

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Fong Choo

The following text is interviewer Tom Spleth's summary of a conversation with the artist in May, 200 on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Fong Choo states, "Simply, I love doing this." He receives validation because of very positive responses. His economist friend says he is in

the top fifth percentile of people in the country who love their jobs. But, at the end of the day, he says, "it is a business."



*Fong Choo- Autumn Marble, Dancing Karmel and Tangerina
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

He hesitates to jot down influence. Instead, he thinks of inspiration more than influence. Yixing¹ is, of course, important, but for the most part he is acculturated into American culture and is by no means an Yixing potter. In graduate school he read a book on Yixing and responded to scale, taking the idea and running with it all these years. He does one thing and does it well.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

¹ Yixing refers to a historic, pottery-producing district of China where small, finely crafted, unglazed and highly polished teapots are still produced.

Utility has recently become an issue for Choo. Some of his works are functional—others evolve out of function: each element is analyzed, but the work is not functional.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

He works in isolation. He likes to teach, does workshops, and enjoys sharing, but when working, he is very alone with the clay. He loves the interaction with the clay which requires absolutely no distractions.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Choo says in answer to this question, “I am big on acquiring skill ... some people talk bull all day long. I want to talk the talk and walk the walk.”

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

He has lived in Louisville, Kentucky for 25 years and considers it home. There is a community of craftsmen around Louisville but his closest friends are an economist and a business professor who provide a viewpoint outside the field.

He enjoys Southern hospitality, and says he has experienced very few instances of being different.

If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

The local community has not influenced him as much as he would like. Horses, for example, do not enter into his work in any way.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it? In your opinion, are there features, factors, or conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

There are a bunch of cool artists in this community that he likes. It is not necessary to live or work in artistic centers anymore. He could live anywhere and make this work. People ask him where he lives and when he says Louisville, they are surprised. They expect him to be involved in New York City. But the cost of living is cheap in Louisville and he can still afford to buy land in Kentucky. He recently set up a studio in a small town in Indiana as a getaway. He enjoys thinking that here is where I live.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Definitely not. Took an idea and made it better. On this subject he says, “Take something and make it your own.” He is more interested in authenticity than in originality.

How is your work evolving?

The work always evolves. The basis for evolution is taking one thing and doing it well. It is unending. He is currently preparing work for NCECA (the National Council of Education for the Ceramic Arts) where he is showing some small things and things a little bit larger. He looks forward to seeing how it goes. Probably he will continue to work until he dies, besides which, the demand has not reached a plateau yet.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

For the past 10 years or so he has not been involved too much with local community because of travel and demands of career. He has had much more contact outside of his home area. Now, he is returning to local community and is finding the experience very interesting. He finds it surprising to learn how much they know who he is. Interviews such as this one are common outside of his community, but now, people inside the community want to conduct interviews.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you?

He is from Singapore - a place that has reached the pinnacle of embracing technology. Singapore is a much more monolithic society, and they are returning to the arts. Coming from a foreign perspective, this country has the culture for the arts in place, from art fairs and the big shows—SOFA (Sculpture Objects and Functional Arts Exhibition), Miami Basel, and thousands of galleries. One may make a living here as an artist. We are very lucky. He could never have done this in his home culture.

What would you like your legacy to be?

He is too young to consider legacy. He says to come back when he is 80 years old. At this time he has only touched the tip of the iceberg.

How did you learn your craft?

His first clay class was in 1984 (he came to the USA in 1983 and studied at the University of Louisville for his undergraduate degree). After this introduction, he worked with established potters and saw that he could make a living in art. He

returned to graduate school at the University of Louisville because he saw that the degree would be helpful, and left grad school with the confidence that he could be a professional potter and make a living. One does what one must do to make a career work. His students say “but you don’t have a job, you just go to the studio.” He responds that he spends 50 to 60 hours a week there. Their point is that he is not supposed to love his job so much.

He muses, “We are so lucky that we have a market here, we can do anything.”

Do you share your experience with others--the next generation of artists?

He shares all. He has nothing to hide and teaches and conducts workshops to pass on his knowledge. The clay world is very open that way, and he can always get help should he need it.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the south? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

Fong Choo thinks that universities have been more important in promoting and causing craft to thrive. He sees Penland as a place to touch tradition and as a more basic “folk” approach.