

BY PAUL LEATHERS

CROSSING BORDERS,

Breaking Boundaries

“A good traveler has no fixed plans,
and is not intent on arriving.”

— LAO TZU, TAO TE CHING

A kind of adventure, artist residencies are exceedingly valuable periods of time when, by taking a perpendicular stance to one's studio routines, one can develop one's practice in new and often unexpected directions. For me, artist residencies offer a number of significant benefits: the challenge of working with new materials and methods, an enlarged social network of like-minded professionals, and the impact of thinking outside of the box for a month or two. International travel and cultural exchange offer a means to expand the technical and conceptual boundaries of my studio practice. In this article, I will reflect on

the impact that participating in a number of artist residencies at The Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, China, has had on recent developments in my work.

A quest for knowledge underpins the study of making and of the artifacts that are made—process and product, respectively. Exploring various connections to the material world is central to being a curious participant in the unfolding of that world. I am curious. I am curious about how things work and how they may be brought together to work in new and unfamiliar ways. I am curious about the connections, both visible and invisible, that exist between material and maker, and believe that it is this curiosity—the fundamental desire to seek answers to self-initiated questions—that drives

each of us as makers.

Our hands extend and project us into the material relationship from which our dreams of activity and action grow. We are the conduits through which intangible ideas are made tangible. Studio practice is layered, like an onion. It radiates outward from the individual maker, through the ideas, the materials, and finally, through the artwork to the viewer, and back again. It is both reflexive and reflective. Each of us, while engaged in the process of making, may experience a sense of heightened focus and compressed time. It is in this state that one “dances the materials,” in an interactive and responsive process of taking the material, and being taken by it, to the edge of one's expectations. For me, the studio is

Paul W. Leathers, JDZ (Silver Fern) Fragment Brooch, 2013. Oxidized sterling silver with titanium (PVD) coated porcelain, underglaze transfers, 2.75 x 1.25 x 0.5 in. All photographs by the author.



ARTIST NARRATIVE

a private space—calm and supremely controlled.

My intent is not to give the impression that I am a studio hermit, far from it! To cross the threshold of the studio door and engage the fluid adventure of the outside world often leads to interesting encounters and developments. I vividly recollect a moment that occurred in Charing Cross railway station in London, soon after getting off a transatlantic flight from Canada. As the crush of early-morning commuters rushed past to start their workday, I had the distinct feeling of being oriented perpendicular to the flow of their daily routines. Having left my own routines far behind, I was solidly in that state of limbo that international travellers experience—no longer where one is from, and not yet to where one is going. I define this experience as *perpendicularity*, which for me means a way of re-examining one's own routines

as the stranger who observes the flow of others; a rupture with the quotidian.

One of the most eloquent writers on notions of adventure and the individual adventurer, “the stranger,” was the German sociologist Georg Simmel. In his essay *Das Abenteuer* (The Adventure), Simmel observed, “the adventure is defined by its capacity, in spite of its being isolated and accidental, to have necessity and meaning.” He continues, “It is like an island in life, which determines its beginning and end according to its own formative powers and not—like part of a continent—also according to those of adjacent territories.”¹ To be the stranger, however, speaks to a specific and very positive form of relationship. As a metalsmith working in Jingdezhen, the Chinese home of porcelain, I do not feel the burdensome expectations of tradition. As an outsider, the

stranger is unfixed and free to wander unencumbered.

Such wanderings take place on the landscape between points of arrival and departure. When transitioning from a central location to the periphery, one tends to move through progressive stages, one set of borders at a time. When dealing with complex ideas, one usually simplifies these into binary opposites such as light/dark, right/wrong. Author Heinz Insu Fenkl believes that the Western logic of categorization based on such dualities is

inadequate for dealing with what he has termed “the Interstitial.” His theory explores the gray areas that are found between borders. Fenkl states, “An interstice is not an intersection. [...] The word ‘interstice’ comes from the Latin roots *inter* (between) and *sistere* (to stand). Literally, it means to ‘stand between’ or ‘stand in the middle.’ It generally refers to a space between things [like] a gap in the clouds . . .”²

The Interstitial is not a transitory waiting lounge and, as Fenkl asserts, having “its own being in a willfully transgressive or non-categorical way,”³ is not trying to become anything other than itself. As a conceptual third space, the Interstitial may be prime territory to locate the further adventures of the self-confident stranger.

Leaving the familiarity of the studio allows, demands even, that we engage our practices from new vantage points: to be set at right angles to the familiar—*perpendicularity*, so to speak. As a resident at The Pottery Workshop, I was able to engage with many local masters working within The Sculpture Factory. Working outside of my material comfort zone has led to my developing a new skill set. While I have never fired a kiln and probably never will, I hold great admiration for those who can and regularly do. I would not consider myself a ceramicist but rather a metalsmith who is currently exploring ceramic materials and processes; and as such, my time spent in Jingdezhen has had a profound effect on my studio practice.

Insights provided by a willingness to embrace a state of being slightly off-balance, whether materially or culturally, prove invaluable. One of my favourite descriptions of a master traveller comes from American expatriate Paul Bowles's novel *The Sheltering Sky*. Arriving at the quayside in Cairo, one of the characters offers that the difference between a tourist and a traveller is that a tourist never leaves home, and a traveller never arrives.⁴

▼ Paul W. Leathers, JDZ (Blue & White; the new Red) Fragment Brooches, 2012. Oxidized sterling silver with slip-cast colored porcelains, 2.5 x 0.75 x 0.5 in.



Journeys are rarely undertaken without encountering hurdles. Breaking boundaries, be they personal or geographic, may even incite a sense of crisis. Derived from the ancient Greek word *kritikós*, meaning “able to discern” or “render a judgment,” the word crisis gets short shrift in this day and age. Crises can, in fact, be quite useful. In *Another Roadside Attraction*, author Tom Robbins observes, “The principal difference between an adventurer and a suicide is that the adventurer leaves himself a margin of escape (the narrower the margin the greater the adventure), a margin whose width and length may be determined by unknown factors but whose navigation is determined by the measure of the adventurer’s nerve and wits. It is exhilarating to live by one’s nerves or toward the summit of one’s wits.”⁵

Through these residencies, I’ve developed a hybridized studio practice that relies on accessing equipment located some 6,000 miles away; and I sometimes feel like a circus performer standing astride two horses. Surprisingly, my early material explorations incorporated multicoloured or titanium-coated porcelain elements. During this time, I found that working with porcelain slip allowed a fresh approach to form development. I developed models that had the appearance of structures hidden beneath skinlike surfaces, and took them through the slip-casting process. I brought the resulting ceramic fragments back to my studio in Canada, where they were sorted, selected, and set into oxidized sterling silver mounts.

When asked what a Canadian metalsmith is doing working with porcelain in China, I usually answer that I appreciate the time spent with my wife, Canadian ceramicist

Trudy Golley (particularly while she is away from her teaching responsibilities), the opportunity for material and technical exploration, meeting new people, eating local food, and experiencing the culture. An added benefit of these residencies has been subsequent professional opportunities such as exhibiting, lecturing, and leading master classes. As Simmel observed in *Das Abenteuer*, “the most general form of adventure is its dropping out of the continuity of life.”⁶ Equaling more than a year-and-a-half’s worth of accumulated time, our adventures in China have certainly had the effect of breaking our cultural and material continuity.

To return home from a trip abroad is to return somewhat changed by the experience, a hybrid. Arriving at one’s point of departure allows for the integration of what had existed before the adventure with what has been taken away from it. One’s horizons and connoisseurship—in the literal sense of ‘one who knows’—are expanded. One may use foreign words and cook once-exotic dishes, not in an attempt to appear *au fait* but to feed new and genuine appetites. Especially interesting for me is the experience of seeing familiar things (surroundings, home, tools) with fresh insight. Then, slowly, perhaps even some months later, routine starts to creep in again and it is time to seek new adventures.



Paul in the studio at The Pottery Workshop, 2013.
Photo by Trudy Golley.

END NOTES

1. Georg Simmel. “Das Abenteuer,” in *Philosophische Kultur Gesammelte Essays*, 2nd ed. Translated by David Kettler. (Leipzig: Kröner, 1919).
2. Heinz Insu Fenkl. “Towards a Theory of the Interstitial [Version 1.0]: The Interstitial DMZ.” Interstitial Arts Foundation, (May 21 2014). <http://www.interstitialarts.org/essays/towards-a-theory-of-the-interstitial-version-1-0-the-interstitial-dmz>. (accessed May 27, 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Paul Bowles. *The Sheltering Sky*. (New York: New Directions Books, 1949).
5. Tom Robbin. *Another Roadside Attraction*. (New York, New York: Bantam Books, 1971),112.
6. Georg Simmel. “Das Abenteuer.”

BIO

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