

## BRITISH ART STUDIES

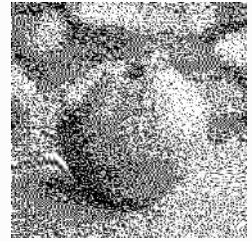
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### Ancient Desires

Artist Collaboration interview between **Charwei Tsai** Artist Collaboration and **Rosie Cooper** Sarah

**Victoria Turner**

WORD COUNT:1,931



## Introduction

This discussion emerges from Charwei Tsai's residency at Wysing Arts Centre, in rural Cambridgeshire, where Rosie Cooper is director. Engaging with ceramics for the first time in her career, Tsai has created a new work, *Ancient Desires*, a set of over 200 offering vessels, inspired by the residency and made in Wysing's ceramics studio with the support of studio artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy. *Ancient Desires* is also part of the research and exhibition project *Making New Worlds: Li Yuan-chia & Friends*, displayed at Kettle's Yard and West Court Gallery, Jesus College, University of Cambridge (11 November 2023–18 February 2024), and curated by Hammad Nasar, Sarah Victoria Turner, and Amy Tobin. The project is inspired by the vision of the artist Li Yuan-chia (1929–94) and the LYC Museum & Art Gallery, which he founded and ran between 1972 and 1983 in the rural Cumbrian village of Banks, next to Hadrian's Wall. It retraces Li's commitment to fostering creativity, his interest in play, and his investment in new ways of being in the world. The LYC's children's room, for example, provided a place for young people to experiment with art-making, while craft workshops hosted communities of makers. The LYC also had a library, a garden, and spaces to socialise, transforming how visitors encountered art. All that physically remains of it today is a derelict building.

As part of the *Making New Worlds* project, the curators have commissioned three contemporary artists—Aaron Tan, Grace Ndiritu, and Charwei Tsai—to reflect on the legacies of Li's work and the LYC. Tsai lives and works between Taiwan and France. Her new work, *Ancient Desires*, is displayed in the exhibition, along with some of her earlier textile and film works, at Kettle's Yard and West Court Gallery. Just before the opening in November 2023, Tsai, Cooper, and Turner conducted this conversation to explore the genesis of the project and the wider themes that connect Tsai's practice with Li's artistic vision, and the synergies between the LYC and Wysing today. Like the LYC, Wysing's ethos is artist-centred; and, in addition to residencies, Wysing has a programme of commissions, public events, and learning opportunities for young people facing rural isolation. It was established by artists and philanthropists in 1989 with the aim of offering artists a place to reflect on their practice outside the habits of daily life.

## Discussion

**Sarah Victoria Turner:** Charwei, could you start by framing how the ideas for *Ancient Desires* and this project emerged out of your residency at Wysing?

**Charwei Tsai:** I feel, somehow, that participating in this exhibition project has helped me to shape the framework of my practice. After learning and thinking about Li Yuan-chia's practice with the curators, I have a clearer structure for myself. I see my practice in three parts: the outer circle, the inner circle, and the secret circle. *Ancient Desires* has crossed all three. It relates to what's happening in our world (the outer circle) and how that impacts individuals and their community (the inner circle). It also connects to my own spiritual search (the secret circle). It's work that reflects on the devastation around the world caused by feelings of dissatisfaction with the current state of things. As a tonic for this condition, I have created a daily practice of making offering vessels to invoke feelings of abundance and generosity, which can carry small individual gifts that contribute to collective well-being. This all emerges from my own spiritual searching, but it's also very much tied to my culture. In Taiwan, where I come from, Buddhism, Taoism,

and Confucianism were the predominant spiritual traditions while I was growing up. In these traditions, making an offering is a very common practice to deal with problems or strife.



Figure 1

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Lucy Rose Shaftain-Fenner.



Figure 2

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Lucy Rose Shaftain-Fenner.

**SVT:** Does the shape and form of the vessels themselves carry particular associations or relevance?

**CT:** In a lot of spiritual texts, offerings can be physical or imagined, so that people who are not able to give can simply visualise an offering. When making *Ancient Desires*, I was visualising offerings such as water, flowers, or incense, and thinking about the forms and shapes that could best contain them. And then the idea is to put different shaped vessels next to one another, to emphasise difference but also to create a conversation (figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4)



Figure 3

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Lucy Rose Shaftain-Fenner.



Figure 4

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Lucy Rose Shaftain-Fenner.

**Rosie Cooper:** Wysing offers space and time to artists when they need it the most, giving financial, curatorial, and spatial support without the expectation of an outcome. That's our offering! We share not just material resources, but also the immaterial knowledge and skills held within our community. It was wonderful for us that you decided to use the ceramics studio, set up in 2014 by artists Giles Round and Phil Root. You also worked with our studio artist community, in particular Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy, who helped with glazing. This collaboration captures the spirit of international connection central to both LYC and Wysing.

**CT:** Yes, although the philosophy behind the work was already in existence, at Wysing *Ancient Desires* could actually take form. I'd never worked in ceramics before, so it was a big step for me to experiment with a new material, a new language even. There are always new things to learn. Being at Wysing gave me a spaciousness—in that I had space to make and space to think. I haven't had that luxury for a while, as I travel a lot between Taipei and Paris, both very crowded cities.

So it wasn't just a residency for me: it was a retreat. Every day I would kind of meditate on the meaning of this project – what I was doing with the ceramics. It was freedom just to have that space as a resource.

**SVT:** What you say reminds me of Li Yuan-chia's motto of "Space – Time – Life", which he frequently employed to try to encapsulate the project of the LYC (figs. 5, 6, and 7). It sounds as though the configuration of space–time–life at Wysing opened up possibilities for your work that you hadn't previously explored.

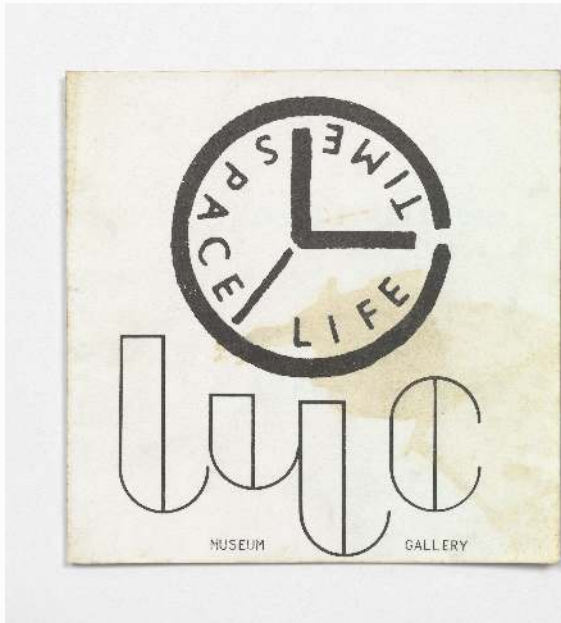


Figure 5

*David Williams: Lines in Space*, LYC Museum & Art Gallery exhibition catalogue cover, 1978. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Todd-White Photography.



Figure 6

*Li Yuan-chia gardening in the grounds of the LYC Museum and Art Gallery*, 1970s. Digital image courtesy of Demarco Digital Archive University of Dundee & Richard Demarco Archive.



Figure 7

*Felt making workshop at the LYC Museum & Art Gallery*, 1970s. Digital image courtesy of Li Yuan-chia Archive, The University of Manchester Library.

**CT:** During the residency, I also visited Kettle's Yard and they were exhibiting the work of the studio potter Lucy Rie. Experiencing the presence of her work for the first time became a big inspiration for my project. After Wysing, I came back to Paris to continue my ceramic practice in the studio of a friend's mother. Quite by coincidence, she was already using one of Lucy Rie's glaze recipes, so I started to use that. Rie made very practical, everyday objects, but at the same time she was breaking boundaries, gesturing towards something sacred.



**RC:** I remember you telling me, shortly after you'd arrived back in Paris, that you had introduced making vessels into your life as a daily practice.



Figure 8

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Installed in West Court Gallery, Jesus College, University of Cambridge, November 2023-February 2024, as part of *Making New Forms: Li Yuan-chia and Friends*, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Matthew Hollow.



Figure 9

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Installed in West Court Gallery, Jesus College, University of Cambridge, November 2023-February 2024, as part of *Making New Forms: Li Yuan-chia and Friends*, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Matthew Hollow.

**CT:** Yes, in the morning I would deal with the bureaucracy of French administration, and then in the afternoon I would take refuge in the ceramic studio. It kept me from going crazy! The method I use is very tactile. It's rooted in the tradition of Japanese raku bowls. You start very simply with a sphere of clay. Then, without using a potter's wheel, you shape the clay. The idea is that you keep finding your centre, your core—and, using your original sphere, you keep turning the clay to make a bowl or vessel object. If there are imperfections, the idea is not to dwell on them but to keep turning. If you dwell too much on the imperfections, the whole thing is likely to come apart. It's a beautiful approach—it can apply to life as well as to making ceramics!

**SVT:** These are obviously ceramics that are made to be lived with and used, but they are also on display as part of the *Making New Worlds* exhibition (figs. 8 and 9). It's different when they are in the more formal setting of a gallery where there are obvious pressures of safety and conventions that require visitors not to touch the exhibited works. However, you have asked that visitors be allowed to leave offerings in some of the vessels (fig. 10). I've been struck by how open you are to the element of risk here. That call for people to interact with the work feels integral to both its form and its concept.

**CT:** Definitely. A thread that runs through my practice is that the idea and process are just as important as the object itself. It's the audience's participation that really activates the work.



Figure 10

Charwei Tsai, *Ancient Desires*, 2023, ceramic offering vessels, dimensions variable, commissioned by Kettle's Yard and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, during a residency at Wysing Arts Centre. Made with the support of artists Lawrence Epps and Isobel Meredith-Hardy at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge, and Marie Saint Bris, Paris. Installed in West Court Gallery, Jesus College, University of Cambridge, November 2023-February 2024, as part of *Making New Forms: Li Yuan-chia and Friends*, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai / Photo: Matthew Hollow.

**RC:** The title of the work, *Ancient Desires*, speaks to the complexity of creative practice and the desire of all human beings to make—something that transcends tired conversations about the difference between “art” and “craft”. The idea of what art is—or what making is, what creativity is—is so fluid and porous. The LYC celebrated that, welcoming everyone and valuing creativity on the makers’ own terms. Your project draws on traditions of practice that are at their heart conceptual but that have been integral to making for thousands of years. It pushes against hierarchies of value that too often seep into cultural production and its display.

**SVT:** Charwei, earlier you talked about an idea already being in existence that then took form at Wysing. Will you continue to work with the concepts developed in *Ancient Desires*?

**CT:** My next project takes me to Nepal, where I will continue to make offering vessels with local artisans. It will be interesting to see how the project evolves in a place where the ancient tradition of making offerings is still very present in people’s daily lives. Since the artisans there are used to mass-producing vessels with a mould, I would love to invite them to make individual ones that vary as much as possible from what they are used to, and to take their time with visualising imagined offerings. The idea is to deconstruct and expand the meanings of these vessels so they don’t lose significance when they are mass-produced. I will join them in the process of making, and one idea is to invite audience members to paint imagined offerings in the vessels.

## Instructions To Make the Vessels

1. Make a sphere with the clay on a circular stand that can be turned manually.
2. With your thumb, pinch into the sphere from four different directions to make space in the centre of the sphere.
3. Keep expanding this space with the thumb by pinching outward with one hand, and at the same time keep turning the wheel manually with the other hand.

4. Add coils on top of the rim if you wish to expand the form, and keep pinching and turning.
5. After you reach the form you like, smooth out the surface, or not, as you wish.
6. Turn the container upside down and make a stand with a circular coil. Press the coil on the stand to let it sit flatly against the stand.
7. Then refine the rim of the container.

Tips:

1. Keep turning: do not dwell on the flaws and it will naturally come together and become a spherical container.
2. What might have been thought of as a flaw sometimes becomes more interesting than what is usually thought of as a perfect form.
3. It helps to set an intention when starting a new vessel. You could think, “May the making of this vessel be of benefit to all sentient beings”.



Figure 11

Charwei Tsai, *Models to accompany instructions for making offering vessels*, 2023. Shown in the ceramics studio at Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridge. Digital image courtesy of Charwei Tsai.

## About the authors

Charwei Tsai was born in Taiwan in 1980. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in industrial design and art & architectural history (2002), and from the postgraduate research program La Seine at L'École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris (2010). Recent exhibitions include: 15th Gwangju Biennale (2023); *World Classrooms* at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2023); *In the Present Moment* at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (2023); *SIGG: Chinese Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection* at SongEun Art and Cultural Foundation, Seoul (2023); performance in “Climat: quelle culture pour quel futur?” at Centre Pompidou, Paris (2022); screening and talk at “Tate Modern Lates”, Tate Modern, London (2022); *Refugees Welcome: Artists for Refugees* at Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2022); “Initiative for Practices and Visions of Radical Care”, *On Care and Resilience*, Lumbung Radio; Documenta XV (2022); and online screening of a newly commissioned project, *Numbers*, at Sydney Opera House (2022).



Rosie Cooper has been director of Wysing Arts Centre since 2021, where she has led the organisation to a new chapter of national and international residencies, collaborations, commissions, and an ambitious youth-led learning programme. Prior to that, she was head of exhibitions at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, and before that she was head of programmes at Liverpool Biennial (2012–16). She is the co-author and editor of several books and exhibition catalogues. She is chair of Home Live Art and trustee of IntoArt. She is a judge of the Turner Prize in 2024. Sarah Victoria Turner is director of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art in London, which is part of Yale University. She is editor-in-chief of the award-winning, open-access journal *British Art Studies* (since its founding in 2015). She has taught at both the University of York and the Courtauld Institute of Art. Much of her academic work has focused on the entangled relationships between Britain, the British Empire, and South Asia; she has published widely and co-curated several major exhibitions, most recently *Making New Worlds: Li Yuan-chia & Friends* at Kettle’s Yard.

## Imprint

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