

Ceramics

Art and Perception

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Contents

ARTICLES

- Casanovas: Where the Future Meets the Past *Maria Lluïsa Borràs* 3
- Michael Cleff: In a Vibrant Order *Barbara Christin* 10
- Karon Doherty – A Profile *Ann Rothman* 16
- The Mythical Art of Vipoo Srivilasa *Ken Ford* 19
- Of Seeds and Life, Ceramics of Fiona Murphy *Joseph Pascoe* 22
- Hans Fischer: "Like an Unknown Country" *Gabi Dewald* 25
- Tatsumi Kato's Lifetime in Ceramics *Meghen Jones* 30
- Peter Johnson. Around the Corner *Michael Walsh* 34
- David Miller's Terres Vernissees Nouvelles *Michael Eden* 37
- The Hatchers' Evolution at Pine Mills *Carrie Provinsal* 40
- Werkstatt Hohlt *Joachim Kruse* 43
- European Ceramics: Gallery with a Mission *David Briers* 47
- Blue and White on the Outside... *Anna Griffiths* 51
- Barcelona: Epicentre of Spanish Ceramics *Rowley Drysdale* 56
- Anita McIntyre's Journeys in Clay *Peter Haynes* 59
- Handmade in Taiwan *Jo Lauria* 63
- Function and Dysfunction *Mike Dodd* 68
- Distelfink Gallery's 25th Anniversary *Jenny Zimmer* 73
- Coals from Newcastle *Susan Steggall* 78
- Luke Lindoe at the Nickle Museum *Paula Gustafson* 80
- Cups of Utility and Concept *Joe Molinaro* 82
- Making Sense of Functional Art *Cheri L. Long* 86
- Tommerup: A Chapter in History *Lise Seisboll* 91
- Multiple Identities: Quebec Artists *Sandra Alfaldy* 96
- Leza McVey: Fighting Against the Odds *Thomas C. Folk* 100
- Ceramics Museums of Europe, book review *Janet Mansfield* 102
- Another Opinion – Letter to the Editor *Warren MacKenzie* 103



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The 1999 calendar for ceramics events to occur throughout the world is rapidly filling. One of the major happenings is the *Ceramics Millennium*, scheduled for July 13-17 at the RAI Convention Centre in Amsterdam. More than 50 speakers will address the gathering of artists, collectors, gallery and museum directors, writers, educators, designers and architects, who will have travelled from nearly all countries of the world to participate. The accompanying *Ceramics Festival* will see most of the galleries and museums in the Netherlands (and most ceramics followers will know the quality of these institutions) feature special exhibitions to coincide with the event. At a specially arranged preview, 20 editors and writers were invited to Amsterdam in October 1998 to hear first hand the arrangements that are being made for the *Ceramics Millennium* and to visit museums and galleries to learn the plans for featuring ceramics during the specified time of the event. There is no doubt that the arrangements are as thorough as they are comprehensive; this will be an event to top all others. Two special fairs are being held at the Convention Centre, one for resources for ceramics (more than 100 booths will show state-of-the-art equipment, books and magazines, schools and organisations) while the Arts Fair will enable galleries, dealers and consultants to present the work of their artists. A film festival will run concurrently. At the conclusion of the formal events, caravans or tours will head to European centres which have become pilgrimages for lovers and students of ceramic art: Stoke-on-Trent in the UK; the Rhineland in Germany; Faenza in Italy; Lisbon, Portugal - of special interest are the tiles; and Barcelona in Spain. In all these centres, specific arrangements have been made to allow participants entry to areas not usually open to the public. Each tour will be led by an expert on the subject. It is anticipated that more than 2000 people of like-interest will attend the *Ceramics Millennium*, taking advantage of the generosity of the host country as well as taking the opportunity to meet others with similar passions for the ceramic arts. Both *Ceramics: Art and Perception* and *Ceramics TECHNICAL* will feature articles from participating artists and galleries, before as well as after the event.

Immediately prior to the *Ceramics Millennium*, an important conference in Perth, Western Australia, entitled *The Edge - National Ceramics Conference*, will link Australia with the rest of the world through an international program of lectures, workshops, demonstrations and exhibitions. To be held at the University of Western Australia from 5 - 8 July, the program is enticing enough to warrant a journey to Perth on the way to Amsterdam. July, 1999, should be a stimulating month.

*At Grimnerhus Museum, Middelfart, Denmark, a museum featuring ceramics - on this occasion, the works made by artists using the facilities of the Tomteberg factory. See p. 91.



Marvin Minto Fang *Handustrialisation*. Installation.

Six Interpretations of Clay Handmade In Taiwan

Article by Jo Lauria

DEFINING AN AUTHENTIC TAIWANESE EXPRESSION was the subject of a 1997 symposium held in New York titled *Questions of Medium, Origin, and Content*. The symposium was co-organised by Ronald A. Kuchta and the Taipei Gallery and sponsored by the Chinese Information and Culture Center and the Council for Cultural Affairs. The symposium coincided with the exhibition *Six Interpretations of Clay: Handmade in Taiwan* at the Taipei Gallery NY November, 1997. The exhibition was also shown in Taipei, Taiwan, at the Fubon Art Foundation, in 1998. *Six Interpretations of Clay* formally made its debut at the Baush & Lomb Healthcare and Optics Headquarters in Rochester, New York, in conjunction with the 30th conference of the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). The Taipei Fubon Art

Foundation venue was the last in a 30-month American, Canadian and Asian tour.

The premise of the symposium was to take a critical look at the ceramic installations of the six contemporary Taiwanese artists featured in the exhibition – Cheng-Hsun Chen, Marvin Minto Fang, Ray J. C. Liao, Chen-Chou Liou, Frances T. J. Shao, and Margaret Shiu Tan, and to contextualise the work within the spheres of both historical Asian and contemporary Western cultures. The task at hand presented a real challenge, as the issues addressed – ascribing the qualities of authenticity and originality to works of art – are complex and, due to the abstract nature of the concepts, largely defy definition and quantification. Here are some of my observations on the subject as presented at the symposium.



Margaret Shiu Tam. *Life is But a Game (so what's the next move)*. Installation.

Vanguard in Taiwan. Forging a New Cultural Identity

The feature of the six installations was that they all showed cross-cultural influences, specifically the seamless enfolding of disparate Oriental and Occidental cultural imperatives into a unified composite statement. To interpret the cross-talk of imagery in contemporary Taiwanese ceramics I think one needs a codex to decipher the cultural entanglements which have bound the Taiwanese artists for many centuries.

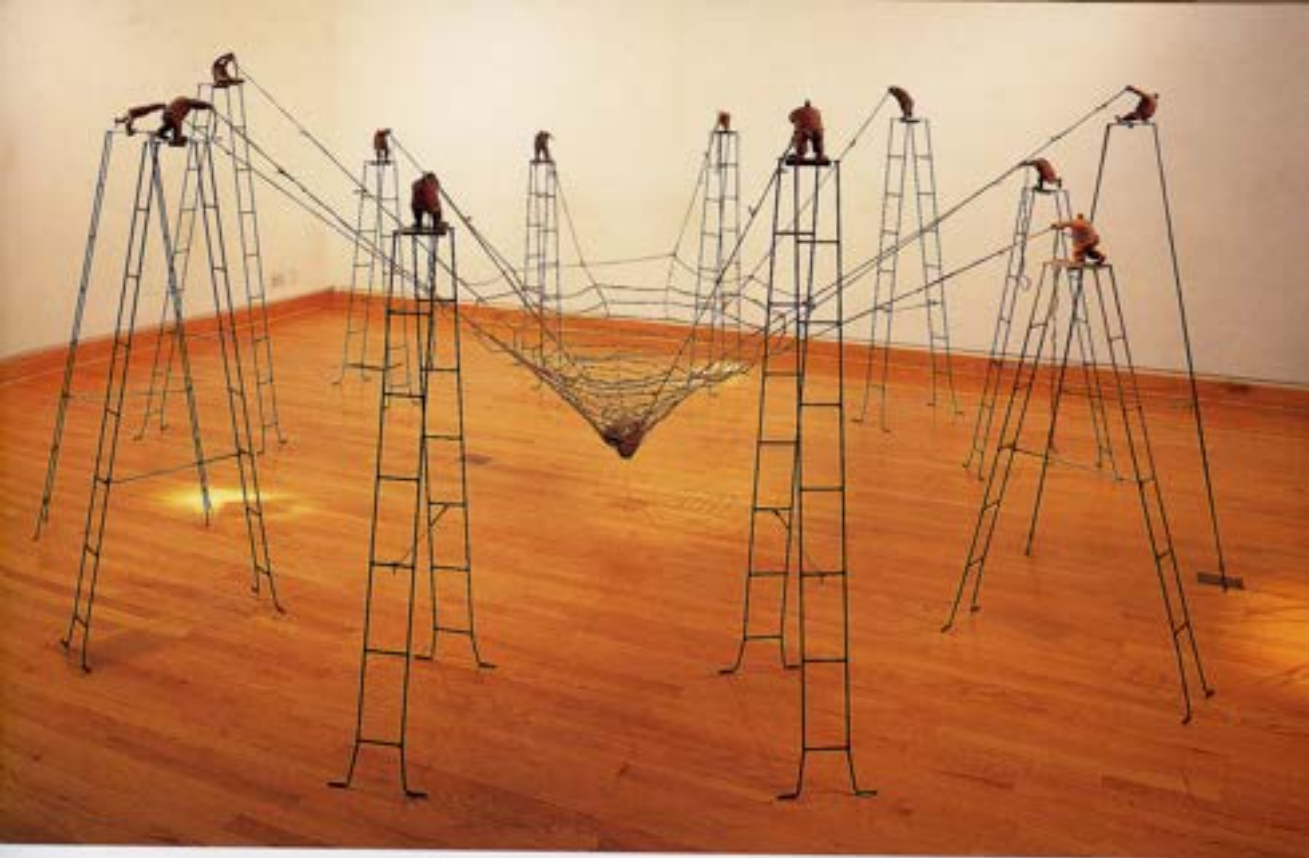
Locked between the super powers of China and Japan, the small island of Taiwan has a long history of cultural domination. By the mid-17th century the Chinese military of the Ch'ing dynasty took control of Taiwan and its native peoples. Taiwan was ruled by the Chinese until 1895 when, upon China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan was ceded as booty to the victorious Japanese. Japan held Taiwan as a colony under its imperial rule until the end of World War II in 1945. In 1949 Taiwan declared its independence as the Republic of China.

Taiwan of the 1950s could now reinvent itself. Subjugation by the Chinese and Japanese was long-standing and irreversible; what was newfound and liberating was the opportunity for Taiwan to adopt the Western model of democracy and capitalism. This presented a weighty task to the peoples of Taiwan: to sift through the layers of competing cultures and derive a sense of unified nationalism and one cultural voice, and to

engage in the production of a distinct material culture. Fifty years after this declaration of independence Taiwanese artists are still wrestling with the issues of identity – besieged/defeated by the cacophony of competing heritage and traditions. This is most evident in the area of contemporary ceramics which has taken a front-runner position in the vanguard movement to define what is recognisably and uniquely Taiwanese: unified nationalism and one cultural voice; and to engage in the production of a distinct material culture.

The six artists in this exhibition turned their backs on the past. For centuries, their Asian ancestors had been producing work characterised by decorative elegance in the vessel forms and by definitive gesture in the sculptures. The overriding goals of these ancestral potters were the refinement of select forms and surfaces and the attainment of perfection within this limited sphere. Greatness was achieved through repetition and imitation. The ideal of 'beauty' was clearly defined and unchallenged. This is the legacy that the contemporary Taiwanese ceramist inherits; this then becomes the burden of history.

There are no pretty pots or stylised figures in *Six Interpretations of Clay*. The exhibiting ceramists have chosen to adopt other strategies to define a contemporary idiom. They have looked outward for inspiration, mining as source material the installation art of



Frances T. J. Shao. *Heal the World*. Installation.

the NEO GEO of the West, the Japanese Mono-ha, and Italian Arte Povera. In the spirit of late century postmodern art, the leitmotifs that run through the installations in this exhibition are the questioning of enfranchised cultural value, mankind's tenuous relationship with nature, and a lamentation on human frailty.

In Marvin Minto Fang's installation *Handustrialisation*, clumsy handmade coiled bowls sheathed in fired gold lustre sit regally on gleaming industrially fabricated metal tablès. In gilding the humble rough-hewn bowl, Fang juxtaposes the common with the treasured. In the placement of these vessels on production stands, he comments on the fugitive values which have been assigned in the 20th century to objects made by hand and to those which have been factory-made and mass produced.

Clay as a material has little material value. Golden clay bowls become inflated with value because gold is recognised as international currency. Gold defines value. In reference to the tension he creates in his installation between the value of gold, the devaluation of the handmade, and the ambiguous worth of the commercial object, Fang comments: "The procedure and way of display removes the original character of the objects, turning them into thought-provoking and larger-than-life instruments, something with which I

broaden the exploration of the 'gold' value. Clad in gold, clay and ready-mades are no longer what they usually are."

Margaret Shiu Tan's installation, *Life is but a Game (so what is the next move)*, is also a critique. Her criticism targets tyrannical political governments that value the privileged and strive to maintain power over the oppressed. Individual human rights and right to life are accorded no value and are deemed dispensable. In her installation, Tan invites the viewer to become a participant in this geopolitical game of chance. Gestural board pieces made of extruded clay can be moved about an oversized mock chessboard. The pieces are moved on to squares that record ubiquitous onerous acts committed by inhumane governments. In this game, one is subject to random acts of injustice because wherever the piece lands on the board tragedy reigns. No-one is safe from the deadly consequences of barbarity.

The installations of Cheng-Hsun Chen, Ray J. C. Liao and Chen-Chou Liou are concerned with the natural environment and with man's placement in this landscape. Chen's installation, *Clay and Wood Series*, is his investigation into "the origin of the universe and the vitality of nature." The monumental clay blocks encasing wood tablets speak about the geological stratification of the earth's rock formations and the



Ray J. C. Liao. *Floating Seedlings*. Installation.

petrification of organic materials. The encrusted, worn, and scarred surfaces of these blocks allude to the endless cycle of life and the unattainable promise of eternity. At some point, everything once living will decay to dust and will be returned to the earth's soil. Chen seems to be saying that the beauty of life lies in the passing of the cycles.

Liao's installation, *Floating Seedlings*, is composed of gigantic seed pods decorated with stunning geometric patterns. These segmented seed forms function as metaphors for the rootlessness an individual experiences in an over-industrialised society where one feels disconnected from nature, from the family nucleus, from spirituality. Liao uses the disenfranchised seed pod as the basis of the metaphor because the seed is a "symbol as well as an archetypal presence... (it) is the origin and continuation of life. Afloat in the air with no earth for the root, it has no branches and gets stuck and lost in a forlorn surrounding." The imposing seed structures are equally seductive and repulsive: their beautiful organic shapes and decorative patterns seduce the eye while their precarious mid-air balancing act are menacing reminders of estrangement.

Clouds, the appropriately named installation by Liou, fills the space with ceramic cumulus shapes suspended on metal poles from clay mounds. This is nature in its most prosaic form. Liou's intention is to convey "nature's grandeur and beauty in reduced three-dimensional forms." The room-filled cluster of leisurely clouds points to the immensity of the universe, the possible freedom to be found therein, and the irrepressible vitality which exists for those who are open to nature's "extravagant splendour." Moving among these airy objects imparts a sense of peace and transcendence. Liou's lofty vision provides a welcome detachment from terrestrial ties.

The final installation to be discussed is titled *Heal the World*. Its creator, Frances T. Shao, is also working within a poetic framework but her visual drama is concerned more with the universal human traits of vulnerability, folly, hubris and potential redemption than with abiding nature. In her metal web-like and netted sculpture, 12 clay figures in active unison perform the task of cradling a ceramic heart caught within a net. Their job is to keep the heart from falling into the abyss of disinterest, apathy and corruption. Only if they all keep hold will the world be saved from destruction. Cooperation, understanding, and a willingness to act are the required virtues. This is perhaps a more direct but, nonetheless effective, visual political statement imploring the global community to heal the planet.

In summation, the six artists whose works are exhibited in *Six Interpretations of Clay: Handmade in Taiwan* have imported the global style of installation art but have individualised their work by imparting and overlaying their personal perspectives and visions. The work defies regionalism as it deals exclusively with universal themes. However, each artist has interwoven a piece of cultural memory and present reality into his/her installation: Fang's criticism of Taiwan's mammonist economy; Liou's zen-like meditation on nature; Liao's feelings of disembodiment as a Taiwanese artist culturally aligned, but politically opposed, to his Japanese and Chinese ancestors, as ready examples. As I see it, Taiwanese ceramic artists now stand at the crossroads of creating an artistic identity that will announce them, loudly and clearly to the global art community.

Jo Lauria is an assistant curator in the Decorative Arts department of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art specialising in the 20th century. She has written extensively in the field of contemporary ceramic art. Photographs by D. James Dec.



Above: Cheng-Hsun Chen. Clay and Wood Series. Installation
Below: Chen-Chou Liou. Clouds. Installation.

