



Above: Sin-ying Ho with *Temptation: Life of Goods #1* (left) and *Transformation: Motherboard #2* (right). 2010. Both are porcelain, hand-painted cobalt pigment and decal transfer glaze. Height left to right: 68 x 23.5 in and 70 x 23.5 in.
Below: *One World* (Detail).



Cultures Colliding

New Work by Sin-ying Ho

Article by Jane Marshall

IN VIEWING THE WORK OF SIN-YING HO, ONE IS REMINDED of the nature of art as a time machine: there are remnants, nuances of the past, but there is also the stream of modern context. Like a good film that can transport you to another time and place, Ho's work, rooted in Chinese blue and white porcelain, recalls the 1000 years of ceramics history of Jingdezhen. Ho's motifs, however, are unmistakably modern and reflect the complexities of the digital age: multilingual, trademarked and motherboarded.

Ho has personally experienced the merging of peoples from different cultures that has come about in the 21st century, caused by political, technological and economic globalization. Born in Hong Kong, she received her training in Canada and the US and is now a professor of ceramics at Queens College, City University of New York. Initially trained as an actress, her focus was largely political. She carries that political awareness in to her ceramics, centring on how difficult it is to navigate cultural divides because of the restrictions of language and seeking a way to express this issue in her work. Symbols have now replaced language.

In the mid 1990s, Ho, while an undergraduate student at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Canada, was fortunate to be able to revisit China as an exchange off-campus student and translator with 'honourable professor' Walter Ostrom. Already interested in Chinese blue and white porcelain, which she saw as symbolic of the duality of China and of its influence on the rest of the world, she encountered Jingdezhen. A recognized centre of porcelain production since the Emperor Zhenzong decreed that the city would provide all of the ceramics used at the imperial court from 1004, Jingdezhen is a city devoted to ceramics. Ancient and modern equipment and processes, apprentices and masters, production as well as art porcelain and old and new designs: all coexist in a supportive atmosphere that is steeped in Chinese tradition. Ho became enchanted with the possibilities of Jingdezhen and with blue and white porcelain, which she saw as the visual history of cultures colliding.

As Ho noted, from the 16th century when Portuguese traders began the craze for the acquisition of Chinese

export porcelain in Europe and the resultant growth of potteries in England, The Netherlands, France and Germany, the world has experienced cross-cultural fertilizations on an ever-increasing scale. As it was then, today people share many words, designs and patterns across the world. Corporate branding has now replaced traditional images and globalization dominates most parts of the world. Ho believes that critical questions of politics, communication, language, cultural identity, economy and power are volatile issues for many societies and that ceramic art is a powerful vehicle for bringing attention to these ideas. To reflect these concepts, Ho has adapted classical Chinese pottery shapes and motifs, decorating them with hand-painted images and computer decal transfers reflecting contemporary commercial logos and cultural icons. She has cut and rejoined the shapes to produce new and evocative hybrid forms.

Her current body of new work had its genesis in 2000, when she had visited Jingdezhen several times and had started experimenting with larger sculptural forms. During Jingdezhen's 1000-year city celebration in 2004, the city's nine-metre-tall ceramic lampposts lining the streets particularly intrigued her. Resolved to continue working large scale, she started to explore issues of how to create such massive ceramic forms, what type of content would be involved and how to transport the completed pieces. She was accompanied to China in 2006 by filmmaker Jeremy Edwards, who is making a documentary on her work. She produced table-sized sculptural pieces, which were exhibited in the Gardiner Museum in Toronto in 2008. All of these endeavours led to the awarding of a Canada Council grant to allow Ho to complete her vision, working in China.

Ho decided that the new work would reveal universal expressions of human nature and, instead of the lampposts, she wanted to develop a more human form that would also explore the idea of a vessel that could both receive and transmit information. The new pieces would be on a human scale, about two metres tall, weighing about 100 kilos when completed. The pieces would be created in pairs, to provide insurance if greenware or kiln or transportation disasters occurred. The sheer scale of these pieces meant that the porcelain forms would need to be produced by teams of artisans in Jingdezhen, challenging the present Western idea of originality as the work of a solo artist. Ho would need to train these artisans, who were used to the demands of standard production work. She would also need to rework her methodology as appropriate to her needs and to communicate these changes to the members of her atelier.

As to content and technique, Ho decided to hand paint as well as use tissue underglaze decals. She decided on worldwide human concerns and symbols to add to the floral and dragon motifs common to Chinese blue and white porcelain. Materialistic desires, the results of marketing, greed, hope, barriers, transformation and propaganda: all are intrinsic to her series. Cross-cultural images abound: Adam and Eve are the



Above: Transformation: Motherboard #2 (left). 70 x 23.5 in. Temptation: Life of Goods #1 (middle). 68 x 23.5 in. One World, Many Peoples #1 (right). 69 x 20.7 in.

All 2010. All porcelain, hand-painted cobalt pigment and decal transfer glaze.

Below: Temptation No. 1 (Detail).





Above: *One World, Many Peoples* #1 (left). 69 x 20.7 in. *Temptation: Life of Goods* #1 (right). 69 x 20.7 in. Below: *In a Dream of Hope* #1. 69 x 18.5 in. All 2010. All porcelain, hand-painted cobalt pigment and decal transfer glaze.



everyman and woman of her ceramic world. To emphasize the contemporary ideas, she added red, yellow and green underglaze decals to the traditional cobalt.

The resulting forms have enormous presence. Past curator Virginia Eichorn and present curator Christian Singer approached Ho about exhibiting the work in the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Canada and she knew that there was a gallery there with 22-foot ceilings. After their long journey from China, the four pairs of porcelain vessels, alike in subject matter but not identical, each the height and weight of a man, took up their dominant positions in the Tower gallery as *One World, Many Peoples* in January 2010. In *A Dream of Hope*, Nos. 1 and 2 feature stock market printouts in a jagged descending graph as well as traditional cobalt floral forms. Ho describes these works as artefacts representing individuals who have been burned by greed but remain hopeful.

One World, Many Peoples, Nos. 1 and 2, utilize human silhouettes filled with words in many languages in red, yellow and green, demonstrating the barriers that different languages can bring to human understanding. In *Transformation: Motherboard*, Nos. 1 and 2, the butterfly is used as a symbol of transformation, superimposed on cobalt floral displays and computer motherboard circuits.

And finally, *Temptation: Life of Goods*, Nos. 1 and 2, presents Renaissance-inspired silhouettes of Adam and Eve sharing space with corporate logos in red. The materialistic yearning represented by the luxury goods labels shares the same fervour as Eve's desire for the apple in Eden. Gardens and flowers are loaded images: the bountiful blue blooms of these tall vessels are the time machines here, reminding us all of simpler times and shared human values.

Sin-ying Ho's journey has been exacting and arduous. Making ceramics is a long process, complicated here by travel, language, developing new skills, refining her vision and problem-solving the challenges imposed by material management on a large scale. She is excited about continuing the relationships that she developed in China and hopes to continue working there every year. The creation of these large pieces has given her the opportunity to assess her personal journey: to encounter, confront and embrace the universality of human experience; and to progress from minority to mainstream.



Right: Sin-ying Ho's Signature.

Jane Marshall is an artist, an art educator and art consultant in the Toronto, Canada, area. She earned a BA and a BEd, both from the University of Toronto. Marshall is currently working on a new series of works on paper from digital media, as well as pursuing additional training in glass.