



NICK GEANKOPLIS

Blending Genre Boundaries

A FEW MORE WORDS ON THE CRAFT,
ART AND DESIGN CONVERSATION

In 2013, I moved to Beijing to teach ceramic design at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), China's premier arts university. While my background in studio ceramics incorporated elements of design, my graduate thesis work was mixed-media installation, which merged ceramics with video and sculptural components. As a new teacher in the CAFA design program, I knew the experience would change how I understood the creative process in ceramics. As I conclude my four years of teaching at CAFA, I am reflecting upon how I've restructured and redefined my understanding of the roles and boundaries of art, craft, and design. What began as a way to address student work has reshaped the way I see and discuss most creative gestures.

THE PROGRAM

In 2006, Alfred University and CAFA established a collaborative program to educate Chinese students in designing ceramic objects for a contemporary Chinese market. While it emphasizes design, the

program also encourages a conceptual and technical understanding of art and craft.

After a year of foundation courses (a standard, introductory structure modeled after the French academy), students begin the program curriculum with a studio hand-building class and two lecture courses, one on Western ceramic art history and one on marketing research. To build a foundation in craft and material knowledge, first-semester juniors take a wheel-throwing course and a plaster and casting course as well as a clay, glaze, and industry course. In the latter half of the plaster and casting course, elements of industrial design are introduced through technical drawing and prototyping. The students also take a second marketing class and a lecture course in Chinese ceramic history. The program's studio class structure is analogous to many Western programs, in giving students assignments that emphasize utility, problem solving, and conceptual development.

At the heart of our program is a course called “Redesigning the Classic.” Instead of making with their hands, students are challenged to direct someone else's. Beginning in the Beijing studio, students work through a systematic design process to design a new functional object or series of objects that blend elements of Chinese history with contemporary culture. After extensive research, they map their concepts and develop sketches. With technical drawings or 3-D-printed prototypes in hand, they depart for a six-week stay in the city of Jingdezhen. Its rich history of ceramics production dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). For centuries Jingdezhen's ceramic wares defined wealth and status among the royal, noble, and aristocratic elite both at home and abroad. Jingdezhen has changed dramati-

cally in recent years, becoming a center for artisan and small-batch industrial porcelain production. Utilizing this infrastructure, students orchestrate the hands of master model- and mold-makers, slip-casters and glazers, intervening in the production of their designs only when it's critical to the creative process or conceptually necessary.

Having experienced making by hand and outsourcing production, design problem solving, and conceptual expression, seniors then gravitate towards processes and practices that suit their personal interests. Examples of the BFA students' thesis work are stylized classical Chinese teaware sets, reverently punk tableware, or ceramic installation with design-for-production objects.

THE CREATIVE ECOSPHERE

Because I'd had little experience teaching design and would be working biculturally and bilingually, I knew it was essential that I clarify my ideological and critical framework for addressing a spectrum of student work. Though this restructured rationale and these distilled definitions are a work in progress, they have proven instrumental.

First and foremost, I have come to understand that there are no boundaries between craft, art, and design. That is to say, there no boundaries such as the ones historically drawn in academia: a pair of silos, one dedicated to art and the other design, with craft often left out. From my standpoint, the *spheres* of design, art, and craft are not independent or mutually exclusive but rather, they commingle, integrate, and are interdependent. Together, they make up a creative ecosphere—an overlapping spectrum—in which very few gestures, actions, and works reside exclusively in one genre.

◀ Yu Jiaqi, *Through the Looking Glass*; serving platter detail, 2017. Bone china, slipcast, overglaze decals, gold luster decals, hand painted overglaze and gold luster, 1 x 12.5 x 12.5 in. Photograph by Nick Geankoplis.



BIO

Nick Geankoplis is an artist, educator, and maker living in Beijing, China. At the time of publication, Geankoplis will be relocating to the Midwest to lead the Kansas State University ceramics program.

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Defining the roles of craft, art, and design is necessary to cultivate and evaluate the intentions and objectives of students and their work. Take, for example, the hand-building class. Students spend a third of the course learning from a Yixing teaware master. The assignments and their outcomes are formal and technical, following traditional craft guidelines. Students spend the remainder of the course developing their work conceptually, working sculpturally while also incorporating utility. In these assignments concept leads, form and function follow. To foster an effective critical discussion among students that addresses their intentions for the work they produce, I introduced the following definitions:

Art is about posing questions and highlighting issues within the contemporary world, driven by the individual.

Design centers on solving problems through innovation, driven by markets.

Craft is the practice of our cultural tradition, driven by enduring solutions to enduring problems.

Problems can arise, of course, when complex ideas are reduced to simple terms—subtleties can be lost and outliers dismissed—but overall, these digestible definitions have been effective in introducing and directing critical conversations.

To be clear, these definitions are entry points, not end points. They act as common ground to begin a broad but nuanced conversation about work that often has varying origins and objectives within a given class. As a student, Yu Jiaqi worked to convey the dynamism of contemporary Chinese life, its rapid modernization, and its intersection with tradition. His research resulted in a design that transmits a classical Chinese sentiment reminiscent of traditional filigree

patterns and yet is comprised of cartoonlike renderings and glimpses of vivid imagery. Drawn across platters and teapots, the motifs cascade, blossoming from one to another. Jiaqi selected formal elements of the teapot from styles of various Chinese dynasties and recombined them to make a new form. The soft peach color and gammadion pattern of the background surface design is warm and classical. In the foreground, contemporary renditions of Chinese patterns collide and play off each other alongside scribbled text and phone numbers found on the streets of Beijing as graffiti-like advertisements. With the combination of these elements, the work becomes reverently punk, owning its origins and embodying a style aimed at an emerging class of Millennials.

Projects like this have helped me and my students visualize and plot our work within regions of a creative ecosphere. Restructuring and dissolving the perceived thresholds between design, art, and craft have prompted students to develop culturally and intellectually compelling objects in which utility is treated as a capsule for concept, content, and *communication*. Doing this has also enabled students to recognize that the boundaries of designer, craftsman, or artist are permeable. What we create can drift between and reside in different locations within an expansive, interdependent, and interconnected spectrum of cultural production.

▲ Yu Jiaqi, Through the Looking Glass; research and development material, 2017. Technical drawings, sketches, paper cuts, concept notes and analogue surface maps, framed and displayed with this student's ceramic work to offer insight in to his creative process, 31.5 x 20 in. Photograph by Nick Geankoplis.

◀ Nick Geankoplis teaching in his studio in Beijing. Photograph by Yu Jiaqi.