





The United States is a mosaic of cultures where immigrants and first-generation Americans participate in traditions brought here by their ancestors. Both groups diversify the cultural landscape of our country and promote an understanding of the importance of diversity through their unique heritages. As both a first-generation Asian American and multigenerational Caucasian American, I am interested in the perceived boundaries of employing one's heritage as a contemporary aesthetic. My ceramic work, which is mostly blue-and-white porcelain, has often been read as Eastern-influenced. I often wonder if these interpretations are derived from the visual historic reference of my color palette or from my last name.

These thoughts have always been on my mind, but I hadn't verbalized them until a fortuitous first meeting with Steven Young Lee. After we had exchanged pleasantries, Steve asked, "What's your ethnicity?" I've always found this question bothersome: when I answer, I see the person's disbelief and letdown because their preconceptions are not met. My life suddenly turns into nothing but a pin-the-nail-on-the-globe game. Coming from Steve, though, the

BIO

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Adam Chau, Contour Plates, 2017. Pie-molded porcelain with CNC cobalt decoration, 8 x 7 x 0.25 in. Photograph by the artist.

question didn't seem accusatory, as it often does, and in it I found an unspoken camaraderie. I asked him if he had ever felt a conflict with the use of Asian aesthetics either in the United States or abroad. I was curious to know if native Asians had a different perception of his work than Westerners, and if Westerners understood his historic references. Steve, a Chicago-born Korean, saw that we had similar lineages as Asian-Americans and asked, "Is there a public perception that heritage gives birthright to access?" His artist's statement elaborates on this topic more poignantly:

Growing up in the United States the son of immigrant Korean parents, I am often situated between cultures, looking from one side into another. Living and working in metropolitan centers such as New York, Chicago, Shanghai, Seoul, and Vancouver as well as the rural communities of Alfred, Jingdezhen, and Helena has raised questions of identity and assimilation. I have experienced being an outsider in the country of my heritage and being one of a minority of Asians in Montana. My work allows me to re-interpret and confront questions of place and belonging. Having begun my artistic career learning Asian pottery techniques in a Western educational system, I am also continually investigating the sources and ownership of cultural influence.

Steven's feelings of being "in-between" cultures opened my eyes to there being other people whose identities are laden with more than one cultural expectation. It seems that first-generation Americans and biracial people are in a cultural limbo, where they cannot wholly assimilate into the dominant culture. I find Steven's porcelain vessels, which combine Eastern and Western visual ecologies, examples of this limbo. His earlier work took historic Asian vessel archetypes and merged them with graphic imagery of American pop culture and kitsch. His recent work explores how visual deconstruction of vessels can be a metaphor for disassembling cultural architecture.

Steven intentionally builds on an Asian framework; I originally had no intention of linking my work to my Asian heritage. My research and the resulting products were purely about the integration of digital technology with traditional studio ceramics processes (see *Studio Potter*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Summer/Fall 2015). In trying to find better ways to convey abstracted lines, I discovered and have been researching *ko-sometsuke*,¹ eighteenth-century Chinese porcelains produced for the Japanese market. Ko-sometsuke use

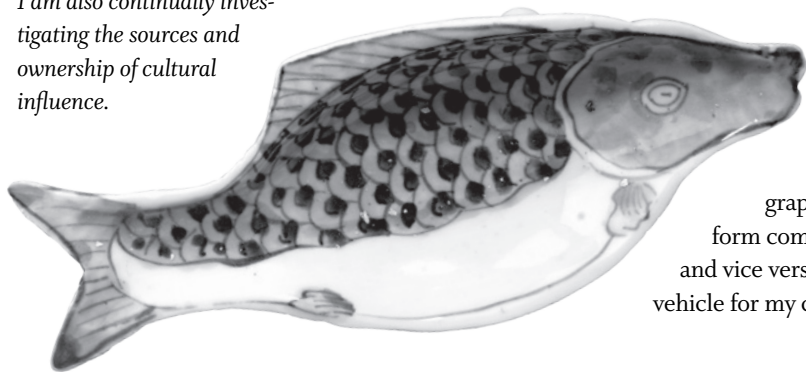
silhouettes to frame cobalt lines into a cohesive graphic image—form completes surface and vice versa. It is the right vehicle for my current work as

it gives cues as to my process and abstract lines now become recognizable images. Ko-sometsuke is a peculiar part of history; it is often linked to Japanese culture, but the ware was first exclusively imported from China. I find irony as well as solace in this because of its ambiguity. Jorge Welsh's catalog of ko-sometsuke describes this in more detail: "In contrast to the traditional blue-and-white wares produced at Jingdezhen, ko-sometsuke porcelain was deliberately potted in a rough manner from poorly levigated clay and bears numerous flaws and imperfections as a result. The *mushikui*, or 'moth-eaten' edges, which are so prevalent among these wares, were particularly prized in Japan."²

The public sees ko-sometsuke as wholly Japanese because of its imperfections, a case of mistaken identity through the stereotypes of the Chinese imperial and Japanese *mingei* aesthetics.

After evolving my body of work to have a direct, historical reference, my curiosity about Asian-American clay artists who transcended, merged, or occupied more than one culture grew. I came across Ayumi Horie's biography, and toward the end of it an intriguing sentence caught my attention: "The refrigerator was always crammed full of food, and the table laid with dozens of Corningware dishes, loaded with everything from sushi to apple pie." This description of a cross-cultural feast made me want to learn more about Horie's work. I've always admired her and find her imagery compelling because of its casual expertise (try it, it's hard to do!). Her loose forms, fused with fantastical characters such as Yeti and Minogame turtles, have an optimistic quality. Her

Carp-Shaped Dish, Chinese, Ming dynasty, Tianqi period (1621-1627). Porcelain decorated in underglaze cobalt blue, 1.5 x 8 x 3.5 in. Exhibited in *Ko-Sometsuke*. Chinese Porcelain for the Japanese Market, and printed in the exhibition catalogue of the same title, London/Lisbon, Jorge Welsh Books, 2013, pp. 81, no. 23.



style of imagery doesn't directly subscribe to the visual precedent of mingei; her lines are graphic and illustrative as opposed to gestural brushstrokes, but her references have a philosophical parallel with it. I decided to broach the subject of "in-between" with her, and she responded:

The notion of birthright access in the context of Asian heritage is a complicated field of moving parts. The cultural diffusion that has defined our long, rich ceramic history from the Silk Road to transcontinental trade has morphed into new questions involving identity and power in the age of the Internet.

In the West, my half-Japanese skin gives me the authority of "authenticity," but in Japan the sturdiness of my pots read as bad craftsmanship. For all intents and purposes, I'm illiterate in Japanese, and yet I use Japanese text at times because it's a way to explore identity. Even with this birthright authenticity in the States, I am sometimes trolled online as Jackie Chan (people make comments about me looking like him, but first of all, he's from Hong Kong, asshole!), rather than being seen as an accomplished professional woman in the field. Gender is obviously still an issue, and intersectionality plays into a discussion of birthright.

I am careful about knowing my Japanese references from my Chinese, Korean, and Southeast Asian references, because I know how important it is to move beyond a shallow and appropriated understanding of a culture. When I think of how Japanese aesthetics and philosophies

have impacted the course of American studio ceramics, I say, Go ahead and be inspired, but do it with a mindfulness of the skin you are in and an awareness of your power.

To take cultural ideas from the East and offer them to a Western audience can be hazardous because there are so many cultural signifiers that can be lost in translation. The buzzword "cultural appropriation" I define as the use of imagery and concepts that are not properly understood or researched or are simply misused for accolades. In ceramics, there are numerous examples, a historic one being the transference of motifs from Asia to Western Europe via the Silk Road, including the Ottoman Empire's "duplicates" of Chinese wares for the Spanish market.³ In thinking about appropriation and artistic authorship, I remember the words of Toni Morrison, "I wanted to [write] a book with no codes...I want to write for people like me...People that can't be faked."⁴ It is up to the author to be well-informed about their subject matter. Both maker and audience need to be educated about the industry in which they are producing and consuming. Mastery can only be called such when the trained eye knows expertise.



*Ayumi Horie,
Whale with Silver
Knot Plate, 2017.
Porcelain and luster,
1 x 8 x 8 in.
Photograph by artist.*

ENDNOTES

1. In China, it is labeled as Ming Dynasty Tianqi ware.
2. Jorge Welsh, Luisa Vinhais, and Richard Valencia. *Ko-sometsuke: Chinese Porcelain for the Japanese Market*. (London: Jorge Welsh, 2013).
3. Walter B. Denny, "Between East and West: Ceramics of the Islamic World Between China and Europe," a lecture presented by the Connecticut Ceramics Study Circle at the Bruce Museum, Greenwich, Connecticut (March 13, 2017).
4. Toni Morrison interview on *Charlie Rose* (1993).