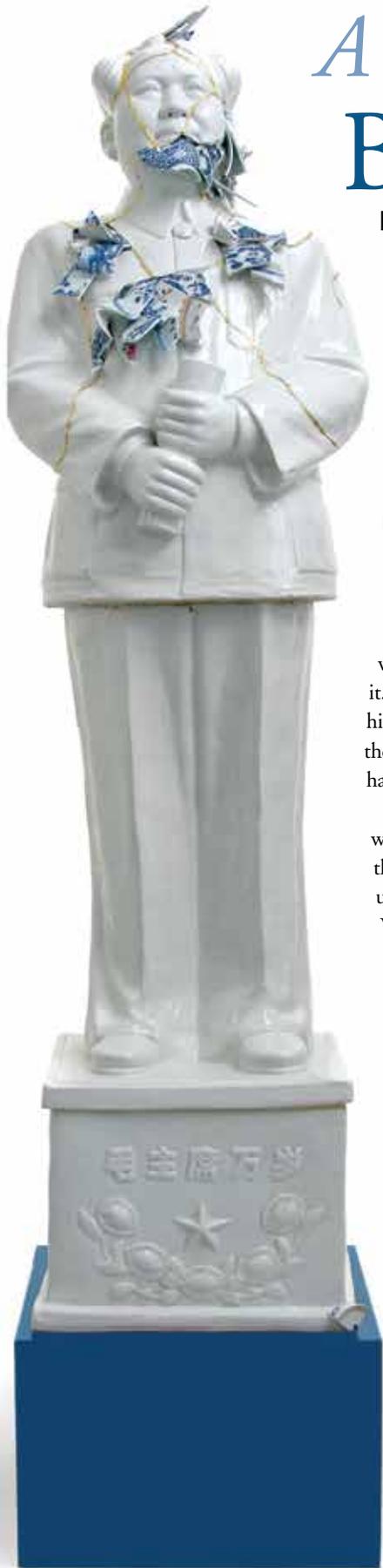


A Mirage of Before BOUKE DE VRIES

by Anthony E. Stellaccio



When I saw them, the first four images of Bouke de Vries' lecture (presented at 2016's New York Ceramics and Glass Fair) took me through a trial of his work as a professional conservator. A patron's haphazard delivery of the collected shards to de Vries' workshop, their careful arrangement on his worktable (a compulsion seen in many of his artworks), the reconstruction of a 3000-year-old Grecian urn broken into hundreds of pieces, and then the finishing of its surfaces: these four slides lay bare a process of passion, compassion, precision, and expertise. These are all qualities that characterize this conservator-turned-sculptor's own innovative artwork.

A few images further on and there were gasps and awe-inspired laughter. These occurred when the artist revealed that the Grecian urn in question is the eternal resting place of Sigmund Freud's ashes (though presumably slightly less of them than before the urn broke). Match point: what we now understand is the power of the past, of iconography, and the artist's reverence for it. Now we can also glimpse in this the enlightened yet very formal humor that de Vries brings to his art. The astute observer, at this moment, will also recognize, or perhaps see for the first time, the complexity that assembles over an object's lifetime as it passes through the centuries: changing hands, changing contexts, and changing meaning. Let me give you one more example of this.

Frauenkirche Church (in Dresden, Germany) met its end under the bombs of Allied forces while Nazis controlled the city during WWII. Under post-war occupation, the Socialists used the stones of the demolished church as a memorial to Allied atrocity, projecting new meaning upon them through an act of commemoration and a manipulation of public consciousness. When the international community, in a spirit of atonement, rebuilt the church in a reunified Germany, the stones of the original building and former anti-capitalist monument were, though not without controversy, embedded into the new structure. This occurred within a city, one immortalized by Kurt Vonnegut, which a similar process of destruction, reconstruction, and reconceptualization endowed with its own numerous visual, metaphysical, and metaphorical layers. This is not one Dresden but multiple Dresdens existing simultaneously in the same space, as a bricolaged, mnemonic structure, for which the question of preserving history is one of both ethics and aesthetics: how much do we preserve when we alter something physically or metaphysically and, alternatively, how much do we alter when we preserve?¹ De Vries' sculptures can be thought of in this way, as bricolaged mnemonic structures with underlying socio-cultural narratives. The two cases compared here highlight how history is also an ongoing narrative and not a thing finite and fixed in time. Rather, history is alive and accumulative, something to which depth is added with every event that creates a past and every recontextualization of that accrued past in an eternally new present. This is a history most often hidden by de Vries the conservator but revealed and celebrated by de Vries the artist, however much we can separate the two.

If my Dresden analogy helps us understand de Vries' work as layered with multiple tenses and meanings, centered on an inseparable relation between ethics and aesthetics, and perhaps even a little violent, then *War and Pieces* is an appropriate centerpiece for a discussion of the artist's oeuvre. This work, when first installed at the Holburne Museum in Bath, England, combined the 18th-century glass and porcelain collected by Captain Francis Holbourne combined with de Vries' own creations, which feature arrange-

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1 *Cultural revolution repudiated*, 6 ft. (1.8 m) in height, 20th-century Chinese porcelain, 18th- and 19th-century Chinese porcelain fragments, mixed media. 2 *War and Pieces*, 2012, installation view at the Holbourne Museum in Bath, England. 3 Bouke De Vries reconstructing a ceramic vessel. 4 Detail of central shattered-porcelain mushroom cloud in *War and Pieces*, 2012. Holbourne Museum, Bath, England. 1–4 Photos: Tim Higgins.

ments and structures composed of hundreds of shards and dozens of figures. The latter, made partly from *ancien-régime*-referencing sugar and partly from a bionic juxtapositioning of modern plastic and historic porcelain, enact a battle in a symbolic war of materials, eras, cultures, and values. Engulfing a table twenty-six feet long (approximately eight meters), *War and Pieces* is visually balanced upon the fulcrum of an enormous, mushroom-cloud centerpiece made of shattered-porcelain. Specifically, the installation is inspired by a ball held on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, but more broadly it comments on the bizarre human habit of celebrating war. Make no mistake, such celebrations are cultural phenomena with numerous moral and philosophical complexities, and they are part of a tradition

that, in some fashion, continues today. Old traditions, you see, like old, broken crockery, quite often will require only a rearrangement of elements to be brought from the historic to the contemporary.

For all its commentary and conceptual nuance, what is most impressive about the installation is its design for adaptability—its creation for an eternal future. To date exhibited in eight locations, from Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin, Germany, to the Taiwan Ceramics Biennial held at the Yingge Ceramics Museum, *War and Pieces* incorporates new elements in each location as borrowed ones are rehoused and the configuration and context of the work changes. Postmodern in this sense but building, quite literally, upon history, the work, like Dresden, gives form to two ideas: that destruction and

damage impart their own beauty and that the past changes over time and exists only in the present. De Vries' work is art and perception.

On a philosophical level, between the present moment of perception and the events of the past that damage signifies, there is a dissonance. This gap is de Vries' creative space and it is directly drawn from in his work. Take for example the expatriated artist's incisive and humorous takes on the still-life tradition of his native country, The Netherlands (de Vries resides in England). In these works, de Vries has two approaches, the first of which is adapting the symbolic language of Dutch *Vanitas* still-lives to a contemporary lexicon, as he does in his elegy for heroin addicts. In his second approach, he revisits the studios of Dutch masters. These are not romantic visions of idyllic, late-Renaissance workshops, but ones full of the stench and sight of the rotting flesh of flowers and carcasses: the very un-romantic realities of the impermanent objects given eternal life in the stopped-time of a four- or five-hundred-year-old painting. (These are paintings that, ironically, were fixed images of impermanence, death, and decay). In his corrective still-lives, as I shall call them, de Vries includes broken pots, decayed or decaying flowers, and other organic matter. In a flux of contradictions and culture, these objects are "really" about the "realities" of life, time, and history, just as they are about the pretenses of art and culture. No doubt, the sculptural assemblages of shards and flowers that the artist bases on Delft (read Dutch) flower vases are an extension of the still-life trope and operate upon similar principles.

The moment in time artificially fixed in the still-life would seem to have its parallel in what scholars such as Dean MacCannell and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refer to as museumification: the artificial preservation and decontextualization of objects with a previous life. The museum is a paradox in this sense, exalting art by removing it from the life that gives it meaning. Conservators are employed in this process of transition from context to decontextualization, and it is up to them to strike a balance between repairing damage and erasing history. This is not only an ethical question, it is also an aesthetic one: Does the record of time that an object bears, however turbulent

its life may have been, increase its beauty and, for that matter, its value? De Vries uses the many tools and techniques acquired as a master conservator to answer this very question in the affirmative.

Some of the most interesting works by the artist consist of mounting shattered ceramic objects on a series of Perspex acrylic rods. A staple of the conservator's art, the Perspex rod is typically used to suspend unjoined fragments within the voids that some violence has left in the original object. De Vries uses this technique, not selectively as the conservator does to suggest unities, but comprehensively, suspending each shard at varying lengths to create the careful chaos of disintegrating (or reintegrating?), three-dimensional images. In this way, the artist deconstructs the objects most common to his practice, those being figures and vessels.

When it is the figure that is deconstructed, de Vries emphasizes the fragility and hollowness of the human image without undoing its existential significance. There is something both unnerving and compelling about these broken, vacuous figures and the potent, organized energy that makes them ocularly overwhelming and thinly precarious. These attributes are even more pronounced when the figures are eerily familiar archetypes or unmistakably recognizable, as Jesus Christ and Mao Zedong are, and it changes mere statuary to powerful effigy. Occasionally, de Vries will then hit a high note, resuscitating the humanity of the broken image with his own improvisational, and often symbolic, touches: hearts, butterflies, and other elements. This reinterpretative humanizing of the abandoned and then adopted artifact appears in much of de Vries' work, where it reveals the deep tenderness and critical commentary that is part of his rapport with his materials and subject matter.

Kintsugi, the Japanese reparation of ceramic objects using lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold to beautify fractures, is another conservation technique appearing in de Vries' art. A prominent tradition in the history and current field of ceramics, this process of reparation is also a cornerstone of the value system that has enabled us to venerate the damaged and repaired ceramic object.



5 *Reconstructed Han Vase*, variable dimensions, Han Dynasty earthenware vase, kintsugi repair, eight di-bond prints, 2016. 6 *Suffer the Little Children*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, 19th- and 20th-century continental porcelain, mixed media, 2012. 5,6 Photos: Tim Higgins. 7 Grayson Perry's *Westfield Vase*, 2009. Courtesy of the Victoria Miro Gallery.



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Notably, de Vries used kintsugi in the reassemblage, commissioned by artist Grayson Perry, of a vessel that the latter smashed point blank in his go-to-conservator's workshop. This vessel is Perry's portrait of the publicly embattled British politician Chris Huhne. It is a piece the artist exhibited at London's National Portrait Gallery, and it is one explicit example of the poetic analogy between individuals and vessels. Christy Bartlett, Founding Director of the Urasenke Foundation, characterized this relationship in the catalog for an exhibition called "Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics."

Bartlett writes: "Mended ceramics foremost convey a sense of the passage of time. The vicissitudes of existence over time, to which all humans are susceptible, could not be clearer than in the breaks, the knocks, and the shattering to which ceramic ware too is subject. This poignancy or aesthetic of existence has been known in Japan as *mono no aware*, a compassionate sensitivity . . . It may be perceived in the slow inexorable work of time (*sabi*) or in a moment of sharp demarcation between pristine or whole and shattered . . . A mirage of 'before' suffuses the beauty of mended objects."

With a full understanding of kintsugi's nuanced meaning, de Vries employed the technique in his own solo exhibition at Galerie Ron Mandos in Amsterdam in 2016. Specifically, in a show titled "Studying Human Activity through the Recovery of Material Culture," the conservator-artist reassembled and repaired with lacquer and gold a Han Dynasty earthenware vase. The title of the work is *Reconstructed Han Vase (After Ai Wei Wei)*.

While much of Ai Wei Wei's work exhibits what seems to be some level of concern with beauty, his infamous triptych of photographs, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, is an aesthetically meager, primarily conceptual and political piece. De Vries reverses this, gracefully rescuing what is beautiful from the outer limits of the cerebral by repairing a similar, broken Han vase and reasserting, or even deepening, its aesthetic value: all without disavowing the still-obvious damage. All of this is affirmed in the artist's choice to display photographs of each individual shard along with the vessel in an almost altar-like configuration.

Reconstructed Vase (After Ai Wei Wei) is also a subversive artwork for its tender, humorous, and savvy critique of the pretenses of art. This is a critique for which Ai Wei Wei is an almost ideal target,

for it reveals, in my own opinion, pandering to Western curators and collectors can be undone with a little lacquer. Yet for all its broad statement, de Vries' *Reconstructed Vase (After Ai Wei Wei)* tells us something crucial about the maker, that the sight and sound of shattering pottery means something entirely different to him.

Breakages are beginnings and reconstructions are not ends, such is the nature of an object's movement from one form to another: from clay to object, from object to new object, from new object to uncertainty, from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust. De Vries is very much aware that his art represents only one stage in this cycle, a fact that remains true in the many manifestations of his work. And to be sure, only some of this estimable artist's multifarious ways of working have been enumerated in this article. Like shards and fragments themselves, the variety of works de Vries has produced in a relatively short time must be arranged to understand his intent as an artist and the complete meaning of his art. This is work that is compelling, intriguing, inventive, at times as dark and comic as it is enlightened and optimistic, endearing, and Aristotelian—a sum greater than its parts.

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1 The discussion of Dresden relies heavily upon Mark Jarzombek's 2004 study: *Disguised Visibilities. In Memory and Architecture*. Albuquerque, ed. Eleni Bastéa, pp. 49–78. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.