

# CERAMICS: LETTING GO, FIXATIONS, ET CETERA

Claylaboration — Contemporary  
Ceramic Art Exhibition

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Feature Article

## Chan Yuk-keung

Organised by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, "Claylaboration — Contemporary Ceramic Art Exhibition" is distinguished for its exploration of the possibilities of cross-disciplinary collaborations in ceramic art. Ceramics is an art form with its own distinctive characteristics and traditions. This exhibition invites various generations of Hong Kong ceramic artists to re-examine customs and innovations of ceramic art through collaborating with creative talents from a variety of fields. It could be a challenging task to the ceramic artists, many of whom are accustomed to solitary pursuits. It also imposes challenges to their creative partners.

# Traditional body in the age of technology

The history of ceramic art probably goes as far back as the discovery of fire. Transforming clay into vessels by the firing process represents a critical step forward in our ability to use tools, further separating humanity from our fellow animals. No matter how much civilisation and technology advances, items made from clay continue to be an integral part of our lives. During winter, for instance, we prefer to drink hot tea from a ceramic vessel, with the weight and texture of the ceramic ware adding to the sensory appreciation of the tea. The relationship between humans and ceramics has survived for thousands of years. Technology may be intervening in our engagement with the digital age's material world, but no matter how immersive technology may get, we remain tied to the boundaries set by our senses and the accumulated culture passed down through the generations, produced through exchanges of sensations between matter and the body. The more advanced technology becomes, the more the human body demands feedback from the real, material world. The more day-to-day objects become mass-produced and uniform, the more people look for craftsmanship, emotional connections and individuality. As the number of cars increases, walking and biking become more fashionable, reconciling physical distance with a return to manual labour.

Despite our desire for meaningful interactions, technological changes are constantly transforming our way of life, and our increasingly alienated lifestyles have further split apart the way our bodies and the world function. In certain areas of our lives, it has gotten to the point where all one's daily needs can be met with a mobile phone. With the Internet compressing physical space and distance, our perception of reality has become more fragmented; our bodies let technology do all the manual work, and the real, physical world seems more and more foreign. But our five senses continue to work together organically

## Shaping clay, shaping character

Ceramic art has a distinctive personality and position in the art world. It has a long and rich history, which has led to a self-sufficient culture with its own techniques and aesthetics that give it a sense of exclusivity. Ceramic production has a lot to do with functional ware. Firstly, its basic technology remains unchanged: clay is mixed with water and fired to produce ceramics. The clay transforms from soft to hard and is highly versatile. Secondly, as an art form, it has the characteristics of sculpture but can also be used as a surface for paintings. However, in face of the contemporary artistic development, where ideas reign and technological and material aspects are given little weight, ceramic art, which places more emphasis on craftsmanship and techniques than ideas, appears out of fashion. The average ceramist's usual approaches, aesthetics and thoughts are often questioned and are not considered forms of contemporary artistic expression. In fact, ceramic artists have long occupied an awkward position in the world of fine art. The first reason is the way ceramic artists are trained and recognised as professionals, and the second is that they have a mature and unique tradition where they experience art in a more tactile and physical way than other artists might.

A ceramic artist always starts with hands-on training, coming into direct contact with the clay. He or she must practise over and over, and, while the methods may seem simple, every stage of the learning process is about building a certain "potter's poise". For example, one must possess extraordinary concentration during throwing, as well as

to perceive everything in the world, including the dust generated by the constant collision of matter, as well as the feelings of clearness, sootiness, lightness and heaviness as they seep into the air. All that can be replaced by technology will be replaced, but technology is no substitute for the complex sensations that the body feels, which is why we still need things like craftsmanship and good food. We accumulate experiences through the compound of neurons and time and welcome in traditional handicrafts that have been passed down for thousands of years. It is for these reasons that traditional arts, such as painting, prints and ceramics, persist. All that can be replaced by technology will be replaced, but there will always be a place for objects and experiences that have nothing to do with convenience or efficiency.

Imperfections and mistakes not tolerated in the world of technology are what bring vitality and sentimentality to traditional arts. The computing power that modern technology is known for is beginning to replace holistic thinking, the same way the Industrial Revolution replaced human workers with machines. However, the richness and complexity of thinking by feeling remains difficult to replace, as it is influenced by our personal experiences, academic background and even culture. Technology is not only replacing the way some old things are produced but also opening up new ways to feel and create. Technology and traditional arts will always contest and integrate with each other, but they also work as complements. This exhibition bears no direct connection to technology, but we cannot discuss the traditional significance of ceramic art without addressing the way we live in a technology-driven world as well as the importance of making things by hand in this day and age. When technology intervenes in and alienates us from our relationship with the physical world, can we turn to artisanal art as a form of healing and redemption?

delicate and skilful trimming techniques. After applying the glaze, one must have the patience to wait for more than ten hours for uncertain results, not to mention all the accidents that might happen in the kiln. A good ceramic artist's character is likely to conform to the training; subsequent works are bound to display some aesthetic fixations.

Manual work has always been a major aspect of learning ceramics. Our hands — fingers, palms and wrists — push and press into the clay, and we develop subtle body awareness through our physical interactions with and responses to the clay. The process allows the potter to feel and communicate with natural resources the way our ancestors did. Learning to throw clay not only makes one aware of how practicality and art can operate in harmony but also allows ceramic artists to rid themselves of their worldly thoughts and enter a relaxed state during the centering process. Ceramics is a form of art, yet the glazing and firing process is a form of science, and plenty of patience and logical thinking is needed to achieve the desired results. Proper procedures, management skills and patience are a must. Instead of asking why ceramics is often associated with craftsmanship, it would be better to say that ceramic-making has shaped those who make pottery.

# Letting go, fixations, et cetera

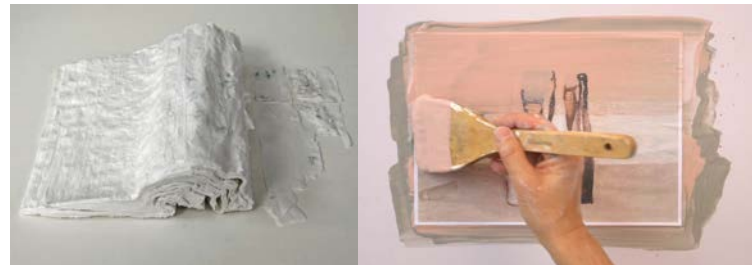
This exhibition curated by the Hong Kong Heritage Museum has brought together a group of ceramic artists spanning three generations. They are all active and representative members of Hong Kong's ceramic art scene, and many of them share a teacher-student relationship but are walking very different paths. The Museum has introduced a model of cross-disciplinary collaboration wherein ceramic artists have invited their friends from different disciplines to participate in their creations to explore new means of expression. These crossovers are not uncommon and have become increasingly popular in the multimedia community in recent years. Within the scope of contemporary art, the richer the artistic expression and the more diverse the sensory experiences, the greater a work's scale it would be. Cross-disciplinary collaborations, in this sense, are almost indispensable. However, ceramic-making can perhaps be thought of as similar to painting: it is likely to be done by one person, so it is not easy to go from working independently, with art materials and self-dialogue, to working via discourse with other people. Identifying

the contemporariness of ceramic art seems to be akin to identifying some elusive, profound philosophy captured within the clay.

However, ceramics are by nature often expressions of our bodies' experiences and material technology, and less commonly a medium for different ideas or a platform for the exchange of knowledge. What works with traditional ceramic values does not necessarily work with the relative open-mindedness and intellectual requirements of contemporary art. That is why, for the time being, many contemporary ceramic artists still follow a gradual liberal creative approach — they begin their work using traditional ceramic methods before introducing new ideas and techniques that open up all kinds of possibilities — and it is clear which takes priority. On one hand, this approach maintains the distinctive features of ceramic art; on the other, it opens new avenues of interpretation and imagination, making it possible to integrate with a wide array of artistic disciplines.

## Annie Wan

Annie Wan has always been a ceramic artist who thinks self-consciously about contemporariness. She pays meticulous attention to the seemingly basic ceramic-making process, opening up innovative perspectives by re-examining accustomed practices. For example, she uses firing shrinkage as the pivot point of her work, making use of the environment to turn unfired ceramic slabs back into powder by leaving them outdoor and even using light as a mould. She turns the customary purpose for making ceramics on its head, pointing towards the nature of time, materials and the firing process. For this exhibition, Wan's work combines and propagates the concepts seen in some of her previous work — concepts related to books and painting. She is collaborating with Elvis Yip, who has a keen sense for images. In one of the works, she applies slip onto the pages of picture books, records the process by video and replays it backwards. Wan once again shows us her interpretation of time: the sequence of video playback shows her vying to apply clay and paint onto the images of other people's works, with the original images materialising as time reverses. In the end, what the audience sees are the ceramic pieces displayed side by side with the video recording. Her two other works for the exhibition are ceramic books — created in a similar fashion — that look like colour charts, pointing to the foundations of painting.



Annie Wan applied clay slip onto the pages of picture books before firing them in the kilns, turning them into ceramic books.



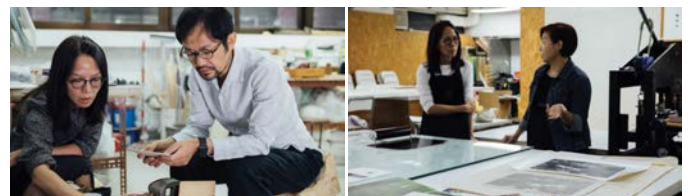
Exploring the collaboration between ceramics and painting with creative partner, Elvis Yip (left).

## Fiona Wong

Fiona Wong's work has always been delicate and exacting. She has a potter's unflappable patience and focus and can transfer her skills to other necessity goods, such as clothes, shoes and light fixtures. Most of her attention is concentrated on material objects related to the body, and her work naturally conveys a sense of personal warmth. Her diligence and ingenuity may be explained by the threefold relationship between the structure of her objects, the intellectual dimension she projects onto them and the logical ceramic-making process. So, it is not difficult to understand why she chose to collaborate with Yung Sau-mui, an artist from the Hong Kong Open Printshop, as well as Lau Ching-ping, who is known for his introspective photography. Ceramics and printmaking occupy positions at the margins of contemporary art, with both placing great emphasis on craftsmanship. The collaboration between Wong, Yung and Lau mainly uses the production of prints and photos as the background of the work, hinting towards the possibility of opening a new dialogue between these two technical mediums and the equally technical ceramic medium, joining the current crossover trend in contemporary art.



Fiona Wong transferred and printed two-dimensional images onto porcelain plates.



Discussing the relationship between ceramics, photography and printmaking with photographer Lau Ching-ping (left) and Yung Sau-mui of the Hong Kong Open Printshop (right).

## Jakie Leung

Jakie Leung, a veteran Hong Kong artist, is partnering with artists Rex Chan, Denise Chen and Ryan Cheng. Leung is trained in design and is very active in the cultural and creative industries. He is knowledgeable about a wide range of Chinese cultural topics, engaging with both refined culture and folk culture. It is not hard to see why he picked these three artists from different backgrounds to be his collaborative partners. Besides his ceramic partner, Ryan Cheng, it is worth noting that Rex Chan, an experienced painter, and Denise Chen, a member of the indigenous Paiwan tribe in Taiwan with a doctoral degree in the study of traditional ceramics, have made significant contributions to this art project. Chan specialises in free-association painting, excels in line strokes and is familiar with ceramic art. His expertise, combined with Chen's understanding of folk images and traditional handicraft techniques, had led to a seamless collaboration that ties together technology with knowledge. The focus of the work here is more on exploring the language of ceramics rather than a conceptual investigation into traditional concepts of ceramic art. Leung's approach to designing the structure and process of his work helps the four of them play to their potentials, as each member has considerable freedom within the framework that he established.



Jakie Leung and Rex Chan worked together to create thin porcelain tiles decorated with landscape motifs and painted with mythical animals inspired by *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.



Jakie Leung (left) and Ryan Cheng immersed in the process of throwing in duo.

## Chan Kiu-hong

Chan Kiu-hong's works have always been characterised by an openness in form. He works mainly with ceramics but also likes to explore different methods of expression, preferring to extend his work through physical assembly to investigate the concept of space and even the world of sound. Cultural symbols are the starting point of his work for this exhibition, and, while he means to tell stories with the piece, it does not deviate from the ceramic artist's interest in physics. His partner is Ken Hung, who studied fashion in Tokyo. Both men seem to be interested in exploring the boundaries of their professions. Giving it the name Lushan, they created a gigantic beast that looks as if it is breathing. The work is mainly composed of reptilian scales made from the negative spaces of spoons, a daily necessity. From using ready-made spoons as the casting moulds to the noises the artwork makes in operation, Chan purposefully avoids showing his craftsmanship and signature style as a ceramic artist, replacing production with direction and placing equal importance on sound and style. To a certain extent, this approach confounds traditional expectations of ceramic artworks — the technical aspects in particular — and shifts the focus to the way the ceramics are installed.



Chan Kiu-hong (right) and Ken Hung were creating the skin of their gigantic monster by sewing numerous Yixing clay scales onto a large piece of fabric.

## Nick Poon

Nick Poon's methods and aesthetics for this project are a step away from the mainstream. He uses the human form as the starting point for his work but seeks the unexpected effects created by the uncertainties in kiln firing. The attitude he takes shows that his pursuit of visual arts is rooted in classical aesthetics, that he is a believer in the rise of the anti-aesthetic movement in contemporary art. Perhaps this is the kind of compromise his generation of Hong Kong ceramists must make under the influence of contemporary art. Poon uses sculpture as an entry point — the human form is a classic and eternal subject for sculpture. Unlike any other sculptor, however, his works must be transformed from something concrete into something abstract using the kiln fire as a mediator. The logic of each work depends on a transformative process that can only be triggered by the various complex interactions happening inside the kiln, which finally turns into an abstract human form. Interestingly, Poon's collaborative partners — lighting designer Lee Chi-wai and set designer Jason Wong — provide a specific perceptive and interpretative angle for this semi-abstract piece, and the information scattered by its uncertain shape becomes tangible once again. The way I see it, Poon's work is about process and transition.



The intense heat from kiln firing had led to varying degrees of deformation in Nick Poon's ceramic sculptures.



Designing a stage-like display for the ceramic sculptures with Jason Wong (right).

## Wy Lee and Ryan Hui

The exhibition also includes a pair of ceramic artists: Wy Lee and Ryan Hui, founding partners of Toki Nashiki, a ceramic studio and brand. The two are quite young, but they are committed to upholding the ceramic traditions. In fact, these days it is rare to find ceramic artists who so carefully study a traditional vessel and uncover all of its fine textures. Their works fall mostly into the category of functional ware, but the attention paid to form and glaze makes them so much more than functional pieces. They can even reflect and convey the warmth of the artists' hands and hearts, which is surprising, to say the least. Their collaborator is Changlin Fashi, who was a well-known photographer before he became a monk. They planned to invite a large number of members of the public to use the vessels they have made, and Changlin Fashi will take pictures of the participants and their used vessels. The idea here is to highlight the functionality of pottery in the context of ceramic art's cultural history — ceramics exists for human use. As people and pottery engage and interact with each other, however, the latter transcends its function and becomes an object onto which one can project emotions and feelings. Through the accumulated traditions of generations of ceramic artists, pottery has exerted influence on people. With photography as this artwork's intermediary, the chance coupling of people and pottery opens up our simple imagination, illustrating the profound impact ceramics can have even when it is seemingly playing a straightforward role as functional ware.



Wy Lee and Ryan Hui using skillful throwing techniques to create each ceramic bowl for this exhibition.



The young potters and Buddhist master Changlin Fashi are both advocates of the belief in appreciating the beauty of life through the use of ceramic wares.

## Yokky Wong

Yokky Wong is a veteran ceramic artist from Hong Kong. There is a lot of variety to her work, and she has experimented with many ways to break through the outmoded conventions of traditional ceramic-making and ceramic displays. For this exhibition, she invited wordsmith Lee Wai-yee and designer Kevin Tang to be her creative partners, probably because she wanted to transform her studio into a theatre-like environment. The collaborators use words as a means to explain and fuel our imagination, and design as a way to organise the visual relationships between the objects of the piece. Wong uses the marks left on her studio — either made by herself or through her interactions with other people — as the main body of her work. Her relationship with ceramics is, in a sense, self-explanatory; the relationships between the people and objects that you do not actually get to see are revealed instead. Her core theme is remembering and forgetting. The importance of individual ceramic works seems to have taken a back seat; seen another way, perhaps because ceramics is already a part of life, Wong seems to have decided she might as well focus on the life that surrounds ceramics. I am interested to see what direction the group takes with Lee's writing and Tang's visual setup. Will they compose a poem by expanding on and deconstructing Wong's ceramic objects and tools? Or will they write a novel by reorganising and rearranging these objects? Using different methods, the author should have plenty of space for a versatile setup. The resulting alchemy is something to look forward to.



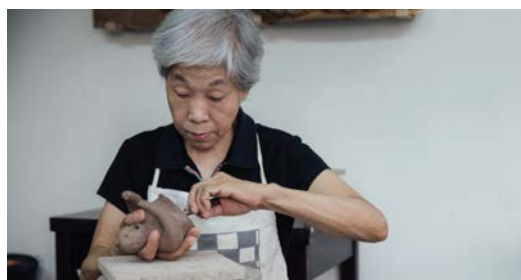
Yokky Wong replicated each object in her ceramic studio with clay, based on her own feelings and memories.

## Rosanna Li

Rosanna Li is the most senior artist in this exhibition and the teacher for many ceramic artists. Most of her works poke fun at daily life and often have a light comedic feeling to them. As usual, her work for this exhibition features her trademark ceramic figurines, but this time it is much more ambitious and bigger in scale. Her lampooning style is a lot more critical, venturing into the ageless theme of crime and punishment. More specifically, she reflects on and critiques the apocalyptic ideas that modern society has foreseen through the depictions of the "Ten Courts of Hell" and the various punishments in hell. Li seems to be aiming to dig out the sense of crisis that is buried under daily life. In her sixties, she knows the ways of the world and is focused on the broader perspective of life and life's ultimate concern. Looking back on her crude childhood experiences, she draws out topics that one would start thinking about at her age, such as causation, karmic results and reincarnation, with death being the most crucial and dramatic subject. Her artwork perfectly responds to and summarises the ups and downs of life — a theme that she has been depicting for years. Li invited space designer Ng Hoi-chi to be her creative partner and set up the exhibition. This collaboration further motivates her to ruminate on what she has focused on in recent years — how to handle the accompanying space beside her ceramics.



Scenes of judgement in hell created by Rosanna Li.



Each ceramic figure is made by hand pinching.

# Concluding remarks

This exhibition's emphasis on the collaboration between ceramic artists and their partners from other professions seems to hint at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum's role in encouraging ceramic artists in Hong Kong to consider infusing heterogeneous elements into ceramic traditions to stimulate new possibilities. Actually, according to my observations, Hong Kong's new generation of ceramic artists has long been mulling over ways to integrate with contemporary art while adhering to traditional aesthetics. This push-and-pull relationship has long been a focus of concern for ceramic artists of different generations, but most are caught in a dilemma: once the ceramic artists abandon traditions, the ceramic sensibility accumulated over thousands of years — something which cannot be expressed by other mediums — will gradually disappear. Exchanging what is familiar and fascinating for the unknown may not be worth the risk; digging a new well in a sea of traditions is not an easy task either. One would need to dismantle and rethink the procedures instilled in centuries of training, examine the footprints of those that came before, look back on the convictions that grew with skills and start all over from there. Not only would one need to be knowledgeable about ceramics, but you would also need to have the courage to let go.

It is evident from the artists' projects for this exhibition that everyone took different levels of risk. Sometimes, the collaborators are meant to play an active role in the creative process, while other times their

focus is on technical expertise or providing the audience with the desired atmosphere and perspective for viewing the work. In any case, the choices made by the artists are reflections of how the Hong Kong ceramics art scene is responding to the aforementioned pull-and-push relationship. Some artists take the approach of integrating other techniques into the ceramic-making process; some find ways to extend their finished pieces and interpretations of their work; some return to the classic principles of ceramic ware. Each artist can respond differently but always by finding a point between utilisation and spirituality, or by revisiting the question: what else can potters do apart from making functional ware?

This exhibition is fascinating because it touches upon some age-old topics in the contemporary ceramic art scene, such as the comparisons between art and craftsmanship as well as the choice between traditional and modern methods. For most artists working with ceramics, there is no single answer. Times keep changing. The focus of contemporary art has started to shift from information to matter. Automated algorithms and manual methods now serve as complements to each other; it is best to have synergy and versatility. Without singling out any medium in particular, this approach seems to already be in use in many non-artistic fields. Either wittingly or unwittingly, this philosophy is also reflected in the exhibition's conception.



## About the Writer

Prof Chan Yuk-keung is a reputable scholar, art educator and veteran artist in Hong Kong. Since 1989, he had been teaching studio art, supervising MFA students and engaging in art research at the Chinese University of Hong Kong until 2016 when he retired. Over the years, he has participated in more than 100 local and overseas exhibitions, including the 51st Venice Biennale and the 2nd Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, and authored many publications on Hong Kong art.

CLAYLABORATION

Contemporary  
Ceramic Art Exhibition

Hong Kong Heritage Museum  
29.12.2018 – 15.4.2019



Exhibition details