



# DIANA WILLIAMS HIGH FIRED

by Heidi McKenzie



I arrived in Jingdezhen, China, in May of 2013 for a month-long artist residency at the Pottery Workshop, which is nestled within the fabled Sculpture Factory. At one time, the Sculpture Factory housed over 1500 artisans and craftpersons within its rabbit warren of cobblestone paths. In China, creating is all about division of labor, which can seem antithetical for Westerners. There is a craftsperson skilled in virtually every aspect of the creative process that relates to ceramics. In a small-city of 1.6 million people, 1.2 million of its citizens are employed in the ceramics industry. It is in this context that within a week upon settling into the possibilities that lay before me, I met Australian-based ceramic artist Diana Williams, who welcomed me warmly into the ex-pat community.

### Growth and Opportunities

Williams was working within the older part of the original Sculpture Factory in the Fragrant Garden Studio, which happened to be the studio of Great Sculpting Master Liu Yuanchang. Master Liu was, at the time, one of eight Great Masters, and was also one of the instigators of the creation of the Sculpture Factory itself. The title of Great Master is bestowed upon only the most highly skilled and is the highest honor achievable in the country. Williams' photographic portfolio of her overglaze/onglaze painting using mineral oxides on ceramics so impressed Master Liu that he immediately invited her to paint for him and offered her studio space and resources as well as personal training in sculpting, casting, and press-molding techniques. Williams had first gone to Jingdezhen in 2004 for the 1000th year exhibition of the Great Masters at the International Trade Fair. Within days of their meeting, the Great Master invited Williams to exhibit at the trade fair. This opportunity immediately led to her first commission to paint an Australian landscape on a contemporary horse sculpture made by the Great Master for the polit-bureau in Beijing. She has never looked back.

Williams spends 6 months per year working in Jingdezhen and has done so for the last 15 years. She has achieved impressive accolades during this tenure: the first foreigner to be awarded an honorary doctorate from the School of International Studies, Jingdezhen Ceramic University, and in 2018, the first foreigner and the first woman to present a solo exhibition in the Jingdezhen China Ceramic Museum seen by a viewing public of over 200,000. She was also the first foreign artist to purchase her own apartment in Jingdezhen.

### An Impressive History

Williams was born in Germany and her family emigrated to Australia in 1960 when she was still a toddler. She hails from a family steeped in the tradition of painting churches and frescoes. She admits to always having had an innate feeling that a career in art was the only possible path for her. What's impressive about Williams is the fact that she has no formal training in art. In the musical world, she is what one might call a prodigy. By the age of fourteen, her teachers were buying her paintings. After dropping out of school, and pushing through a difficult time in her life where she worked as a hairdresser for two decades, Williams navigated back to her comfort zone and began painting on porcelain as well as painting in watercolor on paper in 1989. She was living in Canberra, Australia. In 1997 to 1998, Williams was the president of the Australian Capital Territory Porcelain Painters



**Opposite Top** *The Bearer*, 16 in. (41 cm) in length. Photo: Josef Muller. **Opposite Bottom** Installation *High Fired Motherhood*, Jingdezhen China Ceramic Museum. Photo by Josef Muller, edited by Matt Haysom. **1** Diana Williams working on a prototype for *High Fired-The Bearer*, 2015. Photo: Deanna Roberts. **2** Williams and Great Master Liu at the opening of "High Fired Motherhood," Jingdezhen China Ceramic Museum. Photo: Jiafeng Shao. **3** Sculpture Factory, Fragrant Garden Studio, housing the gallery and studio of Great Sculpting Master Liu Yuanchang, 2006. Photo: Diana Williams.





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39 ornately decorated artillery shells, became the first of 3 of her *High Fired* series.

For this first series, Williams drew from the natural environment to adorn the missiles using symbols and metaphors that related to the military. She explains, “I realized that what I wanted to do was take the manmade object of war, then take nature and undermine the aggressive shape of war by placing natural images on it.” She never intended to make this work public. It took a triad of forces to dissuade Williams from smashing the work before she left Jingdezhen to return home: Master Liu himself, local ex-pat veteran artist Takeshi Yasuda, and the ex-pat who had introduced her to Master Liu, Susan Bateson. The work was shipped back to Canberra, where she held her first solo exhibition in Australia at the Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly,

to great acclaim. The exhibition nearly sold out. Her desire to learn to sculpt led to tutoring by Great Master Liu in 2005, and later with Professor Zhang Siping, of Jingdezhen University. She started creating figurative forms in multiples. The baby with a lotus was a symbol of birth, rebirth, and purity. The second series was first completed in 2008 and went on to Washington, DC, where Williams was invited to have a solo exhibition at the Australian Embassy.

#### Evolution of Expertise and Vision

The evolution of Williams’ technical expertise and artistic vision in the second series firmly laid the foundation for the final iteration of *High Fired*. Buoyed by her success, Williams returned to Jingdezhen and, over the next several years, continued to create her final *High Fired* series. She incorporated cherubs and babies reminiscent of the images in churches that her family and ancestors had painted in Germany.

This third series ended up catching the eye and imagination of the US curator, Jane Milosch, former chief curator of the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, then founder and director of the Smithsonian’s Provenance Research Initiative at the Smithsonian Institution. Milosch had seen Williams’ 2008 show in DC, and had kept in contact with her. The exhibition of the third *High Fired* series quickly morphed from vision to reality in 2017. Director Zhao Gang

Association. In 1998, she subsequently founded and was president of the Australian Capital Territory On-glaze Artists Association Inc. By 2001, Williams orchestrated a major 3-month exhibition and concurrent educational program at the Canberra Museums and Gallery, “Porcelain Art into the New Millennium,” curated by Director Peter Haynes.

#### Realizing a Vision

Williams transitioned from a ceramic overglaze painter whose canvases were Master Liu’s creations to a ceramic sculptor in her own right virtually overnight. Shortly after her return to Jingdezhen in 2005, her 17-year-old son called to tell her that he had joined the Royal Australian Navy, following in the footsteps of her husband, who had had a 20-year career as a small-arms and gunnery trainer. Williams’ response was visceral. She was sick with the knowledge that she had lost her son to the military, to the “war machine.” She recounts having a vision that night, inspired by a vase she had recently seen that resembled an artillery missile. She saw her work laid out before her, the variations and permutations of how she could communicate to her son her intense feelings of turmoil and dismay. She had a local potter throw the shape for her as a model, had it made into a mold for slip-casting, and started to experiment and work on her forms to realize her vision. The resulting pieces,



4 *Cycle of Life lotus pond, Inception, Renaissance, The Passing* (installation view), 6 ft. 6 in. (2 m) in length. Photo: Neil Williams. 5 *High Fired Motherhood* (installation view). 6 Installation view: *Innocence* (center), *Infantry* (left, right). Photo: Josef Muller. 7 *Innocence*, 28 in. (72 cm) in length. Photo: Jane Milosch. 8 *Infantry* (alternate view). Photo: Jiafeng Shao.

of the Jingdezhen China Ceramics Museum, extended the invitation to Williams to exhibit the series in 2018. The museum invited Milosch to curate the exhibition, titled “High Fired Motherhood,” and give lectures, which were made possible through the generous support of Howard and Roberta Ahmanson to the Smithsonian Institution.

For this third series, Williams, now an accomplished sculptor, worked with the female figurative body. Using her daughter, granddaughter, and friend as her models, she cast multiples of three different molds made from masters: a pregnant woman; a woman, crouched over as if in the form of a WWI tank, many of which carry bullets on their backs, suggesting that they bear the weight of the world on their shoulders; and the infant, cherub-like baby from the original series.

The final exhibition has 48 variations on 13 different poses/works. The aesthetics of the exhibition are arresting: the deep blood red walls towering above the multiples of female figures, pregnant or curled over, lined up in perfect precision, like soldiers themselves, soldiers with a message of peace not war; the simplicity of monochromatics—buff flesh color, crackle-glazed porcelain, the metallic sheen of the PVD (physical vapor deposition) coating that is highly accessible in Jingdezhen. (PVD is a process where a thin

layer of metal is deposited onto the surface of the sculpture through a high-temperature, vacuum-sealed chamber.) The installation itself deployed the tactical positioning of a military encampment.

Williams explores a mother’s emotional response to war and the impact that wars have on all mothers and their children. In Williams’ words, “A battle array of expectant mothers and their children poised among weapons of war is a powerful metaphor of the production line of human beings as fodder for war.” The themes pivot around paradox: creation versus destruction; love versus fear; death, birth, and rebirth; and the ongoing cycle of life. This work could only have come from a woman’s hands, mind, and soul.

Williams has continued to return to Jingdezhen for shorter periods since 2019. She is presently working on her upcoming book, *High Fired Motherhood*. She is currently in discussion with galleries and museums across China that are enthusiastic about mounting her exhibition and the new work she continues to create that continue to call out for action—the action of peace.

**the author** Heidi McKenzie is an artist, author, and curator living in Toronto, Canada. Learn more at [www.heidimckenzie.ca](http://www.heidimckenzie.ca).