

Richard Fahey

Title: “Colonial Shino”: A Case Study of Cultural Importation, Translation & Transaction.

‘Colonial Shino’, a phrase coined to describe particular values associated with the effervescent flourishing of the studio pottery movement within New Zealand from the 1950’s to the 1970’s.

This paper seeks firstly to map the connection between geographical locale and cultural experience through consideration of the peculiarly distinctive socio-political conditions from which emerged New Zealand studio pottery.

For the most part an understanding of New Zealand cultural production operates within the appropriative paradigms associated with the rise of European colonialism and global capitalism. In absence of indigenous clay traditions, local ceramics had to hitch a ride on the back of industry, water pipes, bricks and lavatories. Twentieth century Modernism had by necessity taken a circuitous route to find its way to these cloudy isles. On its belated and travel-weary arrival, it was commandeered by cultural accountants who repackaged it as a marriage of Romanticism and Nationalism. The pursuit of a nationalist canon was implicitly aligned with the post-war production boom, import substitution and trade protectionism.

During the 1950s, 60s and 70s this partial economic and cultural assemblage was pieced together. By the early 80s it had become unhinged. This was a generation whose senses had been numbed by the reverberating phrases, sounds and images of the mass media. Buffeted by post-feminist, post-modernist, post-colonial discourses, nuclear false alarms, oil-shock crises, ecological booby traps and technological obsolescence, this was a generation whose collective understanding of ‘self’ was in shambles; defactoed, decentred, multiple and mobile.

This paper presents the view that it is precisely the very nature of New Zealand’s, diminutive demographic and geo-political distance that makes for a distinctive and sustainable infrastructure for cultural production. New Zealanders have a ‘club’ mentality that draws its members from a small gene pool. Inevitably diversification arises when different propositions rub shoulders in such close proximity and exemplary performance can emerge where the demographic is simply not of a sufficient scale to accommodate the mediocre.

Galvanized within rival processes of innovation and received tradition, New Zealand contemporary ceramics is arguably as provincial as it was 30 years ago – the difference now is that ‘difference’ is understood as a response to the aestheticisation and the consumption of cultural difference. Citation and appropriation are the hallmark of aesthetic development and economic diversity. By conceiving the contemporary as thus, issues to do with status, definitions and ascription of merit, erode, and in their place, opportunities for a diverse, sustainable and a critically mediated craft practice arise.

Finally this paper will consider a number of propositions based on the extrapolation of the ‘village’ metaphor for how we may productively conceive of a sustainable model for the future of global craft production, distribution and reception.