

THE 
GRIFFIS ART CENTER

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM – MAISON des ARTISTES
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT USA

ZHAO Meng

2002 July International Artist-in-Residence
Hang Zhou City, Zhe Jiang Province, People's Republic of China



"Wave I"

Date Acquired: 06/01/02, Date Created: 2002

Size: 19 1/2" x 9.6" x 6"

Medium: Glazed Earthenware

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“Having worked with clay for so many years, clay still sometimes evokes my childhood memory. When I was a little boy, I commenced playing with clay as a hobby and then it developed into one of my primary interests. With no doubts, I selected the Chinese National Academy of Arts and studied in the ceramic department for four years.

“I have spent a lot of spare time since then reading books concerning traditional Chinese culture and arts, including painting, calligraphy, and religion, all of which I find emotionally and intellectually seductive. Take Yin-Yang theory for example. It is simple and generalized. The Yin-Yang theory holds that all phenomena consist of two aspects, which are variously defined as: up and down, left and right, light and dark, hot and cold, stillness and movement, male and female, day and night. It seems to be the law of Heaven and Earth.

“This theory is reflected in my works. Collaborating simple angular forms, water and texture, I strive to express two contrasting natures within water – the simple material we are familiar with. Water is so soft that it can easily be shaped with different containers. However water is also so strong that small drops of water can dig a deep hole in a piece of hard rock through the ages.”

- ZHAO Meng, New London, CT 2002



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The Art of Meng Zhao

Jeffrey Hantover

Rocks, shaped by water, air and time, graced Chinese gardens by the Han dynasty. Rocks as miniature mountains and jagged landscapes have held pride of place in literati studios since the Song, and rocks have been the building blocks of landscape painting throughout Chinese history. For over millennium Chinese scholars' rocks have been objects of contemplation and meditation and the physical embodiment of Daoist thought about man and nature. When contemporary ceramic artist chooses to recreate in clay what nature has carved so well in limestone, it raises question of why: Isn't this like bringing coals to Newcastle or clay to Jingdezhen?

Meng Zhao's ceramic works answer that question by rising above virtuoso imitation. They are independent works of art that break new ground at the same time as they affirm tradition and continue the ongoing dialogue of present and past that so marks contemporary Chinese art. Meng Zhao was born in 1967 in Anhui province home of Lingbi, the most favored of all scholars' rocks. As young boy he played on the river bank, shaping rocks out of wet sand and constructing miniature garden landscapes from sand and pebbles. At twenty he began his studies at the China National Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, surrounded by the city's many gardens and rocks. He has lived in the United States since 2002 and believing as he says, "I have big fire in my life and under the Dao, needed more balance, more water" looked at map and chose to live in Massachusetts.

Out of this unique personal history and shared culture of ideas and art, Meng Zhao is creating objects to look at and think with.

Like the scholars' rocks that inspire them, his sculptures are for him objects of contemplation and meditation. Because of their abstract and formal qualities, they give free rein to the imagination more so than representational sculpture which does not give the viewer space to ask questions (the answer most often already given). Mi Fu, the 11th century painter and calligrapher, went on spirit journeys through the cavities in his stone ink stone. Six centuries later another scholar, Lin Youlin, expressed common literati theme when he praised rocks as the best vehicle to "cause people to go beyond themselves." Like their limestone forbearers, Meng Zhao's fantastic rocks invite you to touch them, to pause, slow down and contemplate the larger natural world of which they and we are part.

Meng Zhao in creating scholars' rocks in ceramic is continuing tradition within Chinese art that dates back at least to the Ming dynasty but has been lost to general knowledge. Richard Rosenblum's preeminent collection of scholars' rocks included detailed imitations of rocks in ceramic, bronze and glass. Rosenblum claimed that there did not appear to be any known record of the production of ceramic rocks. Several of the ceramic rocks in his collection were so convincing that they were sold to him by reputable dealers unknowingly as real rocks. Meng Zhao's low and high fire rocks are much larger than Rosenblum's ceramic rocks, which are only about five inches high. Meng Zhao's pieces, some of which are over two feet high and foot wide, are because of their size and the stress caused by their many holes and voids more technically challenging than earlier ceramic rocks from the Ming and Qing. Because of the



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challenges faced in firing pieces of this size and complexity, Meng Zhao approached the sculpting of scholar rocks deliberately, moving to them after working in more solid forms and geometric shapes. Even when he arrived in 2005 at Harvard as an artist in residence after winning gold medal at the 2003 International Ceramic Art Competition in Faenza, Italy, he didn't fire anything the first semester, wanting to learn about the properties and potential of American clay and to understand more thoroughly the "controlled accidents" in communal kiln.

Meng Zhao's art is not only rooted in specific Chinese ceramic tradition and the broader tradition of one material used to imitate another Yixing teapots made to look like leather, wood or bamboo and porcelain snuff bottles made to pass for jade but is consciously informed by larger currents of Chinese philosophical thought. When Meng Zhao lies on the ground to photograph rocks in the shifting shapes of clouds, he sees them through the lens of an ancient belief in rocks as the petrified roots of clouds. When he holds scholars' rock in his hand and examines the holes and perforations made by the drip and flow of water and when he begins to build piece, he considers actions from within cultural framework that extends beyond the confines of the Harvard Ceramic Studio.

Water as philosophical concept and physical reality are central to Meng Zhao's work. From 1998 to 2003 he did series, *Water Pieces*, which explored the abstract movement of water. He quotes with ease Lao Tze's adage on the paradox of water: "Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it." Early in his career, he would sketch the intended sculpture before beginning: everything was planned. Now he does just the opposite. He tries to cultivate what in Daoism is called, *pu*, passive state of receptiveness, of perception without preconception: "So my mind is free and my hands are free when my fingers touch the clay." For Meng Zhao, the process of creating sculptural rock is process of mimicking the natural force of water that created the scholars' rock. "I put myself in the position of water eating away the stone," he says. Just as water working on the rock creates as it destroys, Meng Zhao imagines the path the water might take and strips and gouges the clay in an act of creative destruction.

If the work was simply virtuoso imitation of scholars' rock, its texture and color an exact simulacrum of the original, Meng Zhao's work would warrant respectful applause but only passing attention. Because he harnesses his technical skill to replicate the processes of nature itself, he achieves an artistry beyond mere imitation. Dedicated to process rather than externalities, Meng Zhao creates sculptures that express the spiritual energy of the original rocks so valued by the Chinese and connoisseurs. Meng Zhao's rocks become like Nature's work portals to worlds outside ourselves. Perhaps at time when many feel small and adrift, buffeted by external forces beyond their control, meditation on objects that speak of world beyond ourselves is paradoxically comforting.

Jeffrey Hantover is writer living in New York. His novel, *The Jewel Trader of Pegu*, was published by Harper Perennial in 2009.