

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Vancouver Art Gallery Presents Two Major Ceramic Exhibitions this Spring

Written in Clay: From the John David Lawrence Collection and *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* celebrate ceramic art across time and place



May 23, 2025, VANCOUVER, BC // Traditional Coast Salish Lands including the xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

This spring, the Vancouver Art Gallery is proud to present two bold new exhibitions that celebrate the imaginative and enduring power of clay. Opening May 25, 2025, *Written in Clay: From the John David Lawrence Collection* invites visitors to explore the rich ceramic traditions of British Columbia while *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* offers an immersive journey into the world of one of Japan's most exciting contemporary artists.

"We are excited to present a season devoted to clay—one that we hope will inspire visitors to engage with the medium's layered history," says **Eva Respini**, Interim Co-CEO and Curator at Large at the Vancouver Art Gallery. "Together, these two exhibitions celebrate clay not only as a medium but as a vessel of memory, imagination and community. We are deeply grateful to our many collaborators, supporters and partners who have made these exhibitions possible."

Featuring nearly 200 ceramic works, *Written in Clay* traces the history of studio ceramics in British Columbia from the 1930s to the early 2000s through the extraordinary collection of **John David Lawrence**—a long-time Vancouver resident, musician, activist, collector and the owner of DODA ANTIQUES. Over four decades, Lawrence has built close relationships with local artists and gathered a vast collection of objects that reflects the diversity and evolution of ceramic production across the province. His collection is not only extensive but intimately lived with; every piece in the exhibition has been on display in his home, reflecting his personal commitment to and deep respect for the medium and its makers.

Organized into three thematic sections—“Emphasis on Function”, “A Sculptural Turn” and “Artist Spotlights”—the exhibition traces the evolution of BC’s clay community from a focus on functional wares to more experimental approaches that expanded the possibilities of the medium. “Artist Spotlights” highlights the work of eight influential artists including **Wayne Ngan**, celebrated ceramicist and educator, and **Charmian Johnson** who is well-known for the elegance and simplicity of her functional wares. The exhibition explores influences ranging from Scandinavian utilitarianism and Japanese Raku to the studio pottery movement inspired by **Bernard Leach** and **Shoji Hamada**.

The title *Written in Clay* refers both to the personal marks, stamps and chops that ceramicists use to sign their work and to the stories embedded in each object—stories that collectively trace the development of a regional movement and the community that sustained it. Celebrating ceramic artists, *Written in Clay* highlights the critical role of mentors, interlocutors, societies and schools in shaping and preserving BC’s ceramic heritage. Featured artists include **Mollie Carter**, **Axel Ebring**, **Michael Henry**, **Glenn Lewis**, **Santo Mignosa** and **Laura Wee Láy Láq**, among others. At the end of the exhibition, visitors will encounter a family-friendly space where they are invited to relax, explore ceramic objects at special touch stations and read books about clay.

Written in Clay: From the John David Lawrence Collection and *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* are curated by **Diana Freundl**, Interim Director of Collections & Senior Curator. “Whether tracing the significant legacy of BC’s studio pottery or wandering through Otani Workshop’s mythical dreamscapes, these exhibitions invite us to consider how clay holds stories, histories and imagined futures. It’s been an honour to work with John and Otani on these exhibitions and I’m excited to share these deeply personal and richly layered worlds with our audiences.”

On the east side of the Gallery, *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* introduces audiences to the fantastical world of Japanese ceramic artist **Otani Workshop**. This marks the artist’s first ever solo museum exhibition. Born in 1980 in Shiga Prefecture, in a town near to Shigaraki—one of Japan’s oldest and most storied pottery centres—Otani has emerged as a leading figure in contemporary ceramics. *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* traces Otani’s artistic journey, offering a window into his deeply personal and imaginative practice. The exhibition provides insight into the mythical figures and contemporary imagery that characterize his works, featuring new paintings inspired by personal memories, alongside hand-built figurative and abstract ceramic sculptures—ranging in scale from intimate to monumental.

Otani’s sculptures are formed by hand, and bear wildly varied surfaces—cracked, rough, polished or smooth—evoking a sense of both traditional and contemporary making. Many of the artist’s works were created during an extended residency at the Shadbolt Centre for the Arts in Burnaby, using natural materials foraged from local parks and forests. Presented within a labyrinth-like installation, viewers are immersed between tradition and innovation, landscape and fantasy.

For more information, please visit: <https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/upcoming-exhibitions>

Written in Clay: From the John David Lawrence Collection and *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* are on view at the Vancouver Art Gallery from May 25 to November 9, 2025. The exhibition openings will be celebrated at [Art Party](#) on Saturday, May 24, 2025, 8 PM–12 AM.

Written in Clay: From the John David Lawrence Collection is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by **Diana Freundl**, Interim Director of Collections & Senior Curator, **Michael J. Prokopow**, Independent Curator, and **Stephanie Rebick**, Interim Director of Exhibitions & Publishing with **Andrea Valentine-Lewis**, Curatorial Assistant.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, titled *The Place of Objects*, [available for purchase in the Gallery Store](#). The volume celebrates John David Lawrence's eclectic and expansive collection—spanning ceramics, Indigenous art, jewellery, folk art, photography and plant life—with contributions from curators, artists, writers, scholars and friends. Through the stories of some of these pieces and of Lawrence himself, *The Place of Objects* reveals a kaleidoscopic portrait of the many and diverse talents working in and around BC's art scene over the past forty years.

Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery as an initiative of the Centre for Global Asias and curated by **Diana Freundl**, Interim Director of Collections & Senior Curator.

The Gallery store will feature exclusive limited edition *Otani Workshop: Monsters in My Head* merchandise including t-shirts, hoodies, toques, and tote bags—each featuring a hand-drawn design by the artist. The exhibition is also accompanied by *Monsters in My Head*, a playful children's book written and illustrated by Otani Workshop that takes readers on an imaginative journey through the artist's early fears, curiosities and creative beginnings. Tracing his path from childhood dreamer to acclaimed ceramicist, it features eleven original paintings and handwritten text in both English and Japanese. Explore the merchandise here: <https://shop.vanartgallery.bc.ca/collections/monsters-in-my-head>

Both exhibitions are generously supported by:

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[Download the media package here](#)

Media are invited to an exclusive tour of the exhibitions prior to public opening on May 23, 2025, at 9AM. Email media@vanartgallery.bc.ca to RSVP.

Images: John David Lawrence in his home, Photo: Vancouver Art Gallery

Artist Otani Workshop at his solo exhibition Tanilla Tanilla Tanilla, held at Kaikai Kiki Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, from January 12 to February 24, 2024, Photo: Tomohiko Tagawa, ©Otani Workshop/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

ABOUT JOHN DAVID LAWRENCE

John David Lawrence is a Vancouver-based collector, musician, performer and activist whose lifelong engagement with the arts has made him a vital figure in British Columbia's creative community. After relocating to Vancouver in the mid-1980s, Lawrence began collecting works by local artists, eventually focusing his attention on ceramics in the early 2000s.

Driven by a deep passion for the medium and a personal commitment to living with art, Lawrence assembled one of the most significant private collections of British Columbia ceramics, with nearly 200 works dating from the 1930s to the early 2000s. His collection—carefully curated and displayed throughout his home—reflects decades of relationships with artists, galleries and fellow collectors.

Lawrence's dedication to preserving and championing local ceramic history has positioned him as a respected and influential figure in the field. His collection not only tells the story of the studio pottery movement in BC but also reveals the interconnected network of artists, teachers and communities that shaped it. Through his passion and advocacy, Lawrence has played a key role in bringing broader recognition to the region's ceramic legacy.

ABOUT OTANI WORKSHOP

Otani Workshop (b. 1980, Shiga Prefecture, Japan) is a leading figure in contemporary Japanese ceramics. Born in a town near Shigaraki—one of Japan's oldest and most historically significant pottery centres—Otani pursued his art studies in Okinawa and later settled in Awaji Island, where his studio is in a repurposed tile factory.

Known for his hand-built, often fantastical ceramic sculptures and richly textured surfaces, Otani draws on traditional Japanese techniques while experimenting with form, scale and narrative. His work blends ancient craft with contemporary imagination, exploring themes of memory, mythology and the subconscious.

In 2008, he began exhibiting as Otani Workshop. At this time, he was introduced to **Takashi Murakami**, who became his unfailing champion and advocate. Otani's work has been exhibited widely in Japan and internationally, and *Monsters in My Head* marks his first ever museum solo exhibition.

ABOUT THE VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Founded in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery is recognized as one of North America's most innovative visual arts institutions. The Gallery's celebrated exhibitions, extensive public programs and emphasis on advancing scholarship all focus on historical and contemporary art from British Columbia and around the world. Special attention is given to the accomplishments of Indigenous artists, as well as to those of the Asia Pacific region—through the Centre for Global Asias (formerly the Institute of Asian Art) founded in 2014. The Gallery's exhibitions also explore the impact of images in the larger sphere of visual culture, design and architecture.

The Gallery's new Art of Wellbeing lab furthers its commitment to community by promoting the role of art in fostering health and wellbeing. Developed in collaboration with healthcare professionals, researchers and Indigenous Elders, the lab creates opportunities for individuals to engage with art in ways that support mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is a charitable not-for-profit organization supported by its members, individual donors, corporate funders, foundations, the City of Vancouver, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts.

The Vancouver Art Gallery is situated on the ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, and is respectful of the Indigenous stewards of the land it occupies, whose rich cultures are fundamental to artistic life in Vancouver and the work of the Gallery.