

FIONA WONG – GIVING PRIMACY TO THE VISUAL AND THE SENSUAL

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If any one particular sector of the arts can be said to have undergone major development in Hong Kong during the 1990s, it must be ceramics. Several centres of creation, including for example, the Pottery Workshop, became a breeding ground for a whole generation of very talented ceramists whose reputations have spread far outside Hong Kong's borders. Fiona Wong Lai-ching is a good example of this. Her work takes its inspiration from the sensation that is obtained from contact with the material, as she says, "I use clay as my medium, like the painter uses colours. I always let the material inspire me". The first thing about her work that strikes the observer is the richness of her material, which shows great diversity in terms of textures as well as colours, the browns, ochres, yellows, oranges and greys of the various clays that she uses, until that is, her recent discovery - the pure white of porcelain. The absence of any glaze gives her colours a greater depth and her objects a more natural, rustic look.

Given the similarity of their shapes to shapes that are found in nature, the series of objects that make up her *Multiples*, might make one think of imaginary food items – spring rolls, asparagus or various types of dim sum, in autumnal colours that are imparted by the material itself. But by their repetition, the way in which they are formed into various piles, the artist gives them a rhythm that is as much visual as it is musical. With her *Multiples*, she can thus arrange and rearrange her installations ad infinitum, a bit like a jigsaw puzzle where each new arrangement would be a new configuration of its inner world. Through their apparently unabated flood, these objects thus come to life.

She also looks for nature's imprints, vegetable or animal imprints (fossils, skeletons, fish bones) that she mixes together with the human imprints (from tissue, fingerprints) that are found in her objects. Objects that thus contain a history, an impression, like in 1997 for example, a collection of little clay coffin-like boxes into which the skeleton of a wheatear, a small bird that is a delicacy in Chinese cooking, had been delicately placed. As well as ceramic, she also uses other materials for her installations, such as small dried fish or fried pigskin that have translucent qualities.

Her work with these raw materials was to lead her towards a quest for purity of shape and colour through the use of unglazed white porcelain. Her magnificent 1999 exhibition, *Porcelain White* is an invitation to step into her personal world. She represents her bedroom with her objects – a collection of shoes, some new, some worn, books that have been leafed through, bowls with irregular edges that are piled up in such a way that they undulate like waves, and clothes that still show where the body has been. She folds the white porcelain like fabric and gives it an unreal lightness that renders it alive and sensual, like a skin that is so

fine that one expects to see it quiver under the fingers. And one imagines the fragility of the human body and the uncertainty of life that lie below this covering.

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