

Felicity Aylieff

COLLECT 2015

*A Review by
Bonnie Kemske*

POWER & GRACE. One would think that two-metre high pots would be anything but graceful, yet Felicity Aylieff's monumental vases are just that. Large and looming, but bright and dynamic, these sculptural works are all about challenging our preconceived ideas of scale, colour and graphic design.

In recent years Aylieff has been working in China, and the porcelain works shown in London by Adrian Sassoon at COLLECT 2015 were all produced there in 2014 and 2015. Working in an area of China where huge ceramic works are made, Aylieff has been able to pursue an interest in scale that started with a research degree at the Royal College of Art, London, in the 1990s. These monumental pieces also reflect the influence of China on her on-going interest in graphic design and the use of colour in ceramics. In particular, she has been exploring the traditions of blue brushwork and the technique of *fencai*, both of which she has personalised as much as 'Westernised'.



In Aylieff's blue freehand brushwork, she exploits the densities of colour that can be achieved through the use of cobalt oxide. Dark, deep blacks to light, almost translucent blues dance around the pots, each brushmark bouncing off the next before resolving into a deep mesh, 'like a thicket'. The work is anchored in the blue and white heritage of Jingdezhen, the city in China thought to be the birthplace of porcelain, and Aylieff often uses Chinese tools, such as large calligraphy brushes, which are round and thick with long hog-hair bristles that taper to a fine point, yet she draws on her own artistic background to create her finely-honed cobalt markings. As she says, "I don't have their graphic skills; I have only my own." Aylieff playfully acknowledges her bravery in doing brushwork in the 'Land of Calligraphy', although her blue brushwork is a form of well-planned gesticulated expression, rather than designs arising from the refined canon of Chinese *shufa*.

Fencai is an over-glaze enamel technique that dates back to the 18th century. Aylieff first encountered it on small pots that she found in the local market in Jingdezhen, and which she began to collect. These pieces typically depict domestic scenes, vases of flowers, bowls of fruit and objects reminiscent of a scholar's life. The technique requires an oil-based black line to define the image and contain the water-based enamel pigment, rather in the manner of cloisonné. Traditionally, the areas filled with colour were broken up using simple Chinese flower motifs. Aylieff in her contemporary translations, however, uses dots in the manner of pointillist painting to increase the intensity of colour. This approach has enabled her to translate *fencai*, which was originally used on small-scale objects, into large-scale work. Her approach is to first sketch the design onto the pots using ink, which burns away, before committing to the final design and composition, typically employing the flat perspective often associated with Indian painting. Like other enamel colours, *fencai* is applied to an already glaze-fired surface and requires a second lower temperature firing. This is not straightforward when working with forms up to two metres in height.

The pointillist dots were evident in all the *fencai* pieces included at COLLECT 2015. In one series, *Pots on Pots*, Aylieff used the curved forms of these gigantic vases to further emphasise the curves of the overlapping drawings of pot shapes on the surface. These represented many different cultural vessel designs. Another, *Monumental Vase; Still life* (2015), had drawings of other vessel shapes with branches of plum blossom to break the uniformity of the design. Flowers appeared on other pieces. In one of *Pair of Still-Life Fencai Vases II* (2014), spectacular large-headed stylised yellow flowers stood on straight stems out of a blue almost Cubist vase. The vase was shown on a flat round base, which in turn



Facing page: **Pots on Pots II**. 2014. Thrown and glazed porcelain with hand painted *fencai* over-glaze enamel. 191 x 85 cm. (75 x 33.5 in.) Private Collection, US.

Above: **Pots on Pots (Detail Showing Fencai Technique)**.

floated just above the real base of the pot. The other of the pair of *Still-Life* vessels was of identical form and scale, with drawings of a tea bowl, a narrow-necked pot and a double-hipped vase, from which leafy branches emerged.

In recent years porcelain has gained ground as a favourite material of studio ceramists. From translucency to intricacy to repetition, we have grown to love both the material and the works created with it. We have appreciated Edmund de Waal's wallfuls of porcelain cylinders, Masamichi Yoshikawa's implacable block constructions, Thérèse Lebrun's delicate yet menacing undersea forms and the decadence of Chris Antemann's carefully arranged figurines. But to see Aylieff's monumental porcelain vases is to see a different use of this fine, precious clay. Aylieff has taken her interest in the material back to source. Living and working part of each year in Jingdezhen since 2006, she not only has taken on the challenge of porcelain itself, she has also taken on the ceramic practices and skills of the local ceramics community. She works with one ceramics manufactory, whose highly skilled makers create traditional vases for public buildings in China.



Above: Pair of Tall Blue & White Scribble Vases. 2015. Thrown and glazed porcelain, painted with cobalt blue oxide. 91 x 32 cm. (35.825 x 12.625 in.)

Facing page: Pair of Still-Life Fencai Vases II. 2014. Thrown and glazed porcelain with hand-painted fencai overglaze enamel. 109 x 40 cm. (43 x 15.75 in.)

“The Chinese company I work with is a small family business. I like the family – that is important – and they have certain skills and techniques I can tap into that I don’t have.”

In the West many potters have felt uncomfortable with the idea of working in China, the remnants of colonialism making some feel that perhaps to do so could be exploitative. And sadly, this is indeed part of some Western artists’ relationship with workers in China. But Aylieff does not order what she needs while in Britain or during a fleeting visit to the manufactory. She is on the scene – now part of the ceramics business of Jingdezhen. When you speak with Aylieff about the potters who throw her

pots and those who fire them, you sense the deep collaborative nature of the relationship; you sense her deference to them as individuals and for their centuries-old skill base and the legacy of their work. "It was important that I chose a company to work with where my work was not in competition with theirs. I am respectful of what they do and how they do it. I would never interfere with their own working patterns or impose my own working practices on them, although I have been pleased to see that

my health and safety practices are being taken up. When I work there, I always wear a mask, keep my space spotlessly clean and so on. And now I see that some of my Chinese colleagues are sometimes using masks too. I would never, however, 'instruct' them in such things."

Aylieff's huge vase forms are thrown in segments to her designs by the manufactory's throwers. She prepares her initial designs while in Britain, then refines the dimensions of the pots on the







computer to ensure that the scaling is accurate. The Chinese artists, however, have well-defined skills, and working within this skill set sometimes has its frustrations. Because of the limitations of the porcelain (Aylieff says that the Jingdezhen porcelain is different from anything available in the West) the Chinese vessels made in the area are more or less straight sided. Aylieff asks for curves. Over the years that she has been working with them, Aylieff and the Chinese potters have begun to better accommodate each other and, as time passes, the artworks have begun to reflect Aylieff's design adjustments and the throwers' expanding throwing vocabulary.

Working with others has had other challenges as well. Being a well-established studio ceramist, Aylieff says she has had to "negotiate letting go" of the total ownership of what she is creating, although when speaking with her now you sense an acceptance of this. Perhaps this is linked to the deepening of her working relationship with her Chinese partners.

Aylieff's concerns with scale and mark making have taken her in directions that most potters would never consider going. In 2013 she completed



Facing page: **Pattern Puzzle**. 2012. Thrown and glazed porcelain with hand painted fencai overglaze enamel. 177 x 67 cm. (69.75 x 26.375 in.)

Top left: **3 Vases Still Life**. Thrown and glazed porcelain with hand-painted fencai overglaze enamel. 96 cm. (38 in.)

Top right: Tornado Tower Qatar commission with the artist. Tallest form: 4.6 m. (15 ft.)

a commission for Tornado Tower in Doha, Qatar, consisting of three monumental sculptural vases. One, a flaring telescopic design, stands 4.6 meters high and is decorated with her blue brushwork, bringing a Chinese-influenced use of cobalt to the region of the world in which cobalt originated.

Whether four metres high or a mere two, Aylieff's current monumental sculptural vase forms express a joyful magnificence, and although it is unclear how she has accomplished it, they remain subtle and refined, despite their large scale. The works reflect the best of international collaboration, and with this new artwork, Felicity Aylieff should be applauded not only for the production of a body of fine sculptural ceramics, but for expanding what we conceive studio ceramics to be.

American Bonnie Kemske has lived and worked in Britain for many years. She makes sculptural ceramics and writes about ceramics that interest her. She has a PhD from the Royal College of Art, London. Her book, *The Teabowl: East & West*, is an exploration of the historical and contemporary iconic form from the perspective of a potter and erratic tea ceremony student. It will be published by Bloomsbury Publishing in March 2017.

COLLECT 2015, presented by the Crafts Council UK, ran at Saatchi Gallery, London, 8–11 May, 2015. Felicity Aylieff's work was represented by Adrian Sassoon (www.adriansassoon.com). All works were made by the artist in Jingdezhen, China. All photos courtesy of Adrian Sassoon, London.