

# Taiwan Ceramics Biennale 2014

## Interview with the Curator of the Biennale, Wendy Gers by Ting-Ju SHAO

The Taiwan Ceramics Biennale follows a dual-track system whereby the biennial exhibitions alternate between competitions among artists and competitions among curators. The previous curatorial competition winner, in 2010, was Moyra Elliot of New Zealand, who organized the “Korero” exhibition, and in 2014 it was Wendy Gers of South Africa (photo right) who pulled ahead of the rest. Gers, an art historian, is also a researcher and lecturer at universities and other institutions in South Africa and France. Her transnational background has enriched the content of this year’s Biennale, since it encompasses not only the ceramic art of Europe, the US, and Asia, the face of which is familiar to most viewers, but also the ceramic art of Africa – it broadens viewers’ horizons.

Even within the more familiar realms of European, American, and Asian ceramic art, the curator introduces many young ceramists who are expressing their own 21st century language. At the same time, viewers will discover fresh new works by more seasoned creators who may not perhaps be as well-known to some. Those artists’ unique expressive methods and creative ways of thinking will likewise draw attention.

Taiwan Ceramics Biennale 2014: Terra-Nova: Critical Currents / Contemporary Ceramics, which took place from May 2nd to October 12th, focuses on design but also explores the relationship between design and contemporary ceramic art and how they are both bringing in digital technology and audiovisual media. The exhibition also emphasizes how they coexist and depend on each other. Gers is also bringing ceramic 3D printing technology (which has been attracting much attention around the world) into the venue. She aims to break free from the usual chronological line of presentation and deliver a colourful synchronous performance of the evolution of ceramic art’s local cultures and globalization.



*(Shao) Could you please discuss your relationship with and background in ceramic art?*

(Gers) I am passionate about ceramics, and did a MA (cum laude) in Art History that focused on ceramics. I have a curated ceramics exhibitions and written extensively on the subject.

*Being a curator of the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale requires not only a perspective on contemporary ceramic art around the world but also some knowledge of Taiwan’s cultural background and ceramic art. Could you talk about your experiences and observations from the time you came to Taiwan before the exhibition?*

In addition to my own personal research into Taiwan’s cultural background and ceramics, the Yingge Museum kindly facilitated meetings with some Taiwanese artists. In addition, the Yingge Museum staff took me to visit the National Palace Museum, Kaohsiung Museums and the National Craft Research Institute. They were also very generous and gave me many wonderful catalogues! The curatorial team spent lots of time with me sharing their extensive knowledge of Taiwan’s culture and ceramic art. I have come to love your country. The Taiwanese people are so friendly and helpful. I love Taiwanese food and life-style, and hope to work with Taiwanese artists and designers in the future.

*This exhibition is entitled, “Terra-Nova: Critical Currents / Contemporary Ceramics,” and it has four subheadings: (1) Glocal Identities; (2) Shattered, Upcycled & Recycled Ceramics; (3) 3D Printed & CNC Ceramics; and (4) Digital Materialities. Could you discuss the content of these four in greater detail?*

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left and opposite page -

Wendy Gers photo by Damien Artus

view of the exhibition



All exhibition photos courtesy of New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum

### Glocal identities

Clay is a medium which enables artists and designers to articulate individual identities that are located within diverse cultural and socio-political contexts. I believe that the valorization of local identities and hybrid regional material cultures is producing a new global generation of confident, informed glocal ceramics artists and designers.

The works in this section of the TCB reflect on aspects of contemporary glocal discourse and can be divided into three sub-sections. The first of these sub-sections focuses on the built environment, including post-industrial and architectural heritage. The second sub-section focuses certain elements associated with East Asian and Sub-Saharan culinary heritage. The final sub-theme focuses on cultural heritage from around the globe.

### Shattered, upcycled and recycled ceramics

All over the globe, green activists argue the future of our earth is at stake. In most countries, to varying degrees, the three R's – reduce, reuse and recycle – have become a part of our daily life. In view of the growing international concern for the environment, as a consequence of global over-consumption, I believe that it is important to consider artists and designers

whose work evokes socially responsible practices of upcycling, recycling and revalorizing shattered ceramics.

### 3D printed and CNC ceramics

Ceramics production technology in the sphere of the visual arts has not advanced significantly over the past centuries. The ancient Egyptians pioneered the potter's wheel in about 2,500 BCE. Many early societies, including the ancient Romans used moulds to cast and 'mass produce' ceramic commodities. While numerous technological advances have been made in the field of industrial ceramics over the past decades, few of these developments have filtered down to artists and designers.

However, the recent advent of relatively accessible, 3D modelling software, inexpensive open source 3D ceramics printers and CNC milling machines, among other digital tools, has radically changed this situation. Ceramic art and design practices are now engaged in a new historical trajectory. The TCB 2014 focuses on some key artists and designers who are at the forefront of this digital revolution in ceramics.

Works in this section of the TCB primarily explore hybrid production processes that involve new relationships between the hand, traditional skills and digital tools. Many of the projects are

collaborative and the rich combinations of different skill sets produce innovative works that push the boundaries of conventional ceramics.

### Digital Materialities

The rapidly expanding field of ceramic expression is enriched by the numerous multimedia possibilities offered by digital technology. Indeed, digital technology offers the possibility of exploding the cannon in terms of our understanding and experience of the ceramics medium. Multimedia and moving image works that offer new and original tactile and sensory experiences form the backbone of this section of the exhibition. However, works in this section of the TCB do not merely incorporate digital technologies, but use these tools to ask pertinent questions about ceramics, art and society. Rather, works in this section seek to explore how contemporary global material culture is enriched by digital characteristics and how data, digital material and code are interwoven into our quotidian.

Not all works in this section physically incorporate digital technology in their conception or in their execution. For example Miki Yoko's work uses classical hand production and moulding techniques to speak about aspects of our contemporary 'networked' life.





Also, could you introduce some of the representative artists under each of the four subheadings?

I don't wish to say any one artist is more representative than another! They are all representative and play an equal part in the exhibition. Please see the handbook and make your own choice!

We've seen Bouke de Vries's *War & Pieces* in the exhibition, where it is set over a platform with constantly rippling black water. It looks like a very fragile, delicate installation, and where those fragile pieces are submerged under the water surface, there is an even deeper sense of uncertainty, but at the same time this strengthens the impression that the work is like a long table prepared for a grand dinner banquet in a palace. In other words, two entirely different moods are created in the same place. This display approach dif-

fers from what the artist has done with it in the past. Was this viewer-dazzling outcome at the suggestion of the curator? Could you discuss this part? Also, what was the reason for the suggestion?

'War & Pieces' was originally conceived in 2012 for the Holburne Museum in Bath, sponsored by the Arts Council of England, where it was presented with elements from the permanent collection. The work has subsequently travelled within Europe, and in every setting the installation has been subtly modified. This is its first showing in Asia, where a significantly reconfigured installation form is presented. The transformation of the 'plinth', from a table to a shallow tank, was the outcome of collaborative discussions between the Curator and the artist. The design of the aquatic environment enhances the apocalyptic nature of the battle scenes. Furthermore, the aquatic

top Jiang Yanze, *Tea Tray*, 2009  
Installation, 224 x 58 x 26 cm

below l. Kukuli Velarde, *Bien Torreja es esta Chuta, Note vaya a cagar!*  
2010, 36 x 47 x 52 cm

below r. Tembi Nala, *Ukhamba*, 2007  
Ø 27.5 x 25 cm

opposite Francesco Ardini, *Circe Convivio*  
2013, Installation  
150 x 100 x 80 cm

environment is intended to highlight the significance of the ritual role of porcelain table sculptures in British and European banquets and pre-battle feasts, such as the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo.





*And are there similar examples with other artists?*

Yes, I worked closely with many of the international artists. I encouraged them to design or redesign their installations. The following artists designed original installations for their works: Malin Lundmark, Brian Peters, Kululi Velarde, Miki Yoko, Hitomi Igarashi, Elenor Wilson, Shlomit Bauman, Cho Ming-Shun and Unfold. I also discussed installations with the Taiwanese artists that Jia-haur Liang co-ordinated. In some instances I just encouraged the artists to design the best possible installation for their works, in other instances I was very closely involved in that design process. I also worked very closely with the exhibition designer of the Yingge Museum, Cheng Chien-jung to design the exhibition.

*Kukuli Velarde's eight sculptures are hidden in Gallery 4 of the Development of Taiwan Ceramics section on the museum's second floor, so that viewers have to search for them, while Elenor A. Wilson's work takes traditional Taiwanese ceramic window lattices and reconstructs them, which corresponds with some of the early everyday objects on display in the Development of Taiwan Ceramics section. These reflect the connections between foreign cultures and Taiwan's culture, and even the connections between the galleries. Could you explain a bit of*

*your thinking behind this arrangement?*

The facilitation of dialogue between international artists and Taiwanese artist, culture and cultural institutions is an essential part of my curatorial vision. I was very keen to develop the Biennale in this manner, although it was quite difficult at times!

*The main difference between ceramic artists and designers, apart from their creative categories and stimulations, is that the ceramic artist is always interacting with the material after the initial idea – from the time he or she takes a lump of clay to the time the entire process ends, through the shaping and the firing. Now in the 21st century, it won't be long before 3D ceramic printing technology will start rushing in on us. As people become more and more dependent on technology, they will be increasingly detached from their surroundings, and the keenness of their original, tactile sense and mental perception of the things around them will be dulled or distracted. On the other hand, we see a group of young ceramists who grew up with modern technology and develop these explicit creative ideas and strive to return to highly painstaking techniques—their delicate, skilful craftwork elicits sighs of admiration. As a curator, how do you view the future? Is it one full of possibilities? Or one full of contradictions?*

Great question... I think it is one full

of both possibilities and contradictions. When the camera was invented it did not kill painting – although many people thought it would. It made painters think about what they did and position themselves differently. I believe that the same is true for new technology in ceramics. It will reconfigure the way we think about the discipline, and why we make, but will not 'kill' any traditions... rather it merely offers new opportunities for diversity, and enriches this ancient tradition.

*What kind of work do you think can be considered outstanding? What are your views on the outcomes of this exhibition?*

I have a very broad appreciation of ceramics – and cannot say that I think there is any one kind of work that I consider to be outstanding! In fact, I consider all the works on the TCB to be outstanding!

*Thank you for accepting this interview.*

**Wendy Gers** is an art historian and curator – specialist in contemporary ceramics. Gers is the winner of curatorial competition at Taiwan Ceramics Biennale in 2014, she is the research associate at the University of Johannesburg, and a lecturer at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art et de Design de Valenciennes, France. [wgers@sfr.fr](mailto:wgers@sfr.fr)

**Ting-Ju SHAO** is a ceramist and author based in Taiwan. She also writes for international specialist art magazines and is a member of I.A.C. [shao0306@gmail.com](mailto:shao0306@gmail.com)