



*Growth, Fruits of Labor Series.
2006. Ceramic and found
(purchased) object.*

Dirk Staschke Industrial Chinoiserie

Article by Glen R. Brown

CHINA LOOMS LARGE IN THE ENTREPRENEURIAL imagination. Industrial titan of the contemporary world, it is a land of opportunity where glinting spires of glass and steel rise through veils of white smoke hanging in the air like an unearthly fog; a place where labour is still astonishingly cheap and its instruments are legion; a place where factory upon factory glows and fumes and clanks and squeals, churning out the endless array of products on which a vast global consumerism feeds like an insatiable beast. China's goods are destined for dispersion to every home and business in every city in every corner of the earth. Its familiar export stamp graces everything from plastic toys and inexpensive clothing to engine parts and high-tech instruments: a million things that the world cannot do without, or, at any



Stack, Fruits of Labor Series. 2006. Ceramic and found (purchased) object. 114 x 30.5 x 25.5 cm.

rate, would not wish to. In this sense, China is more than a country. It is the beating heart of a vital system of production and trade that encircles the globe.

When Philadelphia ceramic sculptor Dirk Staschke first experienced China in 2004, these were among his impressions. Unlike the majority of Western

ceramists who have travelled to China in recent years, he was not on a tour of famous ceramics-related sites. Nor was he bound for a residency at Yixing or Jingdezhen. Though he spent some time as a visiting artist at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, his stay was related principally to business that his wife was conducting for one of the myriad foreign companies with production ties to China. As a consequence, his reflections during his travels turned as much toward global commerce, especially the thriving trade between East and West, as toward ceramics. Above all, he was interested to see that international commerce had carried Western influences to China as extensively as it had brought Chinese goods to the West. The seed of an idea began to grow in his mind, and he considered the ways in which this relationship of mutual influence through trade might be addressed in a series of ceramic works.

The first part of the answer was relatively simple. While China's foreign trade has escalated to unprecedented scale since the 1980s, there have of course been other periods in history when the Chinese have engaged in extensive exportation of goods, both to other parts of Asia and to countries in the Middle East, Europe and the Americas. As every ceramist is aware, during the Ming and Qing dynasties some of the most lucrative of these trade goods were porcelains, both tableware and objets d'art. For a time, Chinese blue-and-white and, later, overglaze-enamel wares were the most prized possessions to adorn the mantels, sideboards and dining tables of the great palaces and manor houses of Europe. During the Ming period, the lower-grade so-called kraak wares even fed important middle-class markets in countries such as the new Dutch Republic.

While the extraordinary appeal that Chinese porcelain held for the 17th-century European consumer no doubt derived first from its rarity and second from the physical qualities of the paste – the ringing hardness, translucency and above all the milk-white purity – which had no parallel among Western wares – there was clearly something else that worked its subtle influence over desire. Chinese porcelains generally bore examples of the Chinese aesthetic: something exquisite, exotic and eminently useful for visually corroborating the stories of strange, far off lands encountered by European explorers and traders. From the fluid, linear motifs and delicate patterns on Chinese porcelain wares, the aristocracy of Europe developed its taste for chinoiserie, a whimsical, fantasising and largely unprecedented style of decoration that reached the peak of its popularity in the mid-18th century.

For Staschke, chinoiserie carries implications directly relevant to the present as well as the past. "It occurred to me," he relates, "that this decorative style was an artistic crystallisation of what we now call

globalisation. Europeans began imitating the Chinese wares and the Chinese soon figured that out and began making imitations of those imitations in order to better serve the foreign market." The result of this mutual imitation was a series of strange new forms that had developed largely out of attempts, often wildly imaginative, to address a distant and different other. Chinoiserie was neither truly Chinese nor wholly European but rather an acknowledgement on both ends that the world was not monocultural and that there were innovative ways to take advantage of that fact in the production of aesthetic objects. For Staschke, the historical example of chinoiserie suggested some intriguing possibilities for hybrid forms in a series of contemporary ceramic sculptures embodying the themes of globalisation, industrial manufacture, international commerce and the role that ceramic objects still play in the interaction of cultures.

The result, the year following his trip to China, was Staschke's introduction of his current series, *The Fruits of Labor*. Consisting of contemporary underglaze blue-and-white Chinese export porcelain vessels that have been combined with slipcast and constructed white stoneware elements, the sculptures are, significantly, half commodities and half creative responses to those commercial objects. In this series of strange but oddly attractive sculptures, Staschke has taken the modern counterpart of the Ming export vase and negated its utility. In its new exclusively aesthetic and metaphorical role the vessel has become not only a base for decorative extension and elaboration of a larger work but also and more importantly a support for a generalising vision of the other. Staschke has, in other words, utilised the contemporary Chinese mass-manufactured porcelain vessel to represent a certain perception of the conditions of its making. Although this perception is of an anonymous, efficient but alienating factory system of production, it parallels – as part of a fantasised vision of a distant culture – the 17th-century perception of China as a tranquil natural paradise inhabited by solitary scholars in lofty mountain retreats and exotic beauties wandering among gardens of flowers and birds.



Amalgam, Fruits of Labor Series. 2006. Ceramic and found and fired object. 76 x 25.5 x 25.5 cm.

Due to his interest in the phenomenon of globalisation, Staschke has not employed his industrial chinoiserie merely to comment on those contemporary Western perceptions of China that have been formed largely through familiarity with its industrial products. Equally important is the implication that, along



Towers, Fruits of Labor Series. 2006. Ceramic and found and fired objects. 61 x 35.5 x 28 cm.

with traditionally Chinese aesthetic conventions, Western interests have exerted their influence over certain aspects of those products. The work *Structure*, for example, features a Chinese blue-and-white bowl that serves as the base for a mish-mash of classical European architectural ornaments: a pastiche of Corinthian acanthus leaves and ionic volutes that rises upward like a massive stylised flower. This curious blend of culturally distinct decorative traits is, in the end, perhaps most interesting because it is as visually rich as it is tendentiously synthetic. The obvious artificiality of Staschke's chinoiserie – unlike the ostensible naturalness, even inevitability, of some cultural or period styles, but like the chinoiserie of the 17th and 18th centuries – proves no impediment to its

effectiveness in orchestrating an aesthetic experience.

The upper section of *Structure* could clearly be called opulent, perhaps excessively so. Its mass of ornament threatens, visually and literally, to overwhelm the relatively fragile bowl, even topple and crush it through leverage and sheer weight. Contemplating this bulky neo-classical hybrid, one is not surprised to learn that in previous works Staschke employed architectural ornament as a metaphor for social oppression. "Society," he explains, "is something that we build collectively but are forced to experience individually. In those other works I drew on my experiences living in New York City, a crowded place where you are almost more isolated than if you were living in a small town." In *Structure*, however, Staschke's intent in incorporating imposing, multifarious architectural elements was somewhat different. *The Fruits of Labor* series as a whole employs the moulded white stoneware sections more obviously as symbols of abundance than oppression – although abundance, as the case of near-epidemic rates of obesity and diabetes in contemporary China suggest, can certainly have its pernicious side as well.

Other works in the *Fruits of Labor* Series more obviously signify abundance through their conglomerates

of moulded melons, apples, pears, squash and other natural foods that rise and billow like clouds of smoke from factory stacks. The cornucopia effect of these moulded forms and the vessels that belch them forth makes unmistakably literal the metaphor of fruits of labor.

The contradiction between nutritious produce and noxious fumes also obviously raises issues about the cost, in terms of environment and health, of unrestricted industrial growth. Who could look at these works and fail to reflect on problems such as global warming? Who could miss the irony that the fruits of labour may contain the seeds of destruction? If piquing fears and nettling the viewer's conscience were the extent of Staschke's motivation, his sculptures would no doubt be effective enough. He has, however, cultivated in his work a subtler commentary on production as well.

To understand that commentary, one need only recognise that the medium is not incidental to Staschke's sculptures. The found-object vessels play a crucial role in establishing connections to chinoiserie of course, and they are equally necessary to the allusions to contemporary Chinese industry. Beyond that, however, they invoke the issue of labour and do so specifically in the context of ceramics. The mass-produced vessels that Staschke incorporates into his sculptures are of the lineage of the great blue-and-white porcelains of the Ming dynasty, yet they have become even more overtly the products of anonymous workers. Ming decorators still hand-painted their underglaze cobalt motifs, and as a consequence manufacturers' desires for uniformity were constantly thwarted by the reality of variation in the marks made by individuals. In this sense, Ming dynasty factory production, however unintentionally, still acknowledged the maker.

Application of today's porcelain manufacturing and decorating technology has, however, diminished the traces of the individual to the point where the products of industry seem to emerge without the necessity of agents. Transfer images and decals have increasingly, if not absolutely, replaced the traditional hand work of individual decorators, and the result is a general decline of the factory produced ceramic object from expressive form to mere thing, useful or attractive as it might be. How many viewers, upon encountering one of Staschke's works for the first time would have immediately perceived the sculpture as a product of collaboration? After all, industrially produced ceramic vessels of the sort that Staschke utilises as found objects have come to epitomise the estrangement of the worker from the products of labour. Cold and bloodless, they symbolise the loss of self-determination that, along with contamination of the environment and deterioration of human health, has been an ironic consequence of the pursuit of abundance and a higher quality of life in the modern world.

Staschke does not, of course, present any solutions to the daunting problems of environmental contamination and the social and somatic illnesses generated by the modern mentality of excess. His assemblages may, however, offer some glimmerings of hope for recovery of the mass-manufactured ceramic vessel as a vehicle of expression. His industrial chinoiserie, too, may have its pragmatic side. Contamination of the



Structure, Fruits of Labor Series. 2006. Ceramic and found (purchased) object. 50.5 x 28 x 28 cm.

environment is a global issue, yet one of the foremost among the factors that have allowed it to take a death grip on the planet has surely been the failure to effect reform on a global scale. Today China may be among the most visible of offenders against the environment, but its precedents as an industrial behemoth lie in the West. Moreover, the influences of international consumerism and entrepreneurial zeal exercise their power over China's industry today far more relentlessly than ever before. Staschke's industrial chinoiserie is a reminder of these facts. Perhaps in some small fashion it may even be a catalyst for change.

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