SIN-YING HO
Past Forward
A professor at Queen’s College, City University of New York, Sin-ying Ho, whose work has been widely shown and collected, has developed one of the more unique voices in contemporary clay. Born in Hong Kong, she immigrated to Canada in 1992, initially to pursue a career in acting. After receiving a degree in ceramics from Sheridan College in Ontario in 1995, Ho also earned a 1997 BFA in ceramics from the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design in Halifax and a 2001 MFA from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

Her training reflects the diversity of approaches to ceramic-making in North America in the late twentieth century. While in Nova Scotia, Ho was introduced to practices that featured stoneware and earthenware as media and were grounded in a mid-twentieth-century preference for Sino-Japanese traditions that can be traced to the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the spread of Zen (or Chan) Buddhism from China to Japan. Reverence for stoneware in the West reflects the influence of potters such as the British artist Bernard Leach (1887–1979) and philosopher/critics such as the Japanese academic Yanagi Sōetsu (1889–1961), who extolled (and romanticized) a vision of the studio—as opposed to commercial—potter as an individual who threw, glazed, and painted his/her own unique pieces.

During her time in Louisiana, on the other hand, Ho decided to use porcelain as a medium and explore the conceptual use of clay for personal and political expression. Ho’s choice of porcelain, a material largely disdained by studio potters in the first half of the twentieth century due to its use in factories and other commercial enterprises, stems in part from her first trip to the city of Jingdezhen (fig. 1) in Jiangxi Province in southeast China in 1996. Popularly known as the “porcelain city” in current Western writing, Jingdezhen flourished in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, became the center for the manufacture of blue-and-white (that is, porcelain painted with cobalt blue under a clear glaze) in the mid-fourteenth century, began to serve the Chinese court in the early fifteenth century, and remains one of the primary centers of global porcelain production today. First used in China around the sixth century, porcelain, a combination of a clay known as kaolin and the feldspathic rock petuntse that fires at temperatures of 1200 to 1400 degrees Celsius, was one of the great discoveries in global ceramic history. It was produced in Korea in the fifteenth century and Japan in the early seventeenth century, and it was finally created in the West in 1708 at Meissen in Germany. The reemergence of porcelain in studio, or art, pottery in the 1970s and 1980s coincides with the ability of artists from around the world to live, work, and study in Jingdezhen.

Identity (plate 1) from 2001 is one of a series of works exploring the collision of Western and Eastern cultures. The shape, which can be traced to a form first produced during China’s Neolithic period (about 6500–1500 BCE) and was used to store grain and wine, was introduced to Western ceramics as part of a global trade in Chinese porcelain. The organization of the decoration of the surface with differing patterns at the neck, body, and foot follows well-established Chinese traditions.
The overall design, however, subtly blends Chinese and Western imagery. The three Chinese characters written under the lip read *fu, lu, shou*, or blessings, wealth, and long life, an auspicious triad often referenced in word and image in Chinese art. The geometric pattern at the neck and under the lip also derives from earlier Chinese traditions transmitted to the West through trade in porcelain, as do the floral sprays at the base. The rococo cartouches that fill the body of the jar, on the other hand, are based on the devices often used to display aristocratic crests in European art, and on Chinese porcelain created for trade with Europe. Ho has incorporated details from her identity card as a Hong Kong resident and her passport into this European device. In addition, her English name, Cassandra, which was required in Hong Kong during British rule (1841–1997), is endlessly repeated in the borders that separate the imagery on the body of *Identity* from that of the foot and neck.

The double-gourd shape of *Future Is in Our Hands* (plate 5) from 2008 is also a traditional Chinese form—one long associated with the religion of Daoism and the search for immortality. Set against a background of “at” signs, a visual trope for endless and immediate global interactions, two Chinese boys lift personal computers, another reference to the speed and ease of connections between individuals and cultures. Some Chinese children huddle together, and others fly kites, while a Western family plays a video game and a Western child plays hopscotch on numbers in the shape of dollar bills.

The red and blue used to decorate *Future Is in Our Hands*, a palette that defines Ho’s works, are also the first two colors used for Chinese porcelain in the mid-fourteenth century. Red, derived from copper, was fugitive and soon disappeared as a pigment. Blue, from cobalt, has become synonymous with “china,” a word used as a synonym for porcelain in the West. While the cobalt in Ho’s work is hand painted, the red designs are created with computer designed, digitally printed decals, a technology she discovered in graduate school and stuck with because she liked the pixelation that occurs in the process. Her choice challenges the understanding that transfer printing for the decoration of porcelain, an eighteenth-century British development, is a commercial rather than artistic technique. In addition, Ho often uses terra sigallata, a highly refined clay slip widely used on Greek and Roman pots, to give a soft sheen to the surface of her works, as well as the clear glazes often covering porcelains.

Ho’s interest in the intersection of cultures and the ways in which shapes and visual and written imagery serve as multivalent codes is further illustrated in pieces such as *Wedlock* (plate 2) from 2004 and *Histogram No. 2* (plate 3) from 2007. Both were created from thrown and molded vases that were cut and reassembled to make distinctive shapes that cannot be easily recognized or read. Both pieces are bifurcated at the center. One side of each vase has a crackled red pattern that alludes to the longstanding Chinese interest in the effects created by both accidental and deliberate crazing in the glaze. The other sides are painted with cobalt blue. The red side of *Wedlock*, which shows an image of Ho and her husband, is bordered by groups of the paired character *xi*, or happiness. The doubling of the character is a standard motif in Chinese wedding imagery, as are the small boy playing a mouth organ and the lotus pods (fig. 2), both symbolic of the wish for children and painted in cobalt blue. Storks carrying babies in their mouths and pomegranates, also in cobalt blue, further illustrate the links between marriage and family shared by all cultures.

Snippets from Ho’s signature in Chinese and English in a seal-script style are found on one side of *Histogram Fig. 2. Wedlock* (detail), 2004, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze.
No. 2, while a dense geometric pattern is interspersed with the types of inscription found on both Chinese and European porcelains on the other. The Chinese words are references to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), particularly the reign of the Yongzheng emperor (1722–1735), a brief period renowned for the production of exquisite court porcelains at Jingdezhen. The Roman letters illustrate the types of marks found in works produced by European royal factories such as Meissen and Sévres, which, like some at Jingdezhen, marked their best pieces.

Ho’s fascination with concocted and traditional shapes persisted in her work dating between 2007 and 2009, as did her development of a deeply personal visual language to explore identity, the dissemination and sharing of cultural markers, and the relationship of such markers to the expansion, not always beneficial, of global markets. Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and Marilyn Monroe (1926–1962) repeatedly share the articulated, and slightly broken, surface of Made in the Postmodern Era (plate 6) with Leonardo da Vinci’s equally iconic Mona Lisa (1503), his slightly earlier drawing Vitruvian Man (about 1490), a seminal Renaissance-period exploration of the proportions of the human body, and a powerful, prowling Chinese dragon.

Also found on Identity from 2001, dragon’s scales, outlined in gold, define the neck of Confucius, John Lennon and Jesus Christ Confluence (plate 4), another engaging blend of global icons, here painted on the body of this 2008 piece. Lennon (1940–1980) strums a guitar on one side, held aloft by Jesus Christ; on the other, Confucius (551–479 BCE) sports a banjo, an unusual implement for the founder of one of the most influential philosophical traditions in East Asian history.

Bella Series No. 2 (plate 7) from 2008, Ho’s nod to the European majolica, a tin-glazed earthenware first produced in the thirteenth century, blends the Chinese phoenix, a traditional symbol of the empress, as well as rebirth, with a humorous visual meditation on notions of female beauty. Contemporary majolica was introduced to Ho by Professor Walter Ostrom. This vignette features the type of woman often rendered on majolica—a figure found in Chinese porcelain dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century—as well as Barbie and two renderings of Wonder Woman surrounded by exploding stars (fig. 3). The tiny seated women wearing bobby socks above Barbie’s head also appear seated upon the leaves and branches in the background, which is filled with images of equestrians and a miniature woman swimming with goggles and fins.

Between 2010 and 2014, Ho, working with artists in a small workshop (fig. 4), created a series of monumental pieces through a collaboration that is part of a global trend in which many artists commission pieces, or parts of works, from shops in Jingdezhen. While Ho’s cylindrical vases echo a form often found in Chinese porcelain in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the slight articulation in the center, which gives the forms a waist, reflects her interest in the parallels between clay shapes and human bodies. The two figures standing beneath a tree in Temptation: Life of Goods 2 (plate 9) from 2010, both of which grasp a fruit, are allusions to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, a motif that often appears in works produced in 2010. Neither figure is either clearly male or female,
and both are filled with circular forms with square holes—traditional Chinese coins that later became a visual trope for blessings in Chinese decorative arts. Ho’s coins (fig. 5), however, have been transformed by the addition of corporate symbols for global firms such as Coca-Cola or Nike, as well as high-end goods such as Piaget and Chanel, another invidious temptation in this global age. The imagery of Adam and Eve filled with coins, and often juxtaposed with a gold-colored jagged line referencing the catastrophic crash of the American stock market in 2008 and its subsequent global implications, often appear in Ho’s large-scale works at the time. The transformation of the traditional apple into a peach tree, a Chinese symbol for longevity, however, suggests a broader geographic context for the story of the temptation, as do the lilies, pomegranates, peonies, and other flowers beautifully painted in cobalt blue.

As signifiers of wealth and royalty in Chinese culture, peonies provide the background for much of the imagery in Ho’s 2014 series entitled World Garden (plate 13). The second work in that series, which can be distinguished from the monumental 2010 pieces by its longer and thinner neck, also displays sunflowers and other plants as a backdrop for a red transfer-printed rendering of a seagoing ship, as well as famous architectural monuments such as the Coliseum, the Taj Mahal, London Bridge, and the Yellow Crane Pagoda. The abutment of such iconic buildings against an idealized setting, lush with flowers that are imbued with seasonal overtones and other meanings in Chinese visual culture, typifies the deeply personal allusive language to be found in Ho’s work. These juxtapositions also provide a code, much like a computer language, that she uses to explore cultural and global identities and the ways in which they are impacted by migration, globalization, and changing economies.

Pieces such as One World, Many People (plate 12), another colossal piece from 2014, use words—in this case, the title phrase repeated in multiple languages—as well as images of people, peonies, and other flowers to create a utopic, garden-like environment. The use of yellow for some of the figures and the addition of a celadon or green glaze (another Chinese invention) reflect the experimentation with new shapes and colors often found in work produced at Jingdezhen that year. Hong Kong (plate 15), which shows a large blue-and-white vase bifurcated by a taller, thinner vase and blended with additional vases and other forms, also has yellow as one of the pigments. The surface of this piece is filled with irregular raised shapes, the remnants of a thick porcelain slip (terra sigillata) after firing.

This effect, and the remembrance ribbons scattered on the surface, represent innovations to Ho’s highly evolved language of shapes and designs. Nonetheless, the form of the primary large blue-and-white vase,
which echoes that of Identity discussed above, the splitting of the two characters for happiness on this vase, and the charming addition of a mythical creature known as a qilin attest to her continuing engagement with her cultural identity, and with her place in the global community of artists who use ceramics as surfaces, and coded images as a method of communication.

Denise Patry Leidy, Ph.D., is the Ruth and Bruce Dayton Curator of Asian Art and head of the Department of Asian Art at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. Her scholarly areas of interest are Chinese sculpture and decorative arts, as well as Buddhist sculpture.

Selected Bibliography


PLATES

(above left) Plate 1. *Identity*, 2001, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze.


(left) Plate 3. *Histogram No. 2*, 2007, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze.


(left) Plate 8. Rosy Garden—Unification No. 4, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, over-glaze enamel, clear glaze.

(above left) Plate 10. *In a Dream of Hope No. 2*, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze.


(above) Plate 12. *One World, Many People No. 2*, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze.

(above right) Plate 14. *Hope No. 1*, 2014, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, luster, clear glaze.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Sin-ying Ho in Conversation with John Stomberg

JOHN STOMBERG: Your biography is rich and diverse. You were born in Hong Kong, brought up in Canada, but live now in the United States. In what ways does your global heritage inform the subjects of your art today?

SIN-YING HO: I was born in Hong Kong and grew up in a time of British colonialism, so everyday life affected my art. My native language was Chinese, but I was required to learn English, and I also had to adopt an English name. When I was young, I remember eating rice out of a porcelain bowl and wondering about how the bowl was made and painted. Although I was not interested in ceramic art at the time, it did influence my later artistic developments and directions.

I grew up in Hong Kong and moved to Canada, where I studied ceramics at Sheridan College of Craft and Design in Oakville and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. I studied the differences between Eastern and Western aesthetics and design. I later graduated from Louisiana State University with an MFA. All this experience influenced and affected the development of my creative work.

I do see myself more as Chinese, but I live and exist in North America. The ceramics continues to be an identity for me—especially the porcelain, which also represents the land of China, the Middle Kingdom. This relationship always brings me back to my Chinese heritage and the focus of my developing work.

I am a global sapien and travel all over the world and live in multicultural cities like New York City, Toronto, and Hong Kong, and I travel to Jingdezhen, where my studio is located. My life is now a universal existence among the many cultures and languages of the world, all of which influence the development of my work.

I feel I belong to the world as a universal person with no cultural individualism and therefore no cultural bias.

JS: Globalism emerges as a constant concern in your work. Could you discuss your take on the global social issues with which you are engaged?

SH: Globalism, technology, and the digital age minimize our time distances but still impact our physical distances from each other. In my work, I use symbols and changes in technology, motherboards, to create narratives of social and global changes.

One of the big vases, titled Transformation, represents the will of change in human nature that can be traced through eras of history such as the stone age, iron age, industrial revolution, and digital age. I used the butterfly as a symbol of transformation, and the figures of Adam and Eve and the pattern of a motherboard were meant to express the way in which human beings constantly look for transformation through technology.

Regarding economies, the world is no longer conditioned by trade between individual countries but now is impacted by the global digital economy. This makes us all more vulnerable to global recessions and depressions, which have a serious effect on regional economies and the global economy.

Also related to globalism, I speak three languages and experience both the limitations of language and the unifying aspects of language—a merging of languages that allows us a greater opportunity for global communication and economic development. Its impact on artists is more along the lines of a multicultural spiritual development and the sharing of ideas. On the other hand, language can introduce a hierarchy between cultures as well.
**JS:** How does the content of your surfaces relate to the form of your vessels? Does the imagery respond to the shapes you create?

**SH:** In my work, most of the specific styles and forms are derived from Chinese history. When I studied ceramics, we referred to different parts of the vase form as the lip, neck, shoulder, belly, and foot. I choose vase forms according to how they relate to the human body. My cut-and-paste technique creates recognizable but also unfamiliar forms whose surfaces represent the narrative of my life, with symbols from both East and West that are hand painted and digitally designed and transferred onto the glazed surface. In some cases, I project images onto the surface and then paint them, so they become visually distorted. This distortion also evokes the distorted narrative of my life experiences.

**JS:** The scale of your large-scale works requires you to work with professional ceramicists. It is literally not a one-person job, and yet many of us think of art as a solitary, personal process. Could you discuss what it takes to work with others in realizing your monumental ceramic works?

**SH:** Art is not a solitary function—ceramics, in particular, requires a team of people to help the artist complete the work. In Chinese ceramics, they refer to the seventy-one steps of making ceramics, including digging clay, extracting the minerals, forming the clay body, wheel throwing, drying, trimming, dusting, painting, preparing glazes, glazing, firing, and grinding. I was trained as a ceramist in the 1990s, based on the European model of a studio potter who makes everything and fires everything. Even when we fire the work in the kiln, it is often with other artists and support people present during the process.

So, in ceramics we rarely work in solitary studios. Ceramics is a group-collaborative process, which is a natural environment for me. When I created the monumental ceramics works, the aspect of my creative process that was the most solitary was the initial sketching and painting, but, even then, I often sketched and painted with other artists around me, as part of a shared experience.

I am in complete control of the entire process of making my artwork, however, even when working with other technicians and helpers. It is like an orchestra that requires constant direction of the multiple individual parts to create a final whole composition that is in complete harmony and control.

The physical nature of my ceramic work is an important aspect of my creative process. I like the physicality of wedging, throwing, modeling, cutting, pasting, casting, and lifting off molds. For the monumental ceramic works, I particularly enjoyed climbing up on the scaffold, scooping trimmed bits from the inside bottom of the big vases.

**JS:** Many of your smaller works are clearly made from multiple forms joined together. How did you arrive at this approach, and in what ways does it offer opportunities that the singular forms do not?

**SH:** These forms represent my personal journey from East to West, and West to East. This journey is deconstructed and reconstructed in them.

The singular form requires more physicality in throwing and lifting the clay, and more accuracy with regard to the forms that I am referencing. It requires a more in-depth study of the historical influence and an awareness of the impact of my multicultural background and the ways in which I can merge these influences together into a cohesive and balanced narrative.

The multiple form has another level of meaning and concept. The fragmentation in the work creates a shifting dimensionality that evokes a sort of cubist appearance to the work. I am more fulfilled as an artist when I am working with this multiple-form approach, possibly due to the wider scope of the creative process, the freedom to improvise, and the multiple dimensions of the conceptual development.

This is an important part of my creative process, and it is intuitive, spiritual, and physical. I enjoy both the singular form and the multiple form and at this time have no specific preference for one over the other.
JS: An overarching theme in your work seems to be the merger of traditional pottery and contemporary art. Would you please discuss the tension between the past and the present that operates in your work?

SH: My work always uses the tensions and juxtaposition of life experiences and cultural observations. These are ongoing influences on my conceptual ideas. I have used European and Chinese forms and multiple forms, decorating the surfaces with images and symbols of cross-cultural narratives. I have selected iconic decorative motifs and images from both historic and contemporary perspectives. For example, in *Ladies*, I chose the iconic painting style for depicting women of the Renaissance and the Han dynasty in China. As a contemporary representative image, I chose Barbie. These three images conflict with one another but also appear similar, which provokes questions about how women were portrayed in Eastern and Western culture, past and present.

JS: Do you think of yourself as a potter, a sculptor, an artist, or some combination? Do these categories matter to you and do you give them any consideration?

SH: I often think about what my identity is as a potter and artist. This is somewhat confusing for me, but during the process of my conceptual work, I find that I am filling all the roles of potter, sculptor, and artist.

JS: As an artist teacher, what are the key lessons beyond technique that you would hope to instill in your students today?

SH: As an art teacher, I do feel that concept and ideas are important to the process. As well, I believe that technique is of vital importance, and that there needs to be a balance between the two. I am trained in both Eastern and Western approaches to making art. In China, the emphasis is on technique, and students are required to copy other works as a means of learning the skills. This acts like a springboard for students to develop a focus on design and not necessarily on new concepts. In the West, students are subjected to a short, four-year degree with an emphasis on concept and ideas. This tends to minimize the focus on technique.

Certainly, if the Western degree programs were longer, we would have more valuable time to support students’ education and introduce the harmony of concepts, techniques, and history. In Western ceramics programs, ceramics history is not considered to be of any significant value to a student’s education. But I feel that history is a way to understand the changing relationships between contemporary art and the history of art, since every stage of artistic development is, at some point, considered from a historical perspective. Furthermore, for the last eighty years, the field of ceramics art has changed so much—these changes should be part of the curriculum.

*John Stomberg, Ph.D., is the Virginia Rice Kelsey 1961s Director of the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth. This interview was conducted via email in January 2018.*
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST
All works by Sin-ying Ho, born 1963 in Hong Kong, China.

Identity, 2001, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze, 15 x 12 inches.

Wedlock, 2004, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze, 16 x 8 x 8 inches.

Histogram No. 2, 2007, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze, 8 x 6 x 8 inches.

Confucius, John Lennon and Jesus Christ—Confluence, 2008, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, luster, clear glaze, 16 x 9 inches.

Future Is in Our Hands, 2008, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze, 15 x 10 inches.

Made in the Postmodern Era Series No. 1, 2008, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, terra sigillata, clear glaze, 15.5 x 11 x 11 inches.

Bella Series No. 2, 2008, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, overglaze enamel, clear glaze, 18 x 8.5 inches.

Rosy Garden—Unification No. 4, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, over-glaze enamel, clear glaze, 23 x 12 x 15.5 inches.

Temptation: Life of Goods No. 2, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze, 68 x 23.5 inches.

In a Dream of Hope No. 2, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze, 68 x 18.75 inches.

Source of Wealth, 2012, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze, 27 x 20 x 15 inches.

One World, Many People No. 2, 2010, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze, 77 x 23.25 inches.

World Garden No. 1, 2014, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, clear glaze, 48 x 18 inches.

Hope No. 1, 2014, porcelain, high-fired reduction, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fired under-glaze decal transfer, luster, clear glaze, 48 x 18 inches.

9.28.2014 Occupied Central, Hong Kong, 2014, porcelain, mid-fired oxidation, terra sigillata, hand-painted cobalt pigment, computer decal transfer, over-glaze enamel, clear glaze, 20 x 11.5 x 11.5 inches.
ABOUT HOOD DOWNTOWN
During the interval of our construction and reinstallation, Hood Downtown will present an ambitious series of exhibitions featuring contemporary artists from around the world. Like the Hood Museum of Art, Hood Downtown is free and open to the public.

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June 8–September 2, 2018

Spring 2018 Hours
Wednesday–Saturday, 11:00 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Sunday, 1:00 p.m.–5:00 p.m.
Closed Monday and Tuesday

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