



Traditional Chinese imagery combines with decoration, function, and fine art in works like these two porcelain vessels from Paul Mathieu's *Four Binary Bowls*.

## Cross-cultural ceramics mould East with West

### VISUAL ARTS

#### PAUL MATHIEU: MAKING CHINA IN CHINA

At the Richmond Art Gallery until June 1

Just inside the sliding doors of the Richmond Art Gallery is a riot of colour, pattern, and shape. An orderly riot. Displayed on rows of plinths and wall-mounted shelves are some four dozen ceramic vessels by Vancouver-based Paul Mathieu. Large vases and small bowls combine traditional Chinese forms, glazes, and decorative motifs with postmodern, Euro-Canadian concepts and references.

That “by Paul Mathieu” is contentious. The artist has commissioned work from individual artisans in a porcelain factory in Jingdezhen, a city in central China famed for both the longevity and immensity of its ceramic production. What Mathieu and his unnamed Jingdezhen collaborators have created are cultural and conceptual hybrids that challenge western notions of art and craft; that is, of distinctions between decoration, functionality, and art for art’s sake. As the show’s organizers point out in the exhibition catalogue, Mathieu’s work also undermines fixed ideas about individual authorship, authenticity, and originality.

“My aim is to reconcile extremes and oppositions, destroy hierarchies and confuse conventions,” Mathieu writes in his artist’s statement. “Contradictions are built-in, embraced and essential.” One example is his set of six ceramic vessels, titled *Flower Vase (After Matisse 1926)*, in which Mathieu handed plain, mould-made replicas of *Henriette*, a portrait bust by Henri Matisse, to different porcelain painters, asking each to decorate the work according to his or her own style and inclination.

Familiar images and designs—including blue-on-white landscape scenes, multicoloured floral patterns, and delicately carved decorative motifs glazed in pale green and white—are juxtaposed in unexpected ways, just as the form itself is provocatively inverted. By standing the portraits on their heads, Mathieu treats each as a functional vase whose neck is *Henriette*’s neck, again muddying the line between high and low.

Some of the work here is political in the western sense: three pairs of kissing lips, some of which have moustaches, address sexual orientation; a set of inverted Buddha figures employs images of walls at militarized borders, past and present; another set of vases conflates traditional Chinese designs with photo-based images from the confrontation between authorities and pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. With other pieces and series, Mathieu seems content to juggle formal rather than overtly political concerns. Still, all the works on view are bound, as the artist proposes, to confuse conventions. To shake us up.

Mathieu’s cross-cultural show is nicely complemented by a small multimedia project by Su-An Yun, a Korean-Canadian artist who lives in Richmond. Yun addresses cross-cultural conceptions of the role of the artist through a series of advertising forms, ranging from banners to hand towels to big, inflatable figures. It’s an ambitious and amusing undertaking.

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