

China Unbound Heidi McKenzie

A Review by Gil McElroy



THE TITLE OF CANADIAN CERAMIST HEIDI MCKENZIE'S Toronto exhibition worked on a couple of levels. Part of it was geographic: some of the work included here was created during a residency

in the 'porcelain capital' of Jingdezhen, China in the spring of 2013 (and, in the interest of full disclosure, some was done while in Denmark in the fall of 2014). And the other level was material: the vast majority of



pieces in this show – just more than 20 in total – were, of course, porcelain.

Multiple levels/multiple meanings are good. I mean, ceramics certainly is not a one dimensional medium (no pun intended), and it is important to keep in mind, to recall, that it is meaningful beyond the aesthetic (inclusive of the decorative and/or ornamental) and beyond the domestically utile. Ceramics has enormous industrial relevance, for instance; recent advances in 3-D printing include polymer-derived ceramics capable of withstanding temperatures in the range of 1700°C. For an ancient technology, it is a pretty damn important part of the 21st century hi-tech landscape.

It is worth keeping that in mind when dealing with McKenzie's work. It is not industrial by any means and, in fact, does seem to cleave more closely toward extracting meaning from the domestically utile in shaping its aesthetic arguments. But – the utile is just a point of departure, for McKenzie is doing things with the vessel form that ultimately have little to do with workaday function yet does not topple entirely over into the realm of the purely sculptural. Her *China Bound* series (2013) is where all this dynamic tension happens.



Facing page: China Bound No. 2. 2013. Porcelain. 4 x 5.5 x 3 in.
Top left: Jade. 2015. Stoneware and acrylic paint. 14 x 6.25 x 6.75 in.
Above: Amethyst. 2015. Stoneware and acrylic paint. 12 x 5 x 5.5 in.

Since the construction of a vessel is time-bound and thus a kind of narrative, McKenzie's work begins conventionally enough with a typical vessel base or foot – the beginning of her 'story'. But moving physically upward (and therefore through time) the vessel form is deconstructed – or perhaps more accurately, is never constructed at all. Instead of solid vessel walls of coiled or thrown origins, what we encounter in its place is a ribbon of porcelain, a decoherent container that only just barely sketches out a volume.

It is a spiral form, and it is significant to note that a spiral is, in fact, the shape of a circle mapped over time. And it is further worth noting that all thrown or coiled vessels forms are just that – circles structurally mapped out over time. The major difference when it comes to McKenzie's body of *China Bound* vessels is that she makes this an aesthetically overt and central factor rather than leaving it latent within the form, and so permits metaphors and analogies to grow and abound, inclusive of (though by no means limited to) the things as seemingly disparate as the chambered shells of the marine creature the Nautilus, and something



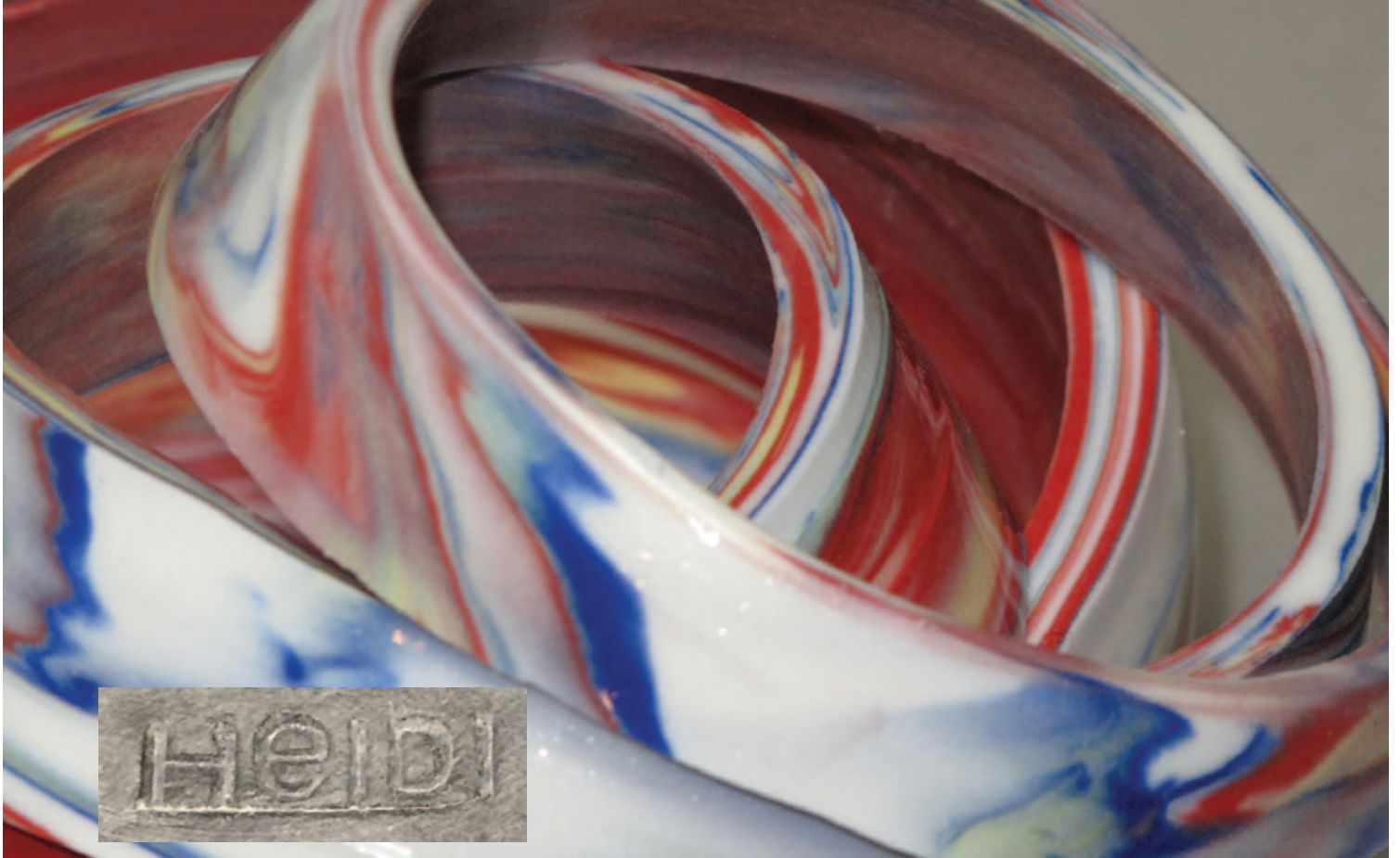
seemingly as esoteric and remote as the spiral galaxies that abound in our universe (and one of which our planet and solar system are a hugely minor part).

I know, I know – that is a bit of a mouthful. At first it might seem as if I am stretching to make my point, but in fact I am not. McKenzie is simply making the geometry of the vessel form the central concern of her work. The loopy, ribbon-like spirals of the *China Bound* series and even more recent works such as *Jade* or *Amethyst* (both 2015) may at first seem several major steps removed from the vessel form, but in fact they absolutely cleave closely to it, articulating the same principles, the same volumes. They are in fact containers, albeit of a much more conceptual bent.

But – not entirely. Some of these spiralled, decoherent vessels in fact contain interior elements. Like their framing container, they too are made of porcelain. *China Bound #2*, for instance, contains a ceramic sphere around and atop which a ribbon of porcelain sinuously coils, almost as if it is in the embrace of some creature such as a snake, or perhaps the arm of an octopus or

squid. *China Bound #3* holds a pyramidal form poking one sharp apex out from beneath an untidy heap of coils. And *China Bound #4* only barely contains the form of a large porcelain cube, as does, for that matter, *China Bound #6*. On a shelf elsewhere, McKenzie has exhibited more complex, multi-faceted iterations of these shapes such as *Essence No. 1, 2 and 3* (2015) on their own, without containing spiral vessels (which McKenzie also showed as independent works without interior holdings).

There is important stuff going on here, for, save for the sphere, these are in fact the *Platonic Solids*, five geometric shapes known and studied for thousands of years, and which the Greek philosopher Plato theorised comprised what were then believed to be the primary elements of earth, air, fire and water. Of course they are fascinating forms in and of themselves,



but it is what McKenzie has done with them in her *China Bound* works that is of aesthetic consequence. In a real way, what she is proffering is the notion that the real contains and holds within it the ideal. These Platonic forms, these shapes, are geometric and mathematical idealisations once used to try and describe nature, define the world; even a 16th century understanding of the cosmos endured the straitjacket of their idealisation attempting to trump reality.

We still, alas, try to force those kinds of fits, but Heidi McKenzie rightly proffers an inversion of that relationship, enveloping these forms, these

Facing page, top left: *China Bound No. 3*. 2013. 3.5 x 3.5 x 4.5 in.
 Facing page, top right: *China Bound No. 4*. 2013. 6 x 4.75 x 4.75 in.
 Facing page, below left: *China Bound No. 6*. 2013. 5 x 5.75 x 7 in.
 Facing page, below right: *Essence No. 1*. 2015. 5.75 x 5 x 4 in.
 Above: *Essence No. 2 (Detail)*. 2015. 5.5 x 5 x 5 in.
 Above inset: *Heidi McKenzie's Maker's Mark*.
 Left: *Essence No. 3*. 4 x 5.5 x 5 in.
 Below: *Heidi McKenzie*.

idealisations, within the shape of that which is real – within the physical articulation of time that is the spiral, and which she manifests in clay.

China Bound is significant work, meaningful well beyond its materiality and medium. There is dynamism of course (and even a weird kind of loving affection) evident in simple coils of clay, of the real, gently containing the sharp, unyielding shapes that the ideal can assume, maybe holding it back from what its inflexibility may wrought upon the world.

And there are lessons to be had in that.



Gil McElroy is a poet, artist, critic and curator living just outside of Toronto. *Heidi McKenzie: China Unbound* ran from April 2 – April 26, 2015 at the David Kaye Gallery in Toronto. All pieces are made from porcelain.