

Interview with Liu Jianhua

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Interviewer: Sayaka Mitome (Towada Art Center)

—Tell us please how you ended up becoming an artist.

As a child I loved drawing, and at around the age of twelve studied painting with my uncle. He had majored in sculpture at university, producing realist and politically-themed works, then after graduating had gone to work at the Jingdezhen Sculpture Factory, and study traditional techniques. In the late 1970s the Chinese government encouraged older artists to teach traditional crafts to their children to prevent the loss of these skills. But my uncle's son was still too young, so he decided to teach me instead. This was how at the age of fourteen I too went to work at the Jingdezhen Sculpture Factory, and learn fundamental pottery skills and manufacturing methods.



The Jingdezhen Sculpture Factory (1978)

—What did you learn at the factory?

I have vivid memories of kneading clay right from my first day on the job, and am sure being able to acquire pottery skills from that very basic beginning continues to influence my practice and expression. Factory hours were from eight in the morning to six at night, with an hour and a half off for lunch. As well as kneading clay, I did things like pour slip into molds, perform repairs, model objects, and make traditional sculptures, all processes indispensable to ceramic sculpture production. From the production process I gradually gained an

understanding of ceramic materials and gained the skills to work with their different properties. Sometimes I would labor and study hard all day, then spend my nights drawing. My uncle taught me the sketching and drawing techniques he had learned at university, figuring it was important to make sure I learned not only traditional pottery skills, but also the fundamental painting techniques that he had picked up at university. His commitment to providing that instruction has been an ongoing influence in my work.

At the age of 20 I received the Jingdezhen Porcelain Art Hundred Flowers Award, the greatest prize in Jingdezhen fine and applied arts, and started to think I would like to study art more holistically, rather than spending my life as a craftsman. So I took evening culture-related classes while I was working, and then took myself off to university.



The works of his school days. 霓裳羽衣舞 1982

—What made you want to study sculpture?

I'd always been interested in three-dimensional forms. The book *Rodin on Art and Artists* (by Auguste Rodin and Paul Gsell), which I came across in 1978, had a huge impact on me. It was through that book I came to understand how humans could take clay found in nature, and use it to express things in three dimensions, and how hands could give animated form to clay. This interest in the three-dimensional encouraged me to major in sculpture at university. At that point I wanted to become a sculptor, so learned a lot particularly from the work of artists like Michelangelo and Rodin. Over four years at university I learned the basics of sculptural expression, and eagerly studied different techniques. But something was lacking: I felt there was more to making art than simply mastering the right skills. At university, apart from Rodin and Michelangelo, the works of leading modernist sculptors like Constantin Brancusi, Jean

Arp, and Henry Moore became important influences. You can see this in the work I produced soon after graduating.

Going to university opened up a path for me to art in general. At university I was able to study not just sculptural techniques, but subjects like Western philosophy. China in the early 1980s was also quite tolerant around matters of art and culture, and many art schools and artist groups emerged during this period.

After leaving university I stayed at Yunnan Arts University, teaching sculpture. By the 1990s, China was experiencing dramatic economic and industrial progress thanks to globalization, and I presented a number of works on that theme. Rather than approaching ceramics as a traditional Jingdezhen craft, I was using the techniques of sculpture to approach it as part of contemporary art.

—Tell us about your works on the theme of China’s globalization in the 1990s.

Works like *The Painted Sculpture Series—Disharmony* (1993–97) and *The Painted Sculpture Series—Memory of Infatuation* (1997–1999) are typical of my efforts from the early to mid-1990s. These two series mark a shift in creative direction toward a more contemporary art mindset, and emerged from problems the whole of Chinese society was facing due to globalization, and my own emotions and observations on life at the time. Simultaneously I was searching for my own original way of expressing. When making works of art, the most important thing is to have a style different to that expressed in the works of others; this leads you to explore new methods of expression no one else has discovered. These works also use non-porcelain materials, including readymade items, and were a turning point for me. It was around this time that I started to really think deeply about materials, including the possibilities for utilizing my experience at the porcelain factory to employ ceramics in a contemporary art context.



The Painted Sculpture Series – Disharmony, 1993-1997, Mixed media, Variable dimension

—You then moved to Shanghai. What changes occurred there?

An artist's creative practice cannot be separated from the conditions and emotions engendered by the surroundings. In July 2004 I left Kunming for Shanghai. The lifestyle in the two cities could hardly be more different. Shanghai is a cosmopolitan metropolis with a thriving arts scene, highly developed economically, socially sophisticated. But in Kunming, the pace of life was slower, and the people simpler souls. It felt like one place was on the very frontline of globalization, while in the other, such development was only just starting to occur. Coming to Shanghai afforded me more interaction with artists, was a positive influence on my creative practice, and still influences it today. Environmental changes, and advances in Chinese society as a whole, are things that affect us all, and that impact is manifested in the works of all artists. Yet while absorbing such influences, artists also like to develop their own brand of originality. Which means choosing different materials and techniques, and having different visual expression and concepts to others. I too am continually contemplating present-day life and society, but rather than making works that stress a narrow regional or national background, I take my own thoughts, based on the accumulation of knowledge and structural frameworks that have influenced me, and sublimate them in works. To my mind this approach comes out of having an international field of vision, and international communication.

—Tell us about your work from the 2000s onward, and the connection between porcelain as a material, and your works.

In 2001 I was pondering the possibilities of ceramics. My thinking was that contemporary art

lacked new methods of expression using this material. I thus decided it might be better to present works using other materials. In 2001 and 2002 there were also a lot of changes happening in my own life. One was that my son, aged four or five at the time, was very sickly and spending a lot of time at the hospital. I felt the powerlessness of a parent unable to help their child, the fragility of life, and the uncertainty of existence. Around that time there were three air crashes in China. Watching them on TV, I found the sight of victims' belongings floating on the ocean utterly heartbreaking. During this period I ended up thinking deeply about a lot of things, like what was going on in society, challenges for individuals, unpredictable things, the fragility of life, the uncertainty of life.



Discard, 2001-2015, Porcelain, Variable dimensions “Liu Jianhua: Fluid voids”, Towada Art Center, 2023

Wondering how to turn all this into art, I lighted upon the hard yet fragile nature of porcelain. My job at the factory required wielding my skills to achieve the form and elegant perfection porcelain possesses precisely because it is porcelain. I started to pursue forms that deviated from that. Porcelain became the heart of how I thought of my works. And when it came to conveying an artwork to the viewer, I became more aware of the “language” of art. The choice of material, to my mind, was an important part of this “language,” and so I chose porcelain, with which I was already familiar. In my works I utilized techniques learned in Jingdezhen, for instance employing the traditional method of slip casting when I wanted soft curves.

In the years from 2004 to 2007 I was also wondering if it were possible as an artist to keep making works only in porcelain, and whether doing so might lead to some loss of creativity and expressive ability. Then it occurred to me that perhaps I could expand the possibilities of porcelain by combining it with other materials. This was during a period of major transition in my private life, when I moved from Yunnan Province to Shanghai. The pace of change is incredible in Shanghai, and I felt under pressure living in such a massive city, and mentally exhausted. I felt my experience of Shanghai physically, reflected and ruminated on it, and sublimated that in my works. I believed it was something I ought to do as an artist born in these times, and wondered as a Chinese artist, if I were going to relay not just the local or regional, but things more international, how I should do that. Then in 2008, my approach shifted to one of “things without meaning.”



Blank Paper, 2008-2019, Porcelain, 200×120×0.7 cm *Trace*, 2011, Porcelain, Variable dimensions

“Liu Jianhua: Fluid voids”, Towada Art Center, 2023

This approach led to *Blank Paper* (2008–19). I wanted to try making paper from porcelain. I

thought that the desire to make, would make a very simple concept. It's not impossible to form white paper from the likes of stainless steel or bronze, but I thought using fragile porcelain would also have great visual impact. In Jingdezhen there is a history of artisans painting landscapes, bird and flower paintings and so on, on porcelain panels. These panels are hand-made from porcelain. *Blank Paper* also uses such traditional techniques, leaving visible traces of the maker's hands.

Trace (2011) was born out of a calligraphy technique, and involved endless experimenting with dripping ink. Writing calligraphy allows you to detach yourself from the noise of the world and draw tranquility toward you through writing. It is also a way to sublimate the articulation of emotion, and in *Trace*, I managed to make the work as a substitute for that. I wanted to make effective use of glaze, and chose a traditional color the black of birds' wings known as wujin "mirror black" glaze.

In *Porcelain Tower* (2021–22) the aim was to give form to the spiritual. In China towers are spiritual symbols, and also vessels for the spirit. Both vessels and plates can be used to serve things, but they also function as boundaries between one thing and another, such as inside and out, real and fake. I also see them as formed objects containing space. Vessel and plate forms are moreover primitive and traditional, so their shapes have influenced modern architecture too.

—Tell us about *Discard* (2001–15) and exhibiting it in other locations.

For *Discard* I made molds for the work from items used by myself, family and friends. These used goods were also mass-produced and already in circulation. Another interest was exhibiting works in different locations. This included installing outdoors, not just indoors, to see what they would look like, and photographing them. I find thinking about how to combine a work with a location, when presenting it in a totally different location, gets my creative juices flowing. For instance, when I presented *Discard* at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, I chose the local Senju Shrine as the venue. It's also a place where people used to congregate for festivals, which interested me. To set up the work, rather than use professional installers, the organizers asked people from nearby farming families to help, which acted as

a kind of icebreaker between us. Thus people in the neighborhood were able to enjoy the work via its installation. At the Oku-Noto Triennale in 2017, I sensed a gateway to cultural interaction in the proximity, within Japan, of Suzu to China, and the region's status as the place from which the monk and envoy to Tang Kukai traveled back and forth between Japan and the continent. Hitting upon ceramics as a shared Sino-Japanese cultural vernacular, I mixed three different types: that used in *Discard*, porcelain fragments found in Jingdezhen, and ceramics fired by local Suzu ware potters, to make the installation, presenting the work on the seashore, as if all the ceramics had been washed up onto land from the water.



Discard, Porcelain, 6200×1220×120cm

"SUZU 2017 Oku-Noto Triennale" Ishikawa, Japan

—Finally, a little about your most recent work?

I've continued to make works over the past few years, still mainly in porcelain and I'm still eager to identify more variations and possibilities in this one material. By possibilities I mean the artist extending the properties of the material, where this new aspect of the material is linked to the concept of the work. For me the important thing is not the material used, but

the ability of the material to blossom freely in its own right, and I believe it is the artist's job to provide the environment for that. Works like *Blank Paper*, *1.2 Meters*, *The Shape of Trace* (2016–22), *Porcelain Tower* (2021-15), and *Gas* (2022) extend porcelain materially. Although of course, the challenge then becomes even more serious. Everyone has their limit, so the question is how to get around falling into that swamp of limits in one's creative practice. Which is why, rather than desperately attempting to show facile changes of this sort, from time to time an artist needs to latch on to a certain rhythm, and hold their creative energy near.



The Shape of Trace, 2016-2022, Porcelain, Variable dimensions "14th Gwangju Biennale" Korea, 2023

For artists it is really important to keep thinking, and finding a rhythm is just as vital. I don't see the job of an artist as spending every day in the studio using materials to create things. Thinking about life, reading books, studying, communicating, going to exhibitions, taking in the scenery: all involve learning, and are tonics for the soul that may just solve the problem of the limits we face in making art.

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