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Deconstructing Self: Ceramics in China

Construction and deconstruction whether it is on a macro scale, such as a community, or a micro scale, such as an individual, is something that everyone is faced with daily. Through studying ceramics in China, I have had an opportunity to explore what it means to be an individual in a larger society. Over the course of six months, I have investigated various hand building techniques which have led to the creation of my senior thesis work. Through deconstructing who I am and reconstructing new ways of working I have discovered how I can impact a larger community and in turn how that community can affect me.

Upon my arrival in Shanghai, I was immediately overwhelmed with the amount of industrial, commercial, and residential buildings. It was as if buildings were being built on top of each other and every square inch of land had been consumed in some sense. Construction could be seen everywhere, but it was not anything out of the ordinary since all major cities in the United States are constantly building and demolishing. A greater focus was being paid to being in a foreign environment, but I still found the Chinese process of construction to be very intriguing.

The transition from life in Shanghai to life in Jingdezhen was a little bit harder to adjust to than anticipated. Trash in the streets, poorer living conditions, and locals constantly staring at me were among the most noticeable differences. This is something I have not experience before: I was noticed, I was different, and I was valued in a sense. After settling into the studio, getting my hands dirty with Jingdezhen's famous

porcelain was a must. The difficulty in using this clay body what not expected, which forced me to go back to the basics and experiment with what this material could do. Mugs, bud vases, and lidded vessels were among the first objects I formed.

On top of working in the studio, I was fortunate enough to take a Chinese ceramics art history course. The first couple of pots we looked at were from Neolithic China. Upon looking at the designs painted on them, I was taught how to tell what type of society they came from. Geometric patterns implied a more agricultural society, whereas animalistic designs meant the society had a greater focus on hunting. I found it very fascinating the way these societies recorded what was important to them by decorating utilitarian vessels. Through the use of imagery from around Jingdezhen, I started to record experiences I had encountered up to that point. Mountainous scenes, production of slab tiles, and patterns from around the city were among the first images used. With the mishima technique (carving the image into my ceramics then rubbing underglaze into the grooves), I began to translate my experiences to the viewer. At times the images became almost abstracted to a sense where only I knew the origin of the image. It was interesting to see this breakdown through the process of viewing a scene, photographing it, and then drawing on the vessel.

Within the first month, our group took a side trip to visit the city of Yixing where they are famous for their slab built teapots. This teapot making tradition goes all the way back to the Song Dynasty. The teapots very small in scale compared their American counterparts and are about the size of a baseball. It was very impressive to see how these artisans could put so much detail into such a small form. On top of that, seeing these perfectly symmetrical forms made out of slabs seemed almost unbelievable.

During my stay, I was able to see the process of how the spouts, handles, and lids were constructed which proved to be beneficial later.

With this new knowledge, I began to work with slab built teapot forms. These forms were on a smaller scale than what Americans consider to be a traditional. I was interested in how the tea cups could be combined with the teapot to create one individual yet still be comprised of multiple parts. In order to keep the teapot forms simple and not overwhelm the viewer, geometric templates were used. Much of the ceramics in Jingdezhen was very traditional blue and white decoration also known as *qinghua*. I explored this traditional style of decoration through using blue decals bought from a local store. The decals were cut into squares to reflect the geometrical design of the teapots and to also allude to an image/photograph. Then using either blue underglaze or the glaze itself I framed the decals to accentuate the design.

While creating these first few teapots, I continued to explore Jingdezhen and became captivated with this idea of construction and deconstruction of buildings. Being held up only by shoots of bamboo, the buildings seemed to be on the verge of collapsing. This idea of instability was something that resonated within me during this time as well. Being the first time I was on my own in a foreign country and away from my safety net of friends and family, I was forced to deconstruct my previous life and reconstruct myself in the current living situation. This gave me a chance to really dissect who I was and what my role was within the broader scheme of things.

Continuing using basic geometric forms, I began deconstructing forms and then reconstructing them. The form would be cut into sections, which were then twisted and

pieced back together. The body of the teapot became off balanced and looked as if it was on the verge of collapse. Any gaps that occurred when the sections were pieced back together would be filled in with clay then textured to give a cement patchwork feeling. This was an experiment dealing with an individual, mainly myself, and how it may function yet still be unstable.



While working with this forms, I practiced my Yixing teapot skills by making simple slab built forms using local yixing clay. I formed the handles using rolled coils



that were manipulated to the desired shape. The spouts were rolled using a specialized tool in the technique practiced by the yixing master teapot builders. I then used Jingdezhen porcelain slip to brush imagery on the exterior. The cross pollination of these two very famous

Chinese clay bodies is something I found interesting and another way to record my time spent in China.

After getting a feel for the yixing clay body, I started working with deconstructed communities. By this point in my trip, I had become quite settled into my new family and realized that each individual had influenced me in some aspect. Beginning with five identical geometric shapes, I cut each form five times and laid them next to each other. Through a standardized way of mixing up the fragments, I pieced each teapot back together leaving the final teapot bodies to have



pieces from each of the five original forms. Through *Fragments*, I wanted to focus on the transformation from a very simple geometric form into a dynamic form. The most enjoyable feature of these teapots is how an individual can affect a community and vice versa.

When arriving back to the United States, I picked up where I left off in China. Through talking with classmates and teachers, I decided that the focus of my work should be on the form rather than making them a utilitarian teapot. One of the biggest critiques I receive about my fragmented teapots is that there needed to be a distinction between which parts belonged to which original form.

Transformative continued on the basis of deconstruction and reconstruction that had been seen in earlier work. Using four slab built pods, I cut them into four sections, mixed the section up, reconstructed each pod and then cut them apart again.



With the use of analogous colors, a focus of community can be deciphered. Process is very important in my work, and I wanted to highlight this through *Transformative*.



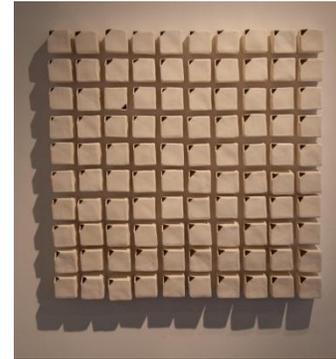
Starting with slabs then moving into volumetric shapes allows the viewer to see the progression from beginning to end. Color coding each pod also allows the viewer to see how each individual is affected by others in its community.

One of the biggest struggles upon arriving back in the United States was realizing that I was no longer the focus of the public eye. The transition from being unique and noticed to blending into the crowd was not as easy as I expected it to be.



Circumstance reflects this idea of how one can be stand out or lost depending on the environment they are placed in. This wall installation is composed of 200 objects. One hundred cubes set up ten cubes by ten cubes are placed next to 99 orbs and one cube. The cube within the orbs becomes a focal

point. When that same cube is placed within the other cubes, it becomes somewhat lost. A distinction is made that it is still unique by having the opening face a different direction the rest of the cubes.



Finding ones place within this world is a key aspect I have gain from doing research in both China and the United States. As much power as there is in numbers, there is also that much power in an individual. Figuring out my purpose and understanding how I influence others is what I have researched for the past six months and will continue to research for years to come. Through creating work, I hope to not only investigate my influence, but also open a discussion to the viewer and have them respond to their identity within society.