

# BRILLIANT ILLUSIONS

Crafted Forms by Li Hongwei



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For a Chinese ceramic artist, the weight of tradition is a heavy load to bear. As an heir to the world's most highly esteemed body of ceramic culture, the creative Chinese ceramist must continually face the conundrum of how to meet the challenge presented by works of the past without simply copying or imitating them. Li Hongwei appears to have met this challenge in part by distancing himself from China and seeing his own culture from a different perspective.

Li left China in 2005 to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in Ceramic Art at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, one of the world's few institutions of higher education to specialize in the ceramic arts (among the others is Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute in China). Building on his undergraduate degree in Sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Li's early New York works were a form of figural busts done in the low-fired raku format. He had a difficult time connecting with others at first and spent much of his time observing the landscape around him and pondering the human relationship to nature.

As he became acquainted with his fellow students and more comfortable in his surroundings, Li's focus gradually changed, and he moved away from the human figure. His interest turned to crystalline glazes and their unpredictable nature. In a sense, this was a logical step forward from the so-called American raku firing process, which often uses various materials in post-firing reduction to create subtle yet largely uncontrollable effects on the surfaces of pieces.

At the same time, he found himself able to look back at his own country's ceramic culture with new eyes. He began to appreciate the elegant shapes and refined proportions of the vases created in the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Instead of the perfect celadon glazes and underglaze cobalt blue decoration of the past, Li decided that he would use some of those classic shapes as palettes for new glaze types, ones that combined intense colors with startling effects that occurred spontaneously in the course of firing.

In fact, the appreciation of spontaneous glaze effects has a long, if somewhat marginalized, past in the history of

Chinese ceramics. In the Song dynasty, the random glaze crackle that occurred in the celadon types known as Ge and Guan were not only appreciated, but even cultivated and emphasized. Although from a technical point of view, glaze crackle represents a defect in a ceramic piece (since it results from a mismatch of the clay body and glaze in terms of expansion and contraction), Chinese connoisseurs loved the pattern that it created, with later collectors equating it to ice cracking on a pond. Celadon wares with crackled glazes continued to be made and prized throughout the centuries and are still admired today.

Other unpredictable glaze effects were found on pieces made at the Jian kilns of the Fujian province. Bowls from these kilns were shipped to Japan in large quantities and were avidly collected and treasured there as tenmoku tea bowls. Their glaze effects were evaluated and named, ranging from "hare's fur" to "oil spot" and "tortoise shell." Most famous of all were the "bright change" tenmoku bowls, of which only a handful exist. This last type displays bright blue iridescent effects that have proven virtually impossible to reproduce, even with modern scientific techniques.

The crystalline blooms that emerge on Li's classic Chinese ceramic forms endow them with a vibrancy unlike that of historical pieces. His works have an energy that transcends the monochrome examples of the Song dynasty, yet is more organic and mysterious than the Qing dynasty examples decorated with underglaze cobalt blue or copper red. Moreover, the nature of crystalline glazes is such that each glaze develops in a distinctive manner during the firing, making every piece unique.

In addition to his efforts to extend and elaborate on Chinese ceramic vessel tradition, through his work Li explores several fundamental aspects of sculpture, namely light, volume, balance, and flow. Although refracted light clearly plays an intrinsic role in his crystalline glazes, Li uses reflected light to make an even more emphatic statement through the incorporation of polished steel in his sculptural works. Certain pieces, like those in his *Illusion* series use a



**FRAGMENTS SERIES, UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #1**  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
45.5 x 45.5 x 120"  
HL112

mirror to give the sense that what is actually only half of a vase is in fact complete. In his *Upwelling of Gravity* series, a ceramic/steel composite form appears to flow upward, defying the pull of gravity. In *Xuan*, the fluid forms seem to be pulled to the center from both top and bottom, reminding one of suspended mercury or, perhaps, a lava lamp.

Li's most monumental works are those of his *Allegory of Balance* series, in which rounded forms resembling polished stones are stacked one upon the other. This approach harkens back to his days of raku sculpture, in which he frequently stacked inverted humanoid heads and shoulders to create pagoda-like constructions. Although a number of artists have stacked multiples of ordinary objects to create striking installations, Li creates his own objects and doesn't require that they be actually balanced in terms of weight distribution. Indeed, what is balanced is the visual effect, not the literal weight.

A conspicuous feature of this series is the mirrored steel sections that create a stark contrast with the colorful ceramic forms. The steel adds a layer of tension to the already rather uncomfortable feel of the stacked configurations, reflecting the ambient light, the other sculptural components, and even the viewer. The pod-like forms feel both organic and otherworldly, almost as if growing life-forms had robot components added to them. The impression given by these elements differs depending upon the level of ambient or directed light.

Like so many artforms that appear refined yet simple on the surface, the composite steel and porcelain forms are incredibly difficult to create. The marriage of clay and metal requires tedious and seemingly never-ending adjustments to produce the effect that the resulting shape is all of a piece. Li's work emphasizes the truth that the natural and the man-made, the organic and constructed, must live side by side in our present-day world.

The Daoist philosophy of Li's natal country teaches that balance between Yin and Yang must be maintained in order to preserve health and well-being. While breaking new ground in technique and approach, Li Hongwei's work also hints at profound philosophical concepts that have existed for centuries in the land of his birth.

— ANDREW L. MASKE

*Associate Professor of Art History, University of Kentucky*



**XUAN #29**  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
28.5 x 9 x 9"  
HL113



**XUAN #41**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 23.5 x 8.75 x 8.75"  
 HL115



**UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #64**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 28.75 x 10 x 10"  
 HL121



Li Hongwei is adept at combining qualities of formal rigor and playful experimentation, conditions that might seem irreconcilable; but in his singular vase forms and carefully calibrated arrangements of porcelain and stainless steel solids, there is a reverence for the past and a willingness to push order and balance to the brink. His work allows for intimate and active looking, as legacies of craft from Asia, Europe, and North America mingle in robust ways.

In recent years, I have come to describe the works exhibited and collected at our Museum as ranging from the “traditional to the radical.” This is meant to inform our audience, comprised of faculty, staff, and students on the University of Kentucky campus and thousands of visitors from our region and beyond, that we have significant examples of both historical and contemporary art for them to see. In Li’s creative output, we have the two impulses combined.

Some viewers believe in art’s comforting and confirming effects, in sympathy with Henri Matisse’s often cited text from 1908: “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” Others rely on artists to unsettle and provoke them, valuing a confrontation with challenging issues and unfamiliar forms or concepts. We believe in both of these types of encounters and revel in creating a welcoming and dynamic institution where visitors can form their own opinions and make meaningful connections.

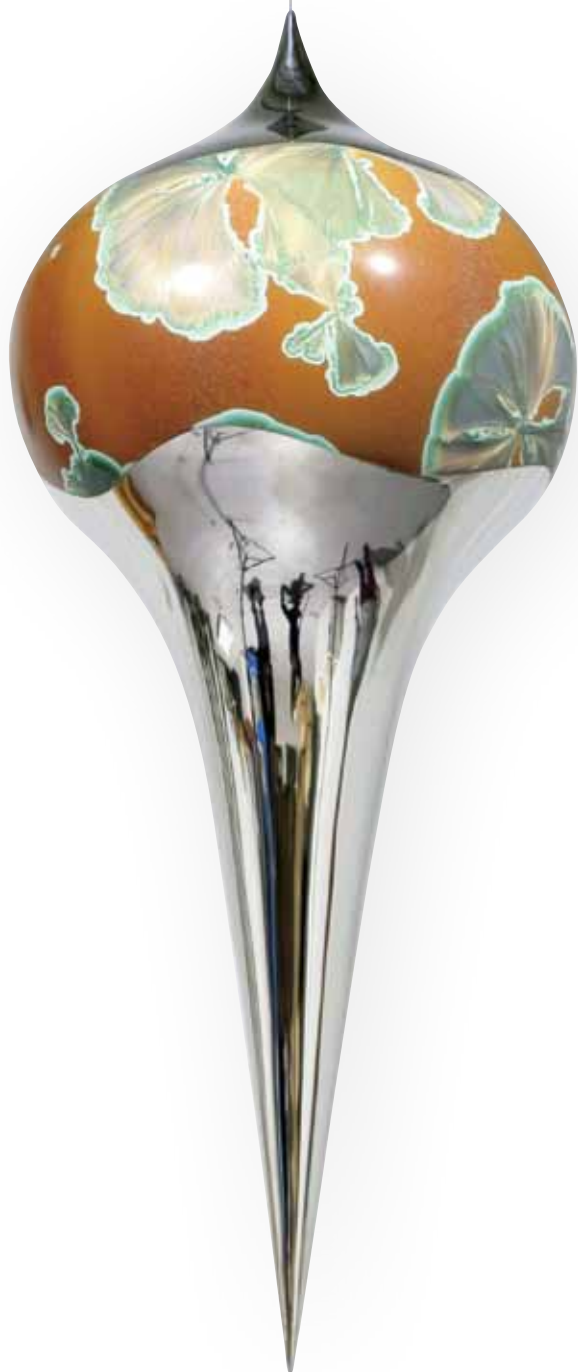
The opportunity to collaborate with peers at our university is often a desire not easily achieved despite proximity and shared pedagogical goals. In this case, we’ve succeeded. Li’s work became known to us through Associate Professor of Art History Andrew Maske, who started a lively conversation with curator Janie Welker which blossomed into a plan to showcase the artist’s exquisite sculptures, facilitated by loans and support by the Pucker Gallery in Boston. Registrar Maggie Bond and preparator Alan Rideout have been invaluable in helping with logistics and all practical matters.

Special thanks go to Professor of History Emeritus and long-time Museum patron James Albisetti, whose endowed fund is sponsoring the exhibition; and to Huajing Maske and the Office of China Initiatives at UK for providing additional resources. I appreciate the passion and intelligence of our colleagues and partners in bringing this project to fruition.

— STUART HORODNER  
*Director, University of Kentucky Art Museum*



**XUAN #32**  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
22.5 x 6.25 x 6.25"  
HL120



**XUAN #34**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 19 x 7.75 x 7.75"  
 HL128

*“Consciousness of  
 the beautiful will  
 save the world.”*

—BROTHER THOMAS BEZANSON (1929-2007)

**C**learly the remarkable art of Li Hongwei immediately calls to mind the descriptor “beautiful.” It is also a profound pairing of the ancient (porcelain and its 5,000-year-old history) and the modern (stainless steel, which connotes modernity).

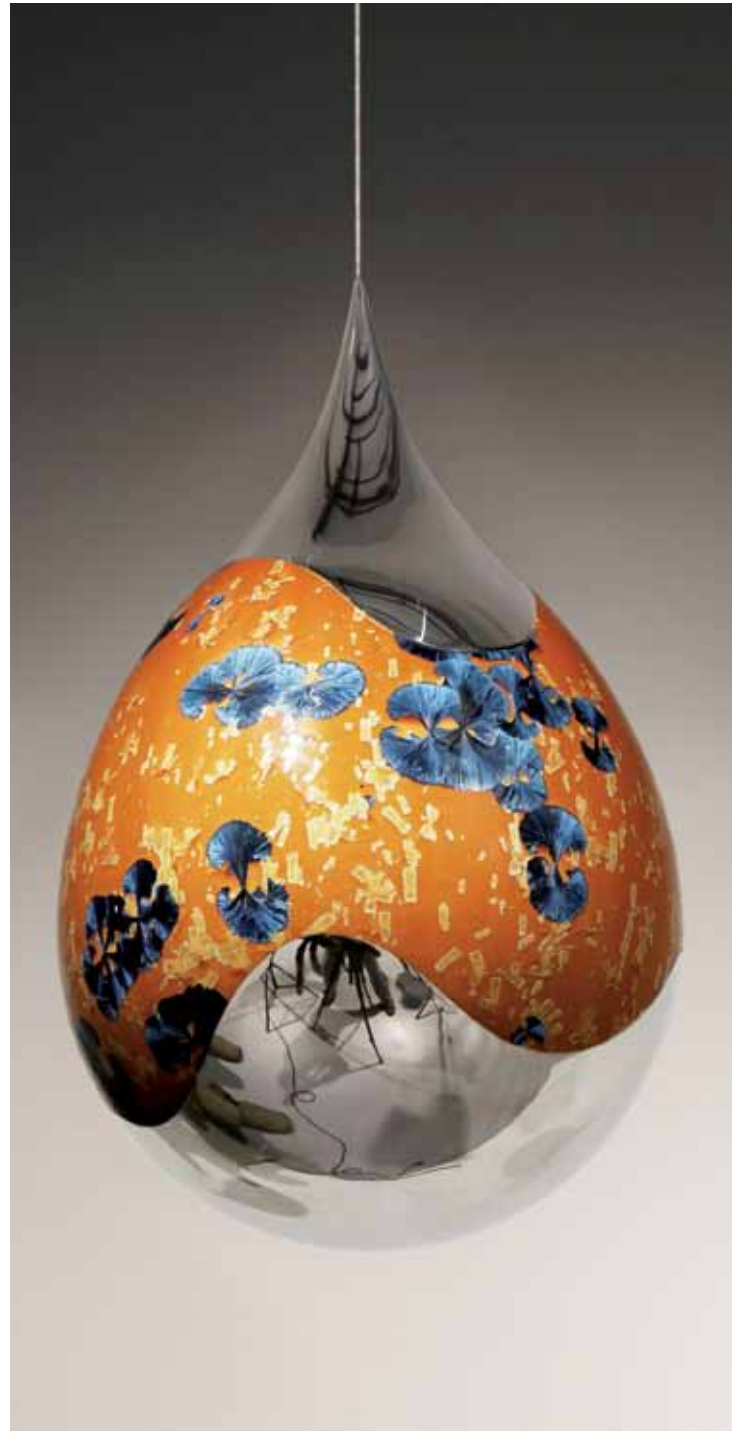
When Tao Wang, Pritzker Chair of Arts of Asia, executive director of initiatives in Asia, and curator of Chinese art at the Art Institute of Chicago, suggested that we meet Li Hongwei and review his art we were pleased to oblige, but hesitant as we already represented 17 artists who work in clay. Our meeting was an experience of “radical astonishment,” personal comfort, and total delight. The artist and his wife, Luqing, exude thoughtful kindness and goodness. Though his art is brilliant, it is grounded in their warmth and humanity.

We are grateful to them, to Professor Andrew Maske who gives written life to the art, and to all at the University of Kentucky Art Museum for mounting this major exhibition of beauty. May it direct all of us to make this a better world.

— BERNARD H. PUCKER  
*Pucker Gallery*



VASE  
Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
Porcelain  
14 x 6.5 x 6.5"  
HL73



XUAN #1  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
18.5 x 10 x 10"  
HL68





**XUAN #16**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 21.25 x 10 x 10"  
 HL87



**OLIVE VASE**  
 Traced ink splash glaze  
 Porcelain  
 16.25 x 7 x 7"  
 HL19



UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #52  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21.75 x 9.75 x 9.75"  
HL102



**PEAR SHAPED VASE**  
 Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
 Porcelain  
 14.5 x 9 x 9"  
 HL117



**PEAR SHAPED VASE**  
 Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
 Porcelain  
 12 x 6.25 x 6.25"  
 HL118



**GOURD VASE**  
 Splash peacock blue glaze  
 Porcelain  
 11.25 x 5.75 x 5.75"  
 HL27  
*Collection of the University  
 of Kentucky Art Museum,  
 gift of the Pucker Gallery  
 in honor of Andrew and  
 Huajing Maske*



**ILLUSION #4**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 25.5 x 17.75 x 5"  
 HL49



**ILLUSION #1**  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 19.75 x 15.75 x 2.75"  
 HL48



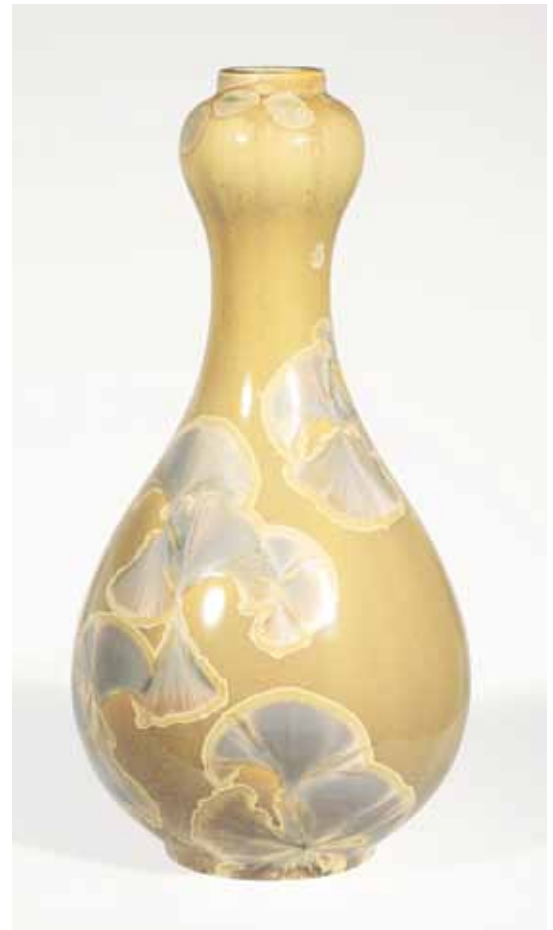
**VASE**  
 Traced ink splash glaze  
 Porcelain  
 12.75 x 9.25 x 9.25"  
 HL99





Li Hongwei (b.1980, China) is a contemporary artist who works and lives in Beijing and New York. His works have been acquired by the British Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, The Israel Museum, the Harvard Art Museum, the University of Kentucky Art Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. His works have been exhibited in numerous international art institutions, including: the University of Kentucky; the National Art Museum of China; the Louvre; the U.S. Embassy Art Program; the New Mexico Museum of Art; the Fox Art Gallery of the University of Pennsylvania; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Dublin Castle in Ireland. In 2013, he was awarded the Taylor Prize by the 2013 France International Salon.

Hongwei holds a bachelor's degree in sculpture from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and a Masters in ceramic art from the New York State College of Ceramics at the Alfred University in Alfred, NY. As a visiting artist, he has been invited to give lectures in different institutions, including Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



**GARLIC HEAD VASE**  
Gold crystal splashing yellow glaze  
Porcelain  
16.75 x 8 x 8"  
HL106



UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #63  
Stainless steel and porcelain  
18 x 10 x 10"  
HL105

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University of Kentucky Art Museum

## DATES:

18 January – 4 June 2022

## GUEST CURATOR:

Andrew L. Maske

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**Cover:**  
**ALLEGORY OF BALANCE #18**  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
61.5 x 27.5 x 21.5"  
HL59