

# SUBLIME

WORKS BY LI HONGWEI



Pucker Gallery | Boston



*Dan*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
14.25 x 10 x 10"  
HL124

# SUBLIME

## WORKS BY LI HONGWEI

When I first encountered the work of Li Hongwei at Pucker Gallery in Boston a few years ago, I wanted to reach out and touch it. His globular, gravity-defying porcelain and stainless steel forms were glazed, fused, and finished so highly that they reflected the shapes and shadows around them. They looked like hard candy or miniature hot air balloons suspended under the gallery lights.

Of course, I resisted the itch in my fingertips. My haptic impulse recalled an electricity felt fifteen years

earlier while walking up the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. There, bay upon bay of sculptures in every conceivable material by the soon-to-be-late and inimitable French-American artist, Louise Bourgeois, invited a similarly tactile response. (I resisted there, too.)

Beyond the same desire to reach out and skim the surfaces and contours of these works, I was struck by the ways in which cultural inheritance pulled like a sandbag on received readings of Li's oeuvre, just like that of the otherwise incomparable Bourgeois.

Some of the first things one is told or reads about Li's



*Fragments Series, Upwelling of Gravity #1*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
3.25 x 3.25 x 14 feet  
HL112

work is the liminality of his status as an artist trained in and living between Beijing, China and upstate New York, and his aesthetic and material debt to preceding generations of Chinese ceramicists in his approach to glaze and decoration.<sup>1</sup> As an art historian, I understand the connoisseurial impulse to contextualize Li's practice in the history of Asian ceramics and their global dissemination. This has been done with authority by the preeminent scholar and curator, Tao Wang, the Pritzker Chair of Asian Art & Curator of Chinese Art at the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 2018, Wang noted the artist's longstanding interest in crystal-glazed ceramics of China's "old dynasties," and the ovoid bodies of his sculptures which "echo the Chinese ideas of beauty, harmony, subtlety, and simplicity." When Li was awarded the Taylor Prize by the 2013 France International Salon, the chairman of the committee commented, "His work is a reflection of plural thoughts and their ongoing changes in contemporary Chinese cultural context."

Li's mastery of the alchemical processes that shape his materials and their surfaces is evident upon the very first glance at his work. He associates his materials with an inherent fragility that evokes, in his words, "fragmentation, damage, even destruction," and his recent *Fragments* series is grounded in explorations of reconstruction. Refusing any idea of a linear progression to his development as an artist, Li instead finds his anchor in an almost obsessive exploration of material, continually circling around and molding centrifugal forms.

It is how Li defines this historical inheritance, and his confident embrace of fine art, craft, and design worlds, that demarcates his practice as a contemporary artist. His sculptures blend recognizable vessel shapes with abstract silhouettes, whether flattening their bisections against polished steel or fusing closed forms together to create conjoined ceramic and metal cairns. His sculptures often play with orientation, turning structures upside down and sideways, and in doing so, changing the ways in which we perceive them as individual components and as a larger

whole. Shaped like an inverted teardrop, in *Upwelling of Gravity #10* (2017)—which is in the permanent collection at my institution in Boston—Li uses stainless steel on the base and lower half of the sculpture to create effects of reflection and doubling. It is a signature aesthetic of his work.

These elements are unarguably present. But as someone invested in histories of modern and contemporary design, they are not the things that set my heart alight about Li's beautiful sculptures. Instead, my curiosity is piqued most by the fact that the artist holds a national patent in China to a unique "splash peacock blue glaze," tying his work to histories of innovation that are codified in design canons rather than art histories.

In that vein, Li's work traces a lineage to Alfred Barr, the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, and Philip Johnson, the inaugural curator of architecture and design. Their exhibition of industrial marvels, titled *Machine Art* and held at MoMA in 1934, was MoMA's first exhibition of design. It displayed innovations in engineering and technology—including a self-aligning ball bearing, scientific beakers made by Corning Glass, and industrial springs. An airplane propeller greeted visitors at the entrance to the museum, then a townhouse in midtown Manhattan. Li's work presents an industrial finish and intellectual foundation that, to my mind, speaks across the decades and disciplinary silos to these objects.

And then, in the same way Li himself moves fluidly between his two primary media, so too do we find ourselves back in the land of contemporary sculpture. The works in *Machine Art* aped the auratic museum presentation of Brancusi sculptures, silhouetted on white plinths in a room where all moldings had been deliberately covered to provide a perfectly siteless backdrop. It recalls the many times I found myself at the end of the east wing of the Philadelphia Museum of Art when I was a design curator there, taking a break from the office to sit in silent communion in that institution's chapel-like Brancusi gallery. It's a connection that Li affirms as central to his practice. He first saw the Romanian artist's work in a

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<sup>1</sup> Li is a tenured faculty member of the College of Fine Arts at the Capital Normal University, Beijing, and a visiting scholar at the School of Art and Design of Alfred University, New York, (he received an MFA from the institution in 2007). His works have been collected by institutions the world over, including the British Museum in London, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, as well as exhibited in the Louvre, the National Art Museum of China, and Ireland's Dublin Castle.

<sup>2</sup> Tao Wang, "Materiality and Thing: A Comment on Li Hongwei's Ceramic Sculptures" in *Inner Reflection: Outward Transformation: The Art of Li Hongwei* (Boston: Pucker Gallery, 2018).



*Garlic Head Vase*  
Gold crystal splashing yellow glaze  
Porcelain  
16.75 x 8 x 8"  
HL106

freshman textbook and, later, made pilgrimages to see his work in museums in New York. Eventually, he made it to the same Philadelphia gallery in which I later sat, admiring the same view. Li's work, *Upwelling of Gravity #9*, was acquired there in 2017.

What do we need to know about an artist to understand and value what they make? Is it where they were born? How they were raised? Where they learned, and from whom? In sum, all the things they bring to what they do? Or is it what we bring when we engage with their work that matters, the way that what is presented to us evokes something within our own experiential vocabularies? Contemporary artists that move the needle allow audiences to find something of themselves in an encounter with their work, even as the artist leaves an imprint of their own

psyche or social location on the viewer in return.

Just as I can trace connections to Li's industrial, visual, and conceptual forebears, each viewer will find their own meaning in any encounter with his sublime sculptures. The lasting sensation—for it is always a corporeal reaction—that wins out every time I behold his work is the sheer joy in seeing a suspended form cast off all the weights that ground it, and defy gravity in a swelling, shining, and tantalizing suspended celebration. In that moment, his work stands completely alone.

— MICHELLE MILLAR FISHER

*Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*





*Mei-Ping Vase*  
Splash peacock blue microcrystalline glaze  
Porcelain  
14.75 x 8.5 x 8.5"  
HL116



*Xuan #24*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 29.5 x 10.75 x 10.75"  
 HL126



*Xuan #27*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 23.75 x 9 x 9"  
 HL127



*Upwelling of Gravity #52*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21.75 x 9.75 x 9.75"  
HL102





*Xuan #38*  
(front cover, second from right)  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
33 x 9 x 9"  
HL130



*Upwelling of Gravity #71*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
31 x 10 x 10"  
HL122



*Xuan #35*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
12 x 7 x 7"  
HL129



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



*Upwelling of Gravity #68*  
Stainless steel and porcelain  
17.5 x 10 x 10"  
HL103





*Upwelling of Gravity #72*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21 x 10 x 10"  
HL123



*Xuan #34*  
(front cover, far left)  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
19 x 7.75 x 7.75"  
HL128



*Pear-Shaped Vase*  
Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
Porcelain  
12 x 6.25 x 6.25"  
HL118



*Fragments Series, Xuan #3*  
(front cover, center)  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
51 x 26 x 26"  
HL111



*Fragments Series, Xuan #1*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 50.25 x 21 x 21"  
 HL109



*Fragments Series, Xuan #2*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 63.5 x 21.25 x 21.25"  
 HL110





*Upwelling of Gravity #30*  
Stainless steel and porcelain  
15.5 x 8 x 8"  
HL104



*Xuan #30*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
28.5 x 9 x 9"  
HL114



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



*Upwelling of Gravity #63*  
Stainless steel and porcelain  
18 x 10 x 10"  
HL105



*Xuan #42*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 25 x 7.75 x 7.75"  
 HL132



*Xuan #32*  
 (front cover, far right)  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 22.5 x 6.25 x 6.25"  
 HL120





*Pear-Shaped Vase with Flared Lip*  
 Splash peacock blue glaze  
 Porcelain  
 12.5 x 7 x 7"  
 HL95



*Mei-Ping Vase*  
 Splash peacock blue glaze  
 Porcelain  
 15 x 8.5 x 8.5"  
 HL93



*Long Necked Flask Vase*  
Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
Porcelain  
17 x 7.5 x 7.5"  
HL107



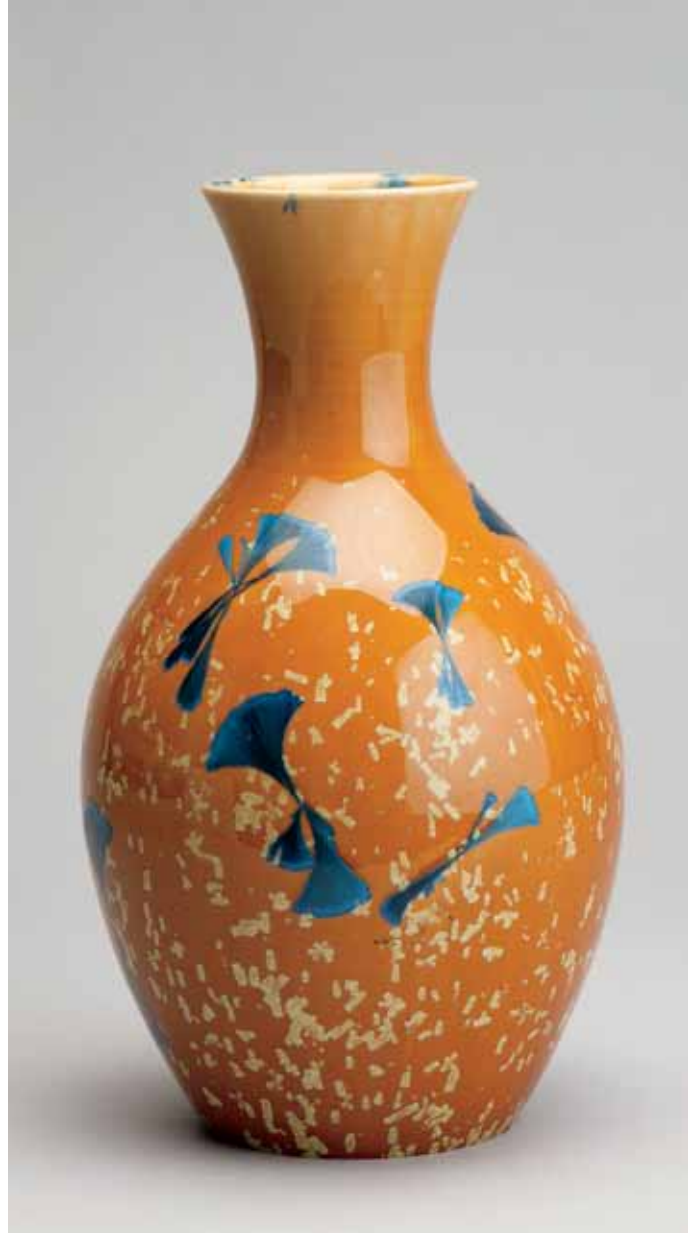
*Pomegranate Vase*  
 Splash peacock blue glaze  
 Porcelain  
 8.75 x 8.75 x 8.75"  
 HL92



*Brush Washer Bowl*  
 Splash peacock blue glaze  
 Porcelain  
 5 x 11 x 11"  
 HL98



Vase  
 Splash peacock blue microcrystalline glaze  
 Porcelain  
 11.25 x 6 x 6"  
 HL97



Vase  
 Splash peacock blue microcrystalline glaze  
 Porcelain  
 10.75 x 6 x 6"  
 HL96





*Upwelling of Gravity #64*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
28.75 x 10 x 10"  
HL121



*Xuan #39*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
21.75 x 7.5 x 7.5"  
HL131



*Pear-Shaped Vase*  
Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
Porcelain  
14.5 x 9 x 9"  
HL117



*Xuan #20*  
(front cover, second from left)  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
30.75 x 10.75 x 10.75"  
HL125



*Upwelling of Gravity #58*  
 Porcelain and stainless steel  
 21 x 9.75 x 9.75"  
 HL100



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



*Illusion #8*  
Porcelain and stainless steel  
19.75 x 16 x 3.75"  
HL89

**L**i 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 Museums, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. His works have been exhibited in numerous international art institutions, including the National Art Museum of China, the Louvre, the U.S. Embassy, the New Mexico Museum of Art, the Fox Art Gallery of the University of Pennsylvania, the Art Institute of Chicago, 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 master's in ceramic art from the New York State College



of Ceramics at the Alfred University at Alfred, NY. As a visiting artist, he has been invited to give lectures in different institutions, including Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



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GALLERY HOURS:  
Monday through Saturday  
10:00 AM to 5:30 PM  
Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

Pucker Gallery is open to all and taking necessary precautions for visitor and staff safety as recommended by current public health guidelines. Though not required, appointments are available.

Pucker Gallery is a member of the Boston Art Dealers Association and the New England Appraisers Association.

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## WORKS BY LI HONGWEI

DATES:

30 October through 28 November 2021

PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION:

Saturday 30 October 2021, 3–6 pm

ONLINE EVENTS:

Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) for a list of virtual gatherings and events accompanying *Sublime*.



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Splash gold peacock blue glaze  
Porcelain  
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HL108



Mei-Ping Vase  
Reduction fired, traced ink splash glaze  
Porcelain  
15.25 x 8.75 x 8.75"  
HL119

Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) to view current and past exhibition catalogues and subscribe to the *Pot of the Week* email list.