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Essay  Emmanuel Cooper
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Preface

For an artist to immerse herself in a culture other than her own, to work in a different context, assimilating everything that is new to her yet maintaining her own integrity, is an immense challenge. Felicity Aylieff took up such a challenge in 2006 when she travelled to Jingdezhen in China to work on monumental porcelain. This book is her story of a time of research, experiment and creativity.

The Royal College of Art awarded Aylieff a sabbatical for her residency at the Pottery Workshop Experimental Factory in Jingdezhen, working in Mr Yu’s Big Ware Factory. Part of her agreement with the College was that she should publish her research and that the ceramics she made should be brought back to Britain and exhibited. We readily accepted her proposal to show the pots in the Lobby of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, as part of our Sculpture in the Workplace programme.

I corresponded with Felicity Aylieff throughout her time in China, learning how she was progressing, and enjoying her tales of every-day life in a Chinese provincial city. Seeing her massive porcelain ceramics develop was truly impressive, and exciting. Meanwhile, I worked on plans for touring the exhibition after its launch in London, enabled by a grant awarded to Aylieff by Arts Council England South West. Having secured venues for the tour, ACE again awarded her a grant towards the costs of travelling the exhibition. We extend our gratitude to ACE and thank Andrew Proctor and his colleagues for their guidance and advice.

Our thanks also go to the ceramicist and writer Emmanuel Cooper for setting in context Aylieff’s approach to working in China, reflecting on Jingdezhen’s history as the primary centre for the production of large-scale porcelain. His essay is a truly informative prelude to Aylieff’s journal.

Felicity Aylieff acknowledges with particular gratitude the following people: Caroline Cheng, owner of the Pottery Workshop Experimental Factory, Jingdezhen, and Takeshi Tasuda, the director; Kang Yang for his assistance, interpreting and friendship throughout the project; Mr Yu of the Big Ware Factory, Jingdezhen; and the Royal College of Art for supporting the research project.

Ann Elliott
Curator, Sculpture in the Workplace, Canary Wharf
Time Present, Time Future

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

TS Eliot

When the Jesuit missionary Père François Xavier d’Entrecolles wrote a vivid, first-hand account of the manufacture of the ‘beautiful porcelain’ in the city of Jingdezhen in China during the first quarter of the eighteenth century, his closely observed and detailed description of its manufacture helped fuel, in the West, the popular interest in all things Chinese. More recently, the invasion of (part of) the Terracotta Army at London’s British Museum has added a further dimension to understanding the power and force of the ceramics of this artistically enterprising and technologically accomplished country. Little wonder, then, that so many people, and in particular potters, continue to fall under its spell.

In August 2006 Felicity Aylieff arrived for a six month residency in Jingdezhen, no starry-eyed orientalist but with a specific project to make a series of large, two-metre high vessels. Calling on her previous experience of, and success in, handling large-scale objects, contact was made with a family business that specialised in making tall pots made from thrown sections that were joined together to form one unified shape. To her surprise, she discovered that these were made by two potters working together throwing each section very thickly. When bone dry these were luted together with slip and the entire outside surface turned to the required shape.

The method she saw closely echoed that described so diligently by the intrepid observer Père d’Entrecolles; ‘The large objects of porcelain are made in two pieces; one half is lifted on the wheel by three or four men, who support it on each side while it is being shaped; the other half, which is almost dry, is put on to it, and they join the two together with the same porcelain materials diluted with water, which serves as a sort of mortar or glue. When these pieces, so glued, are quite dry the seam or join is polished inside and outside with a tool, so that, with the help of the glaze, no inequality is left. In this way, too, they put handles, ears, and other pieces on to vases.’ Ambitiously, Aylieff wanted even more large-sized vessels, some with up to six sections.
The vessels Aylieff had in mind were tall and cylindrical, some straight sided, some gently swelling, others articulated by emphasizing the joins of the different sections while some had a shoulder to create a more bottle-like form. To achieve maximum visual impact, all had to be at least three metres tall when made to take into account the fact that the extraordinary porcelain body contracted dramatically during firing.

Although she had a clear idea of the sort of forms she wanted, these often had to be modified to deal with the practical restraints imposed by the clay and the shapes the potters were able to make. As the pieces were assembled it was clearly fascinating to see the final silhouette emerge as the outside was turned, like a sculptor chipping away stone or carving wood to reveal the form beneath. The thick-walled throwing and heavy turning was a testament to a clay body that, while dictating its own limitations, could be worked once its idiosyncrasies were accepted.

When decorating the forms, in theory, Aylieff was able to exert more control but, in the event, the scale and absorbent, raw surface limited possibilities. Preparation and research was extensive, for she wanted to explore a variety of methods, ranging from painting, low relief carving and linear decoration to transfer printing. Aware of the long tradition of Chinese blue and white decoration, Aylieff felt free to borrow the technique but use it in her own way. The discovery of a supplier of beautiful, hand-made Chinese calligraphy brushes provided the necessary tools to approach the vast pieces with confidence. After many tests of colours and glazes, she settled for traditional mixtures of iron and cobalt, which gave a soft, muted, inky blue, a dark blue-black under a clear glaze.

Once the physical challenge of working on such large vessels had been solved Aylieff sought to use the brush marks expressively, letting her hand rove across and around the surface, avoiding anything that looked representative or too self-conscious. The process and the resulting marks have much in common with the approach of Tachiste artists who wanted the pigment to flow directly from the unconscious, unthinking part of the brain. On some pieces the result is a fluttering, loose pattern of abstract, multi-layered marks covering the surface that intensify awareness of it while remaining fully in keeping with the form and its scale. In the vessel Chasing Black 2006 (pp. 40–41), the brush strokes build up an almost three-dimensional effect of depth as they move over and around the classic form.

On other pieces, such as Three Brushes 2007 (pp. 52–53), the marks of the
distance the forms take on a soft texture and it is only on close inspection that the detail of the low relief carving can be seen.

The paradoxes that Aylieff investigates so subtly in these vessels – between tradition and innovation, the floral and the abstract, precision and freedom – is explored differently in Hu Die Ji jie – Butterfly Season 2006 (pp. 44–45). This almost straight sided cylindrical form is turned into a summer celebration by the addition of hundreds of brilliantly coloured butterflies in blues, reds, pinks and greens that flutter gracefully over the surface, a symbolic expression of release and liberation. Crowded and larger than life at the base, they become smaller as they move up the form, suggesting they are flying away, freed to enjoy their short lives.

During a break in the making, Aylieff took time off to visit Shanghai and the Museum of Quin Terracotta Warriors and Horses Army in Xian, where she, like other visitors, marvelled at the sheer scale of the enterprise and, despite their apparent similarity, the individuality of each of the figures. Unknowingly, the visit may have prompted her to make four large vessels with shoulders, which she describes as ‘a bit like a row of soldiers’, an impression that all these tall figurative-like vessel forms possess. The twelve vessels, majestic and assured, are clearly members of the same distinctive family but consist of unique individuals. Subtly and quietly, to quote TS Eliot, they embody time, past, time present and time future.

Emmanuel Cooper

Félix François Xavier d’Entrecolles, 1664 to 1741, was a Jesuit missionary who travelled to China in 1698, where he studied some of the secrets of porcelain manufacture. His letters, written in 1712 and 1722, were amongst the first accounts available in the West on Chinese porcelain and helped to fuel the European craze for porcelain and the search for its formula.

Friday 4 August 2006

It’s Friday 4th August and I’ve arrived in Jingdezhen! In fact I’ve been here for 3 days now in blistering heat. I had forgotten just how crazy this place is; it’s like being in the Wild West! It is speedy, chaotic, full of energy, which is what I’m going to need a great deal of! I’ve just begun to realise the enormity of this project.

Today I organised some visits to different ‘big ware’ factories to see who is specialising in what, and to check on the craftsmanship and of course prices.

The pictures I’ve sent you are from Wanglong Ceramics. It boasts of having a ‘strong technical force and expert handwork.’ Like all the factories the workshops look like something out of the 19th century, but the skill is phenomenal and the kilns all state of the art. Three men were throwing this pot section in the photograph – they make it look so easy, their coordination was perfect and their combined strength phenomenal. One of Takeshi’s team came along as my interpreter and I have met up with the factory boss to find out what might be possible. They seem willing to be part of this adventure but want me to work on some drawings of the forms I am considering in order to discuss if they can be thrown and also what it might cost. This next bit is the hard bit – trying to match my ideas with practical feasibility. I will start with one form, which is based on a traditional...
thrown in porcelain and fired to extreme temperatures – 1300 degrees. Nearly every factory produces the same library of shapes, which allows maximum use of kiln space. Space is money and so there has been considerable reluctance to make something less formal that might take up extra room. So it has been an interesting exercise: drawing and redrawing forms that can first of all be realistically made, but which may also be accommodated in the kilns so that they don’t lose money. So much to think about! It seems not much when you write it down but trying to negotiate is hard work, especially when the master potters say yes to everything, not wanting to let you down, but a few days later change their minds – but always with an encouraging smile.

Most of the factories are not factories in the way we might use the word, but large workshops and outside spaces with tarpaulin covering work in progress. The area of Jingdezhen where most of the potteries are located is fairly poor – it isn’t a wealthy or healthy occupation. I’ve just started some drawings for surface pattern, which I am really enjoying. I haven’t had the luxury of time to spend in this way for ages, and will send you some pictures in the next email.

Friday 18 August 2006
I’ve missed a week in my journal keeping, I’ve only just begun to settle into some sort of routine – I don’t think routine as such exists in China. Despite the most overwhelming heat there is always something happening, a crisis one moment, fire crackers and a celebration the next. We have just had three days of the most incredible electrical storms with torrential rain. It has turned the streets into a steam bath, and as the pavements are so hot the water immediately evaporates. As my day starts with a visit to the dumpling stall in ‘food alley’ I thought I should send you a picture of my breakfast in preparation. I can’t imagine eating pork and vegetable dumplings in England, but they are delicious and I can’t get enough of them. Back to work . . . . I have now visited three big pot-making factories and I am beginning to understand why they make the forms they do, and also to feel the restrictions on my design ideas. You can see from the images most of the forms are tall and stiff like soldiers on parade. The almost straight sides of the pots mean they are less likely to misshape in the firing. They are...
especially as I’m so used to having control over the whole process: making, finishing and firing. However, I have now ordered some small (2 metres high) pots that I hope will come out something near my expectations.

The factory or small pottery producing the work is a short cycle ride away in a run-down industrial area with buildings put up in the 1950s; huge, austere concrete structures that look Russian in their architectural style. At one time, I have been told, the factory was very prosperous, manufacturing ceramic materials, kilns, and equipment for the pottery industry, but like Stoke on Trent, it is in decline with competition from Taiwan, Poland etc, and struggling to reinvent itself. All the big hangar-like buildings have been subdivided, and small production potteries and ceramic print studios have moved in, many being taken over and turned into temporary housing. It’s desperately poor. Whilst I wait for pieces to be made I continue to think about surface...

We had a crazy party the other night for Takeshi’s team of assistants. We all made hats, and played childhood party games (can’t imagine doing anything of the sort back home!). Put the Tail on the Donkey and 3-Legged Races were great hits. Lots of laughter! The reason I tell you this is that I made this tall hat, of which I have sent you a picture. I collaged the surface with images from comic stickers. It set me thinking about that whole area of pattern construction, composition and also subject matter. Whilst the floral theme captures the essence of Chinese traditional pattern, I have been thinking about what contemporary iconography could be. Another image I have sent has a collection of sweet wrappers from a small shop I pass everyday. Their vivid colour and graphic quality is very appealing, so they sit on my desk while I think about how I might use them.

I have simplified and photocopied in black and white some drawings I made a few weeks ago. Cutting them up and rearranging their pattern has made them less predictable and I am looking into making these into some form of print that I can put onto the surface of a pot. Other images are of some linear pencil drawings that I want to translate as a carved surface. One image shows an initial glazed test. I have also put in a shot from a visit I made to a brush maker. All the brush heads were threaded together and hanging on the wall – very beautiful.

Enough for now, I think; I am off to Shanghai next week to do a couple of days teaching – I realise I am going...
to need the money, and I also want to do a bit of exploring, and rest the creative side of my brain for a day or so!

Monday 4 September 2006

Back from Shanghai and a flurry of activity on the work front. A few images of the factory workshop making one of my pieces are attached. As you can see Health and Safety hasn’t been invented. It amazes me that the potters can work with such precision in these surroundings. It is even more stressful knowing that most of them live in adjoining rooms.

Two very simple pieces, twins, have been finished by the potters, Lian Hua Lotus Flowers 2006 (pp. 46–47) and Bo Yang Hu – Bo Yang Lake 2006 (pp. 48–49). You can see the sections that make up the pot in the photograph. Once fired they will be 2.5 metres high. They are fatter than the pots they traditionally make, and the top rim curves down into the interior. I feel that having made these successfully we can build on our relationship, and I hope they will now be a little more adventurous and throw other designs.

I am pleased I did the teaching in Shanghai. It was hard work, as art education there is very different from that in Britain, and seems to be about
with an awareness of the blue and white painting tradition that emanates from Jingdezhen, and want to use the tonal contrast that you can achieve with the cobalt blue pigment. So the black and white marks will be translated into blue and white. I will let you know how it goes! It’s rather a terrifying prospect moving from flat paper to a curved vertical surface knowing that you only get one go at it!

Monday 18 September 2006

After the excitement of the successful bid for funding from the Arts Council the creative front has hit a low point. I hope it’s only temporary. I seem to be struggling with the change of language that works in a drawing but is hard to interpret in three dimensions, or in my case onto a vertical curved surface. Part of the problem is feeling precious about each large pot. I’m anxious to get the marks right first time and I inevitably overwork the surface. I’ve decided that I will buy some of the factory’s medium-sized ‘big pots’ ‘off the shelf’ so that I can practice at less expense. (I think I will worry about the reality of money when I get back, otherwise I will feel very limited in what I can do). This first batch of images is of a practice pot. You can see how confused the marks are. The dark
tones are the cobalt unfired, a lot of
the sharpness of line and intensity of
colour is lost in the firing as you can
see. This afternoon I am going to have
another go, and ask Kang Yang, one of
the workshop team with experience in
blue and white painting, to assist with
the initial mixing of the oxide, to get
the different strengths I want. He’s a
local boy and has been really good at
putting me in touch with the right
people to help me, and interpreting
when things get confused, which is
most of the time!

The next batch of images is of
more drawings; ink on paper, using
brushes that I have made myself from
some old sweeping brooms. I have
been trying to find marks that aren’t
typical brush marks to get some
different expression into the work. I’m
not sure if the fineness of line is going
to be possible; it may fire out. I will
use my ‘off the shelf’ big pots to
experiment.

A few days ago I made my first
attempt at carving. Probably it would
be better described as drawing into the
pot surface. It was very liberating
working on such a large scale – it was
like having a huge canvas. In the end I
felt it was more an exercise in what
doing rather than what to do! I
know there is potential for some form
of mark making and pattern work,
but I need to push it a bit further. I
think I may try to work with an expe-
renced carver to see how my ideas
and drawings might be interpreted,
and to move them on from being
purely linear. I have put in a couple of
images of what I did, again the pot is
unfired, and things change with a
glaze.

All over the city new buildings are
appearing; buildings that display the
new wealth of China, in vast contrast
to the poverty of the workshop arti-
sans and their working conditions. I’ve
put in a couple of shots of the recently
finished Jingdezhen Academy of Art
and University. It has heavy-handed
architecture, curiously dated, but very
good facilities. I am told that the art
department and ceramics are over
subscribed but not of particularly high
standard. Many of the students end up
at the pottery workshop wanting to
help out in order to see what the resi-
dent artists are doing and to learn new
skills. It has made Takeshi think about
the potential for running courses and
workshops to help fund the whole
enterprise.

Other shots are out of the window
of a screen-printing factory that I am
using to make some transfers for a
large pot. They show a bit of street life
– street vendors, children cycling
home from school, a grave yard for old
cars and motorbikes in the city centre,
the pavement cycle repair man, and
new houses going up, resplendent
with their concrete Doric columns.

It is now Monday and I have some
exciting news! Yesterday I had another
go at painting, and it felt like a real
breakthrough. Some mark-making
tests with my homemade brush and
then some big strong marks made
with a huge horsetail brush with a
horn handle, used traditionally for
calligraphy. I felt drained from the
adrenaline rush built up in order to
focus myself. Sounds odd to describe,
but I find that I use a different energy
for painting than when I am normally
‘making’ in the studio – a new experi-
ence for me!

Thursday 5 October 2006

Rather a long break since my last
e-mail journal. I decided to go to
Shanghai to catch the last few days of
the Biennale, and to look round the
University Art School. It’s miles out of
the centre on a huge campus. I was
my big pots (twins) the biggest pair, which you may have seen in previous photos. I think I’ve decided about the carving. Being dissatisfied with my first attempts, I have spent a bit of time redesigning. I want the drawings to be far more stylised and mixed in with stencil (1980s eat your heart out!). I’ve also decided to have four big pots with necks (a bit like a row of soldiers) and will try and do them in single, strong colours – blue, yellow, red, and so on. So lots of negotiation ahead, and you’ll get some images when I have something worth sending.

I have put in some images of the fired blue and white tests – the painting with fine lines that you saw as drawings. I think this has mileage and I am keen to develop this ‘blue and white’ strand of work using both bold brush marks and a more delicate emotional approach.

You said in your last email that you thought I might want to develop some of the colour and surfaces that I had begun in my studio. I think it is difficult and possibly a wasted opportunity to keep to familiar territory. Also the situation, context, materials and technical expertise are so totally different here. I saw this time in China as a chance to push my own boundaries and knowledge. I suppose the
previous experiments. I feel much more in control of what I am doing.
Having said that, today I made some really lively ink wash drawings on
paper as preparation for painting the big pots, and then went to the factory
and made a complete pig’s ear of it all.
I now have less than two weeks left,
and I must tackle the final forms. I
have them all lined up waiting to be
done. It’s all a bit daunting, quite a
big difference in size between two and
three metres! I have managed one
piece that is telescopic in form. It took
me two days, and I feel that you can
see the change of mood in the surface
marks. I might get this form made
again as I think the marks are potentially lively and dance across the surface. However, they are possibly too small in scale. I am still working away on the transfer prints for one of the pieces, trying technically to find a way to put the image on the form. Time just disappears here, probably because my days have no routine, and I'm always being dragged off to see something new and exciting. I've just come back from a small workshop/factory where they make three-metre long porcelain tiles, wafer thin! Because they are hand rolled they have a really lively surface, beautiful, much better than the dust-pressed versions. I went with a Chinese artist who has been working there, and I decided on the spur of the moment to do some of my own tests. I am thinking that painting on this scale of tile has possibilities and I might explore it further – a two-dimensional surface as a contrast to the big pots. It's no easier unfortunately, as it comes with its own technical limitations. I have put in an image of a plain tile leaning up against a wall (a simple and interesting way to display in an exhibition) so that you can see the scale and fineness.

The tile factory took me into a completely different area of Jingdezhen; an area with lots of tiny alleyways bustling with people, small restaurants where the chilli powder made me sneeze as I walked passed, and colourful street markets selling everything from plastic buckets to caged birds. It had the feel of a Middle Eastern 'bazaar'. The weather is much cooler now, better for exploring and for working. I'm thinking that I must somehow find time to come back to China. Being realistic, it is unlikely that I will finish everything this trip. This week I will look for some storage space to rent and find out about crating and shipping.

Last week I made dinner with the Chinese artist (who took me to the tile workshop) – chicken, dumplings,
Saturday 26 November 2006
How nice but strange to be back in Britain. The first thing I did was to have a large slice of toast with butter and honey. I had been hallucinating about this for weeks before my return. What a wealthy country Britain is in comparison to China, or at least the area that I am familiar with. By the time I left it was getting very cold, particularly at night, and I am told that in winter proper it can get well below freezing. The family running the 'big pot' factory has two very spartan rooms to live in with polythene across the windows and a small charcoal stove. No carpets, bathroom or luxuries of any sort. In the summer I didn’t think much about it as the sun was shining, but now I feel for them. Work is slow in winter as the clay is too cold to throw and the pots don’t dry.

I hope that when I return I can do some filming with Kang Yang who has been helping and interpreting for me. I bought a camcorder today. It will be so much better than just my digital efforts. Hopefully I will be able to capture more of the atmosphere of the place.

Attached are some Jpegs of the last test pieces I did. I’ve not seen them fired, but looking at the dark piece I feel excited about what I can translate on to the real pots. The height here is about 2.17 metres. When I painted them I used a ladder and they seemed enormous, but of course they shrink 20% in the firing.

I’ll send some more images, which may give you a better sense of how I approach the painting, and to understand the size before firing. I have finished two real pieces but am not entirely convinced of their success. It is technically a real struggle to work on something that is bigger than one’s self; the marks have to change scale and the action of painting becomes a feat of gymnastic skill.

I am still pursuing the carving and feel the piece in this set of images is much more snappy and graphic than my earlier efforts, and hopefully, I will...
be able to show you the surface patterns that I have had printed – those that I had technical problems with before – but that will be after Christmas.

This marks the end of the first email diary. Felicity Aylieff returned to China in her Easter and Summer vacations of 2007 before she sent her pots to London for exhibition in the Lobby of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf. In August 2007 she added the following commentary:

10 August 2007

I have spent the last few days working out which pots to send back to the UK. They are now in the Pottery Workshop store having been couriered here by two wiry men who strapped each one horizontally to a wooden cart and pulled them along the lanes from the factory. Their livelihood is constantly moving pots and sculptures from factory to factory and despite what must be heavy work they seem very cheery. New companies are emerging that are beginning to use vans for the same job and it is causing considerable upset, putting many out of work. Employment is an anxiety for many people in China as there are no government benefits and everyone seems to be trying to make some sort of living, which sometimes seems very meagre.
A week later
When sitting with the crate-maker it suddenly dawned on me that he could not understand the drawings. The family business has made the same crate design for ever and ever, and me wanting something different had thrown everyone into a state of panic. In the end I made a model from a couple of discarded cigarette packets, and with lots of help on the interpreting front I think I may have got somewhere. But the good news is that I went to see if my last pot with the scaffolding painting was out of the kiln, it was, and it looks really powerful, so I am thrilled, it feels a good conclusion to the project.

3 days later
Yesterday the crates arrived and I put a team together to pack the work and load it into a Chinese truck. All trucks are bright blue in China and most are very old and rusty and billow out black exhaust. It didn’t fill me with confidence for the twelve-hour journey to Shanghai.

The crates didn’t seem to be much different or better made than the first ones I saw a few days ago. Their reinforcement was minimal and because they were so tall they appeared extremely flimsy. In the end I have finally selected twelve pots out of those that I made. Of course I hope they are the best, and looking at them now they seem to illustrate the ‘journey’ through my different approaches to surface painting, printing and carving. I have just finished painting a final piece, but it will miss the shipment. If it comes out well I will send it back and it can join the tour. I feel very excited by it in its unfired state. The pot is telescopic in form and in two separate parts so it will be three metres high when put together, the tallest so far! After the break back in the UK I have returned feeling much more confident and clear about my intentions in the painting, which is simple, with bold lines that form a structure reminiscent of the bamboo scaffoldings that clad all the new building going up in Jingdezhen.

Today the first of the crates arrived for the pots. There are lots of crate-makers but only one has a government certificate for wood fumigation which all export crates must have. I’m not sure whether this monopoly of the market has led to them to being really badly made and nothing like the museum specification details you sent over. I think it looks like they will have to be made again and I will make some more specific measured drawings for each.
we managed to match the pots to the crates and manpower won over trolleys and forklift as a means of heaving the pots into the crates. The heat didn’t really help and everyone was very fractious. I think it was my most stressful time since being here. In the end I decided I couldn’t watch. All I could think about was how they would survive being loaded into a container, probably by crane, at the port. In the early evening the last of the crates was lifted onto the truck with no room to spare! The whole event had drawn an audience from the surrounding factories and a big applause went up plus the inevitable fire crackers.

The schedule for getting to Shanghai and the port was very tight so Jiangbo, a very methodical and patient staff member of the pottery workshop, volunteered to accompany the truck, and ensure that it didn’t park up for a few days and miss the ship! They left for Shanghai in the early hours of this morning. I wonder how it will be at the receiving end in Harwich – quite different I think.

1 Ceramic Artist, Takeshi Yasuda, is Director of the Pottery Workshop Experimental Factory in Jingdezhen.
2 Arts Council England South West supported the feasibility study to tour the exhibition Out of China: Monumental Porcelain by Felicity Aylieff. ACE also supported the tour.
Chasing Black 2006
Glazed porcelain, cobalt and iron oxide, onglaze enamel
195 × 67 × 67 cm

I chose a large Chinese brush traditionally used for calligraphy to make the marks that chase across the surface of this pot. Unlike western brushes the head is round and fat and the hog hair bristles long and tapered to a fine point. The pot surface is very absorbent at the painting stage, and I had to work fast to keep a fluid line. The spring in the brush lent itself well to the energetic ‘dance’ across the surface.
**Chasing Red 2006**
Glazed porcelain, cobalt and iron oxide, onglaze enamel
193 × 67 × 67 cm

This was painted at the same time as *Chasing Black*. I saw them as a pair of pots. The red brush marks are enamel red, and were applied after the blue painting was fired. The red is the same as that of traditional Chinese lacquer ware.
Hú Dié jì jié – Butterfly Season 2006
Glazed porcelain, onglaze enamel transfer
225 × 57 × 57 cm

Butterflies would settle on the pots that were lined up to dry outside the workshop. Colourful, intricately patterned, exotic; they bask in the hot summer sun and remain a vivid memory of the hours spent at Mr Yu’s ‘Big Ware’ factory.

I collected as many enamel transfers used on the Chinese porcelain as I could find, and manipulated their scale on the computer to create a range of small to large butterflies to cover my pot.

Enamel transfers are applied to a fired glaze and put back into the kiln for a final firing. They are a way of achieving strong colour.
Lian Hua – Lotus Flowers 2006
Carved porcelain, underglaze blue transfers, selected areas of glaze
225 × 56 × 56 cm

Carved Chinese dragons like graceful serpents wind themselves round traditional three-metre high pots.

Having never carved in clay before, I was curious to try my hand at this skill and used drawings I had made of stylised lotus flowers as a starting point. I mixed the carving with floral prints and decided to fire without a glaze to achieve a clean stone-like quality on the surface, referencing the finish I have sometimes used on my work in the UK.
Bo Yang Hu – Bo Yang Lake 2006
Porcelain, underglaze blue transfers, selected areas of glaze
225 × 57 × 57 cm

Many pots made in Jingdezhen today have ‘transfer’ imagery and pattern. Printed on fine paper and placed image down on to the pot surface, the patterns are ‘transferred’ using water brushed across the back of the paper to release the oxide print.

From my own drawings I made a number of transfer prints of flowers using different tones of blue. To achieve the quality of a tapestry I collaged, or overlapped the prints, and, to add another layer of richness, I used a glaze in selected areas, which turned the printed flowers blue. Unglazed flowers went dark brown or black in the firing.
Leaving Marks 2006
Glazed porcelain, cobalt and iron oxide
168 x 67 x 67 cm

During the early months of my experimentation I struggled to gain the tonal breadth I sought in my 'blue and white' painting. Feeling despondent I left the big pots and worked on the surface of some smaller pieces. I played, splashing both glaze and oxide onto their surfaces and painting in a less timid way. The fired results were very strong and dramatic. Feeling more confident, Leaving Marks shows my return to the bigger scale. It was the first piece where I drew back into the painted surface to create more visual depth.
Three Brushes 2007
Glazed porcelain, cobalt and iron oxide
187 × 66 × 66 cm

As the pots that I worked on grew in scale it became necessary that the painted marks also became larger to keep a sense of proportion. I started to bind brushes together to create one huge brush that could hold more pigment. Its weight and scale changed the simplicity of the marks and I began to think in structures and grids, reflecting the concrete architecture and the bamboo scaffolding around the workshop.
**Six Brushes 2007**
Glazed porcelain, cobalt and iron oxide
225 × 57 × 57 cm

For painting on this pot I used three brushes bound together and three others to overlay different marks. The form of the piece is intentionally a simple column, as I increasingly desired an uninterrupted surface or a ‘blank canvas’ on which to work.
Horse Tail Brush, Ming Blue 2007
Glazed porcelain, Ming blue oxide
216 × 54 × 54 cm

There are many mixes of blue oxide used for painting; ‘modern’ blue and ‘old’ blue are the most common. The former has been refined for stability and even application. I found it too brash and flat as a colour and preferred to use ‘old’ blue where the cobalt was mixed with iron to achieve more intense blue browns. Walking through the antique markets I found pots that displayed much darker ‘ink’ blue and was told this was 14th century Ming Dynasty blue. I searched out a supply, and at the same time discovered an old brush shop that sold me a beautiful horsetail bush with hair 30 cm long. Hence the title Horse Tail Brush, Ming Blue.
Hua De Tu An – Flower Pictures 2007
Porcelain, underglaze blue transfers, selected areas of glaze
201 × 81 × 81 cm

The contrast in size between the wide top and small base of this pot is the most extreme that could be made to fire successfully. As with Bo Yang Lake, from my own drawings I made a number of transfer prints of flowers using different tones of blue oxide. To achieve the quality of a tapestry I collaged, or overlapped the prints, and to add another layer of richness I used a glaze that turned the printed flowers blue in the firing. The shapes picked out by glaze are taken from Chinese textile prints and serve to highlight areas of the pot surface and add another level of intrigue.

Unglazed flowers went dark brown or black in the firing.
Fu Ru Dong Hai Shou Bi Nan Shan – Abundance and Prosperity like the East Sea, Longevity like Nan Mountain 2007
Glazed porcelain, Ming blue oxide
280 × 70 × 70 cm

The countryside surrounding Jingdezhen city is one of steep mountains and bamboo forests that are almost cartoon-like in appearance. The mountains recede into the distant horizon, layer upon layer. The Chinese have many maxims that are often illustrated in the paintings on bowls and plates. My awareness of these was an influence on the form, painted imagery and title of Abundance and Prosperity like the East Sea, Longevity like Nan Mountain.
Chinese Ladders 2007
Glazed porcelain, ‘modern blue’ cobalt oxide
Height 300 cm

Bamboo is an ubiquitous material in China. Used for scaffolding, it is bound together creating seemingly precarious structures that clad the exterior of any new building. Bamboo ladders zig-zag their way upwards, as each day another floor emerges and high rise buildings telescope their way towards the sky. The painting and form of Chinese ladders is an attempt to reflect, and to capture this image.
Felicity Aylieff studied ceramics and textiles at Bath Academy of Art (1972–78). She went on to study education at Goldsmiths College, University of London (1978–79), and then joined the Royal College of Art, London, as an M Phil Post Graduate Researcher (1991–96). She was made Professor of Ceramics at Bath Spa University College in 2001. Aylieff has taught extensively throughout her career, and is currently Senior Tutor at the Royal College of Art in the department of Ceramics and Glass.

Aylieff has exhibited widely in group exhibitions, and has had regular solo shows since 1991, in Britain and Europe. Her work is intensely focused on surface quality, carried by simply shaped vessels and sculptural forms. She has for many years been an advocate for blurring the boundaries between art and craft. Her work has been written about extensively, and her own articles have been included in magazines such as Ceramic Review.

Emmanuel Cooper OBE is a well-regarded studio potter with an international reputation, and writer on arts and crafts. He is the author of many books on ceramics, including Lucie Rie, Ceramic Review Publishing Limited 2001; Bernard Leach, Yale University Press 2003; Janet Leach: A Retrospective, Tate Gallery Publishing Limited 2006; Ten Thousand Years of Pottery, British Museum Press 2006; and The Ceramics Book, Ceramic Review Publishing Limited 2006, the invaluable guide to 300 makers in the ceramic arts. He is also editor of Ceramic Review Magazine. Since 1999 he has been Visiting Professor of Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art.

Ann Elliott is a curator, who organises exhibitions and manages a portfolio of visual arts projects. Her clients are wide-ranging, and include private collectors, the corporate sector, museums and galleries, local authorities and cultural organisations. Writer of numerous catalogue essays and contributions to books on British sculptors, Elliott has also written two substantial books on private collections.