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The Ceramic Art of Meng Zhao:
Fantastic Rocks



龍美仙

Mee-Seen Loong Fine Art LLC
presents

The Ceramic Art of Meng Zhao: Fantastic Rocks

at

Berwald Oriental Art

Exhibition and Sale
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BACK COVER IMAGE: Catalogue No. 5

Foreword

Mee-Seen Loong

Works of art in clay depicting various organic forms have long been a favorite conceit of scholar collectors including one of the most acquisitive and demanding collectors in history, the Qianlong Emperor. The Emperor, to satisfy his jaded palate, ordered his artisans to create all kinds of organic items in ceramic. I have long been fascinated by this clever art form and coveted the porcelain renditions of lapis lazuli mountains, pudding stone brushwashers, gilt splashed bronze censers, jadeite bottles and even brushrests imitating stained ivory imitating malachite.

Over twenty years ago I began a study of contemporary ink painters and was fortunate to meet Liu Dan and through his paintings became even more fixated on rocks. I am now part of a band of international rock enthusiasts, constantly and doggedly seeking rocks. At the same time I had also become very keen on exploring Chinese contemporary ceramics and traveled to Jingdezhen, intent on finding some potters who had gone beyond the standard practice of simply painting on a clay "canvas". While I was able to meet many talented ceramic artists I was fortunate to discover, much nearer to home in the United States, the classically-trained potter Meng Zhao.

When I first saw one of Meng Zhao's rock sculptures with my fellow rock groupee John Fong, it was an ecstatic 'waaahhh' moment. A scholars' rock with all the required elements of *shou, zhou, lou and tou*, a chant we repeat on a worthy rock sighting: immediately beautiful, elegantly thin with the right wrinkly skin, winding channels and holes. His repertory spanned the vocabulary of ceramics comprising pottery, stoneware and porcelain while exploring many of the classic forms of Chinese rocks. His sculpture pulls together at this time all the art forms I am pursuing: contemporary ceramics with a link to the literati tradition, contemporary ink paintings and scholars' rocks, both actual and contrived.

I am very proud to present this group of rocks by Meng Zhao, masterfully sculpted and fantastic in form. This is my first effort to bring contemporary Chinese ceramics to fellow enthusiasts and I am very grateful to John Fong, John Berwald, Cynthia Volk, David Priestley, my husband Jeffrey Hantover, Désirée Bucks and her team at Pressroom who have helped me work out all the difficult aspects of curating a show without curbing my enthusiasm.

February 2009



THE WAY OF WATER: The Art of Meng Zhao

Jeffrey Hantover

Rocks, shaped by water, air and time, graced Chinese gardens by the Han dynasty. Rocks as miniature mountains and jagged landscapes have held pride of place in literati studios since the Song, and rocks have been the building blocks of landscape painting throughout Chinese history. For over a millennium Chinese scholars' rocks have been objects of contemplation and meditation and the physical embodiment of Daoist thought about man and nature. When a contemporary ceramic artist chooses to recreate in clay what nature has carved so well in limestone, it raises question of why: Isn't this like bringing coals to Newcastle or clay to Jingdezhen?

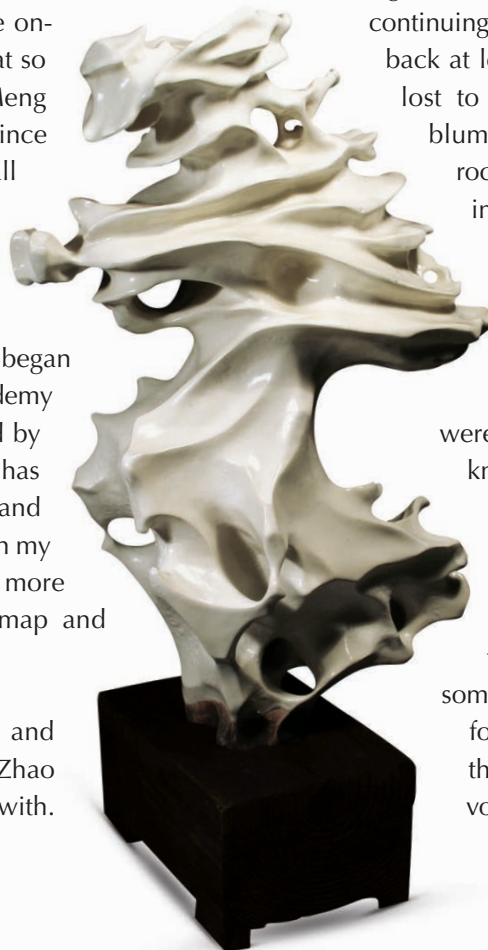
Meng Zhao's ceramic works answer that question by rising above virtuoso imitation. They are independent works of art that break new ground at the same time as they affirm tradition and continue the ongoing dialogue of present and past that so marks contemporary Chinese art. Meng Zhao was born in 1967 in Anhui province – home of Lingbi, the most favored of all scholars' rocks. As a young boy he played on the river bank, shaping rocks out of wet sand and constructing miniature garden landscapes from sand and pebbles. At twenty he began his studies at the China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, surrounded by the city's many gardens and rocks. He has lived in the United States since 2002 and believing as he says, "I have a big fire in my life and under the Dao, I needed more balance, more water" looked at a map and chose to live in Massachusetts.

Out of this unique personal history and shared culture of ideas and art, Meng Zhao is creating objects to look at and think with.

Like the scholars' rocks that inspire them, his sculptures are for him objects of contemplation and meditation. Because of their abstract and formal qualities, they give free rein to the imagination more so than representational sculpture which does not give the viewer space to ask questions (the answer most often already given). Mi Fu, the 11th century painter and calligrapher, went on spirit journeys through the cavities in his stone inkstone. Six centuries later another scholar, Lin Youlin, expressed a common literati theme when he praised rocks as the best vehicle to "cause people to go beyond themselves." Like their limestone forbearers, Meng Zhao's fantastic rocks invite you to touch them, to pause, slow down and contemplate the larger natural world of which they and we are a part.

Meng Zhao in creating scholars' rocks in ceramic is continuing a tradition within Chinese art that dates back at least to the Ming dynasty but has been lost to general knowledge. Richard Rosenblum's preeminent collection of scholars' rocks included detailed imitations of rocks in ceramic, bronze and glass. Rosenblum claimed that there did not appear to be any known record of the production of ceramic rocks. Several of the ceramic rocks in his collection were so convincing that they were sold to him by reputable dealers unknowingly as real rocks.

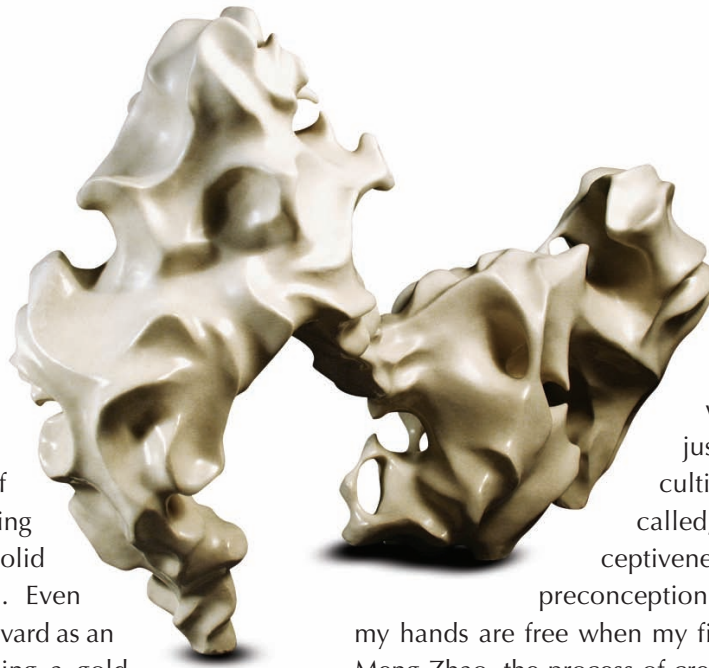
Meng Zhao's low and high fire rocks are much larger than Rosenblum's ceramic rocks, which are only about five inches high. Meng Zhao's pieces, some of which are over two feet high and a foot wide, are because of their size and the stress caused by their many holes and voids more technically challenging than



earlier ceramic rocks from the Ming and Qing. Because of the challenges faced in firing pieces of this size and complexity, Meng Zhao approached the sculpting of scholar rocks deliberately, moving to them after working in more solid forms and geometric shapes. Even when he arrived in 2005 at Harvard as an artist in residence after winning a gold medal at the 2003 International Ceramic Art Competition in Faenza, Italy, he didn't fire anything the first semester, wanting to learn about the properties and potential of American clay and to understand more thoroughly the "controlled accidents" in a communal kiln.

Meng Zhao's art is not only rooted in a specific Chinese ceramic tradition and the broader tradition of one material used to imitate another – Yixing teapots made to look like leather, wood or bamboo and porcelain snuff bottles made to pass for jade – but is consciously informed by larger currents of Chinese philosophical thought. When Meng Zhao lies on the ground to photograph rocks in the shifting shapes of clouds, he sees them through the lens of an ancient belief in rocks as the petrified roots of clouds. When he holds a scholars' rock in his hand and examines the holes and perforations made by the drip and flow of water and when he begins to build a piece, he considers actions from within a cultural framework that extends beyond the confines of the Harvard Ceramic Studio.

Water as a philosophical concept and a physical reality are central to Meng Zhao's work. From 1998 to 2003 he did a series, *Water Pieces*, which explored the abstract movement of water. He quotes with ease Lao Tze's adage on the paradox of water: "Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it." Early in his career, he



would sketch the intended sculpture before beginning: everything was planned. Now he does just the opposite. He tries to cultivate what in Daoism is called, *pu*, a passive state of receptiveness, of perception without preconception: "So my mind is free and

my hands are free when my fingers touch the clay." For Meng Zhao, the process of creating a sculptural rock is a process of mimicking the natural force of water that created the scholars' rock. "I put myself in the position of water eating away the stone," he says. Just as water working on the rock creates as it destroys, Meng Zhao imagines the path the water might take and strips and gouges the clay in an act of creative destruction.

If the work was simply a virtuoso imitation of a scholars' rock, its texture and color an exact simulacrum of the original, Meng Zhao's work would warrant respectful applause but only passing attention. Because he harnesses his technical skill to replicate the processes of nature itself, he achieves an artistry beyond mere imitation. Dedicated to process rather than externalities, Meng Zhao creates sculptures that express the spiritual energy of the original rocks so valued by the Chinese and connoisseurs. Meng Zhao's rocks become like Nature's work portals to worlds outside ourselves. Perhaps at a time when many feel small and adrift, buffeted by external forces beyond their control, meditation on objects that speak of a world beyond ourselves is paradoxically comforting.

Jeffrey Hantover is a writer living in New York. His novel, *The Jewel Trader of Pegu*, was published by Harper Perennial in 2009.

1.

STONEWARE

24½ x 11½ x 10 inches



(TWO VIEWS)

2.

STONEWARE

17 x 12½ x 7½ inches



3.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

16 x 5½ x 8½ inches



4.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

19½ x 6 x 12¾ inches



5.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

29 x 17 x 11 inches



6.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

24 x11 x 11 inches



7.

STONEWARE

18 x 8 x 18 inches



8.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

25½ x11 x17 inches



9.

GLAZED EARTHENWARE

15½ x 7½ x 6½ inches



10.

EARTHENWARE

18½ x 5½ x 9 inches

11.

PORCELAIN

25 x 8½ x 11 inches



LIST OF WORKS



1.
STONEWARE
Reduction Firing 2426 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
24½ x 11½ x 10 inches



2.
STONEWARE
Reduction Firing 2426 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
17 x 12½ x 7½ inches



3.
GLAZED
EARTHENWARE
Oxidation Firing 2008 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
16 x 5½ x 8½ inches



4.
GLAZED
EARTHENWARE
Oxidation Firing 2008 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
19½ x 6 x 12¾ inches



5.
GLAZED
EARTHENWARE
Oxidation Firing 2008 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
29 x 17 x 11 inches



6.
GLAZED
EARTHENWARE
Oxidation Firing 2008 °F,
Harvard Ceramic Studio
2008
24 x 11 x 11 inches



7
 STONEWARE
 Oxidation, Smoke Firing
 2008 °F,
 Harvard Ceramic Studio
 2007
 18 x 8 x 18 inches



8.
 GLAZED
 EARTHENWARE
 Oxidation Firing 2008 °F,
 Harvard Ceramic Studio
 2008
 25.5 x 11 x 17 inches



9.
 GLAZED
 EARTHENWARE
 Oxidation, Smoke Firing
 2008 °F, Harvard Ceramic
 Studio 2006
 15½ x 7½ x 6½ inches



10.
 EARTHENWARE
 Saggar Firing 2008 °F,
 Harvard Ceramic Studio
 2005
 18.5 x 5½ x 9 inches



11.
 PORCELAIN
 Reduction Firing 2426 °F,
 Harvard Ceramic Studio
 2006
 25 x 8.5 x 11 inches

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MENG ZHAO

Born 1967 Anhui Province, People's Republic of China

Studied 1988-1992 in Ceramic Department of the National Academy of Fine Art, Hangzhou, P.R.C.

Moved 2002 to the United States. Currently Instructor, Ceramics Program, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 Kemin Hu Asian Art Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2007 Gallery Anthony Curtis, Boston, MA
- 2006 Judith Dowling Asian Art Gallery, Boston, MA
- 2006 Kemin Hu Asian Art Gallery, Boston, MA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 Brian Haughton Gallery, London
- 2008 The International Asian Art Fair, New York
- 2008 Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award, Shepparton Art Gallery, Greater Shepparton, Australia
- 2008 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, Taiwan
- 2007 Guggenheim Gallery, Chapman University, Orange, CA.
- 2007 The International Museum Of Ceramics, Faenza, Italy.
- 2007 The International Asian Art Fair. New York City.
- 2006 Lacoste Gallery, Concord, MA
- 2004 The Clay Studio Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.
- 2004 National West Lake Expo Museum, Hangzhou, P.R.C.
- 2003 The International Museum Of Ceramics, Faenza, Italy.
- 2002 National West Lake Expo Museum, Hangzhou, P.R.C.
- 2001 The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea.
- 2000 National Academy of Fine Arts Gallery, Hangzhou, P.R.C.

AWARDS /HONORS

- 2008 Finalist, Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award, Greater Shepparton, Australia
- 2008 Finalist, Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, Yingge, Taiwan
- 2007 Finalist, 55th Premio Faenza, For Young Artist. International Ceramic Art Competition Italy.
- 2003 2nd Ceramic Art and Design Competition, Tangshan, P.R.C.
- 2003 Gold Medal, 53rd International Competition of Contemporary Ceramics, Faenza, Italy.
- 2001 First Ceramic Art and Design Competition, Beijing, China.
- 2001 Finalist, 1st Ceramic International Competition, Seoul, Korea.
- 2000 Juror's Recommendation prize, 3rd Mashiko International Pottery Contest, Mashiko, Japan.
- 1991 Excellent Artist Award,, Fine Art Exhibition, Hangzhou ,China.

COLLECTIONS

- The National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, P.R.C.
- The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, Korea.
- South Song Dynasty Official Kiln Museum, Hangzhou, P.R.C.
- Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taiwan







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