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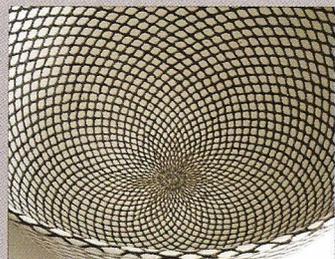
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Cover:

Pippin Drysdale

Vessel Installation – Porcelain

Tanami Traces Series VI 2009

15 to 44 cm/h

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History & Herstory

From East to West: A Hop, Skip and a Hurdle

Article by Jan Howlin

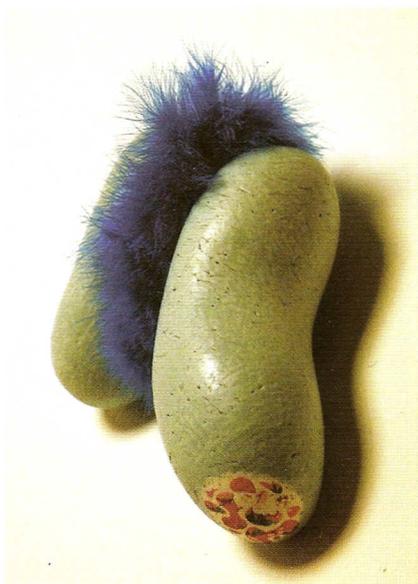
CERAMIC ART, IT CAN BE SAID, SPEAKS A LANGUAGE of its own, an expansive international tongue that is understood across the world, from East to West and back again. Nevertheless, for individual ceramic artists transplanting themselves from one side to another, the differences inherent in a new country's culture and practice remain considerable and inevitable. As the reality behind the recent exhibition, *History & Herstory* at Horus and Deloris Contemporary Art Space in Sydney, Australia demonstrated that straddling cultures can take some doing (not for viewers but for the artists themselves).

When Taiwanese born Wang Yi-Hui and Liang Jia-Haur brought their considerable skills to Australia – to Sydney College of the Arts specifically, to undertake a PhD in ceramic object art – their engagement with the English language presented the first major obstacle. But it was their confrontation with a new set of cultural parameters that proved the next challenge and as they negotiated their ways through quite different creative approaches, they found that the experience, in each case, became a catalyst for re-evaluation and also for consolidation of their ideas.

The disparity between the work produced by Wang and Liang is patent. Wang's work has a femininity that is palpable. It is organic, colourful and playful, often incorporating brightly coloured feathers and decal

patterns. The gently textured surfaces she creates in muted blues and gelato colours using terrassigillata and smoke-firing are soft and warm. Mostly made on an intimate scale, these are objects that require turning in the hand to be fully appreciated. Liang's robust geometric forms, by contrast, have an earthy industrial strength. They are usually large-scale, fundamental forms in rugged clays that express both the nature of the material and the processes that formed them.

Curiously though, the immediate impression on entering the show, the final exhibition of their work prior to the completion of their doctorate is one of unity or compatibility. Certainly neither one fights for dominance, nor wins. It may well be that the common background, training, personal relationship and life Wang and Liang have shared for the last 11 years is responsible for this fusion. Their singular commitment to clay could be another factor, along with an appreciation for space and the way their work is distributed through it. With sculptural work by Wang and Liang shown on the second floor of the gallery and functional objects occupying the first floor, the couple exhibited upwards of 100 pieces, all made during the previous year. The sheer volume of this work is impressive without considering items shown in their other exhibitions, the tableware they produce for a



Top: Wang Yi-Hui. *Being Sensing Series I*.
Above: Liang Jia-Haur. *Transitional Space VII*.

Sydney Japanese restaurant, the international competitions and shows they enter and the significant commitments of their PhD program.

Now in their early 30s, Wang and Liang met and embraced claywork through the course of a Bachelor of Fine Arts and teaching degree in the Craft and Design Department at National Taiwan College of Arts. The teaching of ceramics in Taiwan, as in other Asian countries with a long tradition and deep cultural appreciation of ceramics, equips students with an extensive knowledge of their craft and a remarkably high level of technical skill. Wang and Liang also benefitted from a range of tutors from Japan, the US, Europe and Taiwan, so the influences on their development were diverse. Wang went on to do a Master of Fine Arts degree, majoring in sculpture at Taipei National University of the Arts, shifting in the process from creating functional pieces to hybrid works of 'functional sculpture', then to purely sculptural forms. Her intention at the time was to create organic forms reminiscent of body shapes but the works that emerged had distinctly sexual overtones, which were easily recognisable. But her culture was both instigator and inhibitor of these works and her constraints were deeply fixed. As Wang explains, women in Taiwanese society are expected to maintain a silent modesty on such subjects, and Wang found herself, as a consequence, quite unable to speak about the meaning of the work, or to acknowledge the significance of the ideas about sexuality and the position of the female that were increasingly permeating her thinking. "In

Asian society I felt quite embarrassed to talk about the female body," she says, and at that time she could only acknowledge that the works were based on "inner thoughts and memories".

Wang's arrival in Australia meant a crash course in Western culture. In an atmosphere generally unabashed by sexuality, if not openly celebratory of it, given the personal probing and exploration required for her PhD thesis, Wang found her motivations could no longer be avoided. With exposure to feminist theory and to other contemporary artists focussing on women's issues (to other Asian women artists in particular) Wang's increasing comfort

with the ways of the West have enabled her to accept her subject matter and, gradually, to talk about it more freely.

A work Wang has called *The Moment II* is made up of six organic shapes. These variously coloured elongated forms, each sprouting the occasional suggestive protuberance, are joined end to end and suspended to create a necklace in space, which casts graphic shadows that intensify the presence of the work. The work is completed with a small wall-mounted piece, which has feathers emerging from a crevice. Now Wang freely admits that works like *The Moment II* represent an expression of the female body, although when asked whether the testicle-like additions

mean she would like to see the female sexual persona empowered with the force and dominance of the male she baulks and laughs. "I sit in front of my work and I think, yeah this is a strong thing – not only female but male also."



Top: Wang Yi-Hui. *The Moment II*.
Above: Wang Yi-Hui. *Being Sensing Series II*.

In response to her recent engagement to Liang, Wang created her *Being Sensing* series – a range of wall-mounted organic forms with two parts: feathers erupt from their convergence and a brightly coloured pattern created from a traditional Taiwanese floral motif that symbolises wishes for happy wedded life makes a sporadic appearance. Wang, however, has disembodied these traditional patterns and rearranged fragments of them as a form of tattoo, as if to comment on her status as a branded bride.

In a series entitled *Where are you?* she has made larger draped forms with an undulating surface, which are pierced with perforations highlighted with red and gold. These Wang describes as ‘meat’. She speaks of the time when, in an act of desperation, she began cutting into one of her female body forms. In that moment she felt she had opened herself up to the inside of the body and to a whole new area for exploration.

Another small hanging piece from the *Being Sensing* series (*Brush*), is particularly delightful. Here the unmistakable dangling sausage is ringed with a series of protruding balls, which nest in a neatly trimmed tuft of feathers, mottled bright pink and orange. Within its range of suggestion the notion of a happy sex toy is the most obvious connotation. That such clarity and cheekiness should go hand in hand is perhaps even more surprising given the weighty personal and cultural significance of the issues for Wang. The lightness of touch with which she

handles her subject gives it immediate appeal. When queried on the idea of sex toys, however, Wang will only concede that “they present themselves as playful items”. While the time for denial is long gone and she remains tentative when explaining her work, she confidently expresses her very clear ideas in ceramic terms, which have no need for words.

For his part, Liang Jia-Haur also had his confrontation with Western cultural difference, but over entirely other matters. Having completed his degree in Fine Arts and teaching; along with Wang, Liang went on to gain a Masters degree also in craft and design at National Taiwan University of Arts. Between 2000 and 2005 he also taught at the this university. From this intensive training – with its focus on the design of traditional and

contemporary ceramic ware – his understanding of the nature of clay has continued to inform his process and ideas.

A heightened sensibility to materiality has a long history in Asian cultures and the motivation for Liang, overwhelmingly, is his material. “I like ceramics to be about clay,” he says. “Clay will show me its personality and I just follow that. The work evolves directly from feedback from the material.” Specifically, Liang has chosen to focus on the issue of hollowness. Since ceramic vessels, apart from very small pieces, need to be hollow, he explains, “the rim, the space between the inside and the outside, is the most important thing. This



Top: Wang Li-Hui. *Where Are You?*
Above: Liang Jia-Huar. *Transitional Space IX.*

is the transitional space. If I have no openings, if I have no visible interior, the ceramic looks heavy, like stone or wood. But when I open the space, even with just a small hole, everything is different. Even if you can't see inside you can feel it, feel the space, the air," he says. "So I focus on transitional space and all my ideas are based on this."

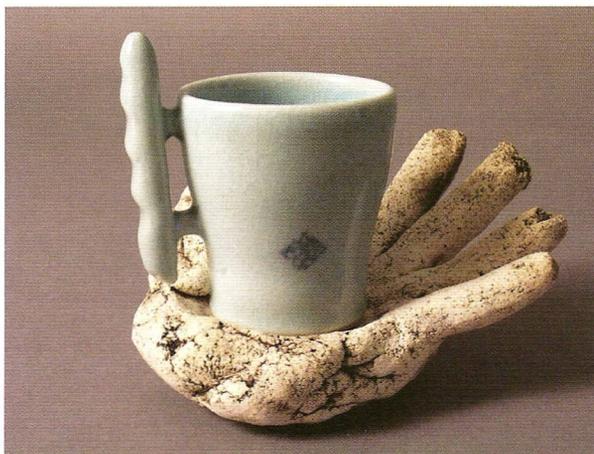
Hence almost all of Liang's sculptural work for the last few years has been called *Transitional Space*

– two straight lines and a curve – is drawn in duplicate, its two walls mere millimetres apart as they describe their space. The mouth insists we imagine the inside of the big black form, the emptiness from mouth to doughnut and the emptiness, the thin air trapped between its single skin, as it doubles back on itself. We are also given cause to consider the expertise required to construct such a work.

Also laid simply on the floor is *Transitional Space*



and simply numbered. *Transitional Space VII* is a large urn-like form that lies on the floor inviting a tour of inspection. Seen from one side (the rear?) it becomes a giant black doughnut with a central hole that disappears into itself. Moving further round, it reveals its destination, the transitional space, made like the open mouth of a petrified pterodactyl chick demanding attention. This mouth



Top: Liang Jia-Huar. *Transitional Space VIII*.
Above: Liang Jia-Huar. *Cup and Saucer*.

VIII, which was selected for exhibition at the 8th International Ceramics Competition, Mino, Japan in August 2008. In this work 15 separate pieces shaped like spinning tops are completed to highlight the varying juncture between inside and out. Some include accretions: stove pipes, a set of stairs, small bombs or rockets or pencils pushing out from inside. In others, the transitional

spaces are like fissures in rock. The form of the top, says Liang, refers to instability, but in each instance he is "playing with the space from inside to outside, or outside to inside".

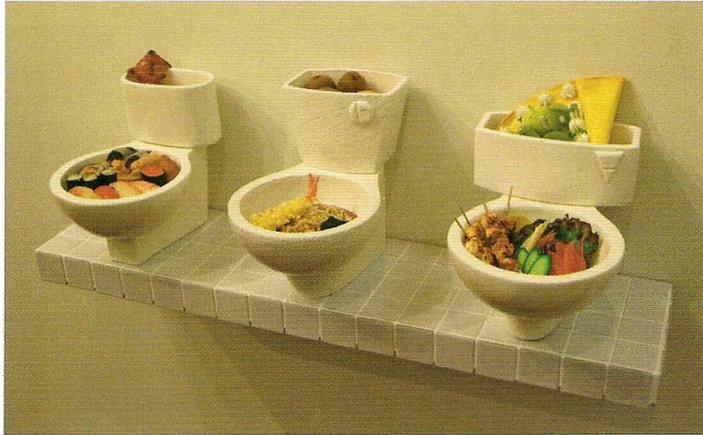
In *Transitional Space IX*, five large circular forms, like disused rolling stock lying around at a Stone Age rail yard, are placed on the floor and on the walls to set up lines of tension and connection between the elements. The forms, mainly in dry earth tones, rough textured, with only occasional colour, express the tough, natural quality of the material. Some are fully formed, others are incomplete, waiting for the mind to fill in the missing curves.

Liang readily acknowledges that all of these circles, eggs, wheels and cones are essentially vessel forms – scaled up, created open ended or made to function on other levels. The vessel is the carrier for his transitional space but it was also in this vicinity that his collision with Western notions occurred. "Our background is craft and design," says Liang. "Before we came to SCA, (which is known for its focus on contemporary art and its theoretical underpinnings), I didn't think about [the difference between] craft or art or design or why craft is lower than art." Suddenly Liang was confronted with the West's long-standing art/craft debate, the broad expanse of contemporary art and the nature of conceptual art. "I was struggling with [issues like] 'What is contemporary art? What is craft?' And at the time I was quite angry, so I just broke all of the functional work I'd made," he says. Then, however, he created a conceptual work from the remains. Translating his preoccupation with transitional space into a conceptual premise, he placed the broken cups and bowls in front of a mirror, and placed the mirror so that it would also reflect another artist's contemporary artwork. Thus he segued from broken tradition to contemporary art through his transitional space, the mirror.

Around this time he also designed a cup and saucer for a competition. A smooth functional chun-glazed cup with a tiny breadstick-shaped handle sat on the palm of a rough-formed outstretched hand. But rather than submit his actual ceramic work, Liang photographed the pieces and presented instead a cardboard cut-out of his hand-made work.

"You want conceptual, I'll give you conceptual," he was heard to say.

In time, Liang worked through his position on contemporary art, concluding that the breadth of his theme of transitional space offered ample scope for the creation of work of all kinds. *Feast or Famine* was shown in the *History & Herstory* exhibition, a work that presents three diminutive ceramic toilet bowls on a tiled plinth, each bowl displaying a selection of the



Liang Jia-Huar. *Feast or Famine*.

plastic food used in the windows of Asian restaurants to advertise their dishes. In this work Liang united the notions of ingestion and evacuation in one ceramic object, his transitional space eliminating the distance and the customary taboo between such opposing physicalities.

As with any exposure to a different culture, the time Wang Yi-Hui and Liang Jia-Haur have spent in Australia over the last few years has expanded their thinking and their horizons. As full fee-paying students, their continuing education has been an expensive exercise but they are grateful for the opportunities and experience it has afforded. While both have integrated new ideas into their work and consolidated their own, Liang now ponders what he sees as the predicament facing the ceramics community. "Some people think ceramics should be totally immersed in contemporary art, [that it should be seen] in the same way as painting or sculpture. On the other hand," he maintains, "ceramics has its own value, a value that we are losing or have already lost. If you ignore the functional way of clay, you lose the quality of the material." While he calls the dilemma to mind, he has no solution to offer. "I believe everything has two sides," he says, with his usual equanimity. On this issue too, Liang has taken a transitional position.

Jan Howlin is a writer and ceramist, currently completing a Masters Degree in Ceramics at Sydney College of the Arts. Wang Yi-Hui and Liang Jia-Haur's exhibition, *History & Herstory*, was held at Horus and Deloris Contemporary Art Space, Pyrmont, Sydney, Australia in May 2008. Wang and Liang completed their Doctorate degrees in mid 2009.