

A Thinker Wandering Between Reality and Eternity - Discussing the Work of Ceramic Artist Shih Hsuan-yu

Falling into deep thought after a viewing is the sort of reaction that Shih Hsuan-yu's work inevitably arouses. Through unique style, complex and profoundly meaningful decorative details, he conveys serious, mysterious and metaphysical-like ideas, like the measured musings of a philosopher, emitting the faint light of wisdom. On the other hand, Shih's mature and precise grasp of clay and fire, and his almost perfect formal aesthetic requirements, are fully revealed in the external appearance of his works. The interaction and mutual stimulation of profound themes and perfect form, ensures that although Shih Hsuan-yu's ceramic art needs to be pondered thoroughly it always leaves the viewer thinking.

About Themes: Wandering Between Reality and Eternity

As an artist Shih's creative choices begin with the observation of social phenomena. Beginning with his first solo exhibition "Be in a State of Equilibrium" in 1994, and continuing through the second "The Axis of the Metagalaxy" and third "The Wings in the Wind" in 1998 and 1999 respectively, the artist's creative work over the last decade has originated in his observation of current social phenomena. Most of the themes Shih has shown an interest in have revolved around the interactive relationship between people and society and the forms this takes. A view of his work shows these to include a view of time controlled by machines, a new social order mapped out by labels and barcodes, consumed religious fervor and the generational differences in the use of words and symbols. These themes reflect new social issues encountered by the artist in his own life.

As a 20-year old young man stood in the sudden torrent of life science and technology, Shih experienced first hand the transformation from an old to new. The rapid development of communications, transportation, computers and other technology, changed, both in terms of substance and intangibly, how people interact. This new life style mode had a totally different pace to that of earlier life, enough to accelerate the changes in and reform the social networks that have been developed over many years. The artist has transformed this real experience into an art form, allowing people to encounter the truth of life as seen through his magnifying lens.

From the time development sequence, it can be seen that Shih's work over the last ten years has moved from describing or interpreting social phenomena, to crafting and conveying the metaphysical viewpoints behind the phenomena considered. After the second solo exhibition, probably because he was older and more thoughtful, Shih gradually began to exhibit a strong interest in religion, philosophy or traditional classical ideas. He now often looks for the ideas and logical foundation that underpin old books and the classics, fully reflecting an interest in speculative philosophy and desire to get to the heart of the matter. For

example, Shih habitually focuses on social issues, gradually peeling away the layers and focusing on the foundation of interaction between people – words. From the differences between words he goes on to explore the establishment and precision of the norms of interpersonal behavior. For this reason, the method of expression of his works has varied, from a sarcastic and playful tone with the use of scales and a measuring cup in “The Wings in the Wind” express the ridiculous phenomenon of measuring the “weight” of time, to more classical, well-knit and solemn expressions, as in “Never Ending See-Saw Battle” which used stories from the Bible to express the process of considering time.

Judging from this sequence, Shih attempts to translate the wisdom of our ancestors and interpret the will of God (the Creator) through various art forms. At the same time as exploring the phenomenon of change in contemporary society, the artist also finds a basis for his ideas in classic works and rays of wisdom in the words of the ancients. With a respectful and modest approach he follows the footsteps of those who came before to retrace the beginnings the phenomena, utilizing shapes and colors to express them concretely in artistic form. As an example, the inspiration for the 2004 solo exhibition “Close the World / Open the Next” came from the section “Lu Li Zhi” (a record of standards for a national music scale, days, months, dates, weights and measurements) in the classic “Book of Han” where it is written:

“From 2255BC-2206BC, rules from the Kingdom of Wu established a national set of unified standards for the measurement of musical scales, length, volume and weight, creating a foundation of trust for people both near and far. If we take the beginning of history as the drawing of the eight diagrams by Fu Yi-shih, then the Kingdoms of Yao and Shun already a large and complete system of national standards. The Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties that followed simply referred to the practices of the past without revision. After the collapse of the Zhou dynasty, governments lost these national standards. Arriving in the Kingdom of Chen, Confucius said to the King: Carefully weigh an object and observe carefully its standards of calculation, revise disorderly official standards, so that the indulged masses will revert to observing this standard. In terms of counting, musical scales, length, volume and weight, an upright judge should be used to determine which unclear situations do not apply to the standards of this country. If we use these same standards to examine history from ancient times to the present, and follow the example of natural life in terms of what we feel and hear, then the classical records of the past offer ample evidence. In this way, chaotic people moved from non-cooperation to accepting unification and the nation accepted national standards. However, measuring all things must accord with human nature and the logic of life. It is important to note that if the government wants to do anything, it must first measure the lives of its people to determine the best standards.”

In his work Shih is like a thinker wandering between reality and eternity, using art to reinterpret the ultimate meaning and value of living.

About Expressive Form: Descriptive Structure of Post-Deconstruction

Reconstruction

After his second solo exhibition, Shih's judgment of the relationship between the meaning of theme and overall style was unassailable. This can be attributed to the increasing maturity of his ceramic art technique and unique expressive form.

Since the 1950's, ceramic handicraft techniques have not only become one form of artistic expression, they have also been influenced by modern art theory. Ceramic production technology has been revolutionized and innovated, the techniques and processes themselves infused with meaning, becoming part of the expressive content. In terms of ceramic manufacturing technology, the numerous formula and combinations of clay and glaze, together with the high degree of changeability in firing forms and techniques, make it difficult to calculate the true degree of diversity. Given this diversity, how ceramic artists are supposed to develop unique expressive skills and forms, molding an ideal style in the process, poses a major test for everyone. After the baptism of modern art theory, traditional, cautious techniques were challenged in many ways, but we can see in Shih's works his preference for a more cautious approach, expressing the precise and perfect combination of fire and clay. In this way his works display the classical features of symmetrical balance, dignity and solemnity, while also expressing a dualist form. This is a remarkable achievement for a ceramic artist who is only 30 years old. However, beneath the seemingly balanced and stable exterior is hidden a sense of restlessness. This is because the artist uses a form of expression that takes post-modern theory as its foundation. The descriptive structure of post-deconstruction reconstruction fills the works with explosive tension.

The basic method in the expressive form of Shih Hsuen-yu's work is the descriptive structure of post-deconstruction reconstruction. The methods he uses are assembling, positioning and simplification. One of the special features of Shi's work is the way in which he assembles various symbol elements, displaying a unique narrative nature. Most of his earlier pieces featured mixed media use of ready-made objects, like glass test tubes, chains, sliding weights, steel wire, wood etc. In the later half of his career, works have been simpler in terms of the selection of ready-made objects, with most being printed barcodes, numbers, old classics, computer viruses, traditional patterns and words from different languages. These have been used as symbols intimating at meaning, describing various phenomena that have arisen as a result of scientific and technological progress. A second special feature is that the style of the work is made up of counter-posed or equal forms. At the same time, the content described is simplified to a dual thought form, emulating the two dimensional forms of *yin/yang*, day and night, left and right, 0 and 1, as presented in the *Book of Changes*. A third feature is that the artist changes the placing of existing operating models or rules for a new logical mode and exaggerates them in an unreal way. Examples include an English word or sentence converted into numbers and then a barcode or illegible ancient prayers, a self-created poem and not an ancient text. This expression utilizes the inherent meaning of

barcodes and old prayers themselves, to make it seem as though the work can be described. On the other hand, the artist also deconstructs the meaning of barcodes and old prayers, in an attempt to break the direct reaction people have as a result of habit. Consequently, although the form of the barcodes is the same, the meaning is very different. This way of creating, being deliberately mysterious or amusing, gives people the misconception of belittlement, indifference, parablepsia, misplacement and distortion, forcing them to consider whether their judgment of a phenomenon is too casual.

It is as a result of this assembling, simplification and position swapping form of expression, in combination with the ceramic techniques he is so adept at, that Shih Hsuen-yu is able to create works that arouse our interest. Over the last ten years, these qualities have been continually used in his work, infusing them with a consistency and uniformity. They have also become an organic life process for the works themselves, expanding the meaning and value the artist wants to convey.

Value and Meaning: Close the World / Open the Next Just to Live

Shih's fourth solo exhibition "Close the World / Open the Next" was held at the Taipei County Yingge Museum of Ceramic Art in 2004. The main theme was an exploration of how the communication foundation between people is established and where it is located. As it says in the "Lu Li Zhi" section of The Book of Han: *"A national set of unified standards for the measurement of musical scales, length, volume and weight, created a foundation of trust for people both near and far. However establishing measurements is an extremely complex and careful process, so that ultimately: "The masses finding themselves in a state of confusion begin to accept a unified system, first one, then ten, one hundred, one thousand, ten thousand etc. until finally everyone accepts publicly determined standards."As such, "The calculation of all things must accord with human nature and the logic of behavior." This is the only way to devise accepted standards, angles, weights, volumes etc."* In other words the establishing a foundation for communication between two people involves following the destiny of all things - the idea of following nature and not any fixed-rule system. It is exactly this sort of value that the "Close the World / Open the Next" series expresses.

In the work "Sitar," Shih uses the traditional Indian stringed instrument as his main form. The two symmetrical voice boxes and the strings are very pronounced, the playing method being very much like that for the Chinese *gu zheng* (a traditional multi stringed instrument that is plucked). The most unique thing about the sitar is the way in which it comes into being not its form. Each sitar master has to play an instrument sitar he or she makes personally. There are no restrictions in terms of the number of voice boxes or strings and also no fixed tune or rhythm. The music played depends on how the performer decides to play. Despite the lack of rules and the fact that the music played is determined by the feelings of the musician, sitar music is actually more able to move the listener.

This work seems to say, the rules for communication and languages between people are not eternal and do not have to be just like that. There should be more important, more fundamental and more meaningful things. In this way the sitar player uses the instrument to present his or her own his rich feelings, respect the nature of things and expressing their vibrant vitality.

“Windward” copies the form and principles of a rotating wind speed meter in a meteorological instrument. The central steel tube, the horizontally spinning wind cup and grinding mortar-like base are made of clay, fine and ingenious. This small piece of equipment can investigate the most evasive and unpredictable thing in the natural world - the wind. Because the wind constantly changes, the World Metrological Organization stipulated winds should be measured in ten-minute units, to calculate average wind speed. This seems to imply that everything is rapidly changing and that all rules just follow what is convenient for human communication. There is not need to be too focused, the original features and state of things is really the basis of measurement.

The value and meaning of the “Close the World / Open the Next” solo exhibition, lies in the way of living it presents as the nature of all things. As with the large feathered wings and shining eyes in “The Wings in the Wind” it seems that all the rules of the world are unimportant. The wings are raised and the eyes open, so that when the wind comes the wings carry us high across the vast sky. The solo exhibition “Close the World / Open the Next” solo exhibition is the culmination for Shih Hsuen-yu of ten years of creative work. It is apparent that he has broad vision and ambitious creativity, with which he has established a new milestone in his own personal art world.