
INTERLOCUTOR

BRENDAN LEE SATISH TANG

Tyler Nesler
June 15, 2021



Brendan Lee Satish Tang (B: 1975, Dublin Ireland; lives/works: Unceded territory of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam Nations) is a visual artist who is widely known for his sculptural ceramic work. He received an MFA from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and he is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, both nationally and internationally.

Tang's work explores issues of identity and the hybridization of our material and non-material culture while simultaneously expressing a love of both futuristic technologies and ancient traditions. Although he is primarily known for his ceramic work, Tang continues to produce and exhibit work in a wide variety of mixed and multiple mediums.



Works from Brendan Tang's series "Manga Ormolu" at C24 Gallery's group show "Earthen Delights"

Brendan is currently showing work from his series "Manga Ormolu" at NYC's C24 Gallery as part of the group "Earthen Delights" show. In a futuristic update of the 18th-century French practice of gilded ormolu, Tang has created a mashup of traditional Chinese Ming dynasty vessels and robotic prosthetics inspired by Japanese manga and anime. The series offers multiple points of entry into a sociocultural dialogue about fantasy and transcendence amidst the evolving Western experience of Asian culture.

In your artist statement you write, "Although I am considered Asian Canadian within the dominant culture's framing, my family has lost even vestiges of connectivity to Asia through several generations of intercontinental migration and ethnic intermarriage." Did this sense of shifting identity act as an initial primary impetus for you to create art?

Maybe? I tend to be the type of artist that gets inspiration from many sources, and then dives into the studio with a head full of images and tries to bring them to life. I liken my process to the way some writers refer to characters in a novel; the writer is simply there to record what their characters are saying and doing. In the same way, I will often get a vision of what I would like to create. It's only upon reflection, or (if I am lucky) during the process of making, that I begin to understand the true meaning of a work.

I am willing to concede that my early exposure to multiple cultures taught me to "code switch" on a daily basis, that is, to be able to shift the way I expressed myself to fit in with different social situations. I believe the cultural mash-up I grew up with results in the type of work I make.



"Manga Ormolu 4.0r", 2013, Ceramic and mixed media - 16 x 20 x 13in. (40.6 x 50.8 x 33cm)



"Manga Ormolu 4.0r" (detail)

You work primarily with clay. What drew you to this medium, and what do you consider to be some of the key challenges and advantages of working with it?

Early on, working in clay was a choice that my body made and not my mind. What I mean is that working in ceramics is incredibly physical, both in the coordination required to handle the material and in the physical directness of many of the processes that I employ (hand building, wheel throwing, slab building, etc.). Working in clay is a very methodical practice, with a lot of stages where things could go sideways. I suppose it is that challenge that keeps me engaged with the material, which seems pretty antithetical to the on-demand culture we live in.

I also really love the malleability of this material and its ability to look like anything (wood, plastic, metal, etc.). On some level, clay's ability to be a mimic of anything is a big part of its appeal.



"Manga Ormolu 5.0x", 2019, Ceramic - 22 x 11.5 x 10in. (55.9 x 29.2 x 25.4cm)

At C24 Gallery's group show "Earthen Delights," you currently have works on display from your series "Manga Ormolu." The gallery describes these pieces as "a futuristic update of the 18th-century French practice of gilded ormolu." Could you explain what 18th-century French gilded ormolu was, and why is it a foundational inspiration for you with this series?

Ormolu is the practice of applying decorative plant or architectural ornament on to pre-existing objects. The French and the Germans in the 18th-century really enjoyed doing this to furniture, clocks, and porcelains from China. I believe it was in an effort to make it more relevant to their European tastes.

I was really drawn to these objects not for their forms, but for the ideas of hybridization and the cultural appropriation that these forms carried. In another way, I saw a part of myself in the Asian ceramic works, dripping in the rococo ornament of the West.

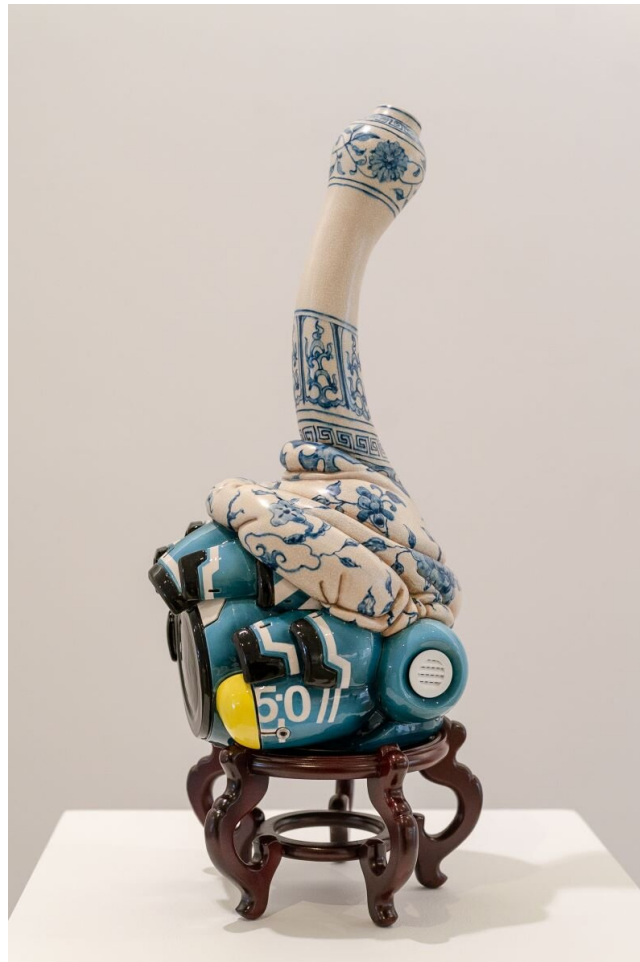


"Manga Ormolu 4.0u", 2015, Ceramic and mixed media - 15 x 10 x 11in. (38.1 x 25.4 x 27.9cm)

The "Earthen Delights" exhibit features ceramic works that update and subvert this traditional craft. What appeals to you about the way you have combined Chinese Ming dynasty vessels with robotic prosthetics inspired by anime and manga, and how do you think this mashup fits into the overall theme of the exhibit?

I find that the "Manga Ormolu" series delights me in many ways. There is the challenge the medium presents that I mentioned, there are the many ways the work can be deconstructed to talk about ideas around technology and its relationship with history, the body, or identity. I also enjoy watching viewers puzzle over the work.

I think the "Manga Ormolu" works speak to the themes addressed in "Earthen Delights." When thinking about "Earthen Delights," I have always read the title as a sort of pun on Bosch's famous "The Garden of Earthly Delights." To that end, I feel that any of the works in the show could easily be found within Bosch's wildly dense and surreal triptych.



"Manga Ormolu 5.0q", 2016, Ceramic and mixed media - 24 x 11 x 11in. (61 x 27.9 x 27.9cm)

There is a whimsical sense of humor and a fun kind of absurdity to your works. How do you think adding levity to your creations helps to engage viewers with the more serious topics of cultural appropriation and identity that you are exploring?

For me, humor serves not only to hold the viewer's attention, but it is also a great way to deliver heavy concepts. Humor is a sort of conceptual Trojan horse if you will. In a similar way, the level of execution of the work as another lure to hold the viewer.

I can't help but remember a sobering statistic I read, that on average, a viewer will look at a work for seven seconds. It is my hope that my virtuosity and humor are a way to grab the viewer's attentions for a little longer.

I will acknowledge that I do play the dangerous game of being the court jester; I can speak my truth in a funny way and everyone laughs but does nothing about it.

You've said that your work is "labor-intensive and detail-oriented." What is a typical day like for you in the studio? Do you have any particular routines or methods to get yourself into the necessary focused state of mind for this meticulous work?

I treat my studio practice like a 9-5 job. I usually spend the mornings emailing and whatnot, then in the afternoon I get hands-on with the material. If I am really excited about the studio work, I will hit that first and let the emails pile up.

Staying focused can be an issue, for sure. I oscillate between music, audio books, and podcasts to keep my brain busy while my hands complete the fine work, and I've also found that listening to Netflix with audio description turned on is a pretty great.

You've created an impressively diverse range of work, including watercolor-painted replicas of video game cartridges and other treasured ephemera from your youth ("Joss Paper" series), a video game homage to Street Fighter ("Clay Fighter"), and imprinting fragments of images onto your skin ("Residue: Tracing the Lore"). What's next for you? Are you currently working on any new series or are there any upcoming shows you would like people to know about?

Over the last year, I have been working on a show called "Reluctant Offerings" that just opened at the Nanaimo Art Gallery on Vancouver Island. The centerpiece in this body of work is a part of a series exploring Chinese Joss paper items, and this one is a full-sized 1984 Ford F-150 pick-up truck, hand-rendered on watercolor paper on a wood frame. It's insane!

So for the moment I'm actually taking a vacation, but once I get back in the studio, I have a couple of pieces from the "Manga Ormolu" series to complete, and of course, I have some new forms rattling around in my head as well. I'm feeling jazzed to get my hands dirty again.

In the fall, I am really delighted to be starting a position at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver BC Canada. I am really looking forward to seeing and working with people in person again! So much of my career has been spent growing my admiration for ceramics in its materiality, its community, and its history, and I can't wait to share the love.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/6/15/brendan-lee-satish-tang-interview-c24-earthen-delights>