



## Sur/Face: Self-Portrait in Porcelain

Nurdian Ichsan

Faculty of Visual Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung,  
Jalan Ganesa No. 10 Bandung 40132, Indonesia  
E-mail: nurdian@itb.ac.id

**Abstract.** This paper discusses artworks that were created through a practice-led research approach. Considering practice-led research, the content of this paper encompasses every possible relation to the artworks, such as the perspective and statements of practice, considerations, thoughts behind the themes, observations, and interpretations of the creative process. All these aspects are grouped into two sections: the context of the practice and self-reflection on the practice. This research found that material-oriented and media-based approaches are not inseparable in ceramic art practice. Indeed, both perspectives are very valuable to understand the creative process as well as the appreciation of art works. Due to the creative process in art requiring non-linear thinking, the contents of this paper are not hierarchical in one direction. Instead, it can be conceived as offering multiple perspectives to understand the making process and the resulting artifact. In some way, this paper can be considered as a narrative style of writing, which is appropriate to reveal the creative process.

**Keywords:** *ceramic; material-oriented; media-based; identity; practice-led research; self-portrait.*

### 1 Introduction

This paper reports practice-led research that relied on the understanding that no fundamental separation exists between theory and practice in the arts. According to this type of research, this study had two main concerns. First, the dual role of the artist-researcher as both the researcher and the researched, indicating the point of view of the artist as a first person. This is a subjective research method as identified by Teikmanis [1]. In this context, the report of practice-led research should avoid what has been referred to as ‘auto-connoisseurship’ or, alternatively, producing a research report that is merely descriptive, as suggested by Barret [2]. Second, in the creative process, the praxis plays a more essential role: art-making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas, as Mäkelä [3] states. Therefore, a practice-led research report can be viewed as an interpretation of the making process based on critical reflection and reflective action.

---

Received March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Accepted for publication April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023.

Copyright © 2023 Published by ITB Institute for Research and Community Services, ISSN: 2337-5795,

DOI: 10.5614/j.vad.2023.15.1.1

This paper will discuss the context of the practice to explain the method, approaches, and awareness within the framework of the creative process. The next section is a reflection on the practice that examines, observes, and interprets the creative process and the artworks. As a result, this paper intends to provide an overview of the creative process of the project entitled *Sur/Face*.

## **2 Practice Context**

### **2.1 Materials and Media Approach**

In art, materials have the function of manifesting the ideas of the artist. There are common artistic materials with a long history in art practice, such as stone, wood, ceramics and metal. Modern art has established material-based practices under the ‘craft’ category, namely glass, ceramics, wood, and fiber. According to Adamson [4], this classification is based on a binary opposition between the material and the optical experiences in the idea of modern art. It is apparent in the ambition of artistic practices, particularly in painting and sculpture, to achieve a purely visual effect. According to Rawson [5], this in fact only exists in western culture. He even uses the term ‘sensuous castration’ to describe how the optical-based experience has dominated western art.

In fact, artistic practices have regarded materials as integral to the creation and interpretation of art. It is reflected in the idea of ‘the truth of the material’, which is rooted in the Arts and Craft movement. This has also influenced the concern of ‘medium specificity’ that grew with Formalism in America after World War II. This idea resides in a self-referential perspective that assumes that the qualities of the artwork rely upon the intrinsic properties of the materials used. Artists should explore the unique qualities of the artistic medium and reveal the true nature of the materials used. Medium-specificity has been used as base premise for the idea of disinterested and autonomous art practices in modernism.

The reaction to formalism has engendered the conceptual art movement, which believes that art should be examined on the base of the concept or idea of the artist. Conceptual art challenged the common assumptions that the role of artists was to create special kinds of material objects. These ideas were linked to ‘the dematerialization of art’, as explained by John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard [6] in 1968. They stated: “As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as the object becomes merely the end product, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. The studio is again becoming a study. Such a trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in the object's becoming wholly obsolete.”

Conceptual art has changed the perspective of art practice, where external subjects are established as an important aspect next to the internal aspect. Along with the use of provisional and everyday materials and the rise of technology-based media in contemporary art practice, the ‘truth of the material’ and ‘medium specificity’, which are regarded as modernist ideas in some way, are no longer appropriate to the concerns of artists. The discourses of medium and material have shifted to a more inclusive perspective.

This has challenged artists to redefine and interpret the notion of materials and media in their practices. On the other hand, the studies of material culture have offered a new way of understanding objects. From the perspective of material culture, ceramic objects are regarded as physical objects that can have a myriads of relationships with people. It is understandable that not only the way a physical object is being used or consumed but the purposes and the reasons why it is was created or modified and the meanings assigned to it as well. As Veiteberg [7] clearly describes: “We find ceramics in many different cultural contexts. Cheap, mass-produced souvenirs and tableware live side by side with venerated Japanese tea bowls, old Chinese urns and exclusive figurines hand-made in European porcelain factories with long-standing traditions, such as Sèvres and Nymphenburg. The choice of clay, firing method, object type and style are not neutral choices, because they are all imbued with different values.”

This reflects on Foulem’s [8] idea that considers ceramic objects as a generic group. He suggests a radical shift regarding fresh critical and cultural approaches to examine ceramic objects. Foulem distinguished a material-oriented and a media-based approach in ceramics practice. A material-oriented approach deals with something tangible, such as the physicality of clay, while a media-based approach is concerned with the specificity of ceramics as a visual and conceptual language.

It appears that the problem in ceramic practice is how to define clay and ceramics both as a material and a medium. This means that an artwork may not only be examined solely from an inclusive perspective based on the specificity of the intrinsic values of the material used. Among others, the materials and media in art practice can also be used as a language to communicate ideas. There is an intense connection between the materials or media used and the content of the message.

The discussion about materials is important to grasp the creative process. It explains in what way the materials and media used influenced the artistic considerations and decisions. It represents the vision of the artist and reveals the whole creative process. It is also necessary to understand the artists’ subjectivity in the context of interpreting a material and medium, which in some way becomes

a basis to understand their practice. In this paper, ‘clay’ is used in a material sense, while ‘ceramics’ in a media sense.

The following discussion is related to the considerations of material-oriented and media-based approaches in my works. Each may be related to clay or ceramics, whether in a physical, a visual, or a conceptual sense. The main concern of this section is to interpret the visual properties of the artwork’s theme. It also functions as an interrogative and reflective approach to the material and medium in order to understand the creative process.

## **2.2 Clay is an Experiential Material**

Clay has been widely used in human life. It is a demotic, basic, and primal material. Clay also has visceral feeling to the creation of man and is associated with earth. To work with it is to create something out of something formless. The experience of clay has been linked to physical interaction, which for some artists means not only through their hands and fingers but also through their whole body. It is no surprise, that clay has been used as a medium for performance art since the 1960s. According to de Wall [8], clay can be described as an actual material, as opposed to other less real materials. In the context of contemporary culture, it seems that clay is the antithesis of the virtual world of the information era. Every aspect of human life has been shaped by technology to become instant, virtual, and artificial. The experience of reality has changed and the concrete object has died.

In the present day, ceramics practice is probably one of the artistic practices that still allows the use of hands as the major tool to construct and formulate a form and surface. Clay offers something that is difficult to acquire nowadays: the experience of materiality and a way to return to reality. For some artists the image of ‘a return to earth’ through clay has become a motive of their practice. Clay allows for a return to self, a return to the body, a return to earth [8]. This material-oriented practice has attracted many artists from various backgrounds to use clay in their practice, especially during the 1970s, when the environmental movement in art appeared as a reaction to the degradation of nature.

It is prudent to emphasize some considerations related to materiality in this practice. The experience of materiality is not limited to the physicality of clay, but also includes the interpretation of it. This influences the creative process but does not always mean to implicate the making process. It relies on the sensibility of the artist toward the material, which is something intangible and may be subjective. The materiality cannot be discussed separately from the motive or intentions of the artist.

### 2.3 Ceramics is a Sensual Media

As hinted above, this idea has come from the distinction between sensuality and opticality of art experience in western art. The sensuality of ceramic relies on our perception of the material, which is rooted in the history of ceramics in human life. Ceramics has long been used for domestic objects, particularly tableware and decorative items, and as such has been an integral part of our daily life and surroundings. Household objects are constantly handled and touched in our daily routines. There are spaces in our home where people often encounter ceramics. Gray [10] states that before the 20th century there were the porcelain rooms of palaces and stately homes, and now the more familiar types are the kitchen dresser, the mantelpiece, and ornaments clustered on tables and shelves.

In most cases, the sensuality of ceramics is contingent upon the sense of touch or tactility. According to Rawson [5], the tactile quality of ceramics comes from our intimate relationships with ceramic objects and our past tactile experiences. He states: "It is true that here is no substitute for tactile experience of pots. But it is also true that in our visual experience of pots there may yet be a powerful ingredient of tactile memory transferred across the boundaries of the senses."

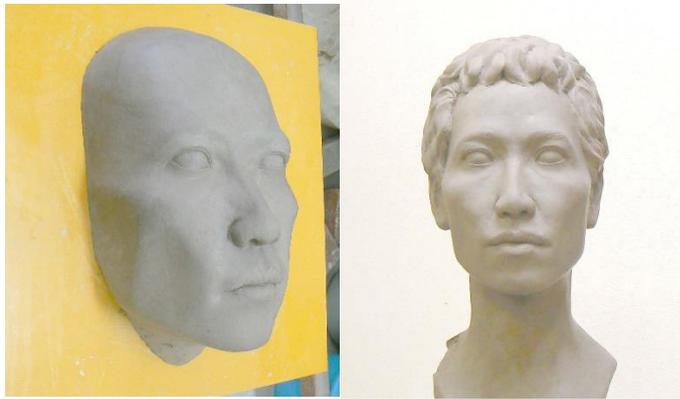
Whether ceramic objects are to be touched or not, the sensate experience of touch is inherent. According to Kemske [11]: "...because of the intimacy that we share with the material, both as makers and as consumers, ceramics as a whole has never ceased to find value in the tactilely sensuous." And in Elkins [12] words: "What matters here is often the idea or the thought of touching."

It seems that the sensuality of ceramics goes beyond the tactile quality of the object. It is about intimacy and the visceral feeling of our personal experience with ceramic objects. To understand this, the physical qualities of objects are not discussed individually. Instead, they are to be considered as one entity, such as form, texture, glaze, and size, which compose a particular meaning.

The ceramic form can be considered as the result of the making process. The way it is formed is visually conserved in the shape of the object. It is common for the maker to leave some tangible finger dints, dimples, and throwing striations in handmade pots. Those marks are a tactile order that refers to the action of the hands during the process. Appreciators may recognize this and understand the whole sequences of the process, which is why the understanding of the process is part of the aesthetic value of handmade pottery.

The works are not handmade functional objects. Mostly, they are made with modelling techniques, leaving very few finger marks. The use of slip-casting is

even more associated with machinal and industrial production. The sense of touch or tactility in such work is different to 'handmade' marks on the surface.



**Figure 1** Life-size models using oil-based clay.

In the work entitled *Inner Series*, the method of making was slightly different. The basic form is a face made by modelling techniques and has almost no hand marks on the surface (Figure 1). Right after being released from the slip-cast mold, the front of the form was pushed by the palm of the hand to make the outside part become the inner part. Regarding the plasticity of clay, this act can only be executed immediately and cannot be repeated or corrected. The process is called 'to reverse' the form.



**Figure 2** Inner Series (Mask), detail.

This process leaves a distinctive physical presence. The texture of the surface that comes from the slip-cast method is smooth. The use of a transparent glaze emphasizes the smooth quality of the surface. In contrast, the shape is irregular, where in some parts it is ripped and bent (Figure 2). This hints at the fact that the form is a result of an action that cannot be fully uncontrolled, and in some sense is an immediate action. To some degree, the form can still be identified as having facial properties, such as eyes, a nose and a mouth. Since those shapes indicate the negative form of the mold, it evokes the idea of a 'reversed form'.

## **2.4 The Depth of Glazed Porcelain**

A glaze is a glassy surface coating of ceramic objects and is applied by brushing, pouring, or spraying and then firing the object to a specific temperature. It may be used to waterproof, strengthen, and decorate the object. Most of these works employ a transparent glaze, which certainly have different function to the functional and decorative ware. Basically, the use of a glaze in these works has made it more similar to a ceramic object rather than a sculpture. In this case, some points of consideration are:

1. Glazed porcelain reminds us of household objects and it is considered more sensual than unglazed ceramics. Thus, it gives a porcelain glaze a more intimate aspect. According to Cavanaugh and Yonan [13], this is so as porcelain has inspired writers to use it as a metaphor for intimate objects that symbolize the heart or the body.
2. A transparent glaze evokes a distance to the viewer. Glazed ceramics reduce the materiality of the clay, covering it from the manual sense of touch and adding the thickness and viscosity of the glaze layer. It freezes the object, making it motionless and silent. The added distance to the object has a perceptual meaning. In this sense, it may be considered as a metaphysical, spiritual and immaterial experience.
3. The smooth and shiny properties of the glaze emphasize the idea of the face as a surface and wall. It creates an impenetrable layer that protects the object from interference. Also, the glass-like quality of glaze creates a reflective effect, resembling a mirror.

## **3 Sur/Face: Self-reflection on Practice**

### **3.1 Inner Series**

The portrait study made me understand two issues. First, the dualistic problem of representation in a portrait. Second, the fascination with the face as central to the identification of a person. According to Woodall [14], the dualistic problem of a portrait is that it is expected to present both a physical likeness and something

invisible, the inner of the sitter. In other words, the body or face as an external aspect and the soul as an internal aspect. This theme led to the creation of the *Inner Series* works. In this series, the technique and form to represent the dualistic problem in portraits are explored. The method of reversing the inside form to become the outside was developed. In slip-casting, the alteration of the form is still possible as long the clay has plasticity. Right after being released from the mold, the face is reversed by pushing the outside form into the inside form.

This not only represents the duality aspect of portraits but also the metaphor of opposite aspects, such as: outside ↔ inside; exterior ↔ interior; abstract ↔ representational; familiar ↔ strange; positive ↔ negative; private ↔ public.

These can be perceived as the inner aspects of a portrait that are invisible (hidden), abstract, unknown, concealed, and somewhat negative. In this series the damaged and uncanny effect is a metaphor for the mysterious and unknown of the inner side of a person.

This series illustrates one of the fascinating and important characteristics of clay, which is the ability to record action in the making process. Clay is able to freeze an action. This work has been perfectly represented by the characteristics of the motion and stasis of the material. The form suggests the soft texture of clay and the hard texture of ceramics. As part of this series, two works, entitled *Mask* and *Mass*, were constructed. Both works employed the same technique: reversed faces.

- **Mask (glazed porcelain, each piece approximately 12 x 18 x 32 cm, 2015)**



**Figure 3** Masks as displayed at Galery Selasar Sunaryo, January 2018.

This work consists of eight life-size reversed faces resembling a mask. It is to be displayed on a pedestal or on a wall so that viewers can observe the details of the forms that have been traced on the faces. With imagination, the forms that derived from the inside part of the face are recognizable. The process of making can be imagined by comparing the differences between each of the masks. It appears that in order to represent something that is invisible, one has to consequently conceal something that is visible. This suggests that something is always hidden, unexplained and held in secrecy in human beings (Figure 2 and 3).

- **Mass (glazed porcelain, each 17 x 7.5 x 9 cm, 2015)**



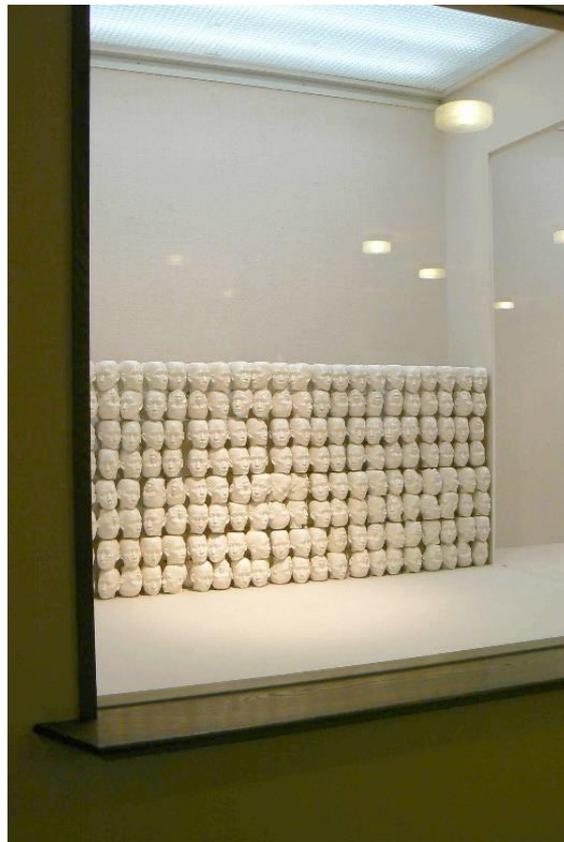
**Figure 4** *Mass* (detail).



**Figure 5** *Mass*, as displayed at CCCSCD [gallery space], January 2015.

*Mass* consists of small-sized bust self-portraits with reversed faces. After being released from mold, the face part was cut, reversed, and then returned to the head. This work uses the figurine as a strategy of representation. It is to be displayed on a wall to adopt a method of collecting objects for a domestic purpose. However, if figurines are typically sentimental, memorable, and familiar, in another way this work is uncanny and disturbing. The portrait is cast in multiple numbers to create the impression of mass and occupation. The figures must be displayed in a row on a wall directly facing the viewer. The number of figures depends on the length of the wall where the work will be presented. This response to space is important due to the idea of occupation. The idea of occupation intensifies the presence of the figures. This means the similarities and differences between the figures can represent the problems of commonness and uniqueness of individuality (Figures 4 and 5).

### 3.2 Selves



**Figure 6** *Selves*, as displayed at Kake Museum of Art, November 2014.



**Figure 7** Visitor interaction with *Selves*, Kake Museum of Art, February 2015.

*Selves* consist of 100 blocks, each sized 12 x 22 x 11 cm and made of glazed porcelain, using the slip casting technique. In this series of works, the idea of identity as a plurality of self and as a social construct is the major interest. Identity can be seen as something plural and constructible. It is an accumulation of information, experiences, beliefs, and information on someone. These identify someone as an individual in the past and the present, which will continue in the future. It means that identity always progresses and is in some way infinite. To represent this idea, the repetitive and accumulative effect as a metaphor of identity is explored. A repetitive method was adopted by casting about 1,800 small self-portraits, which were then constructed into 100 rectangular units. These units have a similar function to a brick as a basic unit to build a form, so this work relies on the space of where it will be displayed. The blocks can be constructed into other shapes, such as a wall or a pillar (Figures 6 and 7).

The massive effect of this work strongly suggests an interesting issue. A thousand compacted faces remind us of the problems of individuals within society. It evokes the relation of powers that construct and control people to make society orderly. In this work, the individuality is lost in the collective, especially in organized and structural society. The individual is dissolved into a homogeneous identity. At the end, it is merely a surface; there is nothing behind those figures. Ironically, the fragility of porcelain indicates the susceptibility of the shape. It means the structure and shape are easy to change and collapse. It suggests how personal identity and social identity are temporary.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to express his gratitude to the Japan International Cooperation Agency, Bandung Institute of Technology, and Kurashiki University of Science and The Arts who made this research possible.

### Reference

- [1] Andris Teikmanis, *Typologies of Research*, in Share: Handbook for Artistic Research Education, Ed. Mick Wilson and Shelte van Ruiten, ELIA, Amsterdam, 2013, p. 166.
- [2] Estelle Barrett, *Foucault's What is an Author: Towards a critical discourse of practice as research*, Working Papers in Art and Design, 4, 2006. Available online: [http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research/papers/wpades/vol4/ebfull.html](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol4/ebfull.html)
- [3] Maarit Mäkelä, *Knowing Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practise-based Research*, Research papers in Nordic Design Research Conference, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, May 29, 2005 – May 31, 2005.
- [4] Glen Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 40.
- [5] Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, p. 19.
- [6] Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, *The Dematerialization of Art*, Art International, 12, pp. 2, February 1968, p. 31.
- [7] Jorunn Veiteberg, *The Ceramist as Commentator, Léopold L. Foulem's ceramic practice in a European perspective*, retrieved August 16, 2014 on 10:35 from [https://www.academia.edu/5450188/Leopold\\_Foulem\\_The\\_Ceramist\\_as\\_Commentator](https://www.academia.edu/5450188/Leopold_Foulem_The_Ceramist_as_Commentator)
- [8] Leopold L. Foulem, *Guess Who's Coming to Lunch*, in Ceramic Millennium; Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory, and Art, Ed. Garth Clark, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Canada, 2006, p. 343- 347.
- [9] Edmund de Waal, *High Unseriousness: Artists and Clay* Secret History of Clay: from Gauguin to Gormley, exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, 2004, p. 39.
- [10] Laura Gray, *Museums and the 'Interstices of Domestic Life': Re-articulating Domestic Space in Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, Interpreting Ceramics, online journal, Issue 13, 2011, retrieved August 9, 2014 on 4(21) PM from <http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue013/articles/03.htm>

- [11] Bonnie Kemske, *Touching the Body: A Ceramic Possibility*, *Interpreting Ceramics*, online journal, Issue 8, 2007, retrieved August 10, 2014 on 5:35 PM from <http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue008/articles/22.htm#t14>
- [12] James Elkins, *Two Ways of Looking at Ceramics*, [https://www.academia.edu/3248608/Two\\_Ways\\_of\\_Looking\\_at\\_Ceramics](https://www.academia.edu/3248608/Two_Ways_of_Looking_at_Ceramics), accessed February 1, 2014 on 7:58 PM
- [13] Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan (Ed.), *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-century Porcelain*, Ashgate, 2010, p. 3.
- [14] Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture, Facing the Subjects*, Manchester University Press, p. 13, 1997.