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# PAUL MATHIEU

**BRITISH COLUMBIA: *Making China in China*, May 2-June 1, Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond**

By Paula Gustafson

At least once every decade, Vancouver potter Paul Mathieu pulls figurative rabbits out of ceramic history's hat, turns everything we know about art inside out, and confounds us with totally new ways of looking and thinking.

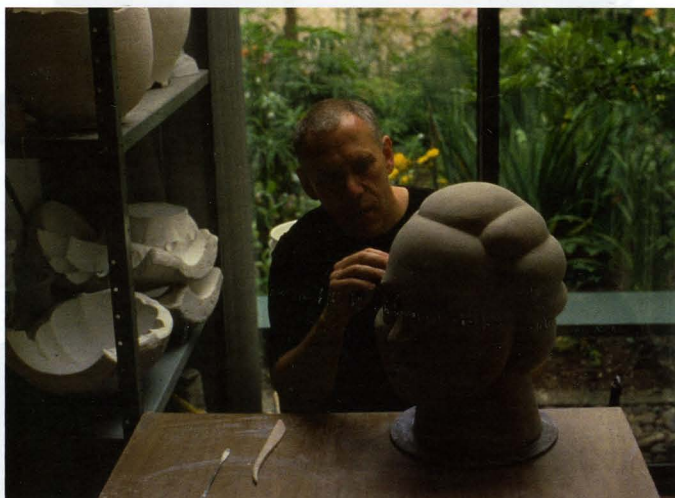
In the 1980s he produced brilliantly deceptive sculptures using ordinary porcelain tableware that played fast and loose with perceptions about three-dimensional sculpture, two-dimensional painting, utility and decoration. Each cup and saucer, teapot or plate was decorated with a drawing or painting. Stacked, the compositions formed trompe l'oeil visual puns referencing one or more of art-making's puzzles, such as foreshortening or multiple perspectives.

By 1990 Mathieu had expanded his theoretical investigations to garnitures — Rococo-style groupings of bowls and vases — ornamented with framed imagery.



Positioned as eye-level horizontal narratives to be read from left to right, the painted scenes on the front of each vessel depicted one half of a duality, such as day and night. When the pieces were turned 180 degrees — and Mathieu's work is always intended to be handled — another image sequence became visible. Mathieu followed up these methods of showcasing his ideas with ceramic and bronze-cast vases featuring replicas of Henri Matisse's 1909 *La Serpentine* sculpture, then with salt and pepper shakers portraying Chairman Mao and Andy Warhol or other mismatched partners. Neither series was entirely successful in demonstrating the Quebec-born artist's depth of thought about form and volume, or context and sub-text. But if Mathieu was proving to be more skilled as a theorist than as a craftsman, artists and academics didn't mind. Audiences in North America, Japan, China, France, Italy, England, Mexico and Australia eagerly attended his lectures and discussed his writings.

Fast forward to 2003, when Mathieu temporarily left his post as head of ceramics at the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver and settled in for the first of four artist-in-residence sessions at the San Bao International Ceramics Studio in Jingdezhen, China. Overwhelmed by the massive resources developed over 2,000 years of Chinese ceramic production, his highly disciplined mind started combining — some might say slapping together — components from here, there and



**ABOVE: Paul Mathieu working at San Bao International Ceramics Studio, Jingdezhen, China**

**LEFT AND BELOW: Abu Ghraib Flower Vases (3 of 12), 2005, porcelain, 15" high**

everywhere. His aim in this exercise, he explained in his artist statement for *Making China in China*, was to "reconcile extremes and oppositions, destroy hierarchies and confuse conventions.

"My work is not particularly well-made and beautiful. In fact, it might easily be considered ugly. The materials and techniques that I use are not that impor-

tant or even relevant, and I long for a certain anonymity, so that when, where and by whom the object is made is at least confusing and at best irrelevant. My intent is to contest and subvert art, design and crafts."

As he suggests, Mathieu's *Abu Ghraib Flower Vases* are neither beautiful nor particularly well-made. Rather, they are provocations, insisting that we reconsider how and why ceramics serve as functional objects, as "tasteful" decorations, and as containers of cultural history.

For example, the drawn images of vases on the surface of each of these vases offers a confusing spatial depth, especially since some of the drawn vases appear to rest on wood-grain shelves while others tilt precariously behind them. Self-con-



sciously touting its purpose, each two-dimensional vase is filled with a decal or a hand-painted flower pattern. Superimposed on each vase picture — and consequently on each real vase — is an all-too-familiar news photograph that could

equally be read as a contemporary political statement or as a reference to art-historical painting, such as the battle scenes on ancient Greek pottery. Then, of course, there's the fact that the vases are not vases at all; they're hollow-cast heads copied from a classical marble statue, up-ended on pseudo-plinths. Mathieu has compressed layer upon layer in these works — pretense, illusion, excess, multiplicity, synthesis and antithesis, to name just a few. *Making China in China* is a challenging exhibition, guaranteed to raise eyebrows and arguments.

**Represented by: Prime Gallery, Toronto**