

In Studio with Ruth Ju-shih Li

Evelyne Schoenmann



Ruth, we met in Yingge/Taiwan at the last IAC/AIC meeting and you told me about your very interesting background and busy life as an artist.

As an artist I divide my time between my studios in Sydney-Australia, Taipei - Taiwan and in Jingdezhen - PR China. I was born in Taiwan and migrated to

New Zealand with my family when I was three years old, and then to Australia when I was ten. Having lived most of my life in Sydney and studied at the National Art School in Australia, I identify as a Taiwanese-Australian artist.

So, you are at home in many coun-

tries, and you change studio and location quite often. At the moment, as you said, you alternate between Australia, PR China and Taiwan. Residencies are also an important part in your life. What is the reason you don't want to settle down?

My work is heavily influenced by



my diverse cultural heritage and the search for a common language. Research and observation play an enormous part in the growth of my work, so traveling and international residencies are a great source of fresh inspiration for me, constantly challenging and evolving my practice. My recent residency in Thailand was beautifully eye-opening. Not only did I meet some amazing international artists that have now become great friends, I was able to take a break from my usual studio practice, immerse myself in nature and experiment with ideas I have always wanted to try but never had the opportunity to.

Can you tell us about differences or similarities between ceramics (and making ceramics) in Australia, PR China and Taiwan?

I can't speak for others, but for me technique always follows the materials you work with. The methods I use with Jingdezhen porcelain cannot apply to the porcelain I use in Australia, nor can it be transferred and used for clay in Taiwan. There is always a need for an adaptation period when I go to a new environment to familiarise myself with the local clay. My advice would be to approach new materials with no preconceived ideas of how it should be, and to embrace its differences once you see its boundaries. It is the best way to make the most of your experience and see your work flourish in ways unimaginable before.

How would you describe your ceramics style?

If I had to choose a word, I would say evolving, constantly evolving. I would be troubled if it were not.

I've read in an article that your wall installation "Florilegium", a circle 2 metres in diameter, filled with 300 different porcelain pieces, should symbolize a cathedral....

That's correct. I always aim to create an experience with my art. And with my installation Florilegium I wanted to create a sacred space, where viewers are led in to a quiet contemplation upon confronting the piece. The size, overwhelmingly complex details and crisp white porcelain all come together to form this tension of pulling back from the fragility and

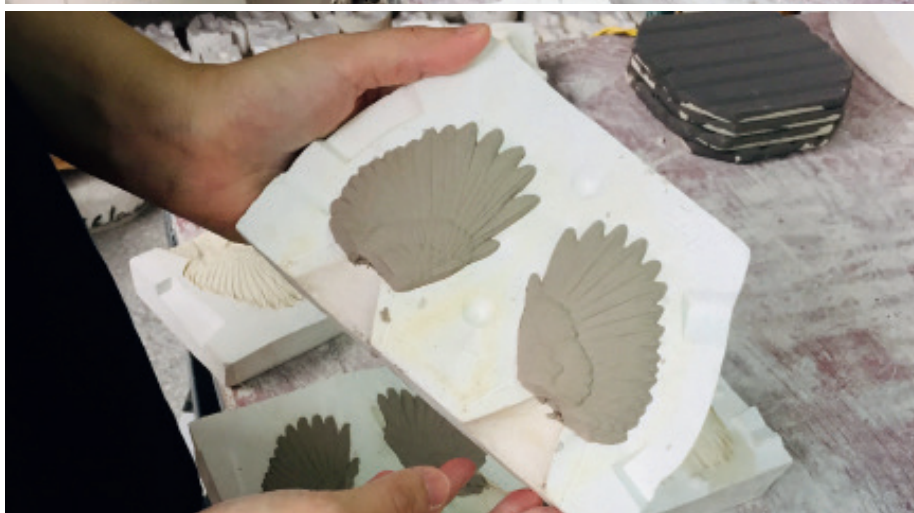
drawing closer to process the details; a sanctuary to approach carefully, a place of spiritual contemplation, a contemporary cathedral.

Let's go on now to the piece shown in this interview. It is called "Self-Portrait". I am curious about the story behind this piece! And please tell us how you made it.

My Self-Portrait series are made with Jingdezhen high white Porcelain. The bases are high pressure slip casted and carefully hand carved to reveal details and ornamentation. I go over the edges with a clean brush to soften the corners and refine certain details. Once the bases are ready, I then freshly cast the smaller decorative components, like wings, tails, claws etc, and handmade floral and organic forms. When the casts are set, I remove them from the mold, leave them to dry to leather-hard and reshape them accordingly with a simple carving knife. I then proceed to clean the edges with a brush and arrange compositions while taking into account any slumping that will occur. I then join the parts together with slip. I never score the surfaces of the joining pieces because scoring can easily damage the delicate forms and details of my work. The uniqueness of Jingdezhen porcelain, at the right consistency and humidity, allows these forms to join with very little cracking once properly compressed. These unique characteristics of Jingdezhen porcelain take a while to grasp, but once you get the hang of it, it will become instinctual.

Once I am happy with the composition, I then compress the joints with a small pointed rubber pen to prevent any chance of hairline cracks forming. The completed piece is then transferred on to a porcelain slab coated with a layer of kiln-wash and the thin edges are supported with small porcelain cones also dipped in kiln-wash. I then proceed to spray a thin coat of 'magic water', a secret recipe of the local craftsmen that prevents any carbon trapping on your work while firing.

When packing a kiln, I like to place my work on the middle to upper levels of the kiln to ensure that they are fired to the desired 1300 degrees Celsius. Once fired I carefully sand and clean each piece by hand and adhere a plate hanger on the back. Once the





adhesive sets then it's ready for exhibition.

In February you had a solo show in Sydney, and you got an art prize at the same time. Congratulations, that's a great achievement Ruth! How do you see your style and art evolving in the future?

Thank you for your kind words! My art is constantly fluid and ever-changing so I expect it will continue to do so. I always prioritize the concept I try to convey, and my art style really is just a visual language I use for communication. Depending on what I wish to say, the audience and the idea, my execution will differ. Every work I make is a sketch for a better one.

So, you want your ceramics pieces to have a long-term effect on people?

I cannot predict how everyone will react to my work, but I definitely hope so. I am constantly searching for better ways to communicate and refine my work, it's an ongoing process. Even as we speak now, I am researching new techniques and forms in my studio for my upcoming solo exhibition at New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum scheduled for November this year. This will be my first solo exhibition in my birth place, it means a lot to me on many different levels, so I want to further develop my work to communicate to the Taiwanese public in an effective way. Who knows where this research will take me, fingers crossed!

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Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with Johanna Beil, Germany

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