

The Influence of Chinese Porcelain on Contemporary Ceramics, 2003

This rather informal talk could take many possible forms since Chinese porcelain and Chinese ceramics in general have played such an important role in the development of ceramics worldwide. This role and influence is not only found in technological developments of all kinds but most importantly in esthetic and stylistic innovations. I could have prefaced this talk with a long digression on all the various impacts Chinese ceramics or more specifically Chinese porcelain has had on world ceramics since time immemorial but I will skip that part and concentrate instead on contemporary aspects of that influence. It might be important to note nonetheless, since this will have some importance for what I want to demonstrate later, that Chinese porcelain was particularly influential in the development of European porcelain in the eighteenth century, with the discovery of porcelain making in Europe, both in soft paste and hard paste form. Chinese porcelain did not only provide the impetus for that discovery, it also provided most of the basic forms for objects as well as the main decorative motifs used on these very forms. This was particularly noticeable at Meissen in Germany in the early 18th Century with the first attempts at true, hard paste porcelain but it is also true of subsequent developments all over Europe and all over the world, up to the present day. This use of characteristic Chinese shapes and forms as well as reworked and reinterpreted Chinese motifs and patterns came to be known in Europe as "chinoiserie" and it had a profound impact on not only ceramics but on all decorative arts as well, an impact still found today.

This impact of Chinese ceramics is not only confined to porcelain of course. Chinese stonewares of the Song dynasty for example have had a profound influence on world ceramics, notably on the Leach esthetic and the functional pottery movement. The same could be said of Tang earthenware and the use of three color sancai glazes or even of specific Tang shapes like horses, figures or ginger jars.

But I will concentrate my talk today specifically on porcelain, in the spirit of this symposium held to celebrate the millennium of porcelain in Jingdezhen.

A few words about method are necessary first. This talk is in no way an exhaustive, scholarly or rigorous demonstration of the influence Chinese porcelain may have had on contemporary ceramics in general. The artists I have chosen to illustrate my talk are representative of certain aspects of that influence that I am particularly interested in and my choice is very subjective. I am familiar with the work of these artists, I have experienced the work directly, I have discussed this work with the artists themselves and quite a few are not only acquaintances but they also are my friends.

Konstantin Bessmertny is of Russian origin but he presently lives in Macao where he works as an independent artist and a painter. His ceramic work is unusual in his overall work and it is not directly connected to his practice as a painter. As is so often the case with artists who find themselves working in a ceramic context, he has chosen here to work with familiar, already made ceramic forms, large vases and covered jars, and simply painted them with overglaze colors. This has the advantage of bypassing and ignoring the difficulties of the ceramic processes and address the work solely at the level of image making and surface decoration. Yet when we look closely at the work, we can see that the themes he is illustrating, that of displacement, journey, travel and immigration are closely related not only to his own history and life experiences but also to ceramics as an art form and Chinese porcelain too. And if Chinese forms and motifs are so familiar to us it is because they have also traveled, immigrated all over the world. There is then a direct connection between two forms of displacement and cultural uprooting, one of individuals and the other of materials being exchanged and traded. The

images on his work are also grounded in history in their content yet are resolutely contemporary in form, in their stylisation, overlapping and childish, graffiti style sensibility. This fusion of the historical and the contemporary is also a characteristic of post-modernism but also an important characteristic of ceramics since time immemorial. We have always found this fusion of different times, spaces, and esthetics in ceramic objects not only now but throughout the history of ceramics as well.

Other artists use rather similar strategies but obviously for different reasons and for very different ends. Liu Jianhua is a Jingdezhen artist who uses familiar ceramic forms and surfaces, here enamel plates of the type found worldwide in Chinatowns and Chinese restaurants (although they more often than not are made in plastic these days ...).

These oversize plates (some are half a meter across) provide a context for headless and armless female figures in prone position of subjection and powerlessness, highly seductive and sexualized. A superficial reading of these potent objects could direct us toward a rather sexist interpretation. Yet the intent here is actually political commentary. The incomplete figure in her typical pre-revolutionary Chinese dress represents pre-communist China while the plate is a visual metaphor for consumerism and capitalism in present day China. Here again, we find different times, different spaces and different esthetics coming together.

Sing-Ying Ho is also of Chinese origin but she was born in Hong-Kong and is now a Canadian citizen. Her work again combines typical, familiar Chinese pottery forms with equally typical and familiar decorative surfaces and designs. Yet these are presented in fragmented form, which reinforced their connection to history and to the passage of time. They also incorporate contemporary techniques in the form of digitally produced photo transfers. These images coming from her personal life and biography as well as the corporate world of advertisement and identity signage, again combine and juxtapose the personal and the universal, the old and the new, now and then in a commentary about important current issues.

That these artists use these forms and contexts in their ceramics work is not too surprising. After all Konstantin Bessmertny lives in Macao and made the work in China in collaboration with Chinese specialists and both Liu Jianhua and Sing-Ying Ho are themselves ethnic Chinese. This is not the case for the other artists I want to discuss since they come from America, Canada and Europe yet they not only use similar forms, techniques, materials and processes but very similar strategies for often very similar ends.

The first of these artists and in many ways the most important is Los Angeles ceramic artist Michael Frimkess who collaborates with his wife Magdalena but whose earlier work from the 1960's, on which I want to concentrate here, was produced during and soon after the end of his studies under Peter Voulkos during his legendary tenure at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. During that time the prevalent esthetic was a very brash, aggressive and macho stance connected to abstract expressionism and the earlier ceramic work of Italian Avant-Garde ceramic artists like Lucio Fontana and others. The work was large, earthy, physical, and the clay was often torn, broken, attacked and slashed. The work was done spontaneously, quickly and directly. In this climate, suddenly appears the work of Michael Frimkess, which in so many ways contests the work of all the others. More closely related to pop art in its interest in jazz, counter-culture practices (drug use, sexual liberation, ethnic and racial issues, etc.) it nonetheless remains independent and had its own distinct voice to whatever else was happening at the time. This is extraordinary work which has had a tremendous impact on so many other artists working today. It could be said that through the use of historical references, the juxtaposition, combination and layering of images, the use of direct political commentary, Michael Frimkess is one of the most important and influential ceramic artist of the last 50 years.

His influence is clearly evident in the work of Grayson Perry, who recently won the prestigious Turner prize for contemporary art in England. His use of historical, stereotypical forms, his layering of images coming from popular culture and mediated sources combined and mixed with very personal subject matter around violence, identity issues and sexuality, makes him a direct heir to the seminal and continuing work of Michael Frimkess from the early 1960's. Many other artists discussed here are as indebted to him as well.

Richard Milette from Montreal, Canada is a perfect example. His work operates around very similar strategies and principles. The reliance on historical forms and surfaces, which are recontextualised to create disjunction and operate a shift in our understanding, so familiar, so easily dismissed, of these kind of objects. One of the format he uses is that of the five-piece garniture, most often in the configuration of two beaker and three covered baluster jars. This format is a classic in Chinese export porcelain by the late 17th Century. Although it was quickly adopted for fashionable European house decoration, and example were produced by all major European ceramic factories, in porcelain or in earthenware, the five-piece garniture actually derives straight from a very Chinese prototype. Every prosperous household or palace would have had an altar table or cabinet graced by a five-piece garniture in porcelain or cloisonné or bronze. These garniture usually consisted of a central censer and cover, a pair of candlesticks and a pair of vases.

The garniture set is one of the most elaborate and ostentatious ensemble of forms available to the ceramic artists and it has been used as such my many, including myself or others like Johan Creten from Belgium. In Richard Milette's work the garniture provides a perfect pictorial space for the inclusion of texts which are used to challenge our preconceived notions of rational meaning and the beliefs that there is such a thing as possible truth in history (art history, for example) or in any other form of ideological fiction.

Another artist from Canada, Walter Ostrom uses reference to Chinese ceramics for very different reasons. The references here are either to the material themselves, to porcelain or to earthenware as cultural signifiers in themselves, or again, the specific forms, patterns and motifs which are used for their importance within the history of ceramics or within the professional life of Walter Ostrom himself. This strategy of using particular forms or surfaces to denote history and culture, this extraordinary and possibly specific potential that ceramic objects, ceramic forms and even ceramic materials have to embody various aspects of culture, is something that is used by many others as well, in some form or other and in various degree, by all the artists under discussion here.

One of them is Philippe Barde from Switzerland, represented here by work he actually produced in Jingdezhen. As such it is stylistically different from his other, more personal work, yet conceptually it is similar, as an investigation of the formal aspects of pottery and ceramics in directing our interpretation and understanding of the role these objects play within culture and history. I will quote from the artist: "In 2000, I wanted to work in Jingdezhen in order to use traditional techniques and esthetics. Only very tiny and insignificant modifications of a personal nature could be introduced. That is to say, my intent was to create an erasure of the personal artistic gesture and work like a scientist, like a sociologist by focusing on familiar forms, by decomposing the decoration and fragmenting the subject. I first used a Ming landscape motif on a porcelain bowl and each time there was an intervention by a new worker I asked that the bowl be changed. Since six different workers made each bowl, I ended up with six different bowls to complete the series. The idea was to establish and clarify the relationship of the object to perfection. The big question raised by the contrast between symmetry and asymmetry. For example in Tang ceramics, perfection is tied to process, which imposes asymmetry in the means used and in the final result. Yet for the Ming, perfection is a goal so symmetry becomes

the mean and the final result. This is the familiar dichotomy and contradictions between classicism and modernity. It was also an intellectual game in order to see if, at each step in the drawing process, the balance would be maintained. Obviously, the painters succeeded in maintaining balance each time, and each bowl remains a marvel of equilibrium, despite the fact that the motif is fragmented and incomplete. I did this with a landscape and with a dragon motif as well.

As for the crude bowl and the more refined one, it is altogether another program. The idea was to establish a relationship between the two extremes so often juxtaposed in China, flowers and excrement. Here again it consisted in a game to juxtapose the casstee, so crude yet alive, with the result embodied by the bowl, perfect yet dead. The bowl has a perforated decoration that I asked to be situated as high and as low as possible on the surface. This dangerous situation was chosen in order to create an awkwardness that would bring the bowl back to life. The cassette is a found object, cheap in its normal context, while the porcelain bowl would be more expensive. When exhibited in Europe, I priced the cassette more than the porcelain bowl as a subversive act to challenge this familiar hierarchy."

Another artist who has had an ongoing relationship with China is Suzanne Wolfe, an American who teaches at the University of Hawaii where she organizes artist residencies every second summer, with artists from the Pacific rim and from around the world. Her own ceramic work has been informed by China and the connection between east and west, in ceramics or elsewhere. This connection between Eastern and Western sensibilities and aesthetics is particularly evident in works from the mid 1980's which combine an European form, usually made in porcelain but here made of earthenware, contained within another typical and familiar form, this one coming from the Asian repertoire. Formally the work is brilliant and more than a little bit clever. Both objects are represented by slices that are then alternated in order to recompose the two distinct objects yet one inside the other. But it is at the conceptual level that this work really functions by operating a shift around our familiar understanding of containment (such an important aspect of the phenomenology of pottery forms). Here again, a combination and juxtaposition of different times, different spaces (which of course imply different aesthetics coming from different cultures), is where the real operative nature of the work resides. These pieces were intended to be deliberate references to the debt of Western ceramics to its Asian antecedents. It also refers to the fact that Oriental artists have had to imitate Western art to be accepted while artists in the West, specifically in ceramics have had to imitate the Orient ... In other work, the references to Chinese or oriental forms and motifs serves to "put on display, possibly even reify, the idea of the decorative, with the cut out form having gold edges that turn them into quasi frames." This work again combines both European and Oriental forms. It is important to note here that the actual materials used here, as was the case for many other of the artists featured, are not actually that important. Whether something is made of actual porcelain or not is beside the point. Often the object is made of earthenware (Richard Milette) or stoneware (Michael Frimkess) and it is the stylistic aspect of the work that makes the viewer/user think of porcelain as a material or oriental as a style for the connotations implied. The actual material is largely irrelevant. This is also an important aspect of contemporary ceramics.

The last artist I want to analyse with more depth is Leopold L. Foulem, a Canadian artist from Montreal. Leopold Foulem's work is articulated around an investigation of the role and function of ceramics as a specific and independent art form within culture. Historical references are used to establish what constitutes the specificity and difference of ceramics. Chinese porcelain, because of its ubiquitous presence in culture worldwide and the very important impact it has had on historical developments, is used for that purpose. I will more specifically address three distinct yet connected bodies of work here: The Monochrome Abstractions from the mid-1990's, the Singular Abstractions of the early 2000 and the more recent Flower vases which continue this investigation in different form.

This important and complex body of work can only be explained in a rather superficial manner in the time I have here so I will concentrate my discussion on these aspects that are specifically connected to Chinese porcelain as a type.

The Monochrome abstractions refer to historical blanc-de-chine, sang-de-boeuf, or other Ming and Qing Chinese monochrome glazes. The Singular Abstractions can also be associated with Chinese ceramics as a genre and their title refers to various Chinese decorative styles or periods, such as Famille Rose, Famille Verte, Famille Noire, Famille Jaune or the also familiar Thousand Flowers decorative motif. The more recent Flower vases, also refer Chinese decorative types but they as well incorporate European styles influenced by Chinese ceramics like the famous Blue Willow Pattern, designed in England by Thomas Minton in 1780 and which has been reinterpreted all over the world, more recently by British ceramic artist Paul Scott and others. There is even a bridge in Jingdezhen which incorporates the Blue Willow Pattern in its railing and I wonder if the people who pass on this bridge daily know that this is not a Chinese motif but one coming from England in the Chinese style.

Since Leopold's work is conceptual in intent, the material used are not important or relevant, the process used neither and the necessity for a personal style, so prevalent in ceramics, is contested as well. What the work is made with, how well or where it is made and most importantly by whom, is largely if not totally irrelevant. This irrelevancy is revolutionary. What matters is the obvious connection we can readily make with ceramics and its histories and how the object, so unusual in its non-functionality, in its apparent pointlessness, challenges preconceived notions we have toward ceramic objects and pottery forms.

My intent here was to introduce a variety of ceramic artists from all over the world whose work re-examines the role played by Chinese ceramics and Chinese porcelain in culture.

By looking at these diverse works a general pattern emerges, one that makes obvious the iconic nature of Chinese ceramics for so many if not all, in some form or other, ceramic artists and potters today and historically. Chinese ceramics remains, with the possible exception of Greek pottery, the most important source for forms, patterns and designs, for anyone working in ceramics, whether this debt is acknowledged or not. The contribution that Chinese ceramics has made to the world of culture is still alive, potent and ongoing, and my guess is that this will be the case for a very long time still.

It could be argued that in many ways, ceramics as an art form acts as the memory of humankind and it is in the continuing connection between the past and the future that ceramic objects find their true meaning.

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