

BOMB

Jennifer Ling Datchuk
Interviewed by Michelle Millar
Fisher

Ceramic work that addresses third-culture experience.



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, *my neck, my back (series)*, 2022, Kohler ceramics, 9 x 9 x 4 inches. Courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk sheltered me earlier this year during a rare Texas ice storm as I traveled through San Antonio en route to an Anabaptist craft community. As part of my job at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, I was on a forty-eight-state cross-country Amtrak research trip to visit craft schools. After long admiring Jennifer's work from a distance, I visited her in the city that she's called home for the past fifteen years. A "third-culture" kid born in Ohio and raised in Brooklyn, her work centers porcelain but connects disparate materials like hair and gestures to complex systems like gendered labor and the reproductive arc. Through making, she metabolizes her Chinese American experiences of place, identity, and culture. Not only did we spend some hours in her studio, but she and her husband, Ryan, gave me a warm bed for the night and treated me to dinner at their own table. There, we talked for hours about everything from the place of ceramics in the contemporary art world and their time teaching at a San Antonio gem, the Southwest School of Craft, to our shared experiences with infertility. The interview below stems from a follow-up conversation.

—Michelle Millar Fisher

Michelle Millar Fisher

When I came to your studio at your home in San Antonio, you told me that back in the day and working with AOL dial-up, you emailed artists to ask how they nurture creativity. You said you still hold on to correspondence from Kathy Butterly and Beth Lo, two ceramicists you regard highly, that really left an impression on you. What was it like to reach out to your heroines, and what pearls of wisdom did they share?

Jennifer Ling Datchuk

First of all, I was just so amazed that they even responded. When you think of artists you really admire, you don't know if they're accessible to you at all. Beth Lo came at a time when I was searching for Chinese American artists, and she replied saying that she nurtures creativity through cooking and food. When you are in grad school, you often think you need to relate your work to art theory or some big movement. To have her validate that meaning can be found in the everyday was really important. Kathy Butterly told me how she has a schedule for her work. Knowing that it was okay to take time for yourself was helpful. I met Beth in person for the first time recently while going through the airport security line after the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, and I told her, "I have been following your work ever since that email in 2005." She was just as lovely in person.

MMF

When we met, you also talked about Mona Hatoum's use of domestic objects, of Lorna Simpson's work as being particularly formative, and of an encounter with Karon Doherty's oeuvre.

JLD

Well, my education is rooted in craft schools, and while there I never saw artists whose work was reflective of my story. It wasn't until I looked in art books. I love the visceral materiality of Hatoum's work, how it engages aspects of the body, and confinement, and silence. I remember learning about her story of being conflicted in between two homes, and I related it to my experience of embodying a third-culture experience. With Simpson, I was so struck by her use of language. Growing up in a Cantonese- and English-speaking household, I experienced a lack of mutually shared words to express feelings and emotion. And then in grad school I had a work-study job to pack up the studio of Professor Karon Doherty, who had passed away a few years before I got there. Her whole office was still intact. She made

really large, wild, weird poodle sculptures, which were so irreverent and fun. She would use nail polish to patch a glaze or fix something, and at that time in the late '90s, using nail polish to match a wood-fire glaze, or shino, or celadon was so antithetical to the purist bent of ceramics. When you're a young artist, you're searching for where you belong; and I realize now I was given these little gifts along the way.



Jennifer Ling Datchuk, *like freckles, like eggshells, like stone*, 2022, Kohler ceramics, varied dimensions. Courtesy of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

MMF

There's a huge chunk of ceramics history that is completely ignored in the art world. How do you, as somebody who has a deep material affinity with clay but also a long history as an artist with a spectrum of engagement with the contemporary art world, feel about the way it treats clay?

JLD

It's interesting how a conversation keeps recycling about "clay having a moment" when we've been here for a very long time. I feel like this question is always asked of artists, but it should be asked of curators because it's more about your schools of thought. In some studio visits with contemporary art curators, they'll say, "Well, yeah, my mom did ceramics," and I know what that means. That's code for my mom was the hobbyist. She made ceramics in the basement.

MMF

I'm sure as hell they don't say, "Oh, my grandmother was a painter," when they visit somebody's studio littered with canvases! Can I ask you about teaching? You didn't necessarily plan on it, but by choice and also by necessity it's an important part of the way that you practice as an artist, right?

JLD

Yeah, I didn't want to teach after grad school because I think I was slightly burnt out from the whole experience of academia, but it wasn't until I started teaching at small craft schools that I recognized that there were very few women or women of color teaching within the field of ceramics. Being that very visible person in the classroom, I was engaging in a lot more conversations that many students said they never had before. I feel, in some ways, like I'm infiltrating academia. I can bring the people who I learned from, and the artists I am interested in, and the techniques of Chinese ceramics that I was taught by white men and claim space in these places.

When I was at NCECA this year, I met a ceramic elder in a think-tank group. He was really upset about how younger people today don't know who Robert Arneson is. I think he failed to recognize that there's been fifty more years of history since Arneson, and that there were so many women, women of color, and BIPOC artists whose stories weren't told at the same time as Arneson.

MMF

Amen.

JLD

That is exactly why I teach. My number one tenet of craft is community. So much of craft happens through collaboration in our studios and from watching hands work. But you can only have community if you feel like you belong to one.



自愛 (Self-love) 2011
霓虹管、LED燈管、木架
尺寸：100x200x5cm

LOVE YOURSELF LEARNING TIME 2011
霓虹管、LED燈管、木架
尺寸：100x200x5cm

Jennifer Ling Datchuk, *Love Yourself Long Time*, 2021, mirrored acrylic and neon. Photo by Colin Conces. Courtesy of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

MMF

Who are the teachers that brought you to your own practice?

JLD

My po-po, my Chinese grandmother, was very important. With her limited English and my limited Cantonese, we experienced each other through acts of making. She would make soup with gelatinous rice like a mochi ball, really sticky. I wasn't sure if I liked the texture, and she told me it was "Chinese bubblegum." It was a way for her to relate something in my kid experience, to help me toward this new texture. That act of translation in my practice came from her. I come from a long line of service industry workers. I grew up watching hands moving all the time. My gong-gong, my Chinese grandfather, cut and trimmed fish on the sidewalk in Brooklyn. My po-po and aunts all worked in sewing factories and brought home piecework. Their hands were always in the path of an industrial sewing machine. Someone was always fixing something. Someone was always raising someone else's children. We washed other people's clothes, and I think about all of that when I engage my hands.

MMF

You just had a residency at Kohler's esteemed Art and Industry program, and you currently have a great show at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha. I saw a lot of good preparations when I was in your studio.

JLD

I applied for Kohler off and on for almost ten years; it was a long haul. It came at the right time: I wanted to tell the stories of my Chinese grandmother and my Irish American grandmother. They were strong, independent women at a time when they weren't supposed to be. The title of the Bemis exhibition is called *Eat Bitterness*, a Chinese idiom about how we swallow suffering, and put our heads down, and just keep going, which I think is something many people can relate to. Bemis is a really large space, so I was excited to take my object-based practice and create an immersive installation with it. There's a synthetic red-and-pink hair curtain, large

ceramic megaphones, scaffolding covered in bamboo, and a three-foot-wide lazy Susan turntable covered in gold disco-ball mirror shards.



Installation view of *Jennifer Ling Datchuk: Eat Bitterness*, 2023. Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. Photo by Colin Conces. Courtesy of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

MMF

I always like to ask this question at the end of an interview as it's a way to manifest: What are the opportunities you wish you had for your work that you haven't had yet?

JLD

I still have lots of dream projects that live in my sketchbook that I hope to have opportunities to create one day. Those keep building after every opportunity. In this Bemis exhibition, I get to build bigger works, and now I want to build even bigger ones. I have this crazy idea of large, mattress-size lazy Susans with weird bok choy labia sculptures on them.

MMF

Oh, I want to see that get made, Jennifer!

JLD

I can see it in my head. It's about connecting the Asian diaspora across the South; jade carvings of bok choy and cabbages related to female virtue; and the mattress as a site for sleep, and rest, and dreaming but also a site of sexualized labor. That's something I would love the space to create.

Jennifer Ling Datchuk: Eat Bitterness is on view at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska, until September 17.