

# Geng Xue's Sensuous Worlds in Porcelain and Clay

Written by Alma Studholme

Ever since a private collector of Chinese contemporary art, Judith Nelson, opened the doors of her White Rabbit Gallery to the public in 2009, this Sydney venue has become my regular place of art-pilgrimage—offering frequent encounters with cutting-edge contemporary ceramic art. The Gallery is registered as a charity institution funded solely by Nelson and it curates two free exhibitions a year based on a particular subject or theme.

Considering China's long-standing tradition of ceramic practice, almost every White Rabbit exhibition features at least one exceptional up-to-date work using the ceramic medium. Some of the ceramic installations of the continuously growing collection include Ai Weiwei's *Oil Spill* (2006) and *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), both made from porcelain, as well as artist Liu Jianhua's *Fallen Leaves* (2012) made out of 5000 porcelain pieces, and *Water Drops* (2014) by Kung Wen-Yi and Ko Yu-Cheng. However, one of the artists introduced by the Gallery who explores the potential of ceramics in a unique way is Geng Xue. She gives clay and porcelain a poetic, sublimely beautiful and sensual dimension in the context of her multimedia practice. Geng is represented in the White Rabbit collection by two stop-start animation films; *Mr. Sea* (2014) accompanied by a porcelain installation, and *Poetry of Michelangelo* (2015). Both films add a new dimension of life to the porcelain and the finished works she has created.

Geng Xue was born in 1983 in Baishan, a city in the Chinese province of Jilin. In 2007 she graduated with a ceramics major from the Sculpture Studio of the prestigious Chinese Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. She also completed her master's degree in the Department of Printmaking at CAFA in 2014, and remained in Beijing following completion of her formal education. In her May 2014 artist

statement for the two exhibitions of *Mr. Sea* (one being a group graduate show at CAFA Museum, and the other a solo show at Zero Art Centre in Beijing) she explained the reasons for being drawn to working with porcelain:

*My preference traces back to my passion for Chinese traditional art, and porcelain carries a long history. I was playing with modelling clay since I was a kid, and the first time I tried to craft some pottery was at school. I was fascinated by the richness of transformation this material can undergo.<sup>1</sup>*

The short film *Mr. Sea* (13 minutes and 15 seconds) took an entire year to make and it was Geng Xue's first work using stop-start animation in combination with porcelain puppets. By using puppetry, she acknowledged yet another of the ancient Chinese art forms. Geng Xue said about making of the film:

*I wanted to try a new language and combine it with my love of porcelain, so *Mr. Sea* can be considered my first experience with video. I did everything on my own and I had friends from the industry teaching me how to deal with a camera and lights.<sup>2</sup>*

The film is based on the classic Qing Dynasty (17th Century) ghost story, originally titled *Killing the Serpent*, but also known as *The Mystery Island*. The supernatural tale is a part of a collection of 430 stories in *LiaoZhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*) written by Pu Songlin. This story speaks about a young curious man (a prince/scholar) named Zhang who arrives on a remote mysterious island via boat, seeking peace. He wanders through the forest admiring flowers that “remained always in bloom”<sup>3</sup>, when two small lumps of clay appear in this perfect porcelain world. One lump transforms into a teapot, and another into a cup from which an elixir is served to the man. As he drinks, from within the cup, appears fire and the cup transforms back into a lump of clay.

Still from *Mr. Sea* video.  
Image credit: Alma Studholme.



At the point she completes the male form, she kisses the man's mouth breathing life into the clay.



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The clay, enveloped in fire, then falls from Zhang's hand onto the ground, growing in front of him, when out of it emerges a mysterious beautiful woman dressed in a red cloak. She seduces the man and the two engage in a sexual act. The sound of tapping and scratching on the glazed porcelain surface creates a further layer to the work that engages the audience's senses as the characters explore their ceramic bodies in this erotic scene.

Followed by the women's form changing again before it is shattered into pieces (represented in the film by the breaking of her porcelain body) and transformed into a deadly sea serpent that chases and captures the man, feeding off his blood. However, because of the elixir that Zhang had consumed earlier, his blood is poisonous for the sea serpent and the monstrous creature ends up being killed.

Mirroring Geng Xue's statement previously quoted regarding the porcelain's quality to undergo *the richness of transformation* as a material, the storyline of *Mr. Sea* also reflects the ancient Chinese beliefs in the world of magic as "a real place, where beautiful things could become monsters in the blink of an eye".<sup>4</sup> Manifold transformations in the story therefore "echo Geng Xue's transformation of crude clay into delicate porcelain figures"<sup>5</sup> as well as the transformation achieved by animation, which turned the rigid figurines "into moving actors."<sup>6</sup> It can also be said that this "bewildering shape shifts—amplified by the interplay of light and shade, pallor and colour, mist and swirling smoke—reflect the workings of our minds."<sup>7</sup> Geng Xue adds that it is our desires and fears that often make us see beautiful things as terrifying.

The film is accompanied by an installation of the ceramic pieces used in the film which were shown to the public in the recent White Rabbit exhibition *Ritual Spirit* that lasted from August 2017 to January 2018. The characters were all made from porcelain covered in a clear glossy glaze that highlighted the delicate features of the man and the woman painted with blue cobalt stain. The same stain was used on the intricate details of the sea snake (Mr. Sea) as well as sparingly on the elements of the scenery of the island, while copper carbonate was used subtly on the trees of the porcelain forest. The glossiness and lightness of the porcelain created a dream-like atmosphere, which made the forest appear saturated with water and life-like. The artist herself described the story as containing "an ideal mix of beauty, eroticism and violence"<sup>8</sup> that matched her aesthetic vision for the film.

The same aesthetic of sensual beauty, eroticism and violence can be found in her

2015 short film *Poetry of Michelangelo* (19 minutes and 9 seconds) that was screened in White Rabbit's 2016 exhibition *Heavy Artillery*. The film is a performance-piece by Geng Xue, showing her engaged in sculpting a life-sized clay man. It begins as an instructional session in sculpting, accompanied by subtitles of poetry written by Italian Renaissance artist Michelangelo (1475-1564). In the same year she finished making the film Geng Xue spoke about her admiration for Michelangelo, saying:

*I love his art because his sculptures and poems are spiritual. His love sonnets are all about religion and art. He is a Renaissance master. There are a lot of reasons why I borrowed his name to express myself, and one of the reasons is because of the world renaissance itself. In Chinese society, we also talk about cultural renaissance and revitalization. Renaissance refers to the peak of an existing culture.*<sup>9</sup>

In the film the instructions on how to shape the arms, or how to adjust the details of the face, can be read simultaneously with Michelangelo's poetry whilst watching the sensuous *ritual* of Geng Xue caressing and stroking the clay, and shaping the male form as if it was her lover. At the point she completes the male form, she kisses the man's mouth—breathing life into the clay and making him move by using stop-start animation. The clay man becomes alive and reacts to the artist's touch. However, the artist then starts preparing for the next stage of the sculptural process, which is moulding and requires cutting off the man's clay limbs. In the context of the previous scenes this entire stage appears as if she is murdering her beloved. The act of dismembering her creation with clay-cutting wire also plays with the notion of artist as God, which is Geng Xue's reference to the Renaissance cult of consecrated artist. It was Michelangelo who was referred to during his lifetime as *il Divino* (the divine one) who, just like God, possesses the power of creation and the power of destruction.<sup>10</sup> ■

#### References

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**Mr Sea** porcelain installation detail. Image credit: Alma Studholme.

#### About the Author

Alma Studholme is an emerging sculptor working with multimedia and mixed media installations, often explored with ceramics as her core medium. Her practice draws on her academic background in philosophy and religion. Studholme is currently working on an interdisciplinary PhD project at the University of Sydney.