

Maskmaker meshes politics and playfulness

■ FINE ARTS Paul Mathieu's work pierces the condescension with which many in the West view Chinese craft while literally turning Western art on its head

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Paul Mathieu teaches ceramics and pottery at Emily Carr Institute. He has a new show of work now up at the Richmond Art Gallery (RAG), called *Making China in China*. More than 30 bowls and vases are arranged in silk boxes and on pedestals. These are Mathieu's works, and they are beautiful works of ceramics, and yet he did not make them. Instead, what he made was a new form of art — or craft, take your pick — that straddles worlds, art that has multiple creators, art that wants us to spend some time with it.

For the past few summers, Mathieu has attended the San Bao International Ceramics Studio in Jingdezhen, China. The city is the centre of porcelain production in China, turning out, according to Liz Magor's essay for the RAG catalogue, one million pieces of ceramics per day. And Jingdezhen has been China's ceramics manufactory for over 1,000 years.

Mathieu's sojourns there, and the ceramics that he has brought home, is a story of cross-cultural hybridity, and of how different hands can come together to make art that challenges all of our ideas of originality and authenticity.

There are, for instance, eight flower vases in the show. Each of them is based on a cast of Henri Matisse's sculpture, *Henriette*.

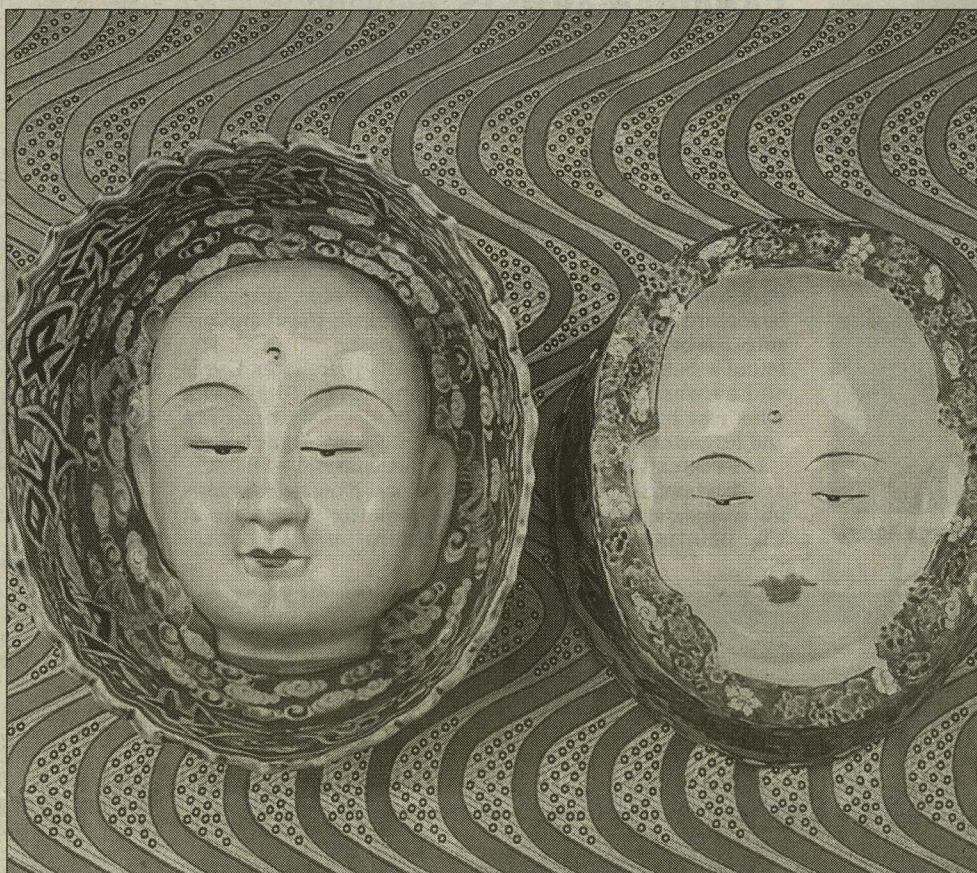
The vases are the sculpture upside down: it is hollow, after all. And on each one, Mathieu asked artists at ceramics factories to paint patterns — pretty much what they wanted — within different outlines of vases. Mathieu is working conceptually here — generating ideas but leaving the handwork to others — as a way of utilizing the skills embodied in Jingdezhen.

But there is also more going on. A classic of Western art has been inverted — turned upside down — and made into something almost functional: a vase.

Not only that, but the mass of the sculpture has been punctured: now what we take to be a solid object turns out to be hollow. We use the word "hollow" to usually mean something lacking: "We are the hollow men," as T.S. Eliot wrote in 1925, or we speak of hollow promises. But here hollow is good, is useful.

But what are we to make of Mathieu's outsourcing his labour to workers in a Chinese factory? This almost sounds like a case for Naomi Klein and the anti-globalization crowd to get worked up about.

In another series called *Tienaman Vases*, Mathieu instructed the artists to paint from photographs of the Tiananmen Square



Binary Bowls - Boddhit by Paul Mathieu, a ceramics professor at the Emily Carr Institute.



Flower vases by Paul Mathieu.

■ MAKING CHINA IN CHINA

Gallery tours:

Saturday, May 27

1 p.m.: tour in English

2 p.m.: tour in Mandarin

3 p.m.: tour in Cantonese

Paul Mathieu will give an artist's talk on Monday, May 29 at 7:30 p.m.

All events at Richmond Art Gallery

7700 Minoru Gate

Richmond, B.C.

Massacre, including the iconic photo of an unarmed man standing in front of a tank. On one side, we see blue and white blossoms or mountain scenes, on the other, images of China's brutality against its own people.

So there is a politics as well as a playfulness in Mathieu's work here. The *Kiss Bowls*, for instance, show three sets of interlocking lips. One pair of lips both have moustaches, another has one, and a third has none; gay, heterosexual, and lesbian smooches. The insides of the bowls are painted in bright floral designs.

The centre of Mathieu's show is his series of *Binary Bowls*. The set is presented in silk-lined boxes one can order in Jingdezhen. Each pair presents a face on one side, and its cast on the other. So, like the Matisse vases, we have negative and positive space, the object and its mould.

But just as Mathieu inverts the Matisse heads and discovers a vase in their void, in the *Binary Bowls*, he challenges our assumptions as to what our face is, or what porcelain faces are. Which came first: the convex surface that we think our face is, or the concave mould which formed it? Displayed in the packing boxes, the bowls appear ready for purchase, or shipping: again, art has been made to appear utilitarian.

What Mathieu is doing finally here, I think, is piercing the condescension with which many in the West view Chinese craft, mocking it as kitsch. Here kitsch has been rescued, but not by turning it into its opposite, or precious art. Thus Mathieu's working method respects tremendously the processes whereby everyday ceramics are made: indeed, there is a range of quality in the painting here, as he accepted all the work that was done for him, including pieces that had cracked during the firing.

If Mathieu's ceramics stand assumptions about art and originality on their head, there are still some other fences for them to jump. This is work deserving of a more prestigious venue than the RAG, with its automatic sliding doors and community centre location. While Vancouver art galleries may be amenable to art that acts like craft (Damian Moppett's show at the Contemporary Art Gallery is an excellent example), they haven't shown themselves to be open to craft that acts like art. And that's too bad.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver educator