

GO EAST

Canadians Create in China

by Heidi McKenzie

“Go East: Canadians Create in China” is a stunning survey of nine contemporary Canadian ceramic artists’ works whose practices have been touched and indelibly altered by their visceral experience of modern-day China. The exhibition, which was on view at the Gardiner Museum (www.gardiner-museum.on.ca) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, showcases works by Susan Collett, Sin-Yin Ho, Jiansheng Li, Rory MacDonald, Paul Mathieu, Sally Michener, Ann Mortimer, Walter Ostrom, and Diane Sullivan.

Curated by Rachel Gotlieb, Go East highlights a recent and current trend that shifts the migratory path of ceramic artists, up until the last two decades, from Japan and Korea to China—specifically to centers of industry such as Jingdezhen and Fuping. Gotlieb plumbs the source of this growing allure while at the same time challenges the community and the Museum’s public at large to consider foreign modes of making as equally valid to North American norms. With over 250,000 skilled artisans in Jingdezhen alone, production is driven through narrowly focused divisions of labor where notions of the individual maker and handcraftedness are antithetical to Western wholistic studio-based models of making.

Although it is virtually impossible to circumscribe categories within this near 30-piece exhibition, Gotlieb deftly groups the works by theme: Making and History; Identity and Tradition; and New and Post-China Perspectives. My review of the work traces selected pieces as they are visually laid out on the viewers’ trajectory. East-coast veteran



1 Jackson Li's *Crane*, 12 in. (31 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain, painted enamel, 2011.

artist and educator, Walter Ostrom, is interested in shedding light on the subversive and spotlighting the ironic. His piece *Chinoiserie Squared* (request this piece?) cunningly references Europe's centuries-old fascination with blue-and-white. Ostrom, known for his mastery of majolica, had a local Jingdezhen cobalt painter copy his tin-glaze plate onto a factory-purchased blank. Ostrom's original, displayed alongside its Asian iteration, cheekily places the makers' mark front and center in a pithy reversal of the anonymous maker. The effect of the simultaneous twinning on display underscores Europe's elusive quest to master Chinese technology pitted against the backdrop of China's over 1000 years of porcelain production.

Rory MacDonald is the current Chair of Craft Division at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University in Halifax. He carries forward the mantle for Ostrom (who taught for 38 years at NSCAD and retired in 2008). MacDonald's works are just as subversive in tone (figure 5). He chose to side-step collaboration, and created his own slip-cast and thrown vases, or sourced existing plates from factories. Using chalk, MacDonald decorated the pieces himself with shards he'd sourced at local antique markets or factory floors as templates for his inspiration. The work is playful and energetic—qualities that belie their tenuous ephemerality.

Artist, critic, and academic Paul Mathieu from Vancouver, Canada, declares that “to make an object by hand is a profoundly political act.” Yet, of the presenting artists, I found his methodology to be the most exploitative of his factory-driven surroundings, while at the same time, the most politically motivated. *T.A.M. Square Flower Vases* is a convincing example of conceptual contemporary art: Mathieu bought the vases from a manufacturer of once-fired porcelain blanks; he commissioned their decoration, referencing stereotypical images of flower, birds, and landscape; and he procured the assistance of a transfer specialist in applying politically charged photographic imagery of Tiananmen Square. Through his activist commentary, Mathieu seamlessly renders the universally familiar into something radical. In a similar vein, Mathieu literally turns style and convention on its head: *Chinese Matisse Vase: Peaches and Bar* is an upside down bust of



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2 Walter Ostrom's *Chinoiserie Squared*, xx in. (XX cm) in height, materials, 200X. 3 Sally Michener's *Journey to Jingdezhen*, 17½ in. (44 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain, 2007. Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum. 4 Sin Ying Ho's *Made in the Postmodern Era—Paradox No 3*, 20½ in. (52 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain, hand-painted cobalt blue, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, high fired in reduction, 2008. Courtesy of the Gardiner Museum.



5 Rory MacDonald's *Chalk Works—Blue and White*, to 29¹⁵/₁₆ in. (76 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain decorated with chalk, 2008.

Henri Matisse with the iconic Chinese imperial “peaches and bat” pattern, which symbolized longevity and good luck, prominently featured. Gotlieb notes that Mathieu intermingles concepts of representation, function, and decoration to underscore the tension between form/surface and image/object.

Hong Kong-born Sin-Ying Ho played a pivotal role as translator for her then teacher, Walter Ostrom, in establishing an East-West interchange between NSCAD and Sanbao, near Jingdezhen. A product of a different place and generation, Ho’s work embraces the fragmentation of Postmodernism. It is steeped in her own experience of cross-cultural tension. *Made in the Postmodern Era Series—Paradox No 3* is a visual mish-mash of cultural iconography and traditional imagery. Gotlieb marvels at the visceral reactions elicited from this pop-culture/historically derivative visual mash-up, “there’s something not quite right when you approach her work, it is masterful and yet so awkward. You’re intrigued, then captivated, then when you look closely, you ‘get it.’” I first viewed the work with a group of middle-aged women who were vocal in their mirroring of the emotional journey articulated above. Ho’s message is partly feminist; she plays with images of 50’s style housewives, Marilyn Monroe, and General Mao.

Jiansheng (Jackson) Li is the co-founder of Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute located outside of Jingdezhen, the city of his birth and

training. Since the Ostrom/NSCAD exchange in 1997, Li divides his time between continents, and calls Toronto his part-time home. Li’s work finds its place among the Neo-Imperial Movement that characterizes the late 1990’s in China. Gotlieb describes Li’s work as a non-derivative reimagination of imperial porcelain styles from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). One of his featured works, *Crane*, (figure 1) offers the viewer only fragments of the Manchurian bird and obligates its audience to complete the image in their mind’s eye. The vase has an other-worldly ethereal quality. In Li’s words, “I do not change the essence, keeping tradition as strong reference, I reduce the noise, narrations, and symbols that have no meaning today.”¹

Gotlieb curated Ho’s and Li’s work alongside Sally Michener’s, as each of these artists are concerned with expressions of individual and/or collective identity juxtaposed within the context of tradition. Michener’s *Journey to Jingdezhen* (figure 3) is a pictorial collage of her travels that incorporates Tang dynasty-like cave paintings and figurative bas-relief self-portraiture against Vancouver’s Lions Gate Bridge and the ancient potteries at Sanbao. The wall-mounted sculpture is haunting, and distinguishes itself within the exhibition as the most covertly personally vulnerable offering of the assemblage.

The final grouping of artists encountered is three makers whose practices took a decided turn or transformation as a result of their

post-China perspectives. Ann Mortimer, a relatively frequent visitor to China, was enthused by the ubiquitous and colorful Chinese parasol, whose bamboo handle is a symbol of longevity. With the help of Jian-sheng Li, Mortimer was able to create a plaster mould to realize her vision of porcelain umbrellas. Upon her return to Canada, Mortimer subsequently crafted her now signature series of umbrellas in earthenware. The dichotomy of ceramic's permanency and fragility lends deeply meaningful subtext to these non-functional, aesthetically charming works. NASCAD and University of Washington-trained, Diane Sullivan transposed her deeply incised carving onto Meiping-inspired vases, thus finding a new grammatical lexicon for her potter's vocabulary. Sullivan's residency at Sanbao proved to be a major watershed, "Being an unknown in a foreign country surrounded by millennia of revered ceramic production turned a creative switch on in my brain that allowed for work I had seen only fuzzily on the outer perimeters of my imagination."²

Susan Collett's towering sculptural forms stand as proof-positive of the artist's transformative encounter with China. *Aggregate 1*, from her "Maze Series," is evocative of Jingdezhen's ever-present smoke stacks, and provides abstracted evidence of her absorption of this fragmented and highly industrialized milieu. The winding gestural slip trails usher in notions of the City's passageways and are drawn from her fieldwork sketches. Collett's works explore chaos and order, and her means of construction asks the viewer to consider the layered dichotomies of the medium's fragility and permanence set against our own temporal existence.

Upon leaving the exhibition there is a chalkboard with the beginnings of patterns inviting its audience to impart their creative energies. As I left my own markings on the board, sketching the Taoist yin-yang symbols, I found myself considering a couple of the questions Gotlieb poses to the viewer: is there, as Glenn Adamson suggests, a rapprochement between studio craft/studio pottery and industry; and is the aura of the object diminished by the latter? I believe, in the final analysis, yes and no, and maybe. This conundrum both satiates and whets curiosity. Go East: Canadians Create in China is Rachel Gotlieb's inaugural solo feature curatorial triumph since her installation as the Senior Curator at Toronto's Gardiner Museum in May 2011. We look forward to many more equally as insightful, ground-breaking, and aesthetically successful endeavors.

Footnotes: 1-2 Rachel Gotlieb, Senior Curator, Gardiner Museum. *Go East: Canadians Create in China*. Exhibition catalog, published by the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012.

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6 Diane Sullivan's *Mei Ping with Lotus*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, glazed porcelain, 2010. 7 Susan Collett's *Aggregate 1*, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, handbuilt paperclay, colored slips, engobe, majolica, multiple firings, 2011. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied. 8 Paul Mathieu's *T.A.M. Square Flower Vases*, to 14 in. (36 cm) in height, porcelain, 2005. 9 Paul Mathieu's *Chinese Matisse Vase: Peaches and Bat*, 13³/₈ in. (34 cm) in length, porcelain, 2005.