

Felicity Aylieff



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Felicity Aylieff – Working to scale  
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Front cover: Flower Jar - yellow, 2009 by Felicity Aylieff.  
Glazed Porcelain, Fencai enamel colours, hand painted.  
Height 146 x 76 x 76 cm.  
Photograph: Derek Au

Back cover: Detail of Fencai Leaves 2, 2009 by Felicity Aylieff. Glazed Porcelain, Fencai enamel colours, hand painted. Height 200 x 60 x 60 cm.  
Photograph: Derek Au

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Fencai Leaves 2, 2009. Glazed Porcelain, Fencai enamel colours, hand painted. Height: 200 x 60 x 60 cm.

Photo: Derek Au

Forward

Felicity Aylieff

Surface and texture have long been concerns in Aylieff's ceramics practice through inclusions of other materials in the body of her pots, intricate inlays of coloured clays or the application of strong coloured slips or painted oxides. The introduction to Jingdezhen, China reignited her passion for inquiring into traditional techniques and the seeking of contemporary translations, this time of a Chinese kind. The huge pots she commissioned out there for her solo exhibition at CAA presented her with blank canvases and new challenges.

For these new works, she has looked for different ways of interpreting and employing the traditions of famille rose or fencai, terms that classify Chinese porcelain by the colour palette used by Chinese potters throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Examination of historical examples, with their patterns of flowers, birds, insects, even small domestic scenes of furniture, with pots and plants as 'still-life' are the source of her decorative inspiration, and her use and reinvention of process to translate imagery onto the pot surface is typical of her habitual curiosity.

These new works, many over two metres in height, display a complexity of line and pattern and a vibrancy of colour. They provide a glimpse of history but are confident contemporary statements.

Ann Elliott, Felicity Aylieff



Photo: Derek Au

Flower Jar - yellow, 2009. Glazed Porcelain, Fencai enamel colours, hand painted. Height: 146 x 76 x 76 cm.

Felicity Aylieff, Working to Scale

Famille rose: a contemporary interpretation

Ann Elliott

Famille rose is a term that classifies Chinese porcelain by the colour palette, together with famille jaune, noire and verte, which was used by Chinese potters throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is also known as fencai or ruan cai, meaning 'soft colours', and was introduced by Kangxi (1654-1722), the second Qing emperor. Kangxi ruled China from 1661 until his death in 1722, and was considered to be one of the most important monarchs in the country's history as a military commander, statesman and scholar. Famille rose enamels permitted a greater range of colour and tone than was previously possible in decorative ceramics, enabling the depiction of more complex images, including flowers, figures and insects – even interiors and landscapes. Felicity Aylieff has recently introduced famille rose into her ceramics, as part of her work researched in China.

Over two years ago Aylieff took a sabbatical from teaching at the Royal College of Art in order to develop a series of monumental porcelain pots at Jingdezhen in China. Her achievement in this historic centre for porcelain production, with its long-established interaction between east and west, was as unusual as it was successful. With the help of the internationally renowned ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda, Caroline Cheng's Pottery Workshop Experimental Factory in Jingdezhen had recently developed a collaborative project between artists from the west and pottery factories in the city, furthering the possibilities for contemporary ceramics production. Under this new initiative the Workshop brokered arrangements for artists to work with one or more of the factories. The appropriate factory selected for Aylieff was Mr Yu's Big Ware Factory, where she was able to work in porcelain on a scale that would have been impossible in Britain. The relationship between the artist and the ceramics technicians had tentative beginnings. Sensitive to the traditional methods used and the designs on which the Chinese worked, Aylieff had to feel her way with great caution. The scale on which she was working meant that only the highly skilled, professional Chinese potters could throw the forms on her behalf. Persuading them to try new shapes that they were uncertain would succeed was difficult, but they gradually came to trust her judgement, and the eventual results were spectacular in their height, form, and the bold decorations that Aylieff devised using traditional Chinese colours and glazing techniques.

Surface has long been a concern in Aylieff's practice, whether textural, through inclusions of other materials in the body of her pots, intricate inlays of coloured clays, or the application of strong coloured slips. The huge pots she commissioned in China presented her with blank canvases and new challenges. Before beginning to paint glazes onto these pots, she made exercises for herself to limber up in preparation for working across the vast curved surfaces using large Chinese brushes, or brushes she made herself, keeping her line and the weight of decoration fluid and spontaneous. She also developed a collage technique for the surface of pots using transfers and, in some cases, carving. The results were astonishing and formed a group of works that were exhibited in London, and then toured with the help of a grant from Arts Council England 2007-09.

Not wishing to leave this seam of interest, Felicity Aylieff has continued to visit China on every vacation from the Royal College of Art. Her passion for inquiring into traditional techniques and developing contemporary translations of them has sustained her and she has also maintained her relationship with the small, specialist family workshops and factories in Jingdezhen. Benefiting from the skills and advice available to her, she continues to experiment and try more and different ways of increasing her repertoire of form and surface for her pots. Now working on a slightly smaller scale, around two metres in height – the earlier pieces reached a maximum of four metres – she then settled on a process that was new to her, but that has been very popular in Chinese porcelain production since the seventeenth century: famille rose.

This course of action revived a past interest of hers that may be glimpsed in her work from the 1980s, in which she devised complex patterns from precise graphic renderings of imagery for the surface of her pots. The minute detail found in famille rose, its subtle colours and the subject matter depicted by Chinese painters, aroused her curiosity and added a further dimension to her practice. For these new works, she looked for different ways of interpreting and employing the traditional famille rose colours. Examination of historical examples, with their patterns of flowers, birds, insects, even small domestic scenes of furniture, with pots and plants as 'still-life', revealed how drawn outlines were first painted in black enamel to create a barrier to contain the colours and stop them from running during their application to the surface of glazed ware. These pots then underwent a second firing at a lower temperature of 780°centigrade.



Photo: Felicity Aylieff

Five Storey's – Chinese ladders series 2009. Glazed Porcelain, 'New Ming' Blue cobalt and Iron oxides.  
Height 280 x 46 x 46 cm.



Photo: Derek Au

Eighteen Vase Still Life 2009, Glazed Porcelain, 'Fencai' enamel colours hand painted Height 146 x 76 x 76 cm.

Fascinated by the domestic scenes painted on Qing Dynasty porcelain, Aylieff found herself drawing the pots and vases depicted on these wares, reflecting their forms and patterns, and interpreting them in a way that would suit the surface of her newly thrown forms. She then converted these line drawings of vessels, some eighteen of them, into linocuts, and from these made plaster moulds to pick up their intricate surface detail. A latex cast was made from the plaster, which was backed with sponge creating a flexible printing block. This, when 'inked' with enamel, could be pressed against the curved surface of the pot to transfer the image. In essence, Aylieff had thereby reproduced, on a much larger scale, the small, hand-carved rubber stamps traditionally used in China to print the outline of repeated pattern. The way she arrived at this process typifies her habitual curiosity and delight in reinventing techniques to suit her own purpose. In order to assist her in the overall design and the distribution of her pot imagery, she first printed them onto paper, which she taped onto the pots so that they would guide her hand to the correct position when printing with enamel, in what she calls 'mapping the design'. Once the black outlines had been printed over the surface, the colours were added by hand. Areas of flat colour contrast with detailed stippling and all forms of intricate handling of the enamels, a clear indication of her inventiveness.

In effect Aylieff was using collage techniques to achieve vitality across the surfaces of her work. Her pot 'cartoons' seem to jostle for position. Some overlap others or nudge one another in a fight for supremacy in the overall composition. Spotted decoration, stripes and crazed patterns, zigzag motifs and cross-hatching give each pot its own character, not to mention their varying shapes – tall and slim, fat and chunky, geometric or sleek – all contribute to creating myriad pot images with distinct personalities. Looking at *Eighteen Vase Still Life* 2009, one cannot fail to be struck by how Felicity Aylieff enjoys everything about ceramics, and celebrates her passion for making stuff with clay and colour; in fact she is in her element.

Felicity Aylieff's famille rose pots are simple, broad-shouldered vertical forms, curving to a short narrow neck or wider opening, and are host to strong yellows studded with orange dots enclosed in minute black circles. They are overlaid with thorny branches and soft flower heads, while strong black carnations and honeysuckle are also superimposed. These are countered by small splashes of blues and pinks in a symphony of colour and shape – soft flowers contrast with angular sticks and sharp leaves. In *Flower Jar, Yellow* and *Flower Jar, Blue*, both of 2009, she brings into play some of the





Felicity Ayleff amongst her completed pots, preparing for crating and shipping to the UK.



Photo: Derek Au

Flower Jar – Blue 2009, Glazed Porcelain, Fencai enamel colours, hand painted. Height 188 x 60 x 60 cm.

character of collage patterns that she laid over a number of the earlier pieces made when she was first working in Jingdezhen.

Another development of famille rose is found in other differently shaped and decorated pots – slender vertical forms, tapered at the base and spreading to shoulders, topped with a long and narrowing neck. *Fencai Leaves 2009* is decorated with stems of generic leaves, outlined in black, then filled with the softest hues of the famille rose palette, each leaf marked differently, many overlapping in a naturalistic way. A patchwork not unlike fabric is created by geometric patterns, organic shapes and small leaves, some of them have grasses and flowers painted onto them – others are left as simple line drawings. The total design is complex, while being made from the simplest of motifs. Interestingly, textiles were Aylieff's supporting study when she took her first degree at Bath Academy of Art (1972-78).

Chinese blue and white porcelain had its origins in Henan province as early as the ninth century, but in the early fourteenth century production started in Jingdezhen, and is said to have reached the height of technical excellence during the reign of Kangxi. Taking a radically different approach, Aylieff made a number of blue and white pots alongside her famille rose pieces. In some the forms are more complex, the surface less graphic, and line more instinctively expressive, while being well rehearsed. In these she has brought forward the free-form brush marks that she laid onto some of her early pieces made in Jingdezhen. Here, they are more accomplished, the marks more assured and the forms curve voluptuously above and below the waist, shoulder and foot. The circular sweeps of the brush, loaded with liquid cobalt and iron oxide mix, emphasise the sensuality of the pot's form. The colour here is different from the blue she used before, being a darker, more inky blue, which she has named *New Ming Blue*. Aylieff has also used this formula in a number of smaller pieces, which are equally lively and show both the density and translucency of the blue.

Certainly this collection of pieces is most diverse in the range of surface treatment that Aylieff has employed, always pushing her need to try something new and to experiment. In her work there is little repetition, but much reaching forward.

When she began making the famille rose pots, Felicity Aylieff admitted to not knowing where they came from, or how she felt about what she was doing. At the time of writing, she is back in China,

completing the pieces ready for shipping to London for this exhibition. Time is getting short, and she is working under pressure. Needing more assistance from the technicians in Jingdezhen, she asked a painter to help with the decoration of a pot that she'd had to remake because it failed in the last firing. Her recent e-mail, just over a week or two since she arrived in China read, ' . . . and it's another extremely hot and sticky day in China, already over 40°centigrade. The heat, more than jet lag, is knocking me out. I started working as soon as I arrived which could have been a tad over ambitious but now I only have just under two weeks before the work needs to be packed and shipped. Why is it always a sprint to the end? I decided that some help might be useful to get me through this last bit and I asked for an extra painting lady to do some basic colour filling in, and then before I knew it she had brought in her whole family all wanting to help; chaos Chinese style! I daren't leave in case they creep back in hoping to help out!' This is a testament to her commitment to learning, and to being open to new influences and experiences – to being where other artists have been, in Jingdezhen since the seventeenth century and learning from others' culture. It is both exciting and demanding work.

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.

Elliott is a Board Member of ArtPoint, a Public Art Commissioning Agency; Trustee of Ironbridge Open Air Museum of Steel Sculpture; she is on the Fabric Committee of Portsmouth Cathedral; and the Exhibition Advisory Committee of The Lightbox, Woking.

Writer of numerous catalogue essays and contributions to books on British sculptors, Elliott has also written two substantial volumes on private collections. She lives in West Sussex.



Photo: Felicity Aylieff

Ink Blue – tall, edition of four Glazed Porcelain, 'New Ming' Blue cobalt and Iron oxides.  
Height: 56 x 20 x 20 cm.

## FELICITY AYLIEFF

Born UK 1954

### Education

- 1972-78 Bath Academy of Art BA Hons Three Dimensional Design: Ceramics  
1978-79 Goldsmiths College ATC Post Graduate  
1993-96 Royal College of Art M Phil Post Graduate Research: Ceramics

### Memberships

Crafts Council Index of Selected Makers, Contemporary Applied Arts, Fellow, Craft Potters Association, Fellow of the Royal College of Art

### Teaching Experience

- 2002 current Royal College of Art, Senior Tutor  
2001 Appointed Professor of Ceramics, Bath Spa University  
1989-2001 Bath Spa University, Full Time Lecturer, BA Ceramics  
1981-93 Goldsmiths College ceramics and Visitor, BA Craft Studies  
1982-89 Bath College of Higher Education, Associate lecturer, Foundation and Adult Studies  
1979-82 Bedales School, Hampshire, Ceramics and General Art and Design

External Examiner, Ceramics: Ulster BA and PhD, Cardiff, Wolverhampton BA, Dublin MA

### Selected Solo Exhibitions since 2000

- 2009 Felicity Aylieff, Working to Scale, Contemporary Applied Arts, London  
2009 The Lightbox, Woking  
2008 Quest Gallery, Bath  
2007 Goed Werk, Belgium  
2007 Out of China, Monumental Porcelain by Felicity Aylieff, Canary Wharf, London, touring Oldham Gallery, Manchester, Shipley Art Gallery, The Barn Gallery, West Dean  
2007 Carlin Gallery, Paris  
2002/3 Sense & Perception, Manchester City Art Gallery, touring Blackwell House, Cumbria, Bath City Art Gallery Felicity Aylieff, Canary Wharf, London  
2001 Gallerie Marianne Heller, Heidelberg, Germany  
2000 Felicity Aylieff, Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

### Selected Group exhibitions from 2000

- 2009 Malerei auf Keramik, Handwerkskammer für München und Oberbayern, Germany  
2008 Represented by Adrian Sassoon, Monumental Pots, Collect, V&A, London  
2008 Colourware, Flow, London touring Hub, Sleaford, Lincs  
2007 Represented by Adrian Sassoon, Collect, V&A, London  
2007 Group exhibition, The Pot, the Vessel, the Object, touring Aberystwyth Arts centre, Design centre Bradford, The Hub Sleaford  
2007 Hue, Line and Form, Contemporary Applied Arts, London  
2007 Out of the Ordinary, Newport Museum and Art gallery  
2006 To Hold, Farmleigh Gallery, Farmleigh House, Kilkenny, Ireland  
2006 Sculpted in Clay, Sheffield Millennium Galleries  
2005 Clay, Los Angeles, USA

- 2005 CAA, London  
2005 Beaux Arts, Bath  
2003 Contemporary Decorative Art, Sotheby's, London  
2003 Felicity Aylieff & Malcolm Ross-White, Seven Worcester Terr. Bath  
2003 Summer exhibition, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh  
2003 Short-listed for 2nd World Ceramic Biennale 2003 Korea diploma of honour  
2001 International Group, British Studio Ceramics: The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, USA  
2001 Short-listed for 1st World Ceramic Biennale 2001 Korea, Diploma Great Britain, Terra Keramiek, Delft, Netherlands  
2001 Short-listed for the Jerwood Prize for Ceramics: London touring to 3 venues in UK  
2001 Crafts Council at SOFA, Chicago, USA  
2001 Sculpture in a Scottish Garden, Edinburgh  
2000 Still Form Bright Line, Canary Wharf, London  
2000 Touring Exhibition, Crawford Arts Centre, St Andrews, Scotland  
2000 International Exhibition, Lucern 2000 Ceramic Biennial, guest, British Ceramics, Lucern, Switzerland  
2000 New Directions in Sculpture, Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Wales  
2000 International Touring Exhibition, Palais Rastede, Oldenberg, Germany; and Groninge  
2000 Inside-Out, Gallery Flow, London  
2000 Represented by Nancy Margolis, New York, USA

### Work In Public Collections

Auckland Museum, NZ; Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery; Contemporary Art Society; Crafts Council Public Collection; Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth House; Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Germany; Keramikmuseum, Westerwald, Germany; Manchester Metropolitan University; Museum für angewandte Kunst, Köln, Germany; Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg, Germany; Museum of Wales Cardiff; Museum of Scotland; Portsmouth City Museum; Prior's Court School, Woodland Sculpture, Berkshire; Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead; Stiftung Lotte Reimers, Deidesheim, Germany; Stiftung Petra Verberne Venray, Netherlands; V&A, London; World Ceramic Centre, Korea; York Museum

### Major grants

- 2008 Arts Council of England, major award for 'Felicity Aylieff, Monumental' Porcelain  
2007 Research Award, development work for China exhibition, funded by RCA  
2006 Arts Council of England, feasibility study for touring exhibition of works produced in China  
2005/6 Diawa Foundation, project funding for Symposium – White Gold  
2005 Learning & Teaching Award, RCA, for Symposium – White Gold  
2003 Research Award, development work for exhibition, funded by RCA  
2002 Exhibition award, Sense & Perception, Arts Council of England, Manchester City Council, Manchester Metropolitan Univ, RCA research fund.  
2001 AHRB Award, Exploring 3D Modelling Software in the Production of Ceramic Artworks



Completed pots.



Outline of pots created using sponge stamp.



Painting with Fencai colours.



Mapping out design.



Completed pots.



Selecting sponge stamps to print design.



Aligning neck to pot base.



Sponge stamps made from original drawings.



Painting with Fencai colours.



Photo: Derek Au

Moving the pots from workshop to storage in China.

This catalogue was produced to coincide with the exhibition: Felicity Aylieff – Working to scale 9.10.09 –14.11.09 at contemporary Applied Arts.



Completed pot.



Completed pot in the kiln.



Decorated pots for firing.

#### Acknowledgments:

There have been many people involved in making this project happen, first and foremost I would like to thank Contemporary Applied Arts for originating the idea and for their unwavering confidence in my abilities throughout the 'journey' from sketchbook to gallery. The Pottery workshop in Jingdezhen, particularly Takeshi Yasuda and Caroline Cheng, who not only provided a base from which I was able to work, but also knowledge and experience that I could tap into. To Jiang Hai Jiao and Wu Jiang Zhong for their respective skills of Fencai painting and 'big pot' production. To the Royal College of Art for their support of this research, Ann Elliott for her continuing encouragement and insightful catalogue essay, and finally Xiong Baixu for her energy as interpreter and friendship throughout my time in China.

#### Felicity Aylieff

Photo credits. Page 15: top left, Dryden Wells; top centre, Derek Au; top right, Derek Au; centre left, Derek Au; centre, Derek Au; Centre right, Derek Au; bottom left, Dryden Wells; bottom centre, Felicity Aylieff; bottom right, Derek Au.  
Page 17: Derek Au and Felicity Aylieff.

Contemporary Applied Arts

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2 Percy Street London W1T 1DD

Telephone 020 7436 2344

[www.caa.org.uk](http://www.caa.org.uk)

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