

# art and politics

by Simon Levin and  
Jennifer Ling Datchuk

When an exhibition gains national attention for threat of censorship and pulled funding to its museum, the focus shifts to the intersection of art and politics. Read on for one artist's personal experience.

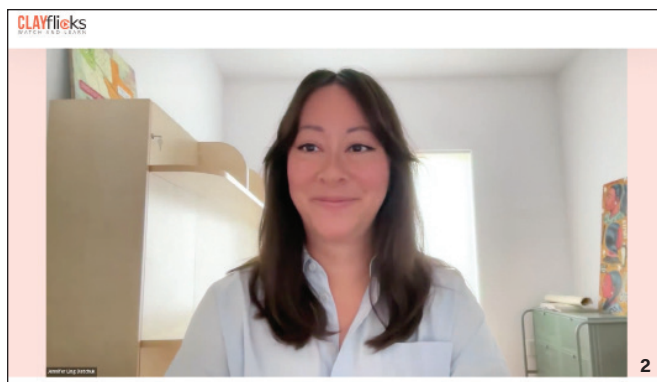
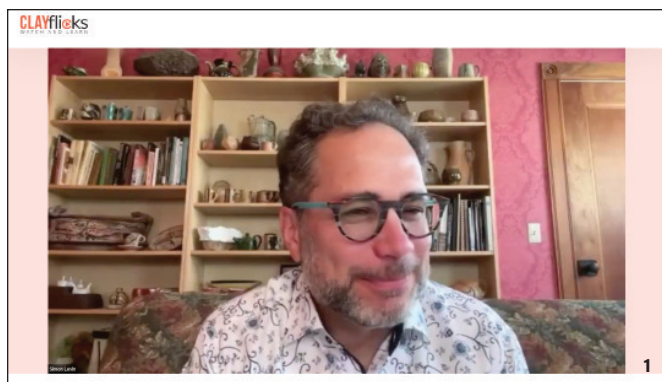
*On November 7, 2024, the Smithsonian American Art Museum launched an exhibition titled "The Shape of Power: Stories of Race in American Sculpture." In its description of the exhibition, the Smithsonian states that the works shown "allow for juxtapositions of historical and contemporary works that invite dialogue and reflection on notions of power and identity. American sculpture in its many forms also has served as an expression of resistance, liberation, and a vital means for reclaiming identity."<sup>1</sup> Since its opening, this exhibition has been called out by the executive order Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History, and the museum is under threat of losing federal funding. The following is excerpted from a Talking Clay interview between Simon Levin and Jennifer Ling Datchuk, one of several ceramic artists whose work is shown in the exhibition. Their discussion touches on her background, themes in her artwork, her views of censorship, and the importance of representation.*

## Talking Clay with Jennifer Ling Datchuk

**Simon Levin:** Do you see yourself as a political artist?

**Jennifer Ling Datchuk:** I do, and I think that also comes with the fact that it took me a long time to say I was an artist. I think that came very much from my lived experience of growing up in an immigrant Chinese household and that I needed to be the best quality daughter and be a doctor or lawyer as the first generation here.

You know, my family still doesn't really understand what I do as an artist. Although when I got a teaching job, they shook my hand and said they were proud of me because that's a title they can understand. And I think it was also teaching them what an artist does and what they're capable of. And I know I choose to make work about these topics—these difficult topics—but I feel like this my life's purpose, to give the visuals that go alongside with our history and our moments.



**1, 2** Screenshots of Simon Levin (1) and Jennifer Ling Datchuk (2) in their Talking Clay interview. **3** Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *One Tough Bitch*, 30 in. (76.2 cm) in width, photograph/documentation of porcelain shards, china paints, gold leaf, edition 1/8, 2019.

4 Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *Half*, 9 in. (23 cm) in length, porcelain; blue-and-white pattern transfer from Jingdezhen, China; collected human hair; 2014. Photo: Mark Menjivar. This work was shown in the Smithsonian exhibition "The Shape of Power: Stories of Race in American Sculpture."



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**SL:** I think you're right on. I mean, you are on several points. One, I understand the family realizing—okay, Jennifer's a teacher. You now have the blessing and the validation of an institution. And not only is it a known job, but you have this powerful institution that is saying you're worthy. You're backed. So, at its core, we're talking about some major institutions here. You as an artist, the Smithsonian as a purveyor, an educator, a representative for artists, and then the institution of the government. And these are all at play here.

But let me ask you, why do you think this exhibition, *The Shape of Power*, has drawn the attention and ire of the current administration?

**JLD:** Partially, I think because race is in the title. I think that has become a buzzword.

I think art has always been a threat to oligarchies, to oligarchs, to hegemonic systems of power—that it lives in the space that people want to control and that art is really a freedom of expression. And so what easy way for any system of power is to attack that? It's a way to silence our voices. So that's one.

The Smithsonian is a government entity. You know, one thing we learned, and I think this is something, too, that's really informative is that you have museums that are supported by your local or state governments. You have the Smithsonian, which is sponsored by the US government, and the people that work there are US government employees. And some ways, they're like the post office. When the government has a shutdown, they're the first to get furloughed. It's kind of interesting in that context, but it's also kind of amazing that our taxes help support that. It's a completely free institution. I love that you can go into any of the Smithsonian

museums for free. And that's a choice. You have that choice. You can go and see the show, or you can choose not to go.

**SL:** What would you want to tell the ceramics community? How should we react? How should we react as a community?

**JLD:** I think being an artist is very political. Whether you choose to make work that challenges or confronts hegemonic systems of power or if you wanna be a potter, that is still very political because we live in a country that doesn't financially support artists.

I think of countries all over the world that have these amazing grants and funding systems where people can be artists. That is their job. It's not artist and teacher, artist and waiter, artist and—so many of us, to be artists in this country, we are artists and our ten other side jobs. That is something I think about all the time. I wish for so much better. And as someone who teaches art, I think about our students leaving the world and having to tell them that being an artist will be the hardest job you have to financially support yourself. And that a lot of times being an artist comes with having multiple jobs. I think what I want everyone to know is that you will be doing this for years with little to no recognition, but you have to love doing this and believe that what you're doing will later find its audience. And that a lot of that is just that you keep making your work.

And so even in these times where we are politically boxed in, or facing censorship, and institutions are losing their funding, we have to keep the hope that one day this will change and that we have this work and visual record of this time because we can't forget that this happened.

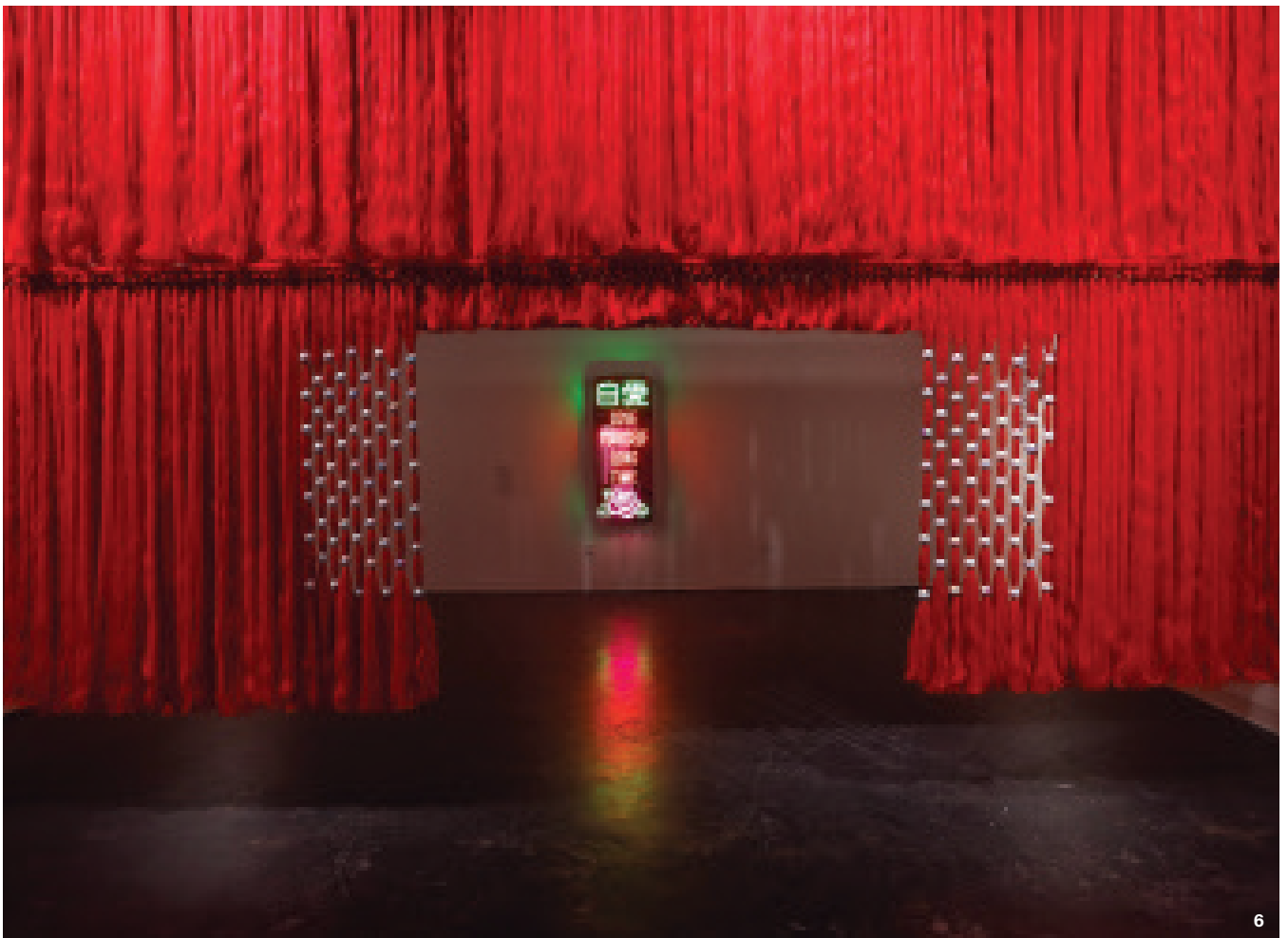


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**SL:** That's lovely. I think back to how we look at history, how we examine past cultures, and art has always been the most eloquent way to connect us to our histories, to draw connections between people who lived in the past in different cultures, different societies, different places in the world. Art is what resonates through time to draw those lines. And it's what got us through—art is what gets us through the hard times so often.

**JLD:** I think that was one thing that when *The Shape of Power* opened during the election week, I tried to go—and I haven't been to Washington, DC, since my seventh grade trip that everyone took. And so I was able to appreciate it now in a much different way as an adult. I tried to go to everything, but what I really loved was every place I went to was jam packed with people from all over the world. I heard so many different languages spoken. It was so packed, you almost couldn't see the artwork or read the labels. And I think there is a desire to learn about other people's histories and stories that and that is what kind of makes America this amazing melting pot—because we have so many communities and rich histories that intersect that all want the same thing. They want to be safe and happy and watch their families grow and thrive and prosper. So I felt like that was a really sure reassuring moment.

And so one thing I think about this executive order is I feel like it's driven more people to go see the exhibition and I love that. I love the conversations I've been having with people who have



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**5** Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *Flawless*; 20 in. (50.8 cm) in length; porcelain; decals from Jingdezhen, China; mirror acrylic; 2023. **6** Background: Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *Love Yourself Long Time*. Foreground: Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *thick*; 22 ft. (6.7 m) in length; synthetic hair; porcelain beads from Jingdezhen, China; 2021.





gone to see it. And I would say my takeaway was when I was there for the opening, I was off to the side, and I watched a young Chinese mother with her mixed-race daughter looking at my work. The mother was reading the label out loud that told my story of being mixed race, of being a third-culture kid, of feeling like I never belonged to one or the other, but I really embody this third-culture experience. And I heard the little girl go, “Yeah,” and nod. And I carry that with me. That is super validating and reaffirming as an artist. I felt so lucky I got to witness that. I felt like I was probably a creeper and eavesdropping, but it meant so much to me. And that those were the type of stories I really wanted to hear growing up—that I was different and that’s okay. So I imagine that with so many pieces in this exhibition, too.

**SL:** Yeah. It struck me that the executive order specifically identifies the fact that the Smithsonian is in DC, the seat of power. And the desire is to control the narrative in that seat of power. And, I’m also touched by this moment. We are currently in the week of Passover, which is a remembrance of past, and it’s a moment, of empathy with others who have been enslaved. And, most Passover Seders end with the injunction that no one is free until we are all free. And I think the beauty of the American experience is that freedom.

*Excerpted and edited from “Talking Clay with Jennifer Ling Datchuk.” To watch the entire*



**7** Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *like freckles, like eggshells, like stone*, to 28 in. (71.1 cm) in height, Kohler Company porcelain, bamboo mats, cheerleader pom poms, bamboo platform, 2022.

**8** Jennifer Ling Datchuk's *Moving on Up*, 36 in. (91.4 cm) in height, Laguna Clay Company porcelain doll slip colors, gold luster, human hair, carpet, wood, mirror acrylic, carpet protector, 2023.

*conversation between Simon Levin and Jennifer Ling Datchuk, find this episode of Talking Clay on [ceramicartsnetwork.org/clayflicks](https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/clayflicks) or scan the QR code.*



1 “The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 22, 2025, [americanart.si.edu/exhibition/67675/sculpture-shape-of-power](https://americanart.si.edu/exhibition/67675/sculpture-shape-of-power).