

An Appreciative Review of the First Taiwan International Ceramics Symposium

Whatever beef you've got, it's raw. You have to cook it yourself.

The First Taiwan International Ceramics Symposium, which immediately followed the official opening of Taipei County Yingko Ceramics Museum, was the first of its kind that I (and many others, I believe) have ever attended. The fact that so many of us came from the far south (at least one from as far as Malaysia) bespoke our deep interest and high expectations to learn something to benefit our continued pursuits in this difficult field.

Have our expectations been met? It depends on what these expectations are. If we had been looking for some kind of panacea for specific problems (How can I make pots in which everybody can read my signature without turning them upside down? How to make a sculpture at once local and international? How to market my things? etc., etc..) We could have been disappointed. A symposium doesn't work that way. In its ancient origin Socrates, Plato and their fellow philosophers talked and talked, drinking all the time, on any topic under the sun. Among other things they talked about love. That idealist Plato was more interested in love without sex (Platonic love) in contrast with the contemporary indulgence, with all its hullabaloo. We ceramists, ceaselessly laboring with clay, are more akin to the latter-day action type of lovers. But we do need some more philosophical background if want to grow, and that's what this symposium was about. It offered us some food for thought, a point of reference against which we can weigh and consider what we've been doing so far. "Should I dovetail my work with classical Chinese pottery?" "If so, how?" If one could say to oneself, "I've been on the right track all the time," so much the better. Either way a doer in this labor-intensive and time-consuming line of life has to think a bit more.

A good advice came from Mr. Tony Franks, whose philosophy of art education relates ceramics to poetry, music, dancing, and other disciplines. As he suggests, the shortest distance between two points is not always a straight line. Occasional digressions, or better still, habitual ventures into other forms of art, give us inspirations as well as pleasures. Equally useful is the portfolio learning. I find his ideas congenial, for I've been doing more or less the same things all my life. All arts work with the same elements: rhythm, theme and variations, point and counterpoint, contrast, balance, metaphor, etc. Hopefully a person more or less versed in the humanities has more ideas in store and a better sense of design in their executions.

Many other things in the symposium interested me, too, but I can cite only a few. Mr. Jimmy Clark's juxtaposed slide lecture served well his purpose-generational overviews of mentors and proteges. One slide showing an artist's work and the other the milieu surrounding him enlivened the presentation. It deepened the impression that art works are as much people as they are objects-artists and their cohorts, who helped, encouraged, critiqued, and advanced one another. When showing works, neither Mr. Clark nor Ms. Mansfield once failed to mention the names of the artists. This democratic respect for authorship was, I'm sorry to say, lacking in at least one Taiwanese counterpart. I don't blame him. In Taiwan, more often than not, a newspaper (or other media) shows a photo of a work of art without naming the artist. I watched spellbound as professor Patrick S. Crabb and his Taiwanese assistants working away in full flourish. He was redoing what he did at home, but I believe he worked with equal flow of energy then. He was taking parts from different cultures and building them into a coherent whole. Perhaps he had much of himself in mind when, in response to Professor Richard Hirsch's emphasis on the importance of the university system on the making of artists, he suggested that young people, instead of going to college, spend the several thousands of dollars of tuition on touring and seeing the world. My opinion is that young persons not oriented in the basics of world cultures in a college course see only fragments, which they can neither relate nor interpret. Not many people, after all, are blessed with his brand of intuition, insight, imagination and synthesizing ability.

Simultaneously on the upper tier of the workshop, Ahleon (Mr. Ching-Liang Chen) was demonstrating throwing tiny teapots. A trompe-l'oeil master, he does anything after wood from stump-shaped through railroad tie-imaged teapots to dilapidated bridges, with a deceptive likeness that has earned him a considerable reputation at home and abroad. He philosophizes as he pots. All his works show a cautious craftsmanship, in stark contrast with the carefreeness of Professor Crabb working below. As I remarked this to Ms. Mansfield standing nearby, she said, "Very good". What's good? Diversity of course. Needless to say, this was one of the reasons why we got together at the Symposium.

The Japanese ceramist Mr. Zenji Miyashita and the Canadian ceramist, Mr. Les Manning, both used laminating techniques with very different effects. The former exercised great care to prevent stripes of colored clay from staining one other. The works he created elsewhere show much more minutely nuanced color fields resulting in landscapes very poetic and otherworldly. In comparison, Mr. Les Manning's was a rougher and bolder type of lamination. The placement of three colored stoneware clays altered with the throwing. As he trimmed the muddy surface off, an abstract landscape showed up, crude and robust, reminiscent of the vast, snow-covered, pristine wilderness of his country. In contrast Mr. Miyashita's landscape reminds one of Nishiji Nori, the exquisitely hand-woven fabric, the pride of the people in the area of the ancient Japanese capital Kyoto. Environment shapes an artist, who forms an artwork, which in turn mirrors the environment. Doesn't this echo Ms. Mansfield's idea of the cyclical?

Cochin ware, workshopped by Mr. Dong-Je Hsieh, is perhaps the only genre of ceramic art in Taiwan, which still keeps its grass-root tradition alive. Ceramic population relates to it in extremes: the adherents treasure it above anything else while the rest, it seems to me, can't care less. Its practioners are loyalists, sworn to preserve the temple accessories (models figurines and statuettes) in "authentic" colors, textures, and subject matters. Anyone who tries an "improvement" may be excommunicated, so to speak. Outside attempts at vitrified version of Cochin statuettes would be derided. Hence the no man's land, though outwardly Cochin ware and stoneware are displayed back to back in the market. Incidentally, it is perhaps the only genre of folk ceramics whose masters enjoy government stipends as national cultural assets. I'd like to see this official patronage uninterrupted. Due to reasons of health, I could not attend every lecture and every demonstration. Often, when I did attend, I could not sit through. However I'm sure of their contributions to this Symposium in particular, and to Taiwan's ceramic development at large. I'm grateful, for instance, to Ms. Deborah Bedwell, who, with the collaboration of Professor Ching-yuan Chang, curated "Uncharted Territory" Contemporary Taiwanese Sculpture (1992), in which my two entries foreran, in surface treatment, my public art "Arch of Millennium", now standing in the pool of the Ceramics Museum. Professor Chang and another professor, Chen-chou Liou, both of whom spoke at the Symposium, are two of the several important educators in ceramics at college level in this country. The potter Mr. Cheng-hung Wu surprised his audience as he coil-built large pots at a speed that challenged an electric potter's wheel. It reminds me that on the day of Museum opening. The veteran thrower Mr. Kuo-cheng Wong the Elder entertained as he demonstrated. With what might be called a feather-light version of legendary Chinese "Kungfu" at his fingertips, he brought the clay, up into a tall slender cone in a wink. A minimal modeling be followed by the slash and twist of a knife blade, and presto, the audience almost heard the quack! Quack! Of a duck. Sporting anything from a baggy celadon Chinese suit to Indian red overalls, he helped out on whatever he could. From wherever he was, a ripple of smile or a roar of laughter spread out.

As I'm concluding this writing, can't help imagining groups of homebound symposium participants aboard a plane or a train discussing what they have got or not got from this special gathering in Taiwan's ceramic history. Again an argument like this tends to run in two opposing values. Truth is always in between. "Where's the beef?" to quote a cliché. Well, whatever beef you've got, it's raw. You have to cook it yourself.

Ps. if you still have the portfolio, please review Mr. Franks' lecture. However if you want to turn the raw beef into delicacies, you have a lot of work to do.