



Sarah Goffman: Forgery and Uttering in Blue and White

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While discussing her new work, Sarah Goffman told me the story of the English forger who died in the process of immaculately drawing a five-pound note. ‘No-one knows how many he made. They were such identical copies, they just disappeared into the flow of currency. But the beauty is that he wasn’t too greedy. He just supplemented his pension with a fiver every now and then.’¹

Forgery and imitation for profit, on the other hand, is the life-story of Chinese blue and white porcelain, now almost ubiquitous across European and Asian cultures after five hundred years of diversification through large-scale export and local design modification.² For the past twelve months Sydney-based Goffman—known for her relational, atmospheric and playful installation environments utilising recycled plastic, discarded objects, light and ephemera—has been turning a controlled hand and indelible blue felt-tips towards white painted tubs and containers; creating semblances and assemblages of these familiar blue and white wares.

Her new work, *Plastic Arts* (2009) presents a conundrum of material concerns and economies, and a challenge to the presumption of linear design evolution. These vessels and ornaments in blue and white do not merely juxtapose traditional aesthetics against contemporary forms, they also force a consideration of the familiar within a complex matrix of values. In September I saw a retrospective exhibition *According to What?* by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. There, his Neolithic earthenware vases dipped in house-paint that dried in dribbles over ancient red clay, were clustered on a low plinth adjacent to three famous large-scale photographs of the artist dropping a Han Dynasty vase on the ground. Where Ai Weiwei questions the status and meaning of objects of enormous cultural value by inserting, modifying and sometimes destroying them within a contemporary moment, Goffman’s far more materially humble practice reflects and abstracts these same concerns with trademark humour and gentle, formal arrangements.

Above and facing page: Sarah Goffman, *Plastic Arts*, materials, 2009. Photo: Michael Myers.



Considering on the one hand ancient vases and on the other, plastic utilitarian vessels, I began thinking about the everyday oriental ‘Willow’ pattern plates that are displayed in many British and Australian homes. The versions my mother owned were made in the pottery factory in Stoke-on-Trent where her relatives worked. Indeed, while the love-story it depicts is (supposedly) Chinese in origin, the pattern was designed in Europe and mass-produced for a middle-class market.³ So Goffman’s practice of alteration and modification of decorative blue and white on unlikely, yet quotidian, objects engages with an extended and fragmented design evolution.

The introduction of underglaze painting in cobalt blue on white porcelain was perfected by Chinese artisans of the 14th Century. Historians have suggested, however, that by the 17th Century, when China was exporting large quantities of pottery and other luxury goods, a surprisingly mechanised blue and white production line was already in operation,

One workman does nothing but draw the first colour line beneath the rims of the pieces; another traces flowers while a third one paints ... The men who sketch the outlines learn sketching, but not painting; those who paint [i.e. apply the colour] study only painting but not sketching.⁴

Decorating the surface of her juice-bottle vases, paper plates and yoghurt pots, Goffman restores a kind of individual artistry and care to the pre-industrial copy, marrying it with post-industrial waste.

Walking into an installation environment by Goffman is like walking into a cave filled with surrogate treasure. The threshold of her solo exhibition *Paradise Found* at Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney (2008) bathed visitors in a warm red light radiating through a draped plastic sheet, softening the edges of the hard space and introducing a physiological, sensual relationship to colour that was punctuated in high-chroma arrangements throughout the two rooms. Situated within all of Goffman’s plastic practice is a measure of joyously robust and defiant technological by-product tempered by the problematic of its own throwaway use- value and sheer abundance. In one corner an awning made from bright, pictorially printed plastic bags created a cloud-form that was both a celebration and a lament, and amid the exhilarating light and colour display of this installation was the pathos of small objects rescued, and placed into new, formal groupings and relationships with others.

Above and facing page: Sarah Goffman, *Plastic Arts, materials*, 2009. Photo: Michael Myers.



Plastic Arts has focused Goffman’s attention (at least for a while) on these small things, marking a divergence from minimalist intervention in the form and structural integrity of objects—her installations often seem to effect a transformation on found things through relational and spatial associations—to a practice that approaches the working methodologies of craft (without surrendering to a traditional provision for utility or ornament). Her blue and white vases and vessels which repurpose drinking bottles, polystyrene plates, vitamin bottles and plastic trays are the product of long hours of detailed drawing, and have been displayed as a group of objects on gallery-standard shelves, vivid against white walls. In talking about this new strand of her work, Goffman has identified herself as one of several contemporary Australian artists participating in a kind of revival, revisioning or reiteration of the (original) ceramic forms; Chinese/Australian artist Ah Xian being the most famous, producing his well-known *China Series* in the late-nineties, and Perth-based Andrew Nicholls with his ongoing exploration of Australiana and colonialism through blue and white porcelain.⁵ Historically this pottery, with its global appeal and potential for mass-production and variation is like the Coca-Cola bottle of its age, reflected by Goffman’s gaudy line-up of household vessels.

In *Plastic Arts* Sarah Goffman works with high-tech stuff and packaging, engineered in the knowledge that the atomic half-lives of these forms could extend to hundreds of years. They are anything but precious, yet they are still desired. In some ways her *Plastic Arts* are durable artifacts of the future, embodying simultaneously the zenith and nadir of a design and technological evolution, combined with evidence of the individual author, working away with a fine blue pen. While there is no chance that Goffman’s blue and white ware could be mistaken for the real thing (and slip into currency like the five pound note of her English forger) we realise that among centuries of fakes, they at least stand as equals.

1. Email from Sarah Goffman to the author, October 5 2009.
2. William Watson, *The Genius of China* (Kent: Westerham Press, 1973) 155
3. George Bernard Hughes, *English and Scottish Earthenware, 1660-1860* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960) 153
4. A description sent in letters by French Jesuit, Pere d’Entrecolles who was in China from 1698-1741 in: Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) 264
5. From a conversation between Sarah Goffman and the author, 14 September 2009.