

Material Disciplines in the Shanghai Art World

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'Stele', part of conceptual artist Liu Jianhua's solo exhibition at the Shanghai Museum of Glass.

Summary

This report considers the position of material-based disciplines in Shanghai, focusing on ceramics and glass as case studies. It notes the existence of educational programmes for both materials taught in terms of studio practice, but also the absence of an infrastructure in the city that can support early career creative practitioners wanting to focus in these materials. Ceramics practitioners face conceptual barriers with respect to the material as embodying Chinese intangible heritage and financial obstacles in the form of low-margin retailing combined with the extensive production facilities of specialist

ceramics production centres. In contrast, due to the lack of historical precedents, glass practitioners do not suffer the same burden and have a potential advocate in the Shanghai Museum of Glass, which presents a range of contemporary glass sculptural works.

Art Fair Innovations (AFI)

Art Fair Innovations was a UKRI funded pilot project focused on identifying opportunities and unpacking issues relating to the management and delivery of the West Bund Art & Design Fair, one of Shanghai's main arts events. Each of the threads of activity was chosen for its potential to initiate an

examination of an aspect of the Shanghai art market and its related creative sectors. These were designed to as proofs-of-concept for subsequent UK-Chinese research engagement with the West Bund Art and Design Fair and other Shanghai cultural institutions. The activities also facilitated the direct engagement and networking necessary to build a shared understanding between the UK project team and academic colleagues in Shanghai, as well as initiating or consolidating meaningful connections with key individuals working in or overseeing Shanghai's cultural sector.

Report Scope and Research Activities

The activities that informed this report were undertaken in response to a single question: *to what extent do cultural institutions in Shanghai currently encompass practice or work featuring specific material disciplines and, where they do, how are these contextualised?* From preparatory discussions with the Shanghai University based member of the project team and the UK-based PI, who has had a long-standing engagement with the city's art sector, it was apparent that material-based disciplines were taught within the academy and related artefacts were on display at cultural venues. This raised the questions of how education programmes and presentations were conceptualised and framed and how far education and curation connected. The researcher's previous extensive experience with the contemporary craft support infrastructure in London and familiarity with comparable infrastructure in other major cities, such as Los Angeles, was utilised for benchmarking. But it was also accepted that Shanghai might have generated alternative means of support unknown or atypical in the West that should be identified during the fieldwork.

Upon reviewing the breath of material-based courses that Shanghai University's Shanghai Academy of Fine Art offered: Ceramics; Fibres; Glass; Laquer; Jewellery

and Metals, it was decided to primarily focus on ceramics and glass for the pilot. These materials offered sufficient diversity from a historical perspective and some obvious and definite anchor points in terms of high-profile museum presentations that could be used as starting points. The selection turned out to be ideal in terms of drawing out key issues, though a longer project that encompassed other materials might produce further insights.

Research activities included: field visits to a selection of established and new museums and galleries either operating as contemporary art venues, presenting historic artefacts or aiming to promote one or more specialist material disciplines; one-to-one meetings with academic staff delivering and students taking material-based programmes at Shanghai University, and studio visits to specialist practitioners based in Shanghai working in ceramics and/or glass. This was backed by a short 'snowball' survey of previous academic research on craft policy and ceramics and studio/art glass production in post-revolutionary China. The role of material disciplines in the art world in Shanghai was the subject of the AFI project workshop led by the author, who also attended another of the AFI workshops focusing on gallerists and collectors.



AFI Curator and collector workshop in the West Bund Art and Design Fair Office, 18 July 2019.

Case Study: Ceramics

In the West, ceramics are synonymous with China. The blue and white porcelain of the Ming and Qing dynasties epitomises this relationship, though polychrome decorated porcelains, celadon green stonewares and teapots made from unglazed coloured clays (called *zisha*) are also all seen as typically Chinese ceramics. These wares were produced by clusters of craftworkers living in established centres of production associated with specific materials and techniques. For example, Jingdezhen is known as China's porcelain capital, whilst Yixing is the traditional centre of *zisha* ceramic production.

Both cities are still home to these specialised ceramic industries, a situation that has ramifications for ceramic practitioners working in Shanghai. Since the 1980s, the heritage of these ceramic centres and their associated manufacturing traditions has been an important element of national pride. The value of these sites as cultural tourism resources has also been recognised. Consequently, World Heritage Site Status inscription campaigns and increasingly sophisticated tourism offers have been implemented in both cities.

Collections of high-quality imperial-era porcelains are on display at premium cultural venues in Shanghai, including the National History Museum and West Bund Long Museum. The National History Museum also shows *zisha* teapots from the same period, as well as large earthenware tomb sculptures. The National History Museum shop sells contemporary objects in the style of the historic porcelain and *zisha* wares in its collection. 20th century *zisha* teapots are displayed at the Arts and Crafts Museum in the French Concession (where a craftsman also has a workspace and sells *zisha* ceramic items). Contemporary Xiyong teawares are also available to buy in stores specialising in high quality tea located on retail streets and in luxury malls.



Zisha teapots (made of purple and yellow clay), part of the permanent collection on display in the Shanghai Museum of Arts and Crafts.

The alternative trajectories taken by China and the West during the twentieth century resulted in China not having any direct equivalent to the West's 'high modernist' period. There has never been a moment in post-revolutionary China when hand-making or hand-decorating ceramic artworks has been conceptually closely aligned to fine art practice. Within China, the mid-twentieth century enthusiasm for industrialisation which led to manual ceramic production being thought of solely in terms of factory-based manufacture – *shougongye* – has mellowed into acceptance of private, studio-based practice more closely related to arts and crafts ideals – *shougongyi*. Despite this shift, and a reappraisal of Chinese historic ceramic traditions and artefacts, the teaching of ceramics within Chinese art academies currently references Western conceptions of ceramic practice, with the US perspective possibly the most predominant. The current debates within the Western academy regarding the place or future of studio-based material disciplines, including ceramics, appears not to have penetrated China.



A ceramic practitioner's studio in Shanghai.

Successful ceramic practitioners working in Shanghai situate their practice across a range of activities that are seen as distinct in the West. e.g. surface decoration, studio ceramics, and product design. This has implications for their professional identities, working arrangements and the prices their output can command. It also raises the question of how difficult it might be to present them and their work in an international context.

An opportunity that does exist for practitioners in Shanghai is creating porcelain works in partnership with ceramic manufacturers in Jingdezhen. When undertaken as spontaneous one-off decorated designs these assume an indirect relationship with Chinese ink painting that gives a certain artistic space and recognition. However, the excess of technical expertise and production facilities at Jingdezhen also causes difficulties. Though one of the respondents had a consistently positive experience of having their designs and decorated works produced (possibly facilitated by making a commercial investment in a Jingdezhen factory), another felt it was a risk to make this type work there due to the possibility of a proliferation of well-made copies that would undercut the originals on price.

The lack of specialist galleries in Shanghai dedicated to contemporary ceramics is an obvious issue. Practitioners have

responded by utilising their studios as permanent display and selling points, with seating and exhibition spaces, to an extent atypical in the West. It is also common practice for people with studios to display work of colleagues who do not have such spaces, even when the visual aesthetic does not match their own.

Ceramic works were occasionally encountered within contemporary art venues. However, in this context, ceramic was being treated as subject, rather than medium. Whilst in the short-term these conceptual artists raised the profile of ceramics and gave producers a financial boost, they did not commit to substantial long-term engagement or develop a permanent affiliation to the discipline.



Candice Lin, fragments from 'A Hard White Body', displayed at 'Opera for the Animals' exhibition, Rockbund Art Gallery, 20 July 2019

The current situation poses significant barriers to individuals wanting to specialise in studio ceramics. The prominence of historical ceramic types and 'living' historical traditions situates ceramics in the field of cultural heritage rather than art, obstructing the development of a local audience for more innovative approaches to the material. In addition, the relatively low price of copies makes it exceptionally difficult for creative practitioners to build a new audience for one-off, studio-made pieces at viable prices.

Case Study: Glass

Glass in Shanghai does not suffer similar constraints to those that affect ceramics. There has never been any historical industrial district in China equivalent to the glass production centres once found in the Czech Republic, Italy, Sweden or the United Kingdom, though blown glass was made in China for the Qing Imperial Court. Cast glass - *liuli* - was first created during the Western Zhou period, though knowledge of the technique was later lost.

Hot glass techniques are pre-eminent in Western studio practice, but kiln casting is the glass forming technique most typically used in China by creative practitioners. This technique, used in antiquity, was reinvented in Western Europe in the 19th century and initially exploited by studio enterprises that concentrated on visual aesthetics for a fashionable luxury market rather than minimising costs. During the later 20th century, kiln casting developed a robust studio practitioner base across the US, Europe and Australasia.



Kiln cast glass sculptures by Richard Whitely, an Australian artist, on display at the Shanghai Museum of Glass, April-October 2019.

Kiln cast glass covers a range of artistic styles, including formalist geometric, figurative abstractions and naturalistic figures and dioramas. A sub-specialism is creating work in which optical effects or

colour effects are a key feature. Free standing cast pieces are typically called glass sculptures and in the West are presented and sold through specialist glass art galleries and exhibitions.

The profile of glass in Shanghai was raised by the founding of the Shanghai Museum of Glass (SHMoG) in 2011. The museum is housed in a disused industrial glass factory. It has a small but representative and high-quality permanent collection of historical glass encompassing the leading global traditions (including examples of *liuli*) and a selection of works by leading studio glass artists. It also holds temporary exhibitions of glass practitioners of international standing. When it first opened, SHMoG offered residencies to established glass artists, but now offers these to artists associated with other material disciplines or approaches, including conceptual artists. Whilst injecting an element of unpredictability into the museum's programme of exhibitions, this new approach potentially makes glass more the artist's subject than their medium. However, the museum's existence, its relative longevity on the Shanghai cultural scene, and its broad spread of activity all help promote glass as a creative material.



'Mirror Effect', part of conceptual artist Liu Jianhua's solo exhibition at the Shanghai Museum of Glass, the culmination of his museum residency. Visitors were invited to walk over the shards of broken glass that covered the floor of the exhibition space.

Implications for Future Developments

The pilot study was based on provision at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art, Shanghai University, and therefore the following comments refer specifically to its educational offer. That said, wider research did not uncover evidence that contradicted this analysis.

The Shanghai Academy of Fine Art has extensive workshop facilities that support studio ceramic practice and glass kiln forming techniques, alongside workshops dedicated to lacquerware and to jewellery and metals. Students are offered the opportunity to develop specialist technical ability in the use of their chosen material during the course of their studies. However, the students appear to lack an understanding of what is often called professional practice or business practice in Western art colleges. This includes understanding the nature of specific markets and the ability to articulate their motivations and interests in the materials they are committed to working with to clients or gallerists. This set of 'soft skills' is essential for building successful careers, and I would note here the practitioners I met all demonstrated ownership of this skillset. It was also apparent that they had a very clear idea of the most receptive markets for their work and had tailored their promotional activities and networks accordingly.

From the evidence gathered through the pilot research activities, it appears that the post-study infrastructure necessary to enable the majority of graduates specialising in particular materials to develop professional reputations and become financially self-sufficient through their practice does not currently exist. The creative sector infrastructure being developed is focused on alternative frames of practice, primarily contemporary fine art. This contrasts with the developed contemporary craft-focused infrastructure found in cities with a more long-standing cultural industry sector, such as London,

Los Angeles, New York or Paris. In all these cities, dedicated museums, niche commercial galleries and specialist events (e.g. COLLECT in London) provide sustained networking and financial opportunities for both new and established practitioners. In Shanghai, the individuals who have managed to build careers around ceramics appear to have done so by leveraging professional networks external to the city (e.g. family links to Jingdezhen) or Shanghai-based networks linked to other, more established art practices (e.g. Chinese ink painting).

Whether the necessary infrastructure for any or all the specialist material disciplines taught in SAFA will develop in future is not clear. Attempting to support every specialism may not even be practical. The recent closure of Two Cities Gallery, the only venue exhibiting material disciplines as contemporary crafts (as understood in a Western sense), demonstrates the practical difficulties of presenting such works in this way in Shanghai. However, existing institutions, such as the Shanghai Museum of Glass, do have the focus and vitality to play a key role as anchor points in any future developments. Equally, Shanghai University and other academic institutions in the city could play an active role in helping to stimulate the growth of the needed wider infrastructure. Any such initiatives would align with many specific elements of the Shanghai Urban Development Plan, so policy-makers adopting or promoting such an approach would be acting within the government's and city leaders' expectations. The valuing of historic and industrial landmark buildings in Shanghai, combined with their imaginative reuse potentially offers a range of sympathetic sites for venues promoting material disciplines. It is therefore not impossible to imagine a future where Shanghai has become home to diverse creative communities enjoying an infrastructure distinct from, but similar in structure to, the one now supporting contemporary fine art.



Imitation historic Chinese blue and white porcelain and celadon stonewares, copying exemplars from the Song, Ming and Qing Dynasties, on display (and for sale) at Shanghai Pudong Airport, July 2019.

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