



Splendid imperfection: Dutch artist Bouke de Vries and Chinese porcelain – in conversation

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The artist's deconstructed creations yield fragile beauty through imperfection.

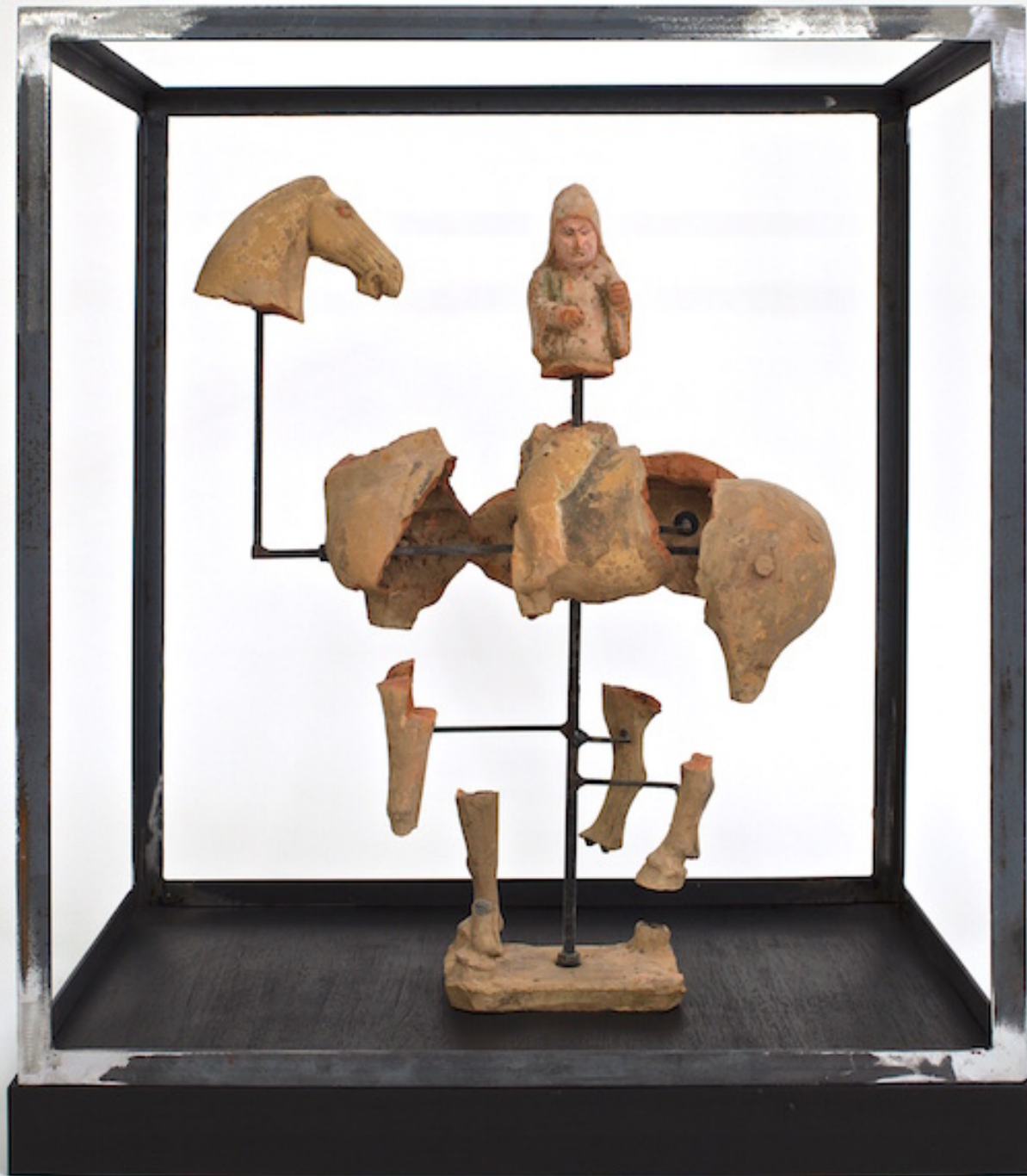
Dutch artist Bouke de Vrie's solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London shines a light on the illustrious history of ceramics in China with a decidedly contemporary twist.



Bouke de Vries, 'Grown from Chinese Clay' (detail), 2017, 18th-century Chinese porcelain fragments and mixed media, 15 x 12 x 58 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Bouke de Vries employs skills honed as one of London's top ceramic conservators to breathe new life into damaged ceramic pieces using fragments originating from China's Han (206 BC to 220 AD) and Tang (618-907 AD) dynasties to Europe's greatest porcelain and pottery makers.

Born in the historically significant city of Utrecht, Bouke de Vries studied at Design Academy Eindhoven and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London. He then went on to work in the fashion industry with some of its top talents before studying Ceramics Conservation and Restoration at West Dean College in the United Kingdom.



Bouke de Vries, 'Looking Back', 2017, Tang dynasty horse and rider and mixed media, 56 x 36 x 64 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

de Vries' work is currently being exhibited in "Fractured Images" at the **Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery** until 15 July 2017. The artist has participated in both solo and group shows worldwide in 2016, including the Galerie Ron Mandos, New Art Projects, **Peabody Essex Museum**, CODA Apeldoorn, Ferrin Contemporary, Ariana Museum,

Art Radar caught up with de Vries to learn more about why the artist considers broken objects to be “perfectly imperfect”, and his recent foray into using traditional lacquer and gold dust to mend broken pieces.



Bouke de Vries, 'Culture Clash', 2017, 18th century Chinese porcelain and mixed media, 32 x 32 x 24 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

In 1990, you returned to school to focus on ceramics conservation and restoration. What prompted this career change?

I had been working in the fashion industry and had come to a point where I felt that it wasn't my future. I worked with some of the great talents in this country like John Galliano, Stephen Jones and Zandra Rhodes, and I always recognised the unique talent they each had and wanted to find in myself something I could be good at.

As a ceramic conservator, you were often given broken pieces that were beyond repair. Did this process have an impact on your career or later work?

As a restorer, you look at objects that are broken and that people want you to make perfect again. Sometimes pieces aren't considered worth that. I started looking at these pieces for what they are: even in their damaged state they can be beautiful and interesting. This became the starting point for my art work.



Bouke de Vries, 'Still Life with Hummingbird', 2017, 17th century Chinese porcelain bowl, taxidermy, wax fruit and mixed media, 33 x 33 x 24 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

You were born in the Netherlands. Are there any particular periods, styles or well-known Dutch artists that influence you and your work?

When I first started making my own works, I looked very much at the still-life paintings of the 17th century, no particular artist but as a genre. Growing up in the Netherlands the art of the Golden Age is everywhere. You are constantly reminded of it, so it's not a surprise that it's reflected in my works.

Please tell us more about your work *Self Portrait 1*. Is it still an apt representation of yourself?

The self-portrait was the very first piece I made. It is a white figure of a Dutch boy in national costume, which my partner had given me and had gotten broken in a house move. I hadn't thrown the broken pieces away and years later had the idea of sticking it together using my restoration techniques but as if it was frozen at the moment of shattering. I think it's sensitive and vulnerable, aspects of one's character we often hide – but which are expressed in this piece.



Bouke de Vries, 'Self-Portrait 1', 2009, 20th century white bisque figure of Dutch boy and mixed media. Image courtesy the artist.

You have described your style as “reconstruction meets deconstruction”. Your studio must be an interesting place! Is it more reconstruction or deconstruction?

That depends [on] when you visit! Sometimes, in the middle of making a new piece, the art studio is organised chaos. Other times, when the pieces I have been working on have gone to the gallery for exhibition, it feels suddenly empty, becalmed. But there is always a creative tension between reconstruction and deconstruction.



Bouke de Vries, 'Cocoon Jar', 2017, Han dynasty earthenware cocoon jar and gold paint, 30 x 18 x 26 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Some of your work utilises *Kintsugi*, a technique from Japan that 'repairs' broken ceramics with precious materials such as gold dust or lacquer. When did you first learn of this technique? Do you use this technique in a contemporary way? How?

Mostly, I used to utilise my own modern version of *Kintsugi*, using epoxy resins and gold leaf. Recently, I have had a master class in the traditional way, using the traditional lacquer and gold dust, and I am starting to use it.



Bouke de Vries, 'Homeland South Korea', 2015, MDF and celadon fragments by Lee Eun Bum.
Image courtesy the artist.

You often use ancient ceramics in your work. In the piece *Homeland South Korea*, you used material from contemporary artist **Lee Eun Bum. Please tell us more about your collaboration with this artist.**

I had previously done a map of the Netherlands, using 17th and 18th century archaeological fragments of Dutch Delftware. When I was invited to be part of the Cheongju International Craft Biennale in South Korea, I wanted to make a map of South Korea. As an act of collaboration, I thought it would be interesting to use ceramics from a Korean potter which had gotten damaged in the making process. The clay of Korea –

through the porcelain fragments – makes up the map of Korea. The piece was acquired by the Korean department of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Your work *Memory Vessel XLVI* was chosen by Ulrich Leben in an article about the 2017 edition of TEFAF. Can you please tell us more about how this work was created? How do you choose shapes for each blown-glass vessel?

Memory Vessels are a series of works where I find broken containers (usually vases) and put them back together with tape to establish their original shape. I then have a scientific glass blower make an exact replica, after which I glue the fragments inside the glass replica. The glass replica becomes a “ghost” of the original piece and a kind of funerary urn of itself.



Bouke de Vries, 'Memory Vessel', 2016, early 17th century Italian earthenware Majolica (Rome) drug jar and glass. Image courtesy the artist.

Your solo show currently at the Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London is entitled "Fractured Images". Please tell us more about the impetus behind the show and your connection or interest with China.

China has been the greatest producer of ceramics in history and gone through so many stages with amazing new discoveries in techniques and materials. It holds an endless fascination for me. In this show, I have looked at different periods in Chinese history and the ceramics associated with these periods, including modern-day China.

Please tell us more about your recent work *Cyber Empress*. Does this piece represent a departure of sorts? How?

It's a departure of sorts but quite a natural departure. I'm not a ceramicist as such but, because of my conservation specialisation, ceramics have been the material that I have used to express myself. However, I have never seen it as the only possible material. It has given me the confidence to start making my works but that doesn't mean that other materials are excluded. I have done some wood pieces in the past and just done my first bronzes. *Cyber Empress* is quite a natural thing for me to have done as I originally studied textiles, then I designed embroideries when working for Zandra Rhodes.



Bouke de Vries, 'Cyber Empress', 2017, 20th century ceramic dolls head, hand embroidered gown and mixed media, 75 x 67 x 20 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

I am particularly interested in learning about your piece *Jar Carrier*. Any interesting stories behind how you came upon the Han Dynasty figure or the Chinese porcelain marine-archeology jars?

I have been aware of the Han figures for a long time but was really blown away when I actually saw them at the excavation site in China. They were made very simply and crudely. The bodies would have been dressed in silk robes and they have no arms as these were made of wood – both robes and arms have decayed over the centuries. What's left is these strangely monolithic figures. I was offered a group of them and have used them in a couple of different ways so far. Here I have grouped them with archeological jars from a Chinese shipwreck from another source to form a figurative, slightly Brancusi-inspired form.



Bouke de Vries, 'Jar Carrier', 2017, Han dynasty figure and 15th century Chinese porcelain marine archaeology jars and marble, 25 x 25 x 11 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde

In an article for another e-journal, you stated that **“Art is one way in which we can outlive our own mortality”** and discussed the relevancy of the phrase *sic transit gloria mundi* (‘Worldly things are fleeting’). Is art important in our increasingly complex and fractured world? What purpose does it hold, do you think?

Of course, art is important right now. It allows you to comprehend things in a different way; it can make you laugh, cry, think, change...

Lisa Pollman

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