995 and 2003, Toyonaga secluded himself in a cabin in the Catskill Mountains, at his Redkill studio, where, driven by a



powerful energy welling up from the dark field of his subconscious, he produced some 300 ceramic-based objects—never intended for sale or exhibition.

“The superficiality of today’s Japanese culture is a collective effort to transform Japan’s horrendous experience of nuclear annihilation,” wrote the artist Takashi Murakami in his 2005 groundbreaking exhibition catalog, *Little Boy the Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture*. Such a collective amnesia from Mephistophelean progress today, defines a majority of the works by the second generation of the post-World War II Japanese artists. Unlike Murakami and Kenji Yanobe, other artists of Toyonaga’s generation, whose works encompass popular Japanese culture, Toyonaga explores beneath the reality, thus his sculpture “creates a tension between control and resistance, artificial and organic, and homogeneity and disturbed individuality,” said curator Yamamura. Stemming from Mephistophelean reality, Toyonaga’s sculptures provoke, and can be unpleasant, triggering memories of pain and suffering in their viewers, raising a host of issues relevant to our times and dispels the general anesthesia brought on by today’s highly bureaucratic society.

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**About the Curator:** A lecturer at the Museum of Modern Art and an art history PhD candidate, Midori Yamamura is currently a 2008-2009 resident fellow at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Center for the Place, Culture, and Politics. She was the 2007–08 Andrew Mellon Dissertation Fellow at the CUNY’s Center for the Humanities and the 2006-2007 inaugural Terra Foundation predoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, for her research on global aspects of American Art. She has curated exhibitions and written critical essays in both Japanese and English, among them, “Yayoi Kusama’s Early New York Years: A Critical Biography” in *Making A Home: Japanese Contemporary Artists in New York* (The Japan Society and Yale University Press, 2007). Originally from Yokohama, Japan she now lives in New York City.

### **About the Vilcek Foundation**

The Vilcek Foundation was established in 2000 by Jan and Marica Vilcek, immigrants from the former Czechoslovakia. The mission of the Foundation, to honor the contributions of foreign-born scholars and artists living in the United States, was inspired by the couple’s careers in biomedical science and art history, respectively, as well as their personal experiences and appreciation for the opportunities they received as newcomers to this country. The Foundation hosts events to promote the work of immigrants and awards annual prizes to prominent immigrant biomedical scientists and

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artists who make outstanding contributions to society in the United States.