

Kitchen Gods and Kiln Gods

Jack Tan

I don't quite remember in my early childhood whether we ever hung a picture of the Kitchen God near the gas cooker in our kitchen. As a family we followed a lot of the customs in Chinese folk religion before we converted to Pentecostalism--burning incense, worshipping our ancestors, making food offerings to gods, bathing with temple flowers--and so I like to think we had a hearth/kitchen god too. But I do remember my aunt telling me that children had to be obedient because the Kitchen God went up to heaven every Chinese New Year to report our behaviour to the Jade Emperor, in a kind of annual performance audit. I never knew what happened after my report was submitted. I wondered if there was a naughty or nice list that affected what I get reincarnated as in my next life. However, I got the sense that I was being watched whether I was in the kitchen or not. It was a mystical panopticon that I carried inside me all the time. But unlike Jeremy Bentham's prison panopticon, where all rule-breaking could be observed from a central vantage point and immediately nipped in the bud by prison guards, I never knew what the rules were exactly that I should be following.

As I grew up, I learned that there were different rules for different scenarios with some contradicting each other, some changing over time, and others to be obeyed formally but not always to be obeyed informally. The rules were ambiguous, or there were so many interacting sets of rules that they merged into a murmuration. And it

was in this shift between rules that I found an opacity and a hiddenness that allowed pause. But far from retreat or escape, the space of movement between rules opened out an opportune moment of vision and action (or ‘augenblick’ according to Kierkegaard and Heidegger). Like the rest between heartbeats, the bounce between footsteps or the turn of each breath, the intended future could be grasped using the momentum of the past and made real in the present.

“The future is queerness’s domain” said performance theorist Jose Esteban Munoz; queerness is a “mode of desiring” that is not pure fantasy but a structured and achievable “schemata”. Later when I trained as a ceramicist, I learned that this schemata did not necessarily have to be forward-planned in a conscious and dedicated way. It could accumulate as a contra-action or alter-thinking within the pause and the slippage between doings: a temporal Undercommons perhaps. In working with clay, each movement of my thumb as it blended coils together constituted an action in tandem with the pause before it, a pause that was an opportune moment of intention and desire. And so making a pot became a process of queer coiling where I obeyed both the rules of doing pottery (seemingly satisfying the watching Kitchen God) and yet infusing that doing with a will derived from inside a space of overlooked and repeated pauses.

But in the end, this pause-doing has to be offered up and offered out so that it can finish becoming. The bread needs to be baked. The work of art needs to be exhibited. The website needs to go live. Indeed, the pot needs to be fired. And all skill, intention, desire, method, material and procedure is put in the hands of the Kiln Gods. In China, people in ceramics-producing cities used to pray for good fortune to pottery gods who were the deified mastercraftsmen of days gone by. In the USA, some potters conduct orientalist rituals of making and placing kiln god figurines on their kilns in hopes of a good firing. However, for me the Kiln God is not a protector, helper or fortune-giver, but a god of chance who demands that we take a chance with no guarantees. The rules and how well you followed the rules don’t matter anymore. The giving over of the work to the kiln (or stage or printer or gallery

or powerpoint) is a letting go to the fire, the weather, to chemistry/ physics and to audience. At the Scottish Sculpture Workshop it takes the form of a daily repeated passing of skill, thought and work between residences, communal kitchens and workshops, i.e. between sleeping, eating and making. This letting go is another point of pause between preparation and fructification, between kitchen gods and kiln gods, where becoming is dreamed of and happens for both the maker and the made.

Jack Tan is an artist based in the Machars in Galloway, who makes work exploring the connection between the social, the legal and art. Using social relations and cultural norms as material, he creates performances, performatives, sculpture, video and participatory projects that highlight the rules — customs, rituals, habits and theories — that guide human behaviour.

Jack joined the Board of Trustees at SSW in September 2019.

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