

Form Follows Feeling: The Work of Ray Chen

Ceramics sculpture in Contemporary Art can be sub-divided into representational (human, animal, plants and natural forms), and abstract form, including geometric, organic, and architectural shapes. “In order to energize space, some artists may combine multiple elements into a larger ceramic object.”(1) In this way, Ray Chen follows the tradition of Henry Moore and his stone and bronze works studying the female form. Like Henry Moore, Ray Chen does not do these works specifically to be sold.(2) Moore’s influence is evident in Ray’s work. Like Moore’s work, Ray Chen’s deal with multiple pieces that interrelate. This is the path that Ray Chen has chosen to follow.

To understand Ray and his work, you must go back to his beginnings and his family in Taiwan. You must understand his educational background and his mother, ChengWah Kuo, shaping him. He excels in the violin and opera, these were areas his mother directed him in. She also was trained in Japanese flower arrangement and Ray came to appreciate the curves and the inter-relationship of those curves and the blooms.

Ray mastered what his mother taught him and tired of performing music that was written by other people and turned first to drawing and then ceramics. Clay always has had the ability to emulate other media in form, texture and surface treatment of other objects since the time of ancient civilizations. Surface treatment was a prominent aspect of ancient ceramics that Ray also uses in his series, *Mother and Child*.

In his own words Ray states: “the relationship between people has been the core theme of my ceramic sculpture *Mother and Child*. For the last several years, I have addressed in my work the central relationship between my mother and myself. Seventeen years ago, she came down with Parkinson’s disease.” In 1996 his mother’s Parkinson’s disease worsened. “As the only son in my family and in accord with the tradition of Chinese culture, it became my role to take full responsibility of her and be strong. As a result, my relationship with my mother grew. I encouraged her with love and warmth. On May 7, 2003, my mother left her physical body and she is in God’s hands. Her love has been around as always and she has more to offer. My sculpture is also then a testimony of my faith.”

“My sculptural exploration of form, space and line has become my outer language to embody my inner feelings about the experience. I value form, space and line between the internal and external—one cannot exist without the other. It has also expressed the crossed boundaries between Eastern and Western culture and aesthetics—as well as the physical distance between my mother and myself.”

Ray Chen’s early ceramic training in Taiwan focused creating pots based on the traditional ideals of China’s Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1279). Some of his functional vessels today still draw upon the shapes and glazes that formed the body of his work in Taiwan. In 1991 Ray moved to the United States and completed two and a half years of foundation courses at Ohio University and went on to graduate work at the Rochester Institute of Technology in NewYork which he finished in 1997. Since then, Ray has

devoted himself to teaching as well as giving visiting artist lectures and taking part in numerous international ceramic workshops. Few artists have an exhibition record that can compare to that of Ray Chen. Currently, he serves as the executive director and curator of the Halcyon Art Gallery that is part of the Swope Art Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana. The gallery focuses on Contemporary art drawn from the region and beyond.

Ray Chen's *Mother and Child* series began in 1998 in response to his mother's illness. All the *Mother and Child* sculptures are installations presenting two or more pieces in a spatial arrangement critical to Ray's feelings for his mother. Most of his earlier works in the series make use of earthenware and stoneware. The mother form is usually larger and darker in color and incorporates a rough textural surface reflective of the toll the Parkinson's disease had upon his mother's body. The child form is usually lighter in color and smoother in shape, but sometimes includes texture reflective of Ray's own pain. The two pieces support each other with the negative shapes taking on equal weight to those of the positive shapes. This delicate balance lends itself well to the name of the series and the attachment of the two pieces serves like an umbilical cord. Both depend on each other for support. If one were broken or removed, the other would not make sense. In some cases, an implied line across space provides the necessary link between the two forms as they reach out to each other.

Often Ray's sculptures begin with drawings and the creation of a maquette in clay prior to the creation of the larger sculpture. Besides his relationship with his mother, he also brings in responses to nature, experiences, feelings, and his deep religious faith. He then starts to create the large scale *Mother and Child* by throwing forms on the wheel and sometimes hand-building. The forms are then aggressively manipulated to form the units that make up the sculpture. Low fire glazes and slips of Ray's own creation then are used to add color and emphasize both texture and movement through the final installation. The finished pieces are either in prominent collections around the world or in traveling exhibitions world-wide. Future 2013 commitments already include solo as well as exhibitions at the National Art School and the Sabbia Art Gallery in Sydney, Australia as well as visiting artist lectures and workshops at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. Ray has also been invited as one of the speakers to lecture at the Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale 2013, Icheon World Ceramics Foundation, Korea.

Figure 1 illustrates the *Mother and Child* (2009) Ray has produced in earthenware and stoneware. Everything is taken into account in the installation: the pedestal, placement of the individual units, lighting, color, negative space and the linear linking of the units across space. Much like a fledgling bird receiving nourishment from its mother, Ray continues to be nourished as a creative artist by his mother. Her spiritual and artistic inspiration continues to shape Ray's response to his life and environment. In 2011, Ray was the NCECA International Residency Program recipient and was supported as an artist at the School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

In the Fall of 2011, Ray Chen's *Mother and Child* series took a new turn with regard to his media and form (Figures 2-6). He was invited to take part in "Porcelain Another

Way”, a workshop and international symposium held in Wroclaw, Poland. The challenge was to make large scale sculpture out of porcelain. The symposium climaxed with three exhibitions in The Glass and Ceramics Museum, Wroclaw; The Galeria Szklia Ceramics BWA, Wroclaw-luty; and the National Museum of Fine Arts, Warsaw. From these venues the exhibition has continued to other sites throughout Europe.

In his work produced for the symposium in Poland, Ray continued the *Mother and Child* theme divorced of color. Texture remains in the juxtaposition of the form of the mother and the child. The pristine whiteness of the medium emphasizes the curvilinear links between the mother and child and enhances the interplay of positive and negative shapes within and between the forms as they interlink across space. The increased scale of the child is reflective of the growth of the child over time. Like the earlier works within the series, each element is dependent upon its link with the other for healing and spiritual survival over time. In one of the series (Figure 4) three elements are introduced as the mother form both nurses and protects her young, much like a bird. The curves link the three across space and juxtapose the smooth surface of the young while continuing the textured surface in the body of the mother that transforms to smooth curving shapes as it reaches out to her young. The dark negative spaces enhance the curves of the forms and the tonal gradations across the lit shapes. As with his prior work within this long series, the forms delicately balance on single points relying on the connection with the mother for nurturing support.

To Ray, “porcelain is a new direction to achieve the way of movement and sensitivity to material. It is an experiment in how I am going to combine the pure clay body to the form with the relationship in texture and negative space, line and the space in between. Form and its language will be a major task, and quality in form as well as my own new direction to develop. Porcelain will be a part of my mother and child form/series. How and the way I am going to handle it will be the next level I will need to work on.”(3)

Ray plans to continue to explore the nuances of different clay bodies as he continues the bond of mother and child in new ways. Porcelain will present a new dimension to his mother and child series and the life-long bond with his mother, Cheng Wah Kuo.

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Endnotes

1. Yih-Wen Kuo, "The Phenomena of Contemporary Ceramics Art in America," *Diverse Domain-Contemporary North American Ceramic Art* (2005), pp. 22-23.
2. Wendy Smith, "Ray Chen of Taiwan and Maine: Master Sculpture and Beloved Teacher," *Casco Bay Weekly*, Vol. XV, No. 36 (September 18, 2003), p. 18.
3. Stephen Smithers, "Interview with the artist."

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