11 September 2015
through
31 January 2016

RE TRA SHAP DI ING TION

Contemporary
Ceramics
from East Asia

The field of ceramics has gone through radical changes in concept, style, and technique: artistic practices today do not confine clay to being the medium of a vessel or container, but give freedom elevating it to the realm of sculpture and beyond. As increasing global exchanges have spread such discourse and visual communication in clay worldwide, many ceramic artists, especially those in Asia, stand at a crossroads. While they inherit rich traditions from the past, the influence of Western practices, wartime destruction of infrastructure and existing values, and the influx of new information and techniques triggered numerous questions, challenges, and possibilities opening up their eyes to view clay with a new perspective. Some have updated forms, treating clay as equivalent to sculptural media such as metal, wood or stone, while others have added social or political commentary giving new significance to ceramic art. Some have used the clay surface as a canvas for expressing their creativity, and others have experimented with entirely new approaches breaking traditional concepts of cultural relics. With these infinite possibilities, ceramicists today freely navigate the boundaries between decorative and fine arts. *Reshaping Tradition: Contemporary Ceramics from East Asia* traces some of these extraordinary attempts and innovations that have re-shaped ceramic practices today through the works by seven prestigious artists, **Ai Weiwei**, **Ah Xian**, **Ik-joong Kang**, **Bui Cong Khanh**, **Liu Jianhua**, **Harumi Nakashima**, and **Yeesookyung**. Their works are individual and distinct, yet they share an important trait in their practice: they build on tradition while innovating outside established manners and aesthetics in the ceramic tradition.

AI WEIWEI
CHINA

Ai Weiwei, one of China's most acclaimed contemporary artists and an outspoken activist on human rights, is known for his controversial iconoclastic works that question existing norms and cultural values. The *Colored Vases* series challenges concepts of rarity, value, and preciousness by dipping earthenware vases from the Neolithic period (5,000–3,000 BCE) into buckets of industrial paint. The artist eradicates the commonly accepted cultural and financial tenets: the precious cultural relics are now covered with cheaply made paint, thus losing their authenticity and historical value—history itself is "no longer visible, but is still there." Using the medium of ceramics, Ai creates metaphors critiquing the overpowering of history and tradition by consumer culture, as well as the prevalent cultural and historical vandalism in China driven by market demand.

left:
Ai Weiwei
Colored Vases, 2011
Neolithic pottery (5000 – 3500 BCE) with industrial house paint
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art
©Ai Weiwei

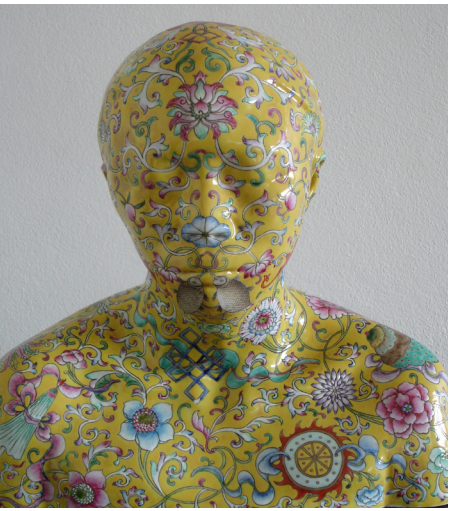
LIU JIANHUA
CHINA

Trained at the Fine Arts Department of Jingdezhen Pottery & Porcelain College, **Liu Jianhua** interprets ceramics from a contemporary perspective, presenting them in a non-narrative and anti-symbolic attitude. The artist's choice of ceramics as a medium closely reflects his own upbringing. At the age of twelve, Liu was sent to Jingdezhen to work with his uncle who was an industrial designer. However, exposure to western sculptors such as August Rodin led him to leave the ceramic industry and study fine art: ten years after he arrived in Jingdezhen to be an industrial designer, Liu became a sculptor. Liu and his work exemplify the complex role that ceramics has in contemporary art, especially in Asia where clay was traditionally considered as the medium of artisan, not artist. With continuous inventions and conscious efforts, the artist demonstrates the unlimited possibilities of clay while honoring its inherently opposing characteristics, of malleability and firmness, strength and fragility. Liu's practice avoids cultural and socio-political interpretations of the ceramic tradition. Instead, he focuses on aesthetic meanings and visual occurrences, which he refers to as "quiet aesthetics."

above:
Liu Jianhua
Fallen Leaves, 2012 (detail)
Porcelain with glaze
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Beijing
©Liu Jianhua

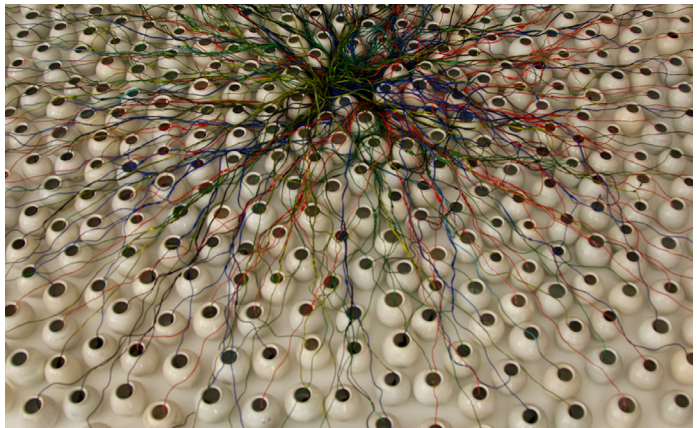
AH XIAN
CHINA

Ah Xian found political asylum in Australia after the Tiananmen Square events in 1989. Since then, he has explored aspects of multilayered oppositions, reflecting his complex life experiences. The series *China, China* resulted from the artist's physical sojourn to Jingdezhen, China in 1999 as well as his philosophical journey in which he sought to reconcile the values and ideas of his native culture with those of the West, his adopted culture. The series is layered with meanings and artistic references: he chooses the ancient Chinese craft method of ceramics; he borrows the sculptural form of the bust, a long-standing portraiture tradition in the West; he decorates the surface using designs derived from the Chinese culture. Fired in a kiln in Jingdezhen, China's historic center of fine porcelain production, *China, China* delves into the artist's personal issue—how to negotiate his own identity, living between two cultures.



IK-JOONG KANG
KOREA

Things I Know/500 Moon Jars by the Korean artist **Ik-joong Kang** is a large-scale installation that embodies seemingly disparate, even oppositional ideas, such as totality and individuality, irregularity and order, and perfection and imperfection. It is composed of 500 moon jars, arranged in concentric circles. The moon jar of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910 CE) was formed from two semi-spheres, thus, the sphere is never perfect, often revealing its join mark. The beauty of the moon jar, however, lies in its imperfection, which makes the moon jar perfect. In this installation, the 500 jars become one: the relationship between wholeness and separation in composition is integral to the work's meaning, since Kang's work is about connecting the world and especially the two Koreas into one. The sounds emanating from the speakers inside each jar connect the artist's past and present, reminding him of scattered memories and hopes.



HARUMI NAKASHIMA
JAPAN

Harumi Nakashima's hand-built organic, psychedelic ceramic sculptures, with his iconic blue dots, tackle diverse issues, ranging from cross-cultural interchange to the aesthetics and functionality of ceramics. Deeply influenced by the Sodeisha movement, Nakashima creates free-form ceramic sculptures that employ a design vocabulary borrowed from blue-and-white ware. Sodeisha resisted following any conventional ceramics tradition, setting a revolutionary course for ceramic as fine art in Japan, and Nakashima's practice exemplifies such spirit. Refusing to work with a potter's wheel, the artist's process is often referred to as "a battle with clay." His mechanic blue dots are disparate from the underglaze blue decorations executed in gestural brushstrokes used in traditional East Asian ceramics. He places circular "patches" of glaze on the clay surface for the main firing, and covers the entire body in transparent glaze for second firing. The result is a striking departure from the traditional underglazing technique, leading to the sinking of the dots upon the over-glaze with forms that seem to turn inside out and inverse, creating dynamic movements between the dots.

left:
Ah Xian
China, China–Bust 23, 1999 (detail)
Porcelain in overglaze polychrome enamels with yellow-grounded 'Eight Treasures' and flower scroll design
Courtesy and collection of the artist
©Ah Xian

bottom:
Ik-Joong Kang
Things I Know/500 Moon Jars, 2010 (detail)
Porcelain with glaze and mixed media
Courtesy of the artist and Sabina Lee Gallery
©Ik-Joong Kang

above:
Harumi Nakashima
Forms that Reveal the Absurd–1213, 2012
Hand-built porcelain with blue in-glaze
Courtesy of the artist and Yufuku Gallery, Japan
Photograph by Tatsuo Hayashi
©Harumi Nakashima

BUI CONG KHANH
VIETNAM

Trained as an oil painter, **Bui Cong Khanh** uses the clay surface as a canvas and paints images addressing the impact of continuing political and military struggles on Vietnamese society. He reminds the viewer of what is being lost by choosing a medium, technique, and compositional reference that clearly resonate with tradition: blue-and-white ceramics. A seemingly beautiful landscape reveals machines and weapons have taken over a traditional pagoda; mountains and river on close inspection reveal a vignette of Vietnam's recent history. For Khanh, blue-and-white porcelain vases become a vehicle to examine cultural constructs and conflicts related to Anglo-Vietnam relations, a sharp commentary on a society where violence, technology, and machinery have eroded the history of modern Vietnam. By containing the landscape in the silhouette of a classical vase and rendering it in soft brushwork, such narratives are reinforced in his delicate work.

The extraordinary range and depth of the ceramic tradition in East Asia provides rich ground for contemporary artists. Artists continue to explore clay: they honor tradition yet expand on it, providing historical context onto their contemporary work. Juxtaposed with select examples representing significant ceramics tradition of East Asia, the contemporary works in *Reshaping Tradition* illustrate how artists are employing tradition as a springboard for countless innovations, creating works that speak to contemporary audiences, provoking meaningful discussion, and inviting fresh perspectives on clay.

YEESOOKYUNG
KOREA

Yeesookyung's *Translated Vases* examines Korean ceramics from both historical and contemporary perspectives. She works with shards of porcelain abandoned by contemporary masters: she reconstructs and rebuilds them with epoxy then traces the seams with 24-karat gold leaf. Korean ceramic masters today who preserve the techniques of the Goryeo (918–1392 CE) and Joseon (1392–1910 CE) dynasties destroy the ceramics that do not meet their standards. Yeesookyung collects those broken, deserted, and failed pieces and translates them into her artistic language. The ceramic shards that were deemed imperfect by the masters become reborn through the artist's hands, who mends their "wounds." Despite their fractured structures, the resulting forms, both organic and lyrical, retain a precarious sense of balance, radically departing from the original ceramic vessels. Through her translation, broken ceramic pieces find other meanings.

far left:
Bui Cong Khanh
The Story of Blue, White and Red (No. 2), 2013
Porcelain, hand-painted
Courtesy of the artist and
10 Chancery Lane Gallery
©Bui Cong Khanh

left:
Yeesookyung
Translated Vase (TVW2), 2013
Ceramic shards, epoxy, 24-karat gold leaf
Courtesy of the artist and Locks Gallery, Philadelphia
Photograph by Joseph Hu
©Yeesookyung

RELATED PROGRAMMING

FUSION FRIDAY
FRIDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2015
7 PM TO 10 PM

Crash it and smash it like **Ai Weiwei** during a night of art, music and fun! Groove under the stars with dublab DJ Rani De Leon, create art using repurposed ceramics with artist Leigh Adams, delicious food truck dining, and Asian style cocktails at cash bar. Tickets are $15 for non-members and free for members.

CONVERSATIONS@PAM
SATURDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2015
7 PM TO 8:30 PM

Conversation between USC Associate Professor & Head of Ceramics Department, Karen Koblitz, along with exhibiting artist **Bui Cong Khanh**. Included with museum admission.

Cover:
Liu Jianhua
Trace, 2011 (detail)
Porcelain with glaze
Museum purchase with funds provided by Stephen O. Lesser, 2015.3.1
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USC Pacific Asia Museum
46 North Los Robles Avenue, Pasadena, California 91101
+1 626 449 2742 / pacificasiamuseum.usc.edu