

Porcelain and thread

Diem Chau's delicately embroidered china demands a second take, Valerie Behiery finds out what lies beyond the porcelain surface

Your work has become highly visible this year. Do you think that this is due, at least in part, to the American public's increasing receptiveness to contemporary art that integrates embroidery?

DC 'I think the biggest reason my work has received so much recognition is because of bloggers on the internet. But with that said, there has been a big arts and crafts revival in the United States. I don't know when the movement started but it definitely gained momentum after 9/11 and our economic crash [2001]. I remember reading a lot of articles about people wanting to live more simply and go back to basics. They wanted to get in touch with things that

were more intimate, more handmade and heartfelt. I'm also very fortunate to live in Seattle. There is a lot of support, as well as many opportunities, for emerging artists here. A lot of my early support came from Artist Trust, 4Culture and local arts organisations.'

How would you describe the reaction to, and appreciation of, your recent work?

DC 'I would say the word 'delight' sums up the general reaction of the public to my work. People often smile when they see it, especially the carved wax crayons. With the embroidery they usually ask how did you do it? 'The work has an ability to draw people

in, most likely because of its size. Because it's small and intimate, you have to come close!'

I have seen comments indicating that some people have the impression that you embroider directly into the china, which is understandable if one has only seen images of the work. Could you describe the actual process and materials you employ?

DC 'I embroider on organza, which is a sheer and stiff fabric. I usually start out with sketches on drafting velum, and then pick the porcelain piece that I want. After settling on my final composition, I mark where the edge of





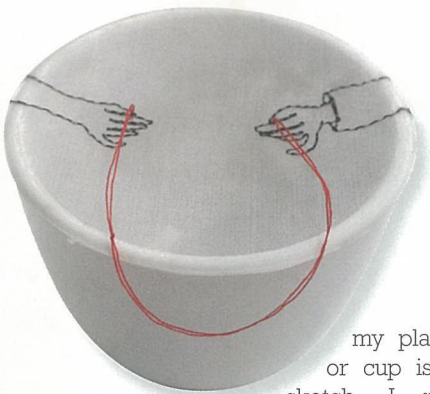
Clockwise, from far left
Offering, 2010. 15.2 x 15.2cm
Was, 2010. 15.9cm x 23.8cm
Ruby Slippers, 2011. 7.6 x 7.6cm
Women, 2011. 10.2 x 11.4cm
All porcelain china, organza, cotton fabric and thread



Union, 2008.
Porcelain teacup,
organza and
thread. 8.9 x 7.6cm

Bound, 2010.
Porcelain plate,
organza, cotton
fabric and thread.
15.2 x 22.9cm

Untitled, 2007. Ceramic
plate, silk organza and
thread. 15.9 x 15.9cm



my plate, bowl or cup is on my sketch. I pin the organza to my velum and embroider on it. The embroidery is mounted to the porcelain with archival glue and the edges are trimmed. It's almost like a drum skin...'

That's a nice image. Your work has a magical and childlike feeling, especially as some of the pieces carry small, crystal-like shiny dots. What is the appeal for you of adding an element of light?

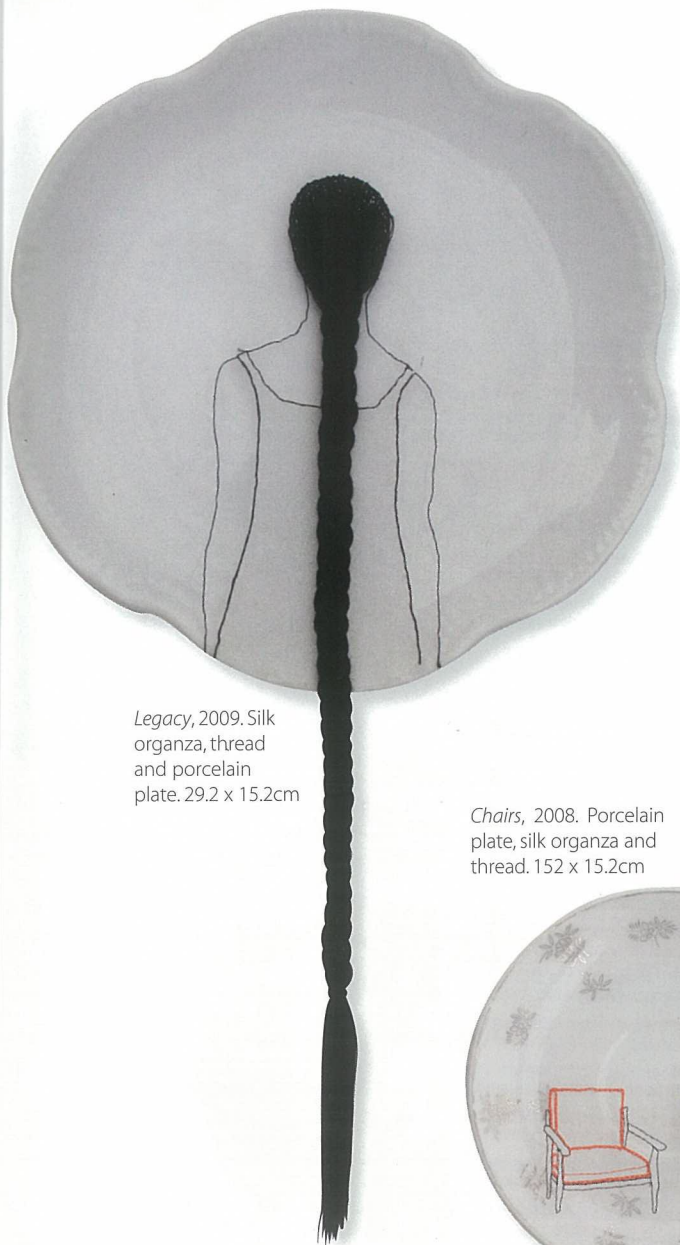
DC: 'The sparkly dots on some pieces, like *Ruby Slippers* and *Was*, are embellishments that are a part of the fabric. It's a bridal organza, basically the same fabric I use to embroider on but it has small silver dots integrated into the

fabric. I really liked the randomness of the dots when I first saw it but I was also cautious about adding glitter to my work. It can easily make it look silly or become too distracting. In the end, I'm very happy with the little bits of sparkle. They remind me of constellations, which plays into the narrative of my work. In *Was*, it reminds me of the phrase, 'star crossed lovers' and how fate can play a role in our lives.'

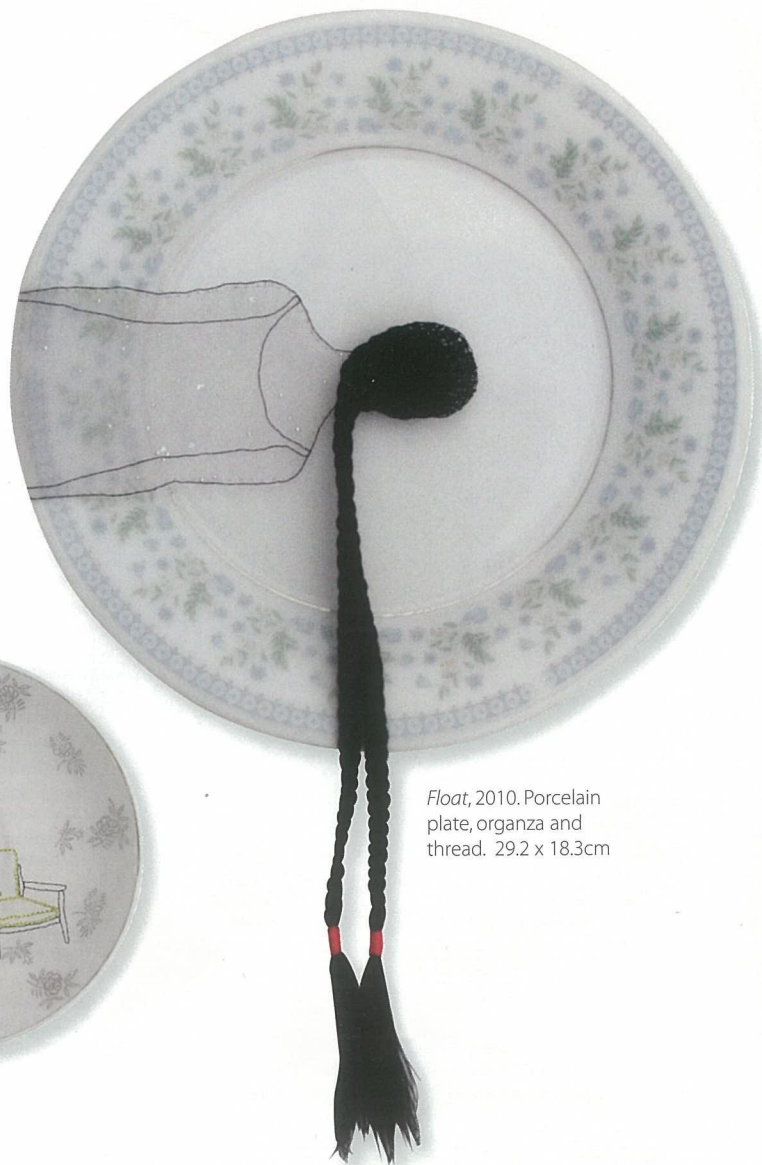
In art school you majored in painting and worked within more established conventions in terms of size, medium and subject matter. How did the transition or evolution occur and what triggered it?

DC: 'This is a tough question... It's a combination of many things. I painted for a few years after getting my BFA. I

loved painting but I had a hard time connecting with the finished work. It was also very expensive maintaining a studio, buying art materials, storing the work and shipping it for shows. The problems and expenses affected my ability to work creatively. Eventually, I started to work from home and experimented with other materials. I've worked with embroidery ever since I was little. I think the evolution of my work comes from playing around. I experiment with a lot of different things. Once in a while there's a spark and I know I have something good.'



Legacy, 2009. Silk organza, thread and porcelain plate. 29.2 x 15.2cm



Float, 2010. Porcelain plate, organza and thread. 29.2 x 18.3cm



Chairs, 2008. Porcelain plate, silk organza and thread. 15.2 x 15.2cm

There is something very moving about mixing old china, plates, saucers and cups from thrift shops with a medium such as embroidery as both evoke home, women and, to a certain extent, the past. Is this conscious? Is there indeed an element of nostalgia in your work?

DC 'My work is nostalgic. I have a lot of nostalgia for the past, not that I feel it was better but that there are things I can never have again and I miss them. One of them is my father. I don't intentionally put this in my work... it just comes out this way.'

Have specific pieces served as a way to reconnect with your father?

DC 'Yes, I made a series of paintings based on photographs of my father. He died when I was 17 and there was a lot I didn't know about his life. I found a box

full of old photos of him in his teens and early 20s. This series was a conscious attempt to reconnect with him and to discover who he really was. By losing him so young, I felt disconnected from my family's history. My grandfather had to leave China (Canton) to settle in Vietnam because of the Communist Revolution and my father left Vietnam for America because of the Vietnamese civil war. In every generation of my family, we've had to uproot from our home. As a result, I have no real sense of home or belonging. It's a position that also has advantages because, as someone who's a bit removed, I can be the observer. Having made work about my father I understood that it wasn't just about him but about longing. Viewers might not have known my father, but

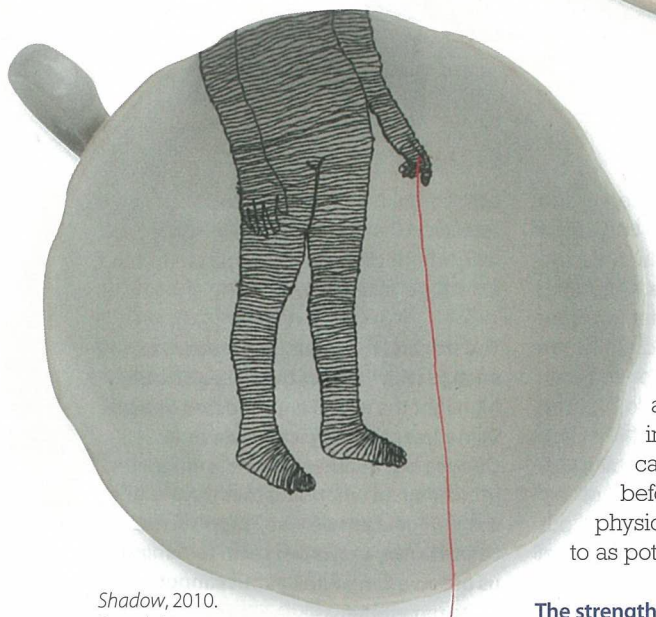
everyone knows what longing is. When I realised that, I knew I had a connection with my audience. It's about searching for what's missing.'

The size and materials help viewers to engage with your art but they also better highlight the actual embroidered images. Sometimes the subject is clear as in *Offering* but at other times it is enigmatic, provoking an emotion rather than telling a story. For example, *Ruby Slippers*, *Just before Dawn*, or *Women* seem to remind us of something familiar but cannot quite remember...

DC: 'Thank you. I try to evoke a sense of intimacy with my work. *Ruby Slippers* is a homage to the Wizard of Oz and Dorothy's search for home. The shoes in my piece are similar to the fabric Asian



Cheongsam, 2010.
Porcelain plate, organza,
cotton fabric and thread.
16.5 x 16.5cm



Shadow, 2010.
Porcelain cup,
silk organza
and thread.
48.3 x 11.4cm

slippers I used to wear when I was young. I imagine my work to be like pages torn out of a book: each piece gives you a glimpse into the story. The imagery evokes a narrative, capturing the moments right before something happens. In physics, these might be referred to as potential energy.'

The strength of your work also comes from the power of understatement.

DC 'I have a natural urge to complicate things. I have to fight this urge every time I make something. Editing was a good thing I learned in art school. In

most of my compositions, you see only hands, feet, the back of the head, or the lower portion of the body. These narrate a story but one which is open-ended and open to interpretation.'

The red thread connecting the figures in *Link* is present in many other works. Does it hold a particular meaning for you?

DC 'Sometimes I feel there's a connection we have to the past. This is what I wanted to express with a piece such as *Link*. Good or bad, our own history is undeniable. I feel when we acknowledge the past and live with it, we can act with a greater sense of conviction. It's about knowing who you are and where you come from. It can



Just Before Dawn, 2009.
Porcelain plate,
organza and thread.
15.2 x 15.2cm



Into the Woods, 2009.
Porcelain plate,
organza and thread.
16.5 x 16.5cm

also be seen as the human connection... what brings us together, as in the case in the piece entitled *Union*.

'Other times I feel completely lost, as in *Shadow*, where the red thread is left dangling. It's an open ended connection and I never know who will pick up the line. The red thread is an offering it says: 'I'm here when you're ready''

The naive and even dreamlike quality of your imagery imparts to it a much wider human or international appeal. Is this a conscious intention on your part?

DC: 'The first series of work I did – the one on my father that I mentioned earlier – was very personal. It was hard to relate to as a viewer. With my current

work, I am trying to reach the widest audience possible. My art is still about a sense of loss, searching for identity and finding where I belong. I try to keep my imagery very simple and my subjects are almost anonymous to leave more room for viewers to bring their own stories to the work, I'm not doing it for marketable appeal but I want people to relate to the work.'

How do you see the work evolving from here on?

DC: 'At the moment I'm working on building a studio in my backyard. I've been working from my living room for years now and I'm beginning to feel the restrictions of not having a dedicated

space. I'd like to work on a larger scale. I have a few ideas I'm playing with but I don't like to talk about them until I have something solid. Sometimes trying to capture an idea is like chasing soap bubbles... They can pop and disappear at anytime!

'My work is also beginning to receive a lot of European interest. It has been included in the 2011 Rijswijk Textile Biennial and there is a strong possibility that I will have a show in Milan in 2012. I'm very excited and happy that my work has made it this far!' ●

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