

## Pillows

Liu Jianhua (Shanghai, China)

**WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE?** Liu Jianhua, the artist who created “Pillows”, was born in 1962 in the city of Ji’an, Jiangxi province, China. From a very early age, Liu Jianhua trained in ceramics following in the footsteps of his uncle, a kaolin artisan who ran a factory in Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen has been the historical capital of ceramic production in China since the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD).

In 1985, Liu began his studies in sculpture at Jingdezhen’s Institute of Ceramics in the Department of Fine Art and he graduated in 1989. Until 2004, Liu was an Associate Professor in the Sculpture Department of the Yunnan Arts Institute, Kunming, Yunnan Province. He is currently an Associate Professor in the Sculpture Department of the Fine Arts School at China’s Shanghai University.



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**WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS SCULPTURE?** The influence of Liu Jianhua's training in ceramics can be seen in *Pillows*, the painted fiberglass installation featured in the current Vancouver Biennale. Like some of his other installations, this piece depicts a mundane, generic, everyday object—in this case a western-style pillow—in a repeated random pattern. The clean white porcelain-like surface of each piece appears sanitized and impersonal, yet gives the visual illusion of a pillow made of a soft welcoming material, one that invites you to rest your head or body. However, the pillows are hard, rigid and are not meant to be utilitarian. Decontextualized from their indoor place on a bed, their original function is denied, and the indentations on the pillows merely imply a former functionality. The juxtaposition of an indoor object with the outdoor space creates a contradiction and a curiosity as to why these pillows are scattered on the lawn.

**HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE?** After exposure to the 'New Wave' art movement, Lui abandoned the traditional techniques of ceramic production. He began making everyday domestic objects in fiberglass, and his pieces derive their meaning from repetition and arrangement. Fiberglass allows Jianhua to mimic the fine detail of cloth, from the fold of the fabric to stitches on the seams.

**EACH FORM IN *PILLOWS* WEIGHS 30 KG (66 LB.), MORE THAN 60 TIMES THE WEIGHT OF AN ORDINARY PILLOW WE MIGHT USE WHEN WE GO TO SLEEP. THE PILLOWS ARE MUCH LARGER, TOO—120 CM (4 FT) X 50 CM (1.6 FT) X 25 CM (0.8 FT).**



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**HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT WITH THIS ARTIST'S OTHER WORKS?** Liu Jianhua is perhaps best known for his small-scale ceramic sculptures of cheongsam-clad women in high heels, draped suggestively across brightly coloured sofas or, quite literally, served-up on 'Oriental' porcelain platters. The headless and armless figures, adopting erotic poses, lay supine among a bed of blossoms, bare thighs revealed, and legs spread. Since the early 1990s, Liu Jianhua has used a variety of traditional Chinese clothing in his work, from Sun Yat-Sen jackets to cheongsams, as symbols which allow him to contemplate not only the ideologies of his country but also China's position on the world stage. The many individual pieces that make up these series of women in cheongsams, *Games* and *Obsessive Memories* from 2000, *Plate Scene* and *If You Need, Please Choose* from 2001, may appear as criticisms of modern sexual attitudes towards women. Already served up in



provocative positions for visual delectation, the miniaturization of the female figurines contributes to the diminishment of their status into mere playthings. Their lack of arms heightens their powerlessness and the absence of heads renders the women anonymous and completes their objectification. Yet the work remains ambiguous. Without heads, we are deprived of their facial expressions as a basis for judgement, and must rely only on their seductive poses.

The works could, however, equally be interpreted as comments upon the relationship between the western art world as the domain of judgement and marketplace and the contemporary art of so called developing countries such as China. The different series may appear to play up to or invite the charge often levelled at contemporary art in China—that it caters too much to western tastes. In earlier works such as the *Cryptic* series, Liu began using fiberglass which allowed him to detail every fold of fabric and each muscle in his figurines. With his work, *Obsessive Memories*, Liu found it difficult to achieve a smooth elegance with fibre-glass and he returned to the techniques he had gained at the ceramic factory. In one of his more recent pieces, 2003's *Regular Fragile*, Liu shifted away from fashioning figurines to reproducing a series of everyday objects in traditional white porcelain. Randomly chosen, there is no intentional relationship between each of the objects and they share only a former functionality. Yet decontextualised from their original

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surroundings, the specifics of even their function is denied. It is left to the viewer to create his or her own imaginary or realistic connections according to individual life and cultural experiences.

As Pi Li has pointed out, in this work Liu Jianhua shifts his practice from politics to culture and from culture to the experience of everyday life. Li writes, 'Unlike many contemporary Chinese artists, he no longer directs his questions to party politics or the political system, but extends his sight to the issue of individual existence, and combines it with the western right of cultural choice and such issues as diversity, pluralism and viewing. In Liu Jianhua's art, we hear a voice that hints to us that only by studying issues of Chinese culture from an individual angle can we break down the stereotypical view of Chinese culture, novelty-seeking vision and opportunist mentality within contemporary art. Here the most effective method is analysis of "everyday life".'

Sources include Pi Li, *Presence of Matter and Absence of Personality* on [www.shanghart.com](http://www.shanghart.com) and *Dream 02* catalogue, 2002 Author: Diana Yeh [culturebase@visitingarts.org.uk](mailto:culturebase@visitingarts.org.uk)

TO LEARN MORE:

[www.artzinechina.com/display\\_vol\\_aid517\\_en.html](http://www.artzinechina.com/display_vol_aid517_en.html)

**WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER?** This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

**TO LEARN MORE** you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at [www.vancouverbiennale.com](http://www.vancouverbiennale.com)

**IMAGE CREDITS:**

- 1 Artist portrait; Artist
- 2 *Pillow*; Dan Fairchild
- 3 *Pillow* (installation); Dan Fairchild
- 4 People sitting on *Pillow*; Dan Fairchild
- 5 Colour Ceramic Series *Obsessive Memories*, 2002; ShangART
- 6 Colour Ceramic Series *Potted Landscape*, 2002; ShangART
- 7 *The Boxing Age*, 2002-2008; cngghialino
- 8 *Unreal Scene*, 2008; cngghialino

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