**A SPACE OF ONE'S OWN:
SPATIAL EXPERIENCE OF
*PLAYING WITH FIRE: CERAMICS
OF THE EXTRAORDINARY***

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A work of ceramic art takes its form through a rigorous process of wedging, forming, trimming, glazing, and firing. The process tests and pushes the limit of earthly materials, channeling the visual and tactile experience of the artist into its form and surface. What is actualized herein is a critical juncture that unravels dialogues. This exhaustive procedure of making ceramics and embodiment of critical concepts schematize the spatial setting of the exhibition titled *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary* in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Canada. This essay examines how the spatial configuration of the exhibition responds to the works, both independently and collectively.

From architecture to philosophy, geography to anthropology, space as a concept has traversed a diverse range of disciplines. For Henri Lefebvre, space is a social product and our inquiry of space must be inclined to the process through which it is produced, not what it is.¹ As a Marxist theorist, he understood this process emerging from different social relations and interactions. He further proposes a triadic model to identify the elements interrelated in this process: spatial practice or the perceived space that is related to the spatial and physical qualities; representations of space or the conceived space which is associated with the conceptual and ideological qualities; and finally, representational spaces or lived space that is related to experiential qualities through which one experiences or imagines a space through its associative meanings.²

The essay takes inspiration from this analytical framework. Exhibition is thus understood as a space arising from social relations and interactions. The spatial and physical qualities of the exhibition will be analyzed by understanding the form of the exhibits and the physical space of the exhibition. The conceptual and ideological aspects will be identified from the exhibition narrative and the context of the exhibits. The experiential reaction of the visitor, in this case, the author, will be taken into consideration to investigate how the meaning of the exhibits evolves from the intersection of the former qualities. Exploring the convergence of all these factors, the paper aims at understanding how the spatial experience comes into being in the exhibition *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary*.

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 36-37.
² Ibid, 38-39.

The tangibility of an artwork is not only contained by its form but also the space it occupies, and vice versa. The aesthetic experience of anyone entering the space is generated by the relationship among the person, artwork, space, and their contexts.³ Although Nicolas de Oliveira analyzes the spatial setting in terms of only installation artworks, it is pertinent to any other genre of work existing in any given space. Space shared and created by artworks in an exhibition is as important as these exhibits because, as Raymond Montpetit argues, the exhibition manifests its “meaning” through the spatialization of its exhibits.⁴ This is why spatial organizations of artworks are to be integrated with exhibition narratives, allowing these artworks to coexist both collectively and independently.

However, the extent of control a particular space has over its occupant can pervade its meanings too. Brian O’Doherty’s criticism of the white cube gallery suggests how a space with certain institutional rules can overpower an artwork as well as its original spatial setting.⁵ Similar concern is also echoed in Montpetit’s exploration of museum space, which indicates that the relocation of exhibits from their original setting can allow the exhibition to posit a new reading of the objects.⁶ Both were cautious in their arguments, but it is also possible that the creative use of space can offer the production of new knowledge or the strengthening of an existing one. Fabienne Galangau-Quérat asserted that the spatial setting of an exhibition can also be utilized as one of the constituents of the exhibits, making the original meaning more accessible and sensible to the visitors.⁷ This means the design of spaces and occupying exhibits holds the potential for the interpretation to evolve and/or somewhat be distinct from any of the previous iterations of the exhibits.

Curated by Carol E. Mayer, and designed by Skooker Broome and Cody Rocko, this exhibition comprises a corpus of installation works by ceramic artists Judy Chartrand, Ying-Yueh Chuang, Gathie Falk, Jeremy Hatch, Ian Johnston, David Lambert, Glenn Lewis, Alwyn O’Brien, Bill Rennie, Debra Sloan, and Brendan Lee Satish Tang, whose art practices and social existences are inextricable from the Canadian province of British Columbia. Their works in this exhibition transcend their formal and aesthetic constituents by unfolding issues that include inequity, oppression, and human psychology. Drawing primarily on the scholarships of space syntax, psychoanalysis, curatorial, and museum studies, the essay explores how these issues are integrated into the spatial setting of the works of this exhibition.

The arrangement of spaces and how they are connected in *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary* (or any other exhibition) as to the occupying artworks can be analyzed by “space syntax”.⁸ According to space syntax, while high integration allows the quickest accessibility to every space from a few number of spaces, higher connectivity refers to how a certain space can lead to a high number of other spaces.⁹ While the first half of the exhibition spaces (a, b, c, d, e, f) is moderately integrated with lower connectivity, the remaining spaces (g, h, i, j, k, l) are both highly integrated and connected (see figure 1). The closeness and constraint in the spatial experience of the first half allows a moderately fixed direction along with the exhibition narrative. On the other hand, the second half offers more choices.

The only space with a dead-end route (see c in figure 1 & 2), housing Bill Rennie’s *Where I was brought up: 6949 Harris Road* (1990), can be a good example of how lower connectivity can offer a sense of confinement. The entrance of this space functions also as the exit, forcing one to suddenly feel cornered by the walls upon arrival¹⁰. Such restriction can also become intense

³ Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry, *Installation Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), 13.

⁴ Raymond Montpetit, “Making Sense of Space,” *Museum International* 47, no. 1 (1995), 41.

⁵ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. (Berkeley: University of California Press University of California Press, 1999).

⁶ Montpetit, “Making Sense of Space,” 41.

⁷ Fabienne Galangau-Quérat, Fabienne. “The Grande Galerie de l’Evolution” in *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions*, ed. Suzanne MacLeod (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 104.

⁸ Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi (2011), cited in Regan Forrest, “Exhibition Narrative: The Spatial Parameters,” *The Exhibitionist* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 28–32.

⁹ Regan Forrest, “Exhibition Narrative: The Spatial Parameters,” *The Exhibitionist* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 29.

¹⁰ It can be argued that the space (see f in figure 2), occupied by Brendan Lee Satish Tang’s *Manga Ormolu series*, could also invoke the same feelings. However, this space can be accessed through two different spaces (see b and e in figure 1 & 2), including an exit located at the corner space. Most importantly, two large-sized mirrors (see f in figure 2; marked in grey) placed on two opposing walls of this space, amplify the entire space.

Figure 1.
 Mohammad Zaki Rezwan,
 Arrangement of spaces in
*Playing with Fire: Ceramics
 of the Extraordinary* exhibition,
 adapted from Hillier and Tzortzi
 2011 and Forrest 2014, 2020,
 Digital, Burnaby, British Columbia,
 Canada.

as this space is situated in the first half of the exhibition; a crucial location whose connectivity influences interest in for moving to the next phase of the exhibition. The artist's frustration towards aggressive and biased urban development is accentuated with this dead-end route. What emerges from this space is an urge for a political conversation that could offer urban dwellers more solutions to their everyday problems, including affordable housing.

The second half then opens up the exhibition to multiple numbers of choice points, enabling a multifaceted exploration of the concerning issues. For an example of how these choice points can destabilize a fixed interpretation by offering different narrative routes, Jeremy Hatch's *Treehouse* (2006) (see I in figure 1 & 2) is worth examination. Hatch's life-size sculpture centers around the ghostly presence of precious memories in our existence. Not only do the three individual routes (see routes g-h-k-l, g-i-l, and g-j-l in figure 1 & 2) leading to this work collectively corroborate what it conceptualizes, but they also demonstrate diverse narrative experiences along each route. The convergence of these routes to the core memory taunts how one tries hard to relive any precious memory through diverse actions. But the question arises; why does the past need to be reexperienced?

Hatch's revival of childhood memory in the work functions like a "restorative nostalgia" which Svetlana Boym described as an act of longing for the past and recreating that past in the present to experience "universal values, family, nature, homeland, [and] truth".¹¹ What matters in the present inspires us to recollect the past, as she also stresses, so that the future can be determined.¹² Taking one (see g-h-k-l figure 1 & 2) of the three narrative routes and the works placed along the path for example, it can be explained why such nostalgic recollection is necessary for the contemporary period. The narrative route contemplates the past, seeks the truth that still exists today, and initiates debates required for a greater future.

¹¹ Svetlana Boym. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007), 13-14.
¹² Ibid, 8.

1.1 Jeremy Hatch, *Shoe Toss*, 2013

1.2 Jeremy Hatch, *Treehouse*, 2006

2.1 Judy Chartrand, *If This is What You Call 'Being Civilized' I'd Rather Go Back to Being A 'Savage'*, 2003

2.2 Judy Chartrand, *What a Wonderful World, Go Back to your own Country*, 2015

2.3 Judy Chartrand, *In memory of Those no Longer with us*, 2016

2.4 Judy Chartrand, *The Cupboard of Contention*, 2001

2.5 Judy Chartrand, *Counteract*, 2006

3 Bill Rennie, *Where I was brought up: 6949 Harris Road*, 1990

4.1 Brendan Lee Satish Tang and Alex McLeod, *#lovechild*, 2011

4.2 Brendan Lee Satish Tang, *Manga Ormolu*

5.1 Alwyn O'Brien, *A Matter of Shadow's*, 2017

5.2 Alwyn O'Brien, *Tree of Life: Ocean of Generosity*, 2019

5.3 Alwyn O'Brien, *California Night Sketch*, 2014

5.4 Alwyn O'Brien, *What To Do With All These Blues*, 2014

6 Ian Johnston, *The Antechamber*, 2010-2012

7.1 Ying-Yueh Chuang, *Flower Series #1*, 2015

7.2 Ying-Yueh Chuang, *Cross Series #3*, 2008

8 Glenn Lewis, *Artifact*, 1970

9 Gathie Falk, *Boot Case with Nine Black Boots*, 1973

Figure 2.

Mohammad Zaki Rezwan, a dummy floor plan of *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary* exhibition drawn from the author's observation without any official reference (e.g. floor plan) from the museum authority; the design may not contain the actual scaling or ratio as it is, 2020, Digital, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

Inequity and oppression predominate in the works placed along this narrative route. Judy Chartrand's *Cupboard of Contention* (2001) and *Counteract* (2006) investigate colonialism and its aftermath that brought inequality and violence to Canada. Glenn Lewis's *Artifact* (1970) looks sharply at the past to criticize ideological oppression which bars the freedom of expression. Ying-Yueh Chuang's *Flower Series #1* (2015) and *Cross Series #3* (2008) may be imagining a utopia, but these also reveal class inequality, especially through the portrayal of division using fabric and porcelain in the former work, that has been persisting in our social domain for centuries. The recollection of the past in all these works offer a closer look at present-day challenges and their underlying causes. Racial discrimination, indigenous rights violation, and income inequality – issues like these are brought into the present by the mischiefs of the past. The future requires nostalgia so that questions can be asked why these challenges still exist. It is Hatch's work that effectuates this narrative inquiry.

From a different perspective, the early human memory in *Treehouse* (2006) can also act as the tipping point of our existence, from which three different paths (see routes g-h-k-l, g-i-l, and g-j-l in figure 1 & 2) emerge, reflecting how our actions are determined by our innate desires, be they destructive or rejuvenating. The treehouse symbolizes the most important part of the human psyche – the id – that is, as Sigmund Freud explained, one of the most powerful forces and responsible for our “instinctual drive”.¹³ Inherited from birth, it affects our behaviors, emotions, actions, and relations. As it is the unconscious part of our mind, it is always there, yet unreachable, just like the treehouse Hatch built.

The path (see g-i-l in figure 1 & 2) which adjoins Hatch's work with Ian Johnston's *The Antechamber* (2010-2012) invokes a narrative that revolves around the issues of human desire. Such desire emanates from the realm of id, which ultimately anticipates our behaviors and actions. Johnston's large scale installation broods over the human desire for consumption that has propelled the mass production of objects. These consumer goods are replaced by a new line of products whenever a new innovation takes place. Driven by desire, this vicious cycle leaves a dire impact on the environment. The spatial journey, undertaken with these two works, lets one celebrate how human desire is fueling the recent climate crisis.

The spatial configuration of defining and enclosing walls in this exhibition plays an important role in conditioning a particular space and eventually the reading of an artwork. Not only does the space (see c in figure 1 & 2) accommodating Bill Rennie's *Where I was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road* (1990) exercise confinement through its dead-end position, but it also evokes discomfort due to the irregularly angled walls. Set amidst lush greenery, Rennie's work presents a comforting view of his childhood home. The house and its surroundings had to be reconstructed from his memory as it fell prey to urbanization. The work is crafted with personal affection but charged with political tension. The asymmetrical space that emerges within this enclosure evinces imbalance, further intensifying the tension created through the political context of the work. In tandem with Rennie's work, this space instigates a disorienting experience, alluding to the imbalance that has submerged Vancouver's real estate infrastructure.¹⁴

Another example can be drawn from the wall that hangs Glenn Lewis's mural *Artifact* (1970). This wall is subtly detached from its contiguous wall which hangs Ying-Yueh Chuang's *Flower Series #1* (2015) (see k in figure 1 & 2, and figure 3). This detachment hints at how the freedom of artistic expression is prone to censorship. Commissioned for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan, Lewis's work was denied from being exhibited at Canada's pavilion.¹⁵ Later upon salvation, *Artifact* became more than it was intended to be. What was once erected by the artist's prurient interest turned into a symbol of ideological repression. Made out of intention, the fragmented salt shakers no longer represent the artist's creativity; rather, they now hint at the aftermath of censorship.

¹³ Daniel K. Lapsley and Paul C. Stey, “Id, Ego, and Superego,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior*, ed. Vilayanur Subramanian Ramachandran, (Elsevier Inc., 2012), 396.

¹⁴ Ee-Seul Yoon, Christopher Lubienski, and Jin Lee, “The Geography of School Choice in a City with Growing Inequality: The Case of Vancouver,” *Journal of Education Policy* 33, no. 2 (2018), 283.

¹⁵ Kevin Griffin, “Glenn Lewis: Art Banned by Canada,” *Vancouver Sun* (October 22, 2010), accessed August 29, 2020, <https://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/glenn-lewis-art-banned-by-canada>.

The severed wall correlates with how this work has displaced from its original meaning to a critique of censorship. Besides, this strategy also allows Lewis's work to coexist in the same space with Chuang's work, while contrasting her utopian dream. While Chuang incorporates hybridity and repetition to envision an equalized social construction, salt shakers, and dated tiles in Lewis's work bear differences through similarities, revealing the tenuous nature of our social construction caused by repressive forces. The crack in the wall signifies the point of demarcation between dream and reality.

The spatial configuration also contributes directly to the visual experience of a particular work in this exhibition. This strategy is prominent in works that were iterated before in seemingly different spatial settings. For instance, the roomy space (see b in figure 2) in front of Judy Chartrand's installation *If This is What You Call 'Being Civilized', I'd Rather Go Back to Being A 'Savage'* (2003) enables it to be perceived as a whole. The installation consists of five ceramic bowls with images of swarms of cockroaches and neon signs of hotels located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. Placed against the backdrop of five large hanging banners printed with dazzling images of the hotels, the five display plinths appear together in a semicircle as a vibrant and grand landmark from a distance. However, a closer inspection of the bowls reveals how this landmark is infested with roaches. Chartrand's work stimulates a combination of "pleasure and repulsion".¹⁶ In doing so, she slams colonialism for affecting the social and cultural realities of First Nations peoples of Canada. The duality of visual perspectives is also parallelly echoed in the work's exploration of identity politics.

Figure 3.
 Mohammad Zaki Rezwan,
 A photograph of Glenn Lewis's
Artifact (1970) (clay, glaze)
 and the detached wall
 from *Playing with Fire:*
Ceramics of the Extraordinary
 exhibition in the Museum of
 Anthropology, UBC, 2019, Digital,
 Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

¹⁶ Amy Gogarty, "Judy Chartrand: 'If This is What You Call 'Being Civilized,' I'd rather go back to Being a 'Savage''", in *An Open Book* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 2008), 9.

Similar experimentations with visual perspectives are also manifested in other works. Set under Jeremy Hatch's *Treehouse* (2006), the reflective black circle on the floor teams up with the surrounding dark walls and spotlights mostly pointed at the white sculpture (see figure 4). As a result, the reflection of this ghostly tree effortlessly follows the eyes no matter where the perceiver moves along the circular path. However, the circle demarks not only the treehouse but also its reflection, all the while reminding us of the material vulnerability of the work. Therefore, there is always a sense of unreachability in both the treehouse and its reflection, regardless of the perceiver's position.

As previously mentioned, *Treehouse* (2006) correlates conceptually with the psychoanalytic concept of the id. The spatial interaction with this work parallels the structure and function of the human psyche in the way Freud had theorized. The experiential navigation around the treehouse, including the physical movements of the observer, serves as the superego; the moralistic part of the mind that strives for idealistic goals.¹⁷

Figure 4.
Mohammad Zaki Rezwan,
A photograph of Jeremy Hatch's *Treehouse* (2006)
(porcelain) and the unescapable reflection evincing from
the black circle underneath from *Playing with Fire: Ceramics
of the Extraordinary* exhibition in the Museum of Anthropology,
UBC, 2019, Digital, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

17 Lapsley and Stey, "Id, Ego, and Superego," 397.

Figure 5.
 Mohammad Zaki Rezwan, A photograph
 of Brendan Lee Satish Tang's *Manga
 Ormolu 6.0-b* (2016) (earthenware,
 mixed media) from the *Manga Ormolu*
 series and the multitude of reflections
 in the display glass from *Playing with
 Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary*
 exhibition in the Museum of Anthropology,
 UBC, 2019, Digital, Vancouver, British
 Columbia, Canada.

The black reflective circle serves as the ego, mediating between the id and superego. Here, the observer attempts to navigate the ideal version of the reality that exists in the entire space (see l in figure 2). The desire and/or trauma, laid within the hidden memory of treehouse, drives the observer, makes him/her move from one place to another, and perhaps invites him/her to climb the fragile porcelain construction. But the black reflective circle negotiates, rationalizes, and determines how much of the reality to be perceived.

Similar visual-spatial interaction is also evident in the space (see f in figure 2) accommodating the earthenware works of Brendan Lee Satish Tang. Intensified by the narrow-beam spotlights directed at 90-degree angles and the enfoldment of dark walls, each work of Tang's *Manga Ormolu* series multiplies its form in the mirrors and display glasses through a multitude of reflections (see figure 5 for example). Within these multifaceted reflections, the works radiate different dimensions of their existence, which float like virtual images in their dematerialized form. However, the virtual images in the reflection could hardly sperate themselves from the actual, as they originate from and coexist with the actual.¹⁸ Thus, both actual and virtual cohere into the ultimate reality – a reality that builds on multiplicity.

A reflection does not alter the reality. It only offers a new perspective to the observer.¹⁹ The reflections of *Manga Ormolu* series offer the observer external viewpoints to locate the multiple dimensions of our cultural identity, which Tang interrogates through realizing hybrid forms and aesthetics within his works. The limit of clay's plasticity and vulnerability is further pushed through the reflections in which the form of each earthenware becomes more, not one. His invocation for deconstructing the reality in which we exist, and which we perceive, is reinforced in the fact that these reflections allow us to see more of the reality, just as he reflects on his own identity. Besides, the inseparability of virtual-actual relationship also hints at the aftermath of techno-human infusion which Tang achieved in his futuristic works, thatis the exertion of human life into cyberspace, and vice versa.

¹⁸ Victor L. Schermer, "Reflections on 'Reflections on Mirroring'." *Group Analysis* 43, no. 3 (2010), 217.
¹⁹ Ibid.

Although both surface and form construct an argument within a ceramic artwork, the tactile experience is forcefully limited in this exhibition for obvious safety and security reasons. However, what remains is not only the visual experience but also the physical experience that allows one to enter the argument both physically and conceptually. This is not merely about taking an experiential stroll around the artwork, rather it is about channeling specific physical experiences into the production of knowledge. The display base of Bill Rennie's *Where I was brought up: 6949 Harris Road* (1990) is affixed with a 2-step stair, offering a completely different perspective which is not achievable by average sightlines. This certain elevation of the body and resulting god's eye view shift the power dynamics of the viewer. The miniature landscape shrinks even more. A home amidst the peaceful woods turns into a piece of land as seen through the eyes of a real estate giant that Rennie questions in his work.

A similar strategy can also be found in the space occupied by Ian Johnston's *The Antechamber* (2010-2012). Mimicking the contemporary consumer culture and its impact, the work presents everyday objects like telephones, kettles, and light bulbs in mass amounts using a process that Johnston invented. While all the other largescale installations are provided with unrestricted and adequate observation space (e.g. k in figure 2), this one offers a constricted observation space, making it nearly impossible to grasp the totality of this installation from a certain point (see i in figure 2). Thus, to the curious eye, it becomes necessary for the body to achieve different sightlines through movements. This sudden realization of the unreachable resonates with the extent of mass production and its chaotic influence on the environment demonstrated in the work.

Interestingly, this long corridor-shaped space also encourages motion. It is noteworthy to refer to Tiina Roppola's observation here. In reference to Francis Ching and Kah Meng Alfred Pang, she points out that even though narrow paths or corridors influence the visitor to move forward, they can also suppress the gravity of exhibits.²⁰ Ironically, such spatial quality perhaps intensifies what *The Antechamber* signifies. In consonance with the repetitive nature of this work, the space provokes movements, further causing a diversion of attention that leaves much of the work unobserved. This distraction is indeed what Johnston warns through his works. Inventions may have made life easier, but their soaring demands have paved the way for mass production. Due to planned obsolescence, these former inventions are losing their functional value. What was once inextricable from the everyday life, winds up forgotten in the landfill, triggering a huge environmental impact that is often overlooked.

Scholars of museum studies often exercise caution over the museum's role in affecting the exhibits. It is true that an exhibition can propose a new understanding of its exhibits. However, there is room for optimism too, as we can see from the evidence presented in the paper. It is evident that the spatial setting of the exhibition *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary* has been employed as one of the constituents of the exhibits, which could make the original meaning more accessible and sensible to the visitors. The rigorous methods of ceramic making is felt throughout this exhibition in accordance with the issues explored by the artists. As the title suggests, the exhibition continuously pushes and tests the limit of its aesthetics and spatial experiences. An in-depth understanding of the artworks emerges, both independently and collectively, from the collaboration between these experiential factors.

20 Tiina Roppola, *Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience* (London: Routledge, 2012), 177.

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