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Figuring Out the Figure: A Cross-Cultural Study on the Interpretation of the Human Form in Clay

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Throughout the history of art, the human figure continues to be a common translator of ideas and a pivot between extremes; mostly, grounding an existential idea in a relatable form. The physicality studies of the Grecian and Roman sculptors, the golden statues of Buddha and his Bodhisattvas, and more recently, the encaustic-layered, hyper-realistic work of contemporary artists prove the popularity and flexibility of the human subject in art. While the intricacies and mannerisms of a figurative sculpture may be determined by the artist's cultural attitude, the construction and commonalities of the human figure propagate a universally understood visual language, arguably translated most clearly in clay.

An artist's constant challenge is mediating the significance of the eternal and the temporal in a visually interesting way. Ceramicists enjoy the ability of their medium to convey both. Ceramic art earns contemporary relevancy through its subject matter and remains everlasting through the clay material, which is derivative of earth and destined to return to it: hypothetically, one million years from now, people will be walking on and breathing in the particles of the ceramic art of today. Likewise, figurative ceramic art represents the human body, which was also created from dust and destined to one day return. Therefore it is reasonable to conjecture that an understanding of figurative sculpture is a fundamental component to the education of the young artist, and why I chose to explore the topic through direct observation and practice.

On figurative sculpture, ceramicist Arthur Gonzalez may have said it best: "Figuration is like a rope bridge that connects two cliffs: one cliff being the time spent making art in the studio and the other cliff being the time spent outside the studio interacting with the world." Through direct observation and immersion into Chinese society, I mimicked a process common of prolific artists: witnessing what I am not to understand who I am. The differences between the Chinese culture and my own American heritage ranged linguistically, socially, and physically, and I was always the outsider. Over the span of one month, the disparities lessened as I became accustomed to Chinese life and culture: the crowds, noises, smells, and tastes, how I was expected to address my peers and professors, their colloquialisms (translated, of course) and topics of conversation, what was up for discussion and what remained absolute. However, the continual gawks, stares, and picture requests were a daily reminder of my Western exterior.

The perplexing dichotomies of the Chinese slowly but steadily unfurled, revealing the self-consciousness of a culture perpetually forced to be on the defensive. The facades of their buildings, much like the superficialities of the people, presented a nice picture. However, once inside, the crumbling, poorly maintained interiors--the insecurities and, what Western culture would deem, vulgarities of the people--reflected the awkward position of this rising nation. As explained by the Director of International Exchange, a man whom I came to call Uncle Xi: "we love capitalism, but we hate capitalism." The tug between tradition and contemporary, communism and capitalism, is apparent throughout the burgeoning cities and even the idyllic

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countryside. The Chinese people seem to internalize this war, which among the younger generation creates an awkward innocence; they are seen by the protective adults as strawberries that bruise easily.

Once back in my comfortable Western setting, where disagreements in the form of constructive criticism are encouraged (and to question a teacher is not considered improper), in the clay studio at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, the disparities I witnessed just a week prior were exacerbated. As I sculpted a seated figure from a live model, correct proportion was emphasized. I remembered the room of discarded figurative sculpture at Shanghai University; rows of student work stacked on top of each other—impressive, anatomically accurate forms that were merely exercises in clay for students. I finally felt satisfied after creating a mound of blue hair on top of my figure, whose tongue I positioned sticking out of her mouth in that crude gesture so reminiscent of children. It was so clever, I thought, until I realized it wasn't at all—it was merely an expression of some subconscious indulgence, allowed to appear because of my conditioning by my surroundings, my culture.

It is impossible for me to understand what I observed in China, even with in depth historical and cultural analysis, because I am not Chinese. I do realize, however, that we are more alike than I initially thought. Because we are all humans, we are fundamentally the same; our figurative sculpture too, is modeled after the same form. But what gave me the impulse to give my figure blue hair differs from the impulse that gives my Chinese counterpart to give her figure a dreamy stare, a pursed lip, or an outstretched hand. Nevertheless, empathy possesses these forms; the artist empathizes as he creates from his own image, the viewer, as he witnesses the situation of himself, now turned to stone.

“Clay is so malleable, so much like the body. You can push it from the inside to the outside. There's no other medium that you can manipulate in that way to mimic the body,” as explained by my Penland instructor, Keith Wallace Smith. An impression made in the clay originates from the artist's hand, which has itself been carved over years of use, attached to the artist who has been conditioned over years of a unique life experience. It may not seem like much of a revelation, but it took 21 years of life, and a summer spent in China and North Carolina for me to realize the meaning of art in all its simplicity, specifically, of figurative art: it is about self and self experience—the world as seen through the eyes of one person, shared with all those who see it. I also became convinced that no other medium than clay can so easily transmit these experiences from world to artist to art to viewer; “it is a three dimensional form only once removed” from the world as we see it (Keith Wallace Smith). We all have arms, hands, feet, eyes, ears, and the artist's expression of these components is a form of communication, easily understood by anyone who also has arms, hands, feet, eyes, and ears. The idea that this form of art represents a human is more important than the form itself.

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