

**Gardiner Museum Interview**  
December 2015  
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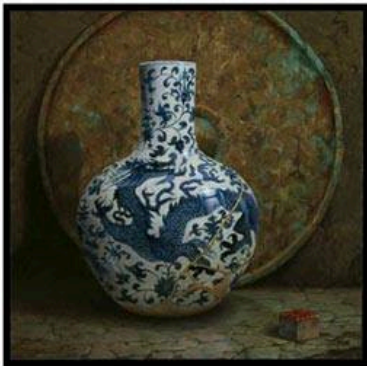
Questions: Rachel Weiner (Gardiner Museum)  
Answers: Bruno Capolongo

**What first attracted you to ceramics as a subject matter?**

In the mid 90's while studying at the Ontario College of Art (OCADU), I lived in a house with seventeen others, all Chinese. It was by no means luxurious, but a large house on Beverly near Dundas, which is East China Town. This allowed for ample exposure to Chinese shops for several blocks, some selling higher quality pottery and real antiques. I found that I was quite attracted to blue and white glazed porcelains, especially elegant vases and bowls; and also spent time at the Royal Ontario Museum discovering their collection of pottery, and eventually the AGO's snuff bottles and Gardiner Museum's collection. While the study and refinement of taste began then and continues to unfold to this day, the seed of that interest in pottery, especially Asian pottery, really came alive at that time, but in an unlikely way.



I think it's worth mentioning a strong pull toward Asian women from my adolescence. By the time I met my South-East Asian wife Grace while studying at OCADU I'd already had Japanese and Korean girlfriends, which served to strengthen my appreciation of Asian cultures. And at that moment something innocent but life changing happened. A wonderful instructor at OCADU, Maria Gabankova, seeing that I was struggling with meaning and purpose in *what* to paint, asserted that within the genre of still-life the artist finds all the beauty and challenges found in any genre of painting. I loved Maria as a teacher, so with some skepticism, and tentatively at first, I began my twenty year career as an artist best known to many as a still-life painter of pottery.

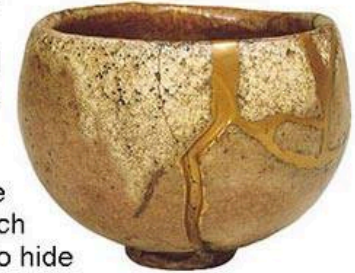


In my work I celebrate fine pottery as translated through the art of painting. There is an intersection of craft and culture inherent in this process that recalls the same cross-cultural influences that have given us the prized pottery we collect today. I have had the privilege to personally handle and paint artifacts from private collections, including ancient Cambodian pottery belonging to a private Toronto collector whose collection has even been sourced by the ROM. In such artifacts, among the simplest and most rustic ceramics, there is astounding beauty if one will only look closely.

As I continue to study pottery from various places and periods it becomes impossible to separate the wares of a people from the people themselves. Vessels in museums such as the Gardiner, whether made for decorative or utilitarian ends, tell us about the people who made and owned them, even as those in our own homes do today. But I really think after twenty years I am only scratching the surface of my subject as a painter, especially conceptually.

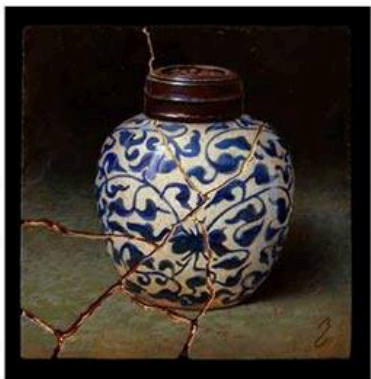
**How did you become acquainted with the concept of Kintsugi? Why does it resonate so strongly with you?**

I discovered kintsugi recently at the end of a period of personal difficulty and transition which I am now grateful for. It coincided with my being a contributor to the Toronto based charity auction *Buy Art Not Kids* (BANK, which raises money to help fight the evil of sex trafficking) where kintsugi was used in an email as a symbol for the young girls and women rescued from traffickers. That was only about a year ago, so kintsugi is relatively new to me, but everyone I share it with is equally impressed with how powerful a symbol it is.



The Art of *kintsugi* (golden joinery) or *kintsukuroi* (golden repair) is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with adhesive lacquer that is overlaid with gold or other precious metals. That which was chipped or shattered is mended and restored with no attempt to hide the scars which are instead embellished with gold. While such pottery is often striking enough on a purely aesthetic level, once understood as a metaphor suddenly kintsugi is laden with rich and transcendent meaning.

While I have figurative kintsugi paintings in the works as well, it is, appropriately, in my pottery based paintings that I have first chosen to explore kintsugi as an artist. These works were just debuted as a *feature exhibit* at Marcia Rafelman Fine Arts (December 2015, Toronto). I spoke formally for a few minutes at the vernissage about kintsugi as analogous to our common though diverse experiences in life - where we have all suffered disappointments, difficulties and defeats, and even terrible loss or tragedy. So like clay vessels we suffer chips, cracks and are at times shattered by life (It's interesting to note that in ancient Jewish, Christian, and other texts human beings are likened to clay vessels).



But my paintings are not about broken ceramics, they are about the beauty and strength we find when we come through the trials of life and pick up the pieces, and heal, learn, and move forward in life stronger and wiser for it all; maybe with more patience and empathy too. It is so counterintuitive to our thinking, where we fear and flee difficulties, not realizing that it is through such fires that we become strong and refined, like metal or porcelain. So kintsugi is not about being or remaining broken, but about finding redemption and wholeness through mending beautifully in the course of life.

That may be a long answer but I haven't even touched on other aspects of the work and how it intersects with other forms and experiences as expressed through *maki-e*, *yobitsugi*, etc. In fact, my Kintsugi series has just begun and I'm looking at years' worth of studio work which is exciting to me and my galleries.

**What is your process for creating these pieces? (I see on your website you show the various stages of your work – I think this would be very interesting to our audience)**

The process of how the Kintsugi paintings are made is one of the most exhilarating aspects of the work, but I'll avoid too much detail in answering the question since only other artists really care for lots of technical detail. While I am known to many to be a technically strong painter, in this series I literally allow things to fall apart, or rather, I smash things! In some pieces I also employ some controlled breakage by cutting as well, but there is far less control than in my established 'Contemporary Still-Life' series, where I employ a geometric, Mondrianesque approach, with an almost Zen-like balance and order.



In the Kintsugi paintings, the breaking, mounting and mending of my clay-like panels is in keeping with the literally broken clay objects of actual kintsugi. Starting this way means I begin with brokenness and work backwards, essentially starting abstractly with shapes, colour, and eventually image and even some real gold. The Chinese chargers and other pottery are largely sourced from museum, gallery and private collections. True to myself – I can't help it – the exact order and process has varied in almost every piece as I am restless in exploring different approaches, so I know this series will evolve very quickly. The text in the catalogue for the 'Kintsukuroi' exhibit also fleshes out my process and thinking on this. In the catalogue I refer to the process as *cathartic*. It's no overstatement. I am not only conveying a kintsugi message or concept, I'm living through it like everyone else.

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