

Ceramics

Art + Perception

July 2017

#105

USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



ART

Shuitu— clay and water around the world

Written by Paul Leathers

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL
CERAMICS ART EXHIBITION,
QINGDAO.

It was my privilege, in September of 2015, to attend the opening of *Shuitu – Clay and Water around the World*. The First International Ceramics Art Exhibition, Qingdao. The inauguration of what the organizers hope will become a biennial event, the exhibition drew on the combined experience and expertise of Chinese ceramic artist and independent curator, Wan Liya and the Qingdao Sculpture Gallery's director, Ye Dongwei. A relatively recent addition to the waterfront, the Qingdao Sculpture Gallery was opened in 2012 with the aim of introducing the public to a wide range of sculptural art practices through exhibitions, lectures and cultural exchanges transcends its notions of materiality.

[1] **Bowl with Gold**,
Takeshi Yasuda, hand-
thrown glazed porcelain
with 24kt gold luster.







[2] **Hollowness series,**
Dai Yuxiang, Gun-shot
thrown porcelain
with glaze. 23 x 23 x
3.5 in. Image credit:
Twocities Gallery.

**We mold clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that makes the vessel useful. [...] We work with the substantial,
but the emptiness is what we use.**

– Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 11 (McDonald, 1996).

In her introduction to the catalogue, Director Ye points poetically to the exhibition's title and the fact that artists, from all times and places, have used ceramic materials to create durable functional wares and to express themselves. "They use water and clay from around the world to create contemporary ceramic artworks reflecting different regions and styles," she states. Such focused activity, Ye Dongwei continues, "changes the ceramic materials into a kind of medium for artistic expression." This would seem to harmonize with French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard's description of *la pâte* – the admixture produced through the union of earth and water – that provides "an elemental experience with material"² and a metaphor, perhaps, for creativity itself.³

Wan Liya, in his catalogue essay, unfolds the developments in Chinese ceramic art since the late 1970s. Then, the impetus was to break free from the constraints of focusing solely on ceramics in the service of political aims and the production of functional wares. As the fine art colleges set up courses for ceramics majors and opportunities for artist exchanges between China and foreign countries grew through the late 1990s, individual Chinese artists began to gain exposure through their participation in international exhibitions. From 2000 to the present, the return of those Chinese students who had studied abroad, the dramatic increase in national exhibitions, the maturing of curatorial vision, and the emergence of various websites, magazines and academic journals have each helped to facilitate increased communication between China and the global ceramics community.

[2] **Hollowness series**,
Dai Yuxian. Image
courtesy of Fang Xiaoyi.



Primarily an opportunity to bring together eighteen Chinese ceramic artists — many of whom are currently working in academia — and a number of international artists who have developed community connections through both making and exhibiting in China, the exhibition featured many senior Chinese luminaries. Among these were (alphabetically, with family name capitalized); Bai Ming (Tsinghua University), Chen Guanghui (Shanghai University), Hong Wei (Capital Normal University), Li Hongwen (Qingdao University of Science and Technology), Li Lan (Qingdao University), Lu Bin (Nanjing Art Institute), Lv Pinchang (Central Academy of Fine Arts), Meng Fuwei (Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute), Qu Yong (Jilin University of Arts), Xia Dewu (Central Academy of Fine Arts), Xu Yake (Qingdao University), Yuan Hong (Shandong University of Arts), Zhang Baitao (Qingdao Technical College), and from Taiwan, Chang Ching Yuan (Tainan National University of the Arts).

Foreigners invited to participate as a result of their ongoing relationship with China included Felicity Aylieff and Takeshi Yasuda (England), Trudy Golley (Canada), Juz Kitson (Australia), Jacques Kaufmann (Switzerland), Jim Koon (Korea), and Zhou Guangzhen (U.S.A.).

A well-attended grand opening took place on the rooftop of the Qingdao Sculpture Gallery, followed by general admission to the exhibition halls. A somewhat emphatically 'Chinese' seminar (unfortunately not translated for the English-speaking attendees) was held in the afternoon, followed by a celebratory dinner that evening. Each of these events was set up in a manner conducive to facilitating communication between the Chinese and foreign participants. Studio tours the following day were a welcome opportunity to see how many Chinese artists are well supported by their local governments and/or private patrons.

[3] **Mr. Sea**, 2014.
Geng Xue. Thirteen
minute video. Hand-built
glazed porcelain with
mixed media. Image
courtesy of the artist.



While the artworks in the exhibition were strong and highly diversified, there were a few standouts for me. The juxtaposition of a historical past with a contemporary context was evident in the work exhibited by Wan Liya, who melded traditional Chinese painting with the current reality of manufactured plastic containers. Called *The International Kiln – Thousands Kilometers Landscape* (2015) [4], this installation-based artwork was inspired by the wide range of historical Chinese vessel forms and quotes directly from *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* – the thirty-nine foot long silk scroll painted in 1113 CE by the Song Dynasty’s eighteen-year-old wunderkind, Wang Ximeng.

Other captivating objects included Takeshi Yasuda’s gold-lustered, glazed porcelain bowl-forms [1] set on an antique scholar’s table and reminiscent of the ritualized presentation of a Japanese *suiseki*. The word *suiseki*, an abbreviation of *san-sui-kei-jyo-seki*, means “landscape scene stone” and refers to a single stone that, as Matsuura Arishige states, “... has in its shape or surface pattern the ability to suggest something far greater than the stone in and of itself.”

An interesting philosophical principle that may be said to underpin much of Chinese art is, 勢 (*shì*, meaning “tendency; outward appearance”)⁴. In his book, *The Propensity of Things*, noted French Sinologist François Jullien describes the underlying concept of *shì* as the positioning of oneself to adapt to and benefit from the prevailing tendency at any given moment.⁵ For me, Dai Yuxiang’s (China Academy of Art) bullet-riddled and glazed platters [2] both reveal and capitalize on the strategic beauty that is to be found through a thorough investigation of his chosen material’s *shì*.

Ceramic works by a number of the exhibiting artists that may be linked together by their apparent grounding in Feminist issues included Trudy Golley’s *3D Wallpaper* (v.2.0), with its seemingly pneumatically inflated forms, that reference female reproductive organs, activities of the Western domestic space, and the classically Chinese Ruyi motif (如意, *rúyì* lit. “as desired; as [you] wish”). Zhang Nan’s installation of skintoned ceramic tiles that featured the addition of nipple-like sprigs made from white slip-soaked crocheted yarn, spoke to the ritualized presentation of intimate DIY handwork. Juz Kitson’s fecund, pendulous, and overtly sexualized forms made of porcelain, paraffin wax, horsehair, sandalwood and bone – and reminiscent of such Western fertility objects as the statue of the Ephesian Artemis – demonstrated her mastery of material and form.

[4] *The International Kiln – Thousands Kilometers Landscape*, 2015, Wan Liya. Slip-cast porcelain, cobalt, glaze. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



An interesting philosophical principle that may be said to underpin much of Chinese art is, 勢 (shì, meaning “tendency; outward appearance”)

A highlight for me, and perhaps one of the most captivating of the artworks, was Geng Xue’s video, *Mr. Sea* [3].⁶ Adapted from PU Songling’s Qing Dynasty erotic ghost story, Geng’s thirteen-minute video features an island landscape and characters made from glazed porcelain. Reminding one of the stop-motion animations of Czech surrealist filmmaker, Jan Švankmajer or The Brothers Quay’s *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), the video soundtrack uses recorded sounds of the characters scratching and tapping on their glazed porcelain bodies to give voice to the drama. These sounds—which must be grating to the ears of a ceramic artist—draw the viewer in from anywhere in the gallery; like a moth to the flame. For me, Geng’s video, while solidly rooted in ceramics practice, both builds from and transcends its notions of materiality.

As Director Ye states in her introduction, “... we also hope to enable exhibition visitors to get a deeper knowledge of [...] contemporary ceramic art.” I feel that Wan Liya, Ye Dongwei, and her team at the Qingdao Sculpture Gallery did an admirable job of meeting, and exceeding, that goal and I look forward to the next iteration. ■



Bibliography

1. Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Complete online text, a translation for the public domain by J.H. McDonald, 1996. Accessed from www.wright-house.com/religions/taoism/tao-te-ching.html#11
2. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*. Translated by Edith R. Farrell from *L'Eau et les rêves, essai sur l'imaginaire de la matière* (Paris, 1942), Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983. Pg. 104.
3. Matsuura Arishige, *An Introduction to Suiseki*. Accessed from www.suiseki.jp/intro.html
4. Robert H. Mathews, *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975. Item 5799.
5. François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. New York: Zone Books, 1995. Pp. 27–29.
6. Available at www.tanc.bbwc.cn/xpuelx.html

About the author

Paul W Leathers is a studio metalsmith, photographer and occasional writer based in Red Deer. www.alluvium.ca