



STATE OF CERAMICS | October 16, 2020

Cathy Lu

Cultural Objects & Ritual

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IN ATTENDANCE:

Cathy Lu, Nicole Seisler, Kenna Dworsky, Rosie Brand, Claudia Solórzano, Patricia Tossen, Nancy Fleischman, Qwist Joseph, Sarah Christie, Teal Stannard, Kory Salajka, Stacy Jo Scott, Anela Oh, Robyn Phelan, Jeanne Andrea, Ashwini Bhat, Kristen Morgin, Rachel Mangold, Ariel Gout, Ilana Crispi, Joanna Bloom, Julia Haft-Candell, Evgenia Ozerova, Kari Marboe, Andres Payan Estrada, Nancy Servis, Ben Skiba, Tim Berg, Marina Weiner, Jonathan Pascua, Linda Lopez, E. Daly

QUESTIONS FROM CATHY LU:

- How do we consider the cultural value of everyday objects in comparison to the cultural value of artifacts displayed by museums? For example, an ancient ceramic water jug may have once been considered at the time of its use to have a similar value as the plastic cups or disposable coffee cups we use today. How and why does the value of an object increase or decrease over time? Is this reflective of cultural values?
- Throughout ceramic history, we see examples of cultural exchange. For example, Chinese blue and white porcelain would have been impossible without the influence of Persian ceramics and their use of cobalt. Delftware would not exist if not for the craze for imported Chinese blue and white pottery. How do we differentiate between cultural sharing and cultural appropriation?
- Is there such a thing as an authentic object? How does an object retain authenticity, or can it lose its authenticity? Can a replica be authentic? (ie. What is the difference between a blue and white vase in a museum and a blue and white vase being sold for \$10 in a Chinatown trinket shop?)
- Who do ceramic artifacts belong to? Who does culture belong to? Is culture a commodity?
- In discussions of historical ceramics, groups of people--not infrequently BIPOC groups--are often central, but in discussions of contemporary ceramics, individual people--most frequently white individuals-- are seen by many to be centralized. Why has there been a shift in focus from groups to individuals despite the communal nature of ceramics? How can there be more equity in the centralization of individuals? (For example, groups like the Color Network are organizing to prioritize BIPOC)

INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT FROM CATHY LU:

This State of Ceramics series theme *Our Clay Bodies* prompted Cathy to focus upon cultural bodies and how individuals are part of larger communities. She contextualized this topic with a reading by Horace Miner from 1956 and images of work that she made over the last five years.

“The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs.”

Body Rituals Among the Nacirema, Horace Miner, 1956

Cathy read this essay by Horace Miner in college and it continues to influence her practice. It’s essentially a fake anthropology paper written by a real anthropologist (in a pretty offensive way that others the group and rituals he writes about). He writes about the Nacirema, revealing at the end of the essay that Nacirema is actually American written backwards. For Cathy, who grew up in the US as part of an immigrant community, she’s always thinking about how immigrant culture becomes accepted into mainstream American culture.



Afterlife, 2015

Cathy (whose parents grew up in Taiwan and China) grew up in 1990s Miami, where there was a large community of Cuban exiles but less than 1% Asian Americans. Grocery shopping was a huge part of how her family expressed their culture and they would travel to Chinese grocery stores to get produce not readily available at mainstream markets. This work is arranged like a Chinese altar and uses fruits common in American culture and those considered more ‘exotic’ like jackfruit or bitter melon.



Treasure Case, 2016-2020

Ten years after first seeing the Treasure Case at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, Cathy made her own Treasure Case with objects relating specifically to her own experience of Chinese culture (as opposed to those in the original, which are beautiful but live permanently in the past, celebrating ideas rooted in antiquity instead of celebrating Chinese American culture and the diaspora). The Treasure Case at the Asian Art Museum is actually replica of one from the Forbidden Palace in China. Do replicas and copies lose their value or authenticity or do they stop being a copy and become their own thing?



Customs Declaration, 2019

For Cathy, fruit is a way of tying us to our culture and thinking about the immigrant experience [in the US]. Fruits that we now consider mainstream—like apples, bananas, oranges and peaches—were brought to the US (ex. peaches are the Georgia state fruit but they are native to China). This net weaves together different fruits from different places, thereby equalizing their value. The net is as much a structure of protection as entrapment.



Security Fence and Drain, 2020

Cultural objects presented in museums are often deemed most valuable but perhaps our everyday objects are actually more valuable, or more representative of us. This series of work recreates 'border objects' (that which direct people's movement, control people, keep people in or out) such as security fences, which are intended to be functional and not beautiful. Making them out of porcelain, the sexiest and most valuable clay, gives them new value and addresses who belongs in a given space.



Traffic Cones, 2020



Cathy used the early days of lockdown to photograph her work in the world (like these porcelain cones and chain). She's been thinking about how we use ugly and mundane objects culturally.

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY A-B PROJECTS DIRECTOR NICOLE SEISLER):

Replicating an object can be both a devotional act and an act of learning. Recreating a specific cultural object can be a way to more deeply understand that object and the broader culture from which it originated—whether the maker belongs to, lives alongside, or is outside of a particular culture or cultural group. A maker may attempt to remain faithful to the original object, they may make changes out of necessity (ex. if particular tools are unavailable), they may purposefully alter elements, or as a ceramicist one may 'rematerialize' an object in clay that was originally formed in a different material. Modes of production—individually versus commercially—have shifted the way that society values handmade objects and influenced the ways in which knowledge and techniques are spread across cultures. Objects are constantly assimilating and shifting meaning.

The timeline for these changes may be more fragmented than linear. The contemporary history of ceramics in America (beginning with postwar ceramics) shares many traits with postwar ceramics in Japan, which was deeply influenced by Korean ceramics. Blue and white porcelain from 14th century China, which resembles Persian cobalt, led to the European desire to own this style of work in the home, which led to its ultimate mass production known as Delftware. The English had their own version of Delftware and in Spain this style shifted slightly to become Maiolica (as opposed to Majolica—see

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/what-are-maiolica-and-majolica> for reference).

Talavera, a style that represents yet another slight shift in color and material from Maiolica,

appeared in Mexico after the country was colonized by Spain. These changes become a sort of ancestral lineage.

Cultural appropriation and/or cultural sharing is complicated but arguably necessary and unavoidable. Does its complicated nature preclude an artist from making work about a particular culture if they are not native to that culture? How would we access cultures other than our own if not for translation (for example: in language and literature)? What is our level of responsibility when we make, tell, or teach 'new' stories, or when we retell people's stories that are not our own? It is impossible for us to untangle ourselves from each other across time and space.

How do we name ourselves, each other, communities, and cultures when it comes to objects, collections, and art history? Naming has the power to center but also to erase. Naming an individual instead of a community can erase the community, while naming a community instead of an individual can erase an individual. Whether in a trinket shop or a museum collection, objects are often given names such as 'Jingdezhen pottery' or 'Japanese vase'. For decades anthropologists and western institutions have collected first nation objects without ever crediting the individual maker. This leads to othering of entire groups of people. Conversely, groups such as the Mata Ortiz began having multiple community members sign their ceramic vessels instead of just one 'celebrity potter' as a way of sharing economic benefits and valuing the community. The mindset of individualism may be a particularly Western and colonial value system. So, is it better to name or to unname?

There are more questions than answers. It is useful and necessary to express our uneasiness about the process of learning and unlearning. We must reckon with the different cultures we participate in (for example: children of immigrants, living on stolen land, participating in capitalism). This process requires acknowledging both the beauty and the ugliness, the sharing of culture and ideas as well as the trauma and the very real pain that people have experienced. Above all it feels essential to acknowledge, include, speak about, and identify people in conjunction with our objects.