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Zhu Legeng

Sequences and Rhythms, Panoramas and Textures

THE MOST FASCINATING THING ABOUT AN ARTIST is the poetic aspect, the will, the desire to say something permanent, to communicate it by way of a script, a drawing or a three dimensional sculpted object. The quest for poetry is, at first, a spontaneous action. It is a response to the inherent need of the creative being for self-expression; over time it elaborates and evolves, assuming a perceptible personal quality, almost visible, touchable by the observer and art critic.

It may be said that the poetry of an artist, while remaining steadfast in the principles and modalities, evolves and transforms through four distinct cycles in a lifetime: the formative years of instruction, the years of training and experimentation, the consolidation of the artistic and professional roles reaching maturity and simplicity and, finally consolidation on a theoretical level and sedimentation of the work in a prestigious public context.

The introduction to the creative world of Zhu Legeng takes account of this evolution and the fact that he has always lived in a family immersed in a world of ceramic art. From such beginnings, one attains an innate understanding of the requisites for exemplary quality and perfection in technical expertise – something that Zhu has developed along his own artistic path to a complete and comprehensive operational autonomy. His generation has invented a new method of creating the ceramic art form; that is to first conceive the sculptural work in all its complexity and self-sufficient form. This is in keeping with rare and gifted artists of national importance, such as Yao Yongkang, the great master of figurative sculpture and celadon in Jingdezhen, who in his full maturity, one can re-appraise his overall artistic career from

an international perspective, with his work having been embraced and further expressed by the second generation Futurists and later by the Informalists.

Zhu graduated from the Department of Art at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, where he earned a master's degree and went on to become a teacher at the Institute. He currently presides over Art Creation at the Institute of Chinese Academy of Arts where he is a professor, doctoral supervisor, outstanding contribution expert and enjoys the special subsidy of the State Council, National Master of Ceramics in China. He is a member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and Vice-Chairman of China Arts And Crafts Association (CACA).

His works have been exhibited in numerous domestic and international ceramic art exhibitions with much success, having received prizes for more than 40 of his works. In 2012, he was the recipient of the Xinhuan prize for Inheritor of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2013, he received the prestigious Yi Wen prize.

His style, his poetry, to summarise in just two words: sequence and rhythm. The artworks consist of

Article by Rolando Giovannini

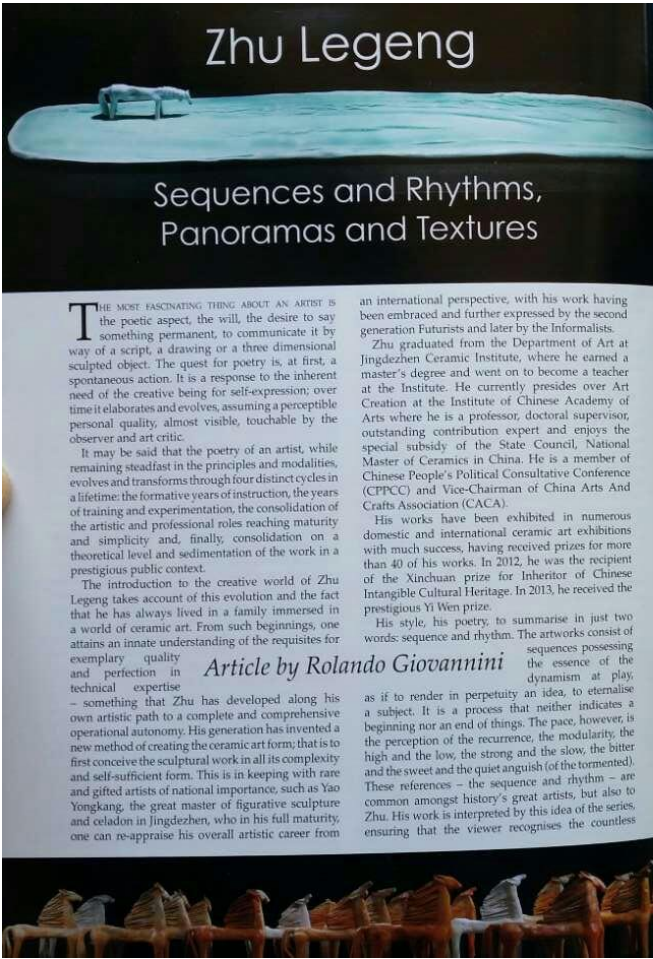
sequences possessing the essence of dynamism at play, as if to render in perpetuity an idea, to eternalise a subject. It is a process that neither indicates a beginning nor an end of things. The pace, however, is the perception of the recurrence, the modularity, the high and the low, the strong and the slow, the bitter and the sweet and the quiet anguish (of the tormented). These references – the sequence and rhythm – are common amongst history's great artists, but also to Zhu. His work is interpreted by this idea of the series, ensuring that the viewer recognises the countless



citations; a sort of texturing of the scene with duplicate items, recurring and overwhelming. And when the sequence and repetition are real, this disperses on the surface, characterising not only the two-dimensionality, but also the space bringing a visual sensitivity to the scene, both pictorial and tactile. In this manner, the works of Zhu not only emphasise the territory, but they stand erect assuming a plastic value, sculptural, symbolic, as if overflowing, like boulders in motion, a mass migration, progress, progression.

Facing page, above: *Heavenly Horse*, 2009. Porcelain, 148 x 30 x 25 cm. Photo by Zhu Yang.
Facing page, below: *Wind*, 2010. Stoneware, 120 x 35 x 140 cm average. Photo by Zhu Yang.
Above: *Light of Life*, 2005. Stoneware, 1710 x 700 cm.
Below: *Heavenly Horse (Detail)*. Photo by Zhu Yang.

His animals in sequence, just like his aligned figures, gathered together in the silence of a muted shout, have this value. A daring parallel – if slightly bold – draws our thoughts to George Seurat's oil-on-canvas



Above: *Imagination of Time and Space*, 2005. Stoneware.
Below: *China Oxen*, 2012–2013. Stoneware. Photo by Zhu Yang.

Paisannes au travail (Farm Women at Work) 1882–1883, in New York's Guggenheim collection (Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York – Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation), where two female figures are portrayed univocally, at work in the fields in an atmosphere of harmonious light and colour. The figures are gathered, soft yet solid, malleable, in the midst of a slow movement. Thus Zhu concerns himself with the world of animals, both as a symbol of strength and positive energy and as a symbol of help to man, in a slow and constant procedure.

His works epitomise the chromaticity of Chinese culture. Technically they range from celadon porcelain, where one appreciates the virtuosity of coloured crystal-dripping, to the wonderful crystallisation of zinc oxide and white stoneware patterned in large shapes. The techniques that the artist employs demonstrate a wisdom and mastery of high temperature, with the use of chromatic surface paints in both high and low intensity fires. The glazes are influenced by the culture of the materials, the visual and tactile sensitivity typical of Asia, where the surfaces are fine, treated, painted with meticulous attention and where the processes go as far as to the use of cooking in a controlled environment reducing the typical lustre.

Being a part of the cultural context of Jingdezhen, not only for being Chinese (which already suggests

depth of thought, a profound wisdom of technique, order of things) it means to be part of humanity's heritage of ceramics, one of the focal points of our world made of moulded and baked clays and minerals. It is in this way that Zhu fulfils the role of teacher, animator of culture, devotee of distant and ancient traditions. This feature of conservation and development in the research is also carried out in the city by Caroline Cheng, creator of The Pottery Workshop directed by Eric Kao, as well as Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute, founded and directed by Jackson Li, assisted by Wendy Li.

Zhu's new house has the capacity of a museum. Open spaces, illuminated by geometric patches of light, are complemented by artworks that spread out and punctuate the ambience. Alongside, one finds a dedicated structure with vast exhibition halls of ceramics of various epochs and technologies. This is a place not only reserved for conservation and cataloguing, but also of didactic use. This is perhaps not so unusual, when one considers the roles that both Xu Dufeng and Dr I Chi Hsu have played in recent years in the creation of the Pottery Art Village in Fuping, China. A rather extraordinary place, it was designed as a place of meditation on the world of ceramics, especially modern and contemporary.

The Zhu house is laid out as homage to Jingdezhen porcelain. The outside is studded with fragments of blue and white objects positioned in a manner reminiscent of *treccadis* (a decorative technique

with the application of ceramic fragments in a haphazard manner to cover a surface). Our thoughts turn to Antoni Gaudi and his extraordinary, avant-garde expressions of Casa Batlló and Parc Güell in Barcelona, Spain, as well as the French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle's *Giardino dei Tarocchi (The Garden of Tarot)* in the artistic park of Garavoglio in Italy and in the "Queen Calafia's Magic Circle" sculpture garden in Kit Carson park, Escondido, California, 1983 – all examples of glittering fragments of pottery harmoniously composed, glass mirrors and ornamental stones.

Lili Fang (Director of the Art Anthropology Research Center of the Chinese National Academy of Arts [Beijing] for the consolidation of knowledge and cultural predisposition in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen) is the coordinator of conferences and forums, which serve as reference points, attended by notable figures in the fields of academia and context of his locality, having contributed to various initiatives that the municipality intend to promote such as, for example, the recent curation of the 2013 China Kaolin Grand Prix for International Ceramic Art, Jingdezhen, which had more than 1700 entrants, with a final selection of 208 artists, competing for prestigious and generous (financially) prizes.

In this speech as curator, Zhu, Dean of Artistic Creation and Research at the Chinese National Academy of Arts: "There is a new term 'Jingdezhen Dream Seeker', which refers to those who come from all around China and from around the world. They come together to open their own studios here and create their own artistic works. Their arrival has

Above: *Cattle Totem Series – Ancient Memories*, 2012–2013. Stoneware, 120 x 110 x 60 cm.
Below: *Zhu Legeng*. Photos by Zhu Yang.



invigorated Jingdezhen, as well as having added new significance to the China Kaolin Grand Prix (for International Ceramic Art, Jingdezhen has become a global focal point for ceramics. Throughout history, Jingdezhen was regarded as the ceramics capital of the world due to its production and widespread export. Now artists from around the world flock to Jingdezhen not only to create their own works, but also to shape the new style and new cultural appearance of Jingdezhen. China Kaolin Grand Prix for International Ceramic Art has become a communication platform for ceramists throughout the world."



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