

Cerartmix: judge's statement

Ceramics is a term universally understood to describe any object or artefact made of fired clay (earth). However, if asked to define what art is, one would be hard-pressed to provide a singularly encompassing definition, particularly within a contemporary context. Thus, a number of questions arise. When we use the term, 'Ceramic Art', what do we really mean? Can we define an art practice by its medium alone, and how does this correlate with critical frameworks for interpreting contemporary art?

Arguably, contemporary art practices have developed out of ancient and time-honoured materials and art mediums. Yet whilst the visual arts play a leading role within creative art fields in the contemporary world, ceramic art seems to have remained static, stuck to one side in a grey and shady area, almost falling outside of the mainstream modernisation seen in other art mediums.

For a long time, ceramic practitioners have become separated from contemporary art practice. Those in the 'ceramic circle' have remained in a self-satisfied state. It is not common to see work in the ceramic medium exhibited at a major international biennale, nor other contemporary art exhibitions. It is even rarer to see any ceramics at major international art fairs unless they are specific craft or ceramic fairs.

Is this specialised ancient art form really so 'special' to be left isolated and alone; so timeless that it does not need to alter with the times? In order to inject new blood and energy into both ceramics and contemporary art perhaps the gap between the two needs to be examined and closed.

Obviously, ceramic work employs materials and processes that are special and unique, and which cannot be replaced by other art forms or materials. Clay is one of the most familiar of materials, having been used every day throughout thousands of years of human history. The survival of the 'earth, water and fire' fusion owes much to its human and responsive qualities. The subtlety of the material, process and temperature combination is embedded and felt no matter if the object is shiny and silk like or rough and solid.

Is there anything wrong with such an expressive and exquisite, fragile yet durable, common material being considered as a precious material and art form? Why is it overlooked, forgotten and left behind within the contemporary art context? In comparison, throughout the process of cultural evolution, other ancient materials such as stone and bronze, and other forms of expression like architecture, performance and music, have continuously played important roles without losing impetus.

Does functional and recreational daily use of ceramic ware impose a problematic positioning and lessening of its importance and potential as a creative medium? Modern art materials and hi-tech media such

as photography, film, video, sound track, electronic, and multimedia are also used for daily living and recreation. However this does not appear to impede artists who also use them to create great and inspirational contemporary art works. In general, 'functional and recreational' has never been a problem but it would be if it were the only consideration.

For too long in the ceramics field, practitioners have been predominantly concerned with materials and techniques – clay, glaze, formula, temperature (and there is no doubt that these are all important) – without giving due attention and consideration to the meshing of these things with the concepts in contemporary art practice.

Year after year people run camps and workshops to practice skills and celebrate earth, water and fire; a way of showing respect to the totem and soul of ceramics. At the end of the day however, it seems that there is a large yet invisible cocoon fabricated around our subconscious. We are an isolated ceramic society, playing our own games lacking the desire, passion and courage to break the barriers and cross the border to the 'outside' world. Respecting our ancestors and learning from them in order to gain greater knowledge and skills in ceramic making has never been a problem, but it may prove to be if it is the only approach.

As one of the oldest continuous civilisations on the planet, China has a long and well developed ceramics tradition spanning thousands of

years. Historically, ceramicists in China provided leadership not just within that country but worldwide and were of central importance to the development of the clay medium, especially with the origination of porcelain.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644~1911) in China porcelain production reached a zenith, achieving brilliance in technique and skill married with a high level of aesthetic value and artistic expression. For a long time people practiced with great passion and it was one of the most expressive, valuable and artistic media.

Following the international popularity of porcelain, mass production was introduced and the form and decoration of porcelain became standardised. Unfortunately, this gradually led to the great medium losing its 'artistic soul' and common craft products were the predominant outcome. Craft and decoration have never been a problem but they are if they are the only elements considered.

The challenge faced by contemporary ceramic art practitioners is to disrupt the definition of Ceramic Art as one of process, and redefine it as of critical conceptualisation, which is founded upon highly skilled technical ability.

After all, creativity is ever the core of art. Without it, art will not be art any more.

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