

BUKIT AIR¹

or chasing 山水 *shan sui* in Nanyang

by Daniela Beltrani



“And there is no reason at all why lines of thought taking up from one or another of humanity’s past ceramic achievements should not be picked up again, and developed along radical new lines.”²

Philip Rawson

PREFACE

In May 2012, Singaporean contemporary artist Jason Lim attended a ceramics residency at FuPing Pottery Art Village, near Xi’an, China, together with 20 other Southeast Asian artists.³

The resulting diverse collection of series of works can be viewed at F.L.I.C.A.M. (FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums), FuPing’s extraordinary legacy of the many residencies the centrehosts frequently.

Extensive choice of materials and glazes, large scale equipment and the possibilities of the space, allowed Lim’s contemporary art practice - combined with his Chinese cultural heritage - to undoubtedly find a fertile ground to flourish in, with remarkably novel creations.

The most original results are perhaps the two landscapes series, sharing the same inspiration yet embodying the starkly antithetical processes of recovery/assemblage (Figure 1) and traditional hand-building/glazing/firing (Figure 2).

Lim serendipitously discovered that the usage of a hand-built wood kiln can offer more potential for surprises and opportunities than an electric

one. Figure 1 shows an essential and stylised landscape the artist assembled out of bricks and metal debris found within the firebox of the wood kiln.

Figure 2 displays a free-standing sculpture so reminiscent of the brush paintings on hanging scrolls⁴ of Chinese millenarian tradition. The visual aspect is clearly figurative, displaying towering mountains, abundant vegetation, windy sky and an almost unnoticeable clue of human presence in the smallest house on the right foreground. The glaze chosen to complete the composition is the so-called *Sancai* (Chinese 三彩, literally three colours) particularly prominent during the T'ang dynasty period. Lim had the opportunity to admire the works during a trip to the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an and to use the same glaze during the residency because it is still being applied by factory workers to their handicraft.

As the most substantial amount of works created during the residency became part of the permanent exhibition at F.L.I.C.A.M., the legacy left from them could only be kept within Lim and stayed on dormant until late 2012.

Lim was able to push the boundaries of what ceramics can offer to contemporary art not only through a vigorous and original interpretation of a rich pictorial tradition of his own cultural heritage. He also achieved this with his unique response to the actual landscape surrounding the FuPing Pottery Art Village, with its multitude and variety of materials closely associated to the living and utilitarian environment of ceramics - glass, metal, discarded bricks, to name a few.

TRANSITION

Having had the opportunity to admire Lim's complete and astounding works from the residency in China, it was never my intention to encourage him to reproduce it as such in Singapore.

Rather, departing from his diverse accomplishments - which were unable to leave China - I was keen to work with him, and for him to test



Figure 1. Jason Lim, *Landscape*, 2012 Collection of F.L.I.C.A.M. Photo by Daniela Beltrani



Figure 2. Jason Lim, *Landscape*, 2012 Collection of F.L.I.C.A.M. Photo by Daniela Beltrani

himself again with the same theme, but in a less favourable and more quotidian setting, so as to uncover the different potentialities of his familiar grounds and his creative responses to them.

Since 2001, Lim's frequent residencies abroad⁵ constitute perhaps the core of his own personal innovative art-making process and are undoubtedly priceless opportunities for him to challenge his own capabilities as a contemporary artist working with clay, in an otherwise unusually focused and uninterrupted fashion.

The opportunities during a residency are not only offered by a different and stimulating environment to be uncovered, but more importantly by the diverse resources put at the disposal of the artist which shape his choices or directions in terms of size, form, "colour, texture, feel, temperature, taste"⁶ of the resulting artwork.

ONE THEME, DIFFERENT PATHS

In the familiar setting of his own country, with full awareness of the extent within which Lim could move, it became clear from the start that the technical aspects of the realisation of his ideas would determine the sites of his art-making process.

A quick glance at his own collection, mostly kept in his studio at the Goodman Arts Centre, suggests the artist frequently looks to nature for inspiration, even if the works materialise as rather abstract-looking.

But with the theme of landscape, Lim has taken wholly different paths and developed it in extremely diverse ways, bringing his aptitude as *flâneur*⁷ and selected experiences of his past practice, to the foreground to serve him in this new and challenging endeavour. Here, Lim seems to have shifted from the often solitary essential component, endlessly replicated or exaggeratedly enlarged or dramatically microscopic, to a larger and more encompassing composition, fluctuating from the essential to the more literal.

The outcome is composed of three separate yet complementing series: *Glazed* from his Goodman Arts Centre permanent studio, *Assembled* from his home space and *Unglazed* from his ad hoc Jalan Bahar open studio space.

GLAZED SERIES

The works collectively display a coherent spirit in the loose exploration of the theme of Chinese landscape with its traditional and essential elements of mountains, water and trees.

As it is with the case of the Chinese landscape paintings, Lim is not concerned with either topographical accuracy or consistent respect of proportions. He is therefore not interested in representing a faithful landscape. Yet what we sense here is undoubtedly his own homeland, the Singapore he has seen and still sees changing so rapidly and dramatically since his birth, barely one year after her independence.

Whilst shaping the components of his sculptures to be reasonably credible and identifiable enough in their essence, Lim's aim is "to capture not only the outer appearance of a subject but its inner essence as well – its energy, life force, spirit."⁸

The mountains undoubtedly dominate the greater space of these works with a strong reliable presence upon which trees perch, more often than not, precariously and unsteadily, perhaps a constant reminder of the fragility of their life in an environment that governs them according to an ever changing urban setting at the service of pragmatic policies.

And again, "while intense conceptualization is indispensable in creating shanshui, as an art it is profoundly, unwaveringly visual. One of its very striking features is indeed its sense of space."⁹

Thanks to the very essence of ceramics, the visual element of painting - also visible with glazes often applied generously - is taken out of its restricting boundaries and into the realm of tactility, with textures that



Figure 3. Jason Lim, G6, 2013



Figure 4. Jason Lim, G7, 2013

exude the richness of a lush vegetation, where water is visually absent but logically implied (G9);¹⁰ the perseverance of insistent weeds growing on rocky and wild grounds (G6); the smoothness of unnatural, yet beautifully manicured greens (G5); the roughness of the soil recently dug out to make space for a user-friendly park (G14); the coarseness of abandoned spaces which nature eventually comes to dominate again (G17) or the powerful light of the Equatorial sun reflected onto a wet branch of a tree extending dangerously over an imaginary empty space (G3).

Lim sees his country's landscape in all its myriads of manifestations and is aware that not one picture is exhaustive of its richness and variety, much the same as with the humanity living in it. And neither does he judge the landscape he creates: he merely attempts to capture the fluctuating spirits in the different corners of his homeland - as he often does with his camera - thus reconciling the diverse forces that are shaping the overall landscape of his own country - perseverance, hope, beauty, impermanence, resilience, efficiency, ruthlessness, to name a few.

In these works, nature is felt in a perpetual yet positive struggle with mankind, in an eternal alternation of winning and losing.

More in depth, within the series, a progression seems to spontaneously emerge in that Lim abandons his reliance on glazes in favour of a more bare and stylised landscape, distilled in its dramatic appearance, where the empty space is harmoniously alternated with shapes, textures and lines (G11-G16). And so the shapes and lines of trees and earth defy expectation: they can offer the reassuring and tranquil atmosphere of a walk during a sunset (G15); they can appear as a cliff reflected onto a large pond where earth and clouds superimpose in ripples of calmness (G16); they can be the base against which fluffy clouds and magnificent waterfalls jump out of the sculpture and take us onto new beginnings (G18).

As anticipated, all the works in this series were created in Lim's studio and not in front of any particular landscape: a confirmation that it is not only the artist's eyes that see (discriminating mind, which relies on the sensory stimulation),¹¹ but the artist's heart that feels (intuitive mind, which links the universal all-encompassing mind to the discriminating mind), to create his works.



Figure 5. Jason Lim, G20, 2013

Yet the process is never the result of mere abstract intellectualisation, rather it heavily relies on intuition and memory, on present and past, to become one with the material (clay) and the tools (the artist's hands).

The creative act is carried out by and through Lim's present and intuitive mind and memory of a great wealth of images assimilated through vision and heart. Past and present ultimately converge in the creative moment repeated until the work is completed and the artist is one with the piece, neither merely its master, nor its creator.



Figure 6. Jason Lim, G6, 2013



Figure 7. Jason Lim, G7, 2013

The piece then becomes a step in this particular journey that reveals the possibilities not only of materiality and senses, but also of the mind and heart; of time and space.

And in a reverse specular motion, the audience is taken onto a similar journey of discovery that unfolds much the same as the *makemono* scrolls, horizontally and at their own individual pace, allowing them to take in what their eyes and heart of their particular time and place wish to take in.

UNGLAZED SERIES

The works in this series lever heavily on their sheer physicality in terms of size and on their stylisation in terms of shape and process.

The building of the works is effected through relentless and patient coiling after a mechanical method of manipulation of the clay into a manageable format.

The elevation at times takes a smaller conclusion than its commencement (U1-U3), and at times takes a wider or open end, which offers a breadth of unexpected space (U4-U5) to complete the appreciation of the work.

The artist creates the shape of the works seamlessly in response to the synergy between his hands, his body, the clay and the physical space they all share.

The building by coiling typically employs a calm, repetitive action so reminiscent of the ink preparation for the Chinese brush painting and which has a very strong meditative quality, integral part to the process of creation of the work.

The highest elevations in Singapore being modest hills, are created and presented here in isolation as the occasional natural peaks dotting the island state and in evident minority to the widespread urbanisation through ever higher buildings and skyscrapers in ever more restricted green spaces.

The lighter colour of some clay (U4) and gold dust applied selectively seem to visually allude to the powerful light of the Equatorial sun.



Figure 8. Jason Lim, U4, 2013

Such shapes from previous inspiration of past commissions - as can be admired in Singapore at the Mandarin Oriental at Marina Square or in a private condo¹² – are aptly recovered and freely elaborated on to new heights. The above observations loosely reflect the Six Principles of Painting by Hsieh Ho (5th century A.D.)¹³ regarding energy, structure, form, colour, space and copying.

ASSEMBLED SERIES

Dulcis in fundo, this series is, in my opinion, at the very core of Lim's often ground-breaking¹⁴ practice as a contemporary artist working with clay.¹⁵

The innovative quality is most evident in the materials and the use Lim makes of it within the context of the theme of Chinese landscape: discarded bricks from repairs to one of the two dragon kilns in Jalan Bahar, and nails melted during the firing and abandoned, forgotten, in the firebox.

Not merely by-products, but effectively rejects of a process which they serve, yet are not directly part of, these materials are elevated by becoming essential constituents of a landscape composition, where the essence of life seems to be captured so poignantly.

Paraphrasing the formidable transformation that the nymph Daphne - following her desperate pleas to the goddess Gaea to escape the god Apollo's excessively ardent fervour - went through from flesh to wood, from human to tree, the bricks and metals are brought from dead to new life and their form celebrated as worthy of a pregnant aesthetic value that can speak to us.

I would like to take the audience by the hand and show them these works not merely referencing apt Japanese elements of design such as *mono no aware* or *wabi sabi* or *shibui*, but especially through that art appreciation that Okakura Kakuzo refers to in his *The Book of Tea*.

Lim's daily aesthetic sensibility in his own life is most certainly not one I come across frequently. I recognise it because I see the affinity with

mine. It is one that - in a world of shiny and perfectly manicured or manufactured products - can see beauty in the discarded, the rejected, the abandoned, the forgotten.

The beauty he sees with such ease and he offers us to partake in is one that has an affinity within himself and with his own life journey and spirit.

"It is rather the soul than the hand, the man than the technique, which appeals to us – the more human the call the deeper is our response."¹⁶ And again, "Engrossed in his technique, the modern rarely rises above himself... His works may be nearer to science, but are further from humanity."¹⁷

These landscapes are created and presented with all the compassion for what is impermanent and ever changing. Lim offers to our eyes and souls the renewed beauty of what was past; an ephemeral moment in the cycle of death and life that is eternal and that nature is ontologically made of. A cycle where there is no judgment over the dualistic process of our human experience and over both its opposing sides. There is only acceptance.

The *shibui* quality of Lim's *petite* sculptures has a *wabi-sabi* appearance: these are works in which "all elements are arranged and balanced in such a way that they have an almost transcendental affect on the viewer."¹⁸

Kakuzo refers precisely to this capacity of certain art to affect the viewer.

"Nothing is more hallowing than the union of kindred spirits in art. At the moment of meeting, the art lover transcends himself. At once he is and is not. He catches a glimpse of Infinity, but words cannot voice his delight, for the eye has no tongue. Freed from the fetters of matter, his spirit moves in the rhythm of things. It is thus that art becomes akin to religion and ennobles mankind."¹⁹

This is the prized experience some art nowadays can offer, but which market-oriented concerns seem uninterested in focusing on and promoting.

The *wabi-sabi* quality comes from within the artist's spirit and not merely from the work's appearance.

Wabi comes from the term *wabu*, which means to languish, and it is often loosely translated as desolated. It refers to a rustic beauty intrinsic in living a secluded and solitary life whose path seeks enlightenment and contentment. Through non-attachment to the material things, one may develop the ability to experience the essence of things and somehow to see them anew: suddenly they are both familiar and unique. Much the same as Lim's works in this series.

Sabi means literally rust and the term refers to a kind of beauty whose essence is found in its imperfection, asymmetry and austerity, which allow the viewer to experience not only a sense of tranquillity but also of infinite.²⁰

Mono no aware is best explained through its long-standing association with the blooming cherry blossoms, the Japanese *sakura*, whose ephemeral beauty - which can be appreciated only for a short period of time during the year - followed by sudden death, emphasizes the feeling of transience of worldly things, thus connecting us with the deeper nature of our own bodily presence on this world.

In antithesis to the works of the preceding two series, the ones discussed here acquire power not so much in their individual appearance - also offered to the viewer as an alternative option - rather on their collective presentation as tranquil steps of a journey that is unravelled vertically in time and space until the highest point.

The simplicity of the cabinets was chosen carefully and after much difficulty, as an opposing yet complementing element of the presentation.

The Chinese inspiration is evident in their shape, yet it is not traditionally elaborate so as to interfere with the works.

The overall size of the work contrasts so dramatically with the sheer diminutive nature of each piece, in a further poignant metaphor of life, made of small steps.

The experience offered is pregnant with dualities and is truly faithful to the creation of each single piece.

In conclusion, it is my wish to state that the observations of landscape created through the body, mind and soul of the artist, such as Lim's complex works presented in this exhibition, are hopefully received by the viewer in a similar way, through his mind, body and soul, thus allowing him to reconnect with the very essence of his own spirit.

And this ultimately is the works' greatest and priceless value.



Figure 9. Jason Lim, Detail of *H2*, 2013 Photo by Jason Lim

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In *Bahasa Melayu*, one of the official languages of Singapore, *bukit* means hill and *air* water.
- ² Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 1984), 206.
- ³ The residency was coordinated by the Filipino ceramicist Hadrian Mendoza through the initiative he has been spearheading since 2008, SEAPots (Southeast Asian pottery). The residency culminated in the 2nd SEA exhibition *Clay Unity: Celebrating the Diversity of Southeast Asia* in June 2012 at both Fuping and Xi'an, China, only three years after the successful 1st edition held at the Ayala Museum, Makati in September 2009, *The Ring of Fire: 1st Southeast Asian Ceramics Exhibition*. See www.seapots.com
- ⁴ In Japanese, hanging scrolls, made up to be appreciated all at once vertically, are known as *kakemono*; whilst hand scrolls, for a more individually paced viewing horizontally, are known as *makemono*. For a basic introduction into Chinese painting, please see M. Bussagli, *Chinese Painting*, (London: Cassell, 1988).
- ⁵ Within just more than a decade the previous residencies in ceramics Lim had attended, typically one to three months long, were in chronological order, in 2001 at the European Ceramic Work Centre (ECWC), in 's-Hertogenbosch (the Netherlands); in 2003 at the University of Southern Queensland, in Toowoomba (Australia); in 2006 at the Vermont Studio Center, in Johnson, Vermont (USA); in 2010 at the ceramics studio of the University of Lincoln, in Lincoln (UK), in 2011 at the Gaya Ceramic and Design, in Ubud, Bali (Indonesia) and in 2012 at FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums (FLICAM), in Fuping (China).
- ⁶ The list of qualities is taken from an interesting essay *Two Ways of Looking at Ceramics* by art historian James Elkins, presented at the 2002 NCECA Annual Conference, http://www.jameselkins.com/?option=com_content&view=article&id=213:two-ways-of-looking-at-ceramics&catid=3:essays&Itemid=10 (accessed March 2013). The essay interestingly proposes to stop attempting the placement of ceramics within the constricting borders of art history and to start concentrating the attention on its essential materiality.
- ⁷ The term was used in a poignant essay by the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire to describe the modern man, the artist who sees the world and is at the centre of the world, and yet he remains hidden from the world. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), 9.
- ⁸ Maxwell K. Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.
- ⁹ Hu Mingyuan, "What You Always Wanted To Know About Shan-Shui," in *Shanshui, Poetry Without Sound? Landscape in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Peter Fischer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011), 19. The publication is a catalogue of an exhibition organised by the Museum of Art of Lucerne in 2011 into questioning how the millenarian legacy of Chinese landscape painting lives on in Chinese contemporary art. The result is an exciting array of styles and media, yet none of the 70 works exhibited, bar one in porcelain by Ai Wei Wei, employs clay.
- ¹⁰ The letters G and U followed by the number refer to the title of the individual works presented in this exhibition.
- ¹¹ For an interesting reading on the influence of Ch'an Buddhism in relation to Chinese painting see Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese On The Art Of Painting*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 91-108.
- ¹² *Ascentia Sky*.
- ¹³ Sirén, 40 and 218.
- ¹⁴ For an informative reading of various attempts at repositioning ceramics within the contemporary art context, see Edmund de Waal, *20th century ceramics*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) pp. 165-215.
- ¹⁵ All through his career as ceramicist, Lim has consistently probed the traditional boundaries of ceramics within the contemporary art context with successful and cutting edge results. Notable amongst them are *Three Tonnes of Clay* (1995), *Just Dharma* (2007) and the *Still/Life* series initiated in 2009 and ongoing.
- ¹⁶ Okakuro Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2005), 93.
- ¹⁷ Kakuzo, 94.
- ¹⁸ Boyé Lafayette De Mente, *Elements of Japanese Design*, (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2006), 33.
- ¹⁹ Kakuzo, 95.
- ²⁰ For an interesting reading on the beauty of irregularity, see Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman*, (Tokyo: Kondasha International, 1972), 119-125.

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ABOUT THE CURATOR

Classically educated in Italy, a doctor in Law and a docent for the Singapore Art Museum, Daniela gained a Master of Arts in Contemporary Asian Art Histories in 2011 from LaSalle CIA, Singapore.

Art and life, to Daniela, are inextricably connected and ultimately her attempts as both curator and performance artist are aimed at uncovering this connection within a spirit of authenticity, including the natural flaws and imperfections.

Since her first curatorial project in 2010, Daniela has consistently tried to probe artistic practices within Singapore and the Southeast Asian region in the direction of marginal spaces, where she could recover the authenticity and connectedness between art and life, that she finds regrettably missing in most main-stream and market-oriented works.

Both with the curatorial practice and art writing, she tries to stay focused on her intent to promote an experience of art that on one side is non-elitist and yet probing and on the other can offer opportunities for alternative and more visceral readings and reflections.

Benefiting from a strong humanistic background, ultimately her efforts tend to encourage the audience of her exhibitions, writings and performances into a more holistic experience of art as a means to cultivate their own individual aesthetic sense and to recover their humanity beyond the flimsy parameters of a decadent and commodity-driven society.