

art & design 23:

November 2022

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1023003>

DRIVEN BY A WILD FORCE

Eva Ding

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of
Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

© 2022 the authors; © illustrations, the artists or other copyright owners.

DRIVEN BY A WILD FORCE

Eva Ding

Arriving in another country as a new immigrant always comes with mixed emotions, and finding a place between fitting in and feeling alienated is something that has preoccupied me for eight years. The experience of living in a different culture is the process of getting to know this new world better and getting to know myself better at the same time. I love this country for its unparalleled natural scenery and diverse cultural atmosphere, enabling me to live in freedom and happiness. It is an open society where equality, love, acceptance and tolerance are all striven for.

Choosing to study ceramics as my major was perhaps the result of an obsession or a particular emotion. I often saw exquisite ancient Chinese porcelain in museums in China in my childhood, and I have admired people with the specific skills required to make such pieces ever since.

The Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic brought me many fantastic experiences; I was tirelessly kneading, rolling, pinching and coiling. Bringing with me the unique experience of immigrant status, I inserted my emotions into my study in the second semester of the first year. One morning, I remember rushing into the head of department, Rob's office and saying I wanted to challenge myself through a 'multiple' project that would aim to create 'us.' It would be a time-consuming project, involving the making of numerous small sticks out of different clay materials and coiling natural grogs (like stone, sand and soil) into clay bodies and firing them at different temperatures. At the same time, this would also be an infrequent opportunity for me to study the properties of different clays. Rob readily supported my proposal; I then made a lot of sticks.

I have a strong interest in the different clay materials of ceramics. The beauty of glaze is incomparable; however, the natural power of clay, which comes from the earth and from nature, has always attracted me. I used earthenware, stoneware, porcelain and different grogs, and batch-firing them in Cone4, Cone6, Cone10R, Cone08R Raku, and Cone6R Sagger allowed me to achieve distinctive colours and textures. Instead of using glaze, I tried to exploit as much of the natural diversity as possible in the clays themselves, utilising an open display mode with no fixed pattern.

I named the resulting work *This is Us* – a large number of unglazed ceramic sticks made of varied materials fired in different atmospheres. Each stick stands for an individual who, together with all the others, constitutes our multicultural society. I was honoured to receive the ceramic award in the ECC NZ Student Craft / Design Awards for 2020.

Over time, my understanding of ceramics has changed utterly through my study at Otago Polytechnic. I fell in love with handmade ceramics. The rough and irregular asymmetrical aesthetics I had never seen in Chinese porcelains have entirely mastered me. While China has never been free from the constraints of traditional aesthetics in the development of modern and contemporary ceramic art, Japan was influenced by modern Western art in the twentieth century and took a different direction under the guidance of the Sodeisha Group, who pioneered modern Japanese ceramic art. I began to think about a question lingering in my mind during my second year's study: How to understand the relationship between ceramic art and art in general? It may be a question that plagues a lot of ceramic artists – I feel that we are in a dilemma, with our work poised between art and craft.



Figures 1-4. Eva Ding, *This is Us*, 2020, unglazed clay.



During my second year, when I finally made my first decent teapot on the wheel and circulated it on WeChat (a Chinese social media site) for comments from friends, most people commented that the spout was too long and unattractive. I could not argue with them. I knew that they were shackled by traditional aesthetics, and so believed that my teapot should match the style of the conventional small-spout pot (which is functional). Nevertheless, I was outraged. Why should it be functional? Can't I make something different? Overnight, I produced another teapot – this time handmade – with an exaggerated spout (*Rout III – Teapot*); it was a 'rebellion' against tradition and an attempt to break through inherited layers of convention.



Figure 5. Eva Ding, *Rout III – Teapot*, earthenware with bright chartreuse lichen glaze, cone 06. Runner up, Waiclay National Ceramics Premier Award, 2022.

In his book *Shards – Garth Clark on Ceramic Art*, the author says: "Within ceramics, one still finds a somewhat tortured ambivalence between the ambition of being a meaningful contemporary artist functioning on the medium's edge, and on the other hand, reflecting a love of the medium's tradition."¹ Very contradictory impulses. His words hit my heart. This inner anxiety plagues me almost every day – the love and appreciation of traditional handicrafts is countered by the feeling of being shackled by tradition.

It's funny how I sometimes feel like a teenage rebel trying to validate my existence by doing everything against the rules. In the traditional handicraft world, inheritance is crucial. But the most exciting thing about art is that artists don't have to imitate history; instead, artists are those who rewrite history with their distinctive understandings of the world and creative visual languages. Although the world is continuously developing in cycles revealing specific trends, the complex political and socio-cultural phenomena at play and the fundamental conflicts involved are different at each stage of human history. An artist cannot use techniques from 200 years ago to represent the current human experience adequately. Likewise, although I often feel an ardent desire to make a delicate and practical vase or mug to pay homage to tradition, at the same time such a work is no longer enough to carry what I want to express. Carrying this confusion inside me, I continue to complete my bachelor's degree in visual arts.

I am possessed by a wild force that drives me to make change. Transforming one's art practice is painful and requires continuous self-denial, moments of breakthrough, and constant thinking and practice. I hope that my work can be a medium to connect me and my audience, or a bridge to connect the shared emotions of independent individuals with different social experiences. Maybe this motivation has arisen because, as an immigrant, I am always seeking to find a sense of identity.

Eva Ding is studying in her third year of a Bachelor of Visual Arts in ceramics and sculpture at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. Eva says: "I am from China and have lived in New Zealand for almost nine years. My art practice focuses on contemporary ceramics, immigration status and the social/cultural environment. This year, the focus of my art practice is on the gender inequality experienced by Chinese girls and women and the manifestation of feminism in Chinese contemporary art."

¹ Garth Clark, *Shards – Garth Clark on Ceramic Art* (New York: Ceramic Arts Foundation, 2003), 358.