

JONI LOW / The Invisible Social Traces of Objects: Wayne Ngan's Ceramic Vessels

It's a late-August morning on Hornby Island, and Wayne Ngan is firing three month's worth of wares, periodically weaving in and out of our conversation to tend to their progress. The kiln door creaks open as he offers a glimpse: the vessels are silently huddled together, elegantly evolving into final form, and rendered magical by the glow of heat behind them. Up since dawn and fully absorbed in the rhythm of his intuitive process, he describes the unpredictability of what emerges: "It's excitement, celebration, a healing process," his eyes sparkle, accentuating the wisps of his long beard. "When I open the kiln, it's like a little world I've dreamed about comes true."¹

In the context of our surroundings, I fully embrace his romanticism. Entering Ngan's pottery studio is like inhabiting West Coast artistic folklore: built from scratch in the early 1980s, the space, which has slowly evolved into his paradise, is emblematic of a practice that fluidly integrates life, art, and environment. The showroom—where he often perches atop a tall stool, chatting with weekend visitors—opens up to a vast garden with a lily pond, hanging vines, and his sculptures placed throughout. Fruit trees shade a messy laboratory of a room, where his potter's wheel and buckets of glazes reside. To the east, the simple Japanese-style living spaces, generously lit by skylights and large windows, look out across the Georgia Straight. One can watch the storms approach and dissipate, observe the tides on the shore below, and be completely attuned with the surrounding nature. One can see how his environment influences the materials, shapes, and glazes of his ceramics, which in turn inspire his everyday life. The space is not as mythologized as the first family home on Downes Point, which, self-constructed with a turf roof, hand-formed plaster, and wood from the beach, vividly expresses the "back to the land" spirit of the 1970s.² It resonates with a different energy: the patience and resilience of someone who has navigated the process of starting from nothing to build his practice.

1 Interview with Wayne Ngan, August 27, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the artist are from this interview.

2 See Doris Shadbolt's curatorial essay in *Pottery by Wayne Ngan* (Vancouver Art Gallery 1978), a catalogue published in conjunction with Ngan's solo exhibition at the time.

Ngan, now 77, is one of Canada's finest and most widely renowned ceramic artists, a virtuoso potter whose originality of vision, sensitivity to form, colour, and proportion, and capacity for innovation are unparalleled. Throughout more than fifty years, he has mastered his techniques through an intimate involvement in every aspect of his craft—building his own kilns, sourcing local materials to fuel his firings and make his own glazes, and experimenting with accents of slip, indentation, and brushwork to enhance the artistic expression of his final forms. He has been celebrated for his ability to interweave the aesthetic philosophies of Eastern and Western ceramics, creating works that evoke associations across culture and time while remaining unmistakably connected to Hornby Island. His oeuvre traverses signature techniques from Raku-fired wares, tenmoku and salt glazes, to his Yukon black glaze, oil spot techniques, and shell-inspired hues. The forms range from the modesty of rustic vases and everyday tea bowls to the classic contours reminiscent of Sung dynasty ceramics.

Ngan is also linked to a wider studio pottery renaissance on the West Coast, which, influenced in part by the philosophies and teachings of Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, and Soetsu Yanagi, flourished during the countercultural spirit of the 1970s, and continues today.³ Leach's *The Potter's Book* was particularly influential in articulating an understanding of studio pottery as imbued with the personality of its maker.⁴ Thankfully, due to the curatorial efforts of Doris Shadbolt, Scott Watson, Lee Plested and Charmian Johnson, Diane Carr, and others, West Coast ceramics has been increasingly integrated into our cultural and artistic history, and considered within the broader context of concurrent international pottery movements.⁵ Though Ngan's career is somewhat independent of these influences, his works undeniably share the

3 "Movement" may be too cohesive and self-conscious a term; a loose network of potters along the coast and Gulf Islands, in search of space and time away from the city to attend to their craft, might be more apt. See Diane Carr, "Recollections and Reflections, 1970–85," in *Back to the Land: Ceramics from Vancouver Island and The Gulf Islands 1970–1985* (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria 2012).

4 See Scott Watson, "Search for Integrity: Bernard Leach's Canadian Apprentices," in Scott Watson, Naomi Sawada, and Jana Tyner eds. *Thrown: British Columbia's Apprentices of Bernard Leach and their Contemporaries* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery 2011), 24.

5 Recent local exhibitions that shed light on the history of West coast ceramics include *High Fire Culture: Locating Leach / Hamada in West Coast Studio Pottery* (Satellite Gallery 2013), *Back to the Land: Ceramics from Vancouver Island and The Gulf Islands 1970–1985* (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria 2012) and the seminal exhibition *Thrown: Influences and Intentions of West Coast Ceramics* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery 2004). For more information, see their accompanying catalogues.

utopian consciousness of this foundational time. The values of self-reliance, deep connection to the land, and meaningful vocation that are expressed through his work feel more relevant than ever within the frustrations of contemporary late-capitalism. The social contexts surrounding ceramics also continue to shift. The revival of artisanal consciousness within our broader culture is indicative of a heightened appreciation and longing for the tactile human trace in our digital age. Amidst this, there has been a resurgence of interest in ceramics within contemporary art discourse over the past few years, with exhibitions reconstructing its histories, situating it in conversation with other mediums, and exploring the versatility of its contemporary expressions.⁶

The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kubai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Ngan's ceramics are intriguing not only for their aesthetic qualities and associated values, but also for the stories that seem to spill from them. I noticed this immediately during my first visit in 2011. Drawing lines in the dirt to illustrate the grandeur of his now-dismantled Sung-style kiln, or re-telling the legendary tale of how he suddenly came to understand *hakeme* brushwork through his own walking movements, Ngan's stories aren't necessarily visible in the works themselves, but they inevitably shape the understanding of the overall work in a *social* way. Like the wood that Calvino describes, Ngan's ceramics carry narrative traces that have accrued over time. There are stories related to the materials from which his pieces are made, which themselves tap into deep geological time; there are those that spring from his artistic discoveries, related to ancient techniques and glazes, which relate to historic time. Then there are the autobiographical stories that shed light on the energies with which he, as their maker, has physically imbued the vessels.

Further, in considering the wider social existence of Ngan's objects in the everyday lives they permeate, and the memories that circulate in the communities that

6 See Lily Wei, "Claytime! Ceramics Finds Its Place in the Art-World Mainstream," *ARTNews* January 15, 2014, and Ian Wallace, "This Clay's on Fire! Behind the Surprising New Renaissance in Ceramic Art," *Artspace* April 17, 2014.

revere his work, one realizes that there are even *more* traces. As functional and artistic objects, their meanings are activated by the social. Philosopher Bruno Latour proposes the social as neither a stabilized state of affairs, nor something to be fit into a pre-existing definition, but rather “a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements . . . a *type of connection* between things that are not themselves social,” which are characterized by their continuous reshuffling into new shapes (5). In his Actor Network Theory, Latour offers a relativist view of the social, one where not only humans, but also objects, can be considered as participants in a course of social action, modifying a state of affairs before receding back into their perceived solid, “inert,” or silent states (63–82). If we accept that the social can function as the nebulous, fluid energy that binds humans and non-humans together in constantly shifting ways, and that an object’s activity can be made intermittently visible through strategies such as history and fiction, the narrative traces of Ngan’s ceramic objects can be conceived as moments that illustrate these webs of activity. Through their existence as social interstices, I believe that these objects express, in Latour’s term, “properties”; they become active agents in the continually forming and dispersing social network of humanity, and affect the mnemonic traces of these connections. These narrative traces, when made visible, can enrich the understanding of objects. With this in mind I’d like to reconsider the social layers of Ngan’s pieces through some of his stories, to see what can be read in these works.

There are two ways of looking at pots: one is the actual clay pot, but the real pot to me is all around me—the spirit of the pot.

—Wayne Ngan

Ngan’s first experiences with clay occurred in childhood, while playing along the lakes and rice fields outside his village near Guangdong, China. “We didn’t have any money, so I made toys with clay. Making these toys became an outlet for my creativity, a way for me to escape the loneliness in my life.” Immigrating to Canada at the age of fourteen, Ngan clandestinely went to art school while working part-time at a shingle mill to pay his tuition. When his grandfather discovered this, he was expelled from the house and lived in poverty for years. Ngan’s narratives of struggle and resilience, and of creating something from almost nothing, have been fundamental to the way he

moves through his work: “That kind of hardship, that darkness, enabled me to transform the negative energy into a positive energy, to digest my misery and turn it into my art. Art is almost like forgiveness in that way . . . your creation heals you internally, and you appreciate what you have.” This inner energy, actively released by the maker into the clay during the act of throwing and sculpting, becomes an inherent part of the work itself, manifested in intangible ways.

With ceramic artists, there is an alchemy between earth, fire, water, and human energy. There is also an intimacy with material that comes through exploration and experimentation, especially for those like Ngan who source clay directly from the land. He is quick to point out that he makes his glazes from scratch often using a ball mill to break down clay and stone to a milky consistency, and then adding minerals to fine-tune his recipes. A potter’s materials have their own stories, which Ngan is always eager to tell. During my visit this past summer, he searched through his cupboards for a set of works made from the volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helens in 1980. Preceded by earthquakes, the eruption scattered volcanic ash across eleven American states and as far the Fraser River. So Ngan went to the Valley and collected clay that had absorbed the ash; from this, he concocted a unique brown glaze that feathers ever so slightly at the edges, echoing the sediment itself.

Other serendipitous moments have inspired Ngan’s transformation of seemingly useless, unwanted material into some of his best known glazes. While teaching ceramics at the Shawnigan School of Art, a puzzling clay from the Yukon was brought to him by a visiting student. After working with her for several months, he discovered the clay’s potential: a deep black glaze with pristine shine and seemingly bottomless depth. On another occasion, a teacher asked if Ngan would build a kiln for Camosun College, and then tangentially showed him a gigantic pile of sticky clay in the corner the school’s parking lot. It had been there for years and was regarded as a nuisance. The teacher said, “If you want this pile of shit, take it.” So Ngan loaded 900 pounds of this clay into his Volkswagen van. Following years of experimentation, it evolved into his signature shimmering oil spot glaze. During my summer visit, Ngan places a large dish on a sunlit countertop, and with a flick of a finger, makes it sing, clear as a bell. “When you use it,” Ngan says, “you have the story behind how it was made, how you found the materials and transformed it, plus similar stories, perhaps from ancient

times.” Linked with his oil spot story, for instance, is the mythology and secrecy surrounding this historic glaze, which originated during China’s Sung Dynasty over 1,000 years ago.

Ngan’s ceramics also generate stories from those who fold them into their everyday lives, revealing more traces of the social. For artists and those in the local community who have works of his from over the years, these narrative traces begin to take on mythic qualities. At a dinner with Tom Burrows, soup is served in a majestic pot painted with delicate prawns and with it the story of how it was a gift from Ngan to his son Elisha many years ago. At an exhibition opening, a mere mention of Ngan’s ceramics will spark an outpouring of stories; the intimacy is instantly apparent. “We have one of those red earthenware pots—do you remember those?” an artist chimes in. “We use it all the time. It’s so rare to see anything like that these days.” Another artist recalls frequenting Hornby as a teenager in the 1970s, something he still tries to do every summer. A visit to Ngan’s studio was always a highlight for him, and over the years, he has collected quite a few of his works. “It is all around my place—I’m not afraid to use it.⁷ I also remember the almost-ceremonial exchange between Ngan and artist Jin Me Yoon when her eyes decisively fell upon an oil spot vase, and the shared understanding of the deep histories that were communicated in the process. Curator Hank Bull has ceramics throughout his home, Wayne’s and his daughter Gailan Ngan’s among many others; some are consciously placed as art objects while others regularly “perform” at hosted dinner parties.

Ceramics have long been alluring as an ancient and accessible art form, and they certainly play a vital role in connecting the consumer to the maker and also to the land, while emanating a particular energy and presence. The longer history of collecting of these wares within the local arts community seems to also signify a shared understanding of, and participation in, a particular West Coast utopian ethos committed to blending art and everyday life.⁸ Ceramics played, and continue to play, a significant role in the activities of the Western Front, where the works of Ngan, Glenn Lewis,

7 Email conversation with the artist, November 3, 2014.

8 Individuals within the art and architect communities who collected pottery during the 70s renaissance included Sidney Shadbolt, architects B.C. Binning and Ron Thom, among many others. Conversation with Hank Bull, November 13, 2014.

Michael Henry and many others were integral to the communal potlucks of the 1970s. As Lee Plested notes, they also performed as “props” in video works produced at that time, symbolizing “the politics of joining art and life, labour and product” (39).

Having envisioned Ngan’s works populated throughout different social networks, one can see how these ceramic objects come to life, modifying the course of the everyday in subtle ways and leaving trails of utopian energies for us to follow. As works of art, they have the potential to act as social interstices, which Nicholas Bourriaud characterizes as “a space in social relations which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly within the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail . . . creat[ing] free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life” (161). As Bourriaud points out, all art is relational to some extent, participating as an element of sociability and as a basis for dialogue. Yet the recent attention towards relational art practices may also be broadening what we consider as art, particularly the social aspects of these ceramics within the everyday. As social objects, Ngan’s ceramics invite pause, offering anecdotes and generating potential occasions to think, behave, and interact differently within various social spheres.

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Ngan is currently exploring new directions in his work. Since the early 2000s, he has dismantled all but his gas kiln, taken up more painting and sculpture, and has begun experimenting with assembled ceramics. These imaginative new forms seem to hover *between* mediums: elongated, gravity-defying vessels and abstract shapes with muted glazes, their visual associations range from ancient cast-iron relics and Egyptian vessels to Mark Rothko paintings. They are expanding the sculptural possibilities of studio pottery as undeniably contemporary art forms. Though Ngan creates largely in isolation, away from the digital chatter and breadth of material available on the Internet, the plurality of inspirations evident in his more recent works suggest a twenty-first century consciousness that defies chronology and category, remixing the vast archives of the past in unexpected ways. He improvises with an array of references, from cave paintings, fossils, African art and modernist sculpture, to his surrounding environment and interactions. “All these things are hidden inside my unconscious—they are like information for my pottery,” Ngan notes.

Ngan's contemporary vessels thus seem to operate on multiple time frames, casting links that connect ancient with contemporary, and gesture towards the future. Recent exhibitions of Ngan's ceramics in contemporary art contexts—The Apartment gallery, Vancouver, Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto, and The Green Gallery, Milwaukee—are also creating new situations for his works to be read in different ways, with the viewer as an active producer of meaning. As such, these new vessels seem on the brink of new connections, in a state of continuous becoming.

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