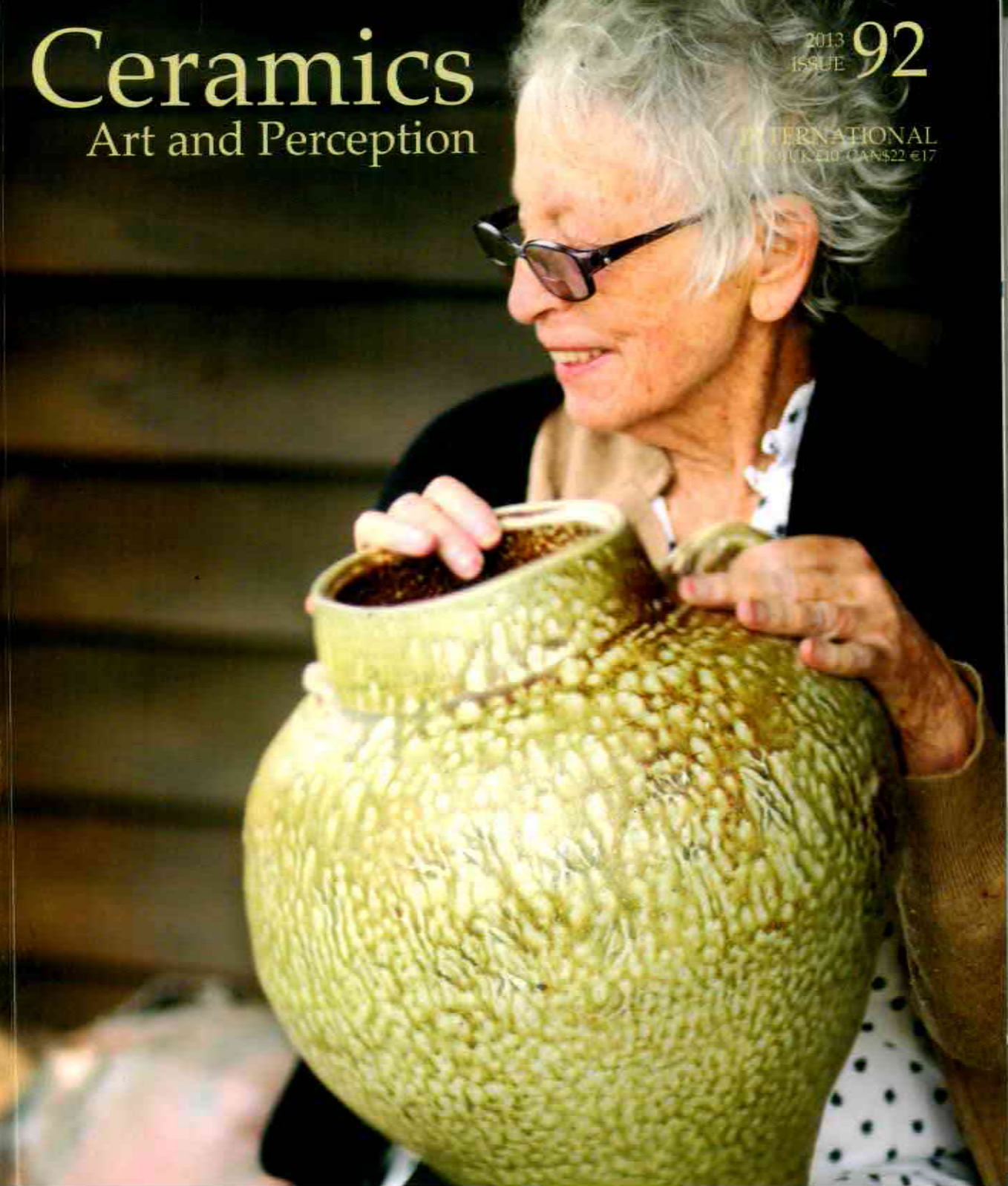


Ceramics

Art and Perception

2013
ISSUE 92

INTERNATIONAL
ENGLAND CAN\$22 €17





THE NOTION OF A 'HOUSE' IS A CRITICAL METAPHOR. IN Hong-Ling Wee's installation of 30 clay houses at *Soft Lines, Hard Edges*, she provokes discussions of the physical form of houses, the sense of community and the public versus private dichotomy.

A home is one of our most basic necessities and desires, at once both a physiological and philosophical underpinning of human civilisation. Houses serve as structures in which we live and as the domain in which we experience security and solace, fulfil expectations and form ties to a community or tradition.

This series of houses, named after Lulang Town, was inspired by and made in response to Wee's travel through Tibet. The work addresses the artist's interpretation of the elusive qualities that define a

sanctum. Wee channelled the unfamiliar, multicultural, fantastical, metaphorical and poetic.

The installation fills an entire wall. The display of clay houses on three tiers conjures a visual *haiku*. The negative spaces in between the houses are an equally important component of the work created. The arrangement is anything but a random assemblage. The circular, cylindrical forms bring to mind traditional Italian Apulian *trulli*, Neolithic British Pimperne roundhouses and historical *tulou* of Hakka people in southern China.

At first glance the muted clay walls are plain and bare. Yet a closer examination of the quiet, eggshell surfaces reveals a complex layering of coloured slips and stains to create subtle shadowing and watermarks, with areas appearing to be worn away by

time and use. In contrast, roofs ranging from sylvan brown to coral red to royal blue to majestic yellow are a deliberate vibrant juxtaposition.

Even though no two units are identical in hue or architecture, this expression of individuality is answered with the inference of conformity: each house fits agreeably into the larger community. On the surface, the tidy rows of houses give the impression that the lives within are similarly neat and simple. But the artist seems to be questioning: behind the facade, each domicile must surely harbour its own despair, secrets and perhaps dysfunction.

Despite the serene exterior, the clay walls display a dynamic power occupying the interior, pushing against the inner surface in bulges and dents suggesting human presence, energy and passion. The viewer's curiosity about the interior spaces is piqued by the relative sparseness of windows and doors, but one is granted only limited access inside through the narrow slits of rectilinear portals.

This work demonstrates Wee's fluency in the language of the surface. She affects the clay-skin playfully at times, through casual markings and *trompe l'oeil* windows and doors and, purposefully at other times, cutting through the clay-body to reveal slivers of darkness from the domestic interiors. These details prompt the viewer to take a more intimate inspection of each piece. As with all sculpture, the houses can not be fully appreciated from a single perspective. Each house would need its own turntable for the viewer to get the complete 360 degree view of all of them. The installation offers both macro and micro visual stimuli at once.

Clay Cunningham is a ceramics artist, a teacher and a freelance writer living and working in Council Bluffs, Iowa. He has published in *Ceramics Monthly* and *Pottery Making Illustrated*.



Facing page, top: *Installation of Soft Lines, Hard Edges at RSP Planet Studios. 2012.*

Below: *Hong-Ling Wee at RSP Planet Studios. 2012.*

All other images: *Installation Details.*

All photos by Clay Cunningham.

Soft Lines, Hard Edges is Wee's journey into the area of uncertainty with the intent of finding a greater meaning and understanding of what is hidden away beneath the surface, just beyond the obvious, behind closed doors, in private. In addition, the show's title sums up the artist's homage to the dichotomous qualities of clay, to celebrate the soft malleable earth and the strong material that can withstand time, use and the elements.

While Wee's installation at *Soft Lines, Hard Edges* is relatively modest in scale compared to her past more expansive showcases, the strength of Hong-Ling Wee's work is apparent in her cohesive presentation. The poetic display provides a sense of departure from the familiar and brings the viewer to a place of fantasy and imagination. The narrative eloquence and subject matter make the work accessible and memorable.



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