

Written by Charlotte Chang
Translated into Chinese by Betty Huen
Images courtesy of the artist and Mur Nomade



Ray Chan, *See-Kwong, Butterfly Prints*, 2011, porcelain, prints

Hong Kong

EXPERIMENTING WITH ART AND LIFE

AN INTERVIEW WITH CERAMIC ARTIST RAY CHAN

陳思光——藝術如實驗

New works by Ray Chan can be seen at Mur Nomade's "GRACE," an exhibition showcasing local artists' ceramic works and installations until 22. November. According to the show's introduction, the works in the exhibition are "choreographed" instead of "curated." The idea of a "choreography" of artworks comes from the inspiration that many of the show's artists found in the movements of nature and people, such as the beautiful wing movements of birds and butterflies, the graceful forms of dancers, and the simple contours of a compassionate gesture. Chan's translucent ceramic works in the "GRACE" exhibition were inspired by a dance duo performed by two local dancers.

Ray Chan, *See-Kwong*



As one of the most promising ceramic artists in Hong Kong, Chan came to visual art and the medium of clay rather late. After graduating from a prestigious British university, Chan returned to Hong Kong and worked as an actuary for 10 years before obtaining his Fine Arts degrees. Rather than thinking that his background influenced his vision as an artist, Chan believes that it was his discovery of ceramics that has molded him as a person. In particular, through the experimental clay-making process, Chan learned to put down his risk-averse and hyper-cautious mentality as an actuary and became less afraid of failure. Translating this new mentality into reality, he boldly changed his career to become an artist a few years ago and is still eager to see how this experimental philosophy stemming from his artistic practice will continue to transform his life.

Chan chooses to work with clay because of its material properties. In the creative process, clay shrinks, cracks, bends, melts, and explodes due to different physical conditions that are not always predictable, especially during the firing process which forms clay into finished ceramic works. Chan likens the firing process, which he can never fully control, to an alchemical practice that transforms worthless raw materials and substances into precious objects. For many people, this unpredictability of ceramic-making is a fault, but Chan is intrigued by his constant uncertainty at just exactly what transformations his works would go through inside the kiln, his alchemist's cauldron.

Chan sees himself as an experimental artist, but he does not have a standard way of going about his experimentations with clay. Instead of following standard procedures, he constantly challenges himself with new processes which could take inspiration from the most unusual sources. Sometimes he is inspired by historical references, other times by things he sees while travelling. Even mundane processes like cooking have in the past inspired him with new ways of making clay. For instance, in an exhibition last year, Chan explored new ways of making art by adopting bread-making processes into ceramic-making, even using yeast to help his works "rise."

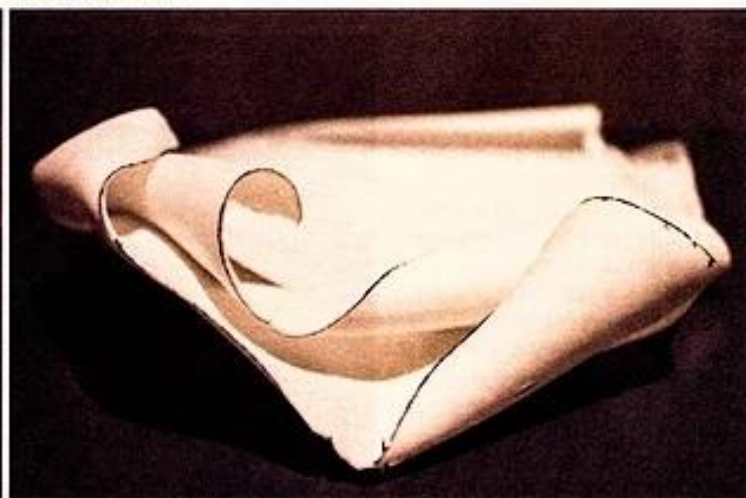
Chan's work *Barbaric Heads* from 2013 resulted from these experiments. At first glance, the work, featuring 7 rows of 7 white ceramic forms resembling Chinese steamed buns stamped with 49 different faces, almost reminds viewers of Italian artist Piero Manzoni's *Achrome* bread rolls in their formal grotesqueness. The title of the work, which sounds like a play on the generic term for steamed buns in Chinese, actually references the supposed origins of the term in ancient Chinese history - specifically, two legends from the Three Kingdoms period involving the famous military strategist Zhuge Liang. The first legend has it that, when Zhuge Liang led troops across the Yangtze River to invade the southern lands, there was a custom for generals to cut off soldiers' heads as sacrifice to the river gods in a barbaric ritual. Instead of allowing this innocent killing, Zhuge ordered the men to create buns made with white dough in the shape of human heads to appease the river gods instead. Because the men cheated the river gods with these fake heads, the buns came to be called "cheating heads" (also pronounced like "steamed buns" but in a different tone). In the second legend, Zhuge Liang was treated to a celebratory feast by the southern "barbarians" after outwitting a local tyrant. In order to honour him, 49 men were to be beheaded as a sacrificial offer. Again, instead of allowing the killing, Zhuge Liang ordered his men to steam buns stuffed with meat as substitutes for human heads, and these steamed buns resembling heads came to be known as "barbaric heads."

The work *Barbaric Heads* shows Chan's engagement with Chinese history to produce his conceptual ceramic art. Through incorporating historical references into his work, Chan also tries to engage with current politics and social affairs by interpreting the history in a modern

Ray Chan Seen-kwong, Duo, 2014



Ray Chan Seen-kwong, Duo, 2014



context that is familiar to Hong Kong people. For example, in using clay to create the 49 "barbaric heads" of legend, Chan also imprinted images of the heads of 49 people who were considered "barbaric" by the people around him. Incidentally, these "barbaric heads" include Leung Chun Ying and Andy Tsang Wai Hung – two figures in the Hong Kong government who became public enemies in the recent Occupy Central protests. Although social critique is not necessarily Chan's aim in making ceramics, *Barbaric Heads* succeeds in reflecting on transcendent themes such as the link between history and the present, and that between language and reality.

When asked about his proudest work so far, Chan picked his large-scale clay installation *Tai Ping Shan 1894*. In this work, which referred to a public disinfection initiative carried out by the colonial government in response to an outbreak of the bubonic plague in the late 19th century, Chan pasted small sheets of clay onto all the windows in the gallery in a performative process that recalls the practice of layering gold leaves in Buddhist temples. Covering the windows with sheets of clay piece by piece, similar to white-washing shacks to disinfect them, involved repetitive body movements, which could be interpreted by viewers as an act of worship, an act of meditation, or simply a monotonous motion. In confronting this large-scale clay work, viewers were given the space to reflect on their various acts of repetition in their lives as urban dwellers.

In the current exhibition "GRACE," Chan collaborated with two dancers in his work *Duo*, using clay to imitate dance movements and challenge the physical barrier between the solidity of the medium and the fluidity of dance. In the dance that inspired him, the two dancers extend their bodies, moving slowly from their finger tips to their core, and influence each other's movements with different body parts in an organic manner. Watching the dance, Chan could almost sense the movement of clay itself, especially as it shrinks while drying in a similarly subtle motion. Hoping to capture this physical property of clay visually to resemble the dancers' natural movements, he applied a thin layer of slip onto two pieces of paper and placed them together in different ways, kind of like the way the two dancers interacted with each other. During the drying process, the sheets would curl up due to the shrinkage of clay against the paper. The ultimate form of the clay depended on how the artist placed the sheets together before they dried, as well as the environment during the drying stage. In this sense, the factors that affected the "movements" of the individual pieces of clay paralleled those influencing the dancers. In *Duo*, Chan tried to push the boundaries of his viewers' understanding of clay as art by showing the material in its purest and rawest state with minimal subjective intervention, allowing his medium to unfurl in its own organic "movements."

Ultimately, as an experimental ceramic artist who is constantly trying out new processes, Chan is concerned with linking the physical properties and materiality of his medium with the physical world and society around him, drawing parallels between art and reality in ways that are at once tangible and unpredictable.

Ray Chan-Sen Kwong, *Tai Ping Shan 1894* (detail), 2014, clay and paper installation





By Chan See Kwong, Ta Ping Shan 1984 (detail), 2014.
Clay and paper installation.

陳思光的新作現正於Mur Nomade的本地陶瓷作品及裝置展覽「GRACE」展出。展期至十一月二十二日。展覽介紹指，作品並非以傳統「策展」，而是以「編舞」的方式呈現。「編舞」的概念是指藝術家們受自然和人類動態所啟發，如鳥和蝴蝶的翅膀的動靜、舞者優雅的形態、一個情感豐富的手勢等。陳思光的半透明陶瓷作品的靈感則是來自一對本地舞者的雙人舞。

作為香港其中一個最矚目的陶瓷藝術家，陳思光在很後期才接觸視覺藝術和陶瓷。在英國一所名牌大學畢業的他回港任職精算師十年後才取得藝術學位。陳思光不覺得自己的背景影響了他的藝術視野和哲學，反而認為陶瓷改變了他的個性。在實驗性的

陶瓷創作中，陳思光學會放下精算師避免風險、極為謹慎的心態並變得害怕失敗。在陶瓷創作和生活上，他開始以冒險作為實驗手段，並在數年前毅然轉職，成為一名藝術家，因為他想知道他這種從藝術而來的實驗哲學會為他的生命帶來甚麼變化。

陶泥的物料特性吸引了陳思光，在創作過程中，在不同環境下陶泥會縮小、破裂、彎曲、融化和爆開，尤其在燒製時，陶泥的變化有時是難以預測的。陳思光將他無法控制的燒製過程比喻成可點石成金的鍊金術。對很多人而言，在製作陶瓷中，這種不可預測性／神秘感是一種錯誤，但陳思光卻被恆常的不確定性迷倒——因為這正是他的作品在鍊金術士的熔爐內所經歷的。

陳思光認為自己是一名實驗藝術家，但他並沒有一套固定的陶泥實驗。不循規蹈矩，他經常在反常的地方找靈感，又以新的製陶過程挑戰自己。有時他會受歷史啟發，有時則是旅遊時的閒歷。即使是日常生活的過程如煮食也曾讓他產生新的製陶方法。例如，在去年一個展覽中，他就嘗試以燜麵包的方法製作陶瓷，甚至使用酵母讓陶瓷「發起」。

陳思光在2013年的作品《蠻頭》便是從這些實驗而來。驟眼看，這個包含共7行，每行7個，印上名人頭像的49個白色陶瓷蠻頭幾乎令觀眾想起意大利藝術家Piero Manzoni丑陋的作品《Achrome》。作品的名稱與「饅頭」相近，卻其實是這個詞語在古代的由來。根據記載，在三國時代有兩個傳說均與諸葛亮和「饅頭」一詞有關。在第一個故事中，當諸葛亮領軍至揚子江攻打南蠻時，將軍之間有個習俗把士兵的頭砍下來獻給江中的神明。諸葛亮不想濫殺無辜，便命人以白麵團製成人頭形狀侍奉神明。因為人取贖江中的神明，這些包子便被稱為「饅頭」（在普通話讀音相近饅頭但聲調不同）。在第二個故事中，諸葛亮以計謀打敗一個暴君後被南蠻設宴招待，他們打算砍下49顆人頭作為獻祭以表揚他。同樣，為避免濫殺無辜，諸葛亮便命人以蒸肉包代替人頭，而這些像人頭的包子便叫「蠻頭」。

作品《蠻頭》表現出陳思光在當代和概念性的陶瓷作品中對中國歷史的關注。透過加入歷史元素，他亦嘗試以香港人熟悉、現代的方式詮釋歷史從而參與政治和社會。例如，在以燜麵包的方法製作49個傳說中的「蠻頭」時，他亦加入了49個香港人認為「野蠻」的人的頭像。無獨有偶，這些「蠻頭」中也包括近日因佔中示威成為人民公敵的政府成員梁振英和曾偉雄。雖然社會評論並不一定陳思光的製作陶瓷的目的，但《蠻頭》仍反映出歷史與現在和語言與現實之間的關係等重要題材。

當被問到他目前最滿意的作品時，陳思光挑選了大型陶瓷裝置《太平山1984》。作品提及在十九世紀末鼠疫爆發時，殖民政府推動的公共消毒行動。陳思光把小塊的陶瓷片貼滿畫廊的窗戶，如同在佛教寺廟中貼金的傳統。把陶瓷片一塊一塊鋪在窗上就像把棚屋塗白消毒，不斷重覆的動作尤如膜拜，又如禱修，或只是一個無聊的動作。在參觀這巨型陶瓷作品時，參觀者有足夠的空間反省他們日常在城市裡所重覆的不同動作。

在今次的展覽「GRACE」中，陳思光在作品《Duo》中與兩名舞者合作，以陶泥模仿舞蹈，並挑戰固體物質與舞蹈的流動之間的屏障。在舞蹈中，兩位舞者伸展自己的身體，慢慢由指尖至身體開始移動，並以不同的身體部位互相影響對方的動作。在觀看時，陳思光幾乎感受到陶泥的動感，尤其當它在風乾時含蓄地慢慢縮小。為抓住這陶泥這種特性以模仿舞蹈，陳思光在兩張紙上薄塗上陶泥，並以舞者互動的方式擺放它們。在風乾時，紙張便會因陶泥收縮起皺。紙張最後的形態取決於藝術家如何擺放它們，同時受風乾的環境影響。這些影響陶泥動態的因素就如同那些影響舞者的因素。在作品《Duo》中，陳思光挑戰觀眾對陶泥作為藝術的理解，以最少主觀干擾展示物料最原始的一面，讓他的媒介綻放自然的動感。

最終，作為一個創新實驗陶瓷藝術家，陳思光希望把他的媒介的物理特性與現實世界和社會連繫起來，找出在藝術與現實之間可觸到的和不可預期的關連。

By Chan See Kwong, Ta Ping Shan 1984 (detail), 2014.
Clay and paper installation.

