

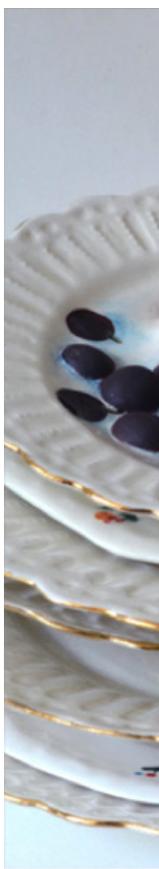
The Sensual & The Surreal: Johnson Tsang and Ronit Baranga's Contemporary Investigations of Anthropomorphic Tableware

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Ceramic teacups, saucers, dinner plates, and dessert plates invade our everyday lives, their presence usually unacknowledged and their function rarely questioned. They pour tea, hold sugar cubes, endure the scratching and scraping of cutlery, are sometimes wounded by a sudden fall and resulting chip, then are washed, rinsed, and placed back on cluttered shelves until they perform their dinner-dance anew. How absurd it would be for these objects to one day come to life and disrupt the utilitarian role imparted onto them! Contemporary ceramicists Johnson Tsang and Ronit Baranga make this possible. By instilling anthropomorphic qualities and Surrealist traits to passive tableware, these artists create something quite fantastical indeed.

I am particularly interested in the fusion of anthropomorphism, Surrealism, and the appropriation of traditional porcelain tableware, as explored in Tsang's *Lifetime Partner* (2009) and Baranga's *The Feast* (2014). By generating sensual and corporeal responses through thematic and material means, these artists instill passive objects with life, and in turn, secure a unique category for themselves within contemporary ceramic production. Ultimately, I mean to engage in a discussion between seemingly different artistic themes, movements, and concepts to demonstrate the range of interpretations that Tsang and Baranga's works convey.

My inspiration for this topic began with the striking similarities between Tsang and Baranga's work in their abstract sculpting of human





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Fig. 1. Ronnity Baranga, The Feast, 2014, clay and porcelain. Photo reproduced with permission from Ronit Baranga. Courtesy of the artist.

forms and facial features. This interaction between anthropomorphism and clay has had a long history in ceramic studies, practiced through a range of clay mediums and influenced by a multitude of global cultures. Traditional African Nok terracottas and 12th to 15th century Ife heads are significant examples of anthropomorphic study through clay, for funerary, ritualistic, or portraiture purposes.¹ Anthropomorphic vessels are just as historically abundant and as culturally mysterious; on a twentieth-century Nigerian terracotta vessel (*ikoko Shango*) from the Yoruba pottery tradition,² for example, we see a beautiful detailed investigation of a human form molded to the vessel's body, complete with meticulous facial features and sculpted traditional attire.³ These clay representations of the body are indicative of cultural practices, rituals, and variances in global ceramic production. Moreover, the progression of anthropomorphic portrayal over the course of art history unveils an interesting physical connection between ceramicists and their artwork, especially when we consider the crucial role of the body in clay manipulation and ceramic-making as a whole. We can perhaps consider Tsang and Baranga's thematic use of anthropomorphism as an appropriation of a historical ceramic tradition, in which the artists acknowledge ceramic's history and evolve this practice for a contemporary setting and audience. Anthropomorphic vessels, ancient and contemporary, have the potential to express the experiences of our human bodies, from our visible flesh to our hidden souls.

Let us now dive right into Surrealism, seemingly a world apart from anthropomorphic vessels, whose artistic investigation of eroticism and the imaginary wholeheartedly relates to Tsang and Baranga's art objects. A precise definition of this early twentieth-century artistic and literary movement is self-contradictory, for Surrealism is in complete charge of its own directional will.⁴ In fact, its clarity, or lack-of, can be best illustrated by a line by poet Comte de Lautréamont: "Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table."⁵ Surrealism thrives in dumfounding juxtapositions, between the arbitrary and the beautiful, the unconscious and the unexpected, and the concrete and the abstract.⁶ Consequently, its art also reveals "topsy-turvy appearances"⁷, forcing the viewer to similarly confront bizarre realities and hidden desires. Surrealism's fascination with psychoanalytic theory emphasizes subconscious fantasy, driving artists to explore eroticism through sculptural, photographic, and painterly manifestations. Its art, through a diverse range of mediums and aesthetics, could perhaps be best understood as attempting to playfully bridge the gap between art and reality, whatever imagined or physical reality that may be.⁸

Surrealist objects have quite a significant popularity in the art movement, as best explained by authors Georges Hugnet and Margaret Scolari:

Nothing that the movement has produced is more authentic, more varied, more personal... Surrealist objects are... the automatic, reasonless, and yet material expression of inhabited wishes, anthropomorphic vegetations of the permanently unpredictable in man.⁹

Surrealist artist Salvador Dali affirms the immense possibilities of the object as the most sincere outlet of interior activity,¹⁰ embodying so much activity in fact, that Surrealist objects seem to live with as much autonomy and spontaneity as the very artistic movement they abide to. Meret Oppenheim's well-known *Object* (1936),¹¹ for example, is a physical manifestation of the surreal and the sensual (Fig. 1). A fantastically bizarre aesthetic twist on utilitarian objects, the artist cleverly coats an ordinary teacup, saucer, and spoon in luxurious fur. Her Surrealist sculpture is most acclaimed for eliciting a tactile response, as viewers imagine pressing their lips onto the hairy surface, or uncomfortably drinking a beverage filled with hair fibers. Furthermore, the lush and sensual quality of *Object's* furry surface evokes erotic and animalistic ideas, which are characteristic of the hidden desires that surface through Surrealist art. My main interest in Oppenheim's striking art object is her transformation of functional objects to something quite alive. It is useful to keep these imagined sensual reactions in mind when considering Tsang and Baranga's work, as I believe they

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Fig. 2. Johnson Tsang, *Lifetime Partner*, 2004, porcelain cup and saucer. Photo reproduced with permission from Johnson Tsang. Courtesy of the artist.

too carry similar aesthetic and reactionary traits and therefore also relate to Surrealist art practice.

Note here that I am not suggesting that anthropomorphism or Surrealism are by any means new themes in ceramics. What I am suggesting is that this mix of Surrealism and anthropomorphic study is an interesting and unique niche for contemporary ceramicists. Artists Tsang and Baranga prove that contemporary ceramics need not be bound to a static interpretation, function, or materiality, but have the potential to expand into alternative realms of art practice, or explore former art movements and theories. My investigation of their artwork encourages a multi-faceted artistic dialogue, which ultimately demonstrates the endless interpretations that these ceramic art objects carry. Furthermore, as I will discuss shortly, their acknowledgement of the history of traditional porcelain bridges contemporary and historical ceramic practices.

Let us now examine the two artists in question. Award-winning Hong-Kong based ceramicist Johnson Tsang has exhibited worldwide, recognized for his combination of realist sculpture and Surrealist imagination.¹² Tsang pushes material limits, working with stainless steel in addition to porcelain, infusing life and soul into static materiality.¹³ Israeli-born artist Ronit Baranga is a psychology and literature scholar, whose interest in human experience prevails through her renowned anthropomorphic objects.¹⁴ Baranga works primarily with porcelain, and she is particularly interested in the fusion of body parts and passive objects.¹⁵ Through the detailed analysis of both artists' artwork, the concepts of anthropomorphic study and Surrealism, and the accompanying notions of the body and of human experience, will become evident.

Johnson Tsang's *Lifetime Partner* (2009) embodies the sensuality of Surrealism while referencing traditional porcelain production (Fig. 2). Showcased at *Living Clay* in 2012, a solo exhibition at Taiwan's Taipei Yingge Ceramics Museum, the deceptive porcelain tableware entrances the viewer with its anthropomorphic qualities. Tsang's teacup sits atop its matching saucer, which are joined together by kissing lips; the vessel is molded in the form of a subtle shape of a human nose, with lightly puckered lips at its base. These lips are interlocked with another open mouth, formed to the saucer's rim, with its adjoining nose nearby. A delicate ear protrudes from the cup's side, as a substitute for a handle, which gracefully connects to the rest of the cup's features with a subtle cheekbone. Porcelain's trademark stark whiteness and soft luster give a ghostly appearance to the human features. Tsang has given the vessels' rim a natural and elegant curve, similar to the

fragile sway of wet clay. Whether viewed from above or to the side, the object's shapes naturally blend together as we forget the very functionality of the tea set, a testament to the artist's skill in ceramic manipulation. Though quite abstract in concept and execution, the faces and expressions in *Lifetime Partner* are intimate and nostalgic, reflective of the gentle curvature of a loved one's face. Viewers hold their breath for fear of disturbing this intimate scene; the two vessels are left to remain embraced forever.

Despite its tableware characteristics, Tsang's object is evidently not functional. With forms too delicate and the lack of supportive handle, not even considering the heartlessness of prying the two lovers apart, Tsang's contemporary tableware is more abstract than utilitarian. Like Oppenheim's sculpture, *Lifetime Partner* evokes very corporeal and sensual associations, as we imagine picking up the teacup and saucer and placing our lips to the vessel's rim, near those already in embrace: a Surrealist *ménage à trois* between art objects and viewer. It is this imagined and physical sensuality that transports Tsang's ceramic object into the realm of Surrealism. Moreover, this sensuality endures from the moment of the object's conception, in Tsang's intimate connection to his clay, to its final execution of embracing forms. Tsang assigns anthropomorphic and Surrealist traits to otherwise ordinary tableware, exploring a unique transformation of passive object into lively art.

Ronit Baranga's *The Feast* (2014) – one of her newest ceramic projects – is an assortment of living tableware which, like Tsang's *Lifetime Partner*, also explores the relations between useful tableware and body parts (Fig. 3).¹⁶ A piled assortment of white dinner plates, cups, and saucers interact with fused fragments of human mouths and fingers; in a small ornate teacup, a gaping mouth exposes a protruding red tongue and sharp teeth, while on a nearby saucer, several projecting fingertips clasp onto a cup's handle. Atop a sizeable pile of plates, another ravenous mouth attempts to eat a sprig of grapes. As evidence of Baranga's attention to detail, every dish is hand painted with vibrant floral motifs and every edge is rimmed with gold. The shocking appearance of carnivorous cavities contrasts the decorative aesthetics of the dishes. The haphazard arrangement creates a chaotic composition of color and form, melding body parts with porcelain and food with tableware; viewers unable to recognize what is alive and what is not. The anthropomorphic qualities of the dishes also suggest their running off at a moment's notice. The spontaneous variety of mouths, each uniquely sculpted, seem to be waiting to be fed rather than performing their practical role as tableware, ingeniously reversing the roles between the feeder and the fed.

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Like Tsang's work, Baranga intends her art objects to disturbingly develop behaviors of their own: "The combination of ceramic cups with ceramic fingers represent an idea in which the still creates a will of its own, enabling a cup to decide whether to stay or leave the situation it is in."¹⁷ *The Feast* enables an interesting interaction between the viewer and the living dishes, but also between the dishes and the space they envelop;¹⁸ Baranga's objects resemble defiant teenagers, who would rather be caught dead than behave appropriately at a formal luncheon. Similar to Tsang's *Lifetime Partner*, Baranga's dishes are quite alive, but unlike the sensual kiss, Baranga's objects appear to be highly unpredictable. Her dishes exist in a state of temporality, remaining motionless for only a moment's notice, and it is this fantastical heightened state that bears resemblance to the intentions behind Surrealist art.

In addition to their collaborative use of anthropomorphic and Surrealist themes, Tsang and Baranga's artworks can be analyzed according to their chief use of porcelain, ultimately referring to the material's noteworthy production and global impact over the course of ceramic history. I suggest that though contemporary in execution and intent, the two artworks strategically acknowledge porcelain's past, and the accompanying social and aesthetic connotations that the material carries. Porcelain production is first attributed to Chinese ceramicists as early as 575 BCE, whose long and precise production process ensured aesthetic distinction and durability, which eventually became tirelessly sought after by eighteenth-century European collectors.¹⁹ As such, porcelain's allure was reinforced by its global exportation and foreign conception, classed as a regal material.²⁰ Its social and economic impact was extraordinary; porcelain as a commodity sustained a global economy, was found on the tabletops of European and Asian households alike, and flooded literature and painterly sources worldwide with its beauty and status.²¹ Porcelain ware is easily identified by its stark white slip, but it also traditionally features royal blue ornamentation, gold gilt design, and floral motifs, which was later appropriated by Europeans and coined 'Chinoiserie.'²² What is essential to realize about porcelain, from its conception to its distribution, is that its meaning lays in its materiality,²³ therefore regardless of its execution as a teacup, vase, or figurative sculpture, its high status is unquestionably recognizable and automatically associated to its meaning.

Tsang and Baranga would have undoubtedly been aware of porcelain's historical luxury status upon conceiving their respected clay sculptures. I would suggest that considering Tsang's Asian heritage, his use of porcelain



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Fig. 3. Meret Oppenheim, Object, 1936, fur covered cup and saucer, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Watermarked photo reproduced from Art Resource online. Courtesy of Art Resource, NY.

is a mechanism of empowerment, connecting his contemporary art practice to an ancestral past. Tsang provides a much-needed twist through his subject matter, but still acknowledges and respects a cultural history of porcelain production. On the other hand, Baranga's combination of porcelain, decorative motifs and shocking body parts mocks porcelain traditions, specifically addressing through her work the historic frivolousness of tea drinking rituals. According to scholar Karen Harvey, porcelain teacups reaffirmed gender constructs, allocating women to the confines of the domestic sphere through tea drinking rituals.²⁴ Baranga's regal-style tableware acts of its own accord, neglecting any sense of social confinement; we can imagine the Victorian elite sipping tea from Baranga's teacups, shocked at the gaping mouth gawking back at them. Despite their differences in engaging in the history of porcelain ware, Tsang and Baranga have similarly rendered their objects completely dysfunctional, allowing them to speak for themselves as art rather than utilitarian objects, quite unlike traditional porcelain tableware. Their transformed tableware is not meant to serve but rather live and behave autonomously, and when considered alongside Surrealist art thematics, they ultimately turn porcelain's historical high status on itself. Though *Lifetime Partner* and *The Feast* may negotiate their porcelain materiality slightly differently, both still acknowledge its important past. Moreover, the appropriation of a historical material and its past onto a contemporary setting further demonstrates the unique space that Tsang and Baranga's work occupies within contemporary art.

Johnson Tsang and Ronit Baranga's work knows no bounds, melding fantastical Surrealist ideas and unique anthropomorphic traits with simple everyday objects. Their contemporary practices reflect upon a vibrant history of porcelain production, appropriating a historic material into the contemporary art realm. As a call for further research, this theme of anthropomorphic tableware could be broadened to encompass other contemporary ceramicists. British artist Beccy Ridsdel, for example, performs laboratory experiments on altered tableware, using surgical instruments to peel back strips of ceramic flesh, revealing a floral interior.²⁵ Pushing the boundaries of ceramics study to encompass alternative forms of artistic production allows for an entirely innovative realm of contemporary ceramics to flourish. After discussing Tsang and Baranga's work, we might also reconsider the historical journey tableware production has undergone up to this point. From a history of passivity to its adoption as fine art, where does porcelain tableware go from here? If these fantastically bizarre objects prove anything, it is simply that magic can exist in the simplest of objects. Perhaps you will think twice the next time you drink your morning coffee in a ceramic cup – it may just come alive.

Endnotes

- 1 Susan Surette, "Terracotta Sculpture in Africa" (lecture, ARTH 350: Aspects of the History of Ceramics, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, September 25, 2014).
- 2 Nicole Mullen, *Yoruba Art and Culture*, eds. Liberty Marie Winn and Ira Jackins (Berkeley: Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, 2004), 16.
- 3 *Terra-cotta vessel (ikoko Shango)*, Ita Yemoo Museum of Youruba Pottery, Ile Ife, Nigeria. "A Saga of Synchronicity" Ceramics Today, accessed on December 10, 2014, http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/synchronicity_images.htm.
- 4 Georges Hugnet and Margaret Scolari, "In the Light of Surrealism," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 4 (1936): 19.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Edward D. Powers, "Bodies at Rest: Or, the Object of Surrealism," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 46 (2004): 228.
- 9 Hugnet and Scolari, "In the Light of Surrealism," 30.

- 10 Ibid.
- 11 *Object* is also nicknamed *Déjeuner en Fourrure* (Breakfast in Fur) by André Breton. Oppenheim's art object also bears the titles: *Fur Breakfast*, and *Fur-covered cup, Saucer, and Spoon*.
- 12 "Amazing Sculptures by Johnson Tsang," Beautiful Life, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.beautifullife.info/art-works/amazing-ceramic-sculptures-by-johnson-tsang/>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 "About," Ronit Baranga, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.ronitbaranga.com/about.htm>.
- 15 "EK Interview: Ronit Baranga," Empty Kingdom, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.emptykingdom.com/featured/empty-kingdom-interview-ronit-baranga/>.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 "Ronit Baranga's Disturbing Sculptures," Daily Art, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.daily-art.com/ronit-barangas-disturbing-sculptures/>.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Susan Surette, "The Chinese Porcelain Body" (lecture, ARTH 350: Aspects of the History of Ceramics, Concordia University, Montreal, QC, October 9, 2014).
- 20 Alden Cavanaugh, and Michael E. Yonan. "Introduction," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-Century Porcelain*, ed. Alden Cavanaugh and Michael E. Yonan, (Vermont and Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 1-17.
- 21 Surette, "The Chinese Porcelain Body."
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Cavanaugh and Yonan, "Introduction," 10.
- 24 Karen Harvey, "Barbarity in a Teacup? Punch, Domesticity and Gender in Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Design History* 21 (2008): 205-221.
- 25 "Surgically Altered Ceramics by Beccy Ridsdel," Colossal, accessed on December 2, 2014, <http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/02/surgically-altered-ceramics-by-beccy-ridsdel/>.

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