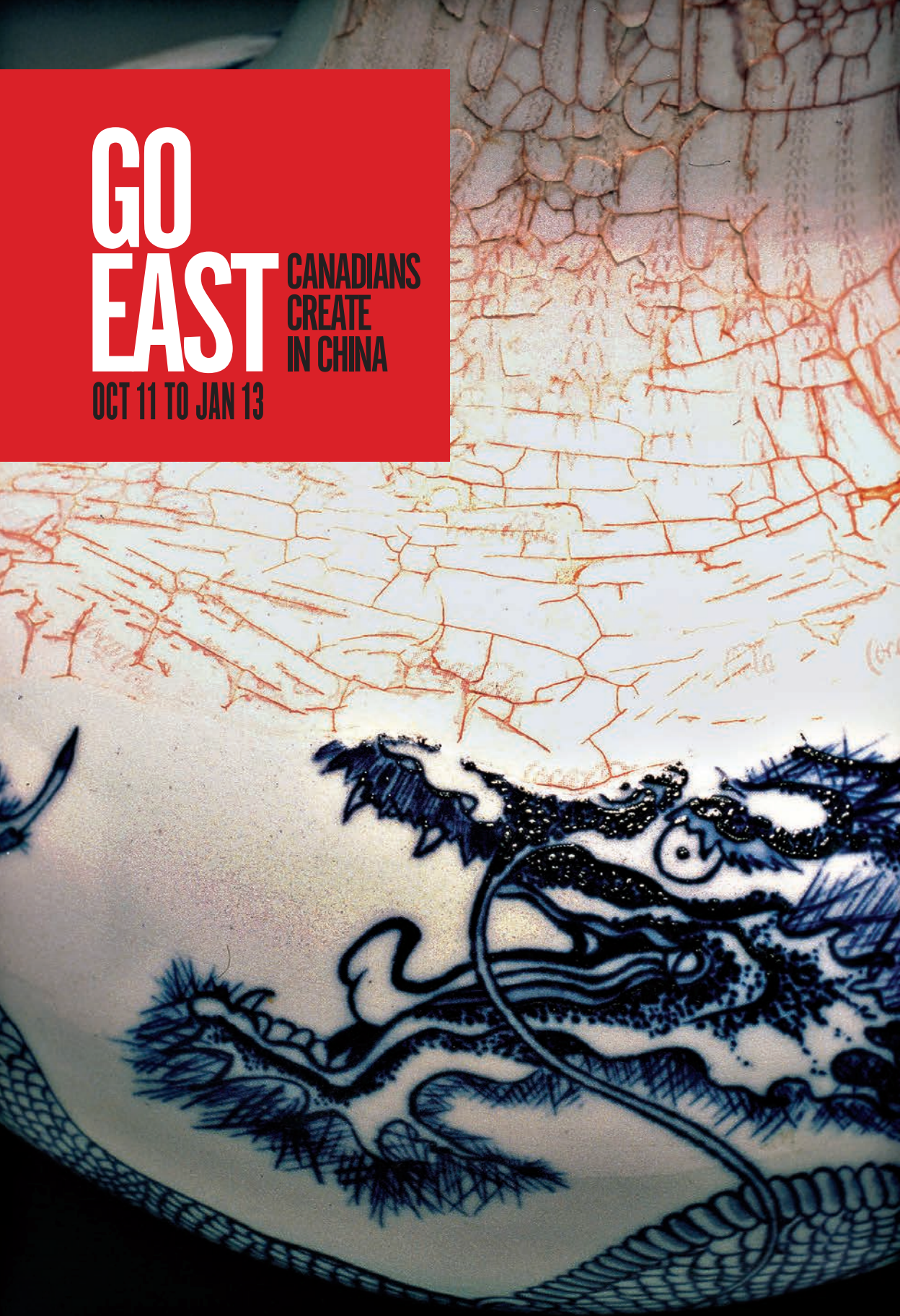


GO EAST

CANADIANS
CREATE
IN CHINA

OCT 11 TO JAN 13



SUSAN COLLETT

SALLY MICHENER

SIN-YING HO (CASSANDRA)

ANN MORTIMER

JIANSHENG LI

WALTER OSTROM

RORY MACDONALD

DIANE SULLIVAN

PAUL MATHIEU

THE TITLE *GO EAST* RIFFS THE PHRASE “GO WEST, YOUNG MAN” TO CALL ATTENTION TO THE GROWING ALLURE OF CHINA FOR CONTEMPORARY CERAMICISTS. TODAY, MANY CERAMIC ARTISTS “GO EAST” TO ATTEND RESIDENCIES AT THE POTTERY WORKSHOP EXPERIMENTAL FACTORY IN JINGDEZHEN—THE CITY FAMOUS FOR ITS ONE THOUSAND-YEAR-OLD PORCELAIN INDUSTRY—OR THE SANBAO CERAMIC ART INSTITUTE, AND PARTICIPATE IN EXCHANGE PROGRAMS WITH THE JINGDEZHEN CERAMIC INSTITUTE. ARTISTS HAVE ALSO VISITED FUPING, KNOWN FOR ITS FLOURISHING TILE INDUSTRY, IN SHAANXI. THIS EXHIBITION EXPLORES HOW THESE OPPORTUNITIES IN CHINA HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO CERAMIC PRACTICE IN CANADA. SUSAN COLLETT, SIN-YING HO (CASSANDRA), JIANSHENG LI, RORY MACDONALD, PAUL MATHIEU, SALLY MICHENER, ANN MORTIMER, WALTER OSTROM, AND DIANE SULLIVAN REPRESENT JUST A FEW OF THE ARTISTS WHO WORKED IN CHINA TO EXPAND THEIR PRAXIS.

RACHEL GOTLIEB,
SENIOR CURATOR

A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of the West's long fascination with China and how it validates its identity in relation to the exotic is a topical issue in recent scholarship. Edward Said called it Orientalism, "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."¹ However, as Linda Nochlin has pointed out, Orientalism could "serve numerous agendas, not just an imperialist one."² While the history of this imaginary Orient is not the focus of this exhibition, it is nonetheless useful to remember that Chinoiserie, as it was sometimes called, emerged in Europe as early as the seventeenth century and culminated in the mid-eighteenth century under the decorative style of Rococo. The craze for blue-and-white china re-emerged in the nineteenth century during the Aesthetic Movement, so popular—such eminent Victorians as Oscar Wilde and William Morris were passionate collectors—that collecting was derivatively named "China mania."³ Perhaps no greater testimony expresses the allure of China than *Willow*, the blue-and-white transfer-printed pattern that was made in Staffordshire, England, by many manufacturers since the late eighteenth century and exported around the world. The pattern tells the story of star-crossed lovers and features a pagoda, a bridge, a willow, and flying doves illustrated in the Chinese-inspired style. For many Western consumers, the tableware was the first cross-cultural encounter with China. The great explorer Commodore Matthew Perry is said to have been surprised when he first visited the country because it was so different from what he imagined.⁴ Today *Willow* is a source of exploration and remediation for contemporary ceramicists such as Robert Dawson, Robert Shaw, and Paul Scott.⁵

In the early twentieth century the emerging studio pottery movement, which called for handmade pottery over industrial production, also turned to China for inspiration. However, Ming blue-and-white porcelain was considered too polished and conventional by the leaders Bernard Leach and William Staite Murray, who preferred earlier Tang and Sung stonewares as the new standard because they exemplified an understated vitality. Characterized by monochrome hues of browns and greens, these early, rustic wares became available with the opening up of China after the Boxer Rebellion in the late nineteenth century, which exposed private collections and led to new discoveries made from excavations for railways in 1900. A landmark exhibition of early Chinese pottery held at Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1910 made a considerable impact on the art community, which continued to have reverberations well into the twentieth century.⁶

CURRENT PRACTICE

During the latter half of the twentieth century, many studio potters travelled to Japan and South Korea for authentic and transformative experiences, where they lived in rural villages to learn traditional folk pottery methods, from hand-shaped Raku teabowls to throwing stoneware pots on the wheel. However this trajectory changed with the opening up of Communist China to the West. Economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s led to the privatization of the national porcelain factories and the elimination of state subsidies. By the 1990s, reproduction antiques and private labelling for big-box stores such as IKEA or Target became the prevailing markets.⁷ Connections with Western studio potters and ceramicists also began in the 1990s with Jingdezhen hosting numerous conferences and tours. Notably, in 2004, the city organized 1,000 Years Celebration of Porcelain to celebrate its millennium of making. American ceramicist Wayne Higby has spearheaded exchange programs between Alfred University and Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (JCI) and Walter Ostrom between JCI and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. Jiansheng Li (Jackson Li), who runs the Ceramic Art Institute in Sanbao and resides in Toronto, has also played a major role facilitating artist exchanges.⁸

In recent years, ceramicists participating in artist residencies in China have become so common that craft historian Glenn Adamson has pointed out, “the trek to Chinese factories... is becoming almost a cliché of contemporary ceramic practice.”⁹ In addition to the artists in the exhibition, Katrina Chaytor, Ian Johnston, Les Manning, Grace Nickel, Gilbert Poissant, Shirley Rimer, Ann Roberts, Jim Thompson, Ying-Yueh Chuang, and more have made the trek.¹⁰

There is the ethical issue of China’s autocracy to consider. The suppressing of public protests at Tiananmen Square or the recent imprisonment of artist Ai Weiwei represent but two examples of political suppression.¹¹ However, for most of the artists participating in this exhibition, with the exception of Paul Mathieu, free speech and liberty are not addressed in their work. The very art of making transcended politics. In Jingdezhen there are some 250,000 artisans who are available as a resource offering a sophisticated and a highly specialized division of labour, from clay mixing to modelling and decorating to box building. To work in massive scale, massive quantities, and in all types of materials is also possible. This vast expertise proved to be fascinating albeit frustrating for the ceramicists and propelled some of them into the long debate in studio ceramics and in studio crafts of how skill and responsibility for the whole process of making influence our perception of value.

Diane Sullivan observes, “The Chinese tradition of compartmentalizing production practices to a series of masters was antithetical to my North American training. I had been taught... to personally master all steps of my process, from the mixing of clay to photographing and packing the finished product. The Chinese artisans I worked with at Sanbao were truly masters in their field, faced with the same challenges as all of us working in the ceramics world. However, with the compartmentalizing came a detachment from an overall vision... of the work at hand.”¹² What confounded and amazed

Rory MacDonald is the complex and nuanced paths in which the objects are made in Jingdezhen: "Everyone [in the city] is still aiming to put the most experienced collection of skilled collaborators together in the hope of taking advantage of the individual skills of the best people at any one given stage."¹³ However, what happens is that the most skilled modellers' work is matched with an unskilled decorator because of "the proximity and fluidness of the studios and the movement of objects."¹⁴

Sullivan and MacDonald experienced the frustrations and joys of collaboration and their statements raise questions about skill, handcraftsmanship, and industry. Is the aura of an object weakened if it is made by many hands and with industrial tools? Mathieu believes that "to make an object by hand is a profoundly political act."¹⁵ He has a point. In our current post-industrial, digital economy, making by hand is a self-conscious and deliberate choice. While not all the ceramicists in this exhibition chose to work directly with the workshop artisans, some did. Adamson observes, "industry is no longer the enemy of craft... but now there exists a rapprochement between mass production and studio craft."¹⁶

This is significantly different from the past. The result of these residencies in Jingdezhen on contemporary studio ceramic praxis is exposure to industry. For many ceramicists trained in the art school or studio pottery tradition there is now the profound opportunity to work with individualized skill and craftsmanship within the mass production of ceramics, affirming that the aura of the object is not diminished by industry.



IMAGE: Paul Mathieu, *T.A.M. Square Flower Vases*, 2005, porcelain
Photo courtesy of artist

MAKING AND HISTORY

WALTER OSTROM, PAUL MATHIEU, AND RORY MACDONALD FOCUS ON THE THEMES OF MAKING AND HISTORY AS A CRITIQUE. OSTROM INTERVENES WITH HISTORY BY SUBVERTING CERAMIC TRADITIONS. MACDONALD APPROPRIATES THE IMAGERY OF *QINGHUA* (BLUE-AND-WHITE PORCELAIN) AND TINKERS WITH TRADITION BY USING EPHEMERAL CHALK INSTEAD OF PERMANENT COBALT PIGMENTS, EMPHASIZING TRANSIENCE OVER PERMANENCE. MATHIEU ALSO MINES EUROPEAN ART AND CHINESE CERAMICS TO CREATE HIS OWN HYBRID INTERPRETATIONS.

WALTER OSTROM

Walter Ostrom's influence on contemporary ceramic practice has been immense. As head of the ceramics department at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University from 1969 to 2008, he led the revival of maiolica—brightly coloured, decorated, low-fired tin-glazed earthenware pottery using local clay. Both as a teacher and artist, Ostrom has a deep connection with world ceramic history and with Chinese culture in particular. He first visited the country in 1976 during the Cultural Revolution and has returned on numerous occasions for research as well as to teach in the capacity of honorary professor in 1996–97 at Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute.

Ostrom's knowledge of ceramic history has been described as "encyclopedic" and "labyrinthine," and this is clearly evident in his work. Quietly subversive, it whimsically critiques the rich history of ceramic consumption and production. In Jingdezhen he experienced both the enormity and the complexity of the thousand-year history of the industry. Jingdezhen impacted his practice by ending his "romantic notions" of studio pottery and underscored a new fundamental understanding of functional



ceramics as cultural signifiers and metaphors of everyday life.

With *An English Chronicle* Ostrom explores artifice and subverts ceramic traditions. "The idea is that I am making pots containing the 'history' of British ceramics," says Ostrom. This history is an assortment of nineteenth-century Staffordshire trademarks, as well as marks of influential twentieth-century studio potters, such as Bernard Leach. They are featured on the front of the plate and were hand-painted by Jingdezhen artist Huang Hui. Ostrom's choice of materials and techniques are significant because they acknowledge that Chinese porcelain set the standards for the last millennium. Chinese pottery is anonymous and therefore Ostrom's emphasis of makers' marks is ironic. Both Ostrom's and Huang's signatures are represented on the underside within the volume of the foot.

RORY MACDONALD

The investigation of ceramic production techniques and viewer interaction is central to Rory MacDonald's work. His residency in Jingdezhen in 2008 illuminated for him the significance of collaboration in the making of a single object, a praxis not typically addressed in contemporary ceramic and craft pedagogy. He completed his residency at Jingdezhen's Experimental Sculpture Factory in 2008. It is part of a larger network of small independent studios that make a range of works using a division of labour based on skilled employees. MacDonald states, "In following the production of any one object there is a collaborative approach, which is nothing less than amazing and has changed my understanding for a model of collaboration. [T]his system represents a pathway of problem solving and production as objects move between studios... The individual and the group are inseparable."¹⁷ MacDonald is currently Assistant Professor of Ceramics and Chair of Craft Division at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University in Halifax.



Chalk Works—Blue and White references a garniture: a decorative device presenting 2, 3 and 5 ornamental vases above high cupboards or chimney mantels that was introduced in the 1680s by the Dutch who were inspired by Chinese Ming altar vases. Also, it symbolizes the ephemerality of pattern and ornament since MacDonald subverts the tradition by choosing chalk for the decoration rather than cobalt pigments. A simple touch will change, diminish, or even wipe away the decoration altogether. Using examples he saw at the factory, MacDonald made these vases himself by combining slip-casting and wheel-thrown parts, which he reassembled. The hand-painted decoration is based on his factory observations and also references patterns from ceramic shards that he found at local antique markets and kiln sites.

PAUL MATHIEU

Paul Mathieu is an eminent contemporary ceramicist whose work investigates the specificity of the medium. A critic of craft and ceramic theory and a professor at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver, Mathieu points out that he actually goes west when he travels to China and suggests that current discourse should avoid “colonial” geography of “East meets West.” His objective during his four residencies between 2003 and 2005 was to “conceptualize the work and use the numerous skills and expertise available, as well as the aesthetics and historical styles still maintained there.”¹⁸ His references are “not specifically ‘Chinese’; they are above all ‘ceramics’; and the work embodies ceramics concepts through the use of universally familiar Chinese ceramics forms and surfaces.”¹⁹ While Mathieu believes that history and the theory of object making are integral to understanding his work, he recognizes that new and unintentional meanings may emerge with use.

With *T.A.M. Square Flower Vases* Mathieu juxtaposes disturbing images of the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing in 1989 with traditional Chinese decoration.



Mathieu simply bought three vases (flaws included) directly from a manufacturer of once-fired porcelain blanks. He commissioned a decorator from the workshop to paint each vase in the Chinese style with a different image: flowers, birds, and landscape. After they were fired, he went to a different workshop specializing in transferring photographic imagery. The artisans did not appear to react to the contentious content, despite his concerns. He invited each artist to choose a colour for each vase they thought most appropriate for the image. During the firing, one was left on its side and much of the surface touched the kiln floor. Consequently it remained cooler than the rest of the body; it cracked and broke. He repaired the breaks by using contrasting yellow overglaze enamel. Mathieu found that the pot was improved by the break because “it added within the material itself and the form a psychological dimension that reinforced the meaning of the painted image[.]”²⁰

IDENTITY AND TRADITION

SIN-YING HO (CASSANDRA), JIANGSHENG LI, AND SALLY MICHENER RENEW TRADITIONAL CHINESE IMAGERY THROUGH PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS AND EXPLORATIONS. HO AND LI IMMIGRATED TO CANADA BUT DIVIDE THEIR TIME BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND CHINA. HO REVITALIZES CHINESE DECORATION WITH A POSTMODERN MINDSET FOR RAIDING IMAGERY FROM BOTH HISTORY AND POP CULTURE, WHICH SHE APPLIES TO HER VESSELS MADE WITH TECHNIQUES THAT CROSS TIME AND PLACE. LI SIMILARLY RECONTEXTUALIZES THE OLD WITH THE NEW BY DISASSEMBLING AND REASSEMBLING TRADITIONAL DECORATIVE MING DYNASTY MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS ON PORCELAIN. WHEREAS HO'S WORK ENCAPSULATES THE VISUAL POLLUTION OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA, LI'S DELICATE VESSELS OFFER VISUAL RESPITE AND QUIET ELEGANCE. BY CONTRAST, SALLY MICHENER EXAMINES IDENTITY BUT AS A PERSONAL JOURNEY: HER COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE IS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND ALMOST NOSTALGIC, YET CLEARLY SPEAKS TO THE CONVENTIONS OF QINGHUA (BLUE-AND-WHITE PORCELAIN).

SIN-YING HO (CASSANDRA)

The connections and collisions between East and West are touchstones for Sin-ying Ho's practice and reflect her peripatetic life journey. Born and raised in the British colony of Hong Kong, her father fled mainland China during the Cultural Revolution. She immigrated to Canada in 1991 and became a student of Walter Ostrom at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (NSCAD). She currently resides in Flushing, Queens, New York, where she is associate professor at Queens College, City University of New York. Ho visited mainland China for the first time in 1996, participating in a NSCAD off-campus study program at Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute. She also acted as Ostrom's translator, and this experience introduced her to the tensions between cross-cultural encounters, which she applies to her artistic praxis. Ho's work represents the spirit of our age: the post-industrial, global, digital world. Her preoccupation with the tension between East and West and old and new is clearly articulated in *Made in the Postmodern Era Series – Paradox No 3*. Mao Zedong, Mona Lisa, Vitruvian Man, Marilyn Monroe, imperial dragons all stake their claim



on this masterfully deformed vessel. Ho made the form by wheel throwing and then breaking it apart and reassembling the disparate parts into one single shape. A Jingdezhen mould-maker cast a mould from the form. It was shipped to her studio in North America where she made the casts, painted the images in cobalt blue, and added her own computer-generated design using decal transfers.²¹

JIANSHENG LI

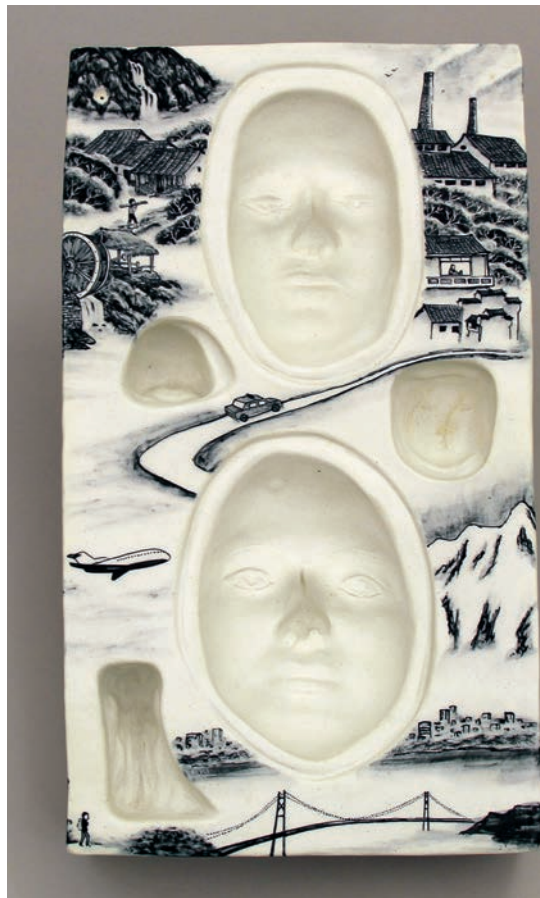
Jiansheng Li, also known by his English name as Jackson Li, was born and raised in the city of Jingdezhen and trained as a ceramic artist at the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute in China. At the invitation of Canadian ceramicists Ann Mortimer and Les Manning, he participated at the Banff Centre in 1992. Later that year he studied at Alfred University in Upstate New York, where he discovered the tenets of late postmodernism. He and Walter Ostrom exchanged teaching positions in 1997. Since then, Li divides his time between Canada and the Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute located outside Jingdezhen, which he co-founded with American ceramicist Wayne Higby in 2000. Li is part of the Post Royal China Ware or Neo-Imperial Ware Movement, which emerged in 1998. He reimagines imperial porcelain styles from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) on delicate porcelain vases. His work alludes to venerable traditions without being derivative. Precision and elegance characterize all his work. With *Crane* Li segments



the bird's leg, neck, and wing with white glaze. Viewers complete the work by uniting these separate segments in their imagination. The curves of the vase articulate the body of the Manchurian crane, a symbol of longevity.²²

SALLY MICHENER

Sally Michener studied studio pottery, learning how to make stoneware pots in the Anglo-Asian stoneware tradition under Warren MacKenzie at the University of Minnesota between 1959 and 1962. She abandoned functional pottery at the University of Cincinnati where she completed an MFA. Moving to Vancouver, Michener foregrounded the practice of ceramic sculpture. Michener shaped the pedagogy on the west coast, teaching at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design from 1973 until she retired in 1998. She completed two residencies in Jingdezhen and Fuping, where she chose to experiment with local porcelain using her own methods but remaining open to the numerous possibilities the country afforded. Michener states: "Within this tantalizing environment offering access to trained assistance in every aspect of production,



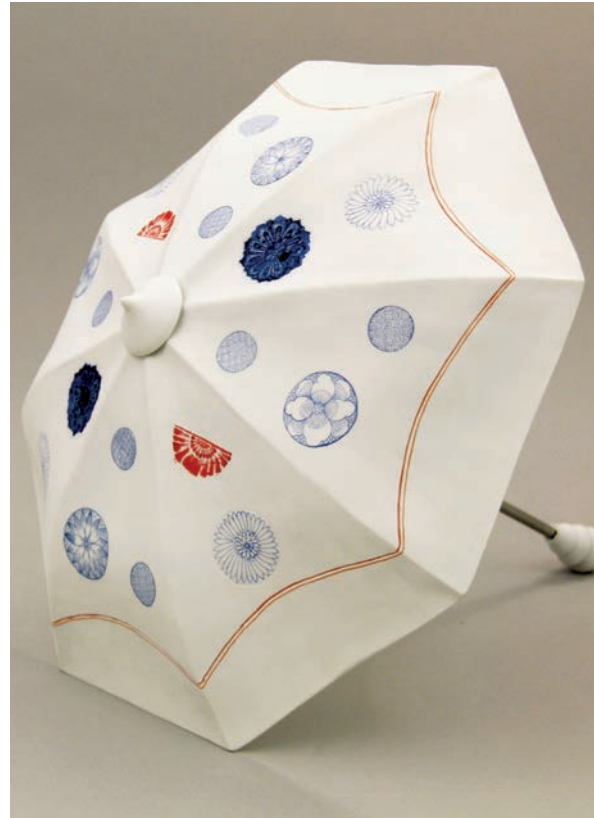
I could have dramatically enhanced the scale and number of completed works. However, I decided to maintain the primacy of my imprint and to use assistants primarily for technical support."²³

NEW AND POST-CHINA PERSPECTIVES

ANN MORTIMER, DIANE SULLIVAN, AND SUSAN COLLETT RESPOND INDIRECTLY TO CHINA'S HISTORY, USING IT AS A DEPARTURE FOR NEW INVESTIGATIONS IN THEIR WORK. THE OBJECTS PRESENTED HERE WERE MADE ENTIRELY OR PARTLY UPON THEIR RETURN TO CANADA. REFLECTING NEW PERSPECTIVES, MORTIMER MAKES THE FAMILIAR UNFAMILIAR BY RECASTING THE UMBRELLA AS A PORCELAIN BEAUTY, WHILE SULLIVAN RECONSIDERS THE TRADITIONAL *MEIPING* VASE WITH THE APPLICATION OF DEEP HAND CARVINGS. COLLETT'S TWISTED AND ORGANIC FORMS MAY INITIALLY SEEM TO HAVE THE LEAST CONNECTION WITH CHINA BUT UPON REFLECTION CONJURE IMAGES OF JINGDEZHEN'S SMOKE STACKS AND UBIQUITOUS CLAY SHARDS. ALL THREE ARTISTS SHARED THE COMMON DISCOVERY OF NEW WAYS OF MAKING AND THINKING ABOUT CLAY, LEADING TO EXPLORATIONS IN NEW FORMS AND TECHNIQUES.

ANN MORTIMER

Ann Mortimer has been a ceramic artist for over forty years. Based in Newmarket, Ontario, she often explores sculptural forms in series, notably elegant abstract birds and floral teacups made of coiled clay tendrils. Mortimer has visited China seven times since 1981, including Fuping and Jingdezhen. The umbrella form is a departure from her usual oeuvre, though she briefly explored it in 1975. She returned to the form after visiting an umbrella factory in China in 2005. The folding umbrella, or parasol, originated in China thousands of years ago and was made with a bamboo handle (symbol of longevity) and an oiled paper canopy. The umbrella, a Buddhist emblem symbolizing spiritual authority and charity, is often painted as a decorative motif on Ming porcelain. Today the umbrella is a ubiquitous object fabricated in all sorts of materials but rarely ceramics. Her goal



to make translucent canopies involved a series of trials and errors but was finally achieved with the help of Jiansheng Li and Li Quiong. Mortimer's porcelain carapace evokes the fragility and tranquility of shelter.²⁴

DIANE SULLIVAN

Based in Williamsburg, Ontario, Diane Sullivan established her ceramic practice in the mid-1990s, using a technique of carving porcelain similar to but more pronounced than the Chinese tradition on shapes influenced by Asian and European history. Her interest in these techniques is in part why she chose to do the residency in Sanbao in 2006. Her objective in China was to absorb as much of Chinese ceramic history as possible. This experience gave her further confidence to explore the grammar of decoration and functionality. Sullivan states: "In working with the artisans at Sanbao I experienced a confidence in my abilities that resulted in a new body of work utilizing my carving techniques on monumental figurative sculptures. My vessel work was also



infused by the same sources and I experienced a renewed affection for the classic palace pot silhouettes that suggest the human figure."²⁵

SUSAN COLLETT

Toronto artist Susan Collett visited Sanbao in 2003 and Fuping in 2007. During her residencies, she “experienced the gamut of porcelain production from huge vase forms, hand-thrown in sections and built to 12 feet in height, to the delicate details of paper-thin porcelain cups.” The history and complexity of Jingdezhen’s porcelain industry and Fuping’s tile industry fired her imagination about the duality between strength and fragility and introduced new possibilities of working in large scale. She says, “without realizing directly what had influenced me in China, I was inspired to experiment and let discoveries distill[.]”²⁶ *Aggregate I* represents Collett’s *Maze* series and explores chaos and order. The layered organic form is a metaphor for the strength we require to navigate our fragile and



temporary existence. The thick and undulating slip trails evoke chaotic passageways that are based on her ink drawings of China’s environs.

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RAPHAEL YU CENTRE
 OF CANADIAN CERAMICS



1 Surplus plates that inspired Rory MacDonald. 2 Walter Ostrom attended the Chinese opera every Sunday. In appreciation, the amateur group dressed him in costume as various opera characters. 3 Anne Mortimer's umbrellas drying in their moulds.