

# BALANCING THE COSMOS

WORKS BY LI HONGWEI



KALAMAZOO INSTITUTE OF ARTS

We are honored to host *Balancing the Cosmos: Works by Li Hongwei* in the Joy Light Gallery of Asian Art at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts (KIA). The Joy Light Gallery is a unique exhibition space at the museum and within the Southwest Michigan region. Established in 2010, this gallery has been a dedicated teaching center for Midwest communities to experience and explore traditional and contemporary arts of East Asia. In addition, for nearly 50 years, artists have learned to create beautiful objects using clay, glaze, and steel—the same materials used by the artist Li Hongwei—in the KIA’s Kirk Newman Art School. Now, dozens of Kalamazoo art students and art enthusiasts will learn from direct observation of Li’s masterful and innovative sculptures during this exhibition.

Li Hongwei is a visionary who expresses the ancient Chinese principle of yin and yang with a fresh universal resonance and beauty. He offers a poetic intertwining of tradition and modernity through his inventive use of clay and stainless steel in symbolic vessels, suspended orbs, and other forms. Many of the works in *Balancing the Cosmos* were created during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time of reflection that tested our strengths and vulnerabilities globally. His reimaginings of ancient balance reflected in new forms invite everyone to seek balance, personal solace, and collective harmony in an uncertain and often divided world.

Li’s work is also an appropriate symbol of complementary and supportive relationships. KIA Chief Curator, Rehema Barber has been a creative and thoughtful partner throughout her curation of *Balancing the Cosmos*. Additional thanks are due to Bernard Pucker and the Pucker Gallery for their much appreciated enthusiasm and cooperation. Finally, we are extraordinarily grateful for the generous patronage of Joy and Tim Light and all of our supporters for making this exhibition possible.

—Belinda Tate  
Executive Director, KIA

Li Hongwei's works feature whirling and brilliant colors, the artist's unique visual language, and reflect the images of their viewers. I spoke with Hongwei about his work and process, and how he hopes people will respond to the blending of ceramics and stainless steel in his unique sculptures.

**REHEMA BARBER (RB):** Your early sculptures were more figurative; can you talk about the shift in your practice from fired clay and porcelain to fired porcelain and stainless steel?

**LI HONGWEI (LH):** I received my BFA in sculpture at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, which borrows its educational approach from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and the Repin Institute of Arts in St. Petersburg. We were trained to create realistic renderings of the human body, inspired by the works of Michelangelo, Carpeaux, and Rodin. I was also enamored of the Qin Dynasty terra-cotta army, the terra-cotta dancers from the Han Dynasty, and Buddhist sculpture from the Yungang grottoes. I experimented with different materials and techniques, including casting and wood and stone carving. I made clay sculptures that were then cast in bronze or iron, and sculptures out of a softer clay that I then fired. For me, clay has a special power in how it takes on shape and changes. It seized my emotions, movements, and memories like no other material, and I spent my last two years at CAFA experimenting with fired clay. I then got my MFA in ceramic art at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University at Alfred, NY. I studied Song Dynasty (960-1279) ceramics to learn crystalline glaze (which had been discovered by chance). This glaze is strong and artistic and works best on simple forms. My experience directed me to the idea that combining crystalline glaze and stainless steel would fit my abstract forms.

**RB:** Do you start with a sketch or work intuitively? Can you discuss the process of building your forms? What does a day in your studio typically look like?

**LH:** Many of my ideas come from my travels and some come from the making process. In general, when I have an idea I start with clay, but also make sketches. I use small 3-dimensional studies, select the ideal ones, use foam to figure out the scale of the work, then work on the life-size model. Scale is very important for sculptures. After working on space and scale, I work on the actual materials. Usually, the finished sculpture is quite different from the original idea because my ideas keep changing. I work in the studio around ten hours a day. I spend some time reading, then work on my art the rest of the time.

**RB:** Do you think about how the viewer will experience the work in relation to their body?

**LH:** The viewer plays an important role in my work. With a smaller piece there is a sense of intimacy. With larger works I think about how the viewer will interact with the piece. Stainless steel has a reflective quality and the surface is curved; the form and the material reflect the viewer. I think about how the viewer will react, seeing themselves on the surface of the stainless steel. When people look at the ceramics, their reflection is blurry. But when their eyes move to the steel surface, their reflection becomes clear. In general, the larger pieces are for public spaces, so viewers can walk around the work. I make life-size studies to experience the piece before finishing it. I communicate with the piece by pretending I am the viewer—I look at the piece and see how I feel. The viewer is a bridge to connect the past and present.

**RB:** Your works express individual creativity, but they also have the ability to interact with viewers. Can you talk about physical space and your work in relation to these ideas?

**LH:** I think that art is a kind of language—a visual language. When people communicate, their own specific languages can be a barrier to being able to speak with one another. With art, I feel I find a way to clearly convey my ideas, and the artwork is very open to speak with viewers. I hope my art communicates my ideas to the viewer, but also that the viewer really sees themselves through my work. I communicate my ideas through this visual language, that's why the scale and other aspects of the artwork are important, but when viewers experience my work, they see their own reflection, their lives.

**RB:** I'm curious about the *Allegory of Balance* series. Those sculptures merge and flow together but have distinct shapes throughout them. There is a play between materials and form. Can you talk about this a bit more?

**LH:** The ovoid and tapering shapes of *Allegory of Balance* reference the Chinese concept of a square within a circle. In early Chinese cosmology, the earth was square and the heavens were domed, thus the square within the circle is a powerful symbol linking heaven and earth. In terms of sculpture, a square within a circle conveys a sense of rigidity inside and softness outside. When fired porcelain and stainless-steel combine, the resulting balanced and smooth structure conveys the Chinese aesthetic of harmony and simplicity and serves as a metaphor for the co-existence of the past and present—in other words, history and contemporaneity. Can tradition and contemporary coexist harmoniously without compromising the charm of each? I try to answer this question by experimenting with different materials, colors, and forms. The combination of traditional, colorful porcelain and contemporary, stainless steel, with the various shapes stacking together, creates musical rhythm. Different historical periods compose an allegory of balance and harmony.

**RB:** The works in *Balancing the Cosmos: Works by Li Hongwei* are from several different series. What are some thoughts or themes behind the *Xuan*, *Upwelling of Gravity*, and *Fragments* series?

**LH:** With the *Xuan*, I read a lot of Daoism, Chinese philosophy. I use the unique characteristics of and pronunciations in the Chinese language as a metaphor for or pun to express the philosophy of “Xuan” (玄, meaning mysterious), by way of something “Xuan” (悬, meaning hanging). In Chinese philosophy, it is very deep, very thoughtful, so I hang the work in the air to open the door to the mysterious. This idea also inspires the *Upwelling of Gravity* series. The Chinese title called “Li” (升, meaning high mountain), shares the same Chinese pronunciation with “Li” (立, meaning stand), and “Li” (丽, meaning beauty). For the *Fragments* series, fragment means separation, disintegration of the whole, loss of order; fragment can refer to confusion, damage, and even destruction. However, these ceramic shards from different porcelain vessels have become my self-sufficient visual language; after reorganization and splicing, the fragments construct a new whole. The shards become the key to eliminating boundaries and crossing the gap. Chaos and order, separation and unity, fragmentation and wholeness.

**RB:** The glazing process can be unpredictable. Are there times when unexpected effects are achieved? What do you do with those works?

**LH:** The firing process is key. I fire the porcelain at a very high temperature and then suddenly reduce the heat to let the temperature drop to a certain level, which I maintain for a few hours. If necessary, I adjust the temperature. It all depends on the desired result. Many factors can affect the outcome—how fast I change the temperature, how long I hold a given temperature, how thickly the glaze is applied. These variables enable me to control the size, shape, number, and color of the crystals, though I can only control up to 80 percent of the outcome; the rest is in the hands of God. I am always surprised by the result, and often in a bad way. If it ends up a perfect piece, I am very excited. If it

is an unwanted result, I consider it an opportunity to break the rules to create something new. That’s why I started to cut ceramic forms into irregular shapes.

**RB:** Ceramicists historically break vessels for quality issues. What made you start breaking vessels? How long does it take to make these monumental works?

**LH:** It takes a few months to make these pieces, to work on the stainless steel, the structure, the ceramics, and the glaze. I save only the perfect pieces, keeping the very best quality vessels. Otherwise, I break them to create the shards. I can’t just use any broken vessel, though; it must have a specific shape depending on the form I need. I gently break vessels to get the ideal shards, trying to save as much as I can. When I work on the shards, there is an idea behind it. I touch every element of the artwork, every shard, and even though I have assistants I am the only person working on the glaze and the firing. I use my heart in every piece—there’s no hate involved. When the ceramics are broken, I’m just changing the ceramic’s life—a sort of back to nature. By using shards, I extend its life, I create something new. I think about how things come together. I think about human life. There’s a plan, but then there’s no plan. I started working with the shards in 2019, right before the pandemic. I traveled across the U.S. and noticed a lot of conflict. For me, the ceramic shards mean brokenness, damage, destruction, but I try to find a good way to make them come together, a constructive way to connect the parts. I’m trying to bring broken things together in a new way.

**RB:** I think what you’re saying is that although we’re different, our differences don’t have to divide us. We can reconcile our differences—recognize our brokenness as people—because everyone has pain. By recognizing this, we get to see one another’s humanity.

**LH:** That’s it. We’re not as different as we think; there is beauty even in the damaged parts.



**O**n July 28, 1976, Li Hongwei's birth city, Tangshan, China, experienced one of the worst earthquakes of the twentieth century. In it, more than 240,000 inhabitants died, and more than 160,000 were injured. Although he was born in 1980 and thus spared direct trauma from the earthquake, its effects were evident among the people he knew during his formative years, including his parents. Virtually everyone in the city lost someone in the earthquake; some were their family's sole surviving member. Watching his city and his family rebuild from fragments, both physically and psychologically, must have had a profound impact on Li's outlook on life.

The area of Tangshan has produced utilitarian ceramics since the fifteenth century. Today, it is known for its industrial ceramics such as sinks and toilets, and for large-scale tableware production, much of it for export. The Tangshan ceramics tradition did not have a notable impact on Li Hongwei during his youth, and his childhood artistic background consisted of training in calligraphy by a local artist from age six. Nevertheless, the prominence of local ceramics production did impress on him the important role of Chinese ceramics in world culture.

There is little debate that China owns the world's greatest ceramics tradition. Nearly all of the great historical triumphs of ceramics technology either originated or were perfected by Chinese craftsmen, from the awe-inspiring life-size figures of the Terracotta Army to the three-color glazed tomb sculpture of the Tang dynasty and from the glories of Song dynasty celadons to the decorated white porcelain of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. Chinese ceramics made for export have been discovered on every continent except Antarctica. The weight of this tradition presents a daunting challenge for the contemporary ceramic artist in China. Many have struggled for decades to create pieces that express aspects of their heritage in innovative ways yet communicate something aesthetically and intellectually meaningful to people of diverse backgrounds.

Li Hongwei came to ceramics through his first medium of sculpture. After exposure to the discipline in high school, he began his training at China's premier art university, the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. There, he received a thorough grounding in the sculptural discipline, which led him to pursue further study in the United States. His choice of the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University was consequential, since it placed him on the only degree-granting institution in the U.S. with a primary focus on the ceramic arts. Much of his early work there was sculptural in nature, executed in bronze or ceramic. At first, he produced pieces based on the human body, most notably a series of abstracted self-portraits. These were created out of the sense of isolation and otherness that he felt in a small, rather isolated community in upstate New York that had almost no other residents of Asian heritage.

While at Alfred, Li Hongwei was introduced to a variety of ceramic approaches that were rarely explored in China. One of these was the American raku technique, a method derived from that used for a certain type of Japanese glazed earthenware called Raku from the sixteenth century and later. American raku relies on relatively quick firing, and Li used it to produce some of his self-portrait pieces. One of the idiosyncrasies of American raku is that it allows for the creation of innovative and loosely controlled surface effects in what is called "post-firing reduction." This method is counterintuitive to the traditional Chinese approach to ceramics in which makers typically seek consistency and predictability in their products.

Another volatile ceramic method that Li encountered in his exploration of ceramic processes was the use of crystalline glazes. Crystalline glazes first played a significant role in Chinese ceramics during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), appearing primarily in muted colors on black-glazed wares such as tea bowls. Li carried out numerous experiments to find ways to facilitate the emergence of crystals that were larger and bolder. Crystalline glazes typically contain zinc oxide, which can form beautiful crystals in the cooling stages of a firing. Such crystals are cultivated by glaze composition and firing temperature manipulation but can never be completely controlled. Li hit upon the idea of using such glazes on classic Chinese vessel shapes to create striking, colorful works unlike any before seen. These pieces are beautiful both in profile and surface and serve to vividly connect Li's work to his Chinese heritage.

Yet, it was a by-product of Li's experimentation with crystalline glazes that sparked his greater innovations. As he fired more and more vessels with the unpredictable glazes, he generated an increasing number of "failures"—pieces with flaws that Li felt made them less than suitable for inclusion in his corpus. Typically, ceramic makers simply break such pieces and discard them in the most convenient way possible. The sherds of many pre-industrial ceramic failures were usually tossed away in the areas next to the kilns that fired them—only to be discovered centuries later by collectors and researchers eager to verify the characteristics of those early wares.

Li Hongwei was struck by what a waste it was to simply throw away any piece that had the smallest flaw and began think about how such pieces might be salvaged. From his experience growing up, he knew that things—objects, buildings, even people—could be restored and made useful again, and that their beauty should be preserved even if they were imperfect.

Beginning in 2013, Li began exploring ways to salvage and reuse examples of his work that had turned out differently than he intended. He hit upon the use of polished steel to supplement or replace areas that he felt needed to be removed because of glaze flaws or other problems. This led to an increasing focus on multimedia abstract sculpture rather than classic Chinese ceramic

vessels with crystalline glazes. Through use of the sculptural medium, he could explore philosophical and aesthetic ideas that were restricted by adherence to the vessel format. He began to create porcelain shapes with crystalline glazes that had little or no relation to traditional Chinese ceramics—shapes that expressed concepts found in Chinese philosophy, such as Daoism (aka Taoism)—and use steel to complete the forms in ways that matched his aesthetic vision. While the colorful glazes highlighted contrasts between pieces, the polished steel components reflected not only other elements of the constructed work, but even those who viewed them, making the audience a participant in the overall visual effect. Among the series Li produced in this mode are *Allegory of Balance*, *Illusion*, *Xuan* and *Upwelling of Gravity*.

Li's series *Allegory of Balance* expresses the Daoist concept of Yin and Yang, the positive and negative forces that complement and counteract each other. Whereas Western ideas of balance tend to be arbitrary and exact, deriving from measured factors such as weight and mass, balance in Daoist terms is much more holistic and organic. This is explored in Li's sculpture, which does not incorporate a strict 50-50 relationship between metal and porcelain, or balance based on two even or equal sides. Instead, this series explores balance as an aesthetic and theoretical concept, similar to the *feng shui* approach to the arrangement of space.

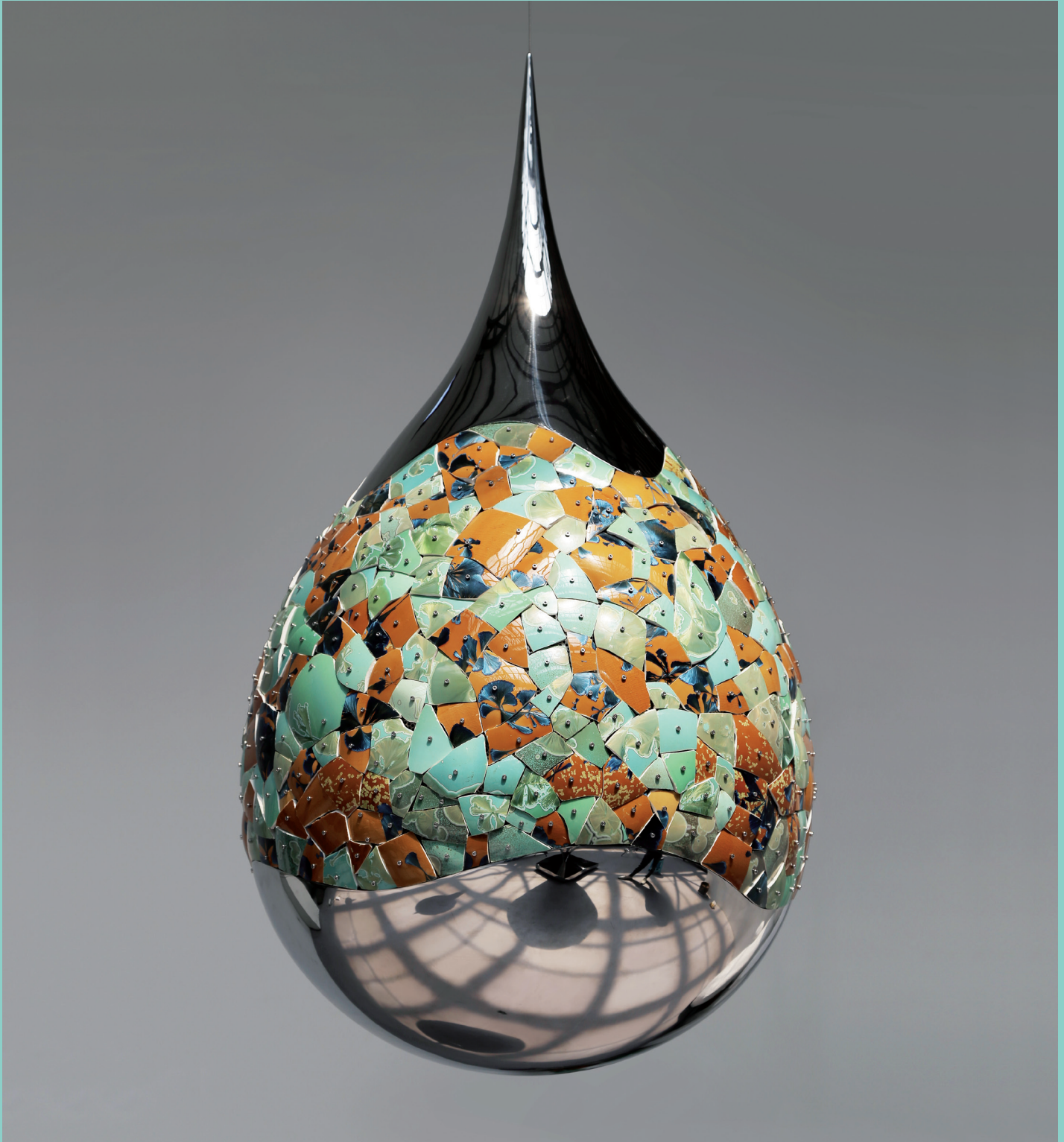
The *Xuan* and *Upwelling of Gravity* series explore forms derived from the behavior of liquids in motion, echoing the belief that the Dao is always in flux. *Xuan* is a Chinese word that vaguely means "mysterious" or "profound." Some pieces in this series are reminiscent of water droplets, but others give the sense of a much more viscous liquid, sometimes suspended between two points. That, no doubt, is part of the mystery. *Upwelling of Gravity* takes the movement of *Xuan* and literally

turns it upside down, demonstrating that the energy of the Dao is not confined by the restrictions the physical world as we perceive it. Recently, these two series have been joined by *Dan (Egg)*, which utilizes the same technical approach but considers instead aspects of birth and life.

Li's most recent work circles back to his earlier ideas of reuse and revitalization. He revisits the various series mentioned above, but incorporates sherds from earlier discarded pieces, using them to create a patchwork of color in place of the custom-formed porcelain of previous examples. He calls this new approach *Fragments*. Like his other sculptural work, the works in this series are created through a painstaking and lengthy process. Whereas works in the earlier series required that porcelain and metal be matched exactly to create a seamless fit, works of this series necessitate careful selection of hundreds of porcelain fragments that are attached individually to a mesh foundation that makes up a section of the overall shape. The effect that is created is one of a mosaic that represents the collective reinvigoration of works that were previously relegated to unusable status.

Like his natal city after the earthquake, Li Hongwei has developed methods to restore, revitalize, and reuse his fragmented surroundings to create work that is strikingly innovative and beautiful. What some might see as simple resourcefulness, to him is something much more significant. It represents restoration—and revision. As our world grows more crowded and our natural resources decrease, it is incumbent upon us to seriously consider our daily choices and look for beauty and utility in places that we have previously ignored. The Daoist ideals that Li seeks to express through his work require a commitment to preservation of not just human life, but to the ecosphere and, indeed, the Universe that sustains it.

# WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



FRAGMENTS SERIES, XUAN #3  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
51 X 26 X 26"





**XUAN #38**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
33 X 9 X 9"



**ALLEGORY OF BALANCE #17**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
49.25 X 25.5 X 17.75"





**XUAN #42**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
25 X 7.75 X 7.75"



**DAN 1**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
14.25 X 10 X 10"



**UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #30**  
STAINLESS STEEL AND PORCELAIN  
15.5 X 8 X 8"



**UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #68**  
STAINLESS STEEL AND PORCELAIN  
17.5 X 10 X 10"





**UPWELLING OF GRAVITY #12**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
22.5 X 9.75 X 9.75"



**ILLUSION #3**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
25.5 X 17.75 X 9.5"



**XUAN #24**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
29.5 X 10.75 X 10.75"



**FRAGMENTS SERIES, XUAN #2**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
63.5 X 21.25 X 21.25"





**FRAGMENTS SERIES, XUAN #1**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
50.25 X 21 X 21"



**XUAN #30**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
28.5 X 9 X 9"



**XUAN #35**  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
12 X 7 X 7"



**DAN PING VASE**  
TRACED INK SPLASH GLAZE  
PORCELAIN  
13 X 6.5 X 6.5"



**OLIVE VASE**  
TRACED INK SPLASH GLAZE  
PORCELAIN  
14.5 X 6.25 X 6.25"



**PEAR-SHAPED VASE WITH FLARED LIP**  
SPLASH PEACOCK BLUE GLAZE  
PORCELAIN  
12.5 X 7 X 7"





Li Hongwei (b.1980, China) 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 Museums, the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others, and exhibited in international art institutions such as the National Art Museum of China, the Louvre, the U.S. Embassy, 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. He holds a bachelor's degree in sculpture from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and a master's in ceramic art from the New York State College of Ceramics at the Alfred University at Alfred, NY.

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JUNE 18 TO OCTOBER 2, 2022



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MONDAY AND TUESDAY: CLOSED

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COVER:  
ALLEGORY OF BALANCE #32  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
59 X 25.5 X 17.75"

XUAN #27  
PORCELAIN AND STAINLESS STEEL  
23.75 X 9 X 9"