

WHAT BELONGS WITH CLAY

ANY GUELMANN

The surfaces on Ling Chun's most recent body of work are fresh arrays of texture and colour. Glaze is not solely clay's partner; it rises from the surface as its own individual. There is underglaze and lustre, coloured slips and bits of metal, and whatever else makes sense. Like hair, for example. Braided, twirled, or cascading from the edges of curves, bringing air into Ling's sculptures and making them impossibly tactile. They belong together, hair and clay—and the idea of belonging comes up a lot in her work.

Ling has lived in the United States for over a decade and is currently a long-term resident artist at Seattle's Pottery Northwest. She's originally from Hong Kong, a place that has undergone deep social and political shifts in the years since she has been away. She experiences these changes in a roundabout way, through the lives of her loved ones back home. Add that to the geographical distance and the time between her infrequent visits, and home starts to feel even more remote. In this gap, Ling finds the impetus to pay testimony to a culture that shaped her, but may or may not still exist.



LOAF 2017 Ceramics, hair, copper, glaze. Multiple firings cone 6 to 04, 38 x 11"
This piece is my study for the colour pink and notion of lust in relation to feminism.

If an artist's background is the fountainhead of their work, and Ling's home is inextricably linked with political and social issues, one might expect to find these topics imprinted in her pieces—as they are, nowadays, in the work of so many ceramic artists (see #clayispolitical). For a Hong Kong artist, however, the expression of opinions requires careful consideration, and Ling tends to shy away from overt displays of personal politics in her work. Subtly, though, it's all there.

Reddish-Blue 2017 Ceramics, hair, wood, steel, resin.
Multiple firings cone 6 to 04, 38 x 22 x 12"

I questioned the form of ceramics. In this piece and *Green Jar*, I approach ceramics in its most iconic shape of vase-form. The spontaneous crawling upon unusual surfaces and manicured hair satisfies my lust for the unconventional.



'When you're making a piece of art you're going through a journey of life. It's inevitable that whatever is happening in that current stage will be reflected in the work. Even though I don't have the desire to make work to talk about certain things, sometimes [they] inevitably flow onto the work itself, on the surface, no matter how things are being abstracted. There are many different things that I could interpret into political statements without being literal on the surface of the work.'

The politics of home are not the only complex topic in Ling's mind. As an educator at Seattle's Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, she has gained insight into other issues. 'I have a whole set of new work that I want to talk about, not related to the political situation happening in Hong Kong, but to my work at Wing Luke. Heritage, the struggle of being an immigrant, these ideas of how culture is being erased, human greed always taking over. I feel an itch to make work about culture being erased and my own interpretation of what that means. Is it good or bad? Does it matter, or is it just something inevitable, because culture changes all the time?'

If Ling is right, and culture inevitably mutates, whether by natural progression or external imposition, how does she cope with it, from a distance? 'It's definitely not easy and not particularly easier if you're far from home, where everything is burning down. I feel like the only thing I can do is raise the awareness and understanding and to clarify that some news aren't so true. As an outsider who was an insider before, I may have access to someone who's currently in the [Hong Kong student] protests that can tell me what exactly is happening. That's my advantage.'

Green Jar 2018 Ceramics, hair, metal, glaze. Multiple firing cone 6 to 04, 60 x 17 x 17"



Installation process, Archie Bray Foundation, long-term resident studio space

This brings up the relationship between creation and creator. 'If I'm able to clarify misunderstandings, then I'm here to clarify them, but I don't think that, as artists, it's our job to be outspoken about politics if that isn't true to our nature. There's no obligation to do that. If your philosophy of art doesn't surround politics, don't do it.' But separating the art from the artist is not simple. She mentions Jackson Pollock's alcoholism and abusive personality and whether or not that has to be considered when examining his work—is the artist inevitably wedged into the art? 'Some people are really good at presenting themselves as part of their art, and that's a whole different story. How much of yourself do you want to see reflected in your work, and is it necessary? To me, I don't think it is.'

I ask if she views her artistic progression over the years as a fluid path, or a series of sharp turns. 'I see it as a light beam shining through a prism,' she explains. 'Dramatically different colours, but they're coming from the same source. I do think I take sharp turns from one series of work to another, but they're all coming from the same concept: how I identify myself in relation to the culture that has been growing around me.'



'My new work is going to be so different,' she declares, describing colour-changing glazes, sound installations, and the neon signs of Hong Kong when she was growing up. 'I remember neon lights everywhere. Of course LED is replacing them all. Neon is a dying culture.' She circles back to the idea of having a duty to speak out: 'Is it our responsibility to be outspoken about political things? I'm not sure. But for me, it's an artist's responsibility, if a culture is dying, to use art to preserve it.'

As Hong Kong grows unfamiliar, Ling's home changes from a location to the idea of human connection. 'Like comfort food, but comfort conversation.' Finding relationships that feel like home is not easy, though. When Ling first moved to the US even bonding with other Chinese students was challenging. 'Despite us all being Chinese, if you grow up in mainland China versus growing up in Hong Kong, the culture is drastically different. It felt like being exiled, like I didn't belong to any group.'

But soon, she arrived at clay. Within the ceramics community, she slowly found her footing, and a home. 'The only thing tying us is that we're all really into clay and that is so beautifully amazing. It's magical. We connect with this material in a way that is universal. The thing keeping me in America is the clay community. I am one of its members. I don't want to lose that.' Clay, it seems, is where Ling belongs.

Any Guelmann is a potter. She was born in Brazil, spent a decade in Brooklyn and landed in Seattle. She works with clay and metal out of her home studio, volunteers as the Washington Clay Arts Association's communications manager and teaches artists about selling their work online. She can be found at www.guelmann.com

Ling Chun is a beauty school dropout from Hong Kong and transposed her passion for hair into becoming a ceramic artist. She's a recent recipient of NCECA emerging artist 2020 and the ArtBridge Fellowship, sponsored by Chihuly Garden and Glass, and has recently been shortlisted for the Young Master Art Prize in London as well as the upcoming NCECA emerging artist 2020.

Unrestricted by the historical significance of clay, Chun's work serves as contemporary artifacts of cultural identity. Long suppressed anger and expectations combust into ceramic forms that act as the ultimate playground for glazes. The spontaneous crawling upon unusual surfaces and manicured hair satisfy a lust for the unconventional.

Photographs courtesy of the artist

Lanternier 2.0, 2018 Ceramics, hair, metal, glaze. Multiple firings cone 6 to 04, 34 x 23 x 22" Lanternier 2.0 is a hybridized form of a Chandelier and Chinese Lantern. I am investigating my cultural transition from a Chinese immigrant to an Asian American.
