

# Breath



## Beth Lo in Korea

**B**ETH LO WAS ONE OF FOUR AMERICAN ARTISTS INVITED to create work on the occasion of the 7th annual *Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale* in South Korea held 23 September – 17 November, 2013. The sculptural installation she created, *Breath*, includes porcelain figures and containers of standing water that gently ripple from blowing fans. The resulting multi-media sculpture shifts between cultural identities, media and artistic disciplines to present a powerful meditation on life and death. Lo says, “I wanted to challenge myself to use other media in this piece and so included light, motion and sound elements.”

*Article by Brandon Reintjes*

At the heart of Lo’s work is her cultural identity as Chinese-American. Like every second-generation child of an immigrant family, Lo strives to reconcile the culture she inherited with the culture into which she was born. The stories of her family – from their origins as wok makers in their ancestral home of Wu Zhen to their immigration to the US – are central to Lo’s work.

Lo, who was born in Lafayette, Indiana, has chronicled her family’s history through her artwork. Her parents were part of a great Chinese exodus tied to the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War between the Communist and Kuomintang armies. It is no accident that her parents moved to the US in 1943. To their delight, they discovered that they loved their new lifestyle and, as their family grew, wanted their children to have the opportunities afforded by the West. Lo’s parents lost

contact with their families for nearly a decade. When communication was reestablished, they were greeted with horror stories of physical abuse, degradation and punishment that affirmed their decision to leave. Given the opportunity to return to China, they chose to remain in the US.

When Lo’s father received a position teaching in the Department of Aeronautics and Astronautics Engineering at Purdue University, the family settled in the Midwest. Facing a new place, they simultaneously sought to blend in and preserve their

traditions, as Lo recounts in her book *Auntie Yang’s Great Soybean Picnic*

(2012). This is the second autobiographical children’s book, after *Mahjong All Day Long* (2005) that Lo illustrated in collaboration with her sister, the author Ginnie Lo. Lo also takes inspiration from her mother, Kiahsuang, a nonagenarian who practices traditional Chinese brush painting.

Lo came to Montana in the early 1970s to study with Rudy Autio at the University of Montana. When he retired in 1985, Lo was hired as Professor of Ceramic Art to replace him. She has garnered a series of awards, including the Missoula Cultural Council Individual Artist Award (2014); United States Artists Hoi Fellowship (2009); University of Montana Provost’s Distinguished Lecturer Award (2006); a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowship Grant (1994); the Montana Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship (1989); and an American Craft Museum Design Award (1986).



A functional ceramist by training, she has generated a vast body of sculptural work with an implied narrative throughout her career. Over the years, she has refined her quick-witted, playful works which elegantly blend serious issues with characteristic aplomb and good humour. These include diminutive figures in casual, yet heroic, poses that are reminiscent of propaganda posters from the People's Republic of China, with *hanzi* characters encapsulated in talk bubbles floating above their heads, as well as her *Fu Dog* salt-and-pepper shakers.

While Lo never lived in the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's influence has certainly been felt. He began to direct the future direction of the Chinese national character as early as 1917, when his article "A Study of Physical Culture" (*Tiyu zhi yanjiu*) was published in the influential journal *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*). This article extolled the benefits of routine exercise as a means to make the Chinese people physically strong. Mao, an ardent swimmer, was an enthusiast whose rising popularity made swimming an accepted physical activity. In 1956, Mao famously swam across the Yangtze (also called Chang Jiang or The Long River) for the first time and was inspired to compose the poem "Swimming" (*Youyong*) about transformation and progress:

*I have just drunk the waters of Changsha  
And come to eat the fish of Wuchang.  
Now I am swimming across the great Yangtze,  
Looking afar to the open sky of Chu.  
Let the wind blow and waves beat,  
Better far than idly strolling in a courtyard.*

Facing page and inset: **Flood**. 2009. Porcelain.  
14 x 12 x 12 in. (Detail) 14 x 96 x 78 in.

Above: **Salt Shakers**. 2009. Porcelain. 3 x 2 in/dia. ea.

*Today I am at ease.*

*"It was by a stream that the Master said –*

*"Thus do things flow away' "*

*Sails move with the wind.*

*Tortoise and Snake are still.*

*Great plans are afoot:*

*A bridge will fly to span the north and south,*

*Turning a deep chasm into a thoroughfare;*

*Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west*

*To hold back Wushan's clouds and rain*

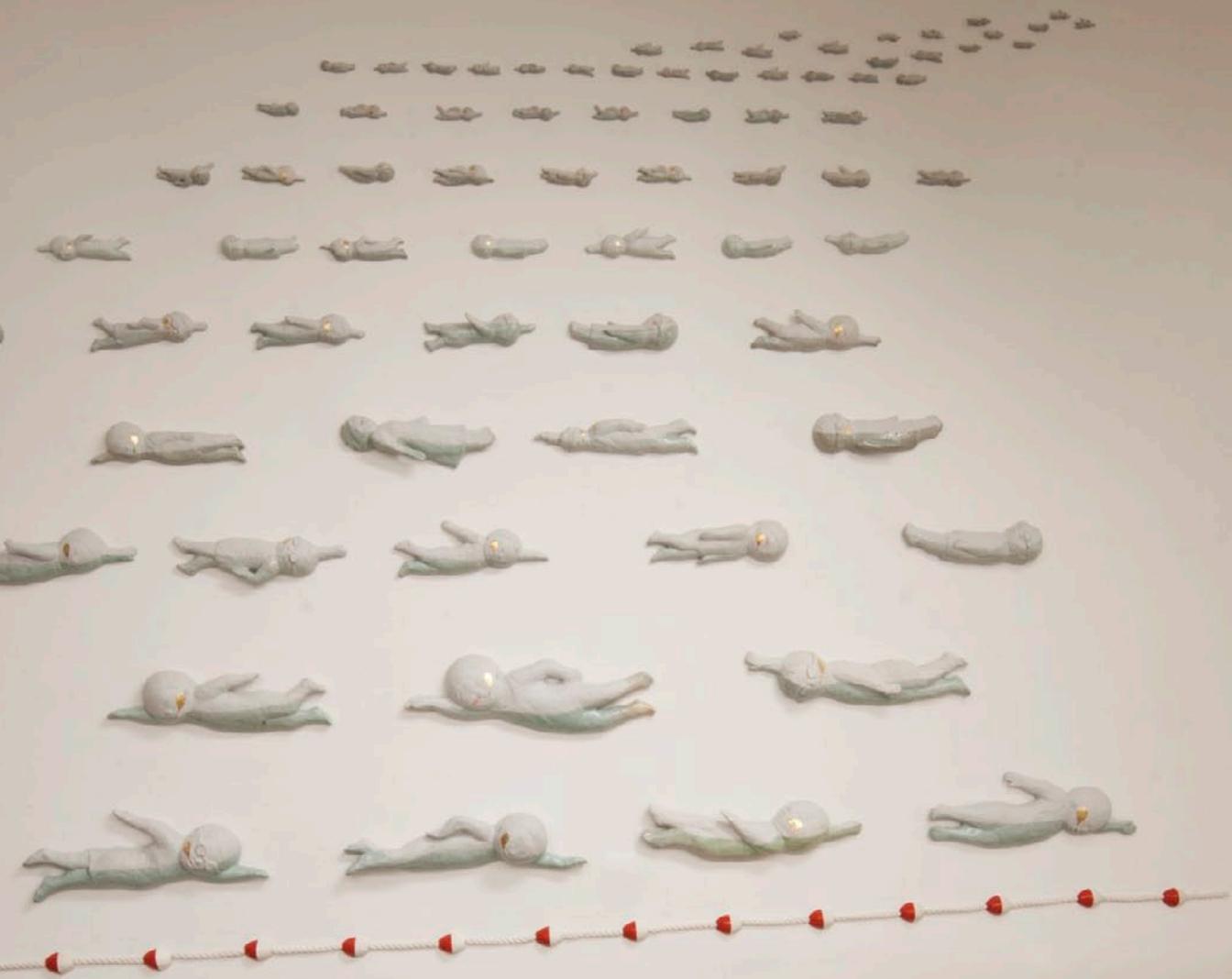
*Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.*

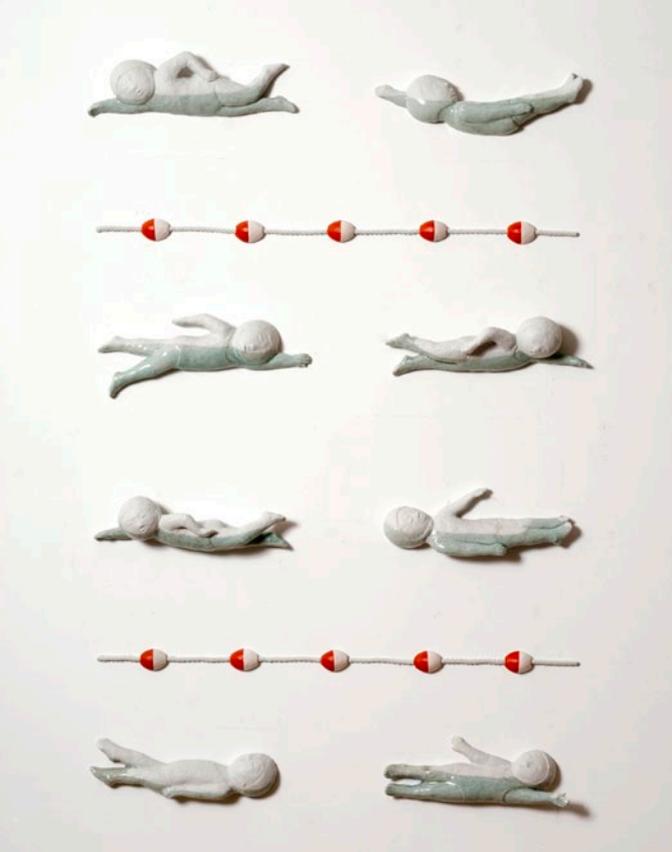
*The mountain goddess if she is still there*

*Will marvel at a world so changed.*

On 16 July, 1966 Mao repeated the feat as a calculated political manoeuvre to signal his robust health to critics in the party leadership. Strangely, the photograph from this event (depicting the heads of Mao and his attendant security personnel floating in the Yangtze) finds echoes in Lo's work for the *Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale*.

Water, floating and bathing are persistent themes in Lo's work. She consistently incorporates imagery of boats, pails and bathers. Breath strongly relates to a sculpture from 2012 entitled *K'an, the Water Hexagram*, also from the *Good Children* series. With *Breath*, however, Lo engages all the viewer's senses while using the associations of floating and swimming (passive and active activities) to suggest





Facing page: *Breath*. 2013. Porcelain, gold leaf, nylon rope, Plexiglas, water and fans. 96 x 120 x 48 in.  
 Left: *K'an, the Water Hexagram*. 2012. Porcelain. 62 x 30 x 3 in.  
 Top: *Beth Lo in Korea*.  
 Above: *Beth Lo's Mark*. Photo copyright David Horgan.

altered states of consciousness such as dreaming, even death.

The work, however, is titled *Breath*, not 'Swimming'. And it is the breath on which we should focus. The title indicates an inhalation or exhalation of air that can be seen or heard. In this work, white porcelain swimmers are silhouetted against the white gallery wall. Colour is kept to a minimum. The breath of the title is visible (rendered as gold leaf balloons issuing forth from the swimmer's mouths) as well as felt in the wind from the fan.

For Mao, to swim was to rebel against his father's Confucian notions of physical reserve. For Lo, swimming is a metaphor for the series of negotiations she makes as a Chinese-American artist and an affirmation of the predominant role that her parents have in her life. *Breath* is less about Lo's struggle to balance the cultural dichotomies of tradition and Westernisation, assimilation and resistance, or native language versus translated speech, which are threaded throughout her previous work. Instead, *Breath* is a reconciliation on the part of the child of traditional parents to understand her role, a theme that resonates in the title of her longstanding series, *Good Children*.

The figures in *Breath* are slightly disconcerting, rendered with a sameness that suggests they are siblings or relatives. This is eerie in the way that clones or twins are disturbing, suggesting infinite successive generations of identical genetic material. This odd mirroring recalls Salvador Dalí's comment about the dead brother after whom he was named, "My brother and I resembled each other like two drops of water, but we had different reflections." The

figures, receding infinitely, floating indeterminately and bleached white, are ghostly.

Lo's newest work is a startling ode to her ancestors, as arresting as a Qing Dynasty memorial portrait of a dead relative, staring back at the viewer from another realm. The figures in *Breath* come from another place. As the fan stirs the hairs on the back of our necks, Beth Lo reminds us that breath is the thin line of mortality, all that separates swimming from drowning.

#### ENDNOTES

- <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems23.htm>
- <http://chineseposters.net/themes/mao-swims.php>
- Alice de Jong; China Information Anniversary Supplement, "The Strange Story of Chairman Mao's Wonderful Gift", *Reminiscences and Ruminations*. Vol 9, no 1 (Summer 1994), pp 48–54.
- Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao – The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician* (London, etc.: Random House 1996).
- Solomon, Richard H. *Time Magazine*. "The Chairman's Historic Swim" Monday, September 27, 1999. [Http://Content.Time.Com/Time/World/Article/0,8599,2054250,00.Html#Izzz2vasapkt](http://Content.Time.Com/Time/World/Article/0,8599,2054250,00.Html#Izzz2vasapkt)
- 6) Dalí, Salvador. *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. (New York: Dover Publications 1993).

Brandon Reintjes is the curator of art at the Montana Museum of Art & Culture at the University of Montana, Missoula. He has published articles and criticism in the *Surface Design Association Journal*, *The Resource Library Magazine*, *The National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Journal* and contributes to *Reflections West*, a radio program about the literature, history and culture of the American West which airs on Montana Public Radio. Recent publications include *Art of the State: 120 Artworks for 120 Years* (2013) and *Picasso, Chagall and other Masterpieces from a Private Collection* (2013). All photos copyright Chris Autio unless noted.