

HEIDI MCKENZIE

China Unbound



China Bound No 6-2



China Bound No 4

By Gil McElroy

Attentions must be paid. But what kind? And to what? (I'm looking at you, ceramics.)

Alas, it's all too easy to avoid thinking about ceramics in terms of the bigger picture – its place in the larger world, I mean. Unlike some mediums, ceramics tends to be so medium-specific you either become so entirely caught up in such and same that you see or read nothing else beyond medium; or you can move past (though not abandon) issues of materiality and medium and undertake a deep consideration of clay's utile, aesthetic and even philosophic place in the world, seeing larger, interwoven relationships. Both are legitimate worldly approaches, but only one really opens doors.

Not surprisingly, then, I very much prefer the latter; it encompasses possibilities, range, openness to a vast and fecund world of ideas and influences and meanings while still being rooted in and committed to material considerations and issues. There is, I think, a danger of a kind of self-absorption in being utterly medium-specific, medium-centred to the exclusion of all else. Modernism, at its very worst, attempts to

shoulder aside context and place. Ceramics, like virtually every other creative field, has in no way been immune to such aridness.

Which is where Heidi McKenzie finally comes into the picture, and her exhibition *China Unbound*, comprising works in porcelain and stoneware. Attentions are paid, both to medium and materiality, as well as to larger issues and meanings and allusions that transcend the insularity of the world of fired clay. It's all about balance, and Heidi McKenzie does a pretty damn good job of it.

I'll be the first to admit that I have something of an obsession about the aesthetics of the spiral form central to thrown or coiled work, about the fact that the thrown or coiled vessel has symmetry about a vertical axis that we just take for granted as opposed to really noticing it, and that we should really stop doing that. And so first off the mark, McKenzie makes the aesthetic argument that attention should be paid.

Her exhibition *China Unbound* is, in many ways, about the visual cognition of the centrality of the spiral form in ceramics. McKenzie's are wildly overt artefacts that way, almost more like springs than the tightly wound spiral classically ascribed to ceramics. The latter, of course, is about the utile need of



Reaching Jade

containment, of a workable vessel. McKenzie's are as well, though in an attitudinally different way. Like the *China Bound* series, for example, in which the spiral, the tight coil, is loosened, some of the implicit tension eased so that the coils actually separate, open up, droop, even. The vessel form, in essence, de-constricts, dematerializes, permitting the elemental spiral to come to the fore, to predominate aesthetically.

And these are indeed vessels, these six pieces comprising *China Bound*, for they contain – and not just in some abstract, vaguely suggestive way. The classical vessel form tends to be deterministic as a container, unyielding as a form. McKenzie's, on the other hand, yield to the underlying imperatives of the form, allow full expression to what is usually compressed within and held in place by the utile needs of the vessel.

So McKenzie aesthetically reminds us – recalls, even – the notion that the thrown or coiled vessel form is, in some critically important ways, all about tension courtesy the creative act of loosening the constraints of the vessel and allowing it, in a way, to fall apart, to open up, to unleash. It is a seemingly oppositional act that, in fact, deeply underscores and supports “vesselness” rather than undermining it.

Still, there's more. This aesthetic deconstraint of the vessel, of the coil, becomes surprisingly animated, almost creaturely. The loosened coil of porcelain retains its meaning as a vessel in a two-fold way: by the fact that McKenzie has inserted objects within the form, and by the suggestively protective and embracing way the deconstructed porcelain form coils around the internal objects, lovingly and even protectively, perhaps. *China Bound #4* (2013) exemplifies this. The closed vessel – the foot – begins to deconstruct about midway up, and the loosened porcelain coils wrap themselves about (and over top



Reaching Amethyst, Jade, Aquamarine

of) the two contained objects; a pyramid and a cube.

More properly, they're a tetrahedron and a hexahedron, respectively. I fussily mention that because it's important, for these shapes are two of the so-called “Platonic solids,” shapes that were known and studied far back in human history and once credited as comprising the elemental structure of our world (earth, air, fire, and water).

So McKenzie proffers elemental shapes wrapped in the products of elemental processes, and the consequences are exquisite objects, fecund and rich with aesthetic possibilities, and meanings and connotations that extend out well beyond their physical presence and immediacy. These are *truly* worldly artefacts.

McKenzie here also exhibited “unwound” vessels that were absent any containing element. *Aquamarine and Jade* (both 2015), for example, were two of several such artefacts, vessels that arise vertically from a base of typical vessel construction and containment, but which unravel into rising spiral strips of stoneware that defy the imperatives of gravity. I of course like what's going on here, the clay vessel being decohered into something “other,” being turned into something akin to objects lighter than air, almost as if they were about to entirely drift away. It is almost like watching an orange being unpeeled in one piece, but much, *much* more interesting.

But absence doesn't necessarily make the heart grow fonder; McKenzie's aesthetic play that encompassed the platonic solids (and several were also exhibited on their own, alone and apart from containing vessels) made for meatier work, stuff richer in meaning and possibilities.

With her *China Bound* series, Heidi McKenzie showed us somewhere truly interesting to go.