

A Neutral Vision: PO-CHING FANG'S TEA SETS

by Elizabeth Reichert

Taiwanese potter Po-Ching Fang (pronounced Fong) explains midway through our interview that his vision of nature, like his vision of a cup, is of a world both constructed and organic, and in this combination one finds a universality understood by all. A mountain is a mountain whether it's in Taiwan or Colorado; and the constructed house in its valley is a house whether here or there. Similarly, a cup is still a cup whether it's a Yuan dynasty tou-ts'ai piece or a wood-fired beauty thrown by an American potter. "In language," he says, "it's different. We are always having misunderstandings. But I believe tactile functional objects also provide a direct way for people to communicate."

Fang's explanation about the universality of land and objects comes at a touching time, nearly two hours into a visit spent guiding me around the university where he teaches: Tainan National



Tea set, 21 in. (54 cm) in width, stoneware, porcelain, wood fired, 2002.

University of the Arts, the youngest of Taiwan's three art institutes and home to a ceramics department that has been growing in reputation over its thirteen-year run. He has shown me the library and a plaza where students celebrate a festival; he has told me about a wood-fire symposium in which artists came from the United States, Korea, and Japan; and he has lead me through a hangar of student and professor studios, and into the kiln room, where, as he joked, there might be a wealth of kilns—the large ones from Chinese factories—to outnumber their students. (Twelve to fifteen students are admitted into the program every year.) We have been speaking in English, though Fang would likely be more comfortable talking in his native Chinese or Taiwanese. And by the time we've reached his home—a faculty flat in a row of triplexes nestled along a man-made river, that river made especially picaresque with saggy willows and water lilies—we've moved onto tougher questions: "What do you mean by 'landscape perspective?'" It's fitting that, in this moment, he suggests that his work is imbued with a communicative aura I might understand despite my differing tongue. "My work," he says, "represents the environment."

Fang is generously distant and thoughtfully measured with his words. And yet, in this mannered calm (just as in his work) there's also a touch of the hip and the casual about him: the youthful T-shirt he wears; the trimmed goatee. He takes out trays and cups, places his pieces onto a table while his wife Shin-Yu Wang, also a ceramicist, makes tea that her father has grown. The tray before us is rough and unhewn, its soil-like colors and heavy form not unlike a slab of land (a cross-section of that universally understood mountain Fang



Above right: *Tea Set for One*, 13 in. (34 cm) in width, stoneware, porcelain, 2004.

Below: Tea set, 14 in. (35 cm) in width, stoneware, porcelain, 2005.



discussed) while the cup, celadon-glazed, is hewn, a soft glass-like structure, not unlike that house or man-made universal element in any human-inhabited environment. If Fang's trays are not of these earthy reds (a shino glaze later sand-blasted), they are of sooty creams and blacks, modern hues that evoke concrete- and metal-scapes. His teapots, small (the size of a cantaloupe or, at times, a grapefruit), also work via stark surface contradictions: the teapot body, usually in a light celadon, will be juxtaposed against its handle, the matt black color and thick form sticking up like a coal-coated chimney, urban and industrial. Taken as a whole (the trays with their cups and pots and, in some cases, a pitcher) Fang's work functions as both tea set and as a portrait of an environment, especially when the trays are hung as a "portrait" on a wall. "I make tea sets approached from a landscape perspective," he explains. "I'm not interested in environmental arguments, though, in controversy. I'm interested in representing what I see."

Born to a teacher and an electrical engineer, Fang was raised in outlying urban areas in Taiwan's northern cities, Taichung and Taipei, where industry seeping into the countryside would have been a sight impressed upon him at an early age. Unlike in the US, where city is mostly city and the countryside country (with the middle made up of suburbia) in Taiwan, because of the rapid economic growth that spread after World War II, one confronts a closer commingling of the constructed and the unconstructed: rural villages criss-crossed with wires; high-rises jutting up from tropical hills. Even the man-made river at the university—once you step back for a wider view—is a gem of landscaped beauty constructed

by an architect's hand, set against undeveloped dry mud and scrub brushes in the same way Fang's cups are set into earthy trays.

Shaping these contradictory environmental sights was not always Fang's focus, though. He used to make functional ware that was wood fired, his interest in rich surface surprises. It wasn't until he began a PhD program in Melbourne, Australia (after completing his master's and bachelor's degrees in ceramics at Tainan National College of the Arts and the National Taiwan College of the Arts in Taipei respectively) that he quit wood firing his works, simply because he didn't have the right kiln. He developed an interest then in surface contradictions, and also in tea sets, and his landscape concepts followed.

His wife jokes at this moment: "My father is a tea farmer. This is why he makes pots." Fang joins in on the joke, too, confessing that they do get free tea and that his father-in-law checks that all his utensils—the pot, the waste drains in the trays—work correctly, but he also says, more seriously, that teapots are a huge topic in ceramics. "Also, the reference is an American, a Japanese thing; ceramics in Taiwan is mostly industry based; any idea of studio pottery has been influenced from abroad."

When I ask about tea farming, though, and tea drinking in Taiwan, and what in his references to such activities is particularly Taiwanese, Fang shakes his head and lets me know that if there's reference, it's to ceramics not to Taiwan: "For me, there is no such thing as the tea ceremony in Taiwan. Westerners speak of tea ceremonies, but they are talking about Japan. Making tea in Taiwan is a casual thing. The tea set theme is a hybrid. There is the tea



Cups on tray, 15 in. (38 cm) in width
stoneware, porcelain, 2005.

tradition in China but also that in the West and Japan. It's a multicultural theme by definition."

Like most artists educated in the West and East (Fang has also spent time in residence at the College of the Ozarks in Missouri), and like most growing up in urban Asian centers, in which industries are in contact with the West and 7-Elevens are found next to dumpling shops, this hybridization of East and West is perhaps not remarkable—part of life, of identity: "In America," Fang says, "people say my work is Eastern, but before I went to America, people said my work was Western. I'm always in between East and West, but I'm also a Taiwanese artist." Taiwan, I suggest, is a hybrid too—governed by the People's Republic of China, occupied by the Japanese during WWII—and though I like to make this parallel between his work and home, Fang suggests that if he is influenced at all, it is by ceramic history, not by the history of his country.

He is speaking of *Mingei* now, the Japanese folk arts movement that began in the 1920s and that elevated common crafts to the expressive status of art. In the early 1980s, Taipei held an exhibition of Japanese ceramic artists, which greatly affected contemporary Taiwanese pottery, and as Fang says, "I'm now the unofficial fourth generation of Japanese-influenced potters." Suddenly, we are talking about Hamada Shoji's work, the dynamic fusion of art and craft that has invigorated 20th century pottery—the wood-fired work of Mark Shapiro, Sergei Isupov's teapots, and the expression in a Peter Voulkos piece. We are speaking a language of ceramics, and our similar foundations allow us to see beyond any Chinese and American distinctions. And like in the US, Fang is telling me, contemporary Taiwanese clay artists are making mostly sculptural work. "They think it's more expressive. But why can't functional wares also express the self?" As Yanagi Soetsu, the founder of the *Mingei* movement claimed, "The attitude that art should be non-functional must be changed." "When we talk about craft," Fang continues, "we aren't just talking about skill. We're also talking about expression. Mine is to represent a neutral vision of landscapes."

We are back now to the beginning, to the universal ways of communication that coalesce around cups, earth, ceramics. "I feel," Fang concludes, "you're missing something in sculpture. It just seems too . . . finished."

The neutral beauty of functional objects of course—as all potters must know, as Yanagi claimed, as Fang shows us—is that they are essentially gifts of daily, universal comfort. We drink from the cup and finish an act of ancient interaction, of communication, with its maker. Beyond the intuitions of landscapes then, of the constructed and organic evoked, of the East and West transcended, what remains in Fang's tea sets is the snowy stillness of that celadon,



Top: Tea set, 19 in. (47 cm) in width, stoneware, porcelain, wood fired, 2002.

Above: Cups and jug, 11 in. (28 cm) in length, stoneware and porcelain, 2006.

the feet that resemble industrial patterns, that red flush where dark oxide has met white, and then how nicely the cups nestle into their trays. What we see in these rituals of tea drinking and conversing and hosting is the beauty of the ordinary, an idea that has perhaps started and finished many a great potter's creations, whether working in Colorado or in Taiwan.

the author *Elizabeth Reichert is a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in CM and other art journals.*