



CERAMICS

Seeking an Art Form

Award-winning artist Chu Fang-yi hopes to see ceramics take its place in Taiwan's contemporary art scene.

BY KELLY HER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHU FANG-YI

Ceramic objects used to be created mostly out of necessity and considered merely part of a traditional craft. Everyday items were thrown on a potter's wheel and shaped into vessels in standard sizes. But today, a growing body of ceramic artists in Taiwan is striving to change that stodgy image and to expand the many ways in which ceramic creations can be presented and enjoyed. Among them is 32-year-old Chu Fang-yi (朱芳毅), whose endeavors have already won considerable recognition. He recently won the grand prize in the 2008 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, an international competition and

Memory, Sign and Record of Objects
Ceramic, 2007
150 x 150 x 22 cm

exhibition open to ceramists from around the world and organized by the Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum (YCM). Chu received NT\$1.3 million (US\$43,300) in prize money and his work was made part of the museum's permanent collection.

Yu Jan-chi (游冉琪), director of YCM, says the museum has taken a number of initiatives since it opened in 2000 to promote ceramic art in Taiwan, as well as to boost interactions among Taiwanese ceramists and the international art community. Yu says she is glad to see the museum's activities, including exhibitions, symposiums, festivals and the international competition, are receiving increasing attention both at home and abroad.

This year, a total of 684 ceramic artists from 58 countries participated in the competition, the third contest since the event began in 2004. The works were screened by a seven-member jury comprised of ceramists, art experts and exhibition organizers from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, Taiwan and the United States, with 114 works selected for the exhibition, which opened in June and runs until December 7. Following several rounds of voting and extensive deliberation by the judging panel, 19 artists, including five from Taiwan, were awarded prizes at this year's show.

Running alongside the biennial for the first time this year, the museum also organized the month-long International Ceramics Festival held

in July to promote both the international competition and ceramic art as a whole. Festival events included lectures, workshops, demonstrations and do-it-yourself activities.

"Art should be expressed freely. Those experimenting with new expressions of ceramics should be given praise and support. This ideal is reflected in the theme of this year's biennial, 'boundless,'" Yu explains. "We use this motif to encourage artists to transcend limits and develop their creativity and provide viewers with a whole new experience of appreciating what ceramics can be." As a result, this year's exhibition saw many marvelous works of ceramic art from Taiwan and overseas that featured various forms of vessels, figures and objects, in representational, abstract and non-representational styles, she adds.

Chang Ching-yuan (張清淵), an associate professor at Tainan National University of the Arts (TNNUA), was one of the judges for this year's Taiwan Ceramics Biennale. He says one major consideration for the jury when assessing the participating works was innovation. "Ceramics were conventionally made into containers of different kinds such as bottles, cups, bowls and vases, with the emphasis on practicality," Chang says. "Such emphasis, however, has set limits on the presentation of ceramic works in terms of form, theme and size. We hope to see ceramists create new kinds of works."

Chairwoman of the jury for this year's competition, Susan Jefferies, says the judges found the wall installation by Chu Fang-yi to be a powerful work, which evoked the themes of time and memory. Jefferies, a curator

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—Chu Fang-yi, ceramic artist

at Canada's Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, says the choice and clarity of images in Chu's work, as well as the "assured manipulation of the clay" were contributing factors to its grand prize status.

Chu's award-winning piece, *Memory, Sign and Record of Objects*, is composed of 25 "objects," each approximately 22 x 22 x 22 centimeters, which are arranged on a wall in a grid pattern. The grid presentation is designed to showcase the 25 shapes, and gives the impression of a seemingly random selection of small, everyday items. "I use objects as visual diaries that detail emotions and memories," Chu explains. "The meaning of an object is never as fixed or obvious as we assume. Its meaning, or the message it conveys, is always based on some aspect of one's own life experience," the artist says. "Instead of being seen as individual pieces, the work can be viewed as a three-dimensional wall painting or totem."

Biennale judge and TNNUA professor Chang says the piece by Chu Fang-yi is a good example of a ceramic work that deviates from the traditional emphasis on practicality and consequently reveals a new sense of aesthetics. "Chu's work



Huang Chung-tsun

Chu Fang-yi hopes ceramics can gain recognition in Taiwan's contemporary art scene.

deserves special attention for the way he uses objects as symbols, letting viewers make an association [between the objects in the work and other objects in their lives]. It prompts viewers to pay renewed attention to the ordinary objects they're likely to see in their everyday living environment like tools, toys or door handles, and to discover their beauty," he says. "Plus, Chu is accomplished with regard to craftsmanship and artistic expression. We had little to criticize." Chang says that many works of contemporary art tend to address social issues and do so in a confrontational way. By contrast, Chu's work appears somehow "reserved" and lyrical, and generates a feeling of tranquility, he says.

What does Chu have in mind when creating an artwork? "Before writing was invented, human beings communicated with one another



Courtesy of Taipei County Yingshe Ceramics Museum

The Taiwan Ceramics Biennale aims to boost interactions among Taiwanese ceramists and the international art community.

through images, and images were used to spur the imagination," Chu says. "But modern people seem to have lost their imagination when it comes to images. So I try to use my memories of certain things and transform them into abstract 'objects' in my creations. When viewing the work, the audience can associate it with their own visual memory or experience."

Constrained, Ingrained

Chu believes that people still have a great capacity for imagination, but it is constrained by ingrained thought processes and social norms. Consequently, most people tend to apply stereotypes toward the things they see. Thus, works in his ongoing Objects series aim to trigger viewers' imagination, feelings and memories and to revive the role of images as a medium of communication among people.

Liou Chen-chou (劉鎮洲), a professor in the Crafts and Design Department at National Taiwan University of Arts (NTUA), says the development of ceramics as a fine art is relatively recent in Taiwan. He says the field only really took off in the 1970s amid an influx of contemporary work from Japan. Before that, the bulk of ceramic production was for functional items such as crockery, or reproductions of antiques. As such, ceramic making was deemed "merely" a craft. Since then ceramic work has gradually transformed into a distinctive medium for artistic expression, especially with the emergence of innovative local ceramists. Such artists infuse their perceptions, reflections and emotions into ceramic work, elevating their creations into works of art.

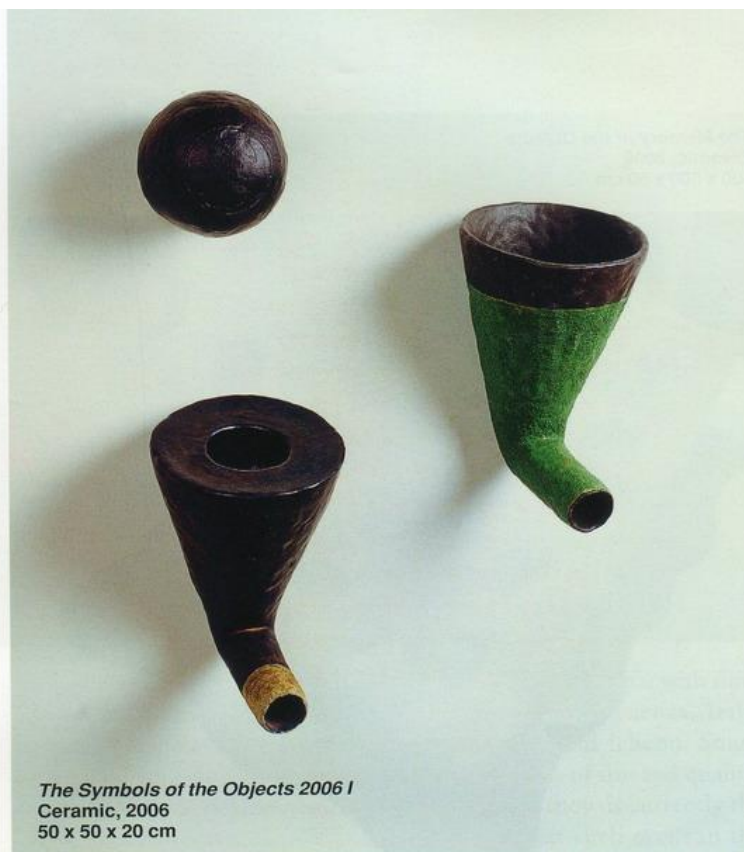
Liou praises Chu's work for focusing on familiar objects as a way to prompt a response from the viewer. The central motif addressed in Chu's works, Liou says, is the shared emotions or memories that exist

between individuals, or between people and specific objects that make one recall other people, places or events of the past. "Chu makes keen, in-depth observations of his surroundings combined with a great deal of feeling and thought, all of which then become the central elements of his creations. His pieces produce a powerful visual and emotional tension through the interaction of objects, the environment and viewers," Liou says. "A good way to view his work is to look at it and respond on an emotional level, rather than looking at a specific shape and trying to figure out what it resembles."

Perfect Imperfection

Most of Chu's artworks feature a simple color scheme of black, white or brown. Employing colors in this way helps to achieve a balance between form and color, Liou says, as the use of bright glazes might play up the color, but weaken the form. Liou is also impressed with how Chu works with clay. "Chu shapes nearly all his objects by hand without using molds or machinery much. Through such close interaction [with the clay], he can contemplate the meaning of a shape in the process of making it," he says. Liou says all the small variations in shape as a result of making each object by hand "do not merely correspond with the natural properties of clay and give his works natural appeal, but, more significantly, can mimic the complexity of human emotions."

Chu himself is fascinated with the plasticity of clay that leads to such variations in form, as well as clay's ability to imitate different



The Symbols of the Objects 2006 I
Ceramic, 2006
50 x 50 x 20 cm

kinds of materials such as wood, metal and leather. However, there are many variables in the process of creating an art piece. "Raw materials, glaze formulas, technique, humidity and temperature, the condition of the kiln—all of these affect the final work and artists cannot have complete control over all of them. But that's also the appeal of ceramic art," he says. "Making ceramics does require craftsmanship, but that's just the basic ability a ceramist should command. The larger challenge is how to convey one's thinking and at the same time trigger a resonance with viewers."

Chu started his Objects series six years ago and since then he has attempted to downplay the traditional emphasis for ceramics on

technical perfection such as a smooth finish, delicate texture and pretty colors. "If you only care about how to avoid cracks, then you have to stick to specific principles of construction and firing, and that reduces the possibility of creating different kinds of artworks," he says. "Flaws that occur in the process are just natural so I let them happen without seeking to cover them up. I'd rather use my time to think more about the motivations behind a work and how to express my thoughts through visual art."

Given that traditional ceramics have long been considered a craft rather than an art form, there are still obstacles for contemporary ceramists seeking acceptance of their work in the art world. Chu says just last year,

The Memory of the Objects
Ceramic, 2006
400 x 500 x 50 cm



one of his works was accepted for a domestic fine arts exhibition and a local art critic made a point of telling him that it was not easy for a ceramic piece to be selected. Chu says that the comment more or less implied a level of contempt for ceramics as an artistic medium. Actually, Chu says he does not oppose the development of functional ceramic ware as that could encourage people to use more ceramic goods in their daily lives. It is just that ceramic art should be allowed freedom and diversity of expression.

"Ceramics is disadvantaged in Taiwan in that it's not yet widely recognized as an art form," he says.

"Even today, some people do not recognize my works as contemporary art. Sometimes when applying for a government grant, I need to offer a lot of explanation to justify, or say, defend my proposal. It's tiring and discouraging. My ambition is to help more people appreciate the distinctiveness of clay, accept it as an artistic medium and advance ceramics into the arena of contemporary art to gain its due respect."

Chu also makes an effort to expand the ways that ceramic works are displayed. Traditional pieces such as bowls or vases are often just placed on a small base for display. "That has restricted the presentation



The Record of the Objects 2007 III
Ceramic, 2007
400 x 400 x 400 cm

of the work," he says. "In my view, [artworks] can be exhibited in any space—on the ground, on the wall or even on the roof." In fact, Chu says the process of assembling and arranging pieces at an exhibition site is part of the creative process as it provides another opportunity to bring out whatever theme he is attempting to express.

Chu hopes the field of ceramics in Taiwan can eventually include traditional crafts, modern design and sophisticated pieces of fine art, and even large-scale sculptures. Last year, Chu created a work titled *Carpet* that features 100 enlarged carpet fibers in ceramic. The work, on display in YCM's Ceramics Park, draws on the design concept of street furniture in that it focuses on an item of furniture usually found in the home and places it in an outdoor setting. "People feel very relaxed at



The Record of the Objects 2006 I
Ceramic, 2006
600 x 100 x 30 cm

home. My ideal is to create a home-like environment in the outdoors so that people can have a similar feeling of relaxation, even in a public space," Chu explains. "Street furniture is basically designed with utility in mind. I wanted to design a piece that could be used, but from an interesting angle and with a sense of surprise and fun for people."

In the Works

Chang Ching-yuan of TNNUA says Taiwan is in a good position to develop contemporary ceramic art, precisely because the local scene is less than 30 years old. He says this is a plus for local artists as it means they are free of any historical burden that would come with a long tradition of ceramic production, and so they can create new styles more easily. Moreover, he sees YCM as an ideal platform for the new genera-

tion of ceramists to showcase their creations. The museum's biennial competition and exhibition, in particular, has actively promoted Taiwan's presence in the international ceramics community.

Chang adds that, in addition to Chu Fang-yi's recent success, a Taiwanese ceramist named Hsu Yung-hsu (徐永旭) secured the top prize at the International Ceramics Competition in Mino, Japan this year. "It's exciting to see, in a single year, two ceramists from Taiwan winning the top award in these two extremely important international competitions," he says. "That also shows Taiwan's ceramic art has reached an international standard and can be representative of Taiwan's contemporary art and culture."

YCM director Yu Jan-chi says the average age of Taiwanese award winners in this year's show is 35, indicating young, talented artists are helping to expand the horizon of ceramic art in Taiwan. She is confident the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale

will someday be on a par with similar events held in Faenza, Italy, Mino, Japan and Icheon, South Korea in terms of size and quality. The Taiwan show is currently the fourth biggest such event in the world after the shows in Italy, Japan and South Korea, she says.

"There are unlimited possibilities for creating works of art in ceramics," Yu says. "By holding the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, we hope to boost the creativity of ceramic artists on the island of Taiwan."

Chu Fang-yi is grateful to the YCM for providing such support, including well-rounded exhibition venues and organizing the international competition. "YCM is a professional museum with local characteristics, but also international standards. It gives me and other ceramists plenty of opportunities to gain exposure for our work," he says. "With such a positive force, Taiwan's ceramic art can expect a great diversity of creative styles in the foreseeable future." ■