The main reason for the prevalence of blue and white ceramics is that porcelain and cobalt pigment have compatible firing temperatures, meaning wares need to be fired only once. But in the context of this exhibition, curated by the artist Takashi Murakami, this colour combination conjured up myriad referents, signifying a long history fraught with everything from alchemy to imperialism. Take Lee Ufan’s *From Line* (1976), in which a rich blue brushstroke texture of sand runs down the centre of a sheet of paper. The piece was exhibited here amongst works of Delftware – the result of Dutch attempts to produce earthenware facsimiles of blue and white porcelain, which was not manufactured in Europe until an alchemist in Meißen, Germany, finally figured out how to make “white gold” in 1709. As with Delftware, this early European porcelain was often painted with blue landscapes, be they Chinese, Japanese or some vague – but unmistakably Oriental – amalgamation that was proudly displayed as a status symbol and proof of imperial reach.

Such historical background ties together some of the threads of this unusual exhibition, which gathered a selection of recent works by contemporary Japanese artists and an array of historical ceramics from across Asia and Europe. It appeared to speculate on rather than answer the open-ended question of its title, suggesting certain interesting parallels. Then as now, ceramics bypasses distinctions between high and low, variously situated between decorative, utilitarian and art object. If this speaks to Murakami’s own practice of ignoring distinctions between fine art and luxury commerce, as he traverses mediums and collaborates with the likes of Louis Vuitton or Kanye West, that’s not all: as in the longer history of ceramics in East–West relations, he intentionally employs aesthetics that are recognizably “Oriental” in order to garner cultural and financial capital in the West that can then be imported back to Japan. Specifically, his work draws from aesthetics from Japanese visual culture, such as anime, and incorporates them into high art.

The exhibition addresses more than the global exchanges that have taken place in the histories of ceramics and sābi, which is based in the acceptance of imperfection, as evident in their asymmetry, roughness, simplicity and modesty.

There was one pairing that maybe came closest to answering to the question in Murakami’s title: Kodai Nakahara’s *Anise* (1991–92), a scantily-clad anime character, was displayed next to two nude Han Dynasty figures (China, 206 BC–220 AD). Together, the slender...