

# Bùi Công Khánh

## Contemporary story

Bùi Công Khánh's painted porcelain vessels feature the ubiquitous sights and sounds of Vietnamese daily life: motorbike riders, street signage, advertising and romantic interludes. By combining what he calls 'the character of the present' with the traditional form of the porcelain vase, Bùi places the culture of modern life into the flow of history.<sup>1</sup>

Bùi's ceramic work draws particularly on traditional Vietnamese blue-and-white pottery, which is decorated using an underglaze technique – cobalt blue oxide is applied to the porcelain vessel and covered with a translucent glaze before being fired in a kiln at high temperature. The use of cobalt blue underglaze, for painting classic images such as landscapes, dragons, flowers, fish and birds, began in Vietnam during the fourteenth century, about the same time as it did in China.<sup>2</sup> Blue-and-white porcelain, whether Chinese or Vietnamese, soon became a trading commodity in markets in South-East Asia and the Middle East, and eventually worldwide, versions of which are still made today for international markets.<sup>3</sup>

Vietnamese porcelain was mainly off-white in hue, and the subtle contrast between the blue decoration and white clay body was considered a distinguishing feature.<sup>4</sup> Vietnamese potters also benefited from smooth-textured clays, enabling them to produce light vessels with thin walls.<sup>5</sup> Both qualities are apparent in Bùi's vases, but he has subverted traditional practices and designs to suit his own purposes.

In APT6 there are two large vases (over a metre high), as well as a series of seven smaller vases (around half a metre high), one for each day of the week, creating a kind of diary of life in Vietnam, 'life that seems never to be interrupted'.<sup>6</sup> Bùi's graphic, figurative images drawn on the porcelain, woven with traditional elements, portray the artist's personal stories mixed with frenetic city life. As he explains, one vase, titled *A contemporary story 1* 2008, includes his own face along with his mother's because 'my knowledge, my artistry were supported by my mom and her hard work'; another, *A contemporary story 2* 2008, includes an image of a man submerged in a container of water, 'swimming in his puddle of life and thinking that it is as huge as [an] ocean' – a familiar predicament.<sup>7</sup>

Bùi's often humorous stories are, however, more intriguing than these descriptions might suggest; the vases present layered narratives, composed of multiple images. *A contemporary story 2*, for example, has an image of a second man sitting on a toilet and holding a plate with a hamburger and a can of soft drink. Writ large above the figure are the words 'Live to eat', which comments on far-reaching Western consumerist society – a recurrent theme in Bùi's art. He also incorporates texts taken from propaganda banners or street signage, such as: 'Attention please!', 'No gathering and no trading' and 'Culture quarter', while the words 'Tonight I celebrate my love' are taken from the Peabo Bryson and Roberta Flack song, popular in Vietnamese karaoke bars.

Despite the layers of images and texts, Bùi says he wants to present modern life as simply as possible: 'like when we close our eyes and we can hear the noise on the streets'.<sup>8</sup> Life in Vietnamese cities has altered dramatically over the last 20 years, starting in 1986 with *Đổi mới* (literally, change and newness), when Vietnam began transforming itself into a market economy with a socialist direction. Since then, the country has seen amazing economic growth accompanied by cultural changes including tacit acceptance of personal freedoms.<sup>9</sup>

It is this new life in Vietnam that Bùi comments on in his art. 'I paint the life calmly like writing my diary', he says. Bùi Công Khánh's ceramics – as well as his paintings, performances and sculptures – skilfully link contemporary society in Vietnam to history. But, even as he draws on traditional practice, what he cares most about 'is the present life, I don't want to sponge the past, I don't want to use the past like a way to preserve the "national cultural character"'.<sup>10</sup>

Ian Were

### Endnotes

- 1 Bùi Công Khánh, email to Russell Storer, Queensland Art Gallery, 8 February 2009.
- 2 Blue-and-white ceramics prospered in Jingdezhen, China, during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and were introduced to Vietnam towards the end of the Tran dynasty (1225–1400). See Tokyo National Museum, <[http://www.tnm.go.jp/en/servlet/Con?pageld=D01&processId=02&event\\_id=1655&event\\_idx=1&initdate=2005/08/01&dispdte=2005/09/29](http://www.tnm.go.jp/en/servlet/Con?pageld=D01&processId=02&event_id=1655&event_idx=1&initdate=2005/08/01&dispdte=2005/09/29)>, viewed August 2009; see also the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/sse/ho\\_1989.157.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/08/sse/ho_1989.157.htm)>, viewed August 2009.
- 3 See Asia Society, New York, <[http://www.asiasocietymuseum.com/region\\_results.asp?RegionID=3&CountryID=11&ChapterID=21](http://www.asiasocietymuseum.com/region_results.asp?RegionID=3&CountryID=11&ChapterID=21)>, viewed August 2009.
- 4 See Tokyo National Museum, <[http://www.tnm.go.jp/en/servlet/Con?pageld=D01&processId=02&event\\_id=1655&event\\_idx=1&initdate=2005/08/01&dispdte=2005/09/29](http://www.tnm.go.jp/en/servlet/Con?pageld=D01&processId=02&event_id=1655&event_idx=1&initdate=2005/08/01&dispdte=2005/09/29)>, viewed August 2009.
- 5 Allison Eckardt Ledes, 'Vietnamese ceramics', *The Magazine Antiques*, vol.150, no.3, September 1996, pp.238–9.
- 6 Bùi, email to Russell Storer.
- 7 Bùi, email to Russell Storer.
- 8 Bùi, email to Russell Storer.
- 9 See San José State University Department of Economics, 'The political and economic history of Vietnam', <<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/vietnam.htm>> viewed August 2009; and *The Star Online*, <<http://biz.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/11/26/business/19558548&sec=business#>>, viewed August 2009.
- 10 Bùi, email to Russell Storer.





Bùi Công Khánh

Vietnam b.1972

*A contemporary story 2* 2008

Porcelain, hand-painted / 58 x 20 x 20cm / Purchased

2009. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant /

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery