

Reflections on Jason Lim's *Still/Life - Series 2* (2009)



Figure 1. *Still/Life - Series 2*, 1<sup>st</sup> Jakarta Contemporary Ceramics Biennale, December 2009

“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.” Genesis 19

Clay. This word naturally conjures up in my mind images of utilitarian objects, mostly used in the preparation and consumption of food, almost since the beginning of mankind. The kitchen is their existing environment, the central place in a house, a place with fire, the element which gives clay its durability, challenging time, despite its breakable quality. They are usually placed on shelves, perhaps behind doors, perhaps lovingly arranged in meaningful stacks, according to colours, shape or purpose: a sort of domestic *Still/life* which truly pulsates with life and repetition, sustenance and variety.

But Jason Lim's assemblage of unfired pots (figure 1.) in precarious towers placed in a long and otherwise empty fish tank is something totally unusual and even unnatural. There is no purpose here other than offering an

uncorrupted visual pleasure and an opportunity of stillness for our minds in pure and empty contemplation.

The imagined pressure each pot above one another places on the ones below gives the whole composition an intangible sense of tension and brings our limited minds to the edge of an expected, incumbent event: destruction. Destruction by sheer, unadulterated presence. Destruction by stillness. Destruction over time, in silence. Our eyes instinctively wonder on the surface of the pots in search for the only obvious signs of this imminence: the finest hairline cracks would reveal the beginning of this process.

Jason explains that this work is inspired by the most common pictorial tradition of “still life”. In a sense, he offers a chance of subversion or, rather, expansion of this genre to the less common sculptural field and even more humbly, given the use of a material characteristically associated with craft and so far removed from the long tradition of “fine arts”. The natural elements of fruits and flowers, traditionally offered to our view at the peak of their short life cycle, are here replaced with another element, deceptively static and dead.

But perhaps this is not the first time that the artist plays with the “still life” genre and creates sculptural artworks with clay. Back in 2007, he conceptualised a grand chandelier for one of the salons at the Singapore Pavilion at 52<sup>nd</sup> *Biennale di Venezia* with rather spectacular results: a display of one thousand five hundred cascading lotus flowers, stylised in unglazed porcelain, brought to life through a show of lights and subsequently dropped unexpectedly onto the floor with the obvious consequence that many of the beautiful and delicate flowers were smashed by the impact. Indeed, life and death before our eyes (figure 2.).



Figure 2. *Just Dharma*, Venice, 2007

But returning to *Still/Life*, the stillness of the title is only a point in the journey we will see unfold before our eyes over the period of time of the exhibition. It is a place we may return over and over again, despite the deterioration we see before our eyes. And this event is further accelerated by the intervention of the artist, who, during the opening of the exhibition, will symbolically fill the pots with water. The plentiness and richness represented by the water, as the most basic source of life, is manipulated here into a destructive power, which slowly and inexorably will deteriorate the clay. Water, undoubtedly associated with life, for these unfired pots becomes a *nemesis*, a tool of blind destruction and it reveals the fragile character of this earthy element in its natural state, before human manipulation. A reminder of the fragility of our lives, which could end abruptly even at a very young age. Death, as the only certainty of our lives.

Jason's *deus ex machina* intervention is a sort of reverse Yves Klein or Jackson Pollock's performance of creation of artwork before our eyes. In fact, ironically, only its beginning was a creation as such: the hands of the artist running smoothly over and inside the clay in a seemingly endless and mesmerising spinning cycle. An action of repetition, almost insistence, perseverance, forming an object, later sacrificed to the slaughter of the life element. And therefore, conversely, the result will not be an art work as such, applauded by the audience in superficial consent, as manifestation of artistic genius. Jason defies general approval, nay, simply he does not need this

approval. He merely offers us a chance of introspection and reflection. He challenges our appreciation and understanding of the artistic experience. In fact, our insistent attachment to objects as tangible manifestation of artistic creation is here thoroughly challenged, simply because there is no physical artwork as such to be admired, certainly not at the very end of the exhibition. Furthermore, ironically, despite the title, this *life* is all but *still*: it is slowly unveiled before our eyes and each moment we view it, represents an extremely personal and subjective picture in a long 'progression of changes.'<sup>1</sup>

And similarly, in an even more loosely context, Jason defies our understanding of destiny, the eternal wheel of life and death. Is he suggesting this cycle is simply transformation and not merely aimed at destruction, as our minds had originally and limitedly suggested? Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier had already made this suggestion in the scientific field: "Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée, tout se transforme." Yet our limited minds often fail to see the 'transformation' and are easily blinded by the apparent 'destruction'.

The essential question at this point is: was the audience ready to appreciate the result? Was the audience able to see beyond the physical and move onto the metaphysical? Was the audience able to start the journey again, from 'artistic' creation to arrive to the result of what two months deterioration meant? Namely, a collection of irregular lumps of dust, which after the show the curator had to irreverently dispose of? We can only answer positively, if in the frenzy of our hectic lives, we do remember that our physical bodies will turn into dust at the end of it...

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<sup>1</sup> As described by the artist in an exchange of email between us on 26 January 2011.