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Ian JOHNSTON

Refuse Culture: Archaeology of Consumption

Amy GOGARTY

In 2006, Ian Johnston began a series of ceramic installations to explore issues of environmental degradation, consumerism and waste, which he grouped under the rubric *Refuse Culture: Archaeology of Consumption*. The work was undertaken during residencies in China, Canada, the United States and Denmark. Johnston approached each residency with an interest in what he calls "the region's vernacular or colloquial relationship to the material world,"¹ ensuring a degree of openness and experimentation to the whole. Two installations, *Swimming Upstream Through the Looking Glass* and *Bag Suite in 4/4 Time*, both begun in China, will be exhibited across British Columbia shortly.² Components of other installations begun in Medicine Hat, Philadelphia and Skælskør, Denmark are also scheduled to be exhibited beginning January 2009.

Due to the complex nature and scale of the work, this essay will focus on the works produced in Jingdezhen, China, at the PWS (Pottery Workshop).³

Johnston came to ceramic sculpture and installation in a roundabout way via studies in architecture. Although he enjoyed the process of architecture intellectually, he found working directly with materials more satisfying. Nonetheless, one can see the mind of an architect at work in the complexity and competency with which his large-scale installations are realized. In China, skillful technicians conducted the actual fabrication — making plaster moulds of originals, press moulding or slip-casting components, glazing and firing. Johnston's education in design predisposed him to viewing this process positively in that it supports him envisioning larger projects, rather than negatively, as a diminishing of personal expression. His installations investigate conceptual issues of transpersonal import rather than biography or personal sensibility, a fact that partly explains why his various projects all look so different; he allows the context of

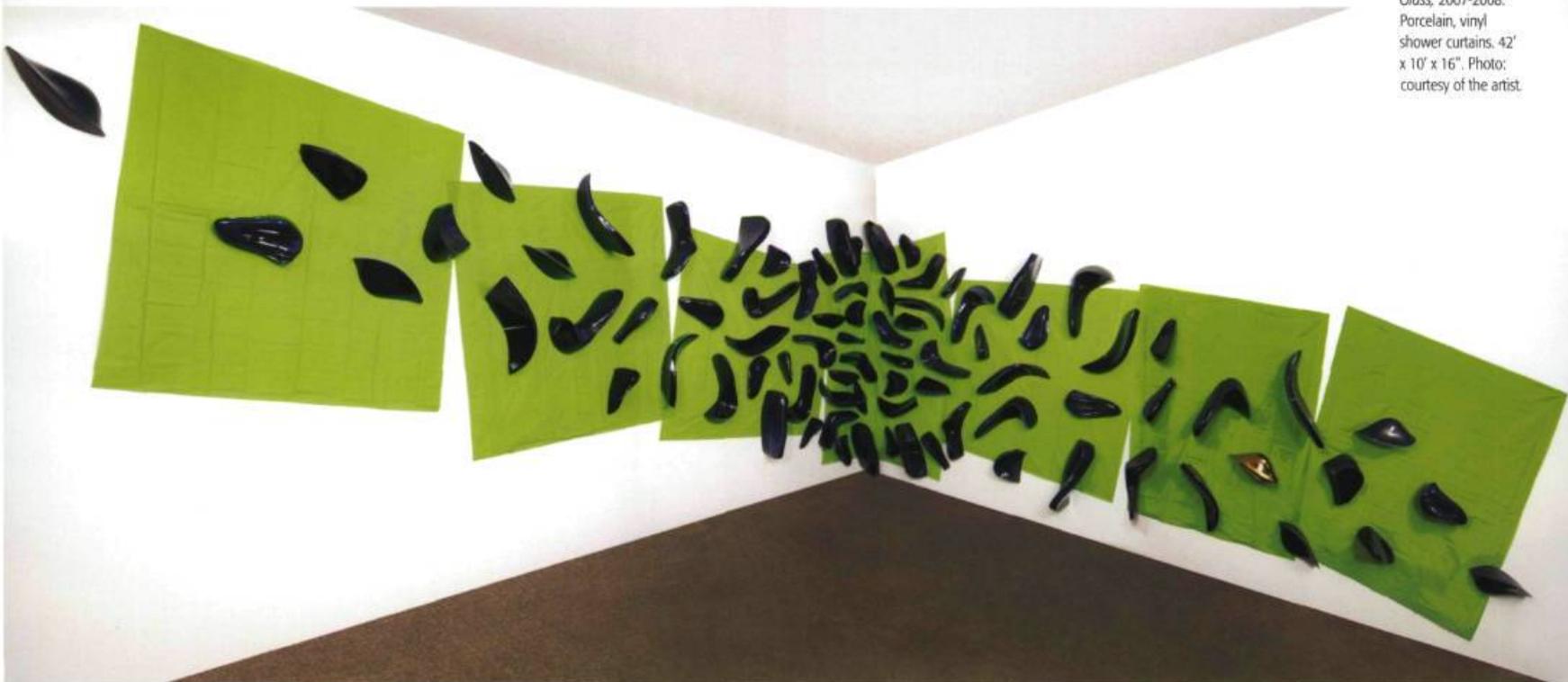
each encounter to influence his process and the resulting form.

The constant beehive of activity in Jingdezhen provided the inspiration for *Swimming Upstream*. Johnston refers to China's "caretaker culture," which aims to provide employment and thus stability to its large and diverse population by doing things by hand rather than by machines. Every morning he would observe groups moving through the city sweeping the studios and walks with their hand-made bamboo brooms. The movement of the brooms created, in essence, a giant drawing on the studio floor. Johnston recreated the movement of the brooms and the brooms themselves in a series of gestural, organic forms sculpted in porcelain, which were cast and press-moulded in multiples. In all, nine original forms were cast to produce ninety components.

The work was done in a cursory fashion as befitted the factory setting of the residency; the same technicians who molded Johnston's forms turn their attention to giant Mao or dragon sculptures at other times. Rather than

see this as detracting, Johnston considered the fingerprints and cracks left by the technicians to be characteristic of the environment in which the work was created. All but one form are glazed a deep cobalt blue, the blue made famous by Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and its European imitations such as Meissen or Delft. The solitary form, the one "swimming upstream," is brightly gilded using a process of physical vapour deposition in a vacuum chamber. This process is often used in China, where the gold colour has cultural significance. The pieces are transplanted from floor to wall, where the individual "strokes" play out across green vinyl sheets. The large green rectangles contribute to the sense of ubiquitous industrial culture. Reflecting the Western obsession with imposing order and structure onto Nature, the rectangles frame and ground the elements, making them into a "picture," a snap-shot of the experience. The rich blue colour calls to mind water; the curving forms suggest currents in a global river of commerce that connects all actions in a world environment.

Ian JOHNSTON,
Swimming Upstream Through the Looking Glass, 2007-2008.
Porcelain, vinyl shower curtains. 42' x 10' x 16". Photo: courtesy of the artist.





Ian JOHNSTON, *Bag Suite in 4/4 Time*, 2007-2008. Porcelain, used retail shelving, fluorescent light fixtures, hemp rope, plastic bags. Up to 52' x 7' x 4'. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

If *Swimming Upstream* presents a conceptual record or trace of physical labour, *Bag Suite in 4/4 Time* solemnly records the cumulative effect of millions of small acts of consumption. In Johnston's view, we fail to see the greater implications of our consumption because capitalism caters to or addresses us as individuals. Advertising thrives on niche markets and the illusion of personal service. We fail to see the impact of our individual actions multiplied by millions, if not billions of similar acts world-wide because those acts are well-hidden from public view. Johnston is disconcerted by the degree to which garbage is neither recycled nor responsibly disposed of globally. In the neighbourhood where he worked in China, garbage was generally swept up and

burned, although the general level of poverty ensured that much was recycled. Europe generates enormous amounts of garbage through excessive packaging and unnecessary display, a situation that runs counter to the continent's reputation for green policies, wind energy and other forms of ecological engagement. *Bag Suite in 4/4 Time* consists of stanchions and rope framing a series of four-foot shelves and fluorescent lights. The installation can be configured to reach lengths of up to 52 feet. The use of scale and repetition of four-foot units noted in the musical reference of the title suggest an ever-expanding and limitless quantity of product. The shelves are uniformly stacked with slip-cast



porcelain replicas of plastic bags, objects ostensibly banned in pre-Olympic China yet still appear to be omnipresent. Emblazoned on each bag is a black decal bag logo, which confers elite archival status onto each form. One golden "princess bag" is set on several smuggled Chinese plastic bags and presented as an "heirloom."

With these ambitious installations, Johnston encourages viewers to acknowledge their own acts of consumption, to reflect on materials as they pass through the physical world and to consider alternatives. The series title, *Refuse Culture*, neatly sums this up: not only are we asked to pay attention to what is discarded

as refuse, we are challenged to *refuse*—to refuse the alluring position proffered by capitalism and consumer culture in favour of an approach that is more balanced, ecologically sensitive and self-aware. ←

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NOTES

1. Personal interview November 19, 2008.
2. *Swimming Upstream: Through the Looking Glass*, 2007-8, to be shown at Vernon Public Art Gallery, Jan 8–Feb 26, 2009; Grand Forks Art Gallery, May 2–June 6, 2009, and Touchstones Nelson, Museum of Art and History, 2010. *Bag Suite in 4/4 Time*, 2007-8, to be shown at Grand Forks Art Gallery,

May 2–June 6, 2009; Touchstones Nelson, Museum of Art and History, 2010, date to be determined; Kelowna Art Gallery, Dec. 18, 2010–Feb. 6, 2011. Other work from the *Refuse Culture: Archaeology of Consumption* to be shown at Kootenay Gallery of Art History and Science, March 6–April 19, 2009; Kelowna Art Gallery, three-person show, *Module*, March 20–May 31, 2009.

3. The PWS Experimental Factory is situated on the site of the old National Porcelain Company Sculpture Factory in Jingdezhen, China. See <<http://potteryworkshop.org/jingdezhen>>.

