

# Creating Creatures in Ceramic

## A visit with Singapore ceramic sculptor Jessie Lim

By Lynn Biondi

I met Jessie Lim, one of Singapore's best-known ceramic artists, through her brother-in-law (and FOM member) Russell Bresland. As Jessie showed me around her beautiful home and studio, I marvelled at her phenomenal work, especially the tall, organic, sculptural forms that graced the garden.

Jessie did not start out studying art: she studied English literature and political science at Singapore University, later completing a degree in education and going on to teach English and geography in secondary schools. In 1982 she and her husband, the late Lim Joo Hong, travelled to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire (USA) where she discovered pottery by accident. "My husband was a student in computer science, and I was planning graduate studies as well, but I decided to sign up for a pottery class for a single term. It was the beginning of my lifelong work," she told me. Soon her life revolved around making and teaching pottery and raising three daughters.

Like most ceramic sculptors, Jessie began with a focus on functional bowls and platters. By the mid 1990s, however, Ng Eng Teng the 'Father of Singapore Sculpture' was encouraging Jessie to move towards sculpting because "he felt it would be a more expressive form, artistic development, for my work. But I have not fallen out of love with simple bowls and platters. In fact, I find myself drawn to creating their subtle strength and beauty again and again," she says.

Over the past 20 years Jessie has continued to study, working with eminent potters in New York, Rhode

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*One of the colourful ceramic pieces made by Jessie Lim*



Island and Colorado. She also lived in Beijing for four years in the 90s and produced work from a kiln in her garage, discovering that the differences between Western and Eastern ceramics are profound.

Writing in the Australian journal *Sculpture News* in 2006, Gina Fairly described Jessie's work as "combining Eastern transcendence and Western formalism." A woman of few words when discussing her own art, Jessie says, "My work combines the forms of Asia with the forms of nature." Her porcelain and stoneware works are fluid and organic, simultaneously delicate and strong. She creates spires, orbs, and starburst forms reminiscent of minerals, cacti, and marine creatures, all with surface additions of strong ribs, serrated edges, gentle undulating curves and other protuberances that she says 'create tension'. Jessie's surface-finishing technique is stunning, full of vibrant colour or contrasting smooth, light-absorbing, matte shades of white and black. She creates her own glazes, many of them metallic. "I am particularly interested in what can be created on the surface of the work," she says.

Jessie's first solo exhibition in Singapore (and, coincidentally, the first time a Singaporean woman exhibited solo for pottery) was in 1988 at the National Museum Art Gallery (the predecessor to the Singapore Art Museum). Since then she has shown worldwide, including exhibitions in Beijing, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Sweden.

Always a teacher (though no longer of English or geography!), Jessie has taught at LASALLE College of the Arts and at Singapore's Dragon Kiln.

She currently heads the ceramics programme at the School of the Arts.

Two readily accessible places to view Jessie's large-scale works are the Supreme Court building, where there's a spiral installation

*Sculpture artist  
Jessie Lim at home*



of black and white organic forms entitled *Journey*, and at the Marina Barrage outdoor entryway, which holds *Community Wall*. This raku clay and tempered-glass installation of nearly 1000 separate pieces, created with the help of American ceramicist John Stewart Jackson, evokes flowing water ("like a sculpture of water," says Jessie).

If you fancy ceramics and are looking for a hands-on opportunity, or in Jessie's words, "a place to just enjoy the clay and create," Jessie is opening a new centre for classes and workshops at Mid-View City just off Thomson Road. The centre will include a display area for both Jessie's and her students' work. Best of all will be the opportunity to learn from Jessie Lim herself.

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**Lynn Biondi** moved to Singapore in December of 2008. She is a member of the FOM Council, an active FOM docent and a PASSAGE staff member.

*Photos by the author*



*A storage room in Jessie Lim's home, full of her organic ceramic work*