



Jing Huang

The Unknown Scenic

If the distance between China and North America is 7723 km, then what is the distance between the previous me and the current me? If there are 12 hours between home and here, what time is it now?

I wrote these two questions in Chinese when I first arrived in Canada in 2013. I translate and continue to reflect on them still, to remind me of who I am, and how this journey began.

I was born and raised in a small tourist city, Guilin (桂林), in southern China. My journey in ceramics began as a young student in Jingdezhen, known in China as the “porcelain city” since the Song Dynasty. Intensive study there at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute for four years helped me gain a range of skills rooted in an understanding of Chinese traditions in ceramics, such as the strict requirements of techniques, subtle aesthetics, and a high respect for tradition and history. In 2013, I brought my art practice abroad to Canada and later to the US in 2018. Integrating the complexity of North American culture and people through hands-on and academic study and residencies shaped new aspects of my personality and mindset, and further influenced how I make my work. In North America, not many others shared my background—I had both negative and positive experiences living in Toronto, Ontario; and Alfred, New York, as a Chinese woman.

I’ve been asked not to speak my native language while talking with my Chinese friend in a restaurant; but I’ve also been encouraged to speak up and add my diverse experiences to discussions. Over time, I began to understand that my background and identity can bring a fresh voice to the community, and I should not suppress it. My figurative works made between 2013 and 2018 were inspired

by the feelings of living in an unfamiliar landscape, meeting different people and my immersion in new cultures.

This is my ninth year living away from my country. Nine years could be short. It is too short to be able to adapt myself to the environment here. Nine years could also be long. It is long enough to nearly get lost in the city where I grew up. Last time I went home to Guilin and visited my family, everything looked different and obscure compared to my memories of people and places. My boundaries are blurring—I am questioning what is ‘new’ and ‘unfamiliar’ to me. Old, new, familiar, unfamiliar, I am constantly searching for myself somewhere in between.

Amid the dislocation and ambiguity of being neither here nor there, I anchor myself by tracing the liminal space between my ‘past’ and ‘present.’ I explore nature, identity, sense of place, and cultural displacement. Nature continuously changes. It moves, as I have moved. Mountains, clouds, and rivers appear frequently in my work. These three elements coalescing from memories of my hometown, also speak of different relationships to place. Mountains are distinctive of certain locations. Clouds, however, are the same even though I see them from different parts of the globe. Rivers flow down the hill in response to the topography and gravity. Recalling and abstracting these elements in my memory gives me the ability to interpret, imagine, and graft them together into a poetic ceramic moment.

I pull elements from my past, and rebuild them in the present. Instead of the linear way of making a sculpture from a sketch, design,



1 JING HUANG, *Workshop with Advanced Ceramics class at UNC Charlotte, 2022*. Photo credit: ChengOu Yu
 2 JING HUANG, *Loop #5, 2022*. Glazed stoneware, 15.5" x 16" x 13". Photo credit: Jing Huang

2



or prototype, I handbuild my work part by part without a blueprint, and assemble them together once I have plenty of components. For a sculpture that needs to stand upright, it is my intention to build it horizontally from the beginning in order to achieve an unknown structure. In this case, the greenware is usually too fragile to move; therefore I can only find its place through the completion of the process and reorientation. I approach this system as a way to rethink and rediscover my past in order to be able to create new meaning, and to make things that move beyond my imagination.

I reference the Chinese scholar's rock, inspired by memories of my father gathering strange stones while hiking. Displayed in our tea room or living room, I thought they were simply souvenirs from my dad's trips. Later, I realized that his collection of "respected stones" reflected a traditional practice. During the Song dynasty, the Chinese literati took a piece of rock from nature as a representation of the actual landscape, to observe and experience, to display and appreciate in their studios. Their wonder mirrors my feelings and early memories of my hometown's landscape, my culture and tradition. When I was young, my parents taught me that we should navigate our life out of detours and dead ends. In their eyes, the key to reaching the destination or being successful in life or career, is efficiency. I have started to question this point of view. Stepping away from one's origins can intensify focus. Until I moved from home, I had little conscious appreciation of my environment. This natural appreciation of my past and my own culture is something I only developed through a long-term departure and quite a bit of wandering. There was no efficient shortcut.

My recent body of work, the *Loop* series, is based on this idea of an amorphous shape that indicates no beginning nor end, but instead places emphasis on the winding path itself. Turning around, up and down, my life experiences accumulate into a process of change and discovery. For some destinations, you can only arrive by making a detour.

The karst limestone mountains from my hometown shrink down to a rock form, embellished with rivers, and clouds, becoming the basic building block for me to create a sense of place. My work and explorations spring from my culture and Chinese heritage, but develop under the influence of being caught in the spaces among different surroundings, languages, and cultures. Unlike the traditional manner of displaying the scholar's rock on top of a wooden base or table, my forms might be installed against a wall, on an architectural platform, with a found object, or on a metal frame. Each sculpture offers an 'environment.' In *Given*, the large ceramic rock can only stand with the support of its surroundings. A tiny part of the rock attached to the wall, together with the pedestal, balances the rock in this idiosyncratic corner.

Reminiscent of my early experiences practicing traditional Chinese painting in childhood, I use a soft color palette and velvety glaze surfaces to mimic the Chinese pigment: azure blue (天青蓝), gamboge (藤黄), malachite (石绿), and ochre (赭石), etc. Inspired by the

ways of using color in Chinese painting such as color washes, wet underpainting and layers of color, my work also comprises multiple layers of ceramic materials. I fire my sculptures suspended on stilts, letting glazes run and pool with gravity and form, inviting a sense of nature and flow into the work.

During the unconventional and unpredictable processes of making, firing, and installing, the position of my work shifts and changes to contribute new gestures and unique scenery. Unlike languages, art is a universal vehicle that allows me to express myself without barriers. My diasporic experience, of moving from China to travel and live in different cultures, has taught me how the power of interacting in diverse communities can affect an individual's growth, values, mindset, and creativity. Diversity and inclusion, to me, are not just things to be theorized about, but have been central to my life and art practice. As an artist, I strive to use my work to generate hope, power, and meaningful conversations for other artists who are facing the same challenges or who share similar experiences. In 2021, facing increased awareness of social tension, violence, injustice, and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate, I co-curated an exhibition titled *Here, There; Now, Then: In Between Journeys* that brings together nine artists

inspired by their cross-cultural understanding and interpretation between the cultures of China and the US. Acknowledging our lives and histories, we foregrounded new and evolving voices, a transformed power, and the potential for integration of cultures in the entire ceramic community. Working at this difficult time in history has given me the opportunity to learn to respect and understand others I meet in life, as well as myself. As a perpetual shifter and seeker, I'm drawn to explore environments, 'landscapes' and new 'contexts' for myself to be and the work to become. I consider my work to be neither a representation of my hometown nor the view of any specific location; it is a process of

seeking a deeper understanding of my identity and experience in the world. No matter if the scenery echoes my past or present, East or West—in the transitional space of my work, landscapes co-exist.

Born in Guilin, China, **Jing Huang** is a ceramic artist currently living and working in Charlotte, North Carolina. She earned degrees from Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (2012), Sheridan College (2015), and Alfred University (2020). Huang has lectured, curated exhibitions, conducted workshops, and exhibited extensively throughout the US, Canada, China, and the UK.



3 **JING HUANG**, *Given*, 2019. Glazed stoneware, painted MDF board, 44" x 16" x 30". Photo credit: Jing Huang

4 **JING HUANG**, *Installation Image of Liminal Exhibition*, 2022. Glazed stoneware, Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Jing Huang