

Connecting cultures

Interbeing is a ceramic and sound art project based in the UK and China, curated by Kay Aplin and Joseph Young. *Ellen Bell* explores the background to the collaboration

Ka Ho Ng, *Passing through the narrow path*, 2019, black clay, oxidation firing, water, acrylic, size varies, part of *Emptiness is Form* at The Ceramic House



FROM FAR LEFT CLOCKWISE: Ling Chun, *Green Jar*, 2018, ceramic, hair, metal, glaze, H152cm, part of *Emptiness is Form* at The Ceramic House; Andrew Livingstone, *The English Scene*, 2011, bone china (fired and unfired), glass and vintage china plate, H130 x W30cm, one of the Jingdezhen artists in residence; Annie Wan, *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread*, 2019, porcelain, one of the Powell-Cotton artists in residence; Yanze Jiang, *Beijing Cloth*, 2015, bone china, cup H7.5cm, tea tray L45.5cm, at Chiddingstone Castle

The creation of sound within a ceramic installation is not unknown (artist Ingrid Murphy employed it to great effect in her *Seen Unseen* show in 2018), but its use as a distinct artistic experience that runs in tandem with that of a ceramic practice is. *Interbeing*, a project comprising a series of residencies and exhibitions in both China and the UK in which ceramic and sound artists work collaboratively and responsively with each other, is breaking new ground.

The brainchild of artist-curators and life-partners Kay Aplin, a maker of ceramic public art, and Joseph Young, an artist who works in sound, performance and installation, it made sense for their particular disciplines to be the focus of their latest project. With its title borrowed from *Heart Sutra*, a Buddhist text, *Interbeing* is principally about what Young calls 'implicit connections'. 'Often when we think about meeting another culture we are talking about discovery, of acquiring new knowledge,' he explains. 'But what we were trying to get at with this project is that we are already connected in this global world; we already have these points of connection with each other.'

With over three years spent on its development, *Interbeing* – with residencies at the Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, China; the Powell-Cotton Museum, Kent, where they have a notable Chinoiserie collection; and a virtual pairing with exhibits from the Buddhist collection at Chiddingstone Castle, Kent – offers not only a complex web of possibilities for uncovering these connections, but also, as in the case of the cross-cultural interactions with the UK collections, another take on our colonial past.

CREATIVE ALLIANCE

Though by far their most ambitious curatorial project to date, *Interbeing* will nevertheless follow similar models established by the couple during their earlier residential projects, such as having the ceramic artists 'lead' the collaborations and placing The Ceramic House, based in Brighton, at its core. Although The Ceramic House is Aplin and Young's home, it is also a research centre for both ceramic and sound art practice, the place where they host the residencies, and a living ceramic archive of Aplin's public artwork.

The couple first began working together creatively in 2015, during a residency at Scalloway Booth on the Shetland Islands. 'During our walks there we had a parallel response to the landscape,' says Aplin. 'I would collect tiny flora growing underfoot and Joseph would record the sounds of the birds, the wind and the waves.'

The ensuing exhibition – *In a Shetland Landscape*, 2016 – was, as Aplin says, 'a lovely combination of the two. My work was on the walls providing the visual element and the whole space was filled with the most beautiful sounds.' The success of their Shetland collaboration encouraged them to approach other artists and *Landscape Islands*, 2016, a residency programme curated by Aplin and Young that brought together two pairs of international ceramic and sound artists, was the result.

This residency was the first to take place in The Ceramic House. 'The ceramic artists lived here and used my studio,' says Aplin, 'and the sound artists, most of whom lived nearby, would visit once a week. One of the partnerships was fantastic; it really gelled, with the sound artist actually using the objects made by the ceramicist in her recordings.'

Aplin and Young's second curatorial residency project was *Made in Korea*, 2017, produced to coincide with the *British Ceramics Biennial (BCB)* in Stoke-on-Trent. For this, a 'sound walk' was created: 'We commissioned three UK and three Korean sound artists to make sounds about either the making process or the materiality of ceramics,' explains Young. 'These sounds were then heard when you visited various locations around Stoke.' They were also 'geo-located' in Seoul. 'If you have the app you can still hear these sounds in both Stoke-on-Trent and Seoul,' adds Aplin.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

Serendipity has played a large part in shaping *Interbeing*. They met a Chinese producer at *Made in Korea*, 2017, and then at *Collect* in 2019, encountered Stephanie Braun of the Hong Kong-based Karin Weber Gallery. She suggested approaching ceramic artists Annie Wan and Lau Yat Wai, who will be two of the participants in the residency at Powell-Cotton Museum. The impact of Covid-19 has also been considerable: 'It is an unbelievable time to be trying to manage a project like this and with a country like China,' says Aplin. With China's firewall blocking access to mainstream social media outlets, Aplin and Young only had WeChat (a messaging and social media app) as a means of researching possible participants. 'Though we had a two-and-half week research trip over there, finding emerging ceramic artists was difficult,' says Young.

Securing the UK contingency of ceramicists for the Jingdezhen residency, all of whom are known to Aplin, was less problematic. 'We are all going to be in a very intensive



LEFT: Kay Aplin, *Ceramic Wallpaper – Peonies*, 2019, unglazed wood fired porcelain H140 x W180cm **ABOVE:** Gerald Mak, *Hand studies*, 2019, carved porcelain, each tile H28.5 x W28.5cm, part of *Emptiness is Form* at The Ceramic House **BELOW:** Jenny Chan, *Pondering Monk*, 2020, stoneware with oxides, H35cm, part of *Emptiness is Form* at The Ceramic House



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INTERBEING SCHEDULE

- **May–June 2021:** *Emptiness is Form* – exhibition of contemporary Chinese ceramics at The Ceramic House, Brighton, UK, featuring international artists of Chinese heritage and established artists living in China
- **July–Oct 2021:** *No Interdependent Origins* – residency of two Hong Kong ceramic artists at Powell–Cotton Museum, Kent, UK, paired with two UK sound artists, followed by an exhibition at Quex Park, Kent, UK
- **July 2021:** *Listening Hands* – Joseph Young will work with a Tai Chi master and group at the London Chinese Community Centre. A film will be produced of a live performance featuring Young’s custom-made Sonic Baton instrument conducting sounds recorded in China and the visual language of Tai Chi movement, which will be premiered on *Silver Sunday*, a national day celebrating older people on 3 October 2021
- **Sept–Dec 2021:** *Neither Increasing Nor Decreasing* – virtual exhibition pairing established Chinese ceramicists with objects from the Buddhist collection at Chiddingstone Castle, Kent, UK



Joseph Young recording at a porcelain mill in Jingdezhen, 2019

- **Oct–Nov 2021:** *Perfection of Understanding* – residency of five UK artists at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (JCI). Each UK ceramic artist will be paired remotely with a Chinese sound artist to produce accompanying sound pieces, creating five new interdisciplinary sound and ceramic installations to be exhibited at the JCI gallery. The results will be documented in a film
- **Dec 2021:** *Silk Roads and Floral Routes – Ceramic Wallpaper: Peonies*, a new ceramic sculpture inspired by symbolic Chinese flora by lead artist Kay Aplin, will be compiled into an artist’s book entitled *Silk Roads and Floral Routes*

situation together for a significant period of time, so it is really important people get on,’ she explains. ‘This is why I have tried to find ceramic artists who already know each other.’ With Jingdezhen being ‘the capital of porcelain’, the finesse in the porcelain work of David Cushway, Fenella Elms, Andrew Livingstone and Valerie Nascimento was also a principal consideration. ‘Interestingly,’ says Young, ‘because it is so high-fired and fine it does make the best quality sound. But budget restraints mean that the sound artists will not be able to be on site, so how they will respond to the work remains to be seen.’


The effect of Covid-19 has been remorseless. Funding for artists to ship work from China has been cut and China’s current quarantine laws mean that when Wan and Lau return from the UK they will have to self-isolate for three weeks in a hotel at their own expense. ‘Having to organise this project during the pandemic has certainly made things interesting,’ says Aplin, ‘not only because of trying to manage travel constraints but also losing partners due to budget freezes.’

For example, the event at Chiddingstone Castle, where established artists from China select a piece of their work to be ‘paired’ with one from the Buddhist collection, was only secured at the last minute after a partner institution had to pull out. In a situation like this where plans are having to be adapted daily, resourcefulness has been essential; Aplin’s *Peony* ceramic installation originally due to be exhibited in Guangzho, China, will now take the form of an artist’s book and Young, who had intended

to make a film about Tai Chi in the same province, will now work with a group from the London Chinese Community Centre. Aplin and Young have a variety of creative contingency plans in place for the project: ‘We have this hybrid model,’ says Young, ‘where we will do physical things where possible, but nevertheless everything will also be online in the form of a viewing room. There people can see the work, listen to the work and there will be films documenting the processes as well.’

LAUNCH SHOW

An inaugural exhibition of contemporary Chinese ceramics featuring international artists of Chinese heritage and established artists living in China is due to launch the project in May 2021, to coincide with Brighton’s *Artist Open Houses* festival. With the current uncertainty as to whether this can go ahead as planned, the continued resolution and tenacity of Aplin and Young, seemingly against all the odds, is remarkable. ‘We are determined not to give up,’ says Young, ‘even with everything that has been going on. It has taken so long preparing and getting to this stage, we are not going to stop now.’

Although its full promise is yet to be realised, as an exemplar of what can be achieved in the midst of a global pandemic, Aplin and Young’s *Interbeing* project deserves all possible plaudits. 

For more details visit theceramichouse.co.uk; artofnoises.com

Images: Ling Chun, Maria Fernandez Canut, Ole Akhoj, Jo Ritchie, Annie Wan, Yanze Jiang, Zhou Sumin