

## **Ceramics and the Emergence of Hybrid Cultures**

Julie Bartholomew

### **Abstract**

For centuries, cultural exchange between distinct and distant nations has motivated a rich and diverse history of ceramics practice. The Silk Road trade routes in China were catalysts for cultural interchange between Asia and powerful nations of the West. In contemporary times, movement between disparate nations has radically accelerated cultural interchange. Accessibility to international travel, new communication technologies, social media and the Internet have reconfigured the dialogue between Asian and non-Asian nations. Not surprisingly, ceramics reflects the transmission of cultural exchange between diverse individuals and nations because it has always engaged with the social and cultural environment. The chameleon nature of ceramics, and its capacity to align itself with high art, low art, the personal, impersonal, consumerism and the unique, is its great strength as it evolves with the local and the global, the microscopic and macrocosmic worlds.

A global culture is a reality in an increasingly fast shrinking world hastened by travel and expanding communication technologies. Globalization is increasingly fueled by a rampant world economy and dominant ideologies that often impact on local values and identities. My presentation examines the ceramics practice of selected individuals from different nations, within and without Asia. They debate the realities of cultural exchange in a world experiencing accelerated change. These artists reflect the dynamic relationship between multifaceted connections to the past and present, cultural autonomy and global consumerism. Most significantly, they re-evaluate identity, not as static or aligned to one nation but as constantly in flux while negotiating transcultural forces.

For centuries, ceramics has reflected the transmission of cultural exchange between diverse nations motivating a rich history of ceramics practice. The Silk Road trade routes in China were catalysts for cultural interchange between Asia and powerful nations of the West. In contemporary times, movement between disparate nations has radically accelerated cultural interchange. Accessibility to international travel, new communication technologies, social media and the Internet have reconfigured the dialogue between Asian and non-Asian nations.

Ceramics has always had the capacity to reflect social and cultural exchange due partly to a traditional orientation towards containment. The ability to hold, to possess, to store, to carry is a defining human characteristic, as basic and essential as making tools and this attribute embeds ceramics in everyday life.

Reflecting social and cultural exchange may also be linked to the chameleon nature of ceramics. It engenders multiple partnerships with high art, low art, the personal, impersonal, consumerism and the unique. This is its great strength as it evolves in synchronization with the local and the global, the microscopic and macrocosmic worlds.

It is therefore not surprising that ceramics continues to embody social and cultural exchange but in the twenty-first century, this engagement is on a global scale in an increasingly fast shrinking world hastened by travel and expanding communication technologies.

Many contemporary artists who find themselves positioned in global networks of new cultural and social relations are drawn to ceramics as a powerful means of expressing in-between or hybrid identities. As a material and practice that embraces interconnections and explores the everyday, ceramics is well positioned as a conduit for the transmission of identities shaped by the shifting and sliding between different nations and cultural influences.

Artists working with ceramics from different nations, within and without Asia, are expanding an artistic vocabulary that reflects the realities of cultural exchange in a world experiencing accelerated change. The visual language of ceramics is saturated with imagery transmitting cross-cultural narratives such as the Chinese Blue and White. The most well know design is the willow pattern, originally from the ninth century Henan province in China. The Blue and White genre evolved over the centuries as the most produced, distributed and profitable of styles. It emerged as a

metaphor for cultural exchange, telling stories about integration, displacement and interchange in a world that has shifted from a time when navigation between continents and cultures was slow and formidable to an era of accelerated interchange.

Sin Ying Ho adopts the Chinese Blue and White as a metaphor for cultural exchange and as a reference to her Chinese heritage. Like many of her generation, Ho transgresses multiple worlds. She was born in Hong Kong, immigrated to Canada in the 1990's and now resides in both China and the United States. The surface treatment of her vessels reflects the ambiguity of different cultures from Blue and White floral motifs, reminiscent of traditional Qing Hua porcelain, to corporate logos, bar codes and printed words from different languages. Ho reinvents traditional Chinese Blue and White porcelain within the context of contemporary Western iconography utilizing traditional cobalt brushwork in combination with digital decals.

The large scale of her vessel forms reminds the viewer that these works are human scale and about human identity. Globalization is increasingly fuelled by a rampant world economy and dominant ideologies that often impact on local values and identities that risk sliding into homogeneity. However, by acknowledging the emergence of hybrid and transcultural forces, Ho's ceramics positions identity, not as reductive or homogenous but multiple and constantly in flux as she negotiates diverse cultural influences from her past and present worlds.

Questioning what it means to be human in today's globalized transcultural world, Ni Haifeng was born in China and is now living in Holland since 1994. His installation titled *Of the Departure and the Arrival*, 2005 examines the historic exchange and ongoing cultural legacy between his two home countries, specifically Delft in Holland and Jingdezhen in China.

Common objects such as a vacuum cleaner, gloves, kitchen utensils, toothpaste tube were gathered by Ni from citizens in the Dutch town of Delft, historically known for the porcelain factories in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which imitated the forms and decorations of Chinese Blue and White. He then transported these everyday objects from Delft to Jingdezhen, China and commissioned the local Jingdezhen artisans to cast them into porcelain and decorate with Blue and White imagery so they adopted Chinese characteristics. Ni chose Jingdezhen for the Chinese enculturation of these ordinary objects because this was the centre of Blue and White porcelain production during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These objects have undergone transformation, they are neither

Chinese or Dutch but instead, appear to be new visual explorations of hybridity or cultural co-existence, past and present.

*Of the Departure and the Arrival* comments on Ni's identity, not as static but in flux as he negotiates the otherness of a Chinese background within the Western society of Holland. Ni says 'My living here (Holland) is really an endless process of translation, both in a metaphorical and literal, everyday sense.'<sup>1</sup>

The critical theorist, Homi K. Bhabha states that hybridity is an effect of globalization but not a state that refers back to two original or local cultures. He speaks to a 'third space' which enables other or new identities to emerge. This 'third space' displaces the histories and cultures that constitute it and instead, new structures or identities emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Those who experience cultural transgression often speak about occupying a 'third space' because when returning to their place of origin, they are no longer considered local and they see their old world through different eyes. At the same time, when engaging with their new home they see themselves as *out of place* with threads of connection to their place of origin, but also in a constant state of readjustment or change.

Artist Ying-Yueh Chuang was born in Taiwan but has spent more than half her life in Canada. Chuang says 'I constantly feel caught in the middle, while at the same time I am creating my own hybrid culture. I notice that my Canadian friends think I am so Asian. However, my family in Taiwan thinks that I am so westernized. I actually think of myself primarily as Taiwanese - in my food preferences, aesthetics, value system, and many other areas.'<sup>3</sup> Chuang also concedes to feeling part Chinese because of her early schooling in Taiwan with its emphasis on Chinese culture, very unlike contemporary Taiwan as it asserts its identity as independent from China.

Chuang's ceramics practice explores the natural order by shaping distinct multiple forms suggesting colourful imaginary entities, possibly fauna-flora hybrids. 'I often think that this hybrid quality mirrors my own hybrid cultural identity. We want people and things to fit into neat, separate categories like cultures, but in reality,

---

<sup>1</sup> Steevensz, Bert. *Beyond the Wall*

<sup>2</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London; New York: Routledge, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Bartholomew, Julie. Ying-Yueh Chuang, *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, 48#2 July 2009

even cultures are constantly changing and mixing, and art is a place that can explore limitless possibilities.’<sup>4</sup>

Like Ying-Yueh Chuang, Brendan Lee Satish Tang also experiences cultural transgression and constant change. He reflects the conditions of a new globalized world by positioning his own experiences into the creative ceramics processes. Of his identity he says, ‘Although I am considered Asian Canadian within the dominant culture’s framing, my family has lost even vestiges of connectivity to Asia through several generations of intercontinental migration and ethnic intermarriage.’<sup>5</sup>

Tang draws on his Asian heritage by sculpting pulp-like Chinese Blue and White forms that refer to Chinese Ming dynasty vessels. Visual tension and contradiction within the work is enhanced by morphing traditional Blue and White vessels with exuberant and seductive plastic toys and Manga inspired robotic prosthetics. The multi-dimensional visual play between past and present, the authenticity of history and the surface gratification of a global consumer aesthetic, suggests a new visual language with which to express a new reality. This is a time when local and global forces co-mingle in a state of constant change.

Julie Bartholomew’s work questions the consumption of global consumerism as simply an imposition of one force upon the other. Rather than cultural interchange sliding into a homogenizing, unifying force, Bartholomew acknowledges the emergence of trans-cultural forces that don’t cancel each other out but instead, transpire as dynamic relationships that engender a new ‘third space.’<sup>6</sup>

Writer and ceramic artist Jacqueline Clayton states:

*Louis Vuitton Dynasty* (2008) and *Qing Prada* (2008) take the form of women’s accessories, a reference to the body as a locus for expressions of cultural change. *Vuitton Dynasty*, cast from Chinese copies of latest-release European designer goods, is over stamped with digital decal images of women drawn from Sung Dynasty paintings, while *Qing Prada* is modelled on traditional objects in a museum setting, the clay artefacts carved with the designer logo and wrapped in the lushness of an Imperial Jingdezhen glaze.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Bartholomew, Julie. Ying-Yueh Chuang, *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, 48#2 July 2009

<sup>5</sup> Brendan Lee Satish Tang. [www.brendantang.com](http://www.brendantang.com)

<sup>6</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London; New York: Routledge, 1990

<sup>7</sup> Clayton, Jacqueline. *Another Silk Road*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA, UNSW, 2009

*Qing Armani* continues along these lines by expressing the co-existence of past and present body modification practices that are relevant within the context of China, a country experiencing frenzied development and exposure to global values and branding, within a very short time. Working with Chinese artisans made possible the use of traditional Chinese clays, glazes and decorating techniques, repositioned within the context of contemporary concerns.

In conclusion, the artists discussed here examine the conditions and consequences of a new globalized world by positioning their reflections into the creative ceramics processes. We live in a new reality of ongoing cultural exchange and co-existence. These artists reflect the dynamic relationship between multifaceted connections to the past and present, cultural autonomy and global consumerism. Most significantly, they re-evaluate identity, not as static or aligned to one nation but as constantly in flux while negotiating transcultural forces.