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Interview #134 — Ruth Li

BY MATT CHUN

Ruth Ju-Shih Li is a ceramic artist currently working between Australia, China and Taiwan. She explores different ways of narrating both traditional and multicultural concepts of beauty, transcendence and the sublime.

Li draws from her diverse philosophical and cultural heritage, and from the language of dreams, myths and utopias. Li has exhibited in Sydney, Taiwan, China, Korea, and Thailand.

Ruth speaks with Matt Chun about sculptural ceramics, mandatory quarantine and 'floating in Jing'.



Through the current pandemic, many of us have found ourselves in unexpected circumstances. You've recently returned to Australia from Taiwan – as one of only 3 passengers on your flight! – and I'm now

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My biggest predicament right now is to quickly find a temporary studio I can start working in straight away. Because of the situation affecting everyone around the world right now, and for the safety of others, I am unable to fly to my studio in China. And though most of my projects have been postponed, two exhibitions are going online. This means I will still need to deliver a body of work during a time of isolation, restrictions, suppliers temporarily closed and no studio inspections. I've only got two months to figure this out on top of feeling the weight of financial insecurity (like most of my peers right now)—fingers crossed!

It really has been interesting to see how Australian art galleries have variously adapted (or not adapted) to the lock-down, and to an unpredictable future. I'm glad to hear that your exhibitions are going ahead! Many commercial galleries and institutions are now exploring this option of the exclusively 'online' exhibition. However, the sculptural installation objects that you create should – ideally – be circumnavigated by your viewers.

It's always difficult to properly represent a three-dimensional work on a screen, it never does the piece justice. But in a time where digitalisation is rewriting the way we connect and communicate, it is something we all need to adapt to, especially now, with restrictions in place. I am no expert, but I find getting professional photos of my work done is not enough. Videos are a great way to show depth and give the viewers the impression of the space and if you have the resources or means, even a 3D scan.

I trust that you'll quickly find a temporary studio once your quarantine is completed. Could you tell me a little about the work you'll then be making?

I'm currently working on a new series that resulted from my three-month residency at Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taipei. I was given the opportunity to explore and revisit certain locations from the portion of my childhood spent in Taiwan. And I was struck by the ability of colour to trigger an array of associations because of its immediate and intimate connection with memory; from the sun-faded Chunlien paper on the doorway at my grandfather's house to the line of plastic mint-green stools I sat on at night markets to scoop goldfish with a paper scoop. I extracted and isolated specific colours in search for material embodiments of certain memories, attempting to transform fleeting reminiscence into a tangible object. I find it even more relevant now, since my father's passing, to reflect on these memories. People who follow my work know that my porcelain pieces are always pristine white with no colour, glaze or additives (I've even been called 'chromophobic' before) so this is definitely outside my comfort zone.

I'm genuinely excited to see the results of that exploration. Not only because of your characteristic aversion to colour, but also because we share a creative relationship with Taipei and, I agree, it is a city that stamps a strong—and very specific – palette of colours on the memory. We are both attempting to divide our time between different places. In my case between Melbourne, Taipei and Vancouver. In your case, between Sydney, Taipei and Jingdezhen. For you, what are the challenges or advantages of making art in a variety of contexts?

Being able to dive into and immerse in new environments is such a humbling experience; from the people I meet, to the culinary culture, all the way down to the local materials and minerals in the natural landscape. Anything has the potential to be a catalyst. Sometimes it's immediate, sometimes it incubates and emerges unexpectedly a year or two later. That's why documentation is such an important part of my practice, I always travel with my little H1n recorder with me, it's part of how I attempt to manage the overwhelming flow of information I'm exposed to. But I think the greatest benefit of traveling—and the uncertainty of constantly changing environments—is how uncomfortable it makes me. I'm aware of how laziness creeps up when I'm in a stagnant and comfortable place, so I like the challenge that unfamiliar environments provide.

The downside is not being able to see loved ones for extended periods of time and the loneliness of working alone remotely, especially places where internet is censored. And now with the current global situation I am not able to access my usual resources and studio, which is definitely a challenge.





That studio – currently inaccessible to you – is Jingdezhen, known as the ‘Porcelain Capital’, which has been producing ceramics for at least 1000 years. China is also an ancestral home for you. But does it feel like ‘home’?

As a Chinese person who grew up in a western context, I’ve always had a fascination with my ‘foreign’ ancestral land. My grandfather was part of the nationalist army that retreated to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war, and my parents then migrated to Australia. So, in a sense I feel twice removed from my Chinese heritage and definitely identify more with Taiwan. I had never set foot on the mainland until I became an artist and at the time, I could barely speak Chinese. I definitely felt like a foreigner and connected straight away with the “Jing-piao” community. Jing-piao directly translates to “floating in Jing”, which refers to the group of foreigners who come to Jingdezhen regularly to create work but don’t actually live there. It’s always a funny push and pull relationship as a foreigner with Chinese heritage in China, sometimes I’d suddenly feel a strong sense of familiarity and at times experience total culture shock.

The process that takes clay to ceramic is one of the most permanent metamorphoses. Ceramic objects are amongst the oldest surviving – and the most universal – of human artefacts. But you occasionally use this material to create permanent, time-based installations. Can you describe the conceptual process that led you to utilise clay as an exploration of ephemera?

My ephemeral series are autobiographical in nature. The idea started as a meditation and slowly manifested into physical form—much like the Enso painters. But I’m not out to make any grand statements, only to convey my personal narrative. A few years ago, a close friend of mine passed away from cancer and both my father and brother were also battling cancer. I started contemplating the idea of life, death and the concept of time. I guess for me these sculptures are, in my own way, an exploration of the ephemeral nature of the human condition. Embracing every stage, including the changes, the decay and return to the earth.

The long and rich history of ceramics is one of the many reasons why I choose to use this medium, it’s humble, mundane and organic. It’s very accessible and most people can easily associate with it—whether it’s the IKEA cup they use every day or the chai cups on the streets of India. Clay is also the most common material for the creation of humans in various creation stories across different cultures and mythologies. And this familiarity is what I’m looking for in my search for a common language that isn’t limited to a particular culture, class or religion.

Yes, it’s remarkable that clay plays a role in so many traditional belief systems. I know that you’re a practicing Christian and your ceramic installations are sometimes directly inspired by biblical narratives, and by an experience of the sublime. Christianity is a spiritual framework that I personally rejected at a young age, but despite— or perhaps because of—this, I have an enduring fascination with ritual objects, and with artistic explorations of the divine.

I’m really lucky to have grown up surrounded by people who greatly valued spirituality and encouraged me to question everything, allowing me the space to experience and discover things for myself. My faith is very much a part of my life, especially when I’m traveling alone for extended periods of time. It really strips away all the religiousness and other people’s voices, and boils everything down to the raw spiritual connection. And it is very real. I’m not too sure of how to describe it, but I guess I see it as an underlying note in my work much like it is an underlying part of my life. I know this is an unpopular opinion to hold right now, especially among my peers. But much like I can’t deny my Asian heritage, I have no reason to deny my faith, whatever form it takes. I’m constantly questioning and searching for ways to better communicate this pursuit.

Who are the people you’re inspired by?

I am really lucky to be able to travel a lot for different projects, and this has definitely helped shape my practice. It’s always such a privilege to be invited to participate and immerse myself in a culture that’s unfamiliar to me. Different people sharing their stories, their parent’s stories and their grandparent’s stories is such a wonderfully inspiring thing to experience; and helped me re-examine a lot of the questions I had about myself and my practice.

But my biggest inspiration has got to be my parents. I’ve just come back to Australia from my father’s memorial service in Taiwan. He had been battling cancer for the last six years but nurses and strangers would always tell us that they’d never seen a more joyous cancer patient. Whenever I visited him at the hospital, he’d either be praying for fellow patients, handing out rice crackers or souvenirs to nurses or on a conference call (yes, everyone in the family is a workaholic). But his inspiration goes way beyond the strength and courage during chemo. Even before cancer he was always an inspiring figure. As a child I witnessed the discrimination and hardships that most migrant families experience but I never saw him discouraged, I guess I inherited my stubbornness from him (haha).

He does sound like a wonderful man. And you seem to be holding a lot of significant experiences in balance right now, both personally and professionally – and doing a pretty good job! Do you have any

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And a reason emerging artist more to make music for me to learn, but the things that have become obstacles to me. Firstly, surround yourself with people who believe in you but are not afraid to tell you the truth. And the other—especially when I'm faced with disappointing circumstances, discrimination or gender biases—is the understanding of where your own responsibilities lie and which things are out of your control. This differentiation has helped me persevere.

What are you listening to?

During this mandatory quarantine in a small hotel room: Bill Evans and Lisa Ono have been great company to keep.

What are you reading?

The Book of Tea by Okakura Kakuzo and I recently came across The Peace of Wild Things by Wendell Berry, I think it's a beautiful piece and exactly what I need to survive quarantine.

What does being Asian-Australian mean to you?

It means I don't need to choose; I can be both Chinese and Australian. It means I am a combination of my ancestral heritage, a continuation of my parent's migratory story and part of the next chapter of contemporary Australia.



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