



'Ceratomyx papilligera', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Ceratomyx sinuatum II.', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm

PHOTOGRAPH BY ONG BEON CHIAN



'Phyllidiella meandrina II.', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Bornella anguilla', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm

TRACING THE DOTS

Inspired by the wondrous and colourful undersea palette, Donald Eric Lim uses a pixilation technique to recreate a textured seascape on his flared stem-cups and rotund pots that are sensuous in sight and touch. Profile by Madhavi Tumkur.

THE time I went to see ceramic artist Donald Eric Lim at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum's Lee Kong Chian Collection of ceramics, I found him curiously inspecting the intricacies of a Tang Dynasty vase from the 8th century. 'I feel very privileged,' he later remarked. 'I am the only person here who is permitted to touch and handle these works,' he tells me with an eagerness of a child in a candy store.

As one of the promising emerging artists from Singapore, Lim exhibits in some manner the odd paradox of the pinnacle that Chinese ceramics had reached in the centuries gone by and the renaissance it is witnessing through the young revolutionaries like him in the field of contemporary ceramics. 'At one stage, the West was eager to know the secret of "kaolin" – the essential component of porcelain. That is how invaluable fine china was perceived.

Now it appears to be no less than a form of craft. I want to elevate it back to its former glory and revive the rigour behind this art form,' Lim says.

Lim's induction to ceramics came from none other than the master potter Iskander Jalil, some 20 years ago when he was pursuing a graphic design course. Jalil, one of the lecturers at the course, gave each of the students a ball of clay to express their creativity. Lim says he discovered an innate ability to mould the clay and deftly pinch it in the palm of his hand to give it a subtle form, revealing the most early and basic techniques of hand-built ceramics. Jalil took Lim under his wing and encouraged him to continue shaping clay, obligingly firing it for him upon completion. Although Lim was mentored by Jalil, his influences are evidently more conceptual than visual. Dedication, work ethic and pursuing the path to nurture one's own sensibilities were something Lim imbibed as philosophical values to grow and mature as an artist.

He remained loyal to his pinched forms, moulding, manipulating and shaping them to desired fineness; the uneven edges exhibiting early explorations of a budding potter at the same time imitating nature's inherent imperfections. These were endowed with dots, dextrously painted using a minute brush tip, which once fired gave the vessels a smooth visual appeal. The cups were then elevated onto stems, resembling miniature trophies that offered a toast to the translucence of porcelain when raised. 'Cups are ubiquitous in every culture' says Lim. 'They offer an opportunity for the viewer to relate to the forms and appreciate them by cupping them in the palms of one's hands.'

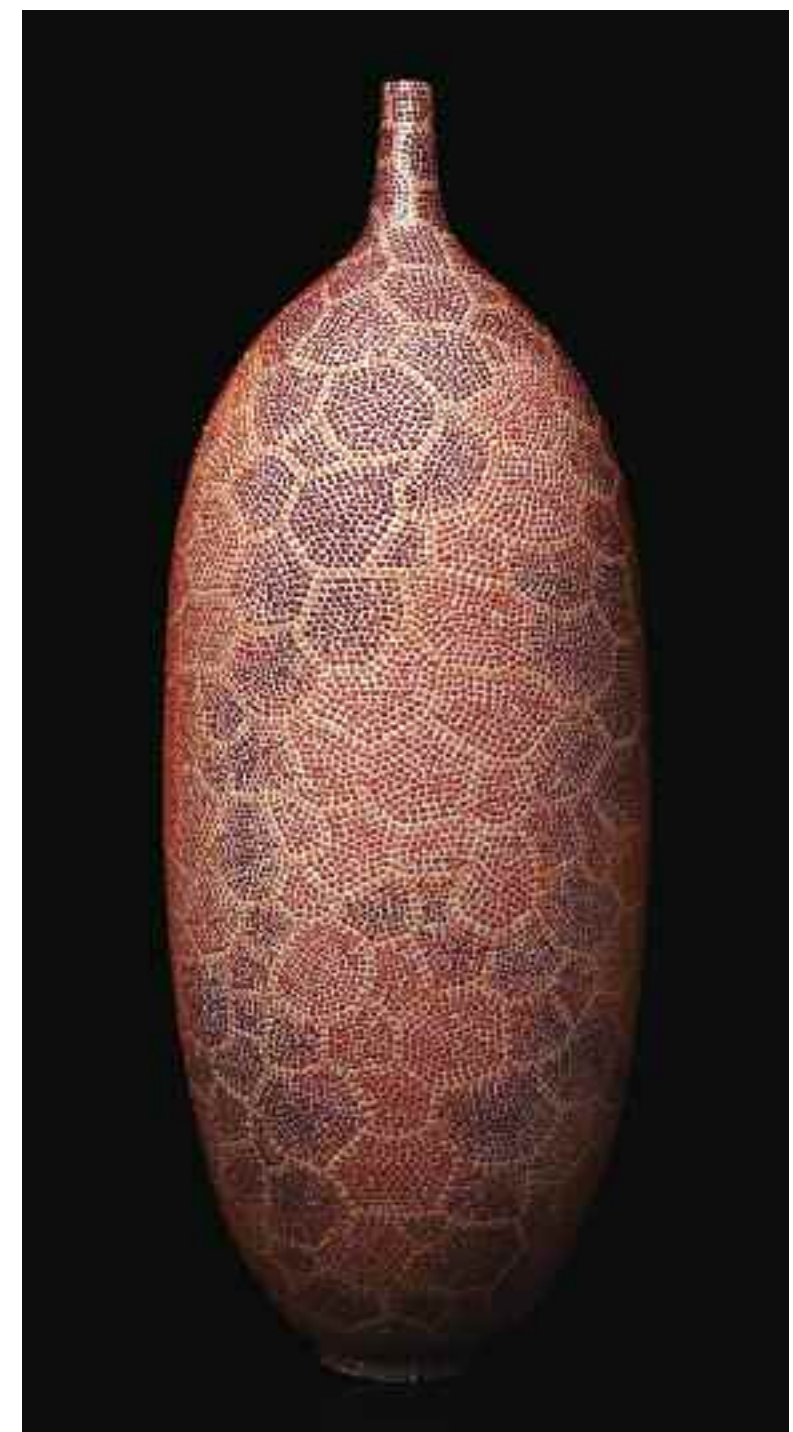
Lim's stem-cups were contoured to fit within the palms of one's hands, bringing one close to a natural experience of drinking from it. However, it wasn't until he took up work at the Collections Management Department at the NUS Museum that the sensory experience of touching and feeling the pots had a profound effect on him. Surrounded by his muse from over 7,000 years, Lim absorbed the influences from each era by closely observing and feeling the contours, incisions and decorations. Their sensation and decorative techniques became educative experiences for

Lim. Intent on extending his own sensory experiences to others, he advanced his brush-tip technique to give his forms a raised-dot texture by devising a formula of clay-slip stained with colour pigments that were painstakingly applied dot after dot in carefully conceptualised patterns. Once fired, these dots gave his vessels a tactile surface and a "3-D visual effect". Lim actively encourages touching, holding and cradling his works, extending the joy of his own sensory experiences and impressing upon the fact that there is more that just meets the eye.

Although Lim's brushwork technique resonates with his admiration and regard for Chinese calligraphy, the dextrously applied pixel dot patterns can be traced back to his graphic design background. Perhaps it was his formal education and the familiarity with the digital media, such as the Internet and video recording, that opened up his doors to imagination and inspiration. 'I am a big fan of *National Geographic*,' Lim says. 'The stunning colours of undersea molluscs and nudibranchs inspired me to experiment with their colour palette.' Although it is common for ceramic artists to be inspired by nature, in Lim's case he combines this with multi-media sources drawn from a broader context, taking the traditional Chinese artform into newer modes of expression. He was particularly intrigued by the intensely bright colours



'Ceratomyx papilligera', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Pleurobranchus peronii', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Ceratomyx papilligera', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Chromodoris tinctoria III', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm

nature has endowed to these sea slugs to warn its predators of their poisonous hides. 'Nature often sends mixed messages,' Lim says. 'A fruit that is ripe is bright and plump, yet the bright colours and patterns of the nudibranchs express the exact contrary.'

Lim's thrown pots amply illustrate this paradox. He did not begin working with the wheel until as recently as 2004, when he was commissioned to make larger pots. 'It was only when I began to use the wheel that I realised how temperamental and wilful clay can be,' reminisces Lim. Throwing requires an unusual amount of restraint and discipline and it was time to recall earlier teachings by his mentor. 'Iskander taught me how to be guided by porcelain. Instead of trying to forcibly mould it, he told me to gently coax it to evolve its own form,' says Lim.



'Ceratosoma sinuatum I', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm

It is easy to see how porcelain guided Lim to imitate nature in all its diversity and abundance. His tall thrown pots are voluptuous and bountiful in their forms. Well bestowed in nature's abundant colour palette, they offer a rich sensory experience both in the touch and feel as well as command a rare visual eloquence in their seductive forms. 'Porcelain is an unforgiving mistress and all your flaws and faults are revealed when the works emerge from the kiln. But then on occasions, you are rewarded with some of the most evocative forms that imitate the "fruits of nature" to perfection. Full of promise they beckon the viewer to hold and feel them and embrace the wealth of experiences it offers,' Lim says, referring to his rotund globular forms that mock nature's plentiful produce in their considerable volume and girth.



'Chromodoris charlottae', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm

'Tranquil Forming Bowl', 2006, black ash burl, 28 x 33 x 28 cm

Lim expresses a rare discipline as a potter. Instead of extending his own personality onto his works by indulging his decorative expressions and ascribing artistic meanings to them, he allows porcelain to express the infinite possibilities it encloses. His works are therefore reflections of polarities – they are fragile yet robust, small and yet hold meanings of macroscopic proportions, surreal and yet so relatable. It is as if in unfolding the mysteries of porcelain the muse has helped the artist to unravel his own personality. This is clearly evident in his advancement as a ceramist who has continued to experiment with forms, colours and techniques to fulfil an ongoing quest to find that absolute beauty.

'The pursuit of revelation is a form of catharsis which unearths my creative potential and allows me to reach a higher ground; it is the imago stage of maturation.'

If you were to connect the dots on Lim's vessels, they tell a lore – a lore of advancement, maturation and metamorphosis; a lore that may well have begun several centuries ago in China but continues on, fuelled by the passion and dedication of the likes of Lim, and other ceramists, to revive the past glory of the humble clay. Just then, he receives a call from the firing kiln and is informed that his translucent stem-cups enriched in a garb of colours and his rotund pots, plump and blushing, are ready to be collected. 'It is not I who chose clay; it is clay that chose me,' he says.'

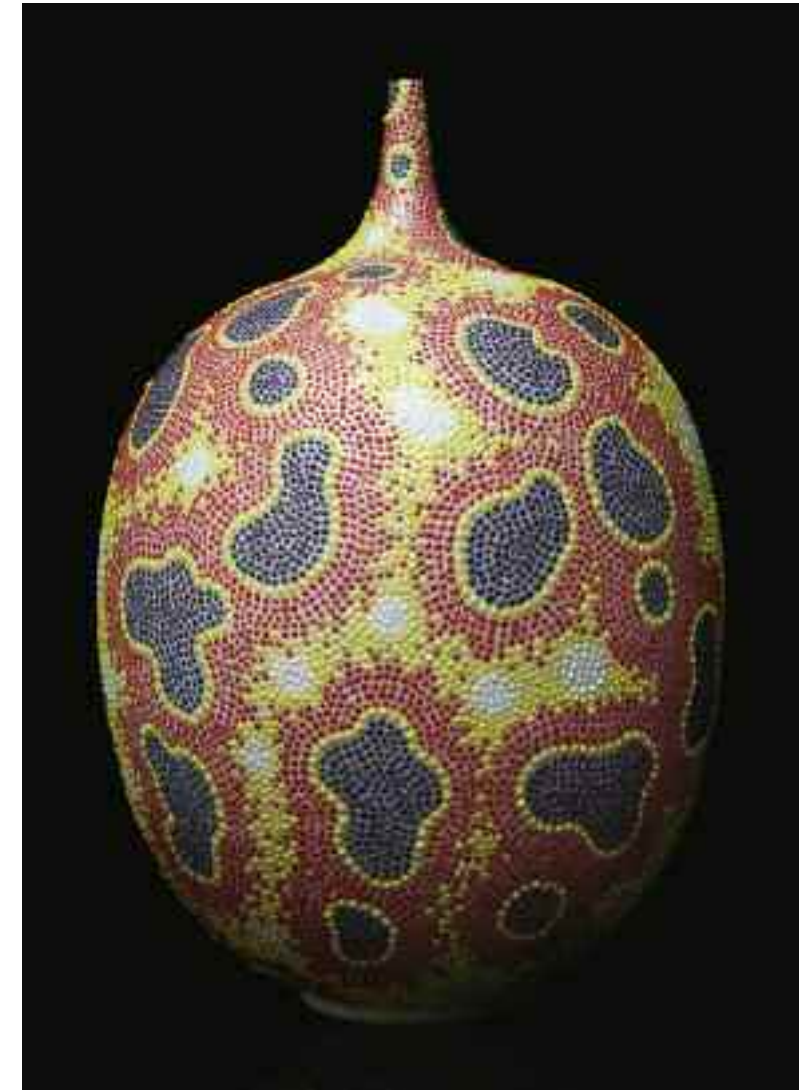
I leave Donald Eric Lim (pictured) at the museum where he and his luring porcelain charges return to their nonverbal dialogues. What artful motif will emerge from the ensuing engagement? What narratives might his future diagrams unfold?

Perhaps all may be revealed by subtly tracing the dots.

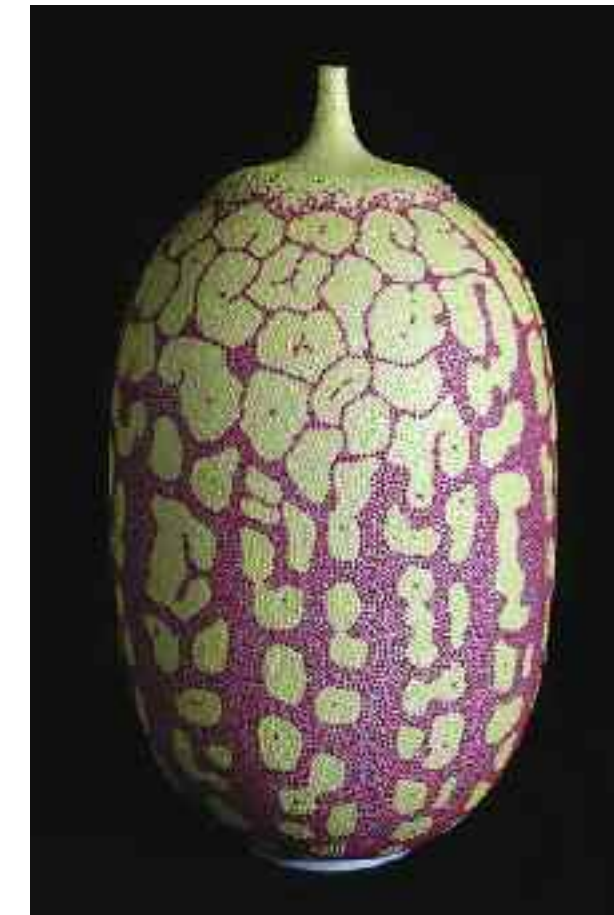


Donald Eric Lim

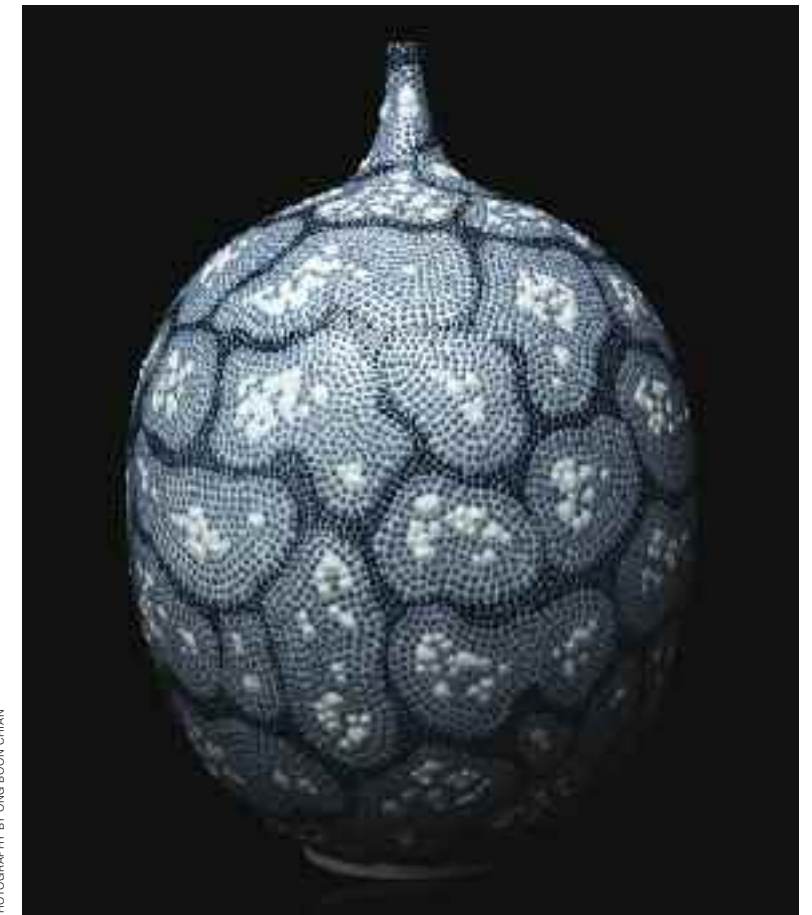
Madhavi Tumkur



'Untitled', 2008, thrown porcelain, 43 x 42 cm



'Chromodoris Tinctoria II', thrown porcelain, 32 x 18 cm



'Phyllidia elegans', thrown porcelain, 32 x 18 cm

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ONG BOON CHIAN