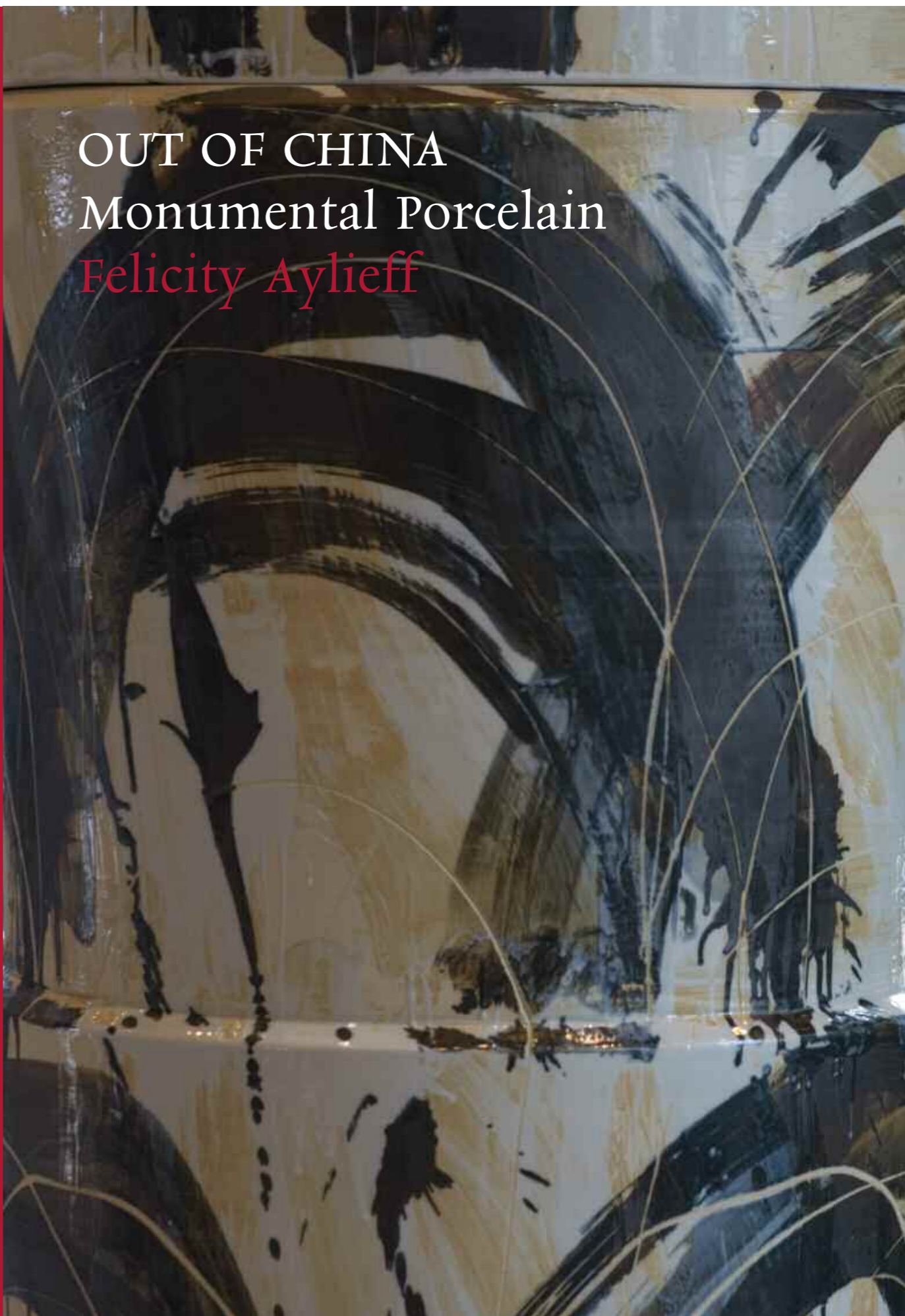




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OUT OF CHINA Monumental Porcelain *Felicity Aylieff*

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Monumental Porcelain
Felicity Aylieff





OUT OF CHINA

Monumental Porcelain

Felicity Aylieff

Texts Felicity Aylieff

Essay Emmanuel Cooper

Editor Ann Elliott

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front cover

Fu Ru Dong Hai Shou Bi Nan Shan – *Abundance and Prosperity like the East Sea, Longevity like Nan Mountain* 2007

back cover, left

Huá Qīng Huà – *Blue and White Painting* 2006, private collection

back cover, right

Chasing Black 2006

OUT OF CHINA Monumental Porcelain

was first shown in the Lobby of One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, 17 September to 23 November 2007; touring to Gallery Oldham, 9 February to 21 April 2008; Sussex Barn, West Dean College, Chichester 1 May to 15 June 2008; Shipley Art Gallery 21 June to 2 November 2008.



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 Yasuda, 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 Francois Xavier d'Entrecolles¹ 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 Museum² 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



brush are more wild and assertive, the pigment more thickly applied so that it almost seems to bite into the surface. The gently swelling, slightly shouldered form is almost obliterated by the broad cobalt and iron brush strokes that virtually cover the entire surface. This is an artist attacking the clay to bring it under control while, paradoxically, liberating it from its formal constraints, setting up a tension between form and surface while creating an integrated whole. On the piece, *Chasing Red* 2006 (pp. 42–43), Aylieff painted scarlet red enamel decoration over the cobalt and iron underglaze with the same sense of freedom. The brush-strokes flicker and shift over the surface, the marks subtly capturing the essence of form.

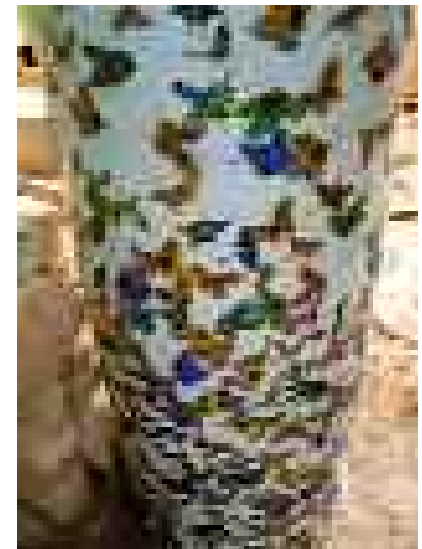
On other forms Aylieff has adopted a more ordered approach, with the broad, energetic brushstrokes following and intensifying their structure. In pieces such as *Chinese Ladders* 2007 (pp. 62–63) and *Fu Ru Dong Hai Shou Bi Nan Shan – Abundance and Prosperity like the East Sea, Longevity like Nan Mountain* 2007 (pp. 60–61), take on a more architectural, tower-like quality both in the form, in which one section appears to grow out of another, and in the assertive, defining brush strokes. By heightening awareness of the articulated form Aylieff has created a pattern-like quality that both emphasises the structure of the container and its surface.

In contrast to this expressionist approach, some pieces make effective use of the thick walls for carved, low-relief decoration. To this end Aylieff made a series of meticulous drawings of flowers and plants, which were cut up and reassembled, examined, photocopied and morphed together to investigate decorative possibilities. Eventually these were simplified into a design of multi-layered natural forms that were intended to cover the entire surface. Carving into the resilient porcelain proved a challenge, but the outcome is light and delicate. On some pieces, to add a further layer of visual interest, stenciled linear designs were added. In *Lian Hua Lotus Flowers* 2006 (pp. 46–47), the abstract elongated lotus leaf appears to move into and out of the surface, which is further heightened by delicate blue transfers. From



a 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 Qin 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

- 1 Père Francois 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.
- 2 *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army*, British Museum, London, 13 September 2007 to 6 April 2008.



Jingdezhen Diary

Felicity Aylieff

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's¹ 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



porcelain shape, and another form that will require the team to throw, and work in a very different way. It might be best to ask them to start on small pieces as models or maquettes in order for me to sort out my thinking, Changes can easily be made at this



early stage rather than later. Tomorrow I shall go off to buy some drawing materials and see where that takes me!

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 electric 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

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 25 August 2006

Jingdezhen is just recovering from some spectacular electrical storms. I'm not usually a wimp when it comes to thunder and lightning but this was the most dramatic I have ever seen and it sent me under the bed covers! The storms have been building up for days . . . The power is now back on and everything feels refreshed, but still hot.

As far as work goes, I've had several days of experimenting, changing my mind, and trying to make decisions. Because I am not making the big pots myself, I am struggling to understand the technical limitations,

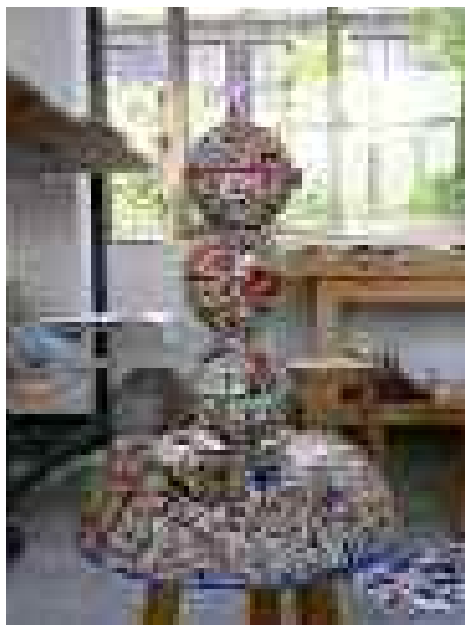


the pottery industry, but like Stoke on Trent, it is in decline with competition from Taiwan, Poland etc, and struggling to reinvent itself. All the big hangar-like buildings have been subdivided, and small production potteries and ceramic print studios have moved in, many being taken over and turned 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

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



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

home!). *Pin 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





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





the meticulous copying of your professor. The academic drawing skill is phenomenal, but free spirit and personal voice seems to be rare, so trying to discuss creativity was tricky. However, the workshops went well and the students seemed to really enjoy the three days.

I spent a couple of days looking round Shanghai, which was preparing for the Biennale. I had my hair cut – quite an amazing experience that unexpectedly included a head massage and ear cleaning! I spent many hot hours walking round the antique market, mainly copies but great stuff all the same. Bamboo and metal bird cages, revolutionary figurines, snuff boxes and traditional indigo cloth . . . I then found the silk market, which

was almost overwhelming with colour and pattern – there was so much that I wanted, but in the end I couldn't choose and left empty handed!

I remember last year being struck by the old houses in the French concession area, much of this area has now disappeared. I have sent you a few pictures that show the relentless march of progress and the devastation it can leave behind.

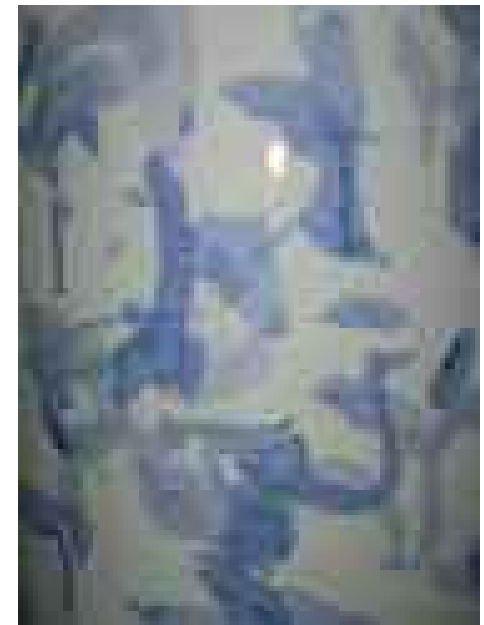
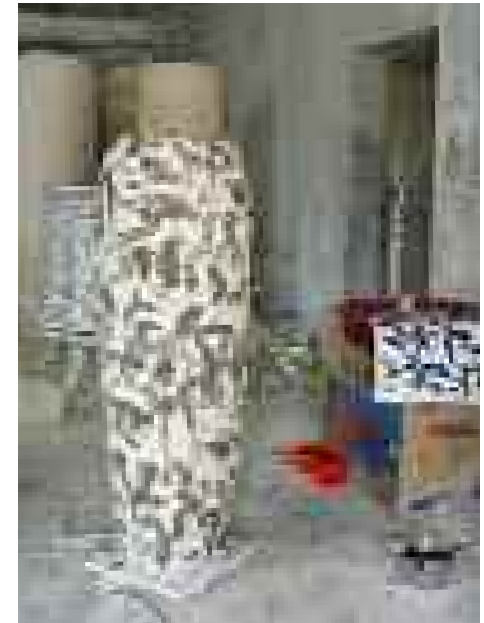
The final email in this group has some images of recent drawings. I spent most of the past two days on my own in the studio, and have done loads of drawing. I am not sure you would call the process *drawing* as such. The results are more like marks on paper using my chunky brushes that I bought from the brush shop a week ago. I think I have finally got somewhere, and feel that I may just take the plunge this week and attack the surface of a pot. I have been working



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 Council² life here on 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 not to do 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 experienced 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 artisans 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 resident 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 adrenalin 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 experience for me!

Thursday 5 October 2006

Rather a long break since my last email 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



wonderful Muslim quarter. The food was delicious; mutton soups, kebabs, interesting cakes and sweets. We spent a lot of time eating! The Terracotta Army is breathtaking – not just the finesse of the clay modelling but the sheer enormity of the original undertaking. Rows and rows of soldiers and horses – you really get a sense of how powerful the emperor was and his obsessive belief in himself and his importance. Like the Egyptian Pharaohs such obsessions leave amazing things behind.

I'm back now and only have five weeks to get things sorted. I am about to test my decals (transfer prints) for

not very impressed by the facilities or the work in the ceramics and glass area, even though it has a good reputation, however it was useful to meet the course director etc.

After that I decided that I wanted to go to Xian, and Takeshi sent one of the young staff to be my guide/interpreter. Well it rained and rained and it was very cold and we learnt how to argue. I can now swear in Chinese, and I have acquired a completely new weatherproof wardrobe! We also laughed a lot, but for the guide it must have felt a bit like taking his mother sightseeing! Xian is a very different city from Jingdezhen with a



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

criteria I set for the work was very open. I wanted to work with scale, as this is one of the few countries that understand this technology. I also want to explore and assimilate the traditional approach to dealing with surface, through painting and pattern. Although I don't like much of what I see being made today (tired copies of original works made hundreds of years ago) the techniques used and the qualities achieved are fascinating. In ceramics it can often be a particular process that can trigger an idea or make you look and consider things in a different way. It seems very necessary to be reactive and responsive to the situation and my surroundings. So at the moment it may seem as if I am jumping around, but at some point the thinking will come together, and with a bit of luck, the results will echo previous concerns and retain my personal voice but be fresh, and I hope, unexpected.

It's hot but not too hot and everyone is getting ready for the big Ceramic Trade Fair that happens annually in Jingdezhen. Takeshi has just managed to send his work off to Beaux Arts, Bath, the opening is this Saturday, early evening – maybe you can go and see if it has arrived! Hope all is well with you – the RCA has just started the new term and I am receiv-

ing a deluge of emails. A long distance help line!

Monday 16 October 2006

Will these pictures of the big pots in the making help give a sense of scale and form?

Wednesday 25 October 2006

Just a recent test piece that has come out . . . I now feel ready to tackle the large-scale pieces that are now ready. I have to summon up quite a bit of courage to make the first mark on what seems like a huge blank canvas. Once you start there's no going back as you can't rub it out or paint over it!

My test pot in the photos is beside one of the traditional pieces that have mountain scenes painted on it. My marks are trying to reflect the mountains in a more loose or abstract way, and hopefully I have achieved some movement and energy in my interpretation. I am still struggling with the tonal side of the blue and white and find it difficult to get the strength of the cobalt blue right!

Sunday 5 November 2006

The pot in the photograph is the last of the test pieces that I have had fired and finished. I'm really pleased with the painting and the tonal values of the cobalt blue are much better than



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,





Chinese salad, sweet soup, fresh tomato pasta, lamb moussaka and apple crumble. It was interesting sharing recipes and learning about our different approaches to food and cooking. It was delicious and a change from our normal daily menu. We made up the table properly and had candles – it looked like Christmas! Someone had some 1930s dance music, so dancing lessons followed, but I'm not sure who was teaching whom.

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





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.

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 the 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





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.

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



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 forever 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



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.

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.





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 × 67 × 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.



extend
bottom edge
to bleed

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.



extend
bottom edge
to bleed

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 x 81 x 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 (1993–96). 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.