

The Pelagic Worlds of Eva Kwong

By Douglas Max Utter

Most of the universe is too big or too small for us to appreciate directly. Aside from mere samples delivered to us by electron microscopes or NASA's Hubble telescope we remain unconscious of the vigorous infinities that crowd around and permeate our lives. We're missing much of Earth's more interesting activity, not least among creatures closer to our own size, living in water. Oceans, after all, cover two thirds of the planet. Such hidden biological dimensions and inaccessible terrains are the refuge of Eva Kwong's very original sensibility, and the inspiration for her extraordinary ceramic sculptures.

When she was still a student at the Rhode Island School of Design at Providence in the 1970's, soon-to-be ceramicist Eva Kwong began to take an interest in things which can't be directly grasped – "Things that are invisible to our naked eyes, yet are there," she recalls, "I was interested in fog for a while, which softens and envelops, magical and mysterious." At that time Kwong was working at RISD's Nature Lab, which housed diverse collections of fossils and other natural husks and accretions.

"I got to catalog all this stuff and study everything three-dimensionally, so I learned how to accept appearances – to think about objects and organisms from all angles, to work in a vocabulary of forms. It helped that the Lab was also like a lending library – you could check things out. Then, in my sophomore year I began to make ceramic objects as part of a broad sculpture program that included ceramics as well as metals." After attending the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan she had originally applied to the Pratt Institute to study sculpture. In retrospect the class seems like a fateful intervention, acquainting the young artist with materials that turned out to be ideal for her interests. She soon fell in love with clay, with its intimacy and quietness, and perhaps its directness. "I experienced the magic of transforming one shape into another through work, through action. You keep at it -- until something happens!" Kwong's curiosity and awe at the variety and vividness of form found a means of expression that would continue to levels of great mastery through the ensuing decades.

At first she struggled with the new medium. Her professors didn't think she was very good at it, even advising her to try another field. "In hindsight, it was a different kind of challenge for me -- I had to work harder. So, I made a chicken, larger than life. I knew about chickens, how quirky they are from a visual standpoint, because we kept them on the balcony at our apartment in [Hong Kong](#). And I made some sea urchins. But my "Thousand Shells" was the first piece I really liked. I loved the ocean and the beach growing up in Hong Kong. I went to Horseneck Beach while I was at RISD, where there was a little peninsula engulfed in mist. I was thinking that we're like shells on the beach, sometimes we have no control over our destiny. We

wait on the beach till the tide takes us out to somewhere else. I was waiting for something to happen in my life. I soon realized I could use things that are part of my life, to be part of my work. I cast a thousand shells – very different sizes and shapes. We are part of humanity, we are all similar, all a little weird with our own idiosyncrasy. The concept of “the same and not the same” is still a recurring theme in my work, that we share a community, like members of a family.

I began to make microcosms and macrocosms, as inspired by Buddhism. Again my childhood experiences came into play. We came to New York when I was in my teens, but before that I grew up in Hong Kong, where my grandmother was a Buddhist, a patron of the temple. We would sometimes be her guests at the Patrons’ Dinner – I was the only kid there. I was a regular!”

From the very beginning, as she precociously developed her flexible, profoundly feminist, erotic approach to form, the central insight of her work has been a vision of the continuity of all life forms, both as individuals and in their generations. The otherworldly organisms and objects she creates have varied widely in size and shape, displaying a range of subtle glazes and surface features. Some are the height of a person, others would fit in a teacup. Most could be called playful, but not alien: the “other” world they hail from is actually our own. Kwong’s creatures are kin to animals large or very small, found in the depths of Earth’s oceans, or the shallows of a drop of water. Sometimes she has called them “noetic,” suggesting that they partake of the ‘noos’, an ancient Greek word referring to the human mind, in all its oceanic depth and variety.

Intriguing and jewel-like as her hand-built inventions can be, balanced on tentacles or pimpled pseudopods, Kwong is at her most profound when her specimens are further imagined en masse -- installed as a kind of art-without-borders, climbing, spreading, pooling throughout the available space at a gallery or museum. From a formal perspective the apparent tendency of these objects to flow around the room is exactly what they were “born” to do. Sinuous and provisional, inconstant, they are the tidemark of will and desire, caressing, occupying, ebbing and flowing.

One of Eva Kwong’s earliest ceramic installations dates from 1981-85. Titled “Fertile Garden,” it was installed at the Pittsburg Center for the Arts and consisted of several large, body-sized ceramic pieces, which seemed to rise out of the gallery floor at intervals. If these lacked some of the fine-tuning of her more recent works, they nevertheless carried the artist’s vision forward persuasively. It’s easy to appreciate the relationship of the swelling, rising, spreading shapes to undersea vegetation, or to the hydroid species that cycle between stationary polyp and free-ranging medusa. Closer to home, they also resemble the efficient, erotic curves and swoops

of any flesh. They are the contours of the human body sketched under a lover's hand, stroked with eyes shut or in the dark.

More recent installations emphasize the multiplicity of life and the complexity of sensual experience, speaking of populations and their movements. Kwong's 2006 "Swarms" was made up of dense, curving phalanxes of short, reddish, worm-like creations, all wriggling together. Here postmodern ideas of accumulation and mark making join with the artist's interest in pelagic species. The results can be both formally uplifting and disturbingly invasive. By contrast, in 1999-2000, her "Bacteria, Diatoms, and Cells" series, shown at the Massillon Museum and elsewhere, was a tour-de-force of individuation. Hundreds of distinct formal variations – crescents, torus-shapes, hemispheres and 3D squiggles, all punctuated like their microscopic models with pores, spores, and marginal ridges – colonized the gallery walls.

In Eva Kwong's sculptures human qualities of mind and body are infused as if obliquely, at an angle to actual experience. Her forms and surfaces are both attractive and suspiciously baroque, like the sometimes poisonous sea-borne plants and animals, and animal-plants, which have lingered in the sculptor's imagination for so long. The world in which these life-forms metabolize and matriculate is first of all a place inhospitable not to life, certainly, but to human life as we must live it; the space she invents is both metaphorical and dangerous. Kwong's formal yet gesture-driven approach to depictions of form and gestation allows her to displace the essential aesthetics of reproduction to the bottom of a tidal pool, and to examine the distances that wash through the decades of our lives. Her imagery moves in the depths between Asia and America, between ultimate origins and the immediacy of touch.