



# TRADITIONS & TRANSFORMATIONS

Dongwang Fan & Susan Chen

6 September - 10 November 2023

**Opening Hours: Mon – Fri (9:30 am – 5:00 pm)**  
**Building EA.G.03, Parramatta South Campus**

# Introduction

“... the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.”

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), T.S. Eliot

Eliot defines the relationship between the past and the present as “a simultaneous existence” in which “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past”, and the creation of a new work modifies the perception and understanding of the tradition. It is this dynamic and reciprocal nature of the past and the present that underpins this new exhibition, *Traditions and Transformations*.

Every artist has a different relationship with traditions and takes a different approach to them. Artists of migrant backgrounds are bound to take a conscious path towards their cultural heritage, which in turn has a fundamental impact on their artistic creation. This exhibition features two artists of different generations and different childhood experiences, but where their unique and surprising reconfiguration and transformation of traditions in their artworks both contrast and connect them in their creative depiction of tradition and contemporaneity. This is what makes this exhibition so interesting and inspiring.

Dr Dongwang Fan was a well-established artist in Shanghai when he migrated to Australia in 1990, with the intention of discarding his Chinese art traditions and Chinese identity to become an artist of the West, only to discover that renewing and reinventing his Chinese art traditions in his creative practice in Australia led to a new world of artistic adventures and achievements. Susan Chen is a second-generation migrant of Chinese heritage. Growing up in a white dominant society, she rejected her cultural heritage, only wanting to assimilate and conform to the “norm”. Later she realised that her cultural heritage inspired her and became an integral part of her own unique works of art.

The design of the cover image is to highlight the surprising and contrasting transformations the two artists have undertaken in their creation. Fan, who grew up in China, created his 2014 Wynne Prize finalist painting of the Australian landscape, *Gum Tree triptych*, through the techniques of Chinese painting, carving and calligraphy, providing viewers with a fresh and new

perspective of this emblematic Australian tree. Chen, who grew up in Australia, cleverly and satirically turned the traditional Chinese game of mahjong into a new “game set”, compelling viewers to reflect upon the human responses to the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic in Australia. Fan’s subsequent and new bodies of works show his continuous transformations of artistic creation across a diverse range of subjects, all distinguished by his sculptural painting style. Chen’s new works include ceramic vases created through merging traditional ceramic techniques with new technology. A closer inspection of the seemingly traditional ceramic vases will reveal Chinese characters digitally embedded into the surface of the vases to capture the essence of positive cultural exchange.

We hope this exhibition will give viewers a refreshing experience of traditions and transformations in art creation and that the artworks will provoke a historical and contemporaneous sense that involves not only the “pastness of the past” but also the “new presence of the past” in the present.

Professor Jing Han

Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture



*Dragon in Water*  
120 x 124cm  
2013



*Blue and White Vase Series, (Hexagon)*  
210 x 210 x 390mm  
2023

## About Artist



Chinese Australian artist Dr Fan Dongwang studied traditional Chinese art at the Shanghai School of Arts and Crafts (SSAC) in the 70's and later became an art teacher at SSAC. As an established Shanghai artist, his work has been exhibited regularly at the Shanghai Art Gallery since 1982, including the 1986 Shanghai Art Museum Inaugural Art Exhibition and the 1987 Shanghai International Art Festival. As a member of the top professional art body, Chinese Artists Association, he was awarded the Prize for Excellent Work for Shanghai International Culture Exchange. In 1990 Fan migrated to Australia as an artist of 'Distinguished Talent'. He studied Master of Arts at COFA, NSW University in 1995, and received the Post Graduate Award and completed Doctor of Creative Art at Wollongong University in 2000. His doctoral thesis *Shifting Perspectives and the Body* established a theoretical model for comparing the differences between the representation of spatial depth in Chinese and European paintings.

Fan has been a guest lecturer at ANU and Wollongong University, and a visiting fellow at Curtin University. His paintings have been shown in group exhibitions at the National Gallery of Australia and numerous university and regional art galleries throughout Australia. His solo exhibitions have been held at Wollongong City Gallery, Drill Hall Gallery, Sydney University College of the Arts Galleries, Macquarie University Art Gallery and University of Newcastle Art Gallery. He has been awarded the Mosman Art Prize; Festival of Fisher's Ghost Art Award; Liverpool City Art Prize; Willoughby City Art Prize; Burwood Art Prize; Ian Potter Cultural Trust Grant; Art on The Rocks Prize; and many grants from the Australia Council and Create NSW. He has been a finalist at both the Wynne Prize and Sulman Prize at the AGNSW and a finalist at the Moran prize. Fan's work has been featured on China CCTV and commissioned by the National Gallery of Australia and Sydney City Council. He currently lives and works in Sydney.

Dongwang Fan is represented by Art Atrium

# Artist Statement – Transforming Traditions

## Sculptural Painting

All of my works in this exhibition aim to transform traditions of the East and West by using a technique called Sculptural Painting.

Chinese jade or lacquer carving is one of the most important art forms in the history of Chinese civilisation. Carvings of landscape images were especially popular but difficult, employing semi-abstract design and elegant decorative elements. The narrow dimensions of the jade or lacquer used by Chinese artists to carve landscapes strongly affected the composition and restricted the figure's volume and depths. Decorative lines and patterns are essential in this process. Artists also used larger shadows, by cutting deeper, to enhance the image. In the end the original Chinese landscape painting turned into a beautiful and distinctive low relief carving of a landscape difficult to find elsewhere in the world.

My painting is a process of applying this traditional technique to reverse the low relief carving back into painting. I use brushes to 'carve (paint) out' the painting's surface, to produce decorative lines, patterns and shadows as if carving jade in low relief. Thus, I bring out a restricted sense of 3D volume protruding from the 2D canvas surface, a visual illusion expressed brilliantly in traditional Chinese decorative carvings. Here Western postmodernist art theory was instrumental in the painting's process of seamlessly transforming the traditional in combination with Western linear perspective to achieve a sense of space beyond the surface of the canvas.

Meanwhile, my paintings' flat brushwork and bright colours are influenced by Western hard edge abstract, optical illusionism and pop art. In these ways, my paintings combine and transform the principles of contemporary Western and traditional Chinese Art. Works by Roy Lichtenstein, Kandinsky, David Hockney and Hokusai as well as Chinese landscape painting masters have influenced my creative approach.

## Chinese and Western symbols

In this exhibition the larger sculptural paintings depict images that are significant in Chinese culture: Dragon symbolising potent and auspicious powers, and *Kylin*, a mythical creature that can drive away evil spirits.

The striking feature of *Arhat*, a Buddhist who has achieved spiritual enlightenment,

was imported from Persia along the Silk Road in ancient times.

*Lady & Lion – After Botticelli’s Pallas and the Centaur*: the main message in Botticelli’s painting is perhaps associated with uncontrolled passion, lust and sensuality, and submission of passion to reason. Here my painting Lady and Lion has transformed it into the conflict of race and gender differences playing out between the East and West (lady and lion).



*Arhat*  
181 x 124cm  
2023



*Lady&Lion-  
AfterBotticelli Pallas  
and the Centaur*  
184 x 174cm  
2023

## The Body

Our bodily relationship with the environment, technology and religion is critical for human existence. Overwhelmed by the hostile environment of natural disasters, worldwide pandemics, and political and economic crises, our once sublime and confident bodies have become fragile and threatened.

My painting depicts such a bodily world in that the ideal renaissance body has fallen off its pedestal, broken into pieces to become the aching, longing, distorted, suspended, confused, isolated body parts, floating and submerging in a blue or red water surface, gasping for air. The fragmented bodies are mixed with different religious and cultural symbols among the robotic objects interacting with the floral background. This is an imaginative vision of the new bodily world, a wake-up call for us to rethink the balance between human and nature.



*Body#1 (Quagmire), 90 x 90cm, 2021*



*Body#2 (Split), 90 x 90cm, 2021*



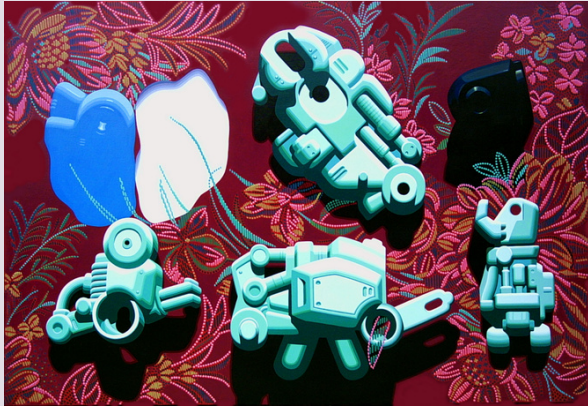
*Body#3 (Pond), 90 x 90cm, 2021*



*Body#4 (Bend), 90 x 90cm, 2021*

**Descendant**

The robotic objects in *The Pandemic Body* and *Descendant* have been given marks of “heads, eyes, mouths, arms, legs and tails” to project an animate quality to the unidentifiable biomorphic bodies. Recent AI developments have made technology more pervasive in human life. The background floral patterns are from handmade Chinese brocade. The flowers come alive over the top of the objects or body parts. Thus, the background becomes object, object becomes background, and a second background is created underneath, suggesting a diverse and integrated cultural environment.



*Descendant*  
(BlackShadow)  
124 x 181cm  
2018



*The Pandemic Body*  
(Transfigure)  
121 x 94cm  
2021



## Landscape

In producing the Australian landscape icon *Gum Tree*, I present an angle of looking upwards to focus on the tree trunks. In the twilight, the majestic trunks like human bodies dance in the wind and soar towards the blue sky in ecstatic salutation, their branches becoming narrow roads winding towards a heavenly and spiritual destination. Gum trees are painterly subjects with the Chinese calligraphic strokes of the branches breaking free and the Western optical colours both subtle and vivid.

My series of Chinese landscape paintings invites people to immerse themselves in the natural world. Inspired by classical Chinese poetry, these paintings depict sceneries of bittersweet memories of the past and uncertain outlooks of the future. Mountains and rocks, and water including lake, river, sea, clouds and waterfall, are integral parts of Chinese landscape painting that embody the concept of Daoism. By gazing at the vast landscape and distant horizon, one can connect with the universe. They also symbolise the dialectic concepts of Chinese culture: yin and yang, hard and soft, solid and void.

The pine tree symbolises steadfastness, self-discipline, and endurance. It's often depicted with other symbols of longevity such as cranes that are associated with immortals in Chinese art.



*Landscape Series*



*Gum tree diptych*  
180 x 124cm  
2014



# Q&A with Artist Fan Dongwang

The interview was conducted by Prof Jing Han - Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts & Culture:

**You were a well-established artist in Shanghai before you migrated to Australia in 1990. What attracted you to come to Australia? Can you list one or two culture shocks when you first arrived?**

I was a well-established Shanghai artist in the 80's, having works exhibited at the Shanghai Art Gallery and in its collection. I originally chose to immigrate to Australia because Australia is the only country close to Asia that has a dominant Western culture. Close to Asia means easier access, and my main purpose of going overseas was to study Western culture. In 1990 I chose to come to Australia to further pursue my artistic career in two steps: step 1, to first study Western art at university; step 2, to establish myself as a practicing artist in a Western country. After I arrived, I visited a local artist and was advised that studying at university would be the quickest way to integrate into the Australian art scene and get closer to the art community.

I found the Australian art scene was not what I expected: it is more relaxed and comfortable compared with British or American and even Chinese cultures. But I like Sydney's art world; it's more versatile, multicultural and interesting than other parts of the country. However, the first few years living and studying arts at universities in Australia was a culture shock due to the different political, economic, ideological and artistic systems.

In 1990, I was fresh out of China. China was a very different society at that time, even more so compared with the Australia of the day. The initial culture shocks I felt were immense, such as the economic pressure new migrants suffer, and the new political freedom I experienced. It was the first time I had to struggle to survive on my own in a foreign country.

**How difficult and challenging did you find the transition from your artistic practice in China to your art creation in Australia? Were there any major differences between the two?**

A few years later, after I was better integrated into the society, I applied and got offers from five Australian universities and hence commenced my Master of Art studies at the University of NSW in 1995. The culture shocks I felt were again different at university, and namely the feminist and homosexual art movements. Overwhelming numbers of female students in the art classes and openly gay and

lesbian lecturers were culture shocks to a Chinese student like me. But I have embraced them. Perhaps that was my endeavour to assimilate. This influenced my work greatly at the time: sexual ambiguity became one of the themes of my paintings. In Australia, the other biggest influence on my work was the fine weather and bright sunlight and colours. I love the Australian glorious sunshine and blue sky. My work became very bright compared to the grey pictures I had created in China (often with fog and grey sky).

**What did you need to do to establish the connection between your previous achievements in China and your new exploration in Australia? Or did you have to go through a process of disintegration, then re-integration?**

My aim was to disintegrate: to get rid of my Chinese identity and acquire an Australian one. But that process was not straightforward. My studies at university stopped me doing so.

At that time, postmodernism and multiculturalism were equally dominant, and there was also of course feminism and the gay movement which I came to embrace wholeheartedly and completely. I was told that truth is relative and that I needed to look back into my own culture for artistic inspiration. This shocked me at first as I thought why did I come to Australia just to look back into my Chinese culture? Then I realised that this is what new art is about – postmodernism and multiculturalism didn't exist in China back then.

But after a year of hard work the results were evident: gender politics and body art, the main focus of the 90's in Australia, were among the biggest influences on my work at that time. I produced many big canvases of fragmented bodies with ambiguous gender identities for my Master of Art studies at UNSW.

**You completed your higher education in Australia, receiving a Master's degree at the UNSW School of Art and Design in 1995, and a PhD at Wollongong University in 2000. How did your academic studies and research inform and influence your own artistic creation?**

During my years of studying, working and living in Australia, I have experienced a constant change in social environment, and this has provided me with a complex, ambiguous and different perspective of life and art. In my doctoral study at UOW I formulated a theory of shifting perspective and employ it in my new artwork.

My doctoral thesis was titled *Dancing Shadows - Shifting Perspectives and Body*. It was a study of different bodies through their different shadows caused by our shifting viewpoints.

Shifting perspectives from a method point of view in visual art are the systems of space rendering, which differ considerably in many cultures and traditions. Shifting perspectives from a metaphor viewpoint have philosophical, social, political, and sexual significance. It is a multiple worldview of today's societies and arts.

Socialism and capitalism are also one of the many themes in my work. It is not as simple as the notion of Left vs. Right. They are more intertwined to represent different ideologies, way of life, and cultural differences. It is apparent in my major work *Shifting Perspectives and Body*.

**You are now an award-winning and successful artist in Australia. When and how did the breakthrough happen if there was one?**

My solo show at Wollongong City Gallery in 2000 right after graduation was a breakthrough moment. It showed my five years Master and Doctoral study results: among many others, a large 9 metre long painting *Shifting Perspectives and the Body #1-5*. Its concept, based on a visual system called "shifting perspective", was explained in my thesis and it was quite complex. For composition and colour, it is a balance between contrast and harmony. The colour is influenced by Western pop art. Overall it mimics the effect of Chinese traditional low relief carvings.

In the work *Shifting Perspectives and Body* I am using surrealism techniques to find meaningful associations and common connections between seemingly different people, things or events. There are many existing logics I can keep or change when applying them to the images. Some are familiar and some are surprising to the viewer, forcing them to question their logic and to think creatively.

It took many years to research and to paint this large work, because I wanted it to be intellectually challenging as well as visually stimulating. That is, to reach my limits in each work.

The other breakthroughs were the 2001 Shanghai Star and 2006 Mosman Art Prize.

**In 2013, your painting *Dragon in Water* was a finalist in the Sulman Prize. It is a very striking-looking dragon, powerful and distinctive. A traditional Chinese icon has been turned into a new kind of postmodern dragon. Chinese dragons have been painted by so many artists, to a point of being over-painted. What approach did you take that made you confident that your creative dragon would be different and stand out?**

I started working on images of dragons from 2001 and have continued to this day, like I have with my body images. The changes happened when I first returned to China in 1997 which had a huge impact on my new work *Dragon in Water*.

The dragon images often evoke different ambiguous meanings in many cultures. In this painting, by submerging the dragon in different layers of air, water and soil, I have adopted a Western postmodern mode of fragmentation. This is different to the Chinese approach that emphasises the wholeness of the image.

Dragons are aquatic creatures living in water with fluid and hybrid identities, using their wisdom to navigate the terrain of ongoing change. Here the water is the environment, the agent for changes. Water dissolves and transforms the old into the new. The horizontal lines represent complex layers as though the dragon is coming through many different realms. Therefore, the traditional Chinese icon has been developed into a new kind of postmodern dragon: one that is disintegrated and reintegrating. The dragon has not diminished but re-emerged onto an unprecedented new level.

To me the dragon represents the emerging Chinese cultural identity. My continuing movement between China and Australia enables me to develop a constantly shifting perspective; it also gives me the ability to develop a unique visual language that reflects my ambivalence towards my identity.

**In 2014, your work *Gum tree triptych* was selected as a finalist in the Wynne Prize. It is very interesting to see that in this work you used an Australian icon, the gum tree, and gave your creation a Chinese art perspective. Tell us what prompted and motivated you in creating this work?**

My large canvas paintings titled *Gum tree triptych* in the Wynne prize was part of a series of gumtree paintings to explore the notion of painting Australian landscape through the techniques of Chinese painting, carving and calligraphy.

Humble, resilient and iconic, the Australian gum tree has been drowned in floods, consumed in flames, cut down by humans. Yet each year it endures. The trees spread back across the land, from scorching deserts to desolate mountains. In the twilight their majestic trunks soar towards the sky in joyous salutation, their branches becoming narrow roads winding towards a heavenly and spiritual destination.

If you look closely, they become living things akin to human beings: their solemn trunks dance in the wind, their magnificent bodies transforming into awe-inspiring male and female torsos. Gum trees are painterly subjects too, with the strokes breaking free and the colours both subtle and vivid.

The gum tree is developed from my knowledge of Chinese relief carving. The paintbrush becomes my chisel, 'carving' out the trees' body shape, applying strong upward perspectives to manipulate the canvas surface to create powerful visual illusions. I also use "the art of line" from Chinese calligraphy combined with Western

pop art colour arrangement to paint the free flowing and gracious trunks and branches.

**Being an artist, and in particular a Chinese Australian artist, what major challenges have you encountered in making your works recognised in Australia?**

The main challenge is to apply the traditions but also break away from them: to employ Western cultural ideas and contemporary artistic approaches to make new art that also has roots in one's own cultural background.

I am using a new visual language to reach Australian audiences. By revitalising old traditions, I provide Australians with a fresh perspective of their trees and country. The great 'Australian landscape' tradition, once emblematic of the Eurocentric vision of Australia, has now embraced indigenous views of the landscape. It will be further strengthened when Asian artistic perspectives join in. My gum tree and dragon paintings might help Asians and Australians understand both the cultural differences and the universal experiences embodied in the representation of our environment and art.

**How did you develop your very own unique artistic style? What are the main elements that have contributed to your style?**

While at university in Australia, I started to incorporate the ideas of Chinese carvings, traditional fabric patterns and Western pop culture colours into my paintings. My past art practices have thus all come together in my new work. I am not the young Chinese art student rebelling against Chinese traditions but instead I am applying them in my new work in Australia. They all become a natural part of me. I started to incorporate ideas of jade/ivory/lacquer carvings, traditional fabric patterns and Western colours into my paintings.

I employ a new method of 'painting as relief sculpture' to produce my new painting the same way as ivory carving – to use the brush to 'carve (paint) out' the painting's surface, as if carving an ivory relief or low relief sculpture. Thus, I bring out a sense of 3D volume on the 2D surface, a visual illusionism expressed in traditional Chinese art, which is also very different from Western linear perspective that's like looking into a space through a window.

**What do traditions and transformation mean to you and to your artistic career?**

For years I have worked with lots of universities in Australia and the experience has been rigorous and thought-provoking. This time I am very honoured to be working with IAC at Western Sydney University, an Institute that specialises in bridging different cultures in Australia.

This show is like a mini survey exhibition that enables me and audiences to examine the progress of my 30 years of living and working in Australia as a visual artist. It focuses on the way that my past traditional learning has played a major role in the transformation of my art from old to new, from China to Australia. Through this exhibition I feel more confident that my art can be further transformed: applying this new visual language of sculptural painting to depicting Australian land, its people and their cultures in a unique style that will appeal to wider Australian audiences. I am pleased to work with fellow artist Susan Chan in this dual show. And thanks very much to Professor Han for helping me achieve my goal.



*Kylin*, 90 x 108cm, 2015



## About Artist



Susan Chen is a Sydney-based ceramic artist, working out of her studio in Sydney's Inner West.

Chen's work explores the intersection of art, design and craft, currently focusing on the use of digital technology in the ceramic art making process. Chen is interested in the changing narrative and perception of traditional ceramic making techniques, and how they can be applied in a contemporary context.

Chen often finds her inspiration in the mundane of the everyday. She is an acute social observer and creates sculptural interpretations and unique narratives from social debris that is left behind, both in the physical and digital realm. Her works comment on social phenomena, including the influence and impact of social media and digital culture.

The artist's recent body of works demonstrate an introspective investigation into her own cultural heritage as an Australian born Chinese artist – exploring the liminal space between the two cultures she has grown up in.

Her work highlights the significance of the object in the ephemeral nature of the digital world.



**Title:** *I'm not racist but...(Australian Mahjong- Photographic Series), 2022.*

**Medium:** Photographic prints x3

**Dimensions:** 594 x 841 mm (A1)

*I'm not racist but...(You really all do look the same), 2022.*

*I'm not racist but...(One of Us), 2022.*

*I'm not racist but...(Go back to where you came from), 2022.*

This series of photographs is a visual essay of some of Chen's personal experiences, encounters, memories, and reflections upon what it was like to be growing up as an Asian-born Chinese (ABC) teenager in Australia during the 1990's. It was a divisive era in Australian politics, when political leaders such as Pauline Hanson would create fear and mistrust of the Asian Australian population through her steadfast racist rhetoric.

The photographs are intended to accompany the original porcelain mahjong tiles and provide a glimpse into the artist's own cross-cultural experience as an Asian Australian. Selected tiles from Chen's mahjong artwork are also featured in the photographic essay, to highlight different narratives including identity, stereotypes and the struggle for acceptance.

It is also a celebration of the artist's rich and important cultural heritage, with a distinctive nostalgic undertone that is carried through in each of the images. Photographed in Chen's childhood family home, the artworks feature favoured childhood Asian snacks and mementos, placed in and amongst the porcelain Mahjong tiles.



*I'm not racist but...(Go back to where you came from)*  
594 x 841 mm (A1)  
2022



*I'm not racist but...(One of Us)*  
594 x 841 mm (A1)  
2022



*I'm not racist but...(You really all do look the same)*  
594 x 841 mm (A1)  
2022

**Title: *Blue and White Vase Series, 2023***

**Medium: 3D printed porcelain with hand assembled reliefs**

**Dimensions: Variable**

The vases in this series represent the cross-pollination of culture, ideas, aesthetics, and technology. They are contemporary interpretations of traditional Chinese porcelain vases, that have a rich history in both East and Western culture.

Historically, the surface of Chinese vases was painted with cobalt blue pigment and featured decorations ranging from symbolic floral and animal motifs, Chinese symbols with various meanings, as well as landscapes and lifestyle scenes.

Chinoiserie, a decorative interior style that emerged in the 17th century, appropriated the aesthetics and imagery of popular East Asian design for the European market. These designs featured prominently on traditionally styled Chinese vases. To emphasise this cross-cultural exchange, the artist has further appropriated this concept by decorating the surfaces of the vases with a combination of floral species, which carry great significance in both Chinese and Australian culture respectively. They also feature Chinese characters that capture the essence of positive cultural exchange.

The vases represent a tangible dialogue between the two cultures.

The vase bodies are printed in porcelain using a 3D ceramic printer, a relatively new technology, while the cobalt floral reliefs have been created using a long-standing traditional hand building and casting technique. The amalgamation of modern production techniques alongside traditional craft skill is an acknowledgement of the contemporary world in which we live. We continue to follow traditions that have served us in the past, while also embracing new traditions that enhance our culture, keeping it relevant and progressive, to ensure they continue into the future.



*Blue and White Vase Series, (Double Gourd), 250mm dia x 450mm, 2023*



*Blue and White Vase Series, (Begonia), 210mm dia x 350mm, 2023*

## Q&A with Artist Susan Chen

The interview was conducted by Prof Jing Han - Director, Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts & Culture:

**When did you know that you wanted to be an artist and what made you believe that you could become one?**

I've always liked making things, especially with my hands, and I've always been quite good at working in 3D. I enjoyed doing all sorts of creative things when I was growing up, but I don't really remember anyone around me being particularly creative at the time to offer any encouragement. I do, however, remember the first time something I was doing at school was acknowledged as creativity. It was in first grade, and we were learning about space. All the kids were colouring in spaceships, and I had finished mine well ahead of everyone. I had already started cutting out stars and I had another piece of paper ready to create a collage. Then the teacher walked past and asked what I was doing. I said I'd finished but I wanted to create more. I thought I was in trouble, but she invited me to create a whole space scene for the back of the classroom wall. It was fun. I didn't realise that I was being creative, it just came naturally. So I don't know if I ever thought I would like to be an artist – I think it's something that I've always thought I already was.

**Growing up in Australia in a family of Asian background, migrant parents normally expect their children to study a pragmatic subject that will lead to a stable and secure job. Visual arts is not one of those subjects. Did you have to resist any family pressure to become an artist? And how did you convince your parents to support your choice?**

My parents are very typical Asian migrant parents. They came here because they wanted a better future for their kids. It was important for my parents that we would have secure, respectable jobs when we finished school, like a doctor, an accountant, a lawyer, or an engineer. Unfortunately, none of those things appealed to me – I always wanted to do something creative. But I was also a very good Asian daughter. When you grow up as a child of migrants you have this huge burden to want to please your parents and make them proud because they've sacrificed so much to come here. I put all the artistic stuff aside and studied hard at school and I was accepted into university to study science. But I hated it, and I couldn't get the whole creative urge out of my head. Eventually I transferred to a design degree. I thought if I was

going to do something creative, then I'd do corporate art that could potentially get me a good paying job. I loved design but it still wasn't quite right. I felt there was something more that I needed to discover and the urge to be a creative never went away. After several years working in the design industry, I applied to study visual arts at Sydney College of the Arts. I was accepted as a mature age student, and I've been creating what I want ever since. Now my parents can't be bothered to be annoyed and I don't think they really care anymore either. They now accept this is what I do and understand that you've got to let your kids do what they've got to do. So being creative is never something I had to actively fight for, I just snuck my way in slowly over the years.

**What drives your artistic pursuit and what do you think you aim to achieve through your art practice? And where do you draw your inspiration from?**

I always struggle with this question when people ask me what I do. There are so many aspects and layers to my art practice, but at the core of it is the idea of the “in-between.” It's that liminal space between the real world and the digital world, technology and traditional techniques, art and design and, more recently, what it means to be an Asian Australian artist – that liminal space between the two cultures I've grown up in.

Much of my practice also involves looking into patterns and codes. They can be patterns from the natural environment, scientific and mathematical world but I have a particular interest in human behavioural patterns. I'm fascinated by online digital culture, especially things like social media, and observing how people move and act online. I draw many observations from people watching but also from looking at things that are almost hidden in plain sight that most people would find boring and mundane. I try to shine a spotlight on seemingly insignificant things or moments that don't get acknowledged.

In terms of what inspires me, my artwork is often quite process driven and methodical. I use a lot of physical and online data, what I like to call “social debris” to inform my work. I look for remnants or clues left in the urban environment or online, from which I can create a visual narrative in clay.

**As a second-generation migrant growing up in Australia, how and when did you become interested in Chinese and Asian art traditions and cultures? And what have you found in them that has formed and informed your artistic creation?**

I was never really that interested in my Chinese heritage and my culture when I was growing up. I was a teenager in the nineties, and it was very hard to be Asian with people like Pauline Hanson around spreading all that anti-Asian rhetoric. I tried to

distance myself from my culture, to adapt and fit into what the so-called acceptable norms were and deny who I was. I feel sad that I did that, but I also understand why I did it. Now as an adult I have obviously developed a lot more confidence and appreciation for my culture and I feel it's a huge privilege and a duty to pass on these traditions and customs. As a second-generation migrant a lot of that gets diluted. With each generation you sadly lose a little bit, but at the same time you're also adding to these traditions by creating your own and making them work for the new life that you're living. For me it's something that I've come to later in life. There's so much richness and so much more to explore. I'm really excited about researching more about my culture and getting new ideas for future works.

### **Why did you choose ceramics to be your main art material in a formal way?**

It was purely by chance, and perhaps a little bit of serendipity, that I fell in love with this material. I took a slip casting class as an elective when I was studying design at university, and I just loved it. Up until then I'd only ever used hard clay at school, while slip is a liquid clay which you pour into a mold and let dry. I realised that I could make 3D stuff out of a material that I could easily access. After I finished my degree and was working in the design industry, I'd find myself sitting at my desk sketching objects that I wanted to make out of ceramics. I just couldn't get it out of my head. And then I went to see a ceramicist friend's show at Sydney College of the Arts, and I just knew I had to work with ceramics. So I didn't choose it because it was a cool thing to do – it most definitely was not at the time – but simply because I loved it.

### **How did you come up with the idea of using the very traditional Chinese game of mahjong for your ceramic artwork entitled “I'm not racist but...”?**

It all began when Diversity Arts Australia invited Asian Australian artists to create works that reflected their experience during the pandemic. I came across an article online about three American women who had decided to create their own cute white girl mahjong set because they said the traditional one didn't reflect their personalities. I was gobsmacked by the insensitivity and the whitewashing of this very traditional game. It made me think about the idea of imbalance in power and white privilege because they obviously didn't consider any potential fallout in appropriating the original design.

Unlike these white women, it's always consciously at the back of my mind that I'm an Asian woman, so I always need to question how the things I do will reflect on me as an Asian woman. I started thinking about that imbalance in power, and how all through my life a part of me has tried to live up to the expectation of what a model migrant should be like. This made me realise that on some level we're always playing their game. We put on a persona, we don't want to step out of line and do something



that's going to make us, or our community, look bad, but we also don't want society to feel uncomfortable with what we're doing. That's how the whole idea of the game started floating around in my head. And I thought if this group of white women can create a new mahjong set, I can make my own too! It was the height of the COVID pandemic and there was so much awful imagery around, and horrible headlines from tabloid newspapers full of hate for Asians. I took elements from these images, stories and graffiti slurs, and I used them to create a Covid-inspired mahjong set. Each one of the tiles has its own narrative and tells a specific story. For example, there's one tile depicting a girl getting spat in the eye. That really happened just down the road from where I live. I felt these things needed to be expressed, that we needed to open a dialogue about casual racism here in Australia. I wanted to create a piece of art that people could look at and at first glance think it's just a cute mahjong set, but if you look at the tiles individually some very nasty themes are apparent. I wanted to start this uncomfortable conversation that's often difficult to bring up, by using satire and humour. Everybody thinks that jokes are great, so I thought it'd be an effective way to break the ice and talk about this really serious issue in a funny kind of way.

**Recently you've been using digital technology in your ceramic art making process. What do you expect to discover, especially in terms of the differences between using traditional approaches to ceramics?**

I've always been interested in 3D printing since I was studying industrial design at university. I remember thinking how incredible it was to be able to create a 3D model from a digital file. When I started studying visual arts at Sydney University, I read about a new printer that could print in the clay medium. Clay and 3D printing were two things that really fascinated me, enough to write a Master's research paper on this topic. I went as far as purchasing my own 3D clay printer from the States because there was no one in Australia at the time that had one I could access. I've been experimenting with it for about eight years now and the technology is still quite new so there's still so much to learn. I began to wonder what would happen if I took the ancient medium of ceramics and combined it with modern technology. A lot of my practice involves experimentation. It starts with a question – I wonder what would happen if I did this? – and then I just follow those lines of inquiry and figure things out as I go along. I'm always trying to make interesting, innovative work, and I think the way that I merge traditional ceramic techniques with new technology is something that is quite unique. I've created seemingly traditional ceramic vases for my latest body of work but on closer inspection you can see Chinese characters digitally embedded into the surface of the vases. Characters, including *speak*, *listen*, *share* and *understand*, were chosen to capture the essence of positive cultural exchange, and the vases act as tangible objects for this transaction.

The vases are a modern take on classic Chinese blue and white porcelain vases, while still retaining traditional integrity. I visited the Wedgwood factory when I was in the UK earlier this year and I was lucky enough to see some of the artisans working with the same techniques they've been using for centuries. They were making molds to create reliefs that go on the classic blue Wedgwood jasperware. I've created vases for this IAC show using digital technology, and I've also made my floral motifs using the same tradition that they use in the Wedgwood factory. It's been a wonderful opportunity to use both sets of skills to create a dialogue between old and new. So, for me it's all about creating interesting work and asking myself how far I can push this medium.

### **What do traditions and transformations mean to you and to your artistic career?**

I think it's important to carry on traditions, but I also think that they need to be relevant, and they need to be progressive, inclusive and safe. I don't like to think tradition should be followed purely because it's always been done that way before. I think that's quite a dangerous mindset. We need to be able to transform traditions to fit with what's going on in contemporary culture and what's going on in our current society. It's better to evolve, or transform these traditions, than lose them completely. Artistically speaking, I think my work is hard to pin down. I think this is probably why I'm not as successful as some other artists because I don't really have what marketers would call "a brand", that one thing that easily identifies my work. I struggle with that, but I don't know if that's something that I necessarily want to have either because I quite enjoy the fact that my work is always evolving, it's always transforming. There are too many things I'm interested in so I think a huge part of my practice is about transformation and evolution and that's just what I will keep following to see where it takes me.

### **Looking back, what do you think you've learned that empowers you for your future pursuits and explorations as an artist?**

I don't feel I'm at my peak yet and that there's still so much more to learn. But looking back, I can say that getting older has made me wiser. It's difficult to have confidence in your own ideas when you're young but now I have much more faith in my ideas as well as the technical skills to tell a compelling story through the visual medium of clay. I think if I maintain a sense of curiosity and wonder, and follow my intuition while giving myself the space to explore, then I will hopefully keep creating innovative and interesting works into the future. I'm really excited about the show and sharing my new works with everyone!



*Blue and White Vase Series, (Pear), 220mm dia x 420mm, 2023*



**WESTERN SYDNEY  
UNIVERSITY**



Institute for  
Australian and Chinese  
Arts and Culture

澳英艺术文化研究院

Curated and Produced by  
**Jing Han**

Text Editing:

**Sallie Beaumont**

Booklet & Webpage Design:

**Yanni Liu**

Interview Video Editing:

**Lindsay Liu**

CHATSWOOD

JOKER



E  
PLAY MARKET

S  
HURSTVILLE



W  
BURWOOD