

Jeannie Mah

« *Ouvrez les guillemets...* »

Greg Beatty

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necessity is the mother of invention. And since human needs rarely change radically from year to year, even decade to decade, it stands to reason that most aspects of our built environment are the product of innovations that are evolutionary, as opposed to revolutionary, in nature. In the multi-media installation "ouvrez les guillemets..." , Regina ceramist Jeannie Mah demonstrates this point in a most satisfactory and provocative manner, tracing the historical lineage of that most mundane of domestic objects—the common teacup.

As an artist, Mah has long been influenced by two antecedents to contemporary ceramic practice—Kamare ware from 17th century B.C.E. Crete and 18th century porcelain from the famous Sevres factory on the outskirts of Paris. Rather than make exact replicas of these cups, however, she uses them as a base for her own fanciful creations which she hand builds from paper-thin sheets of porcelain clay. By privileging form over function, she subverts the cup's traditional identity as a symbol of sustenance and comfort, encouraging viewers instead to focus on its socio-cultural significance as utilitarian and ceremonial object.

Inspired by her study of French literature and film, Mah has structured her exhibition like a classical French essay. Entering the gallery, we are presented with the "introduction" to her dissertation, which consists of a divided partition upon which she has mounted five stylized Minoan cups. By painting the partitions bright red, she evokes the non-threatening atmosphere of a museum lobby, where patrons are psychologically disarmed and prepared for the more austere exhibits to follow. The cups, in contrast, are all metallic black in colour, with simple geometric designs (circles, squares) impressed into their exterior surface. The Minoans,



who were named after the legendary King Minos of Knossos, were the first advanced European civilization. Strategically situated on the main trade route between Asia and Africa, they benefited from contact with other advanced cultures such as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, and became known for their stately palaces and finely crafted frescoes, jewellery and earthenware pottery. While Kamare ware was often decorated with elaborate abstract patterns, as well as life-like images of plants, animals and mythical beasts, the simple designs found here suggest that these cups would have been used as everyday drinking vessels.

Three of the cups are set against dark red painted backdrops infused with swirls of black. The fragmentary lines created by the black paint are suggestive of artifacts that have been lost to the passage of time,

and are only now being rediscovered by Mah as a pseudo-archaeologist. These ghostly traces reflect the tragic fate that befell the Minoan people after a series of natural disasters in 15th century B.C.E. Initially, their conquest by unknown invaders may have helped spread Cretan culture to the Aegean mainland through the medium of captured artisans being sold as slaves. But with the fall of the Mycenaean people in 11th century B.C.E., the region entered a period of decline that ended only with the emergence of the Greeks several centuries later.

Passing through this space, we enter the main body of Mah's essay, where she has organized her hypothesis, antithesis and synthesis on the left, back and right walls of the gallery respectively. The first takes the form of five lithe porcelain vessels mounted on cup-shaped wood backdrops adorned

Jeannie Mah, "ouvrez les guillemets..." , 1997. Detail. Installation (2 walls). Photo: Patricia Holdsworth.

with painted reproductions of invoices and other archival correspondence from French porcelain factories. Originally invented by the Chinese, porcelain became extremely popular among the European aristocracy in the 18th century, when expanding trade with China and the Middle East helped spark the Enlightenment. Competition between factories for skilled workers and quality clay mixtures was fierce. Unable to duplicate the type of hard-paste porcelain that came from China because of the lack of the mineral kaolin, Sevres developed a brand of soft-paste porcelain that was perfectly suited to the decorative excesses of the late Baroque and Rococo periods. Under Louis XIV, Sevres enjoyed a royal monopoly. It was the only French factory permitted to use gold and certain motifs in its designs, and the King would gift its porcelain to favoured courtiers.

Through her delicate and richly-coloured forms, Mah captures the seductive appeal these objects held for the French nobility. Because of a low firing temperature, the soft-paste porcelain manufactured at Sevres had a unique capacity to absorb colour. From the outset of production in 1738, this capacity was exploited, and Sevres porcelain became known for its remarkable tonal range. The colours favoured by Mah in her installation—daffodil yellow and cobalt blue—are associated particularly with Louis XIV's reign as the «Sun King».

Compared to the Minoan cups, with their relatively unadorned appearance and compact handles, the French vessels are elegant and refined, reflecting the disparity in wealth and technical knowledge between the two societies. Of course, this largesse, which extended to what, at least to modern eyes, were perversely decadent forms of Baroque and Rococo art and architecture, was largely a function of an elitist class structure, where a small number of French aristocrats and church officials lived in obscene luxury, while the vast majority of the country's citizens were poor.

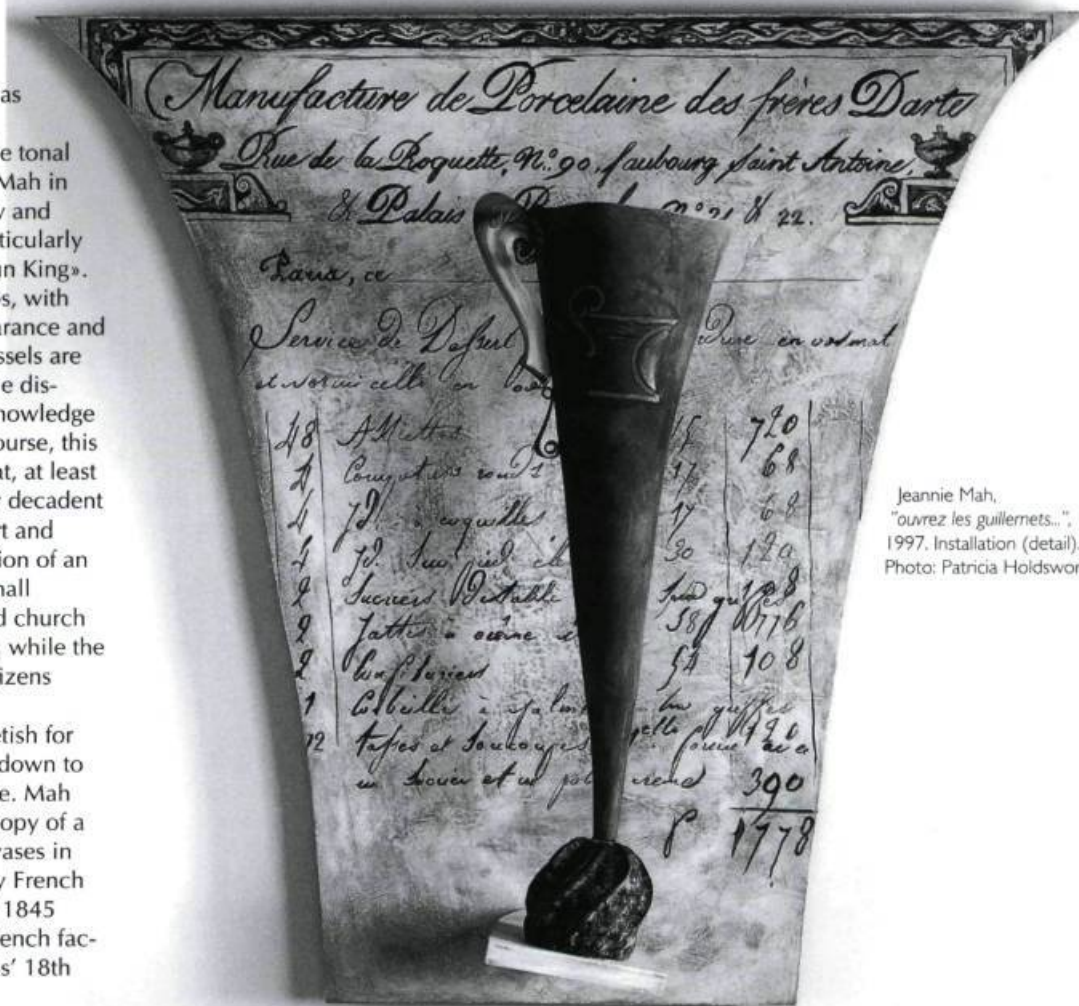
Eventually, the commodity fetish for Sevres porcelain began to filter down to the emerging French bourgeoisie. Mah dramatizes this by including a copy of a 1832 order for three porcelain vases in the Egyptian and Gothic style by French writer Honore de Balzac, and a 1845 request for permission from a French factory to reproduce some of Sevres' 18th

century forms for an Exposition of Industry, among her five painted panels. Through her installation of cups, two yellow and one blue, on the back wall with faux reddish-gold tile backdrops and decorative moulding, Mah emphasizes the diminution in quality and the heightened artifice that would have inevitably accompanied this shift to mass production (the red and yellow colour scheme also serves as a subtle reminder of porcelain's origin in China). Implicit in the anti-theatrical component of her essay is the unspoken question: if forms from pre-revolutionary France were still popular in the 19th century, when democratic inroads had supposedly been made into the power of the French aristocracy, then had the ideology that initially inspired them really changed? Mah's ordering of the three vessels in a hierarchical triangle suggests not.

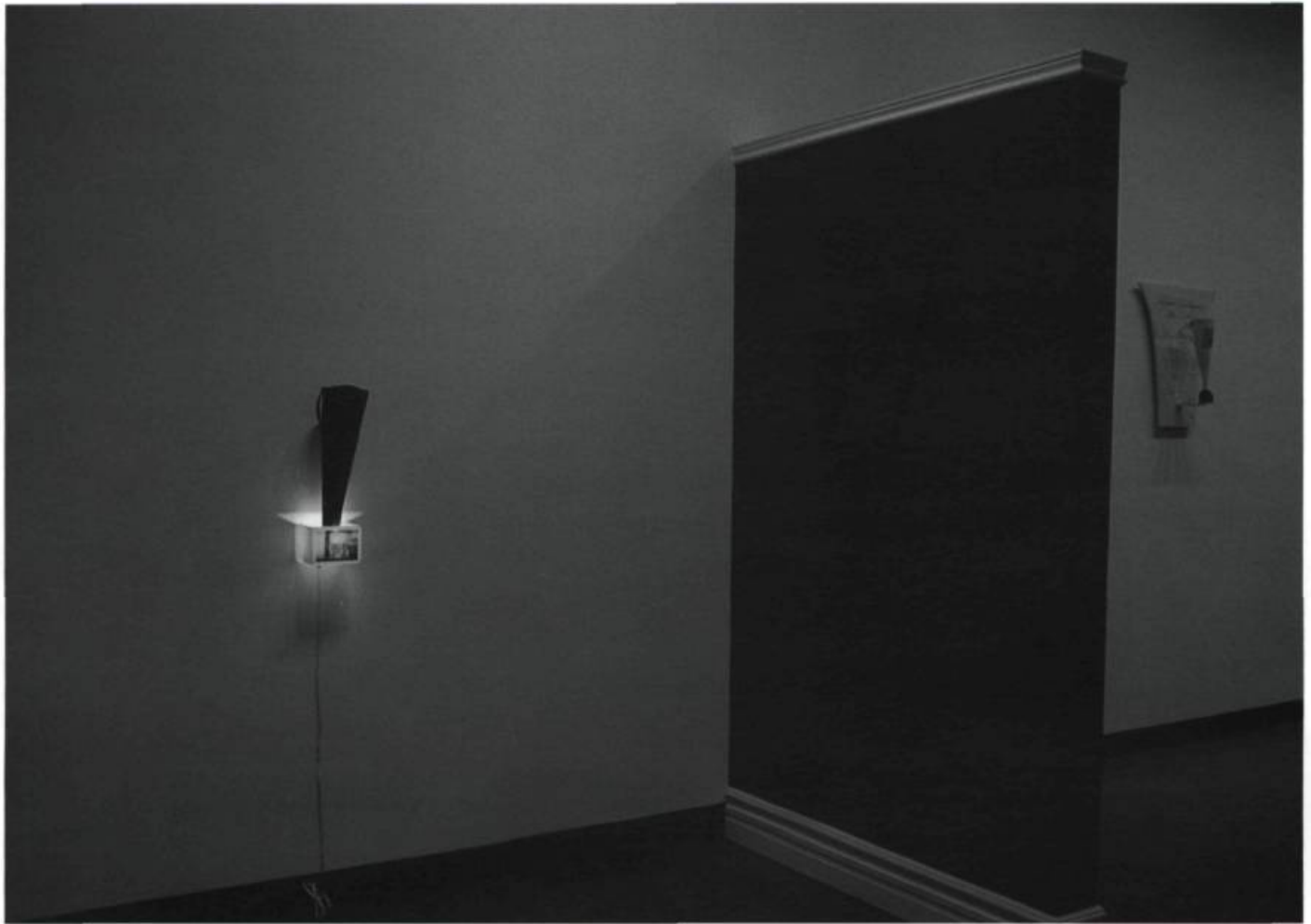
From that point, we move to the synthesis of Mah's essay, where she again presents five elongated, although slightly

less ostentatious, vessels. Placed against wooden backdrops painted to resemble various styles of decorative wallpaper, these works are firmly rooted in the present. The vessels are adorned with line drawings and incised outlines of Minoan and French cups. Through this symbiosis, which recalls the practice of honouring famous people, places and events on commemorative plates, Mah establishes an intertextual relationship between her practice and that of previous generations of ceramists. Her reference to 18th century French cups further recalls the importance of that period in French history to the development of contemporary Western civilization. Indeed, during that time France was the dominant power in Europe, and many of the advancements that were subsequently made in areas ranging from art and architecture to philosophy and science continue to resonate into present day.

The installation's final component, the conclusion, is located on the reverse side



Jeannie Mah, "ouvrez les guillemets...". 1997. Installation (detail). Photo: Patricia Holdsworth.



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 guillemets..."*, 1997.
 Installation (detail).
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 Holdsworth.

of the partition that greeted us when we entered the gallery. Like the introduction, it is open-ended, inviting the postulation of a successor hypothesis to Mah's original proposition in true dialectical fashion. It consists of two tableaux evoking different settings; domestic—a shelf, TV, four interior-lit vessels—and museum—inverted crucifix display case featuring three black cups and a pair of the artist's shoes. Playing on the TV is a video of Mah cavorting with an oversized cup in the Minoan style (which ultimately proves to be made of lightweight metal). By holding it in her hands, she realizes her audience's own frustrated kinaesthetic desire to touch her beautiful vessels. Through her various movements—she places the cup on top of her head, holds it in front of her stomach and hides behind it—she addresses key aspects of her creative process, from the original conception, to execution (birth), to the manner in which the finished product, as a precious art object, ultimately effaces her. With their

interior lighting (a pun on enlightenment), the four vessels which bracket the TV are completely non-functional. Their transition to commodity complete, they resemble nothing if not turgid lava lamps.

In the museum section of her conclusion, Mah juxtaposes modern, industrial and artisan-produced cups with one of her own exotic Minoan vessels. Again, this reinforces the notion that while objects may exist autonomously in space, the temporal connections they enjoy with their historical antecedents preclude their creators from claiming complete autonomy for them. While *"ouvrez les guillemets ..."* possesses a strong linear character, it is not rigidly so. Like the work of French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, whom Mah greatly admires for his intertextual strategy of quoting from cinematic history, literature and pop culture in his films, the installation contains many subtle twists and turns (the ordering of her five painted reproductions of invoices from French

porcelain factories in non-chronological order is only one example). Evolution, after all, whether within a species or a material object, is never a strictly linear process. ■

Jeannie Mah: *«ouvrez les guillemets...»*
 Dunlop Art Gallery
 Sept. 27–Nov. 12, 1997

L'auteur commente l'exposition de Jeannie Mah, «ouvrez les guillemets...». En s'inspirant des anciennes céramiques crétoises et des porcelaines de Sèvres, Mah élabore des œuvres, non pas en concevant des répliques exactes de ces pièces mais en modifiant leur aspect initial afin d'amener le spectateur à percevoir leur signification socio-culturelle comme objets à la fois utilitaires et cérémoniels. Mah utilise une stratégie de présentation qui fait écho au roman classique français avec une introduction, un développement et une conclusion. Malgré cette structure linéaire de présentation, l'exposition ne revêt nullement un aspect rigide. Au contraire, plusieurs médiums s'y côtoient et de nombreux croisements s'opèrent entre diverses cultures, entre passé et présent, entre objets ouvragés et industriels.