

Digestives for the digital ceramics future.
A non-review of the 2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale.

Ronnie Watt, Ceramics researcher-writer, South Africa, 2014

Pickled green plum is a traditional Taiwanese digestive. Midway through the conference in the opening week of the 2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, the delegates were invited to try their hand at the first stage of preparing this pickle. The freshly harvested plums are vigorously rolled on coarse salt to crush the skin and then cracked open with a mallet before being repeatedly soaked and drained in sugared water over a period of days. Picture a group of ceramists and ceramics academics huddled over their baskets of plums, crushing green plum skins and whacking away at the fruit with child-like glee to help produce a low-pH digestive that has a foreign but quite pleasant taste.



Photos by courtesy of Huang Yun-chung, New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum

The pickling exercise was a fun event but in retrospect, gains some other meaning. There comes a moment after being exposed to the visual and cerebral overload in Biennale curator Wendy Gers' *Terra Nova: Critical Currents/Contemporary Ceramics* assemblage, when you have to step back and do some digestive thinking.

Yes, there were pots, vessels, installations and sculptural works. No, it was not a pastiche of materials, talent and skill. In a quite clever way the Biennale hosted by the New Taipei City Yingge Museum of Ceramics posited cyber-ceramics as very real options of ceramic genesis. If this fast-forwards us to the future of ceramics, it is also the prompt to hit the rewind key to review the validity and vitality of current ceramics practises and expressions. Digitally-expressed ceramics is experiential... the making of new sensory and tactile meanings via novel technology. But more so, it liberates our thinking about and via the tangible ("handmade") ceramic object, about how the ceramist engages with critical realities and whether ceramics is the exclusive material domain of the ceramist-artist.

The Biennale is an endorsement of something that Lauren Sandler wrote some years ago in her "ceramic manifesto"¹:

"[ceramics] has the ability to dismantle persistent hierarchies and separations, transcend boundaries, and move toward an art form of convergence and collaboration."

¹ Sandler, Lauren. 2009. In *The Studio Potter*, Vol. 37, No. 2



Unfold (Dries Verbruggen & Claire Warnier), *Stratigraphic Porcelain*, 2012.
Mixed material, ceramic samples, 3-D printing. 30 x 30 cm.
Photos by courtesy of Kristov Vrancken.

The ceramic studios of the future will no doubt include those that are digitally-wired up and driven by wiz-kids from the ranks of the technology fraternity who have some appreciation for ceramic materials but not necessarily follow ceramics aesthetics. New technologies place clay in the (digital) hands of anyone with some measure of computer savvy and a measure of creative ability. It even permits the consumer as end-user, to intervene in the process of making by adding or subtracting to form and surface and “print” as many copies as desired. The result might not be ceramic art... but it would at the very least still be ceramic. There’s no need to reel away in horror at the thought that ceramic art is being usurped because that is not what awaits in the future. When challenged at the Biennale with the question “But where is the ceramist’s hand?”, one of the represented 3-D ceramic printing designer, Dries Verbruggen of Unfold, responded: “We are making the digital, a hands-on experience. We are bridging two languages”. To which Francois Brument of Studio In-Flexions added: “The digital experience is intrinsic to the ceramic object”. If anything at all, the newcomers are re-awakening the debate about whether ceramists have grown insular in their clever thinking and the making of high art that speaks in an exclusive language to the privileged few.

It could easily have turned into a ceramics science expo but curator Gers anchored the Biennale in the work of ceramists who are engaging with the real world and then going back to their

wheels and workbenches to translate their experiences as ceramic events and not as clichés or inventions.

To define and then defy whatever we consider objectionable, we have to first interrogate what came before whether by linear progression, regression or interruption. A number of the Biennale artists made use of discovered ceramic artefacts which were included intact in their works as markers of historical reference, or copied and then altered to ad contemporary meaning. The intent is not to justify or ridicule the excesses of the past but to enquire why it arose at the expense of others and the manner of their materialism and privilege. Though the ceramic figures of the Peruvian-born Kukuli Velarde at the Biennale are modelled on pre-Columbian artefacts, their expressions of shock, horror and bemusement at what Spanish colonialism wrought (and via its insidious legacy continues to impose) on Peru's indigenous people, assume the status of a universal indictment of generic injustice. If, despite being an accomplished ceramist, Velarde herself was not a product of the “crashed, trashed and ridiculed”² indigenous culture of Peru, we could claim the right to question the validity of her work. As such she would be presenting commentary from the privileged position of being an observer (which itself risks being a kind of colonialism) rather than be the representative casualty of conflict, whose lived experience is embodied in ceramics. Velarde belongs to and speaks for a cause – the decolonizing of indigenous aesthetics and reclaiming of dignity³ - and hence her work has authenticity.



Kukuli Velarde, *Chola de Mierda* (Moche Peru, A.D. 200), 2006.
Terracotta with engobes and wax. 51 x 43 x 43 cm.
Photo by courtesy of Kukuli Velarde.

² Velarde, Kukuli. 2014. In *Conference Proceedings of the International Conference of the 2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale*

³ Velarde, Kukuli. 2014. Personal correspondence.



Jiang Yanze, *Useful & Useless*, 2012. Installation of 8 pieces.
Porcelain, slip-casting, oxidation firing in an electric kiln.
Max. 11.5 x 8.2 x 30.5 cm. Installation 100 x 16 x 30.5 cm.
Photo by courtesy of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

Social commentary can easily lapse into caricatured binaries: good and bad, beautiful and ugly, cheap and expensive, meaningful and meaningless, temporary and permanent, etc. It boils down to positives and negatives. The industrial casting molds featured in the Biennale work of the mainland China ceramist Jian Yanze, explore the literal and figurative negatives of ceramic mass production. The mold as negative form, assumes a positive value for itself and by itself. That value is not restricted to being the mere facilitator of practical and aesthetic forms, but in the way it embeds “the beauty of rationality of industrial products”⁴ and challenges perceptions of “useless” and “useful”.



Elenor Wilson, *Alternative Window Space*, 2013. 9 Tiles.
Porcelain, glaze, slip-casting, oxidation firing in an electric kiln.
Each tile 27 x 27 x 5 cm. Installation 84.5 x 84.5 x 5 cm.
Photo by courtesy of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

⁴ Yanze, Jiang. 2014. In *2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale – Handbook*, p. 49

In casting and then deconstructing the traditional Taiwanese ceramic window with its grid of open panes, Elenor Wilson of the USA addresses at the Biennale the simple binary of “us” and “them” and how we define and understand differences. The window is presented intact in its historic traditional form on one side of a wall, and deconstructed as a jumble of jutting planes on the other side. Viewed from either side, it is simultaneously a barrier to protect what is inside and a window onto the other side. The window frame is the only constant: the facilitator of thinking about how and why we see one another as “other”, about looking into rather than on to but acknowledging that the grid of panes are as much opportunities as constraints of understanding.

Hey, presto! We are now not only thinking about the art-ness of ceramics but about the art of thinking through ceramics.



Hitomi Igarashi, *Making Porcelain with Origami*, 2013.
Porcelain, slip-casting in papier mâché molds, firing in an electric kiln.
Installation of 11 pieces, 50 x 50 x 9 cm.
Photo of the installation, by courtesy of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

Convergence might for most be a more palatable option of expanding ceramic expression but if it is done for the sake of being new and novel, it lacks true validity and risks being overtaken by the next new thing in mankind’s headlong rush for something that offers more and better. Instead of leapfrogging into a digital ceramics future, the Biennale artist Hitomi Igarashi of

Taiwan stepped back into the past to converge traditional and contemporary materials and forms. She found it in origami, the traditional Japanese art of paper folding dating back to the 17th century A.D. The essence of a paper-orientated art steeped in history and tradition are not translated into ceramics but are kept as integral components of medium and method. An intricate, multi-walled origami structure is mapped in papier mâché to serve as mold for porcelain slip that is applied paper-thinly. Freed from their paper molds, the works are immediately recognisable as origami and as architected ceramic vessels. Igarashi merges and transmits two seemingly disparate traditions through synergised materials and forms.

The materials and processes aside, the convergence of concepts can leave both the ceramist and collector-consumer confused and the ceramics in a limbo of being neither this nor that. That very state of simultaneously being, wanting to be, and not yet being, is already something by itself. For Fang Po-ching of Taiwan, it becomes an “applied object”⁵... a much easier definition of how the utilitarian, without sacrificing the essence of form which intends and facilitates purpose, can be both functional object and *objet d’art*. Po-ching’s works which are included in the Biennale approach sculptural forms but remain familiarly functional and yet one would be loathe to put them to good use. This makes the works off-centre and awkward as either craft or art and leaves the ceramist – not through any shortcomings of his own but because of entrenched art-craft hierarchies - searching for an identity as either crafter, artist or designer who mediates both those ceramic disciplines. The ceramist can ennoble craft to be art but we need to ennoble our own thinking about a seamless ceramic *Terra Nova*. Here’s what Peter Hughes, Curator of Decorative Arts at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, wrote some years ago:

“Within the diversity of practices and beliefs that come under the rubric of ‘Arts and Crafts’ there is an implicit unifying theme ... an alternative form of individuation or ‘selfhood’ ... it emphasizes relational identity and interdependency over a sharp distinction between subjects, or indeed between subjects and objects.”⁶

Or translated tongue-in-cheek: The difference is dead! Long live the difference!



Fang Po-ching, *Cup and Box for Cups*, 2013.

Porcelain and stoneware, thrown and slab-built, reduction-fired. Width of box 37 cm.

Photo by courtesy of LGM Commercial Photography & Design, Taiwan.

⁵ Po-shing, Fang. 2014. In *Conference Proceedings of the International Conference of the 2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale*

⁶ Hughes, Peter. 2011. In *Craft + design enquiry*, Issue 3, 2011

The work of one more Biennale artist deserves attention. Kim Ju-ree of Korea constructs reduced scale buildings which upon completion is not fired but is exposed to water to decay until the structure returns to being clay. It could be considered a calculated exercise in nihilism, creating a work of ceramic art that has no permanency and will not in the end be what it was at the beginning. But what goes lost - disappearing landscapes and man-scapes – gains greater significance because it bears witness to metaphorical negative processes. The architectural structure is not the ceramic art exhibit... the processes of progressive destruction and loss which decays the art, is in fact the art.



Kim Ju-ree, *Hwigyeong*, 2014.

White clay, water, slip-casting and construction.

Installation 75 x 75 x 130 cm.

Photos by courtesy of (left) Huang Yun-chung
and (right) the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

There was another sublime experience at the Biennale and it had all to do with ceramics but nothing to do with ceramics as art. The art and crafts historian and writer Kevin Murray from Australia brought to the Biennale conference a few of the Indian tea cups made from river mud. These sun-baked and half-dried cups are used to serve spiced tea-on-the-go and when the tea has been drunk, the cups are thrown away and dissolve back into the soil during the next rain. Murray's cups (the handwork of the Melbourne designer Sian Pascale) are embedded with flower and vegetable seeds which will be released from the smashed clay to germinate, giving positive value to a negative act. However, rather than participate in this ritual of regeneration, buyers of Pascale's cups collect and keep them. There is a corollary to be found in contemporary ceramic art: we clamor for meaning with the proviso that our values can be layered over anything else, conveniently ignoring that the rest of the world might well stand indifferent to what we think is good and valid.



All ceramists, ceramics academics and writers, and ceramics collectors ought to regularly eat pickled green plums. It fixes indigestion... and constipated thinking.

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